

Dublin Business School

**Making the Collar and Cuffs Match:**

**Women in Pre-code Cinema**

By

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# Abstract

The main objective of my thesis is to unveil the impact of women and sexuality in cinema during the Pre-code era of film, from 1930 to 1934. The freedom that women in American society were allowed in the 1920's made a tremendous and tumultuous mark on media, specifically cinema. Sex, violence, adultery, unconventional living and the use of alcohol and drugs, were glamorised on the silver screen and idolised by many. The creation of The Motion Picture Production Code was introduced in order to curb such indecencies in film, headed primarily by the church. After its enforcement in 1934, women were no longer able to express their darkest desires and independence on screen.

I will be investigating the churches input as well as why these women were considered so unruly and immoral, in relation to cultural context. I will also strive to breakdown how these women were treated in cinema after 1934, tying in feminism and the popularity of the pre-code's resurgence in the 1980's. Ultimately, my conclusion should lead me to explain how the female characterisation in film during these short 5 years are not sinful, but symbolic of a progressive society and feminist role models.

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# Epigraph

George Raft has said he was astounded the day he found out Carole Lombard wasn't a natural blonde. She undressed in front of him, then made up a peroxide mixture, which she began to apply with a cotton dab to her pubic hair. Seeing his surprise, Lombard said,

—Relax, Georgie, I'm just making my collar and cuffs match.”

# Chapter 1

## Rise of Feminine Power – A Historical Overview

They were smart and sophisticated, with an air of independence about them, and so casual about their looks and clothes and manners as to be almost slapdash. I don't know if I realized as soon as I began seeing them that they represented the wave of the future, but I do know I was drawn to them. I shared their restlessness, understood their determination to free themselves of the Victorian shackles of the pre-World War I era and find out for themselves what life was all about.

- Colleen Moore

America in the 1920's was a vibrant time. The majority of this traditional nation had escaped the clutches of the deadly worldwide influenza epidemic of 1918 and breathed a sigh of relief after the agonising and turbulent Great War, which ended in 1919. However, a wave of new ideas were about to hit its shores as soon as their Soldiers arrived home from Europe. These men had witnessed the European way of life, which appeared far more exciting and appealing than the stiff traditions they had to abide by at home. They had faced the possibility of death and endured a great distance from their loved ones so their newfound outlook on life inspired great change. These now broader-minded men were responsible for the Roaring Twenties.

The arrival of these new ideas defined the era and immersed the population with feelings of joy and confidence. America was celebrating its newfound vigour in all areas of Art, Literature, Fashion, Sport, Business and Politics. More jobs and higher pay was available to most due to the rapid progress of companies and businesses; alcohol and drugs became incredibly popular and fuelled the lifestyles of many; the Automobile and the Radio were two exciting new inventions that became readily available to

all and with this, film and music were more popular than ever. Indeed, opportunities and new experiences were available to all. Therefore, it's no surprise that the Women of 'The Jazz Age' weren't left behind and experienced true freedom like never before.

The women's vote came about in 1920 after the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment of the constitution was put in place, giving women across America a voice for the first time. This ultimately acted as the foundation for the emergence of the 'Flapper' [Fig 1]. These young women no longer needed to answer to old traditions or their male oppressors. The citizens of America were changing but it was the women who garnered the most attention. They displayed their newfound freedom through many different aspects of their daily lives. Fashion became the highest form of expression, so hemlines no longer had to meet the ground. Their clothes no longer hid their body shape so slimmer dress shapes were produced. The very short 'Bob' haircut came into vogue and was a definite far cry from the 'Gibson Girl' image of purity and subservience from the decade before [Fig 2]. They also began to wear make-up, which was now hugely popular due to the confidence that they felt when wearing it. This new confidence led them to smoke cigarettes and drink alcohol in public with men who enjoyed their company without being chaperoned. They listened to exciting new music, known as 'Jazz' and learned new styles of dancing such as 'The Charleston', 'Fox Trot' and 'The Blackbottom', to name but a few. Men and Women were bolder and held each other a little closer in the ballroom. This closeness eventually led to a high interest in sex. It was no longer much of a taboo and the youth of the Jazz Age were unafraid to discuss their experiences and ask questions.

Evidently, it was most certainly a revolution in terms of society and it's youth. Women were experiencing a completely different America to that of their mothers so approval of their new choice of lifestyle was not a common victory. Some may not realise that the 'Flapper' merely represented a small percentage of women during this time and many traditionalists, who were generally made up of the older

generations, abhorred the behaviour of their sons and daughters. They disapproved of the late nights, the alcohol use and the smoking of cigarettes in public, all of which seemingly made them wild and disinterested in study and work ethics. However, due to the increased popularity and development of mass media, the 'Flapper' was a figure that appeared on magazines and most notably in film, which did not help these staunch traditionalists in the least.

From the mid-1910's and early 1920's, many film distributors tried to organise certain material that they felt was too inappropriate for the screen, however no rules were formally enforced. Hollywood's image was also suffering due to the release of a number of recent improper films and many scandals related to its stars. The film industry seemed to be disreputable and it was Will H. Hays, later the chairman of the MPPDA (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America), who was assigned to tidy up the abundance of messy film laws and censorship bills across the country. Many states across America, starting with New York in 1921, assigned censorship boards which decided what content should be banned in their state cinema theatres. This meant that film laws varied from state to state. Many scenes that were considered too controversial ended up on the cutting room floor in order to comply with the abundance of these laws. Nevertheless, there were still major problems related to these changes. Profanities, racy women and violence were still very much present with particular states but in others, these scenes would be cut. The constant chopping and changing of film narratives across the country destroyed the original cut of hundreds of films. Not much had been done in order to apply the laws and a change was desperately needed.

Years later in 1927 with sound making its way throughout the film industry, Hays insisted that a special censorship committee be put in place, in order to create basic guidelines about what should be shown on screen. E. H. Allen from Paramount, Irving Thalberg from Metro Goldwyn Mayer and Sol Wurtzel from

Fox, put out a set of rules. These rules were known as the Don'ts and Be Carefuls. This list consists of 37 factors that must be adhered to when creating a film. The Don'ts included;

- Pointed-profanity
- Licentious or suggestive nudity
- Illegal traffic in drugs
- Ridicule of the clergy

...To name but a few. Some of the Be Carefuls were

- The institution of marriage
- Brutality and Gruesomeness
- The use of firearms
- Man and Woman in bed together, etc.

These new rules were positively received and were later authorized by the Federal Trade Commission. In spite of this approval, there were yet again, ways of getting around these guidelines. Again, there was no enforcement. Films were still considered inappropriate in content and the power of the on-screen female was still stronger than ever. Many people do not seem to realise just how much freedom the characters, particularly women on the screen, had throughout this time and although many distributors tried their hardest to curb the indecent seen in film, nothing could halt the popularity that these films had. Everything from murder to seeing women in their underwear was still in vogue and the young public continued to beg for more.

By the time talkies came about, *The Jazz Singer* in 1927 being the first, on-screen sexuality did not die down in the least. Now that sound was introduced, writers were slowly introducing suggestive dialogue to play with. Film was more popular than ever and it cannot be stressed enough just how celebrated the Women actresses were in Hollywood at this time. Female movie stars like Louise Brooks, Pola Negri,

Nita Naldi, Collen Moore, Clara Bow and Theda Bara, to name but a few, were the 'Flapper' personified and these women aided in creating the dangerous on-screen persona that was the 'Vamp' [Fig 3]. The term 'Vamp', initially coined for actress Theda Bara, refers to the woman on-screen who appears to be sexually empowered, a seductress and temptress. The films that featured 'Vamp' characters had incredibly mature storylines with consisted of unmarried mothers, violence such as rape and murder and prostitution. These women were unafraid to display a heightened level of sexuality and danger on screen, which by now had become the norm in terms of Female characterisation in Hollywood. Their popularity cemented their place in film history and even today, are still noted for their 'racy roles' in early cinema.

