

Chapter 4

A Case Study for Christmas: Changing Attitudes towards Commercialism and Consumerism on Film, 1946 – 1961

A lot of bad ‘isms’ floating around this world, but one of the worst is ‘commercialism’.

- Alfred, *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947)

George Seaton’s *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947) did not hesitate to state clearly the position of the film’s various Santa Claus characters when reacting to the gradually increasing commercialism and consumerism of the late 1940s. Alfred (Alvin Greenman), the young janitor in the film who volunteers as a Santa figure at the local YMCA, remarks that the growing trend of commercialism in post-war New York culture was arguably worse than other “isms”, presumably likening the threats of it to those of communism, as discussed in Chapter 1. Similar straightforward presentations of ideas around commercialism – the ways in which stores market and capitalize on their brand – and, by proxy, consumerism – the process of purchasing – are evident in many of the films from the 1946 to 1961 period analyzed in this study. Such views develop from Alfred’s standpoint to reflect the period’s ever-evolving attitudes towards commercialism and consumption as the post-war American economy rebounded, rebuilt, and flourished, allowing more and more people to engage with the newfound purchasing power of an emerging age of the “affluent society”.²⁴⁸

This 15-year period of growing economic prosperity throughout the late 1940s and early 1960s is captured in the films in a variety of ways. The focus on Christmas in each of the films provides a unique opportunity to examine where and how people shopped both on screen and relative to the off-screen world, as well as what items were most likely to be purchased and given at Christmas. Christmas has been associated with the tradition of gift-giving as early as the Biblical stories of Christ’s birth and the Three Wise Men, on through the folklore around Saint Nicholas, and into the modern era with the classic American poem *The Night Before Christmas* (1823). This tradition of gift-giving and the conceptualization of Christmas as the “Season of Giving” allow for analysis of filmic reflections and representations of the changing attitudes towards both commercialism and consumerism in the wider world, as well as a closer look at the histories of particular commodities

248 John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958).

that develop new – and evolve existing – social resonances throughout the 15-year period.

In bringing these ideas of the external trends, attitudes, and behaviors surrounding the practice of shopping into relationship with Hollywood's filmic representations of them, this chapter will examine three main subjects. First, the main places in which people shopped – specifically department stores – and the ways in which commercialism was displayed in these stores via the exploitation of a synthesized vision of the most prevalent Christmas iconography and its leading figure, Santa Claus. Second, the chapter will analyze how people shopped, bringing together advice from women's magazines and catalogues on the one hand and the practices of Hollywood's filmic shoppers on the other. Third, the items purchased as gifts within the films themselves will be closely scrutinized with a case study examining one recurring item across several films: the mink coat. This case study will explore the cultural and social attitudes towards mink coats and their associations with class status as they changed from the immediate post-war era through the 1950s and into the early 1960s.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that the cultural trends relating to the expanding economy in the post-war period not only introduced modernized ideas of consumerism and commercialism but also inspired interpretations of these "isms" in mainstream cinema. The Christmas films in this study do not stand alone in Hollywood's filmography of the era with their commentaries on these changing social ideas around consumption and rampant commercialization. However, they do offer a unique perspective in analyzing these trends with the recurring tropes of purchasing, selling, and transferring tangible items during the Christmas season and all of its associated traditions.

As Chapter 2 examined the Christmas film genre's reflections of current social problems in the wider world as a result of the holiday's connection with Dickensian tropes, this chapter looks at a specific theme recurrent in the Christmas tradition that becomes increasingly inseparable from the holiday. As will be argued, shopping and gift-giving were already an increasing part of the synthesized American holiday, especially when done through the central Christmas figure of Santa Claus. However, as observed in Chapter 3, after *Miracle on 34th Street* Santa is no longer a central figure in Hollywood Christmas releases until a brief mention in Disney's 1961 *Babes in Toyland* and then not again until the 1980s.²⁴⁹ This chapter

²⁴⁹ A small number of low-budget films in the 1980s center on a magical Santa Claus plot: TriStar Pictures' box office flop *Santa Claus: The Movie* (1985), Disney's *One Magic Christmas* (1985), and Orion Pictures' *Prancer* (1989) to name a few. These films had minimal success at the box office with the next very successful and mainstream Santa-centric film being Disney's 1994 *The Santa Clause*.

shows that Christmas films adapted with the times culturally and socially over this 15-year period as non-extricable elements of the holiday – namely commercialism and commodities – were essential to their storylines. This analysis of the film’s cultural elements shows consistency in the genre’s inclusion of commercialism as well as change in how commercialism itself adapts over time to fit the needs of the contemporary economic climate.

Here Comes (the American) Santa Claus

“Christmas” in this book, as explained in the Introduction, refers to the idealizing American Christmas tradition born out of the consolidation of local and disparate community celebrations around winter, Saturnalia, and Christian holy days. Prior to the 1840s, historian Penne Restad argues, Christmas traditions “reflected a broadening sense of regional and cultural identity” across the US.²⁵⁰ These local traditions, as Restad continues, began to consolidate and nationalize the holiday between the 1840s and 1870s for a number of reasons including the expansion of national media, developments of marketplace and industry, and the Civil War melding American cultures and promoting a more unified nationalized identity. These nineteenth-century political, social, and cultural influences raising Christmas up as a prominent secular American holiday began its gradual progression towards its ultimate identity as a civic holiday in the early 1910s when over 160 towns and cities held public, communal Christmas festivities.²⁵¹

Throughout the nineteenth century, as these local celebrations began to coalesce in the public consciousness and as the streamlining of collective, public traditions developed, canonical imagery began to emerge as well. Iconography for the collective imagination of Christmas started to take shape with poetic and literary representations of the holiday. One of the earliest widely printed versions of Christmas traditions in America was in Washington Irving’s 1809 *Knickerbocker’s History of New York*. Irving’s biographer Andrew Burstein suggests that Irving “considered the *idea* of America something with enduring sentimental potential” and from this began to develop a larger Christmas narrative from minor customs. For instance, Irving offered the addition that families of New Amsterdam hang stockings in the chimney for St. Nicholas to fill with gifts on “St. Nicholas

²⁵⁰ Restad, *Christmas in America*, 91.

²⁵¹ Restad, 91.

Eve”.²⁵² Through his writings, Irving was the first to widely publicize the idea of St. Nicholas as a fun-loving gift-giver for American families.

Another founding text in the construction of a standardized American Christmas was the classic American poem *A Visit from St. Nicholas* – more commonly known as *The Night Before Christmas*. Published in 1823, *A Visit from St. Nicholas* offered the iconic modern description of Saint Nicholas that would define his image for centuries:

He was dressed all in fur, from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;
A bundle of Toys he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a pedlar just opening his pack.
His eyes—how they twinkled! his dimples how merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!
His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow
And the beard of his chin was as white as the snow;
The stump of a pipe he held tight in his teeth,
And the smoke it encircled his head like a wreath;
He had a broad face and a little round belly,
That shook when he laughed, like a bowlful of jelly.
He was chubby and plump, a right jolly old elf...²⁵³

This poem established for the first time that Santa Claus travelled by a reindeer-drawn sleigh, came on Christmas Eve, and looked like a sweet, portly, white-bearded old man, while, crucially, removing the burden of Santa’s moral judgements of children.²⁵⁴ This image and character of Saint Nicolas was popularized with the 1823 poem and became a mainstream version of him that has endured in the public consciousness, in part due to the comparably lasting illustrations that came to accompany this poem and other renderings of the character.

²⁵² Andrew Burstein, *The Original Knickerbocker: The Life of Washington Irving* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 86 <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb07705.0001.001>.

²⁵³ Although the poem is most commonly attributed to professor of divinity Clement C. Moore, the descendants of American Revolutionary War veteran Henry Livingston Jr. contend that he was the rightful author. The Livingston argument claims that the poem was composed in 1808 and recited to his children. Regardless of authorship, the popularization of the poem, and therefore the imagery within it, did not come about until 1823 when it was anonymously published in the Troy, New York, *Sentinel*. Cf. Bruce David Forbes, *Christmas: A Candid History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

²⁵⁴ Forbes, *Christmas*, 87–88.

Thomas Nast's illustrations of Santa Claus for *Harper's Weekly*, beginning in 1863, resembled the figure described by Moore in the earlier poem. This nineteenth-century American portrayal of Santa Claus was an "amalgam of American, Dutch, and English traditions" that reflected the complex identity of the US, blending many immigrant communities and their traditions.²⁵⁵ J. M. Golby and A. W. Purdue argue that these representations of Santa Claus by Nast and Moore and the myriad others developed upon Nast's physical depiction in the late 1800s lean heavily towards a modern Saturnalia rather than a Christian tradition. By omitting any reference to the nativity or Christian touchstones in the poem, they contend that modern Christmas might be "the Saturnalia of an increasingly urbanized, humanitarian, family-centered, and child-loving civilization."²⁵⁶

Other such depictions of Santa Claus developed from these first traditions and either leaned into secularism or highlighted the Christian elements of the holiday. However, as Richard Horsley argues in his "Christmas: The Religion of Consumer Capitalism", American Christmas and its traditions were "only very partially and superficially 'christianized' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."²⁵⁷ These characterizations of American Christmas as decidedly secular in its portrayal led to, as Restad and Horsley argue, the formation of Christmas as a civic festival.

The idea of Christmas as a civic festival separate from religious connotations that could be associated with it – whether Pagan, Christian, or otherwise – raises a complex question about American identities. The default naming convention for the holiday and its figures are most apparently associated with its Christian context. Despite the nature of Christmas celebrations becoming a civic holiday connected to patriotic emblems and a sense of American community across religions and backgrounds, Christian connotations are inextricable from the name and ostensible ownership of the holiday. Christmas, however, especially in American traditions and through the last two centuries, is a complex amalgamation of various cultural traditions and religious customs distilled into a standardized public holiday under the guise of Christian nomenclature. For instance, as Mark Connelly writes, the name Kris Kringle is "one of Santa's pseudonyms, a mispronunciation of the German Lutheran term *Christkindlein*, meaning a messenger of Christ, a gift-

255 J. M. Golby and A. W. Purdue, *The Making of the Modern Christmas* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 75.

256 Golby and Purdue, 75.

257 Richard Horsley, "Christmas: The Religion of Consumer Capitalism", in *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture*, ed. Richard Horsley and James Tracy (Pittsburgh, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 165–187.

bearer.”²⁵⁸ The Santa Claus traditions and the secular nineteenth-century portrayals of him as the holiday’s central figure work to separate the Christianized version from the synthesized American holiday; however, it is still important to be aware of the tendency to default towards the connotations of the holiday as ostensibly Christian.

Among these varied and numerous origins and alongside Santa Claus imagery, depictions of other Christmas traditions were developing as well throughout the nineteenth century. The popularity of Dickensian villages and vague iconography of old English villages mapped onto the identity of American Christmas by tapping into a sense of false nostalgia for many adults. As historian of Christmas Karal Ann Marling writes, the Dickensian iconography was the opposite end of the cultural touchtone spectrum from Santa by invoking “a universal good cheer, benevolence, and simplicity that stood in strong contrast to the commercial bustle of the modern, Santa Claus holiday.”²⁵⁹ In the first half of the twentieth century, one such touchstone was Norman Rockwell through his illustrations on the cover of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Rockwell’s covers depicted a range of iconography including extensions on the Santa Claus and Dickensian mythologies and also, more pointedly, realistic portrayals of the commercialism of the holiday, such as with his December 1947 *Tired Shop Girl on Christmas Eve*. With these covers, Rockwell helped to solidify public consciousness regarding Christmas for many Americans between the 1910s and 1950s.

The aesthetic of a standardized American Christmas developed out of these pieces of poetry and art that became the touchstones they are because of repetition and various media building on the myriad intersections of smaller communities’ traditions that merged into a canonical national identity for the holiday. American Christmas is not just one thing, but rather a standard set of images, ideas, and icons that create a complex cultural phenomenon. This cultural phenomenon was then updated and adapted, amalgamating further for each subsequent generation and their modes of interacting with their own times and their own American identity. One particularly American influence on this mainstream vision of the man, the myths, and the legends of Christmas was the uses of them in commercial advertising, experiences, and entertainments within department stores and eventually in Hollywood.

