
THE MOB AND THE MOVIES: A CINEMATIC HISTORY OF THE ALL-AMERICAN CRIMINAL

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Week 1: Pre-Code Criminals

Early Hollywood and Censorship

- In 1915, the Supreme Court ruled that motion pictures were not covered by the First Amendment
- Cities began to pass ordinances banning the public exhibition of "immoral" films, and the studios feared that state or federal regulations were not far off.
- This was followed in the 1920s by a series of public scandals.

1922

- The formation of Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America
- Will Hays was recruited by the organization to act as president so that the Hollywood system could be seen to be 'cleaning up its act'
- At first, Hays came up with what he dubbed 'the formula' – a set of recommendations with which the studios should adhere

1929

- Martin Quigley, editor of the Motion Picture Herald and Jesuit priest Daniel A. Lord created a Code of standards (which Hays approved of) and submitted to the studios
- After some revisions, the Code was accepted by the studios in an attempt to head off direct government intervention

The Production Code

- Was also known as the 'Hays Code'
- The Code was divided into two parts. The first was a set of "general principles" that mostly concerned morality. The second was a set of "particular applications", an exacting list of items that could not be depicted.
- The men obligated to enforce the Code, Jason Joy and his successor Dr. James Wingate were seen as being ineffective
- From March 31, 1930, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America formally pledged to abide by the production code
- However, compliance with the Code was a verbal agreement and essentially it became difficult to maintain or enforce

The Pre-Code Era - 1930-1934

"That four-year interval marks a fascinating and anomalous passage in American motion picture history: the so-called pre-Code era, when censorship was lax and Hollywood made the most of it. Unlike all studio system feature films released after July 1934, pre-Code Hollywood did not adhere to the strict regulations on matters of sex, vice, violence and moral meaning...the Code commandments were violated with impunity and inventiveness in a series of wildly eccentric films..."

Doherty, T (1999) *Pre-Code Hollywood*

The Pre-Code Era - 1930-1934 (CONT...)

“More unbridled, salacious, subversive, and just plain bizarre than what came afterwards, they look like Hollywood cinema but the moral terrain is so off-kilter they seem imported from a parallel universe.”

Doherty, T (1999) *Pre-Code Hollywood*

Pre-Code Contexts

- The Great Depression
- The nation was plunged into a crippling economic crisis
- Commercial radio came to prominence – threatening to erode the market further
- Sound technology costs were skyrocketing
- Revenues were going down

The Great Depression (1929-1939)

- There were 20 recorded cases of famine in New York City in 1931, and 110 fatalities from hunger in 1934.
- Between 1929 and 1945 there were at least 20,000 deaths due to starvation – The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
- “*Work or starve*”

“Work or starve. Fulsome evidence of one common experience in the Great Depression, the palpable pangs of hunger afflict screen characters across the genres, men and women alike living hand to mouth, propelled by the basic biological urge to eat, to earn not even a decent day’s wages but just a square meal. Food and eating are more than leitmotifs in pre-code Hollywood; people literally faint from hunger”

Doherty, T. *Pre-Code Hollywood*

- Hordes of individuals were compelled to leave their homes during **the Great Depression** (1929–1939)
- Sleeping/living in box cars or under bridges
- Some found work of farms in exchange for food etc.
- Others joined criminal gangs out of desperation

Real Life Crime Figures and the Pre-Code Era

Al Capone

- Very much the epitome of the 1920s gangster
- He was the ‘kingpin’
- Made his money through racketeering and bootlegging
- Managerial and sedentary
- Was eventually caught (tax evasion)
- Riddled with syphilis, he suffered various complications before succumbing to cardiac arrest in 1947

Real Life Crime Figures and the Pre-Code Era (CONT...)

John Dillinger

- His criminal celebrity was much shorter lasting just over 14 months
- In May 1933, he broke out of Crown Point jail – deceiving the guards with a wooden gun – he then stole the sheriff's car
- In what was left of his life he carried out a series of 'bank raids, shoot outs and hairbreadth escapes'
- He was gunned down by the FBI outside the Biograph Theatre in Chicago after watching gangster movie *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934) in July 1934

"Dillinger flashed across Depression America like a comet, fiery and luminous even in his fateful flame-out"

Doherty, T - Pre-Code Hollywood

- He was much more reflective of the 1930s
- Was seen as the outlaw as opposed to Capone's organized establishment criminal
- A Jesse James figure
- He was 'independent and provisional'

The Pre-Code Gangster Movie

"...the gangster as an experience of art is universal to Americans"

Robert Warshow

The Public Enemy (1931)

Directed by William A. Wellman

- The story of two friends who become Chicago booze barons
- Also has the trope of two brothers at the heart of the action - one a hardworking joe, the other a charismatic criminal

Jean Harlow (1911-1937)

- The leading sex symbol of the day
- The perfect pre-Code female figure
- The 'bad girl'
- 'The Platinum Blonde'
- 'The Blonde Bombshell'
- 'The Laughing Vamp' persona
- In 1932 Jean married MGM executive Paul Bern.
- She was also involved with New Jersey Gangster Long Zwillinger
- Just two months in to her marriage to Paul Bern, he was found dead
- Officially, the verdict was suicide (he shot himself), however, rumours about a cover up have continued to persist
- Bern was rumoured to have incredibly small genitals, there were also stories about him being gay and or impotent

The Public Enemy (1931) (CONT...)

“What went largely unremarked was the vicious nature of the relationships between men and women in the gangster genre. The grapefruit James Cagney squashes in the face of Mae Clarke in The Public Enemy is the least of the physical assaults...”

Doherty, T - Pre-Code Hollywood

“Since then girls have been slapped, kicked beaten up, run over, shot, stabbed and raped all in the tradition of mobster violence”

Hossent, H. The Movie Treasury of Gangster Movies

Scarface (1932)

Howard Hawks

- *“The Great Depression had, ironically plagued the decade that invented the term The American Dream.”*
- James Truslow Adams had coined the term in 1931 (*The Epic of America*)
- It asserted that the country offered “opportunity for each according to ability and achievement” – even though millions stood on bread lines
- The violence in Scarface was unprecedented
- Caused shock and outrage with critics, editorialists, politicians and civic groups
- Based on the criminal activities of Al Capone
- The film contains ‘re-enactments’ of actual Capone sanctioned murders
- The shifts in tone from light comedy to brutal violence seemed to disturb critics the most

The Death of the Golden Age Gangster

- After a juvenile killer in East Orange, New Jersey claimed to have been influenced by Hollywood, the town’s mayor called for a gangster film ban
- In Worcester, Massachusetts the chief of police decided to prohibit the exhibition of gangster films in local cinemas
- Widespread public outrage against gangster films forced Will H Hays to privately put pressure on the studios
- *“...no more sawed-off shotgun stuff”*
- But also, the gangster film, in that form had really run its course
- *“The major industry quit gangster themes because the public tired of them...There was never any real dictum against underworld material properly handled. Commercial more than the moral angle was responsible for sudden gangster surcease” – Variety*
- Also, American gangster films tended to only sell well in the home country, elsewhere they tended to flop