

**Outcast Lilies: Prostitutes in Pre-Code Movies (1929-1934)****Jean-Marie LECOMTE****University of Nancy 2, France****A cultural icon of the early thirties**

A spate of “vice films,” as Thomas Doherty calls them, was released during the pre-Code years.<sup>1</sup> Prostitutes, ladies of leisure, street walkers, and tramps, as the borderline women of depression America, flourished on the Hollywood screen of the period. The figure of the prostitute in film drama is largely a cinematic artefact and cannot be primarily construed as a countersign of reality. In most modern cultures, prostitutes are figures of outcast womanhood, living on the fringes of society. Hidden from view in the daylight, they reappear at night, caught in the headlights of a car or in the glare of a streetlamp. Screen tramps rarely imitate the life of “real” sex workers. Filmic prostitutes or – in their veiled screen persona – “ladies of leisure,” allegorise borderline womanhood for other reasons. As documentary evidence of the social condition of American prostitutes in the early thirties, these sex films cannot be quite taken at face value. They reflect, however, an unusual concern for social issues in mainstream cinema, especially focussing on the plight of women who have fallen on hard times due to unemployment, unwanted pregnancies, divorce, childhood deprivation or simply

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 103.

because they have been “born on the wrong side of the track,” as Lilian Lil (Jean Harlow) put it in *Red-Headed Woman*. As visual and concrete objects, they do not give shape to new concepts of womanhood but they accent, or make visible, hidden aspects of the American female that have suddenly become more relevant in the culture of Depression America. Therefore, they reveal immanent traits in the anthropology of the American woman. As cinematic artefacts, they are wedged between the “new woman” of silent cinema and the “femme fatale” to come, but as they come hard upon the heels of the new talking cinema, their verbal attributes are a major component in their construction.

Two major books have dealt at length with the representation of the fallen woman in film<sup>2</sup>. Lea Jacobs investigates the political and artistic forces controlling and shaping a social taboo whereas Russell Campbell offers a taxonomy of sinning woman types realized by a set of meta-narratives at work in cinema. The approach here is somewhat different and strives to remain within a “figural” theory: it holds that pre-code prostitutes are audio-visual tropes converting an idea into cinematic images. This idea is difficult to delineate precisely and can only be groped at, for it is often remote from its concrete filmic phenomena and the stories that enact them. Abstracting a concept from a set of concrete proposals is a perilous task, especially when it breaks free from clear-cut or discrete categories, be they social, moral or logical (married/single; good/evil; black/white; for example). The pre-Code prostitute seems to enshrine an elusive entity both sexual and a-sexual, both fearsome and attractive, such as that dimly conceived by the minds of primitive people when they contemplated the moon.

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<sup>2</sup> Russell Campbell, *Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in the Cinema* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

It would be wrong to push the prostitute mystique too far in an anthropological or feminist direction. First, the concept at work in these movies need no be necessarily gendered, second it is obviously related to the context of Depression America in a distorted, non-documentary way. The pre-Code fallen woman seems to be as much a male as a female creation. The male slant or perspective often associated with pre-Code Hollywood filmmaking has no clear validity as a film remains an impersonal mode of communication, lacking an overt narrative, perceptual or ideological locus or voice. There are covert filmmaking instances breaking into the diegetic aspects of cinema, but these only add an extraneous commentary layer to the overall poetics and rhetoric of a film and cannot be subsumed to a male perspective. The iconic mutability of the cinematic harlot points to a multitude of concrete manifestations meant to mystify viewers and elude definition, far from the univocal male concept of the available woman and subservient womanhood. Furthermore, these stories are contextualized and staged against a backdrop of economic hardship. The ghost of America in crisis hovers over the metamorphoses of these ladies of leisure, who, all through their picaresque adventures, transcend the grim condition of struggling womanhood in the early thirties. In this respect, pre-Code prostitutes do not live in a world of Oz; they are culture-bound myths that defy or invert the “real” world by confronting it head-on, with a realistic, unglamorous style.

For all they stand for as visual entities, they remain abstractions, indistinct ideas of sex, anti-sex and a-sexuality rolled into one concept that projects its flickering shadows. As they are produced by Hollywood in times of economic hardship and social despair, they play a far greater role as popular allegories than their poor screen lives may indicate. These

Amazons fighting against all odds may just serve as a metaphor for America at war against Depression. They are not what they may seem.

### **A New Deal in sexual politics**

Myra (Mae Clarke), streetwalking on Waterloo Bridge, Blonde Venus (Marlene Dietrich) on the game for a meal ticket, or Midnight Mary (Loretta Young), teenage hooker soliciting gentlemen in their cars, may be cultural icons of fallen women, reduced to selling their bodies to survive. But this is only a rite of passage, not a constant pattern. Most soon settle into the category of the hard-boiled women of the thirties, no longer driven by bread and butter issues, but out to revenge themselves. They become tinsel women, gangsters' molls or call-girls, sleeping their way into luxury. A few others, like Baby Face (Barbara Stanwyck) or the Red-Headed Woman (Jean Harlow) make cynical use of their bodies to get to the top of the greasy pole, wrecking the lives of naïve lovers who are not rich enough or old enough to be suitable sugar daddies. Pre-Code Hollywood prostitutes represent figures of exclusion or outcast womanhood, not because they are socially marked as poverty-stricken females who have to make ends meet or scarlet sinners who waylay married men: pre-code *filles de joie*<sup>3</sup> are put beyond the social pale because they stand for elusive, dangerously free females that have to be tamed and socialised. They project a new idea of American womanhood. After the vamp or the flapper of the silver screen, fancy-free women with little social or political consciousness, the pre-Code harlot rises against the lingering Hester Prynne guilt and redefines on-screen womanhood. Pre-Code movies try to reshape the faces of sinning eves to metamorphose them

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<sup>3</sup> The Saigon brothel-inmate, Vantine (Jean Harlow) in *Red Dust* (1932) jokingly says to Dennis Carson (Clark Gable) that she is a "girl of joy."

into covert avengers, amazons disguised as harlots, “using men” rather than being used by them, as Lily Powers (Barbara Stanwyck) sees as the new deal in the gender war.

