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Old Hollywood: The Good, the Bad and the Beautiful

Rich Johnson

Week 7

JOAN CRAWFORD: POSSESSED

Joan Crawford was born Lucille Fay LeSueur, her exact year of birth unknown and although most agree the date was March 23rd the year is noted as somewhere between 1904-1908. A traumatic childhood (to say the least), she was abused physically and neglected emotionally by her mother, eventually forced into hard labour as a young girl while she was sexually abused by her stepfather. Training as a dancer from a young age she began her career as a performing in traveling theatrical companies before debuting on Broadway before signed to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer in 1925. Totally in control of her image (and persona) from the offset, Crawford grew frustrated early on in her career by the roles she was offered and launched a publicity campaign, building her image as a flapper by the end of the '20s and as she entered the talkies of '30s, her fame began to rival her MGM colleagues Norma Shearer and Greta Garbo. Her own background was often reflected in her work, specifically the hardworking women who finds romance and financial success; 'rags-to-riches' tales lapped up during the Depression-era. As one of Hollywood's most prominent movie stars, she was also one of the highest paid women in the United States, but when her films began losing money and her 'poisonous' reputation began to impact on her career, she soon entered (and helped define) a new kind of role within genre cinema. She became more and more reclusive until her death on May 10th 1977.

Please refer to the reading list for a full reference of films.

Main:

Possessed (1931)

Director(s): Clarence Brown

Studio(s): Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Strange Cargo (1940)

Director(s): Frank Borzage

Studio(s): Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Mildred Pierce (1945)

Director(s): Michael Curtiz

Studio(s): Warner Bros.



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Reference to:

Lady of the Night (1925)

Director(s): Monta Bell

Studio(s): Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Our Dancing Daughters (1928)

Director(s): Harry Beaumont

Studio(s): Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Dance, Fools, Dance (1931)

Director(s): Harry Beaumont

Studio(s): Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Possessed (1947)

Director(s): Curtis Bernhardt

Studio(s): Warner Bros.

Johnny Guitar (1954)

Director(s): Nicholas Ray

Studio(s): Republic Pictures

What Ever Happened to Baby Jane? (1962)

Director(s): Robert Aldrich

Studio(s): Seven Arts Productions (distributed by Warner Bros. Pictures)

Strait-Jacket (1964)

Director(s): William Castle

Studio(s): William Castle Productions

Berzerk! (1967)

Director(s): Jim O'Connell

Studio(s): Herman Cohen Productions (distributed by Columbia Pictures)

“Eyes”, *Night Gallery* (1969)

Director(s): Steven Spielberg

Studio(s): Universal Television

Trog (1970)

Director(s): Freddie Francis

Studio(s): Herman Cohen Productions

Mommie Dearest (1981)

Director(s): Frank Perry

Studio(s): Paramount Pictures



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Notes:

“I never go outside unless I look like Joan Crawford the movie star. If you want to see the girl next door, go next door.” — Joan Crawford

Book recommendation: *Possessed: The Life of Joan Crawford* by Donald Spoto. *“Although the source of every feeling I adulthood ought to be blithely sought in childhood experiences, it is certainly true that Joan’s lifelong tendency to see herself as a social reject derived, in part, from her unhappy background. She preferred, therefore, the image of Joan Crawford that she herself, developed, altered and maintained by sheer force of will — and that image was not, despite the opinions of some critics, far from reality.”* (Spoto, p.101).

Young Lucile

Joan Crawford was born Lucille Fay LeSueur in San Antonio, Texas, U.S. Her exact year of birth is not known but thought to be 1904. She came from poverty, her mother involved with several men during her early years and was sexually abused by one of them when she was 11 years old. What makes this story worse is how she often referred to her abuser with some admiration. From a young age, she knew – but not fully understanding through some warped perception – the power of sex.

Growing up she became a dancer and would often travel to local clubs as a young teenager. She would develop a reputation as a vivacious Jazz Age flapper, which would have involved dancing naked in arcade peep shows. Her ‘background’ would ‘advance’ her career, rival Bette Davis often smearing Crawford with jibes over the years believing she slept “with every male star at MGM — except Lassie.”

