

The Notorious Bettie Page

Sex and censorship in America

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The Notorious Bettie Page, an HBO film directed by Mary Harron, written by Harron and Guinevere Turner

Referring to the 1950s fetish pin-up icon, Bettie Page, writer Harlan Ellison commented: “There are certain women, even men, in whose look there is a certain aesthetic that hits a golden mean. Bettie is that.” Elsewhere he writes: “She is simply pure fantasy. A dream girl in all the nicest ways, in that undiluted human passion way that we all shared at some point in our innocence.”

Mary Harron (*I Shot Andy Warhol*, *American Psycho*) captures this quality of the legendary model in her likeable film, *The Notorious Bettie Page*. The term “notorious” is employed ironically in that the underground career of Bettie Page as a poser for sexually provocative photos between 1950 and 1957 is in a certain sense at odds with the real person, someone of intelligence and humanity.

About the film, Bettie Page, now 83, commented: “I want to be remembered as a woman who changed people’s perspectives concerning nudity in its natural form.” *The Notorious Bettie Page* more or less conscientiously honors Ms. Page’s wish.

Bettie Page appeared to have tackled in her own way the era of sexual repression with an integrity and openness that was remarkable. Harron’s film begins with a brief scene from a 1955 Senate hearing on pornography to which Bettie Page has been called to testify. A Catholic priest warns that the threat to American is not communism, but the rottenness “from within.” A vindictive statement in a vindictive hearing room uttered by the smallest of small-minded men.

Backtracking to Bettie’s early childhood, the film shows something of the model’s disadvantaged beginnings. Bettie (Gretchen Mol), a half-Cherokee Native American, was born in 1923 near Nashville, Tennessee, into a deeply religious family living on a farm in extreme poverty. (One account of her life describes the Page children as going without shoes to school.)

Narrowly missing out on a full scholarship to prestigious Vanderbilt University, Bettie graduates from a teacher’s college. Dissatisfied with that profession, she lands a screen test with 20th Century Fox film studio. Refusing to submit to the sexual advances of a studio executive, thereby apparently “squandering” her chances for a contract, Bettie heads for New York City in 1949 to pursue a career as an actress, studying with the distinguished acting teacher Herbert Berghof.

Strolling one afternoon on the beach at Coney Island, Bettie is approached by a photographer, Jerry Tibbs, an off-duty policeman. He teaches her the three essentials of modeling—clothes, pose and expression—and is responsible for creating her trademark look—the sultry Bettie Page bangs. An uninhibited natural at positioning her body for the camera, Bettie begins posing in her homemade bikinis for camera clubs, where amateur photographers cut their teeth taking pictures of women for men’s magazines and private collectors. The partial and full nudity of her photographs is controversial, not to mention her professional relationship with Tibbs, who is black. (In fact, Bettie posed for numerous black

photographers, something that was highly unusual, if not taboo, for a white woman at that time. Her color-blindness, particularly for a Southern girl in that era, was one indicator of a democratic instinct.)

Bettie’s disarming, welcoming personality makes her a subculture sensation, attracting the attention of Irving Klaw (Chris Bauer) and his half-sister Paula (Lili Taylor), who run a photo business for private clients, men who like to look at women in exotic outfits and erotic poses. (During World War II, Klaw made a fortune selling pin-ups of Betty Grable and Rita Hayworth to American soldiers.)

In the relatively paternalistic atmosphere of the Klaw’s studio, Bettie can reinvent her sexuality through images. In a protected manner, she is able to push into the background, or safely tap into, the traumas of a personal history of sexual mistreatment—molestation by her father and later in an incident in which she was kidnapped and abused by a group of men. (The film does not treat the period after her “pin-up” career ended, marked by violent outbursts followed by years in mental institutions.)

Bettie looks to religion as a means of “lifting” herself out of a reality she finds difficult to tolerate. She somehow maintains a generous-minded, non-judgmental attitude toward the men, prominent and otherwise, who generate the demand for hyper-real photographs of her tied up or brandishing a whip. Empathy for her clientele adds to her attractiveness and popularity, and by 1954, she is the top pin-up model in New York City.

Model-turned-photographer Bunny Yeager heightens Bettie’s fame with outdoor photo shoots in Florida that accentuate the model’s natural beauty. (Yeager: “When she’s nude she doesn’t seem naked. She’s a true nudist.... I was expressing myself with her body instead of mine.”) Yeager introduces Bettie to a new slick magazine called *Playboy*, for which the latter becomes its 13th centerfold model.

Bettie’s meteoric rise is cut short when in 1955, Senator Estes Kefauver (David Strathairn), a Tennessee Democrat and presidential hopeful (he became the party’s vice presidential candidate the following year), turns his attention to pornography, attacking the businesses of the Klaw. (Five years earlier, Kefauver had gone after organized crime.)

The Kefauver hearings of the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency (with Robert Kennedy on its staff) summon Paula and Irving Klaw, who are accompanied by Bettie Page. Klaw refuses to answer the committee’s questions, pleading the Fifth Amendment against self-incrimination. He is only held in contempt of Congress, but the hearings mark the commercial end for the “king of pin-up.” Bettie waits for hours outside the courtroom but is never actually called to testify.