The Hollywood imagination of the early thirties clearly visualizes prostitutes as wronged women, at first forced into selling their bodies, then gradually becoming aware of the power they can wield in a weak, corrupt, or simply inept male society. As a rule, they are seen as either victimized female Americans or, more often than not, foreign women corrupted by American males. The loss of their innocence is unlikely to drive them into guilt-ridden despair. On the contrary, it seems to open up their eyes to new vistas in sexdom. In 1930, *Madame Satan* (Kay Johnson) and *The Divorcee* (Norma Shearer) seemed to blaze a trail in the new male-female dispensation. Although they fight shy of outright prostitution, merely remaining on the safe side of philandering, they initiate hostilities in the sex war, with unusual discontent and rebellion. Gone are the days of the lover’s tiffs, the illicit trysts or even the adulterous adventures of the liberated woman of the twenties. The “wine of youth”<sup>4</sup> has been laced with vitriol and the flapper no longer fears to cross the dangerous boundary of immorality. Pre-Code female sinners prefigure the *femme fatale* of Film Noir in their cold manipulation of men’s desire and in their controlled sensuality.

One distinctive feature that marks them off from both the *femme fatale* to come and the wanton flapper of the previous decade is the public/private divide in their on-screen life. Pre-code melodramas guide the viewer’s emotions to empathize with the inner turmoil these

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<sup>4</sup> A 1924 movie by King Vidor , summing up the “flapper” spirit of the age.

women experience, for most of them are not free to love or be loved. They labour under a social weight that cannot be lifted like those “women with a past” of Victorian melodramas. The viewer is sometimes made to witness the slightest veil of disturbance which ruffles their stone-faced resolution to exploit male sex cravings. Prostitutes are single mothers, neglected wives, (wrongly) convicted felons or rape victims. For a spell on screen, they become the face of suffering womanhood, ruling cynically over “maledom.” However brief their reign may last, it represents a definite step towards recasting the image of borderline womanhood in American film. Outcast lilies do not embody wanton floozies but ordinary women; they make visible the darkness of their social condition.

Although filmmakers capitalize on the visual charisma of prostitutes on screen, the latter are first and foremost verbal vehicles who use the soundtrack to air their grievances. In the twenties, no female figure could harness the power of the spoken word on film. With the sound revolution, pre-Code women such as Mae West could deliver their volley of verbal witticisms against men and they certainly did not miss the talking boat. Pre-Code female rhetoric must be regarded as the outstanding element in the representation of filmed womanhood. Prostitutes are minatory figures of discourse, possessing verbal power that put men at a disadvantage: tropes of opposition (silence, sarcasm, and flippancy) are expressed by most of the courtesans of the early thirties, but to varying degrees. Loretta Young (*Midnight Mary*) and Greta Garbo (*Susan Lennox*) often embody figures of silence; Myriam Hopkins (*Temple Drake*) and Jean Harlow (*Vantine*) are initially tropes of flippancy; Barbara Stanwyck (*Baby Face*), Dorothy MacKail (*Gilda*), Ruth Chatterton (*Lily Turner*) and, above all, Mae West (*Tira*) mostly express their resentment in tropes of irony. Underneath these

verbal tropes, there lies not so much fear as anger at male physical and financial power. In verbal jousting, males are no match for female discursive artifice and they know it.

These facets of American womanhood reflect a new vision of the popular female, a people's fantastic distortion of women's resilience in the teeth of adversity. Prostitutes are portrayed as working girls. Dissatisfied wives (*Safe in Hell*, *Red Dust*), single mothers (Molly Louvain, Frisco Jenny), teenage waifs (Midnight Mary, Baby Face), foreign ingénues (Blonde Venus, Madelon Claudet) drop the "It girl" pretence of conforming to men's desires and quickly change the rules in sexual politics.

### **The wife-prostitute double bind**

William Wellman's *Safe in Hell* opens in New Orleans, with a panning shot "brushing" down Gilda (Dorothy MacKail)'s leg as the call-girl takes a phone call for a date with a client. "Ok, I'll go right into my dance," she says, in a blasé sort of tone. Wellman obviously sets a trap for the viewer. Gilda is shot as a wicked sister, smoking and reclining in an open *négligé*. Yet, wicked she is not (or not quite); she just "made [her] living they only way [she] could," after she believed Carl (Donald Cook), her all-American fiancé, had forgotten her. A victim of circumstances, she is driven to an island where she, the "only white woman," must fend off the advances of a group of lecherous renegades who sorely try her faithfulness. Carl, tempting the devil, has sailed away (yet again), after marrying her in a hurry and leaving her in a steamy hotel room. Wellman's treatment of the fallen woman theme is a case in point, for it demonstrates the Hollywoodian ambiguity towards feminine sexuality. Gilda is both wife and whore. Pre-Code Hollywood plays upon the essential sexual power of women (their sexual

nature) and their existential abstemiousness (their sexual culture). Left to her own devices, on a primeval island where nature holds sway, she forgets her culture-bound restraint (and her bland husband who weighed anchor just hours before their honeymoon) and revels with the local riff-raff. There is an extraordinary scene – the typical Wellman touch – where she lights up a cigarette with several matches held in rapid turn by men’s hands close to her face, demanding more wine, more cigarettes, more noise: an act of freedom and defiance, dream-like and transitory like a Swedish match. But a strange determinism is at work in most “fallen woman” pictures. Once a female character has shown that a woman’s sexuality can be equal to a man’s, in terms of desire and fulfilment, a tragic course is set, as if cinema cannot bear the dark truth it has helped to make visible. Gilda kills the crook who has come back to haunt her and is hanged for murder by the island judge (who lusts after her). Gilda is a visual semantic unit made up of contraries: she is both raw feminine desire and its denial. No wonder she dies in the end as contraries annul each other.

