

Forbidden Hollywood: three films from Hollywood's pre-Production Code era

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Turner Classic Movies Archives has released a boxed set of three movies generally credited with hastening enforcement of the Hollywood Production Code.

Waterloo Bridge (1931), *Red-Headed Woman* (1932) and *Baby Face* (1933) feature three working class women who use men to better themselves economically and/or socially. The cover on the set promises the “nudity, adultery, and prostitution” that made Hollywood enforce its production code, but this viewer is more inclined to believe that the three movies’ greatest threat to the Code’s commandments was their portrayal of a society riven by economic and social inequality and the narrow range of options for advancement available to a working class woman. One of the films adds to that threat by leaving its leading character unpunished, indeed, at the top of the social ladder, by the movie’s end.

While Hollywood had known censoring bodies since the early 1920s, it was not until the advent of sound that a Production Code was established (1930) and eventually enforced (1934). The onset of the Great Depression in 1929 created additional social tensions and new anxieties for the powers that be. The need to prevent as much as possible the social and moral realities of the time finding expression in a mass medium became a major concern of the Hollywood and Washington establishment.

The eponymous Hays Office (named for its director, Will Hays, a public relations figure from the Harding administration) was formed in 1922 after a series of scandals had rocked Hollywood. Because Hays, however, had been hired not to censor the movies, but rather to convince audiences that Hollywood would censor itself, his office proved ineffective.

The conjuncture of sound and the Depression brought a profound change to Hollywood and censorship. The combination of economic slump and ‘talking pictures’ seemed particularly dangerous. Hearing spoken words seemed more morally threatening, at least to certain religious leaders (especially Catholic ones), than reading titles or lips in silent movies. These same religious leaders therefore urged the creation of a code of conduct for movie language and behavior, specifically, profanity, crime, and nudity; and Hollywood responded by diminishing Hays’ role and adopting a Production Code in 1930. (Its provisions are available here)

Of course, the onset of the Depression had countervailing effects. Certain writers and directors were impelled to depict its social consequences and Hollywood studios, in the face of diminishing ticket sales, were obliged to pay more attention to realistically depicting the plight of their working class audience, including women.

In addition to the three from the Turner Classic Archives, numerous films—among them, *Blonde Venus*, *Faithless* and *Safe in Hell*—featured working class women driven to prostitution or other indignities as a consequence of the Great Depression. But as of 1934 films featuring such content would no longer be made as Hollywood succumbed to increasing pressures and gave the Production Code Administration full authority to review all movies and demand script changes.

The closest thing to nudity ~~Waterloo~~ 1931 release (directed by James Whale, most famous for *Frankenstein*) occurs in the opening scene when a group of chorus girls, backstage after the closing night of a stage show, change from costumes to street clothes. The movie does include prostitution—in fact, a prostitute is the main character, Myra Danville (Mae Clarke); but we are quickly made to understand that this is due to circumstances beyond her control.

Due to wartime economic conditions (the movie takes in England during World War I), the stage show Myra followed from New York to London closes. For two years, she is unable to find a legitimate job in London and equally unable to ask her alcoholic American parents for financial assistance. To survive as a prostitute, she develops a harsh, embittered carapace to protect her vulnerable inner self.

While “working” *Waterloo Bridge* one night, Myra hides during an air raid, and there she encounters 19-year-old American soldier Roy Cronin (played by Kent Douglass). The son of an American woman and a rich English stepfather and military man who moved to England at the start of the First World War, Roy is wholesomely handsome and innocent—at Myra’s apartment, he tells her he joined the services out of “boyish enthusiasm”—and is immediately attracted to Myra. She, in turn, is drawn to his qualities, which bring out her trusting, vulnerable side.

But Myra’s vulnerability makes Roy want to protect and help her, resulting in a sudden reversion (played with remarkable realism by Clarke) to her harsh, bitter self. “Don’t you feel noble?” she snaps when Roy offers to buy a dress she needs, “You’re the prince and I’m the beggar maid.” Her harsh reply is at least partly due to the shame she must feel for accepting money from men for her favors, but it’s also due to her recognition that she and Roy are from different classes, a recognition which is underscored when she refuses Roy’s offer to join him on a trip to his mother’s countryside estate in the morning. A final, emphatic point is made when, after Roy leaves, Myra sits in front of a dimly lit mirror and we watch her soft face turn rigid and businesslike as she applies make-up for her night’s work.

Before leaving for his mother’s estate, Roy brings flowers to Myra the next morning, only to find her out, “still at work.” Her neighbor, Kitty, who has also been forced into prostitution, convinces Roy that Myra is lonely and needs his help. With this news in hand, he rushes to his mother’s and stepfather’s estate—where he also joins his sister Janet, played by a 23-year old Bette Davis—and confides in his mother that he is in love with a girl who is beneath their social standing: “I know she’s only a chorus girl, but she’s different,” to which his mother nods condescending approval.

This condescension carries on to the movie’s final scenes. Emboldened by his mother’s approval, Roy returns to Myra’s apartment and convinces her to return with him to his family’s estate. There, she finally tells Roy’s mother about her secret “occupation” and the mother (and family) immediately accept her. But when Myra later finds out that the mother hasn’t told Roy about her secret, she is sure he won’t accept her and

returns to London without telling Roy or his family.

A final twist occurs when Roy, who has finally learned of Myra's occupation from her landlady, discovers Myra on Waterloo Bridge and tells her he wants to marry her anyway. She accepts; he leaves for the front on a troop truck; and we follow Myra, from the vantage point of a dirigible in the London sky, as she walks to her death by a bomb dropped from the same airship. Because the audience shares the dirigible's viewpoint, we too are reminded of our share of moral responsibility for Myra's death.