The Notorious Bettie Page, although endearing, is a slight film. Relevant historical and political details are touched upon but never fully developed. More could have been said about the larger issues at work, particularly the roots in society of pornography and censorship.

Apart from its cash value—which counts for a great deal—why is pornography such an obsession in America? Perhaps more than anywhere else, official circles in America insist on the myth of a prosperous,

confident, happy population, in the “greatest country on earth.” Ignoring social dysfunction or pretending that it doesn’t exist, of course, only guarantees that the dysfunction will increase and become unmanageable. The more problems are swept under the rug, the greater becomes the need for coping mechanisms, of both the healthy and unhealthy variety.

Harron’s film does ask: What makes pornography, even the soft-core variety peddled by the likes of the Klaws, sufficiently menacing to prompt FBI raids and Senate hearings? This form of authoritarianism is being resurrected by the present occupant of the White House. Currently, the Department of Justice is seeking to require web sites with sexually explicit material—entirely legal material for adults—to use a government-mandated labeling system.

Considerably more could have been made about the Kefauver hearings themselves. The film leaves it, more or less, at suggesting the official hypocrisy and repressiveness at work. In fact, the hearings had a certain social significance.

Senator Joseph McCarthy had had the wind taken out of his sails the year before, in 1954, during the Army-McCarthy hearings. While anticommunism remained (and remains) a staple of the American ruling elite, the height of the postwar hysteria had passed. To a certain extent, attention turned to the “culture war” within the US, as a means of both distracting the population from unresolved social and economic problems and complementing anticommunism with moral issues that could help “unite” the nation. This has an obvious resonance today.

In the mid-1950s, popular publications—women’s magazines, *Reader’s Digest* and such—consistently warned their readers about the internal threat represented by teenage crime (*The Blackboard Jungle* was released in 1955), soon to be supplemented by worries about rock-and-roll, as well as supposedly perverse sexuality. A “hidden enemy,” associated with “communism” and non-conformist behavior of various kinds, was said to be threatening the moral fabric of the nation. The “Beat Generation” became the focus of some of these concerns; Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* appeared in 1956 and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* a year later.

At those same Kefauver hearings in 1955, one of the star witnesses was psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham, author of *Seduction of the Innocent*, who made wild claims about the dangers represented by children’s comic books (chapters in Wertham’s book included “Design for Delinquency” and “I Want to be a Sex Maniac!”). His efforts and others in the same vein set off a wave of sensationalism in the press.

The two reports issued by Dr. Alfred Kinsey and his staff, which also came under attack from Congress, had appeared in 1948 (*Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*) and 1953 (*Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*). The findings revealed an “alarming” percentage of the US population engaged in sexual activities that did not fit into *The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet* or *Father Knows Best* framework (popular television programs about contented suburban family life that went on the air in 1952 and 1954, respectively).

Homosexuals remained a particular target of the witch-hunters. The US Senate authorized a search for homosexual federal government employees and issued a report on “Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government.” The report concluded that homosexuals were “not proper persons to be employed in government for two reasons; first, they are generally unsuitable, and second, they constitute security risks” because “they lack mental stability.”

US society was in fine shape, according to the official version of things, but certain insidious, “perverted” forces were at work seeking to destabilize and bring about its collapse.

Of course, the notion that postwar America was essentially healthy, socially or economically, was on the verge of being smashed up. The year 1955 also witnessed the atrocious murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till, a black teenager from Chicago visiting in Mississippi, by white racists and the launching of the Montgomery bus boycott, officially inaugurating the

era of mass civil rights struggles.

The filmmakers try to compensate for skimming the surface of events by devoting considerable attention to the look of the film, primarily through the use of black-and-white punctuated with Technicolor. Gretchen Mol’s charming performance bolsters the project, bringing to life Page’s unique qualities. Further, Page’s story connects with the contemporary repressive atmosphere and the new moves toward censorship. The film’s energy and rounded characterizations no doubt derive in part from a desire to comment, albeit in a limited fashion, on this reality.

A related question might be: How sanitized is the film’s presentation of the pornography industry? How much erotic commerce in the 1950s was run by small-time operators, such as the Klaws, servicing private obsessions directly? Was there ever the relatively innocent age suggested by the film?

Obscenity, real or imagined, and official efforts to censor it have a strong presence in American social history.

Writer George Bernard Shaw coined the term “Comstockery,” referring to the American religious zealot and leader of the censoring brigade, Anthony Comstock (1844-1915). Shaw defined Comstockery as “censorship because of perceived obscenity and immorality,” which was pervasive due to Comstock’s efforts. The writer remarked that “Comstockery is the world’s standing joke at the expense of the United States. Europe likes to hear of such things. It confirms the deep-seated conviction of the Old World that America is a provincial place, a second-rate country-town civilization after all.”

Little wonder—under Comstock’s personal direction, untold tons of literature were burned. Additional tonnage by such authors as Dos Passos, Hemingway and others was burned after his death under the act that bears his name. Through his various campaigns, the morality fanatic caused the arrest of more than 3,000 persons.

American Puritanism and provincialism were dealt serious blows in the first decades of the twentieth century by economic and demographic changes and titanic world events, particularly the First World War and the Russian Revolution, as well as the efforts of cultural innovators such as Theodore Dreiser and H.L. Mencken.



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