Cinema had never been sexier and it was to remain that way for the next 7 years. By the time 1929 came about, the controversy and tension surrounding such films hit a critical stage.

The Roaring Twenties was short lived. The era of prosperity, excitement and hope, quickly ceased when America took its next blow: The Wall Street Crash of 1929. Not only was the United States affected, but the entire world experienced the effects of the greatest economic downturn America has ever endured. The US slipped swiftly into a deep depression. Businesses went under and work was incredibly difficult to come by. It is estimated that 7 to 12 million people died due to starvation and illnesses that were left untreated due to poverty and famine. Many committed suicide, as they could not bear the pain of hardship and disappointment. This tragedy would last until 1939, meaning an entire decade was lost to a world that was once so vibrant and triumphant. Nevertheless, there was one aspect that strived to ease part of America's pain and that was Cinema. In spite of this dreadful recession, film remained as exciting as ever. Film, along with radio and entertainment shows, provided cheap and cheerful amusement, which allowed the citizens to escape for a while from what was happening to their country.

Throughout most of the Depression, Americans went assiduously, devotedly, almost compulsively, to the movies...the movies offered a chance to escape the cold, the heat, and loneliness; they brought

strangers together, rubbing elbows in the dark of movie palaces and flea-pits, sharing in the one social event available to everyone. – Carlos Stevens, From the Crash to the Fair, 1979

The themes within many of these films ranged from the darkest storylines to light comedies. Either way, Women in film throughout the 1930's remained just as popular as they were in the 1920's. This era of cinema, 1930 to 1934, the early years of The Depression, is referred to as Pre-code Cinema and is notorious for its female characterisations even though the implication of the Motion Picture Production Code, or sometimes referred to as the Hays Code, was put in place in 1930. This code was finally active in 1934. After the enforcement of this code, America rarely witnessed another independent and proudly sexual woman in control of her own environment, on the screen again. It wasn't until 1968 when the code was abolished that these types of female roles were accepted again. Still, the 1930's created a new set of stars that raised the bar in terms of female characterisation. These short five pre-code years, which desperately tried to grip onto the remaining freedom of sexual expression that the women of yesteryear had, remain in my opinion, the best years for women in cinema. I feel that this new generation of pre-code actresses knew that their roles were endangered and therefore, had more to give especially with the introduction and popularity of sound. With their country crumbling outside their doorstep, they worked harder for their expiring liberty through the camera lenses of Hollywood in order to try and maintain their power for as long as possible. They knew that the changes in society and the economy would ultimately reach cinema screens so it was up to them to leave the Age of Nonsense with a bang. This era of actresses and film represented the darkest and realist side to American society through their elegance, bravery and sexuality. Many pre-code classics include Red-Headed Woman (1932), Night Nurse (1931), Gold Diggers of 1933 (1933), Call Her Savage (1932), Red Dust (1932) and Riptide (1934), to name but a few.

However, what exactly are these rules and why did it take four years for the studio bosses to enforce the code? Why did it matter anymore when such films were already around for the last decade and still so

popular? What did these female characters represent and why were they 'put back in the kitchen' in 1934? I will strive to investigate these questions and to explore these great films that show us a side to femininity and sexuality during this time.

## Chapter 2

### The Establishment of the Code

Even though many people during the Depression relied on the film industry to raise their spirits, there still was tension over the content allowed on screen. Much of the controversy was pointed at the introduction to sound in film where dialogue helped to accentuate the indecencies on screen. It is evident that many members of the public condemned how the women and men behaved on screen and it was particularly these people that continued to speak out against these films. However, it was members of the Catholic Church who got involved and implemented the first draft of what was to become The Motion Picture Production Code.

It all began in 1929 when a popular Jesuit priest and writer called Father Daniel A. Lord, and a Catholic Layman and editor of the *Motion Picture Herald* journal called Martin Quigley, came together and created the code. Combining their Irish Roman Catholic values and their traditional morals and beliefs, they produced something profound that commented greatly on how American society should appear on screen. The code focused mainly on young children who Lord felt were easily susceptible to onscreen violence and sexuality. As well as film acting as something to be entertained by, the code strived to educate and influence film goers with the hope of reintroducing old customs and attitudes. The writers delivered the code in two separate parts to the head of MGM Studios, Irving Thalberg in 1930 and upon presenting it to Will Hays, he immediately admired their work and ideas. What all these prominent men had in common was their wish to reform the film industry in a way that educated and shielded the young public from societal harm. Naturally, the code weighed heavy in Roman Catholic values and although Hays agreed with the code, minor adjustments had to be made from the point of view of non-religious American's who could review the code with fresh, non-biased eyes and ideas. Surprisingly, the government stayed out of the film controversy, which they had witnessed throughout the 1920's and up

until this point. During the last decade, the government failed to intervene with such issues because they felt that if they did so, their economy would decline greatly. When the code was presented to the studio bosses, they all equally agreed that the lack of government involvement should remain, as it was Hollywood's cross to bear. It was acceded that all film content management should be held responsible by the head of the Studio Relations Committee, Col. Jason S. Joy. The code was finally completed and adopted by the Association of Motion Picture Producers and was put in place on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March, 1930.

[Fig 4]

The code is separated into two parts. The first section is known as 'General Principles'. This section focuses on protecting the morals and traditions of the audience. It's a short section divided into 3 separate points that mention how the "Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented" and how "Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed..." The second section is titled 'Particular Applications' and it lists specific aspects that are not allowed to be incorporated into film. These aspects are divided into 11 different categories and are as follows: Crimes against the law, Sex, Vulgarity, Obscenity, Dances, Profanity, Costume, Religion, National Feelings, Titles, and Repellent Subjects. Each category presents points related to its title.

Rules such as Murder, Alcohol usage, Scenes of Passion, Seduction or Rape, and complete nudity were all naturally banned from the screen. The criminals and villains had to be punished for their crimes. The church and religion were aspects that had to be handled in a respectful manner. Women and men having secret affairs, was banned as it was deemed too intimate for the screen. Even if a romantic relationship outside marriage was justified by an abusive husband or wife or troubled home life. This all meant that female roles could no longer be seen as driven, independent characters who decided their own fate. Sex played a big part in their empowerment and now they had to remain at home, subservient to God, Politicians and their husbands as well as not being able to express their femininity through fashion and

romance. The entire tone of the code is seemingly very religious and this fact was kept private from the public. In early 1930, *Variety Magazine* published the code for the public read in the hope that this move would solidify its place in entertainment; however, the code would soon prove useless.

In spite of its approval by the Board of Directors of Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (DMPPDA), film was still producing storylines with disapproved themes. It was simple for studios to create scenarios around these new rules. Producers were able to make an appeal to the board in order to get the go-ahead for certain films, if they were backed up by at least 3 other studio film makers and producers. Hollywood continued to make gruesome, erotic and generally ‘\_obscene’ films without action being taken against them. Col. Joy who was the codes enforcer seemed remiss when it came to making significant cuts in many films. Without much staff and less support than originally assumed, reviewing roughly 500 films annually was a difficult task.