Marriage is the enemy of love and desire. In *Madame Satan*, the wife has to turn into a scantily-dressed female Lucifer, during an evening of saturnalia up in a Zeppelin, to resuscitate her husband’s desire. She offers herself up for auction to the highest bidder and the husband wins the bid. The message is clear: the husband can only be aroused by the prostitute in his wife. In pre-Code Hollywood, uxorious love and sexual love do not keep good company, unless, as is the case in *Madame Satan*, the wife conjures up her lustful self to bewitch her philandering husband during a fancy dress ball. The trick works ... as long as she is wearing the mask of the devil. Another “portrait of the wife as a whore” is deftly shot by



Victor Fleming in *Red Dust*, in which Vantine, a brothel prostitute (Jean Harlow) and Mrs Barbara Willis (Mary Astor), the seemingly prude wife of a text-book engineer (Gene Raymond), vie for the love of Dennis Carson (Clark Gable), a solitary rubber plantation owner. Only cinema can illustrate the wife-whore double bind with such economy. The fast-talking blond prostitute stands in sharp visual contrast to the silent dark-haired wife. But *qua* women, they are interchangeable: Vantine wishes to settle down as a wife and Barbara's sensuality goes haywire in Gable's manly tropics. In a King-Kong scene, Barbara (aka Bab) is caught in a tropical storm; Dennis grabs her, dripping wet, and takes her to the safety of a bedroom where they embrace. Rivals though they may be, Vantine and Bab are sister souls: they share their emotions in intimate conversations. Barbara thinks that her adulterous affair is born out of the excitement of the moment. In the case of Vantine, her inner voice warns her: "watch out for the next moment, honey, it's longer than the first." A strange paradox comes to light: Vantine, the Saigon "glad girl," the prostitute, stands for an absence of feminine desire, a particular kind of cold and unresponsive sexuality, while the prim and proper wife, once set loose in the primeval jungle, exudes steamy sensuality. Vantine will only recover her sexuality in the guise of a would-be wife for Dennis. In the Hollywood scheme of things, neither wife nor prostitute is truly desirable, only the double bind wife-whore is.

The most obvious avatar of the double bind, and by far the most frequent, is exemplified by the prostitute who is wooed for a wife by an honest, all-American boy – a doughboy, a model employee, a rising engineer or, surprisingly, a lawyer – in other words, a member of the law-abiding middle class in love (or in lust) with poor sinning ladies. Myra

(Mae Clark) in James Whale's *Waterloo Bridge* may serve as a prototype for the American sex worker who holds popular appeal and draws sympathy from mass depression audiences. Myra, an American showgirl, plies her trade on Waterloo Bridge, driven to streetwalking by war-time unemployment. She comes across a client in an air-raid shelter and takes him home. He is a naïve American soldier, a mere boy who has no idea she sells her body. To her amazement and annoyance, he behaves like a romantic suitor and even invites her to his parents' wealthy mansion. She gradually relents as the love-struck lad proposes marriage. But his upper-class mother is not to be fooled and spots the fallen woman. In a reversal of fortune, the father finds her an attractive wife for his dear son and the mother also comes to forgive the sinner. This is an extraordinary outcome for a Hollywood film. The prostitute showgirl, the fallen burlesque entertainer, wins the affection of a straight-laced American socialite, tickles the fancy of a gruff, no-nonsense *paterfamilias* and weds the green scion of a respectable American lineage. As far as class levelling goes, only pre-Code Hollywood sex can achieve that. A similar course of events is filmed by Capra in *Ladies of Leisure*, where Kay Arnold (Barbara Stanwyck), a poverty-stricken call girl, marries into the American bourgeoisie.

### **A sense of moral ending**

Stephen Roberts's Temple Drake (Miriam Hopkins) is an interesting variation on the theme. Temple, the upper-class Southern coquette, a spoilt brat, has to hit rock bottom and work as a prostitute for her rapist (Jack La Rue) before she actually qualifies to be wedded to a member of her own class. It is "The Taming of the Shrew" theme revisited by pre-Code cinema. Unlike Alison Drake (Ruth Chatterton) in *Female* or Lily Powers (Barbara Stanwyck) in *Baby*

*Face*, whose independent feminine libido is tamed by the power of love, her body must go through the pre-Code ordeal of rape and underworld prostitution to be cleansed, as it were, of upper-class coquettish femininity.

Lily Powers remains the most amoral of all pre-Code prostitutes. After a stint as a teenage tramp, under the aegis of her pimp father, she decides to rise in the world and “use men.” She prostitutes herself to anybody in a big banking company for the slightest promotion or favour (even the janitor has a share in the fun). When she meets a decent, honest bank executive (George Brent), who is not interested in sex, but in a platonic courtship before marriage, she mellows into a sacrificial figure and atones for her sins. Similarly – but in a figure of contrast – Alison Drake, the unmarried female boss of a company, offers her body to her male employees in a show of dominance and contempt for men. Corporate sex is for her both a boring game and a way of management by humiliation, until she comes up against an engineer as cold as a dead fish to her advances. Her wild libido finally finds a channel and Alison becomes a figure of atonement.

The wife-whore double bind must always remain a cinematic fantasy. Whatever their adventures in the land of sexdom, ladies easy to love end up either dead or married. Endings might be tacked-on under the pressure of producers but they are revelatory of the meta-narrative force bringing erring women down on their knees. Female libido is a flame to be extinguished; it cannot be allowed to burn low for fear of being rekindled at the least male provocation. Marriage and death are kinsfolk as they both herald the demise of fleshy desire. As a result, a sense of moral ending is systematically injected in closing sequences.

Socialisation through marriage with the “good guy” with a steady middle-class job is the usual redemptive lot of the reformed bad girl. There are few exceptions. The subversive ending of Jack Conway’s *Red-Headed Woman* is a notable one. Lil, a serial adulteress, gets away scot-free from her many sins: she steals a husband, then cuckolds him with his boss, who, in turn, is deceived when she has an affair with the chauffeur. She flees to Paris and marries an elderly man whom she quickly cuckolds with the same chauffeur. All is well that ends well in a world of cuckolds. Lily Turner (Ruth Chatterton) also comes to an ambiguous end. After a marriage of convenience with a hopeless alcoholic and sleeping around with many men, she plans to settle with an engineer. In the last sequence however, her dream of a quiet, decent life is shattered when she has to rush to the side of her dying husband. There is no clear resolution to her tribulations.

Some may not rise on the social ladder, but nearly all get a moral uplift by climbing the Mount Calvary of sex, for their acts should not be construed as lascivious self-indulgence but as a necessary evil. To some extent, these products of the pre-Code fleshy school of filmmaking share many features with the fallen women of popular Victorian melodramas. The outcast lilies of pre-Code Hollywood are heirs to the “Esther Waters” of Victorian England. What makes the theme of pre-Code prostitution something else than a mere variation of the vamp theme of the twenties and of the fallen woman theme of popular literature is the social and political consciousness that seeps into the movies of that period.

