



Complicated Women: Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood

Mick LaSalle

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Between 1929 and 1934, women in American cinema were modern! For five short years women in American cinema were modern! They took lovers, had babies out of wedlock, got rid of cheating husbands, enjoyed their sexuality, led unapologetic careers and, in general, acted the way many think women only acted after 1968.

Before then, women on screen had come in two varieties - good or bad - sweet ingenue or vamp. Then two stars came along to blast away these common stereotypes. Garbo turned the femme fatale into a woman whose capacity for love and sacrifice made all other human emotions seem pale. Meanwhile, Norma Shearer succeeded in taking the ingenue to a place she'd never been: the bedroom. Garbo and Shearer took the stereotypes and made them complicated.

In the wake of these complicated women came others, a deluge of indelible stars - Constance Bennett, Ruth Chatterton, Mae Clarke, Claudette Colbert, Marlene Dietrich, Kay Francis, Ann Harding, Jean Harlow, Miriam Hopkins, Dorothy Mackaill, Barbara Stanwyck, Mae West and Loretta Young all came into their own during the pre-Code era. These women pushed the limits and shaped their images along modern lines.

Then, in July 1934, the draconian Production Code became the law in Hollywood and these modern women of the screen were banished, not to be seen again until the code was repealed three decades later.

Mick LaSalle, film critic for the San Francisco Chronicle, takes readers on a tour of pre-Code films and reveals how this was the true golden age of women's films and how the movies of the pre-Code are still worth watching. The bold, pioneering and complicated women of the pre-Code era are about to take their place in the pantheon of film history, and America is about to reclaim a rich legacy.

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