As well as this new complication, there was still a large amount of producers and directors who felt that the censorship was too restrictive and finicky due the many years of freedom, previous. Many publications condemned the code and found many aspects of this new way of film making to be hypocritical and lacking in terms of how religion, politics and crime had to now be handled. The critics and writers generally treated the code with little or no respect and frequent bashing and joking became the norm. Later, as a form of protest in 1940, A.L. Shafer who was the head of photography at Columbia studios, created a photo that incorporated much of the banned imagery into one picture. This photograph made waves amongst Hollywood and eventually ended up in many publications. It was applauded for its symbolism [Fig 5.]. More importantly during this time due to the economic state of the country, Hollywood needed funds to keep running. If film had all of a sudden become restrictive and dull, filmgoers would eventually attend theatres less and less. Films that contained violence and seduction

brought in the most funds, so allowing the banned content to appear would ultimately help the studios financially.

There was a huge divide in opinions when it came to the code but ultimately, the general public won as films such as *The Public Enemy* (1931), *Shanghai Express* (1932), *I'm No Angel* (1933) and *Grand Hotel* (1932) reigned at the box office during the code years. Each of these films contains much of the banned material that the code tried to implicate, from murder to prostitution. The characters were able to keep hold of their vices for now and female characters were able to remain modern. The women ran Hollywood thanks to Mae West and her loveable quips, Marlene Dietrich and her blatant sexual openness and Barbara Stanwyck and her likable and daring taste in film roles. After a short while, the code seemed to be a distant memory, to the benefit for such actresses and the public.

## Chapter 3

### Women in Film during the Pre-code Years

These glorious pre-code years of Hollywood belong to women. No longer did actresses have to choose between being just either virtuous or ‘Vampy’. They were presented with a spectrum of roles that were multi-dimensional in personality. For the first time, these women were not just good or evil but they could be flawed human beings with feelings and ambition. No longer did they need to be protected by a male on-screen counterpart nor did they have to be fully unjustifiably evil and be punished. Due to the abundance of exciting film roles available to stars such as Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, Norma Shearer and Joan Crawford, storylines became complex and melodramatic and this held the audiences’ attention like never before. This is why these women were so popular in the media. The code, thankfully, did not take away their freedom on-screen.

With many female roles exercising their liberty on the screen, it truly is no wonder why these rules were compiled. If these women characters weren’t so modern and open with their independence and sexuality, would there have been a need for such rules? These women were considered libertines and were constantly being accused of being too licentious and bawdy. However, no one commented on male roles or judged them too harshly for their actions. It all relates to double standards. A man romancing a woman was considered the norm and was rarely questioned on screen but when a woman pursued a man, she was immoral and lacked control. It is understandable in relation to the context that these films were produced but this outlook has been debated between feminists and traditionalists for many years. By examining many of the pre-code hits of the 1930’s, it is easy to see just how suggestive and controversial these women on film were at this time but also how inspiring and admirable too,

considering the social circumstances. By breaking down specific pre-code films, we can easily understand why these Women in film were considered sinful for the time but revolutionary and important, in our present.

*Anna Christie* (1930) [Fig 6], originally a play written by Eugene O'Neill is one of the earliest pre-code films that was produced by MGM Studios and directed by Clarence Brown. It stars the great Swedish actress Greta Garbo in her first ever talking role, along with Peter Bickford and George F. Marion. This story is about a poor alcoholic sailor who has not seen his daughter, Anna, for the past 15 years. When young, she was sent to live on a farm with relatives and wants to return back to her father in New York. When Anna appears on screen for the first time, she appears tired and unhappy. She walks over to a table in an almost empty bar and utters one of the most famous film lines in history, "Give me a whisky, ginger ale on the side, and don' be stingy, baby." She is demanding alcohol to ease her probable pain and the audience watches her face change from sorrowful to satisfied when she finishes drinking and says, "Gee, I needed that bad alright, alright" to the old woman sitting opposite her. She smokes a cigarette and slumps in her chair. Already, it's evident that there are code rules that have been broken. She is consuming alcohol and smoking in public, behaving in what was considered and unladylike manner as she converses with others on screen. She expresses her delight in drinking the alcohol too, all within a matter of minutes into the story.

Later on after she meets her father and goes to live with him on his boat, she saves an almost drowned sailor called Matt and two others and eventually, she falls in love with him. It is not long until he proposes to her but this distresses Anna. She has been dishonest to her father and Matt and has harboured a secret since her arrival. Anna had previously worked in a brothel for the past two years and she had been too ashamed to reveal the truth. Anna is a character who has been enigmatic and troubled from the very beginning. This dark part of her life is clearly not something she could ever be proud of or

reveal. By telling her father and lover the truth, she risks being abandoned physically and emotionally. Her harrowing dilemma eventually comes to a head when she admits to them both, her past life.

In this scene she stands as her father and Matt sit either side of her. She delivers a vigorous and symbolic speech before her big reveal, —.You was going on’s if one of you had got to own me. But nobody owns me, see?—‘cepting myself. I’ll do what I please and no man, I don’t give a darn who he is, can tell me what to do! I ain’t asking either of you for a living. I can make it myself—one way or other. I’m my own boss. So put that in your pipe and smoke it!” Her speech speaks volumes and her defiant, feminist deliverance of these lines, act in great contrast to the men by her side who seem to be rendered speechless. After revealing her past, Matt walks out clearly disgusted and angry. In the end, he returns and accepts Anna’s past as he realises that even he had made mistakes throughout his life.

This film clearly disregards much of the Motion Picture Code. She is a woman who smokes, drinks and uses foul language. An ex-harlot and unladylike in manner, she is considered the antithesis of what a woman was expected to be. However this did not affect the box office and it became the highest grossing film of 1930, earning over \$1 million. Garbo’s performance was highly praised and upon hearing her voice for the first time, film audiences applauded. She was a star who was associated with sophistication and mystery and it is here that she leaves behind her silent seductive roles for something more harrowing in nature. She manages to make the audience feel sympathetic towards her character, which was something that the code disapproved of. The code forbid any feelings of sympathy for criminals and that they be rightfully punished. Instead, Anna was rewarded with love, acceptance and companionship, which is what she had strived for all along.

Blonde Venus (1932) [Fig 7.] was released two years later and starred the charismatic and provocative, Marlene Dietrich and Cary Grant. Directed by Josef Von Sternberg and distributed by Paramount, the

film posed problems early on in production over its content. These problems that did not comply with the code appeared from the very beginning in the opening scene. We see numerous American male students in Germany, stumbling upon 6 theatre women skinny-dipping in a lake. Some may interrupt the scene was sexual however; it can be viewed as innocent. One of the women, Helen (Played by Dietrich), calls after the men, requesting that they leave but one of the young men, soon to be her husband, insists that she must see him that night. We skip ahead in time to 6 years later in America where we see her bathing her young son in a very domestic and sweet scene. She and her husband display clear signs of love throughout the beginning of this film, especially when they discuss how they met with their son, Johnny later on. However her husband, Ned, returns home to break the news that he is poisoned by radium and is expecting to die within the year. The only solution is to gather up some money and to seek treatment in Germany but they lack funds and it seems that the only way they can afford treatment is if Helen returns to work. The prospect does not particularly excite her and her husband refuses this option. Behind his back and against his wishes, she auditions for a show and gets her own act as the ‘Blonde Venus’. With this new opportunity and eventually breaking the news to him, she hopes to earn money for her husband’s treatment.