### **The genealogy of a social evil**

Political movies are usually frowned upon by Classical Hollywood producers. Until the fifties, filmmakers usually steered clear of them. Yet, in the early days of cinema, D.W. Griffith tackled sensitive political themes and, with the advent of sound, William Wellman displayed a social consciousness that could only be matched by mavericks such as King Vidor, Charlie Chaplin or Orson Welles, all of whom eventually paid a heavy price for it. Wellman's pre-Code output stands out among his peers for his frank depiction of depression America on film. His cinema is not a record of actual events nor even an imitation of life, but an artful and imaginative representation of the filmmaker's personal vision of some of the social issues besetting America in the early thirties. Between 1931 and 1933, he made four pictures with a prostitute as the main character, but almost all his movies feature women erring on the wrong side of the moral track. Wellman is more concerned than others to expand on the genealogy of prostitution in its cultural context. He understood the mind of underdogs – and like King Vidor – felt sympathy for them.

The retrospective narrative structure of "Midnight Mary" throws light on Mary (Loretta Young)'s descent into crime and prostitution. Told by Wellman's sympathetic camera, her main crime seems to be, in Dickensian terms, "want and poverty." In the opening court-room sequence, the camera frames Mary looking up towards the accusing finger of the law, in a slight high-angle close-up. This shot of Mary's wide-eyed face will recur in the film. She is viewed as an innocent child looking at her accuser, in silent bemusement. The theme of prostitution as a stain on the innocent is made visually explicit in the montage sequence shown in retrospective, as Mary, in the clerk's office, is awaiting the jury's verdict that may

send her to the electric chair. We are shown, in collapsed time, Mary's progress towards murder. Young Mary as a guttersnipe becomes an orphan who is sent to a reformatory after a false charge of shoplifting. On her release, she is initiated into street prostitution by an older hand and soon graduates to the status of gangster's moll. For a while, she lives in clover, pampered by Leo (Ricardo Cortez), the gang leader. She gets mixed up in a heist during which a policeman is shot down. She meets her Sir Galahad in the shape of Tom Mannering (Fanchot Tone), a "blue-blood lawyer" who tries to put her back on the straight and narrow. But social determinism will not release its grasp on her and the law catches up with her. She is sentenced to three years' hard labour for having taken part in an armed robbery. Released from jail, she becomes a vagrant, sleeping on benches. She is rescued from destitution by Leo, whom she later guns down to shield Tom.

*Midnight Mary* is a pre-Code picaresque movie with a Hollywood difference: Mary is no Molly Flanders but an innocent American girl, both a product of depression America and a victim of adverse chance events. Yet, unlike Marya Kalish (Elissa Landi) in Raoul Walsh's *The Yellow Ticket*, who is branded with the yellow sign of Jewish prostitution but remains unbelievably virtuous, Mary's sexual integrity raises a point. Although Wellman shows that social determinism plays a great part in her fall, he does not rule out the role of chance and, in particular, an innate feminine flaw in her sexual downfall. Her repressed desire for hoodlum Leo and her behaviour towards Tindle, her lecherous boss, remind the viewer that she is a dangerous body, a call to lust and that she knows it. She is no shrinking violet on her first night with Tom:

Tom: "What, do you suppose, made me think of sex?"

Mary: "I can't imagine, most men never do."

Tom: "I am the intellectual type myself."

Mary: "Me, too."

Tom: "Sometimes, my baser nature gets the better of me."

Mary: "It's the animal in you."

Tom: "How well you understand me."

Mary (appreciatively): "Mm!"

Mary is both a feminine body and a feminine mind. To paraphrase Shakespeare, her mind flies up, her body remains below and the twain never meet. Her mind dreams of Madame Récamier and of being Mrs Mannering. Her body is drawn by the magnetic pull of Leo the hoodlum. She is a fascinating complex of forces: the groundswell of essential womanhood, existential willpower, the fickle hand of chance and the reducing, hindering power of social determinism. Will-power, aided by the mysterious agency of love (which is Hollywood's answer to twentieth-century humanism) wins in the end. Or does it? Wellman does not provide the viewer with a definite closure. Admittedly, the film ends on a kiss between Tom and Mary, in a jail cell. Yet the verdict will never be known and Mary's fate hangs forever in the Hollywood balance.

Child abuse and deprivation also drive Frisco Jenny (Ruth Chatterton), Lily Powers (Barbara Stanwyck) and Annie Lennox (Greta Garbo) to prostitution later in life. Unlike Mary Martin, they seem to be visualized as female icons rather than fallen angels. They rise against

their social condition with a vengeance and consciously use their body as a weapon in the class and inter-sex war. Lily Powers wreaks havoc in the male-dominated corporate world. Her dark motives, initially impelled by some predatory Nietzschean philosophy, spring from a hatred of men. Liberated from the Christian belief in the sanctity of the woman body, she wields considerable power by using men as helpless puppets unable to control their lust. This extraordinary pre-Code film demonstrates which is the real weaker sex. Men's shallow defences fall one by one as they grovel pitifully at Lilly's feet. Lilly, hardened by teenage prostitution, destroys men and marriages with systematic efficiency.