But, it was during her stint as a chorus girl on Broadway that she was scouted by an Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer agent. Joan Crawford was born, MGM signing her and making the most out of her flapping. Her film debut was *Lady of the Night* in 1925, and her breakout role was in *Our Dancing Daughters* (1928). Taking advantage of her dancing, this can be seen in films such as *Dance Fools Dance* (1931) and *Heigh Ho, the Gang’s All Here* (1933) with Fred Astaire... in which there is very little chemistry. You can see why he partnered with Ginger Rogers.

Persona

As well as a long term (on again, off again) love affair with Clark Gable, Crawford was married four times. Douglas Fairbanks Jr. 1929-1933, Franchot Tone (1935-1939), Philip Terry (1942-1946) and Pepsi boss Alfred Steele (1955-1959).

While married to Steele, and even after the marriage, Crawford’s investment in the Pepsi-Cola company saw her bring crates of the drink on sets and in interviews as promotion.

Crawford never had children of her own and adopted. Her eldest, Christina, would go on to write the controversial book *Mommie Dearest* in 1978 that exposed her adoptive mother as an abuser.



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Another controversy (or myth) surrounding Crawford – apparently started by her brother Hal Le Sueur – is that she managed to have all copies of a stag film burned that was filmed before she became a star. The long-rumoured films (shot before 1925) “The Casting Couch” and “The Plumber”. The films, whether they did exist or not, no longer exist today, Hollywood often employing ‘fixers’ to make these kind of P.R.-damaging stories go away. Her first husband Douglas Fairbanks Jr. once confirmed one of the films existed but had never seen them. Crawford would often receive blackmail threats over the years claiming to have the films and extort money from her.

According to her 1962 memoir *A Portrait of Joan*, when married to her second husband Franchot Tone, “On our wedding night I received an anonymous phone call,” Crawford wrote. “I’d received such calls before and had been afraid to tell anyone. Two men said they had in their possession a stag reel in which I danced. They wanted to sell it to me.” Crawford, however, adamantly denied that she took part in any such project. “I had made no such movie,” the actress wrote, revealing that she simply forwarded the blackmailer to Louis B. Mayer and the studio’s “legal wizard” J. Robert Rubin. Crawford confirmed that the blackmailer did send his film in, but MGM denied the woman in the picture was Crawford.

Her distinctive features and style evolved from the flapper into bona fide actress, taking on more interesting roles over the years. An iconic look she very much created and she became known for her glamour and powerful presence, so much so, as with a lot of actresses at the time, her back teeth removed to help eventuate her cheek bones.

Possessions

“There’s everything wrong with me...My clothes, my shoes, my hands and the way I talk. But at least I know it.” — Marian Martin

Crawford’s stardom and her persona would greatly appeal to Depression audiences and seal her star appeal and help her to move away from the ‘flapper girl’ persona she was known for.

Not to be mistaken for Crawford’s later film *Possessed* from 1947 (in which she received an Oscar nomination) this is a pre-Code film that tells a rags to riches tale of a factory girl who marries a man of wealth.

There is a powerfully- feminist overtone present during the pre-Code Era as shown with Mae West; women refusing to accept their role in life and be dictated to by men and decide on their future. The relationship at the heart of the film between Marian and Mark shows one ‘living in sin’, as a couple outside the institution of marriage... echoing what was to spill off screen.

The film is worth looking at for the opening sequence alone which is an excellent example of mise en scène, each carriage a window into a ‘scene’... a moment. Perfectly staged and dreamlike. The windows of the train carriage feel like a frame of film that expose a more glamorous world, which is the complete contrast to the depression-era character Crawford plays. Director Clarence Brown was a huge influence on Crawford at this time instilling her and other actors with a great deal of confidence.



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Gable and Crawford appeared together onscreen for the first time in *Dance, Fools, Dance* (1931), their real chemistry literally setting the screen alight. This was their third collaboration within a year. An infamous couple – often referred to as the King and Queen of Hollywood their pre-Code love affair (Gable married to Maria Franklin Prentiss Lucas Langham and Carol Lombard during the '30s and early '40s) continued throughout their lives.

“When you've drifted as much as I have then you're glad to drop anchor - even if it is in the mud!”
— Julie

Another film under her MGM contract with Clark Gable was *Strange Cargo* from 1940. The film is about convicts who escape the infamous penal colony Devil's Island, their lives changed forever by a prisoner who thinks he's Jesus.

