

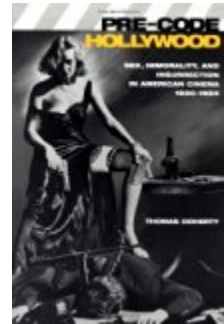
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Thomas Doherty. *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. xi + 430 pp. \$83.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-11094-5; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-11095-2.

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So much has been written about silent era Hollywood's conversion to sound and the ensuing Classical Hollywood period, during which the studio system enjoyed its heyday while making films under the watchful jurisdiction of the Hays Office, that it's hard to imagine new scholarship on an overlooked phase from these years. Nevertheless, Thomas Doherty's *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934* belies expectations by presenting a fascinating study on a period that, amazingly, has thus far escaped intensive critical scrutiny. It's common knowledge that the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, which would ultimately become known as the "Hays Code," wasn't enforced until 1934, at which time the studios, under intense pressure to "clean up" or face government legislation, agreed to self regulation through adherence to the Code. However, Doherty's work is the first to study the films from this period specifically in the context of their having been made in this "pre-Code" era, a four-year span during which "censorship was lax and Hollywood made the most of it."

Doherty begins with a remarkable preface, in which he describes an audience of cineastes' shocked reaction a few years earlier when he had gone to the Brattle Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts to watch a fully restored version of MGM's *Tarzan and his Mate* (1934), which included never before seen uncensored footage of an underwater swim scene featuring Johnny Weismuller clad in only a loin cloth and, more surprisingly, Josephine McKim (Maureen O'Sullivan's body double) wearing nothing at all. Doherty uses this tale as a launching point into the pre-Code era, during which sex and violence routinely found their way on screen and Joseph Breen's insistence on "compensating moral value," a dic-

tum decreeing that "any theme must contain at least sufficient good in the story to compensate for, and to counteract, any evil which it relates," was as yet still on the horizon.

Following a brief but efficient history detailing the social realities of early Depression era America that contributed to the Code's 1930 introduction, the bulk of the ensuing chapters revolve around the unique to the period content of different types of films that flourished in pre-Code Hollywood, including preachment yarns, newsreels, sex and/or vice films, crime films (especially gangster movies), comedies, expeditionary films, racial adventure films (typically featuring a strong underlying miscegenation theme), and horror movies. Each chapter starts with a historical background placing the type of film to be discussed in cultural context. For example, Doherty begins his chapter on crime pics by recounting the widespread popularity of John Dillinger, who in choosing banks as his primary target and consistently outwitting his would-be captors became a Depression era folk-hero, as evidenced by the popularity of newsreels featuring tales of his exploits ultimately leading to the release of a biopic, *John Dillinger—Public Enemy No. 1* (1934). Doherty then goes on to analyze key films in light of their cultural and cinematic milieu, which in the chapter on crime films includes looks at *Little Caesar* (1930), *The Big House* (1930) *The Public Enemy* (1931), *The Star Witness* (1931), *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (1932) and others. For the most part Doherty's analysis is solid, but occasionally he doesn't provide as much background information as one would like, such as in his discussions of Robert E. Burns, the "real life" source upon whose life story *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* is based, and Mae West's pre- and post-Code film work. However,

these lapses are rare.

The pre-Code era came to a close as a result of what Doherty calls “the storm of ’34,” during which the studios were threatened by a Catholic led boycott by religious groups and facing the specter of the “intrusive bureaucracy of the National Recovery Act, the New Deal legislation overseeing what had mainly been unfettered business practices in a laissez-faire economy.” Furthermore, Hollywood studios were feeling the crunch of mounting revenue losses in the wake of the deepening Depression and the increasing popularity of Radio. Rather than dealing with on-going box office boycotts and the likelihood of federal censorship, the MPPDA instead amended the 1930 Code “to give it coercive power over member producers.” The amendments were formally adopted on July 12, 1934 and the pre-Code era, unique in Hollywood history, was over. Doherty goes on to convincingly argue that “self-regulation” was quickly generally accepted for three reasons: because the Code was nationally uniform, it saved the studios huge editing and distribution costs, the resulting “wholesome family pictures” were extremely profitable, and the advent of the enforcement of

the Code coincided with Hollywood’s rapid return to financial prosperity.

In addition to seamlessly blending historical, social and cinematic criticism, Doherty’s work includes numerous evocative stills and four invaluable appendixes, the first containing a kind of our version of The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, the second the Addenda to the 1930 Code, the third the Amendments to the Code, and the fourth a listing of the critical and commercial hits of 1930-1934. Including these appendixes goes a long way in further illustrating the many ways in which the films Doherty highlights violated the Code. In writing the well researched and eloquently argued *Pre-Code Hollywood*, Thomas Doherty has written what will prove to be a significant and lasting contribution to film scholarship that will be enjoyed by film scholars and film buffs alike.

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