²⁵⁸ Mark Connelly, “Santa Claus: The Movie”, in *Christmas at the Movies: Images of Christmas in American, British and European Cinema*, ed. Mark Connelly (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2000), 84.

²⁵⁹ Marling, *Merry Christmas!*, 138.

Commercialism in Stores and on Film

One of the most prominent locations in American Christmas nostalgia and iconography is the department store. In understanding how and why Christmas developed as it did in the American psyche and public traditions, the history of commercialism and consumerism is essential. Specifically, department stores played a major role in the construction and development of a standardized American Christmas. Emerging from early local immigrant populations' communal traditions through the poetry that prompted the imagery, the development of the modern American Christmas narrative then went to the stores that spread it nationwide and the film that eventually crystalized who Santa was at the center of it all from the mid-twentieth century on.

“Palaces of Consumption”: Department Stores and Christmas

Many social, cultural, and business historians agree that the first department store was Le Bon Marché, established in Paris in 1852; however, beyond this fact there is much contention about which stores elsewhere could also be categorized as “department stores”.²⁶⁰ Here, the department store is defined as a commercial center within which specialist retailers using departmental units cater to many of the consumer's needs all under one roof. As historian Daniel Boorstin notes:

The distinctive institution which came to be called the department store was a large retail shop, centrally located in a city, doing a big volume of business, and offering a wide range of merchandise, including clothing for women and children, small household wares, and usually dry goods and home furnishings. While the stock was departmentalized, many of the operations and the general management were centralized.²⁶¹

Boorstin, although conceding that European department stores, such as Le Bon Marché, were the first to be established, argues that “if the department store was not an American invention, it flourished here as nowhere else.”²⁶² This flourishing of the department store in America can be seen in the sudden emergence of

²⁶⁰ For more on mid-century views on department stores, see: John William Ferry, *A History of the Department Store* (New York, Macmillan Company, 1960); Harry E. Resseguie, “Alexander Turney Stewart and the Development of the Department Store, 1823–1876”, *Business History Review* (Pre-1986) 39, no. 3 (Autumn 1965): 301–322.

²⁶¹ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York; Random House, 1973), 101.

²⁶² Boorstin, 101.

these grand complexes – “Palaces of Consumption” as Boorstin terms them – in cities around the country. Some of the largest retailers founded in the nineteenth century were A. T. Stewart’s (established 1823), Lord & Taylor (1826), Arnold Constable (1852), and R. H. Macy’s in New York City (1858), Jordan Marsh in Boston (1841), John Wanamaker in Philadelphia (1876), Field, Leiter & Co. – later Marshall Field & Co. – (1852) and the Fair in Chicago (1874), and smaller but well-known local stores including Lazarus in Columbus, Ohio (1851), and Hudson’s in Detroit (1881).²⁶³ These palaces of consumption quickly became highly important economic centers in growing cities, impacting the metropolises and the cultures in which they were built and ultimately becoming a defining feature of urban life.

As John Ferry wrote in 1960, “No city of any size in the world today is without its department stores. They are part of the make-up of urban areas just as are the churches, theatres, hotels, art galleries, and museums.”²⁶⁴ Harry Resseguie wrote in 1965 that the “principal obstacle” in defining what a department store is “has been its dynamism: its ability to change its characteristics while maintaining its outward form.” This ability to change is a necessary reminder in discussing the abrupt and enveloping evolution of commercialism between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries.

On this evolution, Resseguie continues, “The early department store, for instance, prided itself on its ability to sell national brands of merchandise at substantial reductions from the manufacturer’s suggested resale price.”²⁶⁵ This price-competitive aspect of department stores and the ability to meet many of their customers’ needs in a single location helped establish and maintain their widespread popularity through uncertain economic times. Boorstin, in 1973, devoted a full chapter to department stores in the final instalment of his trilogy on the history of American society, *The Americans: The Democratic Experience*. In this chapter entitled “Consumers’ Palaces”, Boorstin argues that “the new department store grandeur gave dignity, importance, and publicity to the acts of shopping and buying – new communal acts in a new America.”²⁶⁶ As the twentieth century went on and particularly in the post-war sprawl from urban centers to new suburban towns, these department stores ventured into the suburbs with much of their clientele and served as the anchor stores in district shopping malls.²⁶⁷

²⁶³ Boorstin, 101.

²⁶⁴ Ferry, *A History of the Department Store*, 1–2.

²⁶⁵ Resseguie, “Alexander Turney Stewart”, 302.

²⁶⁶ Boorstin, *The Americans*, 101.

²⁶⁷ Robert J. Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth: The U.S. Standard of Living since the Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 349.

With department stores acquiring such importance and status in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is not surprising that these commercial centers and their new communal activities were integral in the streamlining of American Christmas. Capitalizing on the Christmas holiday shopping season, department stores nationwide began creating elaborate window displays for December and integrating Christmas into their marketing strategies. As Marling notes, window displays curated for the Christmas shopping season began in the 1820s “when the first recorded holiday decorations – evergreens, flowers, and ‘patriotic emblems’ – appeared in the window of a New York City shop.”²⁶⁸ These patriotic emblems highlighted an early form of the intense relationship between Americanism and celebrating Christmas as a secular, patriotic tradition. Stores began to put Kris Kringle figures in their shop windows as early as 1840 in Philadelphia and the 1870s in Boston. Gradually, as the popularity of dressing shop windows for Christmas spread across the country throughout the late nineteenth century, Macy’s began to emerge as one of the most iconic and best-known institutions for their elaborate and beautiful displays.²⁶⁹

Owing in part to the large bank windows on the corner of Sixth Avenue and 14th Street at the main entrance of the original R. H. Macy Dry Goods store in New York City, Macy’s became synonymous with the grandeur and design of Christmas celebrations. By 1924, following the lead of Gimbel’s in Philadelphia in 1920, the flagship Macy’s store in Herald Square on 34th Street introduced their Thanksgiving Day parade “with Santa Claus presiding.”²⁷⁰ By introducing these parades with Santa at the helm, Macy’s and the like were co-opting “the domain of the street festival and street fair, colonizing the mummers’ world and working-class celebrations with their own spectacles that were eventually staged more for the consumption of television audiences than for the folks on the avenues.”²⁷¹ Macy’s participation in these Christmas festivities helped to synthesize regionally specific Christmas traditions into a mainstream, standardized view of American Christmas traditions that ultimately was transferred to the small and big screens.

Simultaneously, as Macy’s developed their brand for Christmas, the department store industry capitalized on the benefits of children believing in Santa Claus. In 1897, *New York Sun* editor Francis Church received a letter from a

²⁶⁸ Marling, *Merry Christmas!*, 83.

²⁶⁹ Marling, 87–88.

²⁷⁰ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying & Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 145.

²⁷¹ Schmidt, 145–146.

young girl named Virginia asking if Santa Claus was real. Church published his response as an open letter, writing:

Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to our life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! How dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus! It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance, to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment except in sense and sight.²⁷²

This response echoed and encouraged the societal belief in Santa and without any reference to Christian elements of Christmas. The faith in Santa was distinct from a religious faith but emphasized as a net positive to make the world more tolerable. The presence of Santa was a collective imperative for parents to sustain with their children and for the rest of American adults to cultivate as much as possible. One manifestation of this societal responsibility was the establishment of the Santa Claus Association in New York for “the express purpose of preserving children’s belief in St. Nick.”²⁷³ Ultimately, however, just as the image of Santa was co-opted by department stores and, most egregiously, Hollywood for commercialist propagandizing and maximizing corporate profits, the Santa Claus Association eventually devolved from its purportedly sincere foundations into a monetized grift in itself further exploiting the Santa Claus image for financial gain.²⁷⁴ Regardless, by the 1930s, a standardization of the Santa image became necessary as he was being used more and more in person and in advertising. In response to this need, schools began popping up in major cities to train men on how to look, act, and be the perfect Santa Clauses.²⁷⁵

Macy’s remained a leader in the preservation of the myth and identity of Santa Claus, perfecting the use of Santa as a wholesome character, consistent across all stores. Simultaneously, however, this wholesome image of preserving the myth of Santa was not only for the sake of children or the protection of their innocence; Santa was also a marketing gimmick to get families into the store. As William Waits writes, “Santa was effective because, according to his myth, he did not use money and was not engaged in making profit.” Waits describes Santa as a “decontaminator of manufactured items” and continues that,

²⁷² As quoted in William B. Waits, *The Modern Christmas in America: A Cultural History of Gift Giving* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 132.

²⁷³ Waits, 133.

²⁷⁴ For the full story of how the Santa Claus Association became a vehicle for financial exploitation, see: A. Palmer, *The Santa Claus Man: The Rise and Fall of a Jazz Age Con Man and the Invention of Christmas in New York* (Guilford, CT: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).

²⁷⁵ Restad, *Christmas in America*, 158.

“he made no trip to the toy store to buy the toys, nor even a trip to purchase raw materials. Santa’s motivation for his monumental undertaking was free of market considerations.”²⁷⁶ Because of Santa’s purity from manufacturing, he was used in advertising nationwide for a range of products. As the posterchild for Coca-Cola and a figure in over 20 % of toy ad campaigns in *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *The Saturday Evening Post*, by the 1930s, Santa had become the official spokesman of commercialism, especially when marketing toward children.²⁷⁷

This contradictory idea of Santa as both pure of and the spokesman for the commercialism that increasingly was tainting the American Christmas in the early twentieth century led to even more complex manipulations of the figure. Macy’s used Santa and his clean image, decontaminated of manufactured items, to sell manufactured items. This ostensible innocence, the use of Santa’s long and storied image as a jolly, sweet figure, a grandfatherly type whose image Americans honed for years as an ethereal saint denoting positivity and generosity, was the perfect image to exploit for corporate profits in the palaces of consumption themselves.

Macy’s department store itself became a symbol of the shopping season incorporating much of the iconography associated with the idea of an American Christmas. The connection between the store and the holiday grew organically from the importance of department stores to their local culture and the increasing attempt to captivate an audience of all classes who could stare into shop window displays and live a fantasy in relation to the items in the tableaux.²⁷⁸ With Macy’s deeply entrenched connection to the holiday and its increasing commercialization of Christmas via their advertising resources, including the parade, window displays, and store Santa Clauses, Macy’s became the perfect backdrop for Valentine Davies’s 1947 novella and the subsequent George Seaton film, *Miracle on 34th Street*.

Miracle on 34th Street Steals Christmas

Department stores in the mid-twentieth century were well-established cultural centers integral to a city’s identity. Their Christmas displays, merchandise, and gimmicks helped to streamline the commercial view of what a mainstream American Christmas looked like, especially for the cities in which they were located. Just as department stores helped to standardize the public consciousness of Christmas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Hollywood cinema took this

²⁷⁶ Waits, *The Modern Christmas in America*, 25.

²⁷⁷ Restad, *Christmas in America*, 163.

²⁷⁸ Marling, *Merry Christmas!*, 84.

process to a new level. Santa had been depicted on screens a few times prior to the 1940s, but no film did more for the image of Santa Claus, and the updating or modernization of him, than *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947).²⁷⁹

Miracle on 34th Street is a masterpiece of evasion and manipulation of the audience, of Santa Claus and Christmas imagery, and of straightforward messaging. In the first example of this complex manipulation, the film was originally billed as a romantic comedy, downplaying in all of the promotional materials the film's central Christmas spirit and plot. As the concept of a Christmas film was not yet an established genre and because the film was releasing in June 1947, the marketing for the film emphasized the romance between Maureen O'Hara and John Payne's characters in all of the posters and publicity. Even in the five-minute trailer for *Miracle on 34th Street*, the Christmas elements of the film were entirely evaded.