The film received a 'Condemned' rating from the Catholic Legion of Decency for 'irreverent use of Scripture' and 'lustful complications'. Even after the studio made the changes demanded, distribution was sharply cut by cities refusing to book it.

Again, the film demonstrates the chemistry between Crawford and Gable, including a number of fiery scenes, which remain particularly alluring for a film during the Hays Code era. It was their last film together.

Typical promo shots market both the beauty and allure of Crawford and both stars' magnetism.

The psychological

“You look down on me, because I work for a living. Don't you.” — Mildred Pierce

Joan Crawford won an academy award in 1946 for her career defining role as titular character Mildred Pierce. Based on the 1941 novel from James M. Cain the psychological drama is played as a cross between film noir and melodrama.

Director Michael Curtiz was initially less than keen at working with Joan Crawford. Curtiz was soon won over by Crawford's dedication and hard work. However, Crawford's reputation as a control freak started to rear its ugly head during production, adding shoulder pads to her costumes and interfering with other aspects of the film. Curtiz would refer to her as "Phony Joanie" and "the rotten bitch," laying into her mercilessly in front of cast and crew. Crawford wanted the director fired and replaced "with a human being."

The cinematography by Ernest Haller – one three who worked on *Gone with the Wind* (1939) – is a huge part of the look of *Mildred Pierce* and, aside from the crime element at the heart of the story, is a major part of its noirish tone.

There is as much impact though in the domesticity and household drama as there is the crime. She is really slapped by actress Ann Blyth in the famous stair scene.



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Other Joan Crawford classics include: *The Unknown* (1927), *Grand Hotel* (1932), *The Damned Don't Cry* (1950) and *Sudden Fear* (1952).

But it is *Johnny Guitar* (1954) that begins to push Joan Crawford towards more daring roles, the film falling outside of the Hollywood system and becoming a true cult classic. It is a Western oddity

Which is garish in its use of style and colour. It's a stunning film from the director of *Rebel Without a Cause*, Nicholas Ray who had an affair with Joan Crawford at the time. Apparently these 'affairs' were attributed to Crawford (apparently) 'testing out' her directors before filming.

From grand dame to Grand Guignol

One of her most iconic performances – arguably her best – is in Robert Aldrich's *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962). This was a film that helped relaunch both Crawford and Davis' careers and, in turn, gave birth to what has become known as 'Hagsploitation' movies.

The film is most notoriously linked to the ongoing feud between Crawford and her co-star Bette Davis. The feud lasted their entire acting career, a combination of jealousy, sparked by Bette Davis' love for her second husband Franchot Tone and believing she was a hack. They were different actresses but had more in common personality wise than they would have dared to admit. Read further in my 60th anniversary piece [Hag Queens: 60 Years of What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?](#)

Bette Davis had a few words for her rival over the years. “*My mother told me always to speak good of the dead. Joan Crawford is dead. Good.*”

If you haven't seen it check out the TV mini-series *Feud* (2017) starring Jessica Lange as Joan Crawford and Susan Sarandon as Bette Davis.

She would go on to make a string of these films throughout the '60s and although most would seem throwaway on the surface, work as genuinely solid thrillers. One of the best is William Castle's *Strait-Jacket* from 1964, in which she plays an axe-wielding maniac. *Berserk!* Is also a fun little British horror/thriller.

One of her final performances was in the pilot episode of the TV series *Night Gallery* (1969-1971), “Eyes”. The professional work directed by Steven Spielberg.

Her final performance was in *Trog* (1970). As with *Berserk* (1967), this was the second film that Joan Crawford made as a favour for her personal friend, producer Herman Cohen.

Final years

“*Morning, gentlemen. Nice day for a murder?*” — Rocky Sullivan



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Perhaps a divisive figure... but Crawford's career was very much defined by the glamour and sordid reputations the movie stars of her generation created. She was in charge of the 'Joan Crawford' persona, she created it and never shied away from the controversy.

The film adaptation, starring Faye Dunaway doesn't help, leaning heavily into high camp and the Hagsploitation that shaped the latter years of her career.

Although she claimed in the latter years of her life that she was always an outsider – “I was never part of the Fairbanks tribe, not for Mayer, not for his so-called film society.” (Spoto, p.101) – yet, to the bitter end, the flapper girl Lucille who became the 'movie star', dressed her best, never leaving the house unless she *was* Joan Crawford.