Upon opening night, we see Helen getting ready for the stage alongside a woman who goes by the name of ‘Taxi Belle Hooper. “Do you charge for the fist mile?”, Helen playfully asks her new co-worker. This saucy line implies that Helen assumes that this showgirl plays around, a good example of a Mae West-like gibe. Taxi hits back, defending her nickname, “.Don’t get the wrong idea. They call me Taxi because I won’t ride in nothin’ else. Safety first, that’s my motto. Good drinking partners always make bad drivers...””, she claims. After a brief encounter with the club owner who checks in on Helen, Taxi tells her about a wealthy politician called Nick Townsend (Cary Grant) who gave her a diamond bracelet. She confesses that she can get \$1500 dollars an possibly more from him. Immediately, Helen I

intrigued and she manages to capture his attention in the next scene, which is considered one of the most sexually charged scenes in film history.

The ‘Hot Voodoo’ performance scene is the embodiment of sexuality and allurements. It’s a glittering spectacle, which features a small number of scantily clad women on stage, dressed in plumage and sequins, dancing to the beat of African drums. They move about the stage as a gorilla in chains appears. An unusual sight no doubt, and a spectacle to say the least. The Gorilla takes centre stage with Nick’s eyes firmly following its every move. Suddenly, the performer pulls off each Gorilla glove, revealing a delicate, white hand with glitter bands dripping from each wrist. Once the head is lifted off, we see Helen smirking playfully as the audience makes their applause. She puts on a platinum blonde afro wig and begins to undress out of the Gorilla suit slowly and to the beat of the music. Donning feathers and sequins just like the other showgirls, she appears seductive. With her hands on her hips, in a deep and beguiling voice, she asks her audience in song if they had ever heard ‘Hot Voodoo?’ She continues, —.I’d follow a cave man, right into his cave

That beat gives me a wicked sensation

My conscience wants to take a vacation

Got Voodoo, head to toes

Hot Voodoo, burn my clothes

I want to start dancing

Just wearing a smile.”

This scene is essentially a strip scene, which plays on fetishism and fantasy. The skin displayed on stage adds to the eroticism of this scene. The Blonde Venus symbolises Helen’s alter ego and her emergence from her banal family life into a sparkling wonder world of sin and desire. In this world, she is powerful and self-controlling. Feminine and carnal, she is both the beast and the beauty. From this moment on, Helen’s body is her weapon, using it to get what she wants without being controlled by a male superior.

Nick is entranced and meets her afterwards, giving her money to support her husband. In Ned's absence, she has an affair with Nick who appears to love her. Feeling guilty for abandoning her duties as a loving wife and mother, she leaves him dressed in androgynous clothing. This is symbolic of her rise above her domestic life. Now is on par to her male counterparts in terms of power and identity. To add to her shame upon returning home, her husband has found out about her affair and she runs away with her son. She has destroyed her marriage and has ultimately submitted herself to the title of 'fallen woman'. With no money or stable home, she realises that she must return her son back to his father for his sake. It is here that she fully allows herself to slip into a deep depression, living in poor conditions, giving away what little money she has and an apparent drunk. Nevertheless, she rises again and begins a new life in Paris where she seems to have acquired wealth and respect, without the support of anyone else. Performing for the final time, she appears androgynous in her top hat, appearing cold but all the same, charming. She spots Nick in the audience and is faced with the dilemma of going with Nick or returning home. Ultimately, she returns home to her son where she is accepted back into her old life as a mother and wife.

I feel that if it wasn't for the cultural context in which the story was set, Helen would have been able to keep her son and enjoy her independent freedom too away from marriage. Nevertheless, this film was no doubt very controversial even before its release. The studio, Paramount Pictures, was very much aware of the risks involved with filming a story about a fallen woman who leaves her family behind in order to fulfil other desires, ambitiously and romantically. The film was unfortunately a commercial failure with its over melodramatic story line that did not quite add up as well as seeming slow paced. However, this film remains one of the greatest examples of the 'fallen woman'. Helen represents so much more than just that as a symbol of female capability and strength. This type of role was literally made for Dietrich. Without any credit, she opened up to Von Sternberg about her move from Germany to America with her daughter and how she struggled with her stardom without her husband Rudolf Sieber. In a sense, the

film depicts the real life independent heroine that Marlene truly was. Bisexual and in an open marriage with her husband, her life was just as chaotic as the characters she portrayed on screen.

*Baby Face* (1933) [Fig 8.] is directed by Alfred E. Green and stars Barbara Stanwyck in one of the most daring and dangerous roles of her career. Released by Warner Bros. in July of 1933, the story is essentially one woman's (Lily Power) rise through the ranks of society, using her sexuality in order to get what she wants. There are two separate versions of this film that have different endings, a fact I will go into later. Nevertheless, this is a pre-code film, through and through and we watch Stanwyck use her skills of manipulation and her ambition to out-smart the men she encounters in her adult life. From the age of 14, Lily was forced to sleep with men under the command of her father. A close friend and interestingly, a man, suggests that she leave home in order to achieve a better life for herself. He tells her, —A woman, young, beautiful like you, can get anything she wants in the world. Because you have power over men. But you must use men, not let them use you. You must be a master, not a slave. Look here — Nietzsche says, —All life, no matter how we idealize it, is nothing more nor less than exploitation.‘, That's what I'm telling you. Exploit yourself. Go to some big city where you will find opportunities! Use men! Be strong! Defiant! Use men to get the things you want!” She is inspired and soon grabs the opportunity to leave.

Unaffected by her father's death, Lily boards a freight train with her friend, Chico, to the big city. They are discovered by a train worker who threatens to alert the police if they do not leave and Lily replies with, —Wait...can we not talk this over?”. As the scene fades to black, we are under the impression that Lily has had sex with the worker in order to get him not to alert superiors. Her climb has begun and her power over men is already evident. By using her body, she knows that she can gain control. We see this again in New York, where she is applying for work at the Gotham Trust. With no prior office experience, she sleeps with the personnel who afterwards, offers her the job. This method is what Lily resorts to

continuously throughout, later sleeping also with characters Jimmy and Brody in order to rise through the ranks. With each conquest, the camera swoops upwards to a new floor in her building, indicating her ascent to power.

Her situation becomes more difficult when she becomes entangled with engaged executive, Ned. She plans to seduce him during a moment when his soon-to-be wife and daughter of the first Vice President walks in. J.R. (the Vice President) finds out and begs Lily to leave Ned alone so that she doesn't destroy his daughter's future marriage. However, she manages to enchant J.R. who eventually funds her lavish lifestyle. She is now the owner of an expensive apartment with many other material gifts that J.R. has bestowed on her. Ned discovers that they are together and shoots J.R. dead out of jealousy. This incident becomes a wildly popular public scandal and Lily demands \$15,000 from the new head of the company, Courtland Trenholm. She has created a diary, which reveals details of her relationships and she threatens him that she will reveal all to the papers. Instead of offering her the money, Trendholm sends her to Paris to take over the company's offices and she accepts.

I feel that it is at this point, people were fed up with Lily's behaviour. Conniving and clearly dangerous, people would wonder just how it was possible for any one to like her. Her actions were, and probably still are, deeply frowned upon because not only did she engage in sex with many men, but she had destroyed several lives. If a man was to step into this role, he would not be judged by many for having numerous sexual partners or being at the centre of murder and chaos. He would be labelled a playboy, and an intelligent one at that. There has always been a type of stigma attached to male on-screen characters who behaved in such a way to the point where they are romanticised and idolised for their masculine bravery and control. However, when it is a woman who prides herself on her ability to captivate men and use them to her advantage, people are threatened and disturbed. Lily came from horrific circumstances, which taught her the only way of life that she knew. She took something

negative and soul crushing, which was the abuse that her body endured from the age of 14, and turned it into something positive. By being able to control her own body for her own needs, she was able to make a better life for herself. This time, whatever she did with her sexuality, it was on her terms. If it meant that she would hurt others, than so be it. Her pain is unimaginable to many and we can only assume that her new found way of life is something of a cathartic experience for her.