No feminist or political consciousness motivates Lily Powers. She uses the corporate system in place and its rules to rise to the top. Class mobility, usually achieved by work ethic, string-pulling, family relation or other networking scheme, leaves few doors open to poor girls. Lilly simply adds pussy power to the list of tricks to play the game. From a Nietzschean standpoint, there is nothing wrong and nothing new to that. Mythical figures like Nana (filmed by Jean Renoir in 1925, then by Dorothy Arzner, in 1934), Madame du Barry (by Van Dyke), or Becky Sharp (by Mamoulian) have played the game quite well. What makes *Baby Face* a turning point in American film is precisely the cinematographic form used to shape Lilly Turner as a film icon. Pre-Code cinema has often been studied from a thematic or narrative angle, but, rarely, if ever, from the analytical standpoint of cinematographical form. In fact, pre-Code prostitutes are in no way revolutionary as naturalistic constructs. Naturalist writers in literary fiction and painters went very far in their lurid representation of outcast womanhood. Pre-Code cinema looks quite tame in comparison. Yet, the vision of Lily Powers



as a filmic fantasy gives it a vividness that no other art can match. She first appears as a reluctant body, busy fending off “dirty, rotten men ...ever since [she] was fourteen.” Her brilliant, rebellious speech puts men, including her father, in their place. Her power, first and foremost, lies in her verbal skills, visualised, as it were, by Barbara Stanwyck’s fierce mouth and facial expressions. At the beginning, the camera relentlessly observes men pawing her in her father’s speakeasy. Her father’s home is a hostile space where her mobile body is surrounded and enslaved by men, by their grime, their smoke, their noise. She wriggles in and out of their roving arms. She tries to escape by opening the window and a POV shot only reveals “dark, satanic mills,” blocking her horizon. Her nimble body is therefore shown as restricted, alienated by her filial (i.e. her cultural) bondage, eager to take flight.

After her father’s death and the literal explosion of her domestic universe, Lily’s cinematography changes. She appears in a loose flowery dress contrasting with the tight black skirt that used to encase her body. Her movements are no longer restricted. Close-ups on her face reveal wavy blonde hair and a face lit by a sly, ironic smile, wiping out the sad, resentful face of the opening sequence. Her first act of sexual freedom and manipulation takes place on a freight train, where she trades her body in exchange for a free ride. Later, in a tracking shot, the camera follows Lily Powers and her boss into the gents’. Her sexual power is wielded in non-socialized spaces: trains, lavatories, closets, etc. – locations far from the usual bedrooms of traditional comedies of sex. They remind the viewer that her “reclaimed” body is a wild, natural space, no longer the “sanctified temple” found in Christian iconography. Although the editing has recourse to ellipsis to cut what would be unacceptable to censors, Alfred T. Green

shows as much as possible of Lily's sex acts. In the same vein, Green also depicts underdog sex-working in *Union Depot*. Ruth Collins (Joan Blondell) hangs around a railway station, half-starved. She agrees to follow Chick Miller (Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.), a thief, into a railway hotel for a meal. This seems to be a realistic piece of depression Americana. In the thirties, prostitution would befall the likes of Lily Powers and Ruth Collins, poor girls down and out in industrial cities, rather than Sternberg's sophisticated women such as Marie Kolverer aka Helen Farraday (Marlene Dietrich in *Blonde Venus*).

Josef von Sternberg sees the woman of easy virtue from a different point of view. Wellman's and Green's films display a social imagination that was previously lacking in mainstream cinema, despite the social consciousness inherent in Vidor's *The Crowd*, Cecil B. DeMille's *The Godless Girl* or some early cinema short features.<sup>5</sup> Sternberg sees fallen women as primarily malleable, mutable or unaccommodated female icons which crystallize the fear and the desire of men to seize a concept that seems to elude them for ever. They live in fantasy places, travelling shows (*Blonde Venus*), war-time zones (*Dishonored*), and exotic locations (*Morocco*). Marlene Dietrich embodies the mysterious lady of leisure, bewitching men and Greta Garbo (*Annie Lennox*, *Mata-Hari*, and *Anna Christie*) also plays a similar role. Both may be called Hollywood creations whose cinematography communicates conflicting messages about the elusive idea of femaleness.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Treasures III. Social Issues in American Film (1900-1934)*. Image Entertainment Distribution, 2007.

**Female mutability and the Americanization of the foreign ingénue**

Sternberg develops the theme of female elusiveness in *Blonde Venus*. In a pre-sequence opening the film, Sternberg introduces Helen Farraday (Marlene Dietrich) as a young German nymph swimming naked in a lake. The bucolic scene then dissolves into a shot showing a mother bathing her boy. Helen has become the dutiful wife of Edward Farraday (Herbert Marshall), an American chemist. The primeval Helen has metamorphosed into an American wife, house-bound and contented. The remanence of Helen's first impression will remind the viewer of her mysterious foreignness, a ghost haunting her newly-acquired Americanness.

As the story goes, the happy couple hits tragedy when Helen's husband falls ill. He needs a costly operation. Rising to the occasion, Helen suggests she should return to the stage to pay for her husband's treatment abroad. Her wicked side takes over. Disguised as a gorilla, she makes her first appearance to the heavy beat of African drums and catches the roving eye of Nick Townsend (Cary Grant), a corrupt politician. After a fling with him and the breakdown of her marriage, she runs away with her son. With an irate husband (and the police) in hot pursuit, she wanders across America, eking out a precarious living with occasional prostitution. She is charged with vagrancy and ends up in a cheap Texas brothel. The loss of her child sends her to the depths of drunken destitution. Using "man after man as a stepping stone," she bounces back and becomes a favourite of the fashionable Paris stage. Eventually, through Nick's benevolent agency, she is reunited with her husband.

As can be seen, Sternberg borrows from a multiplicity of genres to build his unique vision of the fallen woman. Aspects of gangster movies blend in with melodramatic elements,

fantasy scenes and pre-Code sleaze. In addition, Sternberg also constructs Marlene Dietrich as the baroque woman in an America in crisis. Sternberg has often been associated with baroque aestheticism, with the term being loosely applied to his inordinate taste for extravagant costumes, pictorial details, fastidious lighting, and shot composition. Granted that, in *Blonde Venus*, Marlene Dietrich is graced with baroque headgear, vestimentary and cosmetic adornment, there remains to be seen what other baroque codes govern this pre-Code picture set in depression America. Post-renaissance baroque refers primarily to an architectural style but, in literature and in the arts, a body of works came to be known as baroque for their shared characteristics. One feature that fits the narrative structure of pre-Code movies – especially that of *Blonde Venus* – is a sense of mutability, transience, and flux. Helen flees across the continent changing names and appearances as fast as the train that carries her. The viewer sees only shapes of an unreal woman who is mother, slut, tramp, and star rolled into one changeable body – no permanent, but only shifting roles. Depression Americans could easily identify with shifting experiences. Fortunes changed overnight and Americans, like Helen, sought escape in the glittery world of entertainment. The Americanization of Helen made her restless and her restlessness was only exacerbated by the neurotic character of a nation in crisis. Marie Kolverer, the German nymph, realized she could no longer hold a stationary European-bound position after she had gone through the democratic mill and become Helen Farraday, the American woman. Her education, her ordeal and rite of passage made up a trail of tears across the continent that adopted her.