Kent Douglass as Roy Cronin is like many of the matinee idols of his time: an innocent face and too good to be true. Other stereotypes—Myra's landlady and neighbor, as well as Major Wetherby—appear throughout the film. But Mae Clarke's Myra is entirely believable, and the movie's insistence on identifying the causes for Myra's occupation and death are noteworthy.

Directed by Jack Conway and released in 1932, *Red-Headed Woman* does contain a glimpse of a bare breast as well as adultery, but given that more than a few pre-Code movies feature at least this much "offensive" content, one must assume that the main reason for the censor's wrath was that it allowed a working class girl, Lillian Andrews (played by Jean Harlow in her first leading role), to get away with sleeping her way to the top.

The movie quickly establishes the lack of legitimate options for the working class, both men and women. Lillian's working class boyfriend, whom she drops for her boss, is a bootlegger. And unlike Myra, Lillian does have a legitimate job as office help, but she has no illusions about getting ahead via this route. Her option is her handsome, rich, and married (to the vapid Irene, played by Leila Hyams) young boss—Bill Legendre, Jr. (Chester Morris), who can't take his eyes off of her.

The scene in which Lillian confronts her boss with this fact—she uses the excuse of delivering work papers to the home of the sick Bill Jr. to seduce him—is just one of the instances that reveal the hypocrisy of the upper class and Lillian's ability to use this hypocrisy to her advantage. When the married Bill Jr. can't deny that he watches Myra's every move, or later, when their affair is growing and he tells her he can't be with her because of his marriage, she confronts him with his hypocrisy by demanding, "Look me in the eye and tell me you don't love me."

And following Bill Jr.'s divorce from his wife, Myra uses his inability to stand up to those members of his class (including his father, played by Lewis Stone) who are attempting to split up the couple as an excuse to leave him for a richer, older man, coal tycoon Charles B. Gaerste (Henry Stephens).

The theme of upper class hypocrisy follows to the movie's end. Gaerste won't even speak to the married Lillian because she's from a lower class, but he quickly accepts her offer of sexual favors when she visits his apartment anonymously. Then, after their marriage ends abruptly (he's found her with his chauffeur, played by a young Charles Boyer), Lillian uses the money that Bill Jr.'s father gives her to leave to reestablish herself in France. There, several years later, while attending a horse race, the Legendres—son and father—commit the final hypocrisy when Bill notices the woman placing the wreath on the winning horse is Lillian, who's now with a French nobleman. Bill Jr. hands the binoculars to his father, who appears mesmerized, so much so that he and his son fail to tell their wives whom they're watching.

Harlow's Lillian can sometimes be annoying, as when she overdoes her little girl routine; and her attempt at drunkenness in one scene is unrealistic. But her vibrancy and newfound ability to deliver, with machine gun precision and rapidity, a string of invectives at the rotten phoniness underlying the ruling class fairly begs the audience to celebrate her ultimate triumph.

Turner Classic Archives offers two versions of *Baby Face*: the censored version released to theaters in 1933 and the original, uncut version that

was rediscovered in 2004 and contains approximately five additional minutes. This reviewer will honor the filmmakers' intent and discuss the latter version.

Baby Face (directed by Alfred E. Green) is similar to the earlier *Red Headed Woman* in several ways. Lilly Powers (Barbara Stanwyck) comes from a working class background that is portrayed even more graphically in the opening scenes: forced to grow up in her father's basement speakeasy, which looks out onto factory smokestacks, Lilly is also forced by her father to provide entertainment for the men who frequent the joint, including prostituting herself from the age of 14.

Lilly finds too she has no other option other than using the skills she learned in her youth. She is released from bondage when her father's still explodes and also kills him, and she turns for help to a neighborhood figure who might best be understood as the film's confusing nod to 1930s' American radicalism. Sitting amidst his library of books, a gray bearded, bespectacled immigrant man recommends reading Nietzsche and using men to get what she wants. No doubt, a Marxist couldn't have gotten past the censors; besides, a Marxist wouldn't have made that recommendation.

At any rate, the similarities between the two 'forbidden' films continue when Lillian decides to sleep her way to the top, this time literally. Beginning on the first floor of a bank-owned skyscraper in New York, she seduces one company official after another (in the process, we watch her blow off a young John Wayne because he's not an executive) until she's living in a penthouse on the top floor and causes the murder-suicide of two company executives whom she has seduced.

After discovering that a newspaper has offered Lilly \$10,000 for the diary she (falsely) claims to have kept of her experiences at the bank, the board of directors offers her \$15,000, which she accepts, and hires a young playboy, Courtland Trenholm (George Brent), as president, whose first duty is to offer her a job in Paris.

At this point, the movies' similarities end and *Baby Face* suffers for it. The playboy president arrives in Paris and quickly falls in love with Lilly, and she begins to behave and dress more conservatively. However, as was the case with many American banks during the Great Depression, his bank goes bust and he is indicted. When he asks Lilly for the money the bank gave her so he can fight the charges, she refuses and Trenholm returns to New York; but she has an attack of consciousness and follows him home, where, following his attempted suicide (which he survives) she suddenly realizes she needs him more than she needs the money.

In addition to the contrived, underdeveloped ending, *Baby Face* suffers from male stereotypes, especially the working class frequenters of Lilly's father's speakeasy, who are, to a man, coarse and filthy. On the other hand, the film's attention to detail in presenting Lilly's background and Barbara Stanwyck's emotional range are first rate.

The quality of the transfer to disc is excellent.



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