Eventually, Lily meets Trenholm again and he is impressed with her work ethic and commitment to the company. They fall in love and marry but it is not long until he comes into ruin and he needs to take expensive legal action. He begs Lily to sell the jewels and clothes he bought for her but she refuses and leaves him. Her guilt and genuine love for him makes her return to find that he has attempted suicide. The story ends when we learn that Trenholm will survive as he gazes up at his wife.

There are two versions of this story, one of which was cut in several places due to the sexual content. The New York State Censorship Board disliked the numerous suggestions of sexual encounters and included a scene in the end, which depicts how Lily is a changed woman for the better. In this way, the film would create the illusion of regret on her part. Why should Lily have to be apologetic for her past actions? We do not sense any regret throughout this film for how she had behaved previously and instead, we believe she is happy and free being her own person. She learns that money is not everything in the censored cut of the film but it must be noted that her love for material things and living comfortably is understandable, considering upbringing. She, like many other female characters of the pre-code era, is symbolic and revolutionary in the sense that she is unafraid to feed her appetite, sexually and selfishly.

These films above all, stand amongst a sea of liberated, sexually proud and self-controlling women in film. It's easy to see just how much was slipped past the censors when we watch these films. They seemingly, got away with a lot. With the code in place and not being taken too seriously, such stories and women were able to exist. These roles represented the desires that many women may have had and they displayed their capabilities in a male dominated society. Thankfully, these few years could exercise such roles on film but it was to all come to a halt in 1934.

## Chapter 4

### How Cinema Adapted to Breen's Reinforcement

After a short while, tensions rose again. Religious organisations voiced the need to review the code. Many churches, particularly Roman Catholic dioceses, openly condemned the immoral themes frequently seen in films. This led to the creation of the Catholic Legion of Decency in 1933, which was brought about to protest against these films and to help enforce decency within cinema. Many people from around the country supported the church's attempt to banish sinful films from the public and this spurred Hays to comment. He attempted to defend Hollywood, stating that the studios were indeed censoring many films but due to economic pressures and general public popularity, studios allowed much of the material to be screened. Eventually, Hays called in Joe Breen, a Catholic layman, to take the reins as the code's administrator. He was just as horrified with film as much of the public was and he ordered numerous boycotts on many films that featured offensive content that challenged religious morals. This was essentially a boycott on almost every film produced during this time and there were few and far between that complied with the code. Irving Thalberg pleaded with Breen. He desperately tried to explain that cinema was simply a reflection on what was happening in reality and therefore, influence cannot be an issue. Breen ignored his excuses and continued to boycott, which affected Hollywood finances greatly. Now that the studios had his attention, he requested that all films could not be distributed until he had the final word.

He succeeded in carrying out the Churches wishes and the code was permanently put in place in 1934. Joe Breen took his role extremely serious and truly believed that he could control the American public if

the film industry adhered to the code. By condemning images of flesh and dubbing over expletives, he thought that he could banish much of the corruption that was occurring in society. If a film was to be approved by his standards, it needed to be pleasant in message and most of all, moral. Therefore, if a character was too wicked in manner, that character had to be brought to justice and made an example of. In order for his duty to be carried out, this meant strict regulation.

Everything in the code, had to be adhered to. No more immorality. All criminals and immoral male and female characters within a story had to be punished for their wrongdoing. The marriage between man and wife was to be permanently upheld and pre-marital affairs were to no longer exist. Women could no longer take pride in their liberty and had to remain subservient to their husbands. Characters became extremely restricted and could no longer voice desires, strike debate or express opinions against religion or politics. According to Mick LaSalle who wrote *Complicated Women: Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood*, he believes that the code had more of a negative influence on Hollywood film than positive. It was detrimental to film narratives and characters. Naturally, female actresses were now restricted to one-dimensional roles than men were. This also led to the destruction of many careers as the struggle to find quality work within the industry took its toll on many of its stars. Mae West for example, thrived during the pre-code years but now it was difficult for her to adapt her identity for more moral and submissive roles. They just did not suit the persona that she had built up, years before. The same applies to actresses such as Ruth Chatterton and Nancy Carroll who are mostly forgotten, today. Coming from an era of film where these actresses were the biggest stars and films were being specially made to highlight these actresses in vibrant roles, the struggle must have been agonising. What also is interesting to note is how America lost much of its modern culture. The pre-code films, although many melodramatic and over-exaggerated, did in fact represent American society. Film was and still is, a medium that mirrored modern culture. With the effects of the 1920's and the depression, many people could relate to what they saw on screen whether it was fashion or something deeper like desire.

Now that several of these actors and actresses were forgotten about, along with brilliantly written complex stories that depicted many diverse characters, films were being cut down to the bare minimum. Everything had to be changed when it went through Breen's doors. Overdubbing was a common practise and the deletion of certain scenes was naturally a necessity. In order to get past these many restrictions in film, directors tried to develop new ways of portraying sexuality and other topics banned by Breen. They determined that symbolism and metaphor was the way to do it and if done right, they escape the risk of their films being tampered with by the committee. This new method of storytelling was especially used in Screwball comedies. This made way for innuendo to continue and almost always, succeeded in escaping Joe Breen. Due to the fact that these were not serious films, the constant love/hate relationships between men and women who bickered and insulted one another, were taken lightly. Through this, sexual tension could be created between characters but in a playful way through both dialogue and action. For example, in Frank Capra's multi award winning, *'It Happened One Night'*, Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable are stuck in the middle of nowhere. Peter, (Gable) is unsuccessful in flagging down a car so that they can hitch a ride. Ellie (Colbert), gives it a try and steps onto the side of the road, lifting her skirt high to reveal her leg. Unsurprisingly, a car comes to a screeching halt and Peter and Ellie are whisked away. This is probably the first case of many where a female character could take control of her environment without having to answer to the code. Many screwball comedies followed and they thrived during this period. Actresses such as Carole Lombard, Myrna Loy, Irene Dunne, Jean Arthur and Katharine Hepburn, always gravitated towards comedic roles and the possible draw was the little freedom they were able to have while in character. Most of the time, they got away with it but Breen was constantly on the look out for what is known as *'Diegesis'* and this relates greatly to the symbolism and sexual tension that had to be reinvented by directors and writers. *'Diegesis'* is essentially the world within a film that is occupied by the characters on screen. The censors had the job of monitoring each film carefully for diegetic images and symbols that would be considered inappropriate. Directors had to be extra careful.

Like I have mentioned before, considering the abundance of strict measures taken by Breen, it's no surprise that women in film suffered the most during this time. On a positive note, the restrictions bore new ways of developing stories. Whenever Breen disapproved of something, producers took note and tried to find new ways to portray the forbidden message or image in whatever project was next. Actresses were seen in a new and comedic light. The majority of their sexual freedom was suppressed by the code and they were no longer able to engage in lustful endeavours. However, many actresses displayed a comedic talent, which they were able to show off frequently through the popular trend of Screwball comedies. Carole Lombard was one of the most popular comedic actresses of the early Golden years. Through her many comedic roles, she managed a level of accepted sexuality on screen along with being approachable. The same applies to Myrna Loy, a former Vamp. Her incredible diversity was witnessed in film such as *'The Thin Man'*, made in 1934 and is considered a darling of 1930's cinema. As of 1934, the next 30 years that followed is regarded as the Golden Age of Hollywood.