Yet, Sternberg also shows that the Americanization of the foreign lily entails loss of innocence and dignity. Foreignness in Hollywood often codes for un-American weakness, ideally suited to be hard done by or mistreated. As such, foreign women and working-class American girls are sister souls, sex toys in the hands of their betters. American lovers often get embroiled in foreign love affairs. In pre-Code cinema, corruption of foreign blooms and their subsequent fall into prostitution come as a result of the inept or callous sentimental education of American men. Madelon Claudet (Helen Hayes) falls for Larry, an American artist. They elope to Paris, he quickly gets her pregnant and, just as fast, leaves for his country never to return. Madelon is of course more sinned against than sinning. She represents the imaginary French woman<sup>6</sup> in an imaginary Paris, a mere sexual souvenir, easily bought and easily forgotten. Larry's foppish friend voices the upper class American ethics about foreign girls, especially French ones:

“Still thinking of that French girl, hey? Come on Larry, step out of it. Have another drink, come on!

That's better. You know those mamas themselves don't take it so hard. Well I ditched one the last time

I was over. You know the one with the striped dress? She took it like a sport. Still sends me postcards!”

In other words, French girls take it as an honour to be seduced and ditched by American boys. They harbour no grudge and remember fondly their American conqueror. But Madelon Claudet is unlikely to forget. She is left holding the American baby until an old roué (Lewis Stone), who is also a jewel thief, takes her under his wing. She spends ten years

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Pierre Verdaguer, “Hollywood Frenchness : representations of the French in American Film” (*Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, vol. 8, no. 4 (Autumn 2004): 441 – 451).

behind bars. On her release and no longer in her prime, she becomes an aging prostitute plying her trade on the Parisian kerb and in dingy bars to pay for her son's education. The film relies on the same plot as *Madam X* (Lionel Barrymore, 1929) but with a major difference. Charting a French woman's pilgrim progress to whoredom, it delineates a fiercer kind of wronged woman. Ingénue though she may appear, Madelon Claudet soon metamorphoses into a hard-boiled harpy, using her body and her claws to achieve her ends.

Michael Curtiz's *The Strange Story of Molly Louvain* tackles the same theme, albeit obliquely. The film opens on a shot of water lilies and pans slowly towards the reflection of two lovers in a pond, with the off-screen voice of a crying girl. The camera tilts up to reveal the tearful face of Molly Louvain (Ann Dvorak) against a backdrop of what looks like luxuriant bulrushes. The sequence plays on metonymies to suggest sexual transgression. Pre-Code cinema was also obscured by the veil of censorship and Curtiz had to resort to oblique representation. Lilies, water, tears and fears, two lovers, a girl in white, and luxuriance connote secret love making and possible loss of virginity. Molly recalls to her seducer how her mother abandoned her and how her mother's poor reputation hangs on her like a social stigma. Her foreign-sounding name is the flimsiest of clue that she is not from American stock, but otherwise Molly's treatment resembles that of Madelon Claudet. Her high society American lover, who is also the father of her illegitimate child, leaves town. She throws in her lot with a crook (Leslie Fenton) in order to raise her daughter in secret and ends up a whore, before being rescued by a street-wise newspaperman (Lee Tracy).

What comes to the fore in these movies is the uneven power that these characters wield in their different female facets: virgin, wife, mother, and harlot. They are most vulnerable as teenagers or foreign girls servicing American gents. In their most socialized guises (as wives or mothers), they stand as wholly dependant on male financial power. But as harlots, they curiously command high social status, not on account of their promiscuity, but by reason of their uncanny sexual aura. It is not difficult to see in pre-Code prostitution a near-pagan renaissance of feminine sexual domination. During their fleeting on-screen reign as sex goddesses, before their libido is finally harnessed by middle-class respectability or untimely death, these heroines enjoy a unique spell of freedom and social self-confidence. Greta Garbo, together with her rival Marlene Dietrich, embodies the dangerous power of female availability and freedom. By empowering the figure of the spy or the dark *intriguante*, they bring out the immanent feebleness and impotence of the male in power. Most of their victims are emblems of virility and social standing: army officers, wealthy rakes, and politicians. And screen whores win on almost all counts for they often promise more than they deliver. Paradoxically, *qua* prostitutes, pre-Code females turn out to be regarded as successful businesswomen rather than wanton or wicked strumpets. Mata Hari (Greta Garbo) and agent X-27 (Marlene Dietrich in *Dishonored*) claim lives as angels of death, including their own. Admittedly, their power is rarely unalloyed and they never carry out their mission to the full, for they bear a Hollywood charm, an iota of feminine love and tenderness for their victim, a remnant of their Christian past which even regulated pre-Code paganism cannot expunge, because pre-Code censorship still holds the whip-hand over Hollywood, before coming down with a vengeance in 1934.

However, we are more concerned here with their brief career as ruling women of low repute and high standing. Susan Lennox (Greta Garbo) barely escapes being raped by Jeb Mondstrum (Alan Hale), her drunken fiancé and finds solace in the arms of Rodney Spencer (Clark Gable). Jeb returns to claim her and she flees in panic. Penniless, she works as a belly-dancer in a travelling show where she is spotted by Rodney, who rashly assumes that she is a whore and spurns her. She takes him at his word and becomes a high class tart preying upon the rich. Briefly, Susan Lennox behaves out of character and defies both her obnoxious lover and the upper-class set fascinated by her lower-class sexual charisma. Like the majority of pre-Code fallen women, she uses prostitution to hurt men as well as go up the social ladder or pay the rent. Thus, instead of indulging male viewers' fantasies, pre-Code movies frustrate them. Filmic harlots often symbolize cold, asexual avengers, inwardly raging against their masters, like amazons fighting men in a gender war. They prefigure the film noir females of the nineteen forties. They yield nothing and keep lechers at arms' length. As a result, wives and lovers appear far more sensual. In a reversal of social values, females cross class and gender boundaries and achieve gendered and social equality not through promiscuity but through controlled sex. Wives and unmarried girls are invariably women in love and in lust. Prostitutes fall out of love and pour contempt on anything that smacks of tenderness and sex. All pre-Code female characters go through various stages of womankind (daughter, fiancée, wife, divorcee, untied libertine or harlot) but they never indulge in a Hollywood kiss in their harlot guise. It seems that on-screen prostitution served as a catharsis for depression female viewers who may have briefly identified with women controlling sex.



