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In the pre-Code Hollywood era, between 1929 and 1934, women in American cinema 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-sweet ingenue or vamp. Then two stars came along: Greta Garbo, who turned the femme fatale into a woman whose capacity for love and sacrifice made all other human emotions seem pale; and Norma Shearer, who succeeded in taking the ingenue to a place she'd never been: the bedroom. In their wake came a deluge of other complicated women-Marlene Dietrich, Jean Harlow, and Mae West, to name a few. 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became the law in Hollywood and these modern women of the screen were banished, not to be seen again until the code was repealed three decades later.

A thorough survey and a tribute to these films, *Complicated Women* reveals how this was the true Golden Age of women's films.

Complicated Women: Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood Details

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From Reader Review *Complicated Women: Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood* for online ebook

Jenny says

Entertaining and informative history of women's roles in the pre-code (late 20's - early 30's) era. Warning: this book will make you want to see all of the films mentioned in it! But that's a GOOD thing.

Jennifer says

I'm very angry about this book, and the way LaSalle talks about women. Clearly this book is the product of the early 00's, but even then I can't imagine this book was considered a forward-thinking book. I've never read a book this anti-woman while being this pro female sexuality.

I've taken some serious time to ruminate on this book and digest why I am upset with it. My main reasons boil down to the condescending tone of the book, LaSalle's madonna/whore complex with Garbo and Shearer, and LaSalle's insistence that any movie post-code enforcement cannot be feminist or liberating.

The condescension isn't something you can really get around or talk about aside from that it exists, so I'm going to skip over that and move on to the other two things I hated. First off was the tendency to glorify Greta Garbo as a latter day Madonna figure, often speaking of her with overt religious references and overtones. Contrast this to his tendency to immediately before or after these rhapsodic passages, talk about Norma Shearer like she was a degenerate whore. I just--you know what? Let me copy/paste my rant via IM about this, because that captures it better than anything I can write post-finishing this crap. (Full disclosure, it also features way more swearing than my usual reviews do.)

Jennifer Lee:

He keeps completely writing off the late thirties and the entirety of the forties because they fall under the realm of the production code, so clearly there can be nothing liberating or feminist about those movies.

He continues to be condescending about actresses and their performances while at the same time fetishizing their on-screen personas.

He seems to find no value in pre-code films that stick to what I'll call the "traditional" formula for couples.

And he ascribes to the virgin/whore dichotomy but slightly twisted, where the virgin becomes a long-suffering saint and the whore becomes a "slut with a gold heart."

I am literally only continuing to read this so I can eviscerate it on goodreads.

Also, the embodiment of his slut is Norma Shearer, while he waxes rhapsodic about Garbo's suffering saint performances. It's hella icky.

Longsuffering Friend:

That book still. Ah.

Word

Jennifer Lee:

OKAY HAS THIS ASS EVEN *WATCHED* A PRE-CODE MUSICAL?????????
"COMPARE FAVORABLY TO TECHNICOLOR MUSICALS FROM THE LATER
DECADES" WHAT THE HELL IS THIS BASTARD EVEN ON?
HE LIKES THEM BECAUSE THERE ARE TITS.
THAT IS LITERALLY HIS REASONING.
THEY SHOW NUDITY SO THEY'RE AS GOOD AS ROGERS AND HAMMERSTIEN.
FUCK YOU, YOU LASCIVIOUS JERK.
Jerk may take some of the acid out of that last comment, there, but I couldn't think of a good
enough profanity.
"DRAINED OF LIFE AND SPONTANEITY?????????"
MICK LASALLE, I AM FUCKING *COMING* FOR YOU.
Hagrid voice DO NOT INSULT GENE KELLY IN FRONT OF ME!

Longsuffering Friend:

gaaaaaaasp

the piano and crowd fall silent in every saloon in the country

Jennifer Lee:

*grumbles about how I may not like American in Paris either, but there was no need to call it
pessimistic and depressing, for Christ's sake*

Yup. I'm going to issue a personal challenge to Mick LaSalle and fight him. I may not win, me
being really horrible at any kind of fighting, but I'll do my best to defend the honor of the late
thirties, the forties, and the fifties. And also to get back at him for liking pre-code musicals
because they have nudity.

Um, did.

Did I just read that right?

So, for the whole book he's been praising these women and these movies for the sexual
freedom and their feminism, and now, when he's talking about a movie where a wife cheats on
her husband and refuses to apologize, he gets all "Well, this is too much."

Longsuffering Friend:

Men. Are. Scum.

Jennifer Lee:

And I quote: "It gets worse. Next thing, she's blaming him."