## Chapter 5, i.

### The Golden Age of Women in Hollywood - 1930's to 1950's

Now that the Motion Picture Production Code was firmly in place, cinema had no choice to adapt. Breen was frequently featured in the news discussing the advances made in film censorship. He assured film goers that immoral behaviour would no longer be tolerated by the studios. Many producers disliked Breen for taking away their artistic freedom but for also tampering with pre-code classics. Breen used the code to destroy the majority of female driven films such as *Queen Christina* (1933) and *Mata Hari* (1931). The opposition could do nothing but endure the destruction of such symbolic and passionate films. The face of cinema had fully transformed and so did the female character's that, according to LaSalle, "...got their virginity back." Women characters could no longer be 'immoral' but they still managed to slip through the censors. With films such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939), *Gilda* (1946) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), evocative and ambitious female roles were making their way through the restrictions. The roles were out there for actresses but they just proved difficult to find. What Breen did not understand was that cinema was an art form. Art cannot stand alone without some form of freedom of expression. Besides that very fact, art can ever truly be perfected or appealing to every single person. He may have assumed that the morals of American society were in his control but that was truly never the case. He may have been able to control what was on the screen but he could not conduct society's development.

The code in no way affected the way Scarlett O'Hara took control of her husband's business in *Gone with the Wind*. Scarlett took control of her life in the most aggressive, selfish and ambitious manner, fighting tooth and nail for the life she knew she deserved. If it meant destroying her sister's happiness by

stealing away her beau, than Scarlett would do it. The character of Scarlett O'Hara stands for not just female empowerment but for American empowerment. In *Gone with the Wind*, her fighting spirit during the civil war is considered admirable to most and her childish attitude towards true love was something that never stood in her way. With the help of Vivien Leigh's perfect performance, Scarlett is what makes the film one of the most successful productions of all time. Emerging from her theatrical background, Leigh was very expressive in her films and not interested too much in being attractive or sexy, in spite of her natural beauty.

During World War II, America was highly productive and unlike the Great War, Hollywood's female stars made their rounds, promoting the sale of war bonds and factory working. They continued to entertain even outside of work and the much-loved Hollywood Canteen is a great example, which was organised by no other than the great Bette Davis. When the war finally ended, a new America was emerging and suddenly life was much too precious again. It must be noted that it was female actresses like Rita Hayworth that kept the American moral going during and after the war, particularly with the Columbia hit, *Gilda* (1946). Not only is the character of Gilda remembered for her dangerous hair-flipping beauty but also her desire for revenge in this exciting film noir. By the time the 1940's came around, Film Noir was in vogue. Generally, Noir is viewed as misogynistic by critics in the sense that the women were almost always evil. However, great actresses made the best of these roles as they generally had far more interesting dimensions and it was better to appear a femme fatale than appearing as a woman who was compliant to men and societal values. During this period, femme fatale characters were made popular by many actresses including Lauren Bacall, Veronica Lake, Gene Tierney and even Barbara Stanwyck who survived the oppression of Breen. On the plus side, femme fatale characters injected a much-needed dose of sexual energy and Gilda was no exception.

In 1946, we were introduced to the character of Gilda, portrayed by the electrifying Hayworth. She may seem like a supportive trophy wife to many viewers but there is more to her character. Her constant flirting and teasing in the presence of men is very much apparent, purposely dancing with other men in her husband's nightclub and casino, while an old flame, Johnny, watches on. Her intention? To make him jealous. Her cocky wit and spiteful demeanour, makes her a dangerous woman. In spite of secretly loving him, she disregards her feelings in order to drive him mad and even declares at one point that she hates Johnny so much, —.that I'd destroy myself to take you down with me.". Towards the end, Gilda performs in one of film's most famous scenes, known as a 'clothed striptease'. While drunk, she takes to the floor of her husband's crowded nightclub and sings 'Put the Blame on Mame', a suggestive song about a woman called Mame who is responsible for many natural disasters due to her sexuality and power. [Fig 9.] Every aspect of Gilda pays homage towards the lost Pre-code female roles. Rita Hayworth delivers an incredible performance, proving that great, multi-faceted roles could be found for actresses during the 1940's. Films like this defied the code and at this stage, Breen's control was waning.

In the 1950's, stars like Marilyn Monroe, Sophia Loren, Jayne Mansfield and Elizabeth Taylor flaunted their popular sexual image on-screen image. The 1950's is classified generally as a puritanical era that greatly suppressed the freedom of women in American society. Women generally stayed at home to raise their families and few acquired an occupation. However on film, actresses are able to express their sexual desires and femininity even if most women in society did not choose to. At this stage, the code was practically ignored. Very few studios abided by many of its rules. Films like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *The Quiet Man* (1952) show advancement in diversity related to female roles. In *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, we follow a pair of showgirls. One wants to marry for money and the other for love. This does not stop them from flirting with men on their

voyage to Paris, while sussing out a detective on board their ship. These characters, played by Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell, are glamorous and feminine and both are guilty of using their sexuality to their advantage. Most importantly, both characters are good natured, fun-loving and independent.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, we see Vivien Leigh again in a role that furthermore proved just what a talent she was. We watch her character, Blanch DuBois, slowly breakdown in the home of her sister and brother-in-law. Constantly made fun of by Stanley (Played by Marlon Brando) who suspects she has a shady past, Blanch displays numerous sides to her personality. One minute she is flouncing around, bragging about former suitors and the next, she acts like a scared, vulnerable child. A part of Blanch shows guilt for being a sexual woman but there is another side to her that loves to be desired by men. Her social snobbery and contrived sophistication are qualities that are fabricated by her, in the hope of eventually finding a partner. The rape scene, which made it through the censors that occurs between Stanley and Blanch, is done in a way that it is only suggested. A mirror, symbolising Blanch's fading beauty and mind, breaks violently as Stanley moves in to force himself on her. Haunted by the death of her husband and after working in a brothel soon after losing her beloved childhood home, she disintegrates into madness and is taken away to a mental facility. This kind of role was rarely seen throughout the golden era and Vivien Leigh took full advantage of this much-coveted role.

Her sister Stella, played by Kim Hunter, is someone who never ceases to forgive her husband and his demanding and aggressive nature. Upon leaving him after a violent argument one night, he cries out her name outside their neighbour's home where she fled for safety. Stella may be judged too quickly by viewers who see her as a woman who gives in too easily to her belligerent husband. However it can be

argued the Stella is fully in control of herself. She knows that she is all that Stanley has. Their love for one another is passionate and genuine above all else and by returning to him in this scene, she is rewarding him and threatening him at the same time. She is capable of leaving him but for the time being with the exception of the ending, stays as she hungers for him emotionally and sexually.

If such films were made during the mid-1930's, there is no possible way they would have made it to the screen due to Breen's fierce involvement and determination to change cinema for the benefit of society. Each of these films mentioned are made up of numerous elements that were frowned upon by Breen and the church but since they were losing a great deal of power, directors and producers took their chances. Without truly understanding the context of the code, it's easy to wonder why such films were still created if they were against film law. Yes, there were still decent roles available to actresses but when you compare the female roles of the 40's and 50's to the pre-code roles for women, there is a stark difference. Trying to fit all the characteristics of Lily in *Baby Face* (1933) into a 1950's context would have been considered too bold a move and her characterisation still considered too racy for these times. Nevertheless, America was about to undergo a cultural revolution where freedom of expression was something that was a priority. With the code viewed as old fashioned by directors, producers and studios alike, it would not be long before a change was in order.

