

The Pre-Code Era

COLLECTION PROFILE

From the beginning of American motion picture history, a debate has raged over film's role in promoting social and moral values. In the late 1920s, increased local and state regulation of film exhibition, calls for federal censorship, and a series of Hollywood scandals united industry leaders in an effort to fend off threats to the industry's autonomy and profit-making ability. And, in 1930, the Motion Picture Production Code was developed in order to appease Hollywood's critics. The Code was a self-regulatory measure which outlined specific dos and don'ts concerning what should appear on American movie screens. The code began to be strictly enforced in 1934 when all films were required to have certificates of approval issued by the Production Code Administration.

Many motion picture historians have argued that Hollywood sound films produced prior to enforcement of the Code were not only more provocative but also offered more diversity than those produced while the Code was in place (1934-1966). Often cited notorious examples include *BABY FACE* (Alfred E. Green, 1933), *THE STORY OF TEMPLE DRAKE* (Paramount, 1933. Stephen Roberts) and *COMMON CLAY* (Fox, 1930. Victor Fleming).

Some film scholars have even attributed the



Bad girls, like Jean Harlow (pictured here in 1931's *Goldie*), and risqué material were common features of the "anything goes" mentality of Pre-Code films.

appearance of homogenized portrayals of women, sexuality, race, and religion to the imposition of the Code. Mae West's career at Paramount Pictures, for example, illustrates the effects of the Production Code's enforcement. Her popularity in films such as *SHE DONE HIM WRONG* (1933), *I'M NO ANGEL* (1933) and *BELLE OF THE NINETIES* (1934) was derived in part from her characters' predilection for double entendres, sexual innuendo and implied

promiscuity. Following the Production Code crackdown, films such as *GOIN' TO TOWN* (1935) and *KLONDIKE ANNIE* (1936) feature a considerably sanitized, and some would argue, stifled version of the Mae West persona.

The Pre-Code Era

FILMS

(this is only a partial list – consult the Archive Research and Study Center for further listings)

Story of Temple Drake (1933). Paramount. Director, Stephen Roberts. Writer, Oliver H. P. Garrett.
Study Copy: VA 13791 M

Baby Face (1933). Warner Brothers. Director, Alfred E. Green. Writers, Gene Markey and Kathryn Scola.
Study Copy: VA 964 M

Goldie (1931). Fox Film Corporation. Director, Benjamin Stoloff. Writers, Gene Towne and Paul Perez.
Study Copy: VA 17992 M

I'm No Angel (1933). Paramount. Director, Wesley Ruggles. Writer, Mae West.
Study Copy: VA 2310 M

Search For Beauty (1934). Paramount. Director, Erle C. Kenton. Writers, Frank Butler, Claude Binyon.
Study Copy: DVD 6691 M

Blonde Venus (1932). Paramount. Director, Josef von Sternberg. Writers, S. K. Lauren, Jules Furthman.
Study Copy: VD 599 M

Trouble in Paradise (1932). Paramount. Director, Ernst Lubitsch. Writer, Samson Raphaelson.
Study Copy: VD 724 M

The Painted Woman (1932). Fox Film Corporation. Director, John Blystone. Writers, Guy Bolton, Leon Gordon. Study Copy: VA 2056 M

Guilty Hands (1931). Loew's. Directors, Lionel Barrymore and W. S. Van Dyke. Writer, Bayard Veiller.
Study Copy: VA 17811 M

Murder at the Vanities (1932). Paramount. Director, Mitchell Leisen. Writers, Carey Wilson and Joseph Gollomb. Study Copy: DVD 6691 M

PRINT RESOURCES

(for more information consult the UCLA Arts Library)

LaSalle, Mick. *Complicated Women: Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood*. New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2000.

Doherty, Thomas Patrick. *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema 1930-1934*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999.

Vieira, Mark. *Sin in Soft Focus: Pre-Code Hollywood*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999.

Jacobs, Lea. *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film 1928-1942*. Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991.