**Body and language control: the resocialization of the American pre-Code woman**

When we draw the threads of the prostitute's adventures in Hollywood-land, one concept comes to the fore. After being victimized as a social being in the roles of foreign ingénue, innocent daughter, or neglected wife, the movie persona metamorphoses into a new woman. She then divests herself of her traditional sexual and social attributes and evolves in a space where gender and class barriers are broken down. Nearly all fallen woman films work along these lines. The cinematic space peopled by the "new fallen women" of depression America consists of sideshows, fancy-dress balls, exotic islands, war zones, namely metaphors for resocialized spaces. There, the fabric of American society loses its socio-political texture. In *Safe in Hell*, for example, the set of fugitives lusting after Gilda (Dorothy MacKail) represents different rungs of the social ladder. On the island, they are equals, driven by the same carnal desire in the race for the only white woman on the island. Another social structure is delineated. Men, reduced to their bare animality, serve under the double sexual and financial domination of two American women. Gilda holds the upper sexual hand and Leonie (Nina Mae McKinney), the black hotel manager, has the financial whip hand over them. Thus, the two exponents of underdog womanhood in America, the Black woman and the working-class female, rule their former masters in a reversal of the slave/master relationship. Similarly, Blonde Venus bewitches politicians in a cabaret looking like a jungle scene. Often, underworld settings redistribute social roles and relationships in which the leading mobster, as the top dog, assumes subservience to the prostitute. As long as the new woman controls sex, she controls everything. Female control in pre-Code Hollywood is a hangover from the power

structure prevalent in matriarchal communities. As noted before, the new prostitute's social domination is never allowed to last, for she falls back into the role of romantic lover assigned to her in the nineteenth century. She meets a middle-class man of her own age or her husband returns from a long trip. Love means absence of sex control and subservience to male libido; thereby the taming of the pre-Code prostitute is achieved. Remarkably enough, when she feels liberated from the Victorian ethics of love, the pre-Code woman is no longer bound to seduce the set type of lover boy. She can cast her net far and wide and catch varied prey such as elderly beaux (the old jewel thief in *The Sin of Madelon Claudet*), decrepit aristocrats (the old millionaire in *The Red-Headed Woman*), traitors (Colonel Von Hidau in *Dishonored*), nondescript passers-by (Lili Turner's hotel client), priest (Reverend Davidson in *Rain*) and even her own rapist (Trigger in *The Story of Temple Drake*). Baby Face sets herself no limit and seduces the whole staff of a bank from ground floor to top floor, irrespective of age and status. At the outset, she sleeps with a brakeman, a doorman and a fat office boy (just to get an appointment) and later ends up in the old bank owner's bed. Pre-Code film hints that, if women had not been shackled by nineteenth-century female love ethics, they could rule the world.

In conclusion, the pre-Code prostitute, far from being the fallen woman or the lascivious harlot of Christian iconography, embodies a calculating woman in control of sex, in a social context whose rules have been recast to give her the edge over males. In contrast, wives and daughters, swayed by the groundswell of their uncontrolled desire, or motivated by the soppy love ethics of their forebears, appear to be the "real" whores of the early thirties Hollywood screen. From an even more surprising angle, prostitutes act as feminine agents of

order in a chaotic male world. This is felt mostly in war films, when female spies offer their bodies to undermine the enemy within, in religious films like *Rain*, where Sadie Thompson (Joan Crawford) soothes the excesses of Puritanism, or in underworld movies where ruthless gangsters mollify in the presence of their molls.

In a visual medium, it is easy to ignore what marks pre-Code borderline women off from other female personae on film. The form of this period benefits particularly from the power of the vocal track. Actresses who rose to prominence in the early thirties vibrate on the screen with their particular vocal imprint. Bette Davis, Katherine Hepburn, Joan Crawford, Kay Francis, Barbara Stanwyck, Sylvia Sydney, Margaret Sullivan, Loretta Young, or Mae West often play articulate women, putting film dialogue on a war-like path.

### **Verbal figures of opposition and the avenging female**

“Midnight Mary” (Loretta Young) is on trial for the murder of her lover. While waiting in the clerk’s office for the jury to return their verdict, she reminisces about her slow descent into hell, from child of the gutter, orphan, reform school inmate to street walker and gangster’s moll. Throughout the story, Midnight Mary is clearly shown as a figure of victimized innocence, but like all her wronged counterparts, she rages inwardly.

The first shot of Mary serves as a trope for condemned womanhood. As the off-screen voice of the prosecutor is ranting about her criminal record, she is framed in a high-angle close up, her face hidden behind a *Cosmopolitan* magazine. The camera slowly tilts up to reveal her steady eyes looking up at her judge. She lowers her magazine and her calm,

unemotional face is briefly animated by a slight ironic smile playing about her lips. She slowly resumes her reading, indifferent to the litanies of accusations raining about her. This is a consistent point of view taken by William Wellman, who focuses on Mary's character as a critical reflector of the world around. The story is seen from her eyes – not focalized through her subjectivity – but felt and shot in close contact with her ideological presence. Later in the film, Wellman frames her in the same way when, as a young girl, she stands behind the desk of a judge in a juvenile court. We can only see her wide eyes looking in childish perplexity at the wagging finger of the law. She remains silent, as if dumb-struck by her fate.