The speech he quotes from to support this? The opening line he quotes is "Whatever's
happened, some of it's your fault, some of it." She goes on to talk about how he's cold to her
and she'd rather he never forgive her if it means she gets a man who "makes you so dizzy you
don't know what's happened and you don't care!"

Oh, ouch. He just called a scene where a woman is trying to figure out who was in her bed last
night "funny." Because she cringes every time a man says hello to her.

Oh, and two paragraphs later, a woman who abandons her child to feed her cocaine addiction is
wrong when she says there's something missing from her soul, because according to this ass,
"maybe she has a little *extra* something."

Wait, not abandons. "neglects to the point of malnourishment."

not my impressed face

Like, I'm not saying all women have to be bastions of wifely good humor and motherhood
(obviously) but I fail to find anything particularly admirable about child abuse. Which
apparently LaSalle does? Or seems to? His implication isn't that the role is daring and therefore

interesting compared to films made during the code, but that it is a type of woman to aspire to be?

His whole point through this chapter is confusing and not well thought out, though, so.

Longsuffering Friend:

Hmmm

Jennifer Lee:

I really want to force Mick LaSalle to say things like, "rape is bad and I will not find it humorous when a woman flinches at men who say hello to her" and "sometimes men are the ones at fault in the breakup of a relationship and I should not try to pretend it's unreasonable for a woman to call a man out on this."

Longsuffering Friend:

Make him say it 100 times

Jennifer Lee:

"Women are not objects for me to fetishize, no matter how many movies they appeared in, or how many sheer dresses they wore."

glares at this two-page soliloquy on how the production code forcing filmmakers to be subtle is a myth

It's not that his points are wrong, it's just that he's making condescending blanket statements about his points.

Mollie says

Fascinating subject and wonderfully written book. These actresses deserve so much more recognition than what they get. Wow.

Sarah Fields says

I have some disagreements with LaSalle's assessment of Pre-Codes. He makes them out to be much more progressive than they are and is harder on the films that came after 1934 than I think is fair. I do agree that the representation of women between 1929 and 34 was more complicated, as LaSalle says. They did often subvert certain gender norms and cultural expectations, but they were also products of their time and could be just as misogynistic as any film made later. If anything, many of the films were more honest and harsh about it and subverted things like rape culture almost accidentally because in their efforts to be the most shocking or sensational they dropped the romantic filter that distorts the violence and oppression of patriarchy.

All that said, I think part of why I liked the book so much was that I disagreed in places but remained engaged in the "conversation". LaSalle's style is incredibly accessible and he knows a lot about these films. It made those places where I disagreed feel like a stimulating debate and fueled my fascination. The book made me want to learn more and understand more and I think that's the best compliment I could give any

piece of historical research.

This period of Hollywood history is one of its most interesting and even if you don't know a lot about these movies to begin with this book is a great place to start. Historical and thematic context can be incredibly helpful in understanding and engaging with these films if you aren't already familiar with them and there really is no better place to start than this book (other than maybe the documentary made based on the book). It is a great primer and will add depth and complexity to how you view them.

Blueglass says

I was really excited to read this book since I love watching Pre-Code films. However, I had not realized that this book was mainly focused on Norma Schearer and Greta Garbo, with just a glancing over of all the other fine actresses of the era. Also, it was repetitive at times and could have used more editing. The last chapter about "current" actresses being compared to Pre-Code actresses could have been scrapped. It added nothing to the topic. I found the way the author wrote to be distracting. It was too conversational in tone and too opinionated. However, I did find some important nuggets of information, like essential movies to watch. I will be on the look out for those!

Magnus Stanke says

I can't praise this book enough. It's the Best, together with the 'sequel' Dangerous Men!!!

Complicated Women is intelligent, highly readable, informative and perceptive in equal measure. It tells the story of the Pre-Codes (uncensored Hollywood films between 1929 and 1934) in the best possible context, with just enough examples and synopsis to make its points without ever becoming boring or overbearing. As I'm writing this in early 2018, the entertainment world (and not only that) is at a crossroads, shaken and stirred about the shameful abuse of power by industry men; where nearly every day the lines of demarcation are newly defined, fought over and declared 'overstepped'; when, maybe more than ever, the role of women in the movie industry is getting a timely look at.

Complicated Women takes us back to a time when film became modern, recognisable (in the 20s, as opposed to the teens when flickering images looked otherworldly, Victorian), and when, for a short while, women on screen were allowed to be just that, women, without the audience being told necessarily what to think of them. Just before the self-proclaimed guardians of moral rectitude enforced their rigid views on them, and by extension, the rest of the world.

