

Bombshell: The Hedy Lamarr Story—“Do good anyway. ... Think big anyway. ... Build anyway”

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Alexandra Dean’s documentary *Bombshell: The Hedy Lamarr Story* is an account of the life and career of famed Hollywood actress Hedy Lamarr. Dean’s film focuses on Lamarr’s recently uncovered career as an inventor whose efforts paved the way for secure Wi-Fi, GPS, and Bluetooth, cell phone and military technology.

Cursed to a certain extent by her beauty, Lamarr appeared in many forgettable films. Her most interesting ones were made in the World War II era: *Algiers* (1938), *Boom Town* (1940), *Tortilla Flat* (1942), *Experiment Perilous* (1944), *The Strange Woman* (1946) and *Dishonored Lady* (1947).

The backbone of Dean’s film is an interview with Lamarr (recorded on audio tapes) conducted by Fleming Meeks—a *Forbes* magazine staff writer—for a 1990 article, ten years before her death. The movie also includes comments by members of her family, biographers and admirers such as Mel Brooks and Robert Osborne.

In the Meeks interview, Lamarr comes across as a warm, thoughtful and perceptive human being. She lived in convulsive, often tragic times and was obviously determined from an early age to do something important with her life.

Dean’s *Bombshell* suggests that Lamarr was largely wasted by the film industry, which could make little use of her personality and intellect. “Any girl can look glamorous. All she has to do is stand still and look stupid,” contends Lamarr. In a good number of her film performances, she has an other-worldly look as though her mind is elsewhere. The documentary hints at some of the things she might have been thinking about.

Lamarr, born in November 1914, grew up in a well-to-do Jewish family in Vienna, which at the time was one of the most sophisticated cities in the world, home to Sigmund Freud, Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Arthur Schnitzler, Karl Kraus, Robert Musil and other luminaries.

Hedwig Kiesler (the future Lamarr) absorbed something of this cultured, “artistically inclined” atmosphere. As a child, she was enormously bright, inquisitive, alert about the world. *Bombshell* refers to an article that notes, “Hedy’s interest in gadgets really started at the age of five when she took an old-fashioned music box apart and put it back together again.”

Lamarr’s son, Anthony Loder, tells us: “My mother was curious. She had a very intellectually curious mind. She wanted to know

how things worked, and her father told her things. Although her father’s official position was as bank director, he was also interested in technology.”

The cosmopolitan atmosphere of her youth had much to do with her later duality as an artist and inventor, but those surroundings (“I miss Vienna,” she tells Meeks, “I would like to make a movie about it. ... All of the nice things I have seen when I was a child”) were about to receive heavy blows delivered by titanic events. Lamarr was born in the first months of World War I, which ultimately led to the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

She entered the film business as a teenager in 1931, with a small part in an Austrian-German comedy. She was given the lead in the notorious *Ekstase* (*Ecstasy*), at the age of 18, in 1933, the same year Hitler came to power. The film could not be shown in Germany because the actress was Jewish.

Bombshell, unfortunately, has only a limited grasp of what made Lamarr tick: her life kept colliding with world-historic events.

The actress arrived in the US in 1938, having been signed by Louis B. Mayer of MGM. He “had come to Europe,” one of the commentators in *Bombshell* observes, “to buy up all the actors and actresses who were escaping Nazi Germany. He figured he could take them back to Hollywood and enslave them in his Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer empire for a cheap price.”

As a Jewish refugee from Hitler and already well-known because of *Ecstasy*, Hedy Kiesler now became Hedy Lamarr. About Lamarr and *Algiers*, which made her a star, comedian/writer-director Mel Brooks jokes: “When I was a kid, I saw her in *Algiers*, I said, ‘I’m gonna get to Hollywood and I’m gonna marry her. And if I don’t get to marry her, I’ll get to buy her dinner and feel her up under the table. Whatever I can get.’”

The documentary narration notes that it is “almost unfathomable how busy she was in 1940. They [the actors] were expected to do what the studio wanted. Bette Davis described it as a ‘slave system.’ And they were owned in the sense that they had signed contracts that bound them to studios for seven-year periods.”

Lamarr’s son Anthony states, “My mother was worked like a racehorse. She had to run fast all the time. They gave her pills to wake her up to perform. Pretty sure it was some form of speed. And then, to make them sleep, they gave them sleeping pills. They worked six days a week.”

In fact, according to *Bombshell*: “Women really had to get to the

studio early because they had to have their hair done, their makeup put on, their costumes put on. And then, you know, they worked into the night. And here's what's remarkable. After a grueling day on the set, Hedy didn't go to bed. She wasn't socializing. Hedy was at home working on her latest invention ... she not only had a complete inventing table set up in her house, but [aviation tycoon and film producer] Howard Hughes gave her a small version of the set of equipment which he had in the trailer where she stayed in between takes."