The trailer describes the film as "Hilarious! Romantic! Delightful! Charming! Tender! Exciting!" In a meta spin, the trailer pans back to a producer watching the trailer for *Miracle on 34th Street*, enraged at this characterization of the film. He exclaims:

That won't work – it's no good. What do you make a trailer for? To give the public an idea of what kind of a picture to expect. Hilarious! Romantic! Tender! Exciting! Make up your minds. It can't be all of those things. Tender, exciting, why they're practically opposites. You've got to decide what kind of a picture this is. Is it a romantic love story? Is it an exciting thriller? Is it a hilarious comedy? Make up your minds. Now go to work and fix it up.

The producer subsequently leaves the viewing room and encounters a number of celebrities on the studio lot and enquires if they have seen *Miracle*. None of these stars are in the film but are used in the promotional materials for it. Anne Baxter very nearly gives away the Christmassy elements of the plot and that there is even a Santa Claus in the film at all but stops herself in time, saying "no, I'm not going to spoil it for you." The trailer is brilliantly self-referential and as evasive as the film in refusing to deliver a straightforward message.

This evasion of purpose and manipulation of the audience even prior to their seeing the film was an excellent marketing strategy for *Miracle on 34th Street* specifically. Without even acknowledging the actual plot or subject matter of the film, the studio and distributor marketed the subplot to attract viewers. As will be seen below, the film itself does the same thing with the surface-level plot and messaging of the film that becomes much more complex and even sinister

²⁷⁹ For an exploration of more Santa imagery on screen, see: Max A. Myers, "Christmas on Celluloid: Hollywood Helps Construct the American Christmas", in *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture*, ed. Richard Horsley and James Tracy (Pittsburgh, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 39–54.

with deeper analysis. The ostensible image of the Santa figure in the film as anti-commercialist, the image of him as a “decontaminator of manufactured items,” very quickly becomes manipulated by 1947 commercialist needs for the character.

Miracle on 34th Street

George Seaton’s *Miracle on 34th Street* is a film about a sweet old man who believes himself to be the real Santa Claus and the lengths he goes to convince a young girl and the city of New York that truly knowing is not as powerful as believing. Kris Kringle (Edmund Gwenn) is hired by Macy’s to be the store Santa Claus after a drunken imposter is fired on the spot for being inebriated while presiding over the Thanksgiving Day parade. His hiring manager, Doris Walker (Maureen O’Hara), her daughter Susan (Natalie Wood), and their lawyer neighbor Fred Gaiety (John Payne) become central figures in Kringle’s life between Thanksgiving and Christmas as accusations against Kringle’s mental health emerge. Kringle enacts a goodwill policy at Macy’s, telling customers to go to another store if the price is better or a toy they want is only in stock elsewhere. His policy causes a complicated stir at Macy’s and prompts a legal battle in which it ultimately is decided on a technicality delivered by the US Postal Service that Kringle is in fact Santa Claus and his goodwill policy shall remain.

The film has many complex layers and leans into manipulations of ostensibly innocent scenes. For instance, young Susan does not believe that Kringle is truly Santa Claus as he claims. She expresses her distrust by being quite vulnerable and telling him that: “That’s what I want for Christmas ... a real house. If you’re really Santa Claus, you can get it for me. And if you can’t, you’re only a nice man with a white beard, like mother said.” This ultimatum is not a traditional request for Santa Claus. A house is not something that can be made in the North Pole and put under the Christmas tree. Instead, Susan is picking up on a different mode of materialism in the identity of the American Christmas: commercialism. If he cannot provide her with the house she truly wants for Christmas, then there must be no Santa Claus and Christmas must not be the “magical time of year” some of the adults around her claim it to be.

This connection between Kris Kringle and the commercialization of Christmas is the driving force of the plot. Susan’s insistence that Kringle can only acquire the house of her dreams if he is the real Santa Claus is deeper than a child’s ultimatum. Susan’s mother Doris is a single, working divorcee who allows her previous relationship with Susan’s father to spoil her own imagination and hope for fairy-tale endings and love. In asking for the house, Susan is expressing a desire to move out of the city and into the suburbs with the symbol of the American family at the heart. If Kringle cannot deliver a happy American ending, then he has no role in

her life. Specifically, if he cannot purchase the exact house in the listing Susan showed him, his magic is not real. Susan's request and ultimatum equate the magic of Santa Claus and the Christmas spirit with the purchasing power of commercialism and underscore a more sinister idea: that a happy American ending can, and ideally should, be purchased.

This equation of the Christmas spirit with commercialism is also more emphatically made in the central plot of the goodwill policy. The goodwill policy causes Kringle to clash with his superiors as he independently introduces this honesty policy for helping parents get their children the gifts they *want* instead of the gifts their parents *think* they want. The goodwill policy works by encouraging shoppers to find the best deals for the items they are looking for, even if that means buying from a rival. In response, Macy's customers are shown becoming more loyal, ultimately driving profits up for the store. As one customer exclaims, "Imagine a big outfit like Macy's, putting the spirit of Christmas ahead of the commercial. It's wonderful. I never done much shopping here before, but from now on, I'm going to be a regular Macy customer."

In crafting this idea of the goodwill policy to promote good publicity for department stores, the film forefronts the consumer rather than the customer. The consumer of the toy section at Macy's is not the buyer necessarily but, especially at Christmas, the children receiving the toys as gifts. The film first has the store manager explain to Kringle that the job of the store Santa Claus is to suggest certain toys that are harder to sell, toys or items that happen to be overstocked, hoping to push these products onto a child consumer who will then inform their parents that they want that particular item for Christmas. Kringle becomes irate at the manipulation of a child's desires, scoffing, "Imagine, making a child take something it doesn't want just because he [the store manager] bought too many of the wrong toys. That's what I've been fighting against for years. The way they commercialize Christmas." Kringle's on-screen acknowledgement and disgust at the premise of commercializing Christmas masterfully sells to the audience the idea that Christmas is not about buying anything for the sake of buying it, but rather about buying precisely what a child wants, all the while maintaining the outward appearance that the commercialization of Christmas is a negative interpretation of the holiday. *Miracle on 34th Street*, in a paradoxical way, ostensibly condemns the commercialization of the holiday while also promoting this goodwill policy, suggesting again that not only can you commercialize Christmas, but also that you should, by manipulating the role of Santa from generous toy bringer to business savvy salesman.

In one scene, a child on Kringle's lap asks for a toy fire engine while his mother attempts to discourage this request. Kringle promises the boy he will get a fire engine and then calms the angry mother by telling her she can get the exact toy at

a rival store, giving her the location and price while assuring her they are still in stock. When she expresses disbelief at his honesty, Kringle quips that he keeps a close eye on the toy market and says, “Well the only important thing is to make the children happy and whether Macy or somebody else sells the toy doesn’t make any difference. Don’t you feel that way?” Bewildered, she responds that she certainly feels that way but didn’t know Macy’s did.

This exchange exposes one of the most apparent adjustments *Miracle on 34th Street* makes to the Santa Claus image. As mentioned above, the image of Santa prior to his twentieth century’s rampant commercialist exploitation – and the reason for it – was as a “decontaminator of manufactured items,” as one who does not purchase his toys and who is free of market considerations.²⁸⁰ In popular mythologies around him, Santa Claus has a workshop at the North Pole in which elves make the toys that he delivers. However, in *Miracle on 34th Street*’s Manhattan, Santa Claus isn’t producing the toys, but rather relaying customers to department stores to purchase them while he keeps “track of the toy market pretty closely.” This portrayal of Santa as a moderator of well-priced toys is a dereliction of his role up until this point. He had been used in earlier advertising to sell a company’s own products, but never before had Santa been such a public agent of general commercialism promoting any sales as long as profits were made for Christmas. Santa here is no longer the decontaminator of manufactured items, but rather their direct dealer.

Relegating Santa Claus to the role of keeping track of the best deals on commercial goods removes him from previously established myths of Christmas and places him as nothing more than a signifier denoting that it is the season of buying. In key, brief instances, audiences are treated to the “real Santa Claus” character Kris Kringle is portraying. In the first scene of the film, Kringle walks past a shop clerk decorating a window display for Christmas on Thanksgiving morning. Here, as Schmidt observes, this opening scene of Kringle looking through a shop window sets up the idea that “commerce frames the story” and symbolically and literally places Kringle directly in the middle of it.²⁸¹ Kringle, stopping to admire the display, notices that the reindeer are out of order as he would have them. Addressing the shop clerk, Kringle corrects his placement of the reindeer with such lines as “Dasher should be on my right-hand side,” and “I don’t suppose anybody would notice except myself.” This quick scene establishes for the audience in the opening sequence that whether he truly is or not, Kringle believes he is Santa

²⁸⁰ Waits, *The Modern Christmas in America*, 25.

²⁸¹ Schmidt, *Consumer Rites*, 171.

Claus and, further, that he is willing to use his identity to help vendors properly and accurately commercialize Christmas.

This portrayal of Santa Claus as an economically wise market-watcher giving cost-effective advice to parents is a stark deviation from the publicly-accepted version of Santa as the toymaker and gift-giver. To normalize the actions and behaviors of Kringle's deviation from the "traditional" depictions of Santa Claus, the film makes a concerted effort to portray Kringle as the real mythical figure complete with a certain magical quality. At one point, when a young, newly-immigrated Dutch girl sits on Kringle's lap in Macy's, her adoptive mother apologizes profusely that the girl doesn't speak English, yet she insisted on meeting him regardless. Kringle waves the woman off and speaks perfect Dutch to the bemused girl, learning exactly what she wants for Christmas. This moment feels as though it is magical, giving a glimpse of the more traditional "Sinter Claes" as the girl calls him, all witnessed by Susan who begins to believe that Kringle may truly be the real Santa Claus.

Immediately following this magical scene, Doris asks Kringle definitively to tell Susan that he is not Santa, which he refuses to do. Doris decides to discreetly fire him but is subsequently praised in another meeting with her superiors for hiring him in the first place, as Macy's customer loyalty and, more significantly, profits have gone up as a result. These three scenes happen in quick succession: Kringle displaying perceived "Christmas magic," his firing for proclaiming himself to be the true Santa, and his rehiring for increasing profits. The film seems to be signifying that the real Santa Claus is no longer marketable if representing such traditional, magical elements, but is marketable when turning a profit for the company.

The film endorses a complex message rebranding not only Santa Claus but also commercialism through him as positive American forces. The film mixes traditional Santa Claus iconography – bestowing gifts, embodying kindness, being worldly and welcoming – and the for-profit commercialist structure of the post-war department store. By abandoning the traditional Santa and literally firing him for believing in the ideals and existence of the holiday's more "magical" aspects, Macy's hires the version of Santa they wanted in the first place: the one who will inspire better sales, higher profits, and more loyal customers by exploiting those innocent associations with his name and image.

Playing Santa Claus in *Miracle on 34th Street* is not only for Kringle. There are two other Santas in the film: the drunk Santa whom Kringle replaces in the Thanksgiving Day Parade and subsequently at the store; and the young Macy's janitor, Alfred (Alvin Greenman), who dresses up as Santa for the children at his local YMCA. The first, drunken Santa, is immediately scorned as he fits neither the traditional Santa myth nor the role of the good commercialist icon that Kringle will later fill. The second, Alfred, is a parallel character experiencing the same changes

to the holiday that are affecting Kringle without the added element of potentially being the true Santa.

Alfred and Kringle form a relationship around both of their interests in the Santa figure. Alfred claims that he loves playing Santa for the look on children's faces when he gives them gifts, reassuring Kringle that he also disapproves of the commercialist angle of Christmas. As cited at the start of this chapter, Alfred states, "Yea there's a lot of bad -isms floating around this world, but one of the worst is commercialism. Make a buck, make a buck. Even in Brooklyn it's the same. Don't care what Christmas stands for; just make a buck, make a buck." Despite the first line's possible pass at communism, Alfred is affirming to both the audience and Kringle that, even outside of the department store, he believes in the goodness of the traditional role of Santa Claus: giving gifts for the joy of children. Shortly after, however, Alfred informs Kringle that he will no longer be playing Santa at the YMCA because the store's mental examiner, Mr. Sawyer (Porter Hall) has diagnosed him with a guilt complex and subconscious hatred of his father, as discussed in Chapter 2. Sawyer contends that the only reason someone would want to give gifts to strangers for free would be that he must have done something bad in his childhood for which he is trying to forgive himself. Mr. Sawyer also interviews Kringle and diagnoses him with "latent maniacal tendencies." This diagnosis is used later in the film to set up the climactic court hearing to decide whether Kris Kringle is insane or truly Santa Claus.

