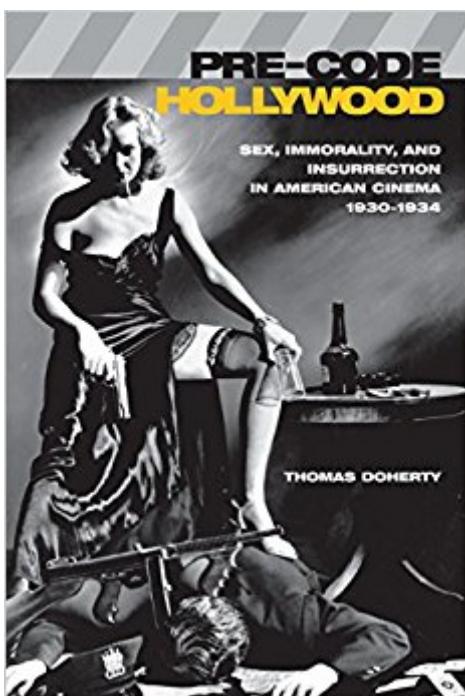


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# Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, And Insurrection In American Cinema; 1930-1934



## Synopsis

Pre-Code Hollywood explores the fascinating period in American motion picture history from 1930 to 1934 when the commandments of the Production Code Administration were violated with impunity in a series of wildly unconventional films—*a* time when censorship was lax and Hollywood made the most of it. Though more unbridled, salacious, subversive, and just plain bizarre than what came afterwards, the films of the period do indeed have the look of Hollywood cinema—but the moral terrain is so off-kilter that they seem imported from a parallel universe. In a sense, Doherty avers, the films of pre-Code Hollywood are from another universe. They lay bare what Hollywood under the Production Code attempted to cover up and push offscreen: sexual liaisons unsanctified by the laws of God or man, marriage ridiculed and redefined, ethnic lines crossed and racial barriers ignored, economic injustice exposed and political corruption assumed, vice unpunished and virtue unrewarded—*in sum*, pretty much the raw stuff of American culture, unvarnished and unveiled. No other book has yet sought to interpret the films and film-related meanings of the pre-Code era—*what* defined the period, why it ended, and what its relationship was to the country as a whole during the darkest years of the Great Depression... and afterward.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Who says the world of classic Hollywood moviemaking was never risqué? We tend to think of black-and-white movies as representing a sanitized world, where crime never paid, ladies of the evening had hearts of gold, and married couples slept in separate beds. But in fact, censorship in

American cinema didn't begin in earnest until 1934, when Will Hays and Joseph Breen began enforcing the legendary Hollywood production code. In this revelatory book, Thomas Doherty looks at sound movies of 1930-34--what is now known as the "pre-code" era. This was a Hollywood of loose dames, hot whoopee, and coked-up killers who'd do anything for a pot of jack. It was a world that was often amoral and anarchic--an industry that allowed James Cagney and Paul Muni wild orgies of violence, openly flaunted the sexuality of Marlene Dietrich and Mae West, gave King Kong permission to crush cars and eat people, and allowed Tod Browning to make *Freaks*, one of the ghastliest, most sensationalistic, and greatest American movies. Doherty's book captures this mad universe beautifully, describing films in such delightful detail that you may find yourself tossing it on your couch and racing to the video store. He also documents the downfall of the period, the outrage that was leveled against early sound films, and the emerging code that repressed American movies for almost 30 years. Film fans reveling in the debauchery of Hollywood's naughtiest era will also want to see Mark A. Vieira's *Sin in Soft Focus*. --Raphael Shargel

In early 1930s America, weighed down by the Depression, a vice-ridden, wise-cracking, anarchic antiauthoritarianism ruled Hollywood. Doherty's exhaustive cultural history of the films produced in the last years before the enactment of the Motion Picture Production Code reveals how the ascendancy of sound and a plummeting economy led to four years of wildly edgy films (1930-1934), radically different from the spic-and-span products of classic Hollywood. Most of the films chronicled hereAsporting titles like *Eight Girls in a Boat*, *Call Her Savage* and *Merrily We Go to Hell*Ahave been both forgotten by film historians and unavailable to generations of late-night TV viewers. Doherty begins with the misery and discontent gripping the U.S. in the 1930s, explaining how these forces shaped a motion picture industry just learning how to use the power of sound. He organizes the later chapters around a colorful, trashy array of genres: anarchic comedies; horror, gangster and vice films; over-the-top newsreels; and expeditionary films set in dangerous territory. Doherty's plot summaries at times grow tiresome, but he rarely fails to enliven them with gossip, quips or anecdotes. Ultimately , he shows how the fun came to a crashing halt when the National Legion of Decency and the Production Code Administration, spearheaded by Joseph Breen, launched a massive and astonishingly successful crusade to clean up "the pest hole that infects the entire country with its obscene and lascivious moving pictures." Given the politics swirling around Hollywood's edgier fare in the wake of the shootings in Littleton, Colo., this lurid and all too short-lived chapter of Hollywood history has never seemed more germane. (Sept.) FYI: A series at New York's Film Forum, *The Joy of Pre-Code*, running from August 20 to September 14, 1999, will