Interestingly, Lamarr got involved with the design of Hughes' airplanes: "I thought the aeroplanes were too slow, so I decided that's not right. They shouldn't be square, the wings ... So I bought a book of fish and I bought a book of birds and then used the fastest bird, connected it with the fastest fish. I drew it together and showed it to Howard Hughes and he said, 'You're a genius.'"

This was also when she dreamed up a tablet that would fizz up and make cola. Hedy: "You know, during the war nobody had Coca-Cola and I wanted to compress it into a cube so that servicemen and factory people, all they had to have was water and put it in." This particular idea did not work out.

Lamarr's greatest contribution as an inventor was inspired by a tragic event in the summer of 1940, when "a shipload of children was torpedoed. All hands lost including 83 children. At the time, the German U-boats were on the verge of winning the war. They seemed to be unsinkable because they easily outmaneuvered the outdated British torpedoes."

She thought, "I'm gonna do something about that." In an article, Hedy says, "I got the idea for my invention when I tried to think of some way to even the balance for the British. A radio-controlled torpedo I thought would do it."

According to *Bombshell*: "The Germans fill the air with radio interference. She came up with the idea of a secret way of guiding that torpedo to the target that couldn't be interrupted, that couldn't be jammed, that couldn't be messed with.

"Instead of just one transmit frequency communicating, she said, 'What if we changed those frequencies constantly in sync with each other?' Frequency hopping.

"The idea was mine, but the implementation was George's."

Son Anthony tells the camera: "My mother met [modernist American composer and pianist] George Antheil at Janet Gaynor's party. And she liked George Antheil a lot. [Antheil had lost a younger brother in the war.] So, when she left the party early, she wrote her phone number in lipstick on the windshield of his car."

Ultimately Lamarr and Antheil "wanted their torpedo and ship to communicate on 88 different frequencies, like an encryption system, basically, that nobody could crack."

They gave their invention to the Navy, who threw it back in their faces. In addition, the US government seized Hedy's 1942 patent as the property of an enemy alien. "I don't understand," decries Lamarr, "They use me for selling bonds, [she sold \$25 million of them, or \$343 million in today's dollars] then I'm not an alien. And when I invent something for this country, I am an alien?"

Bombshell's postscript points out that "Hedy's invention is now the basis for secure Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, cellphone, GPS and military technology. The market value of her invention is an estimated \$30 billion. If current trends continue, experts believe

almost everyone in the world will soon be connected by frequency hopping."

Adding insult to injury, Lamarr, Dean's documentary points out, "a woman who had tried to change the course of the war," now "found herself in a third-rate film as a distraction for the troops," as the demeaning "native girl" Tondelayo in *White Cargo*.

The documentary conveys the sense that Lamarr knew most of her films were forgettable. She was often type-cast as an exotic femme fatale, partly because of her accent and partly because of her dazzling looks, a combination capable of making the American he-man dissolve into a puddle.

There were, however, a few exceptions: the above-mentioned *Algiers*, Jack Conway's *Boom Town* with Clark Gable and Spencer Tracy, and John Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat*, directed by Victor Fleming. Her acting abilities were particularly on display in Edgar G. Ulmer's *The Strange Woman* (which she co-produced), Jacques Tourneur's *Experiment Perilous* and Robert Stevenson's film noir *Dishonored Lady* (1947) with Dennis O'Keefe and John Loder, the father of her two children—she had earlier adopted a third. Then there was of course Cecil B. DeMille's Biblical epic, *Samson and Delilah* (1949), a tremendous success for Paramount.

Her six marriages were also not a source of satisfaction. Her first was to Fritz Mandl, who ran a leading Austrian armaments firm. According to *Bombshell*, he was "by German measures, Jewish, and therefore, Hitler was concerned not to be seen with him, and I doubt very much if Hitler was a guest at one of their houses, but Mussolini was." This was Lamarr's first exposure to military technology.

In the 1950s, she tried to produce a film without success, then she turned Aspen, Colorado into an Austrian ski resort. As noted, there were more marriages, none of them lasting very long, and drugs, including methamphetamine the studios had prescribed, an embarrassing arrest for shoplifting and loads of plastic surgery. Lamarr ended her life, sadly, as a recluse: "She wouldn't even see her family. We wanted to spend time with her, but she kept us away. There was so much scandal. There were different chapters of scandal." Lamarr claimed to have no regrets, "You learn from everything," but the facts of her last years perhaps suggest otherwise.

Lamarr's life, as she explains to Meeks, had "many phases ... I have been through a lot, my whole life."

She once said, "People are unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered. Love them anyway. If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish alternative motives. Do good anyway. The biggest people with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest people with the smallest minds. Think big anyway. What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway. Give the world the best you have and you'll be kicked into the teeth. Give the world the best you've got anyway."

A remarkable woman.



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