Sawyer's diagnoses on behalf of Macy's are complex reflections of distrust towards generosity. In both instances, Sawyer, as a representative of Macy's, cannot fathom the desire to do something selfless, especially when it pertains to giving material possessions away for free. Macy's executives, likewise, do not understand the goodwill policy as an intrinsically honest policy, but see it rather as a way to exploit customers from an emotional angle. Adding the external storyline of Sawyer misdiagnosing Alfred, an average person with a kind heart, brings in a deeper layer of not only the more understandable challenging of the mental state of an old man who claims to be Santa, but also challenging anyone's desire to give gifts solely for the purpose of giving without any added incentive. Centralizing this concern in Sawyer also allows the film to introduce this idea of the absurdity of selflessness in juxtaposition to the Macy's executives who are using that selflessness to increase profits.

In a meeting concerning Kringle's performance, Mr. Macy himself applauds the new policy. He exclaims that over 500 parents, including the governor's and mayor's wives, expressed their gratitude for the new "merchandising policy." He suggests that every department should employ the strategy, proposing "No more high pressuring and forcing a customer to take something he doesn't really want." Macy continues, realizing the profitable potential of this scheme should

they lean into emotional manipulation: “We’ll be known as the helpful store, the friendly store, the store with a heart, the store that places public service ahead of profits,” before adding with a snide smile, “and consequently we’ll make more profits than ever before.” This misuse of the goodwill created by Kringle is an exploitation of the Christmas spirit, and it is never condemned within the film because it is, in the film’s estimation, a good commercialist practice.

To the point, other department stores in the film – namely Gimbel’s, Macy’s fiercest competitor both in the film and reality – also employ the same strategy, and both expand the policy nationwide. In one scene, Santa is literally stood between Mr. Macy and Mr. Gimbel as they shake hands for a photo-op. In front of the photographers and journalists, Macy gives Kringle a sizable Christmas bonus with which Kringle says he will purchase an x-ray machine for a doctor friend, leaving Macy and Gimbel to argue over who will cover the rest of the costs. Again, the film is displaying the notion that the department store only gives value to the monetary benefits of performative philanthropy, concerning itself principally with the publicity of grand gestures. This performative philanthropy is not criticized in the film.

Alternatively, Sawyer’s character is rebuked. The film is very careful in who is made the villainous character, not wanting to frame the department stores negatively. While the department store executives embracing the goodwill policy are superficially engaging correctly with the commercialization of Christmas, following Kringle’s own lead, Sawyer is the embodiment of the critiques Kringle makes of the rampant commercialism he is supposedly challenging. Later in the film, Kringle is admitted to a mental hospital and says openly to Fred – his lawyer and friend – that Sawyer is “contemptible, dishonest, selfish, deceitful, vicious,” continuing, “yet he’s out there and I’m in here. He’s called normal and I’m not. Well, if that’s normal, I don’t want it.” Fred reminds Kringle that “what happens to [him] matters to a lot of people” and offers hope that one day things may change with the Sawyers of the world being “in here, instead of out there.” Ultimately, the inclusion of this scene commits the film to the message of the correct approach to commercializing Christmas. Framing Sawyer as the villain, the character who cannot fathom kindness and selflessness, as the antithesis and threat to Santa reinforces the idea that giving gifts is good, and that those gifts can and should be purchased from “the store with a heart.” What happens to the film’s Kris Kringle happens to the real world’s Santa Claus: he and his myth are co-opted by the department store for an exploitative commercialist scheme to sell more products and increase customer loyalty without rebuke.

This ostensibly positive portrayal of commercialism in the film creates a paradox of acting selflessly for the sole purpose of driving one’s corporate profits up. Despite acknowledging it is the right thing to do to be honest with customers

and help them get the right toys for a good price, the department store executives admit alternative motives. The executives explain how embracing the goodwill policy will boost customer loyalty and ultimately manipulate the consumer into thinking a selflessly generous approach to commercialism is what Macy's and other stores are striving for. As in the evasive trailer, promotional materials reflect the reality of the manipulation within the film. In the pressbook material for *Miracle on 34th Street*, there are instructions detailing how real store owners could capitalize on the goodwill policy as portrayed in the film. The pressbook reads:

NOT JUST FOR MACY AND GIMBEL, BUT FOR ALL STORES

WHY? BECAUSE THE DEPARTMENT STORE IS DEMONSTRATED AS A COMMUNITY INSTITUTION – WITH A SOUL! STORE PERSONNEL ARE NATURALLY AND HUMANELY PORTRAYED, AND THE PART PLAYED BY DEPARTMENT STORES IN THE LIVES OF CHILDREN AT CHRISTMAS CARRIES A MIGHTY PUBLIC RELATIONS MESSAGE ...

THE PICTURE DOES A POTENTIAL PUBLIC RELATIONS JOB FOR ALL STORES EVERYWHERE.

... even though this benefit is really part of the entertainment and was not planned that way.²⁸²

This pressbook section explains that all stores in conjunction with 34th Street in Manhattan would be participating in the tie-ins for the film with window displays, perpetual showings of the trailer for the film, and themed histories of their stores to show the humanist side of the shops themselves.

This approach to the tie-ins possible for *Miracle on 34th Street* is exploiting the same Christmas “spirit” shown in the film. By enlisting the real-world department stores in this “public relations” campaign of advertising, the stores are hoping that the good press from the film’s portrayal of Macy’s as the “store with a heart” will increase their own profits and customer trust. The added insistence that this positive portrayal of department stores is a happy by-product of the film’s story echoes the words of the film’s R. H. Macy quoted above, delivered with a snide grin and chuckle: “We’ll be known as the helpful store, the friendly store, the store with a heart, the store that places public service ahead of profits. And, consequently, we’ll make more profits than ever before.”

Miracle on 34th Street’s surface-level disdain for commercialism while advocating for consumerism at Christmas became common among Christmas films that were released subsequently. The commercialist urge to emphasize profits is crass, but the consumerist requirement to purchase gifts is integral to the celebra-

282 *Miracle on 34th Street* Pressbook, Twentieth Century Fox, 1947, microform, Reuben Library, British Film Institute. All font and underlining from original source.

tion of the holiday. This dichotomy of spending money on the right gift but declaring an aversion to the discussion of such spending can also be seen in a film from two years later, Don Hartman's *Holiday Affair* (1949).

Department Stores and Commercialism in *Holiday Affair* (1949)

Holiday Affair follows a single mother and war widow, Connie Ennis (Janet Leigh) and her love-life predicament at Christmas. Connie is a comparative shopper for department store Fisher & Lewis, meaning she engages in corporate espionage, purchasing products from different stores to compare quality, price, and other product information that is then reported back to Fisher & Lewis to surveil their competition's retail business practices. In the film's opening scenes, Connie interrupts a conversation store clerk Steve Mason (Robert Mitchum) is having with a young boy about a toy train Steve is operating on display. The two exchange a frigid back and forth in which Connie asserts herself as a "real customer" who "actually want[s] to buy" a train. Steve remarks that he has no reason not to believe the young boy is intent on purchasing the train as his floor manager shoots him a look encouraging him to make the sale. Already evident is the dichotomy between the customer who purchases the item and the consumer who will actually use it. Here, the child desiring the toy is the consumer who will be gifted it once an adult customer purchases it. Much like *Miracle on 34th Street*'s Kris Kringle, Steve insists on helping the children who will actually play with the toys to understand them and ensure they are asking for what they really want at Christmas.

Connie, impatient and unwilling to wait for a response on the price, hands Steve exact change for the item, "\$79.50 plus tax", abruptly shuffling off while rejecting the complimentary Christmas gift-wrapping. Immediately, Steve assumes she must be a comparative shopper, and when she arrives the next day to return the train after having gathered the relevant information, he gives her a refund and is fired on the spot for allowing her corporate espionage. Steve is largely unperturbed by the firing and even assists Connie in purchasing the next item on her list while asking her out to lunch.

These exchanges set up the personalities of the two characters. Steve is unbothered with the corporate side of the department store experience, caring much more for the child consumers who will actually be using the products than for their parent customers who purchase them. Gradually, through the film, Steve's character is revealed to be a vagabond, traveling from hostel to hostel as he works odd jobs to collect enough money to follow his passion of boat building to the West Coast where he plans to buy into a company in Southern California. On their first outing together, Steve takes Connie to Central Park where he remarks

that the seal in the zoo is “the happiest guy in New York” because “he’ll never be the president of the First National Bank.” His disdain for the monotony of everyday life and for the consumerist-led existence so many New Yorkers live is evident in most of his dialogue and facial expressions.

Later in the film, however, Steve buys the same toy train from the beginning of the film with the last of his money for Connie’s son Tim (Gordon Gebert). Tim had seen the train the night Connie brought it home from work and assumed it was his Christmas present. With his heart set on this particular train, Tim is shattered when Connie scolds him for assuming it was his, only to rejoice later when the same train arrives from Steve. With Steve’s act of purchasing the expensive gift for Connie’s son, knowing that opening the gift on Christmas morning will bring the boy joy, Steve’s hard exterior of personal disdain for the commercialist way of life softens. Despite his repeated displays of disaffection for the profit-driven department store ethos, Steve purchases the train in a selfless act to make Tim happy. Steve’s actions in the face of his disdain for the cold, corporate commercialism that Kris Kringle is also fighting against in *Miracle on 34th Street* parallel much of Kringle’s own attitudes and actions as Santa Claus.

Conversely, Connie’s character, as built from her initial exchanges with Steve, is indicative of the negative aspects of commercialism. Her role as an agent of corporate espionage is to pose as an unassuming customer, an average woman out for the day shopping in other department stores so as to inform her store on the competition’s pricing, product display, product quality, and customer service. Multiple times, Connie is presented as bad at her job of being a customer. Steve mockingly gives her tips on how to pretend to be a better customer, suggesting she’s “much too professional”. Connie’s stern and detached shopping habits for her job and her refusal to purchase the toy train her son truly wants for Christmas represent everything Steve dislikes about the commercialist sector, especially at Christmas.

Here again, however, as in *Miracle on 34th Street*, the department store executives are not made out to be the villains. When Tim receives the toy train from Steve on Christmas morning, the rest of the film revolves around what to do with it. Connie’s boyfriend Carl (Wendell Corey) is uncomfortable with the gesture Steve has made and suspects that Steve is trying to get in close with Tim so as to win his mother’s affection. Steve asserts that he just wanted to give a young kid the gift he really wanted, leaving Connie torn over the happiness of her son, the suspicions of her partner, and her own unexpectedly warm feelings towards Steve. Ultimately, Tim decides he wants to return the gift so that the adults in his life will stop arguing over it and that he may give the money back to Steve because Connie makes it clear Steve needs the money more than Tim needs the train.

On his own, Tim runs away to return the train to Crowley’s department store and meets with Mr. Crowley himself to explain the economic troubles Steve is in,

asking for a refund on the \$79.50 Steve spent on the toy. Mr. Crowley gives the 6-year-old a refund and drives him home to Connie who is worried sick over Tim's disappearance. This scene firmly suggests, as *Miracle on 34th Street* does, that the department store executives are the heroes with hearts of gold while simultaneously throughout the film villainizing Connie's corporate shopper role. Connie's employment in the film represents the cold, corporate side of the department stores as Mr. Sawyer's does in *Miracle on 34th Street*, while also depicting department stores as a safe haven when they employ empathetic, sentimental, and humanist consumer-focused commercialist tactics.