The only, tiny shortcoming of this book, where LaSalle is slightly off, is when he talks about contemporary Hollywood films (i.e. the 90s when he was writing/researching) because, unlike everything that went before, that part feels a little dated already.

Marvelous book. Highly recommended

Tereneh says

I fell in love with fashion because of the movies from the 1930s and 40s. What I failed to realize until I read this book is how much I actually missed by not seeing more pre-code films. What a loss what a waste of talent and we are still living with the ramifications. Worth reading.

My only wish is that the author would mention race, i think he did once "black maids." I am bored with the idea that when we talk about women in American history we only mean white women. That is as limiting as only talking about men.

But all in all a great lesson, quick and easy non-academic read.

Bruce says

The preponderance of this book covers the female stars of Pre-Code Hollywood. The movies and actresses of this era reflected the new freedoms women had obtained as a result of changes in society. In the movies women were empowered and on an equal footing as men. Sex and romance combined to provide moviegoers an idea of the new society. Stars like Norma Shearer and Greta Garbo exuded a sensuality that enticed men and women into the movies. Alas, reality was not to last. Anti-Semitic misogynists such as Joseph Breen, Christian fundamentalist (Roman Catholic and Protestant), and the Legion of Decency saw to it that strict moralistic 19th century propaganda was placed on the screen. Woman was subservient to man. A man could commit adultery and would always be taken back by a smiling wife. If his wife also cheated then she bore the consequences by dying. It was forbidden to portray independent women succeeding and having a good life. As a result, the Pre-Code film makers and the actresses lost their appeal as they were confined by strictures of the code. It wasn't until the last decades of the last century that the code was done away with, but the damage was done. No longer was romance and sex intertwined. Joseph Breen and his Legion of Decency has given us a 'cold-blooded and often depraved cinema that gives us sex with no humanity, feeling, or tenderness. Unfortunately, it seems there are those in this country that want us to return to the censorship which exposes their propaganda for their idea of morality.

Creolecat says

An excellent documentary based on LaSalle's book airs on TCM from time to time. Perhaps one day they'll release it on DVD.

James says

This is a book about the onset of censorship in Hollywood and its attack on women, mostly headed up by TADA! the religious right and the Catholic church. The same sort of evil clowns who brought you the 50's comic code. Women were advancing, progressive and permissive roles were shown on the silver screen; that had to stop.

I only remember a handful of the movies listed in this work and I'm not old enough to have seen them in

theaters, but for those LaSalle's descriptions are spot on. The author is in love with his subject and the prose is a bit gushy, it would be hard to pick a few films from the list of 200 hundred to watch since many get the royal treatment. What would be great (but impossible) would be a DVD with appropriate film clips, which is something he probably does for his classes.

There is a film documentary done in 2003, might be fun to watch.

Rama says

The fascinating history of the pre-code Hollywood

This is a fascinating book that discusses the movies produced during pre code period of 1929-1934 and evaluates the impact it had on the careers of Hollywood's leading ladies. The movies of Norma Shearer and Greta Garbo are extensively discussed along with many other leading ladies and how it impacted the studios and the Hollywood culture. Shearer was a smiling subversive and her most characteristic film is the *Divorcee* and *Riptide* in which she portrays as woman of questionable morals in spite of being married. In *Divorcee* (1930) she has an affair with her husband's best friend after she finds out that he cheated on her. Her roles explored women's feelings about love, and sex with honesty. Greta Garbo's *Mata Hari*, *Camille*, and *Two Faced woman* were also similar in character and spirit. Garbo's *Queen Christina* explored bisexuality; that was the most daring examination of gender and sex the studio system ever produced. The author observes, despite some daring stuff and no matter how far off from the societal values, Garbo's movies had touching Christian allegories to assert divine faith that enriches the power of love and passion

Dorothy Mackaill, a hard drinking Ziegfeld Follies girl turned actress, was a strong contender of the roles of Jean Harlow in early 1930s, analyzed the effect of war on Hollywood and its portrayal women's sexual freedom as a logical change in values and none of the old taboos can affect them. Shearer began working with director Monta Bell; he shaped her career like Josef Von Sternberg did for Marlene Dietrich, and G.W. Pabst for Louise Brooks. Joan Crawford, Jean Harlow, Marlene Dietrich, were also in top of the pack. They were like Lindberg for speed. From New York stage, came ladies like Claudette Colbert, Barbara Stanwyck, Ann Harding, Bette Davis, and Kathryn Hepburn. Marlene Dietrich was imported from Germany by Paramount Studios as an answer to MGM's Greta Garbo.