## ii. The Abolishment of the Motion Production Code &

### The Rise of Feminism

The industry had completely abandoned the code at this point with the resurgence of controversial themes and sexuality clearly staying put. The code was failing to censor much of its rules to comply with the very changeable American society. Even though Breen retired for a short period from the PCA (Production Code Association) in 1941 until 1942, his official step-down from the association officially took place in 1954 after the release of Otto Preminger's, *The Moon is Blue* in 1953. The film was released without the PCA stamp of approval, which deeply angered Breen. He managed to ban the film from several film theatres across the country but the film proved to be a critical and commercial success, regardless. His power over Hollywood was practically non-existent anymore. Geoffery Shurlock took over his position and was immediately faced with immense pressure. By 1956, Shurlock reviewed the code, allowing drug addiction, mixed race relationships and abortion among many other aspects previously banned by the code, to be featured on screen. He also allowed producers to make an appeal to the board if they wanted to include any other subject matter that was currently banned. The Catholic Legion of Decency was also in decline during the 1950's. People no longer paid attention to their disdain and objection to many great films produced in recent years and Hollywood no longer feared them because their rallying had no financial effect on ticket sales.

American society entered the 1960's with an open mind and this was instrumental in the development of the film industry. People were becoming more open with their sexuality, human rights and views on politics and war. By 1961 in relation to film, Shurlock was thinking about getting rid of the code for good in order to comply with the hasty development of American society. With the success of *Who's*

*Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), *Blow-Up* (1966) and *Valley of the Dolls* (1967), a new system of censorship was being mulled over by the association since nudity and profanity in film seemed accepted by much of the American public. With critics and industry workers unafraid to voice their opinions to studio heads, they believed the code was a contradiction to their new way of life. Taking a page out of Britain's book, in November of 1968, the Motion Picture Production code was officially eradicated and replaced by a new form of film classification system. The Motion Picture Association of America came together with the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO) and the International Film Importers and Distributors of America (IFIDA) to oversee this new system of rating films based on their content.

Until 1969, the rating system was divided up into four categories:

- X: Adults only
- R: Restricted. Under 16's must be accompanied by an adult
- M: Mature. Parental guidance suggested.
- G: All ages.

The new ratings acted as a guide for the American people so that it was easier for parents to control what the younger generation was exposed to. This was a great success that worked for everyone involved in film and for those who simply enjoyed them. Like most things, there was some controversy over this change but not enough to change the system again. The American New Wave had officially begun.

With these new rating rules, directors had almost complete freedom to play around with sexuality, social issues and violence. With the rise of Second Wave Feminism, female actresses were unafraid to seek sexier and more diverse roles. Beginning in the early 1960's, The Women's Liberation Movement was an organisation that was established to protect and promote women's rights in all areas. Feminist writers such as Simone de Beauvoir and her book, *The Second Sex* from 1953 and more recently, Betty Friedan

and her book, *The Feminine Mystique* which was published in 1963, influenced this movement's views. Both writers condemned the social conventions that women were expected to adhere to due to the oppression of male dominated society. Even though magazines, television and film allowed actresses and celebrity figures the freedom to now appear as sexually free and independent if they chose to, many feminists disliked this image as it was obviously controlled by men, stereotyping them as sexual objects. According to Friedan, this image of sex was what the feminine mystique was. She comments that, "The feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfilment of their own femininity." (Ch.2. P.33) This essentially meant sex, which was now relieved of from taboo. Now there was another debate on hand. The sexualised images of women on the screen in the 1960's and 70's, dominated the box-office, just like it did during the pre-code years. By the time the 1970's came around, feminist film criticism, most notably film critic Laura Mulvey, was very much active, commenting heavily on the 'male gaze', which attributes greatly to classic Hollywood cinema. Instead of these female characters from film in this era being applauded for their sexual openness and bold attitudes, they were viewed as victims of misogyny. Either way, history had more or less remained the same in spite of the constant toing and froing of artistic freedom in film. The only difference was how women were perceived along with the development of the mentality of modern society.

In the 1980's, pre-code cinema was rediscovered again when Bruce Goldstein, a Film Forum programmer and producer, began annual pre-code festivals in New York City. This sparked huge public interest and he is regarded as the person who single-handedly introduced a new generation to these wonderful films. Following the festival's popularity, Metro Goldwyn Mayer began to release numerous pre-code films on VHS throughout the 1990's. Turner Classic Movies also aired, and still do, numerous pre-code favourites. Today, very few are available on DVD but a large amount can be viewed on such sites as Youtube and Openculture.

I believe that it will always be debated whether women in pre-code films represented the emergence of the suppressed woman, a powerful force in sexuality or if they were seen as simply items of pleasure purely created for the benefit of men. It was, and still is, up to the individual to decide if women and sex in film is something positive and feminist or if it is sexist in relation to how men wanted to see women through the media. As time has gone on, female sexual openness has become more celebrated in cinema and this can easily stand shoulder-to-shoulder alongside feminism as a symbol of strength. Generally, the women who appeared on film during the pre-code years are regarded as such. Their image is celebrated by most, not in a sexist way, but in an artistic, fashionable and symbolic sense. It is also important to note how pre-code cinema gave Hollywood some of its all time greatest stories.

Melodramatic and dark in content, it set the bar high in terms of narrative and imagination. When the code was implemented, many filmmakers and producers longed for that kind of freedom again and they worked for decades to try and restore cinema to its former glory. That in itself says so much about the popularity of pre-code film and the power of women and sex. As Mick LaSalle explains towards the end of *Complicated Women*, –The actresses of the pre-code era are one particularly vital aspect of the birth of the modern era, and it's impossible to watch them without admiration.”(Ch. 11, P.252)