Steve and Connie, at the start of the film, are polar opposites. Steve is spontaneous and fun, living only within his means and despising the corporate system; Connie is kind and pleasant, but rigid and structured in her life, feeling the need to control everything so as to maintain order in her single-parent household. By the end of the film, Connie softens and runs away with her son to catch Steve on his midnight train to California, presumably leaving her job at Fisher & Lewis for a more spontaneous lifestyle. Steve, on the other hand, seems to maintain his disposition throughout the film. His disdain for all of the things Connie represents at the start remains throughout the film, even as he engages in consumerism when buying the toy train for her son.

Connie's boyfriend, Carl, is also rigid, not spontaneous, and awkward around Tim. Connie and Carl have an uncomfortable multi-year relationship in which Carl has proposed marriage numerous times, only to be told by Connie that they should wait. Tim doesn't like Carl very much and is visibly upset when Connie finally tells him that she has made up her mind and is going to marry Carl on New Year's Day only a week later. With the introduction of Steve into their lives, Carl notices small but distinct changes in Connie's behavior and the ways in which Tim immediately takes a liking to Steve. Carl begins to fear for their relationship and lashes out towards Steve with cynicism, voicing suspicions about his generosity that parallel Mr. Sawyer's diagnosis of Alfred in *Miracle on 34th Street*. Similarly, this accusation of impropriety and the instigating gift-giving itself become the turning point for the rest of the film. By spending the money he has been saving for his next adventure on her son and showing him the affection he does not receive from either Connie or Carl, Steve becomes a Santa figure to Tim, putting all else aside for the sake of a child's joy at Christmas.

On Christmas morning, Tim wakes Connie and races to the living room to open presents. He has saved up all year to buy Connie her favorite perfume. This sweet moment is cut short when he begins thanking Santa for the train, and Connie realizes Steve must have purchased it for him. Carl calls to wish the pair a merry Christmas ahead of coming round for dinner later and becomes irate again when he hears about Tim's train. Carl accuses Steve of trying to make a pass at

Connie by buying her son gifts, claiming that no man would have done that out of the kindness of his heart for a stranger's son without an angle of wanting to get close to the boy's single mother. As in *Miracle on 34th Street*, the characters who cannot fathom someone wanting to do a kindness for a child with no reciprocity are indicative of the cold, distant, and negative sides of commercialism at Christmas. Selflessness is seen as a ploy, and here Carl's fears become a self-fulfilling prophecy as Connie does ultimately choose Steve for the kindnesses shown to her son as well as her own sudden attraction to him.

When Carl accuses Steve of having a self-interested angle in buying the train, Connie is confused and concerned about what to do. This is the moment her character begins to change and be influenced by Steve's. She states that Steve didn't have the money to spend on this expensive train and that she is determined to get the money back to him. Carl offers to pay for the train, so as to act as though he saved the day with the pretense that, ultimately, he is the one who paid for it and so Tim should be thankful to him. Tim sees Connie's despair and offers to return all of his other gifts to the department store to raise the money to give back to Steve for the train. Tim's consumerist mentality is the same as that which Kris Kringle exposes in *Miracle on 34th Street*: giving a child the gift he or she wants for Christmas is more important than giving just any gift. Tim's willingness to return all of his other gifts solely to be able to keep the one he actually wanted shows further that Connie is disengaged from what her child actually wants.

The commercialism of Christmas in these two films revolves around the department store as a source of goodness while condemning the people who see shopping as a means to a selfish end. Any character who takes issue with giving a gift for the sole purpose of a child's joy on Christmas morning further suggests a personal selfishness or even alleged mental illness for doing so. This attack on those characters who would give selflessly is further supported by the department store executives, namely R. H. Macy and Mr. Crowley, who embrace – so as to exploit – the Christmas spirit. The films' suggestion that there is a good reason and specific way to commercialize Christmas – by putting the children's wants first and being “the store with a heart” – as opposed to the negative, more selfish reasons of profits and personal gain, come together to shape the consumer's experience as an activity that should be embraced and enjoyed. The films in this study not only instruct businesses on how to portray a positive commercialization of Christmas but also instruct shoppers on how to be good consumers during the holiday.

Consumerism and How to Shop, on Film and in Print

Shopping in department stores, as explored above, was an integral part of the metropolitan culture many Americans enjoyed. The ways in which people shopped in these Palaces of Consumption are documented both in the films of this study and in magazines and women's chronicles such as *LIFE*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Redbook*, *Women's Day*, *Seventeen*, and more. Frequently in these publications, shopping tips and advice were conveyed through sponsored content advertisements and stories of women going about the family shopping or making personal purchases. These shopping guides and sponsored suggestions give insight into not only how people shopped, but also the ways in which print media wanted people to shop as compared to how Hollywood movies presented shopping.

A primary focus of the advertisements and shopping tip guides in women's publications was the raising of young girls to be smart shoppers, something Connie had not mastered in *Holiday Affair*. This training included hunting for the best bargains, learning about the shops themselves, and making shopping decisions on their own while supervised by their mothers. One SWAN soap advertisement from a 1946 issue of *LIFE* is entitled, "How to Bring Up a Young Daughter: Tips from a Teen-ager's Smart Mama!"²⁸³ The by-line of the advertisement – itself structured as a photo-essay – begins, "Lucy's mother has big dreams for Lucy: She wants her 13-year-old daughter to have the fun of being pretty and popular right now. And she knows ... that this just leads up to the day Lucy will leave to start a home of her own." The advertisement continues to present six tips with accompanying photos, the first of which is "learning to be a smart shopper." Part of the process of learning to be a smart shopper, according to *LIFE*, is Lucy's abilities to learn "to compare. And know a thrifty value when she sees it." The final tip of the section for raising a daughter correctly as a woman is "choosing her own wardrobe," emphasizing that, "Mother lets Lucy buy some of her clothes – with just a word of advice," and while promoting the soap in the sponsored content, the tip reminds its readers "pretty clothes must be *clean*." This photo-essay collection is not rare among the pages of women's publications. Rather it perpetuates a common view that learning how to shop and, equally as importantly, what to purchase is a key skill in a young girl's development into a woman who is ready to be a wife.

The emphasis on learning to be a discerning shopper who hunts for bargains and compares the quality of products against the price is evident throughout both printed publications and the films in this study. In another advertisement from

283 "How to Bring Up a Young Daughter: Tips from a Teen-Ager's Smart Mama!", *LIFE*, March 11, 1946, ProQuest.

LIFE in a 1951 issue on the importance of smart shopping to buy luxuries with the savings, A&P Super Market boasts that, “My food budget bought the bouquet – thanks to A&P!” while showing the various ways a “test shop” at their stores would help women find the best prices around for their weekly shop.²⁸⁴ With the development of supermarkets as a form of department store in which all the groceries could be purchased at once without needing to attend various shops or pay at each counter – e.g. the grocer, butcher, baker, etc. – women were incentivized to become acquainted with their shopping experience as a single trip with one receipt, making tallying and saving easier.²⁸⁵ *Redbook* in 1960 included an article entitled “How to Avoid Being Cheated By the Pound, Gallon or Yard: How to Make Sure You Get What You Pay For” in which the authors provide tips for being a better shopper anywhere, but specifically addressing the issues of “housewives” in New York City who “were complaining bitterly about meat markets which failed to give them full weight.”²⁸⁶ There was a considerable variety of articles in women’s journals from the post-war period and throughout the 1950s addressing women’s concerns of how to shop and advising them on the best shopping practices.

Throughout both *Miracle on 34th Street* and *Holiday Affair*, there is much emphasis on the ways people, and particularly women, participated in consumerism. Their shopping habits were key to the plot of *Miracle on 34th Street* with Kris Kringle marketing the commercialism of Macy’s directly towards mothers seeking the best prices for their children’s gifts and citing the customer who, bewildered by the goodwill policy, praises Macy’s for making it so much easier to engage with the shopping season. The same constructions of women being good, smart, calculating shoppers that are used in sponsored content advertisements and articles in women’s journals are used in *Miracle on 34th Street*, pointing towards the desired perception both in print media and in Hollywood’s portrayal that shopping is not only an activity performed by women, but also one perfected by them.

This idea of women perfecting the art of shopping is used as the punchline to a recurring joke throughout *Holiday Affair*. Connie is a corporate comparison shopper and notoriously bad at her job. Steve immediately recognizes her as such, saying “[you] didn’t ask me a lot about the train; didn’t ask me the price, but you had the exact amount all ready, including the tax. You didn’t want me to send it. You didn’t want Christmas wrapping,” adding, “It didn’t take the greatest brain in the world to spell out ‘corporate shopper’.” This exchange not only moves the plot

284 “A&P Super Markets Advertisement”, *LIFE*, July 9, 1951, ProQuest.

285 Gordon, *The Rise and Fall of American Growth*, 341.

286 Ruth Brecher and Edward Brecher, “How to Avoid Being Cheated By the Pound, Gallon or Yard: How to Make Sure You Get What You Pay For”, *Redbook*, August 1960, ProQuest.

along in getting Steve fired for not reporting Connie to his employer, but it also sends the message to the audience that a good, smart, discerning shopper would inquire about the product and its quality, ask about the price, and then make a value judgement for herself instead of knowing ahead of time what she wanted and how much it would cost.

The film makes an even clearer assessment of women shopping when Steve gives Connie tips on how to be a better shopper, saying, “you’re much too professional. A customer doesn’t know what she wants until she sees it, and then she doesn’t want it.” Throughout the film, Connie is teased for her bad judgement when purchasing gifts and her terrible taste in men’s neckties. Her character’s inability to shop seems to parallel her inability to decide on whom she wants to be with, Steve or Carl, and adds to the presentation of her primarily as a mother and widow more than as a woman in her own right. The fun the film pokes at her poor shopping habits is a character judgement on her confidence in her womanhood, a joke that would likely land well with an audience of women primed to be good shoppers from the time they first started reading women’s magazines and journals.

In other articles, women were taught to want to shop, and more exactly, how to want to shop. In the same 1946 issue of *LIFE* in which the SWAN advertisement explored above was featured, appeared the article “Naked at Bergdorf’s: A Shopper’s Dream Takes Place in New York Store.” This photo-essay follows model Stasia Linder as she starts “practically naked” and wanders through the store accompanied by a photographer to capture her living “every shopper’s dream – of starting from scratch on a shopping binge with unlimited funds and nothing to ‘match.’”²⁸⁷ The article advises that Bergdorf Goodman’s department store is the ideal place to live out this fantasy, describing it as “an elegant place with carpeted floors, crystal chandeliers and refined but not supercilious salesgirls.” It continues: “In it one can buy all the beautifully useful and silly things women like. It has \$45 panties, \$75 shoes, \$50,000 sables and swansdown powder puffs for 25¢.”²⁸⁸ Following Stasia around the shop, *LIFE* documents all the finery she picks out starting in a slip and building her outfit from nothing while taking careful consideration about what luxury items she might want.

“Naked at Bergdorf’s” is projecting multiple ideas for women readers to internalize. Firstly, the photo-essay is informing women that shopping to match items they already own is burdensome, and it instils the idea and desire to build a ward-

287 “Naked at Bergdorf’s: A Shopper’s Dream Takes Place in New York Store”, *LIFE*, March 11, 1946, 85, ProQuest.

288 “Naked at Bergdorf”, 85.

robe from scratch. This insistence that women want to shop from lingerie up challenges the fashion concept of “staple pieces”, the garments women would be trying to match while shopping. Instead, it projects the idea that to be a real shopper, one must fantasize about building a wardrobe of outfits rather than a cohesive set of interchangeable garments. This mentality about the wardrobe is designed to convince women to shop regularly and in larger quantities. Secondly, the article is defining the atmosphere of a proper shop being one of grandeur and fanciful, ornate design in which a woman of any class could shop for anything from a cheap powder puff to an elaborate fur and still experience the shopper’s dream of elegance and luxury. Thirdly, “Naked at Bergdorf’s” undercuts all of this by reasserting that the things women want to buy are either useful or silly, tapping into the idea that shopping should be both a practical and a fun experience. Linking these two ideas frames shopping as an activity one can do in most moods, from serious to jovial, while also telling women how to behave and how to want to behave while performing the activity.