Ruth Chatterton in the movie *Female*, hires young men for her firm, uses them for sexual pleasure, and then let them go. Constance Bennett played a poor girl who slept her way through to become rich in the movie, *Easiest Way*; she gives birth to a baby out of wedlock in *Born to Love*; and in *Bed of Roses*, she slides into the oldest profession. The most outrageous movie is the *Common Law* where she leaves her live in lover and becomes a nude model. Carole Lombard becomes a kept woman in *Summer in the Sun* to lead a luxurious life style. In *Faithless*, Tallulah Bankhead turns to the oldest profession when her husband becomes ill and incapable of supporting the family. All movies produced at the height of Great Depression. Ironically, some of these examples were the real life stories of the 1920's stars like Barbara La Marr and Louise Brooks who lurked into poverty. Cecil DeMill's *Sign of Cross* breached the boundaries of faith which annoyed the Catholic Church and Christian conservatives where in Claudette Colbert plays Nero's wife Poppeae and losses her lover to a Christian woman (Elisa Landi), and she is humiliated by pagans and aroused in a dance that contains lesbian like overtures.

In many pre-code movies women got away with murder. Most notorious example is the Ricardo Cortez. Loretta Young shoots Cortez in *Midnight Glory*; Kay Frances does the same in *56th Street*, and poisons

Cortez in *Mandalay*; and Dolores Del Rio stabbed Cortez in *Wonder Bar*. He also gets shot by Helen Twelvetrees in *Bad Company* and by Anita Louise in *The Firebrand*. Marjorie Rambeau kills blackmailer Arthur Hohl in *A Man's Castle* and Sally Eilers kills gigolo Ivan Lebedoff in cold blood. Ruth Chatterton kills a woman, Clair Dodd, a Broadway star for stealing her husband.

The code had significant effect on the work of many stars who built their career around uninhibited and honest portrayal of love, marriage, and womanhood. But this was not tolerated in the code era, consequently Ruth Chatterton, Constance Bennett, Miriam Hopkins, Ann Dvorak, Madge Evans, Glenda Farrell and Kay Frances faded. The code damaged stateside popularity and made Joan Blondell less important. Mae West also faded into the horizon. Ann Harding left Hollywood and triumphed on stage in London. Bernard Shaw, a caustic critique of marriage, said that Harding was the best for the role of *Candida*. By the end of 1942, Garbo was 36 and Shearer 40 had passed their final phase of movie business.

This book is brilliantly written and contains well researched materials. There are some rare pictures of 1930s stars, and I especially liked the pictures of Greta Garbo, Mae Clarke and Dorothy Mackaill; they are simply gorgeous.

Collin Bost says

Mick LaSalle's central thesis is the pre-Code offered the most complex portrayals of women in the classic studio era--that this was the best time for actresses, more so than the 1940s, because women were allowed to be real people and to have real fun on screen. Although this argument might be persuasive (and even true), most of this book is actually about how much LaSalle really, really likes Norma Shearer.

The book is organized around in-depth sections on Shearer and Greta Garbo. As a result, LaSalle gives short shrift to other major actresses of the pre-Code era. (For example, there's very little on Barbara Stanwyck, despite her work in essential pre-Code films, such as *Baby Face* and *Night Nurses*.) At times, he does offer some great critical insight, such as his deconstruction of Marlene Dietrich's persona, which he sees (rightly, I think) as basically ironic. Ultimately, though, LaSalle seems to present a very selective analysis/history of the pre-Code era.

The book is also frustrating because many of the films mentioned aren't readily available. Fortunately, I live in city that has great video stores. (While reading this book, I rented from Vulcan Video *Born to Be Bad*, with Loretta Young and Cary Grant; *Midnight Mary*, also with Loretta Young; *Safe in Hell*, with the neglected Dorothy Mackaill; and the musical *Wonder Bar*. Only one of these can be rented through Netflix, I believe.) Even though I'm lucky to have access to more resources than the average reader, the book kept taunting me with movies I'd never be able to see. Damn you, LaSalle! So, I guess, this book also functions as a highly frustrating list of movie recommendations.

Hilarie says

Fascinating subject. Definitely got me wanting to see more Norma Shearer movies. There is also some hints at some largely overlooked aspects of women's lives and feminism in the late 20's and early 30's. It's not a bad overview, but it lacks depth. The book is 20 years old and starting to show it's age....particularly with some of LaSalle's descriptions of the actresses he clearly has the hots for....that gets a bit icky.

