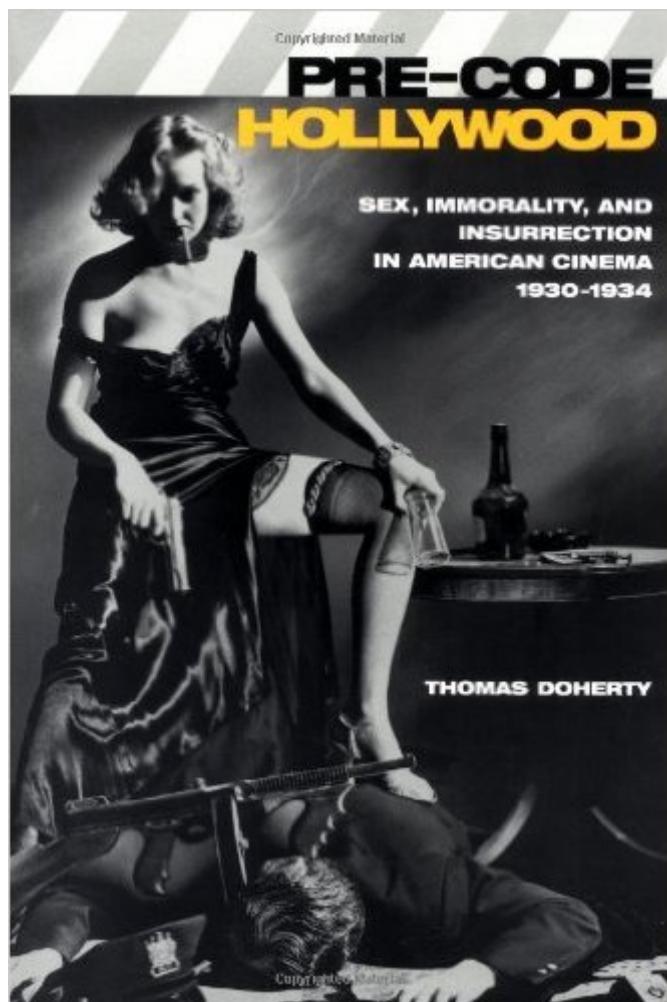


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# Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, And Insurrection In American Cinema; 1930-1934



## Synopsis

Pre-Code Hollywood explores the fascinating period in American motion picture history from 1930 to 1934 when the commandments of the Production Code Administration were violated with impunity in a series of wildly unconventional films•a time when censorship was lax and Hollywood made the most of it. Though more unbridled, salacious, subversive, and just plain bizarre than what came afterwards, the films of the period do indeed have the look of Hollywood cinema•but the moral terrain is so off-kilter that they seem imported from a parallel universe. In a sense, Doherty avers, the films of pre-Code Hollywood are from another universe. They lay bare what Hollywood under the Production Code attempted to cover up and push offscreen: sexual liaisons unsanctified by the laws of God or man, marriage ridiculed and redefined, ethnic lines crossed and racial barriers ignored, economic injustice exposed and political corruption assumed, vice unpunished and virtue unrewarded•in sum, pretty much the raw stuff of American culture, unvarnished and unveiled. No other book has yet sought to interpret the films and film-related meanings of the pre-Code era•what defined the period, why it ended, and what its relationship was to the country as a whole during the darkest years of the Great Depression... and afterward.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is a good book, but it doesn't capture the excitement of its subject matter. All kinds of wild & crazy things were happening in pre-code (1930-1934) Hollywood movies (extramarital affairs, prostitution, robbery, violence, etc.), & they happened for the most part without moral judgment on

the parts of the movie makers. But this book presents this exciting period in a rather dry, humorless way. It contains lots of useful information about the era & its surrounding politics, but also leaves out a lot of things that should be mentioned. On the plus side, it contains a complete version of the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 (which is referred to in so many books, but hard to find a copy of). The photos are great, but small in size & printed on the same porous paper used for the text (which results in less sharpness than if printed on glossy paper). The biggest negative, in my opinion, is that a number of important pre-code movies are not even mentioned in this book (for example, Norma Shearer's "The Divorcee"). And why the author spends 4+ pages analyzing "Congorilla" (a 1932 African documentary that was made during the pre-code era but has little to do with Production Code censorship) is beyond me; it's a good analysis but perhaps belongs in a different book!

I love this era, and I love reading about this era, but even so, I gave up reading this book about halfway through. There are better books about pre-Code, at least two or three. Geoffrey Blake has a great book about how the Code came to be, and Mick LaSalle and Mark Vierra also have excellent books about the artistry and the gossip and the history. This one is OK, but I'd recommend it only to people like me who just can't get enough. And even then, I found out, I can.

This is a very respectable but uninspired treatment of the pre-Code era. Its virtues come mainly in the beginning, with an interesting introduction. Its weakness stems from the fact that the author seems more fascinated by the politics of the era than with the movies -- and that he fails to connect the politics with the movies in a way that ultimately illuminates THE FILMS, on an artistic level. I don't think he has a feel for the ART of the era at all, and as a result the best chapters are about Franklin Roosevelt and the newsreels of the day. A decent treatment, but better books are out there.

Thomas Doherty's *Pre-Code Hollywood (Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema 1930 - 1934)* is a wonderful study of Hollywood and the movies it produced before the Production Code gained its censorious teeth and bloodied them on celluloid. The most significant and interesting aspects of the book were the politics involved, both in the production of the movies and the movies themselves. Movies looked at vice, poverty, and politics, for example, with eyes wide open and this frightened many people in power who led a successful campaign against the industry. This book tells that tale very effectively. It is a joy to read.

Most film aficionados know about the milestone films that lead the Hays Office to establish a type of censorship code of ethics for the major film studios. This well researched book goes beyond the Mae West and gangster films, and offers a penetrating look at many forgotten films that were aimed at an adult audience in the time period between the advent of sound in the late 1920's and 1934, when the Hollywood Production Code was written and adhered to. Before Hollywood went "Hollywood" to present a fairy tale portrayal of 1930's depression America, a surprisingly high number of films addressing realistic social issues and sexual mores were written, filmed, and released to a wide audience. It would be almost thirty years before Hollywood would return to, and go beyond, its pre-code roots. Doherty includes discussions of many well-known films in his narrative, but also does justice to long-forgotten films rarely seen since their original release. Although film stars such as Barbara Stanwyck and James Cagney established their screen presence and characters in the pre-code films, we usually remember them for their later work, with a few rare exceptions like Cagney's *Public Enemy*. Doherty recalls the early films of stars like these, and also remembers actors and actresses unknown to the current generation of filmgoers. Many of the films covered in this book were ventures with low or moderate budget ventures, but they had a strong impact on audiences. Comparing a pre-code Warners musical like *42 Street* to one of its post-code counterparts, like *Golddiggers of 1935* illustrates the major change in tone and attitude films acquired as a result of the code. Pre-code language was stronger, more skin was shown, and plots were not sugar-coated with mandatory happy endings. Doherty paints a strong picture of a movie era too often glossed over in most film histories.

While there may be no more fascinating subject in film history, this book just does not capture its magic. Most of the book consists of plot summaries, and the social analysis contains a lot of specious correlations between film content and the transition between the Hoover and Roosevelt administrations. The author doesn't really seem to like pre-Code films all that much--rather he seems to find them sociologically interesting. This is hardly a bad book. A lot of research clearly went into it. But this is not the book to make non-afficionados interested -- or lovers of pre-Code enlightened.

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