The print media’s instructions on how to shop are echoed in the films in this study. *Holiday Affair*’s Connie, as explained above, is repeatedly told she is a bad shopper, that she doesn’t know how to play the part of a shopper well enough. She buys bad gifts, and she knows what she wants when she walks in a store. Stasia Linder shopping in Bergdorf’s doesn’t know what she wants from the experience, so instead wanders the departments staged in photos with shoes of all sorts scattered around her as though she has tried them all, with elegant floor length gowns draped over chairs that she’ll get to next. The prescriptive ideas in both *LIFE Magazine* and *Holiday Affair* suggest there is a correct way to engage with the shopping experience that is expounded on further in some women’s publications and Hollywood films in this era.

The Bishop’s Wife (1947) also plays with this idea of how a woman should shop properly. In the film, Julia (Loretta Young) is shown repeatedly admiring a hat in a store window. She knows she should not spend the money on it, but her admiration for the ornate hat draws her in repeatedly. The relationship between this hat and this presentation of a woman shopping offers a more overt link between Hollywood’s messaging and its shopper audience than any other of the films, as this hat was used as a tie-in for department stores upon release of the film. Following an industry fashion as established and perfected in the 1920s and 1930s, *The Bishop’s Wife* uses Loretta Young’s fame to encourage department stores to recreate the hat and use promotional material from the film to sell it.

Loretta Young, in 1947, would have been no stranger to film tie-ins and exclusive fashion recreations of her filmic outfits in department stores. As Charles Eckert notes in his analysis of Hollywood’s commercial tie-ins, Loretta Young was a starlet used for her fame as an advertising model throughout the 1930s to promote

Hollywood fashions with the “aura of exclusivity” that surrounded her.²⁸⁹ The hat in the pressbook materials, designed to encourage the tie-in, works in the same ways Eckert identifies from the earlier Hollywood commercial practice. As the pressbook states, “In gay relief to the decorous costumes Loretta Young wears in Samuel Goldwyn’s ‘The Bishop Wife’ is an ultra-feminine, breath of spring bonnet.”²⁹⁰ This section of the pressbook continues to outline how to present a re-creation of the hat by a local department store or millinery club and advises that the advert must acknowledge that the hat is a re-creation and not directly from the film.

The language used in the pressbook material functions in the same way *LIFE* Magazine comments on women’s shopping as both “useful and silly”. By describing the hat as a “gay relief” as juxtaposed with the “decorous costumes” of Loretta Young, the intention is to convince the shopper that the hat is a fanciful luxury as opposed to the practical, restrained clothing the character, and likely the shopper, dons on an average day. Describing the hat as “ultra-feminine” and a “breath of spring” additionally underpins the selling point of perceived luxury. With the film release dated for November 1947, the language of the promotional material was intended to inspire thoughts of spring during a cold late-autumn and to highlight the “ultra-feminine” quality of the hat in opposition to practical, restrained clothing. This smart marketing tactic was intended to attract shoppers who may be wearing less-fashionable cold-weather coats or dreaming of warmer weather. The promotional materials for the film, as well as the shopping scenes in which Loretta Young’s character interacts with the hat, are engaging in the same marketing technique as the “Naked at Bergdorf’s” article and Hollywood’s tie-in practices in informing women what they want to buy, why they want to buy it, and how they want to shop for it.

While shopping, the place in which a thing is purchased and the experience had while purchasing it are portrayed on screen and in print as integral aspects to the cultural practice, especially as part of Christmas, the gift-giving holiday. The items chosen to be purchased in the films, however, can indicate economic and social changes in the wider world when scrutinized more closely. With these portrayals from how to be a good consumer and customer in *The Bishop’s Wife* and *Holiday Affair* as well as in the women’s journals of the day, and with the added condemnation of overt commercialism emphasizing profits from *Miracle on 34th Street*, this chapter will now turn to the items that were actually pur-

²⁸⁹ Charles Eckert, “The Carole Lombard in Macy’s Window”, in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (New York: Routledge, 1991), 34.

²⁹⁰ *The Bishop’s Wife* Pressbook, RKO Radio Pictures, 1947, microform, Reuben Library, British Film Institute, 16.

chased with a case study on the changing social perceptions throughout the 15-year period of one item in particular: mink.

Gifts

Gifts at Christmas are a fundamental part of the holiday's observances for many Americans and have been for centuries. The tradition's increasing growth and the linking of gift-giving with consumerism can be seen as reflective of the strength of the American economy through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁹¹ The gift-giving aspect of Christmas as portrayed in the films of this study, therefore, offers a unique perspective on Hollywood's attitudes towards the health of the economy over the period. The portrayal of gift-giving simultaneously offers insight into the reasons people use to justify giving presents and also expectations with regard to the gifts themselves.

Material commodities transferred as gifts throughout the films are sometimes key plot devices – such as the above-mentioned toy train in *Holiday Affair* or the house Susan asks for in *Miracle on 34th Street*. Some gifts are more symbolic gestures, however, such as another prominent gift in *Holiday Affair*: the tacky neckties. Connie, already characterized as a poor shopper, is the punchline of a recurring joke throughout the film focused on her equally poor taste in buying neckties. Connie is known for buying loud, garish ties as gifts for both her late husband and her boyfriend Carl, and this becomes a symbol of her romantic interest. When she gives a necktie intended for Carl to Steve as a gift of reciprocity for Tim's train, Carl becomes irate and concerned, knowing the gesture means that she is open to finding love again and remarrying, only not to him. Similarly symbolic, Steve's gift of the train seems to suggest that Steve would be an attentive, caring, well-communicative father-figure to Tim, having taken into consideration what the boy actually wants for Christmas.

Commodities in these Christmas films take on specific meanings and are used as devices to further story development. Some commodities are also used to convey social status and character growth depending on the interactions characters have with them throughout the film. One such item that is present in several of the films and portrays a variety of meanings and usages is the mink coat. The use of mink in films over the 15-year period offers an interesting focus for a case study to explore the changing attitudes towards one specific area of the market: luxury items. Focusing on the category of luxury goods shows an important

291 Restad, *Christmas in America*, 123.

aspect of wider attitudes concerning commodities. Luxury by nature is something that is not essential for basic comforts, but rather has connotations of extravagance. Mink coats and other fur clothing were once consumed as an absolute necessity to keep warm in bitter winters. However, as that need diminished with better-heated homes, public spaces, and automobiles, mink slid up the spectrum from need to want to luxury.²⁹² From the immediate post-war period through the early 1960s, there were marked changes in the social attitudes towards furs. This case study will examine how that change was received by consumers and reflected in Christmas films released in the 15-year period from 1946 to 1961.

Case Study: The Cultural Life of Mink

Mink clothing has a long history in the United States. Originally, fur clothing was used, as it was for centuries before, as a source of warmth and survival against harsh weather conditions. In the early twentieth century, these survival needs were no longer as ubiquitous, and fur clothing, particularly mink, evolved into a status symbol as a piece of luxury fashion by the mid-century.²⁹³ This development in the uses and perceptions of mink is best seen in the 15-year period of this study and evident in several of the Christmas films within it. Mink, in this period and these films, was used as a status symbol, a political statement, a personality trait, and an indicator of the cultural capital one had in a metropolitan space. Mink's use as both fashion and political statements and its repeated appearances on films from 1946 to 1961 offer a balanced case study to examine the changing attitudes towards not only mink, but also the growing affluence throughout these 15 years. By examining the portrayals of mink across these films and also the fashion and political atmospheres in the real world, it is possible to trace the changes in some market attitudes towards consumption and conclude that Hollywood's cultural media was capturing and reflecting the changing tones in American public attitudes throughout the period.

In the immediate post-war period, fashion designers such as Christian Dior saw a need to bring luxury back to women's wardrobes. With his spring line of 1947 debuting in Paris, Dior later recounted that "We were leaving a period of war, of uniforms, of soldier-women with shoulders like boxers," and sought to

²⁹² Ruth Turner Wilcox, *The Mode in Furs: The History of Furred Costume of the World from the Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), 162.

²⁹³ Wilcox, 162.

bring femininity back to women's fashion.²⁹⁴ His line ushered in fashions that would not hit mainstream American consumers for a few years, but introduced women to the notions of luxurious suits, extravagant hats, and broad, full skirts. On 1 March 1948, *LIFE* magazine ran a five-page story on the man and his new fashion trends dubbed "The New Look."

The article claimed that a nation-wide organization of 300,000 women, the Little Below the Knee Club, "succumbed to the overwhelming pressure of events and admitted that its valiant fight to preserve America from the New Look had ended in defeat" after nearly a year by early 1948. Dior's New Look featured low-cut dresses, higher hems, padded hips, exaggerated hour-glass figures, and sensuous designs for women that ultimately won many admirers in the US.²⁹⁵ After years of the Depression and war rationing, the post-war period was ready for a change – a move towards luxury and finery, albeit at affordable prices. Women, according to Marling, "learned to covet ensembles in which shoes, bags, and even perfume were carefully coordinated by a designer to achieve an artful totality."²⁹⁶ Gradually, from Dior's Parisian debut of the New Look through protests against the trend's immodesty, the American public learned to embrace this lavish, if not excessive, consumer expense as a new necessity of the 1950s.

As the introduction and appropriation of Parisian fashion made its way into the nation's average fashion, the political sphere began to weigh in on the trends. On September 23, 1952, six weeks ahead of the presidential election Republicans Dwight D. Eisenhower and Richard Nixon would win, Nixon as the prospective Vice-President gave a televised speech concerning his personal finances. Five days prior to the speech, allegations were published in the *New York Post* claiming Nixon was being financed by a private trust fund that kept him "in style far beyond his salary" and accused the candidate of misappropriating campaign funds for personal purchases.²⁹⁷ To confront this fund crisis, Nixon delivered the speech claiming that all private fund contributions were accepted appropriately and legally and explicitly used for political matters. The speech was later dubbed the "Checkers Speech" after his black and white cocker spaniel whom Nixon mentions his family received as a gift after winning his first election as a United States Senator in 1950. In mentioning Checkers, as well as discussing his personal and family finances, Nixon successfully diverted attention away from the political implications of his fi-

²⁹⁴ Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 9.

²⁹⁵ Jeanne Perkins, "Dior", *LIFE*, March 1, 1948, 85, ProQuest.

²⁹⁶ Marling, *As Seen on TV*, 10.

²⁹⁷ *New York Post* article quoted in John W. Malsberger, "Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon, and the Fund Crisis of 1952" *The Historian* 73, no. 3 (2011): 526.

nances and towards the sentimentality of his wife, children, and family pet.²⁹⁸ This diversion towards his personal relationships, among other deceptions, helped to mislead the public and shift focus from the questionable details of the accounts and funds, while politicizing certain purchases and gifts including the allegation of his wife owning a mink coat.

The speech was seen by an unprecedented 58 million people and garnered overwhelming support of the candidate after near 8,000 telegrams were sent backing Nixon.²⁹⁹ After this outpouring of support, Eisenhower was convinced to keep Nixon on the ticket for the ensuing election; however, many historians believe this crisis to be a turning-point in the relationship of the president and his Vice-President. Eisenhower's trust in his running mate was diminished from then on, leaving the two men with a tense and even hostile relationship.³⁰⁰ The Checkers speech was a significant moment in the election campaign not only for the eventual President and his Vice-President, but also for the framing of morals in the Republican party. In this speech, Nixon opened his personal accounts to scrutiny and made a crucial but poignant joke on the stance of the Republican party: "Pat doesn't have a mink coat. But she does have a respectable Republican cloth coat, and I always tell her she'd look good in anything."³⁰¹

Following the war, the American economy had recovered slowly. There was a housing crisis in the late 1940s, a slow decrease of the unemployment rate, and a return to some sense of what could be considered a new normal economic status after decades of fluctuation, depression, and world wars. This recovery opened the US to a new form of purchasing power that shifted economic priorities and the definition of what some would label as "essential".³⁰² As Nixon remarks, his wife Pat had a "respectable Republican cloth coat". In the years leading up to this speech, there is evidence from the films in this study of the idea of the cloth coat as a respectable alternative to luxurious, expensive mink. These films, as well as Nixon's remarks, frame mink and furs as a symbol of ill repute and undeserved wealth, a view that would change considerably across the films from the 1950s.