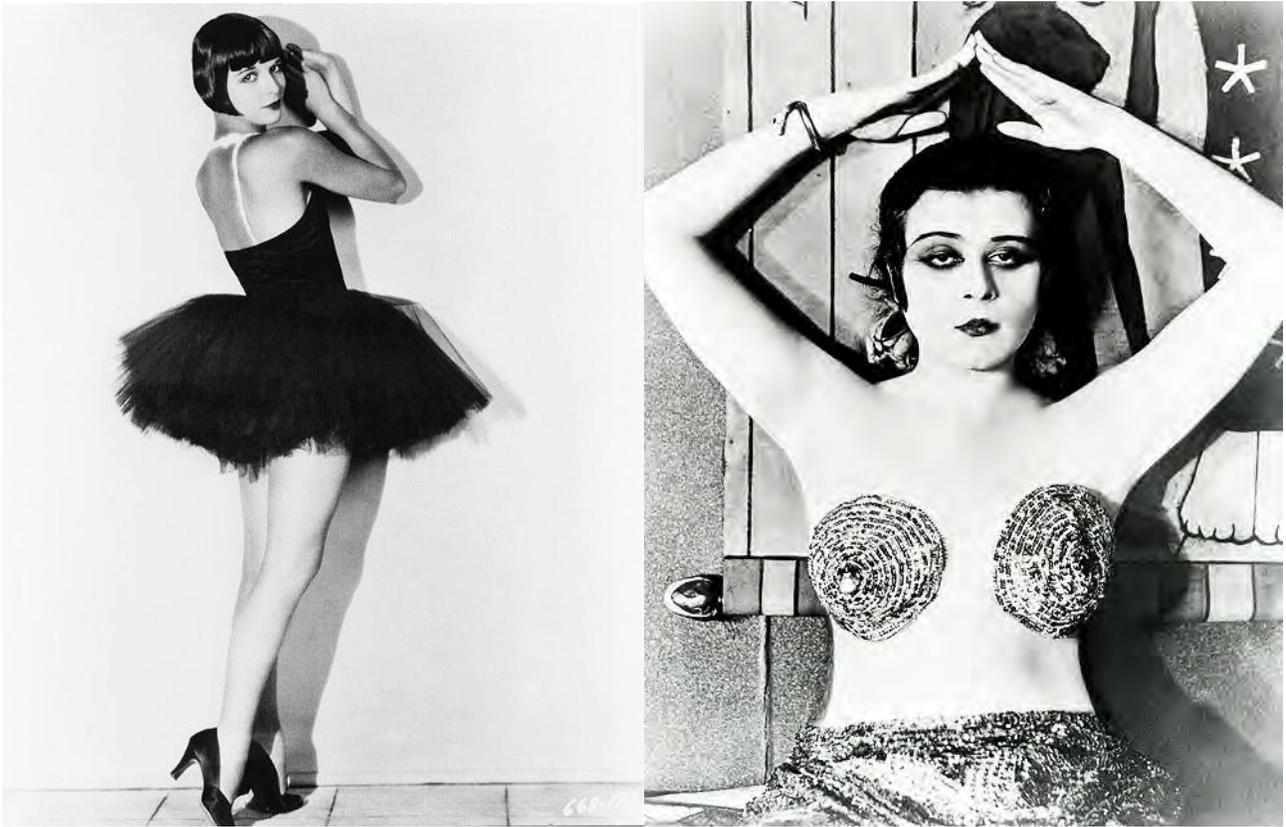
# Figures



[Fig 1.] The Traditional Flapper



[Fig 2.] The 'Gibson Girl' Image, C. 1910's



[Fig 3.] Louise Brooks & Theda Bara – Vamp Style, C. 1920's

gesture, reference, song, joke, or by suggestion (even when likely to be understood only by part of the audience) is forbidden.

**V—PROFANITY.** Pointed profanity (this includes the words God, Lord, Jesus, Christ—unless used reverently—Hell, S. O. B., damn, Gawd), or every other profane or vulgar expression however used, is forbidden.

#### VI—COSTUME.

1. *Complete nudity* is never permitted. This includes nudity in fact or in silhouette, or any lecherous or licentious notice thereof by other characters in the picture.
2. *Undressing scenes* should be avoided, and never used save where essential to the plot.
3. *Indecent or undist exposure* is forbidden.
4. *Dancing costumes* intended to permit undue exposure or indecent movements in the dance are forbidden.

#### VII—DANCES.

1. Dances suggesting or representing sexual actions or indecent passion are forbidden.
2. Dances which emphasize indecent movements are to be regarded as obscene.

#### VIII—RELIGION.

1. No film or episode may throw *ridicule* on any religious faith.

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2. *Ministers of religion* in their character as ministers of religion should not be used as comic characters or as villains.

3. *Ceremonies* of any definite religion should be carefully and respectfully handled.

#### IX—LOCATIONS.

The treatment of bedrooms must be governed by good taste and delicacy.

#### X—NATIONAL FEELINGS.

1. *The use of the Flag* shall be consistently respectful.
2. *The history, institutions, prominent people and citizenry* of other nations shall be represented fairly.

**XI—TITLES.** Salacious, indecent, or obscene titles shall not be used.

#### XII—REPELLENT SUBJECTS.

The following subjects must be treated within the careful limits of good taste:

1. *Actual hangings* or electrocutions as legal punishments for crime.
2. *Third Degree* methods.
3. *Brutality* and possible gruesomeness.
4. *Branding* of people or animals.
5. *Apparent cruelty* to children or animals.
6. *The sale of women*, or a woman selling her virtue.
7. *Surgical operations.*

6

#### A Code

### TO GOVERN THE MAKING OF TALKING, SYNCHRONIZED AND SILENT MOTION PICTURES

Formulated by

ASSOCIATION OF MOTION PICTURE PRODUCERS, INC.

and

THE MOTION PICTURE PRODUCERS AND DISTRIBUTORS OF AMERICA, INC.

Motion picture producers recognize the high trust and confidence which have been placed in them by the people of the world and which have made motion pictures a universal form of entertainment.

They recognize their responsibility to the public because of this trust and because entertainment and art are important influences in the life of a nation.

Hence, though regarding motion pictures primarily as entertainment without any explicit purpose of teaching or propaganda, they know that the motion picture within its own field of entertainment may be directly responsible for spiritual or moral progress, for higher types of social life, and for much correct thinking.

During the rapid transition from silent to talking pictures they have realized the necessity and the opportunity of subscribing to a Code to govern the production of talk-

7

ing pictures and of reacknowledging this responsibility.

On their part, they ask from the public and from public leaders, a sympathetic understanding of their purposes and problems and a spirit of cooperation that will allow them the freedom and opportunity necessary to bring the motion picture to a still higher level of wholesome entertainment for all the people.

#### GENERAL PRINCIPLES

1. No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin.
2. *Correct standards of life*, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.

#### PARTICULAR APPLICATIONS

##### I—CRIMES AGAINST THE LAW.

These shall never be presented in such a way as to throw sympathy with the crime as against law and justice or to inspire others with a desire for imitation.

##### 1. *Murder.*

- a. The technique of murder must be presented in a way that will not inspire imitation.
- b. Brutal killings are not to be presented in detail.

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- c. *Revenge* in modern times shall not be justified.

2. *Methods of Crime* should not be explicitly presented.

- a. *Theft, robbery, safe-cracking, and dynamiting* of trains, mines, buildings, etc., should not be detailed in method.

- b. *Arson* must be subject to the same safeguards.

- c. The use of firearms should be restricted to essentials.

- d. *Methods of smuggling* should not be presented.

3. *Illegal drug traffic* must never be presented.

4. *The use of liquor* in American life, when not required by the plot or for proper characterization, will not be shown.

#### II—SEX

The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not inter that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing.

1. *Adultery*, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively.

2. *Scenes of Passion.*

- a. They should not be introduced when not essential to the plot.

- b. Excessive and lustful kissing,

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- lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures, are not to be shown.

- c. In general passion should so be treated that these scenes do not stimulate the lower and baser elements.

3. *Seduction or Rape.*

- a. They should never be more than suggested, and only when essential for the plot, and even then never shown by explicit method.

- b. They are never the proper subject for comedy.

4. *Sex perversion* or any inference to it is forbidden.

5. *White slavery* shall not be treated.

6. *Miscegenation* (sex relationships between the white and black races) is forbidden.

7. *Sex hygiene* and venereal diseases are not subjects for motion pictures.

8. *Scenes of actual child birth*, in fact or in silhouette, are never to be presented.

9. *Children's sex organs* are never to be exposed.

**III—VULGARITY.** The treatment of low, disgusting, unpleasant, though not necessarily evil, subjects should be subject always to the dictate of good taste and a regard for the sensibilities of the audience.

**IV—OBSCENITY.** Obscenity in word,

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[Fig 4.] Scan of The Motion Picture Production Code, 1930



[Fig 5.] A. L. Shafer's photo protests against the Code, 1940



[Fig 6.] Greta Garbo in *Anna Christie*, 1930



[Fig 7.] Marlene Dietrich in *Blonde Venus*, 1932



[Fig 8.] Barbara Stanwyck in *Baby Face*, 1933



[Fig 9.] Rita Hayworth performing 'Put the Blame on Mame' in *Gilda*, 1946

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