Elaine says

I've watched more pre-code movies since I read LaSalle. His writing was so convincing and his cut to Breen's jugular so adept, I was carried along and convinced, although I'm not usually so convincable. Perhaps it was because he made Breen, the Censor who ruled over Hollywoodland from 1934 on so loathesome. Also, like most Americans who consider themselves intellectual, whether that's justified or not, I am predisposed to find inanity in rigid controls and government interference in artistic portrayal. Breen wasn't government, but he might as well have been.

I'm not arguing here for censorship, however, but having seen more of the movies he extols, I find that LaSalle has misrepresented what pre-code films espoused. First, he claims that they decried the double standard. Second, he said that they showed that women could be as independent as men. Bosh!! Take *The Divorcee* with Norma Shearer. It is true that when her husband cheats on her she retaliates by having a one-night stand and telling him about it. She justifies this because, when she rebukes her husband for cheating, he answers "It was nothing." When she repeats these words to him, he gets angrier with her and refuses to pardon her. What is sauce for the gander is not sauce for the goose. He even alludes to his shock at her being a loose woman. Her response is to plead with him to forgive her. When he won't, she says "From now on my door will be open to any man except you."

Then she embarks on a career of doing what the worse of men do. In short, she becomes a slut. It is clear that soon she is weary of bed-hopping, and, worse, she is consumed with guilt and shame. She is no longer worthy of any decent man. Fast forward to a man who does want to marry her. Unfortunately, he is already married to a woman whom he disfigured while drunk driving. When that woman comes to our heroine's house to plead her not to take away her husband, her plea is as old as sexism: even if he doesn't love me, even if he supports me financially, without a husband, my life is nothing. Needless to say, our heroine agrees.

This movie, and several others (I bought the pre-code DVD sets) all uphold the double standard, view women only in sexual terms, and reinforce a woman's dependence on a man at all costs. It is worth noting that the divorcee does have a lucrative career and is financially independent, but that isn't enough. She has to take her husband's cheating or she is nothing.

Censorship was absurd. Breen was a hateful man. The studios were stupid for letting him police them -- and they did let him do it. However, once censorship was imposed, women were no longer viewed as sex objects. Censorship ushered in the age of the strong, independent woman. The Thin Man series, Katherine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy (with their reversal of roles in *Adam's Rib*, Rosalind Russell in *The Front Page* and a slew of other movies with strong, independent women. My good friend, Fr. Ken Gumbert believes that having to butt against the code increased ingenuity in portraying women and, most important, it took women from the realm of sex objects to characters in their own right, not as mere appendages to men.

Even if you're not a movie buff and even if you hate old movies, this book is of more than casual interest. If you start around Chapter 11 and read about Breen and censorship and his deleterious effect on American movies for decades, which eventually affected how Americans viewed women and other deviates, you'd still gain insights into American culture up to today. For those of you who do know the delights of the Studio Era, the chapters on pre-code movies and actresses are a revelation. These movies weren't just about depicting sex on screen. In fact, they didn't do that. They only depicted the prelude, like a man putting his hand on Barbara Stanwyck's thigh in *Baby Face*, or the after-lude, like a satiated couple in bed together.

Yes, there is a lot of sex, and it is clear in that movie that she seduces her way up the social ladder. However, precode movies are a lot more than that. They clearly violate the double standard and give the message that women should have the same freedom to play that men do. If a man strays from his wife, she doesn't just take it in bravely. She throws him out and goes out and has fun herself. Then came 1934 and Joseph Breen, a Catholic who referred to the Jews who paid him as lice. Yes, the Hollywood moguls let themselves in for this nonsense because the Catholic Church had frightened them with their League of Decency. The moguls, being insecure Jews who had lived through Pogroms, were petrified, not realizing that every time the Legion of Decency banned a movie, more people attended than ever. Movies are extremely influential because their larger than life imagery and closeups of faces stimulate people's emotions and feelings of bonding with the characters. The messages they send out teach people how to act and what to think. This is an important book and a good read. BTW, you can see many of these pre-code films on DVD. Many had not been available for 70 years until the electronic revolution made it profitable to put them on tape and disk.

Bkwormmegs says

I loved this book. It's a thorough and joyful review of the leading ladies and their films in the late twenties and early thirties before the Code was enforced in Hollywood. When you read about the actresses, their ambitions and independence, the influence they held and exercised in their work, the strength of the characters they played and the personas they inhabited - it's all startlingly modern. I came out of this book with a fresh and more favorable view of Garbo as an actress - her mystique somewhat escaped me but I understand her better now in the context of her times and what she and the other ground breaking actresses of the day were attempting to accomplish - and a long list of movies to watch. Fantastic read for any film buff!