In *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), Violet (Gloria Grahame) comes to George in her hour of need and asks him for a loan so she can start a new life in New York City.

298 "The 'Checkers Speech' (September 23, 1952)", in *Richard Nixon: Speeches, Writings, Documents*, ed. Rick Perlstein (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 76.

299 James Devitt, "Tokens of Deception in the 'Checkers' Speech", *Political Communication*, 15, no. 1 (December 1998): 1.

300 Malsberger, "Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon", 527.

301 "The 'Checkers' Speech", 76.

302 Nigel Whiteley, "Toward a Throw-Away Culture. Consumerism, 'Style Obsolescence' and Cultural Theory in the 1950s and 1960s", *Oxford Art Journal* 10, no. 2 (1987): 8.

Violet feels shamed and disgraced in Bedford Falls owing to her overt sexuality and inability to fit in with the small-town life; she feels living in an urban setting would be more appropriate for her personality and character. While this scene, and the alternative world sequence in Pottersville in which Violet is manhandled and disrespected as a loose woman, can be read as commentaries on the juxtaposition of urban versus small-town life, George makes an offhanded joke that also highlights the disparity between Violet's character and the respectability portrayed by others. George hands Violet money from his own pocket for her move to New York and, in her hesitancy to take it, he asks, "what do you want to do, hock your furs, and that hat?" George's comment is a quick joke but embedded within it is the view many Americans had towards fur and young single women: that furs could represent a part of a woman, be it her personality or physical body.

Clothing in general is often used as a symbol of a person's character, personality, social class, gender, or other outward presentation of the self. Theories around clothing and fashion sense are particularly helpful for analyzing filmic representations of characters. As Patrizia Calefato writes, in cinema "every sign on the body of a character has a precise meaning, linked to social characterization, historical identity, grotesque emphasis, transformation in terms of personality or feeling, and so on."³⁰³ The signs on the body often transcend a scene's audio and offer a new avenue of visual interpretation for the characters portrayed, allowing one to read how the characters present themselves. Calefato continues, "in the great sense-making machine of cinema, costume represents yet another signifying system, the signs of which become distinctive features, functioning as linguistic units that are often more important than script or soundtrack."³⁰⁴ Violet's furs are indicative not only of her fashion sense, but even more so of her personality and the person she presents herself as.

In a study on mink in film noir, Petra Dominkova discusses the use of furs strategically on screen. She writes that fur in this period was often used as a point of personality for a character and as a juxtaposition between two women: films can "differentiate between the woman in mink as a rotten, selfish dame and an unpredictable force, and her mink-less antithesis, the maternal 'good' woman who cares about her child and household."³⁰⁵ In the scenes involving Violet, she is distinguished from characters such as George's wife Mary (Donna Reed) not only due to her personality but also explicitly due to the furs she wears. Mary

³⁰³ Patrizia Calefato, *The Clothed Body*, trans. Lisa Adams (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 91.

³⁰⁴ Calefato, 91.

³⁰⁵ Petra Dominkova, "I Want That Mink! *Film Noir* and Fashion", in *If Looks Could Kill: Cinema's Images of Fashion, Crime and Violence*, ed. Marketa Uhlirova (London: Koenig Books and Fashion in Film Festival, 2008), 140.

is always dressed in plain, sensible clothing, never overtly glamorous. Violet, on the other hand, is repeatedly referencing her own clothing with her on-screen presence dominated by acknowledgements of the way she looks.

In one scene at the beginning of the film, Violet, in a beautiful seemingly satin day dress and matching hat, stops to say hello to George who is speaking with Bert the cop (Ward Bond) and Ernie the cab driver (Frank Faylen). George comments on her appearance saying “Hey, you look good. That’s some dress you got on there” to which Violet responds with a hair flick, “Oh, this old thing? I only wear it when I don’t care how I look.” This is the first introduction of an adult Violet in the film, immediately objectified for her outward appearance and enjoying the attention it attracts. One man stops in his tracks in the middle of the street as she walks by, stopping traffic to watch her walk away. George, Bert, and Ernie are visibly flustered by their own sexualizing of her, taking a moment to snap back to reality. This scene introduces the sexualizing of Violet that will continue throughout the rest of the film and was initially perceived as such, so much so that the Production Code Administration (PCA) flagged it as “unacceptable because of its offensive sex suggestiveness.”³⁰⁶

In her moment of vulnerability, when she asks for help from George in starting over, Violet drops the pretense of the confident, strong woman she has portrayed thus far. That George jokes that she would sell her furs or hat with fur on it is indicative of her options: she may either change her personality and powerful presence by selling the furs, or she can take his money and continue living with the air of glamorous superiority. This moment of vulnerability is an intense one for her, bringing her to tears, as she recognizes she is not comfortable in the small town under the reputation by which she has come to be known by her neighbors. When George delivers this joke, he frames it as absurd that Violet would even consider selling the furs, knowing her outward presentation as confident, ambitious, sexual, and powerful is important to her sense of self.

With this theoretical view of the importance of clothing, and furs specifically, as tied inherently to filmic characters’ personalities, this line from George can be read as almost metaphorical of Violet selling part of herself to start her new life in New York City. Repeatedly, in the PCA files for *It’s a Wonderful Life*, there are notes regarding the “characterization of Violet as a prostitute” through allusions and unfinished sentences in the script that sparked concern within the PCA.³⁰⁷ These files do not note the use of fur as part of Violet’s over-sexual behavior. However, the

³⁰⁶ Correspondence from Joseph I. Breen, “Page 4: March 6, 1946”, *It’s a Wonderful Life*, Motion Picture Association of America – Production Code Administration Records, Margaret Herrick Library Digital Collections, digital ID 102_074357_p003.

³⁰⁷ Breen.

choices made in dressing Violet, the use of furs in the final cut of the film, and the joke made by George about selling her furs – a part of her personality – in order to start her new life in metropolitan New York do fall in line with contemporary portrayals of fur in other films from the decade as analyzed by Dominkova. Violet's furs and George's comments point to the familiar ill-repute and negative connotations of fur that audiences in the immediate post-war period may have brought to the film.

In the following year, 1947, two films make mention of furs in more substantial ways. In *Christmas Eve*, Michael (George Brent) is courting a wealthy woman, Harriet (Molly Lamont), with the intention of proposing to her. Michael does not love this woman and has a girlfriend on the side. However, he feels he must marry Harriet, claiming the marriage is “destiny”, to gain her family's fortunes so he may pay off his own overwhelming debts. In order to propose, he purchases on credit a \$32,000 sable coat, a blue sapphire, and other expensive gifts far exceeding his own finances. Harriet rejects his proposal, but keeps the coat and jewelry, leaving Michael broke and helpless without the option of returning the coat for a refund. He believed the fur and other expensive gifts would solve his financial problems by securing him a rich wife, but the coat damages him further and is referenced multiple times throughout the film as a needless waste of money. This representation of a fur coat as a meddlesome, wasteful garment echoes the negative connotations surrounding fur in this period as confirmed five years later by Nixon in his Checkers speech.

Likewise, *It Happened on 5th Avenue* (1947) has a more sentimental portrayal of mink that directly supports Vice-Presidential candidate Nixon's later views. When Trudy (Gale Storm) returns to her father's mansion to find an outfit for a job interview, she discovers Mac (Victor Moore) and Jim (Don DeFore) squatting in the house. She disguises herself as a thief and says she only needs to borrow a coat, promising she will return it after the interview. Mac allows her access to a coat on the condition she does not take the mink, “but something less expensive.” Later in the film, for Christmas, Jim gives Trudy a cloth coat and says, “It may not be mink, but you sure make it look like it.” Trudy says she cannot accept the gift because he does not have the money for it to which Jim replies, “well, it's Christmas.” In this exchange and the former comment on mink's expense, Dominkova's observation that mink is a personality indicator is confirmed. Trudy begins the film as a wealthy and errant teenager who owns and wears mink coats, but through the course of her humbling character arc, she becomes more compassionate, more endearing, and more sensitive to the luxuries she enjoyed in her former life. Trudy cries and leaves the room, touched by Jim's gift of a cloth coat, embracing the shift towards respectability and her newfound desire to marry Jim and settle down in a way she earlier resisted. By not giving Trudy a mink coat for Christ-

mas, Jim allowed Trudy to complete her character arc into a more domestic, “maternal ‘good’ woman”.³⁰⁸

Nixon’s remarks on mink coats and the contrasting idea of a respectable Republican cloth coat are reflective of a prevalent view within his contemporary culture on the subject of mink. Prior to World War II, throughout the 1920s and 30s, mink was a staple in many people’s wardrobes for its practical usage; however, due to the war effort demand on resources, this style of coat became scarce.³⁰⁹ The later 1940s witnessed years of a post-war economy working its way back to a sense of normalcy and meeting the fresh demands of a peacetime market, including recovering products, such as fur garments, back from the scarcity they had experienced during the war. This reintroduction of mink and other furs to the market stabilized throughout the 1950s while maintaining the perception of fur as a luxurious status symbol. From the early 1950s onwards, however, as the economy stabilized and grew healthily, popular attitudes towards the acceptability of owning and wearing mink for classes below the wealthiest did begin to change with help from one person in particular: First Lady Mamie Eisenhower.

By 1952, the American fashion business had turned to cheaper imitations of Paris’s most popular new trends. This greater accessibility for the lower-income general population, combined with the economy beginning to recover from the post-war housing crisis and income inequality, helped to garner widespread support and appreciation among American shoppers. One such admirer of Dior’s New Look, the arguable pioneer of the New Look in mainstream America, was Mrs. Mamie Eisenhower, First Lady of the United States from 1953 to 1961. Mamie Eisenhower’s love for fashion was well-known and she was herself well-photographed, appearing in both national and international publications even before her husband became president. No stranger to hunting for a good bargain, Mamie gleefully recounted stories of shopping in Macy’s and Bloomingdale’s department stores for the mass-produced American versions of Parisian vogue.³¹⁰ As a fashion icon for the American market during the booming consumer culture of the 1950s, the First Lady’s style choices set a standard for the American woman with many accessories and ensembles. One accessory that gained historic renown and signified a newfound American obsession with fashion essentials was the mink coat.

In a publicized tour of the executive mansion in December after the 1952 election, three months after Nixon’s Checkers Speech, soon-to-be-former First Lady

³⁰⁸ Dominkova, “I Want That Mink!”, 140.

³⁰⁹ Dominkova, 138.

³¹⁰ Marling, *As Seen on TV*, 20–23.

Bess Truman and First Lady-elect Mamie Eisenhower posed under the portico for a picture, with Mamie in a floor-length mink coat. When prodded by the press about the material of the expensive-looking coat, she replied, overjoyed, “Mink, of course.”³¹¹ Mamie’s pleasure in revealing that she owned a mink coat fewer than three months after Nixon’s smart remark about the respectability of a “Republican cloth coat” is indicative of a shifting sense of acceptability in terms of owning mink. As one fashion writer, Ruth Turner Wilcox, wrote in her 1951 book *The Mode in Furs* concerning the state of fur in fashions worldwide, “A truly wonderful fairy tale is the saga of furs.” That saga recounted the new ability for men and women in the modern world to wear furs not out of a necessity for warmth and survival as primitive peoples did, but rather for luxury. She continues: “We have come a long way from the severe sumptuary decrees of olden times in which only aristocracy was permitted to own and wear fine furs and when even nobility, if not of royal blood, was told what width their fur trimming might be.”³¹² While some of her points are contentious – including one in which she writes that “the luxury of the fur garment is available to people in all walks of life” – her words in 1951 are representative of a growing change abroad that would make its way to the United States in the ensuing years. This change of more people gaining access to the luxuries that once belonged only to the highest social classes and aristocracies around the world was made even more evident by Mamie Eisenhower’s mink in 1952.

