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Janet Staiger. *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995. xviii + 226 pp. $49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-2624-3; $32.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-2625-0.

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The period from 1909 to 1914 was "a period of intense struggle within the middle class" over changes taking place in women's roles and in sexual behavior. An older conception of "separate spheres" disintegrated as women, in unprecedented numbers, attended high schools and colleges, took part in mixed-sex leisure activities, joined clubs, and worked alongside men outside the home. The conspiracy of silence surrounding public discussion of sex was shattered by the "social hygiene" movement, which arose in 1906 to combat the "black plague" of venereal disease.

The pre-World War I cinematic image of women is often conceived in bifurcated terms: as "whore" or "madonna." That dichotomy, Janet Staiger shows, is a gross oversimplification which obscures the complex functions that early film images of women served. As she persuasively demonstrates, images of women in early film served multiple functions. First of all, women served as "signifiers" of social change–as symbolic representations of such social transformations as the movement from small towns and farms to big cities, the emergence of a consumer economy, and the rise of new middle-class work patterns.

Secondly, female characters served as tutors to a shifting middle-class culture, showing how urban romances were to be conducted, how women could protect themselves apart from family and kin networks, and how women should behave in mixed-sex work environments. Third, Bad Women served as central figures in middle-class morality plays. Rather than being truly evil, the Bad Women of early cinema were cautionary examples that reinforce cultural norms. Thus the vamp, typically, was not a monstrous destroyer of men, but, rather, a "gold-digger" or "parasite."

Above all, the films advanced a new gender ideal: of a woman who was independent, intelligent, and self-reliant, who thought for herself and violated traditional taboos when they made no sense. Staiger's underlying argument is that a new social order demanded a "New Woman." A growing consumer economy needed women consumers; department stores and offices needed female employees; and an expanding realm of leisure depended on new sexual sensibilities. American cinema played a pivotal role in promoting and popularizing this new image of womanhood.

Staiger offers a fascination discussion of the ways that films from 1909 to 1914 gave expression to a distinctive middle-class outlook or ideology. By this, she does not simply mean that the movies promoted a middle-class value system, but rather a distinctive mode of understanding of causality and human agency. She shows how the film industry modified two systems of aesthetics–melodramatic and realist–making them viable for a changing middle class. Then she shows how film narratives were used as tools for constructing social consensus and controlling deviance and how social issues were illustrated through individualized and psychologized characters and individual decision-making.

Staiger's discussion of movie censorship and industry self-regulation is especially illuminating. In a chronicle of early film censorship that is a model of analytical clarity, Staiger lays bare the disagreements that divided regulators and uncovers two contrasting ways that film censors "read" films. How, then, could the movies talk about sex? The answer, Staiger maintains, lies in "narrative regulation"–a method of storytelling which not only described the Bad Woman's failures, but also provided an alternative vision of the New Woman offering a positive social and moral role model.

Bold in conception and impressive in its command of the cultural and social context and the relevant historical literature, Bad Women offers a vivid and theoretically sophisticated account of the turn of the century cultural debate in the United States over the New Woman, of the ways that societal conflicts over women's public and behavior were represented on the screen, and of how cinema constructed new models of womanhood.

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