A few years later, she has turned to street-walking, because “a girl has got to live,” says her hooker friend and initiator. Wellman, in true pre-Code fashion, films her picking up men in cars and dark alleys, always silently submitting to their embrace, again like a quiet lamb to the slaughter. Another striking moment when she shows her customary mute resignation arises when her lover shapes his fingers in the form of a gun to warn her not to walk out on him: she sits motionless, speechless, “like silence on a monument.” Why does innocent Mary consistently remain in hushed submission when the male finger of accusation points at her? Is she resigned to her fate of martyred innocence? Is her life a kind of feminine kenosis? In fact, Mary opposes a Bartleby-like passive resistance that is more minatory than outspoken defiance. Her silence is a figure of opposition, not to male domination but to the female image of the Jazz Age woman or the New Woman of the twenties whose liberated womanhood often takes the form of bodily activity (not to say agitation) and outspoken wit. The same could be said of Lily Powers who lies, deceives, seduces, and despises men. Her dialogue lines are possibly the most interesting to study, along with Mae West's and Jean

Harlow's figures of irony and opposition. These female characters defy the idealized woman, screened in the twenties as a free soul, a sensual and garrulous body. Their tongues fire bullets while their bodies trap the unwary. Their discourse relays their dislike of motherhood, family life, love for a husband, or marital sex.

The prostitute of depression Hollywood is anything but an "It girl" who splashes her feminine vitality on the screen for the benefit of viewers. Prostitution and borderline womanhood represent a feminine paradox, a figure of complete bodily and verbal restraint, a metaphor for anti-femaleness. In semiotic terms, the cinematic image of the pre-Code Hollywood prostitute assumes a double, paradoxical function. It designates an iconic and aesthetic substance of looseness, sensuality, submission, and vice and therefore appeals to the senses. But it also codes for its contrary, that is a symbolic representation of coldness, contempt for men, sexual frustration, and domination.

The representation of outcast lilies in the cinema of that period is a minefield of paradoxes. Furthermore, the images that give them cinematic lives hardly refer to women, male phantasms or even social constructs. They are ideas or abstractions converted into images. The antinomy, the figures of opposition or the mutability enshrined in the fallen woman suggest a concept of resilient womanhood, sacrificial motherhood, thwarting and thwarted sexuality, always rising from its ashes. Borne out of the chaotic world of the Great Depression, these fallen yet spirited Madonnas of the Plains fight against the tragic disintegration of America.

**Filmography**

*Anna Christie* (Dir. Clarence Brown; performers: Greta Garbo, Charles Pickford; MGM, 1930)

*Baby Face* (Dir. Alfred E. Green; performers: Barbara Stanwyck, George Brent; Warner Brothers, 1933)

*Blonde Venus* (Dir. Joseph Von Sternberg ; performers: Marlene Dietrich, Herbert Marshall, Cary Grant; Paramount, 1932)

*Daybreak* (Dir. Jacques Feyder; performers: Helen Chandler, Ramon Navarro; MGM, 1931)

*Dishonored* (Dir. Joseph Von Sternberg; performers: Marlene Dietrich, Victor Mclaglen; Paramount, 1931)

*Employee's Entrance* (Dir. Roy Del Ruth; performers: Loretta Young, Warren William; Warner Brothers, 1933)

*Frisco Jenny* (Dir. William Wellman; performers: Ruth Chatterton, Louis Calhern; First National, 1932)

*Hallelujah!* (Dir. King Vidor; performers: Daniel L. Haynes, Nina May McKinney; MGM, 1929)

*Hello Sister* (Dir. Eric Von Stroheim and Leonard Spigelgass; performers: James Dunn, Boots Mallory, ZaSu Pitts, Minna Gombell; Fox, 1933)

*I'm No Angel* (Dir. Wesley Ruggles; performers: Mae West, Cary Grant; Paramount, 1933)

*Ladies of Leisure* (Dir. Frank Capra; performers: Barbara Stanwyck, Ralph Graves; Columbia, 1930)

*Lilly Turner* (Dir. William Wellman; performers: Ruth Chatterton, George Brent; First National, 1933)

- Madame Satan* (Dir. Cecil B. DeMille; performers: Kay Johnson, Lilian Roth; Paramount, 1930)
- Madame X* (Dir. L. Barrymore; performers: Ruth Chatterton, Lewis Stone; MGM 1929)
- Mata Hari* (Dir. George Fitzmaurice; performers: Greta Garbo, Ramon Navarro; MGM, 1931)
- Midnight Mary* (Dir. William Wellman; performers: Loretta Young, Ricardo Cortez; MGM, 1933)
- Morocco* (Dir. Josef Von Sternberg; performers: Marlene Dietrich, Gary Cooper; Paramount, 1930)
- Of Human Bondage* (Dir. John Cromwell; Performers: Bette Davis, Leslie Howard; RKO, 1934)
- Rain* (Dir. Lewis Milestone; performers: Joan Crawford, Walter Huston; Paramount, 1932)
- Red-Headed Woman* (Dir. Jack Conway; performers: Jean Harlow, Chester Morris; MGM, 1932)
- Safe in Hell* (Dir. William Wellman; performers: Dorothy MacKail, Donald Cook; First National, 1931)
- She Done Him Wrong* (Dir. Lowell Sherman; performers: Mae West, Cary Grant: Paramount, 1933)
- Susan Lennox* (Dir. Robert Z. Leonard; performers: Greta Garbo, Clark Gable; MGM, 1931)
- The Office Wife* (Dir. Lloyd Bacon; performers: Dorothy Mackail, Joan Blondell; Warner Brothers, 1930)
- The Sin of Madelon Claudet* (Dir. Edgar Selwyn; performers: Helen Hayes, Lewis Stone; MGM, 1931)
- The Story of Temple Drake* (Dir. Stephen Roberts; performers: Myriam Hopkins, Jack La Rue; Paramount, 1932)
- The Strange Love of Molly Louvain* (Dir. Michael Curtiz; performers: Ann Dvorak, Lee Tracy; First National, 1932)

*Three on a Match* (Dir. Mervyn LeRoy; performers: Bette Davis, Ann Dvorak, Joan Blondell; First National, 1932)

*Under Eighteen* (Dir. Archie Mayo; performers: Marian Marsh, Anita Page; Warner Brothers, 1931)

*Union Depot* (Dir. Alfred E. Green; performers: Joan Blondell, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.; First National, 1932)

*The Yellow Ticket* (Dir. Raoul Walsh; performers: Elissa Landi, Laurence Olivier; Fox, 1931)

*Waterloo Bridge* (Dir. James Whale; performers: Mae Clark, Douglass Montgomery; Universal, 1931)