That the First Lady of the United States could own a mink coat in the early 1950s – and proudly wear it – was an important moment for the visibility of the health of the American economy. Mamie Eisenhower was, as noted above, both a fashion icon and also, as one historian describes her, “an avatar of 1950s consumption-oriented US society, that society that had been so recently scarred by the depredations and collective trauma of the Great Depression and World War II.”³¹³ This consumption-oriented society was made possible by the growing health of the economy throughout the 1950s and the dawn of what John Kenneth Galbraith termed in 1958 “the affluent society”.

In *The Affluent Society*, Galbraith maps the ways in which American society had changed economically since WWII and how those economic changes impacted American culture. He concludes that the growth of consumption and the current

³¹¹ Marling, 31.

³¹² Wilcox, *The Mode in Furs*, 162.

³¹³ Anthony Rama Maravillas, “Overrated Pleasures and Underrated Treasures: Mamie Eisenhower; a Bridge between First Lady Archetypes”, in *A Companion to First Ladies*, ed. Katherine A. S. Sibley, Wiley Blackwell Companions to American History (Chichester, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 492–502.

direction of American capitalism in overproduction was not necessary, as goods were being mass produced to a point of abundance and waste. Galbraith's argument is that the overproduction in the US was due to a "highly irrational emphasis" on an ever-increasing economic growth.³¹⁴ This needless production, he concludes, needed immediate attention so that the abundance could be redistributed to areas and peoples who need it more than the increasing "New Class" – a class above working poverty but below any perceived aristocracy. Overproduction of frivolous products, ultimately leading to waste, allowed for the emerging middle class, the New Class, to engage with consumerism on a personal level without thinking about the utility, or lack thereof, of the abundance of goods and misuse of resources in society that could be redirected "to eradicate remaining pockets of poverty" in the US.³¹⁵ This apparent call to socialist action was a difficult message to persuade Americans of, as the "extra production was adding nothing (or almost nothing) to well-being" for many once they were within the New Class.³¹⁶

The New Class, as Galbraith writes, emerged from the disappearing leisure class in the United States. The New Class was not exclusive, but rather was growing exponentially; according to Galbraith, "while virtually no one leaves it, thousands join it every year" with the primary prerequisite qualifications being education and the desire to enjoy one's work.³¹⁷ This class was different from the leisure class because it focused on "earned income" and the perception that working an enjoyable job in a surplus society rewarded the worker with comfortable wages with which to buy luxuries. The emphasis on "earned income" replaced the aristocratic ideals of an older leisure class with the perceived new moral superiority of working for one's comforts and luxuries. Here, in this idea of earned income affording luxuries, is how Mamie Eisenhower's statement affirming her coat was "mink, of course" aided in shifting popular American perceptions of mink as no longer a garment of ill-repute to be disrespected, but rather a new kind of luxury status symbol: luxury that was earned.

Mink in the mid-1950s was a cultural signifier of opulence and desire rooted in this culture of the New Class, as opposed to the earlier view of it as disreputable as expressed by then-Vice-Presidential candidate Nixon and in the earlier films discussed. In the 1954 film *Susan Slept Here*, for example, Mark (Dick Powell) gifts a mink stole to Susan (Debbie Reynolds) as she is expressing her wishes to be beau-

314 Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 93.

315 Robert M. Whaples, "Why Didn't Galbraith Convince Us That America Is an Affluent Society?", *The Independent Review* 24, no. 4 (Spring 2020): 582.

316 Whaples, 584.

317 Galbraith, *The Affluent Society*, 219.

tiful and desirable with “clothes that are really with it.” Her first reaction is to say that she cannot accept it, and when Mark insists that she take the mink, Susan’s demeanor changes as she asks incredulously, “a mink? A real mink?” The conversation continues:

Mark: Mhmm. That’s for being a good cook.

Susan: Imagine me in a mink. You know, Mr. Christopher, some girls would do anything for a mink.

Mark: I heard. And now, Susan, you’re the perfect combination for any man: beauty within and beauty without. [*Wolf whistles at her*] There you got your whistle. Now go look at yourself in the mirror.

Susan: Mr. Christopher?

Mark: Yes?

Susan: I can’t look in the mirror.

Mark: Why not?

Susan: If I see myself in it, I’ll never take it off.

Mark: Then never take it off.

The mink stole for Susan is a symbol of desire and elevates her appearance and, therefore, perceived value to men. Captivated by even the *idea* of herself wearing a mink, she refrains from looking in the mirror knowing the moment can only be a fantasy in her current financial situation. In response to Mark’s insistence that she keep it, Susan asks if he would like her to kiss him, explaining “because you gave me a mink.” Mark responds, “absolutely not – [it] wasn’t that kind of mink” implying that mink itself can take on certain characteristics depending on the context in which it is given, with the most common and expected characteristic one of a sexual transaction, as heavily implied in *It’s a Wonderful Life*. This portrayal of mink in *Susan Slept Here*, however, is not connoted as disreputable or particularly depraved. It merely underlines the fact that, in the mid-1950s, mink began to take on multiple characteristics with one of them still carrying the sexual connotations from earlier times.

Views of mink throughout the rest of the 1950s continued to foreground opulence and desire. Some women did still harbor views of mink and other fur garments as indicative of the wearer’s overt sexuality, according to an investigative marketing report by the *Chicago Tribune* in 1958. The social scientists producing the report interviewed 128 women from Chicago and the surrounding suburbs inquiring about their attitudes towards furs and concluded that some apprehension towards wearing mink publicly was still evident due to these older concerns from

the 1940s connecting fur with immorality; however, women with these views were predominantly older middle-class housewives. Younger women from the working world and upper middle class and above were far more comfortable with the idea of wearing furs, either extravagant ones for the wealthier or within their means for the lower-income women.³¹⁸ For most women in the study, however, mink specifically was seen as a desirable, even aspirational commodity despite any concerns about sexually charged connotations. This conclusion is also supported by the answers to a Gallup poll question from December 1958 asking women “If you could have your choice, what one present would you most like to have for Christmas?”, in which a mink coat (though unranked) was among the most common answers.³¹⁹

Three years after those Gallup answers highlighting mink as a most preferred gift for Christmas and the *Chicago Tribune*’s marketing study concluding most younger women across economic classes interviewed were either comfortable with the idea of wearing furs or saw them as aspirational commodities, Frank Capra released *Pocketful of Miracles* (1961). The final film in this study, *Pocketful of Miracles* offers an interesting perception of luxury in 1961 that will be treated more fully in Chapter 5. The mink coat in this film is a part of a larger makeover from rags to riches and shows this gradual emergence of mink from scornful in the 1940s to aspirational in the early 1960s. Such a coat not only exudes luxury as an abstract concept, but also buys the wearer access to spaces she would not have been welcome in before as part of a juxtaposition of two extremes of the social and economic spectrum.

Capra’s *Pocketful of Miracles* shows very clearly the distinctions between the lowest and poorest class and the highest wealthy class. In his 1961 remake, Capra expanded on the 1933 version of the story and added modern dimensions to the portrayal of the rags-to-riches motif that would elevate Annie to the status acceptable for engaging with “society” by contemporary 1960s standards and granting her access to the wealthy spaces in New York City. Annie’s transformation is more than solely through her clothing, encompassing her appearance, posture, mannerisms, speech, and more to play the part of the noblewoman. However, the articles chosen to make her appear to be wealthy are crucial and cannot be taken for granted. The furs Annie dons as Mrs. E. Worthington Manville are integral to convincing the Count and others that she is the noblewoman they assume her to be. Furs, by 1961, had become so acceptable in the mainstream vision of the

318 “Women’s Attitudes Toward Furs” (Chicago Tribune, 1958), 15, Hathi Trust.

319 Gallup, *The Gallup Poll*, vol. 2, 1584.

upper classes that the transition from poverty to nobility was best articulated on screen through the addition of them to the main character's wardrobe.

Conclusion

The quotation opening this chapter – “A lot of bad ‘isms’ floating around this world, but one of the worst is ‘commercialism’” – begs the question of whether commercialism was truly commonly seen as critically as projected by Alfred's character in *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947). This chapter has examined the critiques of commercialism and consumerism across the Christmas films in this study, as well the real-world connections drawn between those on-screen and off-screen stores and shoppers. In the late 1940s, suspicion around commercialism is represented in the films, with shoppers and businesses to some degree being shown how properly to engage with each other. Throughout the 1950s, attitudes towards consumption began to change as the “age of affluence” grew and consumerism adapted to the average customer's increasing spending habits.

These early projections of commercialism and consumerism in the films of the late 1940s show how Hollywood tackled the pressures of a post-war economy now on the verge of recovery in films such as *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947), *The Bishop's Wife* (1947), and *Holiday Affair* (1949). Macy's is depicted as “the store with a heart” for allegedly putting humanity before profits while also exploiting that humanity for profits. Ultimately, the good deeds accomplished through the goodwill policy are meant to leave the audience with a positive view of department stores and shopping altogether. In *Miracle on 34th Street*, there is a paradoxical dichotomy drawn between commercialism and consumerism that emphasizes that profits are crass and selfish while also arguing that maximizing profits is decidedly good if secured by listening to the consumer. This view of commercialism as potentially moralistic – offering a moral judgement on how commercialism should be injected into Christmas traditions – echoes the debates in *It's a Wonderful Life*, emphasizing the moralistic alternative to monopolistic capitalism as explored in Chapter 1.

Holiday Affair similarly can be mapped onto this dichotomy of commercialism and consumerism. Despite being set up as a rugged individualist who hates all aspects of commercialism, Steve is selfless with his money and buys Connie's son the toy train he truly wants for Christmas. Connie, as a comparative shopper, is presented as representative of the negative profit-driven side of department stores and also ridiculed for her poor shopping habits in general. This ridicule is reflective of the instructional stories and articles in women's publications of the late 1940s and early 1950s educating women and girls about how to be good consumers

with various tips and tricks as well as advise on how they should feel about shopping. Hollywood's inclusion of this ridicule of Connie as a bad shopper reflects such attitudes from the wider culture about how properly to engage with consumerism and commercialism as the economy grows.

Social attitudes towards the rebuilding economy are helpfully seen in these films through the examination of luxury items, notably mink. As the economy strengthened in the 1950s, social attitudes towards luxuries became more favorable. In this period of growth and economic development spurred on by increased consumption, mink gained in popularity and shed some of the negative connotations that had been attached to it in the 1940s. These changing attitudes towards mink are evident in at least five films spanning the 15-year period from 1946 to 1961. When taken together, the films show a changing wider cultural perception towards this luxury item culminating in 1961 when mink is increasingly socially acceptable, now understood as a glamorous status symbol but without its more critical connotations from earlier times. The furs worn by Bette Davis's Apple Annie in *Pocketful of Miracles*, although they set her apart from the lowest classes, were not explicitly discussed in the film, an implicit acknowledgement perhaps of the growing social acceptability attached to wearing a fur by 1961.

Commercialism and consumerism in the 1940s and 1950s went through many different iterations. The sentiment of Alfred that commercialism was one of the worst "isms" was quickly undercut by the uses made of it in *Miracle on 34th Street*. As the post-war economy expanded into the age of affluence, films no longer showed commercialism as something which needed to be policed and consumers were no longer portrayed as needing instruction on how to engage with shopping as an experience. The Christmas films in this study do not stand alone in reflecting these changes. However, they do offer a unique perspective through which to explore the pressures and economic changes of the post-war period.

In showing how Christmas films adapted due to wider cultural and social changes in this 15-year period, this chapter highlights a consistent theme in the genre. Emphases on commercialism and consumerism are mainstays in the Christmas film genre as an integral part of how Americans celebrate the holiday. The next chapter will take a similar overarching perspective on the same 15-year period but in place of a theme, it will follow the evolution of two filmmakers: Walt Disney and Frank Capra. Having in previous chapters established the changing tone of the genre as a result of the many political, economic, social, and cultural factors throughout this post-war, early Cold War period, Chapter 5 will examine the consequences those factors had on each filmmaker and their 1961 productions, *Babes in Toyland* and *Pocketful of Miracles*.