feature more than 40 precode films, including many discussed by Doherty. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This is a product of fine piece of work done by Brandies University professor Tom Doherty investigating into the history of Hollywood at the height of Great Depression when much of the nation was reeling under economic turmoil. Hollywood was stressed out not only by the depression and lack of demand for their products and services, but also by the production code requirement of American motion pictures. The studios had no choice but to fight codes in order to make the movies attractive to as many viewers as possible so that folks of the depression have something they can see, enjoy and forget about their financial and domestic problems. During this time, the censorship was weak and Hollywood made movies about anything that looked controversial; sexual liaison, adultery, corruption of mind by wealth, sexism, racism, social inequality, poverty and reckless behavior. This was essentially a reflection of Hollywood, which was the epicenter of all forms of excesses that were of daily occurrences in the bars, salons, restaurants, hotels and other celebrity hangouts in tinsel town. The author presents most movies of this time systematically and discusses them to illustrate his point. For example, in the movie "Tarzan and his mate" (1934), the underwater swimming scene featuring Johnny Weismueller and the Olympic swimmer Josephine McKim (doubling for the lead actress Maureen O'Sullivan) is a fine piece of artistry. In this synchronized swimming, you can see fantastic underwater aerobics; McKim is also totally nude which may be found on YouTube in fully restored version. This is not only erotic but also a spectacular show, and a bold move on the part of the studio. MGM faced minimal objections from the censor board. The pre-code era is known to be from 1930 to 1934; the code was officially adopted in 1930, but never enforced until the beginning of July 1934. The production code administration was widely referred to as "Hays office" that regulated the Hollywood productions and its perimeters with the full involvement of the clergy and the politicians. In MGM's "Faithless," starring Tallulah Bankhead and Robert Montgomery, the pressure of the depression drives a married woman to the "oldest profession" when her husband is incapable of working. Ironically this role was given to Bankhead who was highly controversial with her notorious, well publicized, out-of-control behavior. In "Blonde Venus" (1932), Marlene Dietrich begins her decent by trading her virtue for feeding her child and herself. Released weeks after FDR's inauguration, Roy Del Ruth's "Employee's Entrance" (1933), shows Warren William at his worst. The film tracks the machinations of a ruthless business executive of a department store. A workaholic with no home-life roams the store after hours, and finds an unemployed young woman (Loretta Young) whom he invites for dinner and in the next

scene we see them together in his apartment. Next thing you know she is hired for the store. In Walter Wagner's production of "Gabriel over the White House," directed by Gregory Lava, supported by media mogul William Randolph Hearst shows how acute the malady was in president Hoover's last year. The movie makes you believe that you can have a tyrant president than a passive one. Hays office required many changes but still the final version was allowed to have the president (played by Walter Huston) to have mistress who would roam in the White House. This is certainly the wrong movie for the troubled time. He declares martial law, assumes dictatorial power in order to bring order in America during the Great Depression. Numerous examples are given in the book that includes; James Cagney's gunplay, wordplay of temptress Mae West, and many more. This book is a well researched by a respected academic.

- 1. A Hollywood and Hitler, 1933-1939 (Film and Culture Series)
- 2. A Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II
- 3. A Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture (Film and Culture)
- 4. A Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration

I am reading (and going to be including this) as a required text for an online class that I am currently creating. This text provides an excellent historical perspective regarding The Great Depression, political tensions of the time (such as FDR and Hitler), and gender issues. I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in learning more regarding the Pre-Code Era and how the dawn of early sound in film created moral and social tensions regarding what was deemed "appropriate" on screen (and what was able to be allowed before the implementation of the Production Code from 1930-1934).

This is a good book, but it doesn't capture the excitement of its subject matter. All kinds of wild & crazy things were happening in pre-code (1930-1934) Hollywood movies (extramarital affairs, prostitution, robbery, violence, etc.), & they happened for the most part without moral judgment on the parts of the movie makers. But this book presents this exciting period in a rather dry, humorless way. It contains lots of useful information about the era & its surrounding politics, but also leaves out a lot of things that should be mentioned. On the plus side, it contains a complete version of the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 (which is referred to in so many books, but hard to find a copy of). The photos are great, but small in size & printed on the same porous paper used for the text (which results in less sharpness than if printed on glossy paper). The biggest negative, in my opinion, is that a number of important pre-code movies are not even mentioned in this book (for example, Norma Shearer's "The Divorcee"). And why the author spends 4+ pages analyzing

"Congorilla" (a 1932 African documentary that was made during the pre-code era but has little to do with Production Code censorship) is beyond me; it's a good analysis but perhaps belongs in a different book!

I appreciate great writing, that adjusts to the flow of presented material, gliding through the eye en route to capture...Doherty's reliance on synonymous glory tends to obfuscate, so often, that one forgets how he wanted you to enjoy the anecdotal history that is well-researched. I am (June 2013) moving; this isn't the book remaining in my pack for easy access. Yet, one will learn of the Era, and as a resource it is vital, so I'm glad to own it.

This terrifically entertaining book taught me more about motion pictures than any other I've ever read.

Good read, PAC

If you are searching for that one book to get or give this is the one. Pre-code anything will get you something that will be not only interesting, but vital to that era.

Very nice item, even better than pictured.

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