

## Hollywood and Censorship 1920-30: The Ghost of Fatty Arbuckle

**Middle class reform movements** were very powerful in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Progressives, middle classes, women and preachers pushed hard for Prohibition, women's suffrage, and the censorship of the Hollywood product that some were convinced was undercutting the moral standards of America's youth. **Church groups** were also very active, especially beginning in the 1920s. By about 1930 Catholic groups were the most powerful: they watched films carefully for potential insults to the Catholic Church and to immigrant Catholic groups and for dangers to the moral purity of Catholic youth. In the early 30s Catholic leaders organized '**Legions of Decency**', whose job was to arrange boycotts of Hollywood movies that Catholic leaders considered objectionable.



Magazine Cover, 1920

American public opinion around 1920 was fascinated with Hollywood society that had, according to Robert Sklar, entered the '**Aquarian Age**' (free-thinking, self-indulgent, sybaritic). Ordinary people followed their favorite stars – their personae, lifestyles and values -- in **fan magazines** and in the writings of **gossip columnists**. Despite the efforts of the studios to keep their stars' image wholesome and family compatible, public opinion's image was that Hollywood represented physical beauty, sensual self indulgence through drinking, drugs, sex, swimming, driving fast sports cars, living in palatial mansions and going to wild weekend parties. Anxieties were heightened by the migration of large numbers of "**movie struck girls**" to Hollywood to make fame and fortune; many of them were of course exploited by the system (by "leering foreigners with big noses and small ratty eyes" [Who are they?]), and according to popular legend, destroyed in the process.

**Censorship** was perfectly legal, according to a 1915 decision of the Supreme Court that said the First Amendment did not apply to the movie industry. There was some spotty local censorship in states and cities, but opposition to censorship on the federal level was very powerful – the movie industry was opposed and most people liked a little scandal and in any case preferred making their own decisions about their entertainment.

The anti-movie lobby tried very hard in the 20s and 30s to demonstrate that movies were pernicious to American youth. A 1920s author claimed that

More of the young people who were children sixteen years ago or less are more sex-wise, sex-excited, and sex-absorbed than of any generation of which we have knowledge. Thanks to their premature exposure to stimulating films, their sex instincts were stirred into life years sooner than used to be the case with boys and girls from good homes, and as a result in many the 'love chase' has come to be the master interest in life. (Sklar, 137-38)



Another 'Photoplay' cover 1920

Would-be reformers commissioned **social scientific-style studies** from universities and think tanks, hoping the conclusions would support their convictions. Authors of the infamous **Payne Fund Study**

(early 1930s) were convinced that they had found evidence that movies were “a training ground for lovers”. The findings of most studies were however less lurid. Research showed that movies had a powerful psychic impact (sleep patterns of children were disturbed after they had viewed movies), and that movies probably promoted sexual expression among the young (something like what happened to Buster Keaton at the end of “Sherlock, Jr”), but the censorship crowd was disappointed – there was no smoking gun. Who was to say whether movies had caused the trend toward sexual promiscuity in the 1920s or whether the movies just reflected general cultural trends in American society? Which was the chicken and which was the egg?



‘Fatty’ Arbuckle

### The Scandals and the Hays Office

Change came in 1921-22 in the form of **scandal**. **William Desmond Taylor**, a popular director of Mary Pickford, was found murdered in his house under suspicious circumstances. Reports about the murder and investigation (although Mabel Normand was suspected, the murder was never solved) evoked in public opinion an image of a society high on sex and drugs. More significant were accusations against Roscoe “**Fatty**” Arbuckle that he had been responsible for the rape (with a beer bottle?) and death of actress Virginia Rappe in a wild party that Fatty had given in the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco on Labor Day 1921. Although his trial resulted in two hung juries and eventually a resounding acquittal (the jury issued an apology to the accused), Hollywood caved in: he was fired and never allowed to act again in an American movie. This inaugurated the first **Blacklist** in the History of the

American movies. Arbuckle’s fans were shocked and outraged that their beloved innocent-acting and innocent-looking star might have committed such crimes.

‘**The Sins of Hollywood**’, (from the course website) published in 1922 asserted that a minority of Hollywood people – encouraged by their fabulous wealth arrived virtually overnight – were engaging in a wild lifestyle, including “wild debauchery”, “licentiousness and incest”, sexual perversions, and the liberal use of various kinds of drugs (mainly opium and cocaine: aspiring starlets prefer “cocaine, a ‘shot in the arm’, and an occasional drag at the pipe”), the “wild orgies at road houses” and “Tia Juana and its mad, drunken revels”. The most shocking of the victims were disappointed and penniless young women (**the movie-struck girls**), who had come West looking for fame and fortune, and who had turned to dissipation and prostitution when things didn’t go their way. The author warned the American public about this “pus and corruption” oozing from American society and the “thrill” culture that endangered the fabric of America. Something had to be done, although he warned against “the dangerous notion of censorship”.

The censorship forces were encouraged: in the course of 1922 movie censorship laws were pending in 36 states (none on the federal level). The moguls were worried.

Hollywood reacted affirmatively creating a system of self-regulation to prevent outside censorship. The moguls created the **Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association**, and hired former Postmaster General **Will Hays** – at a fabulous salary of at least \$100,000 – to head it. Hays acted primarily as a public relations man, campaigning tirelessly to convince America that the movie industry was responsible and just as concerned as anyone else about the well-being of young Americans; he asserted that an attack on movie freedom was an attack on American democracy, and an attack on the march of progress toward a better future.



The dapper Will Hays

He had great press, and spoke to churches, women's groups and reform groups to smooth the work of his bosses. In the 1920s Hays also set up guidelines, "Dos and Don'ts", that production studios were urged to follow. Following the guidelines was however voluntary; there was no punishment if a studio operated outside the supposed limits of good taste and decency.

Hayes' campaign was successful for the moment. All the pending state censorship bills failed. Relative quiet reigned on the censorship front until the early 1930s; the campaign of the Hays Office was generally successful.

### The Business of Hollywood 1925-40.

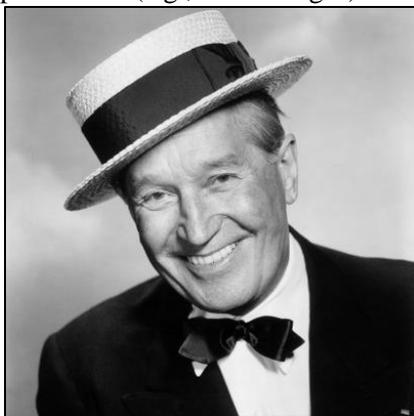
a) The most significant development about the business of Hollywood in the late 1920s came with the introduction of **sound** into movies. American companies had been conducting research on the problem since the beginning, and by the mid 1920s both RCA and Western Electric had developed practical ways of adding sound (dialogue, sound effects, and music) to the film. Motion picture companies were however hesitant to make the required financial investment, and it was only with the **crisis of the motion picture palaces** (first run theaters) in the mid-1920s that they were brought around. The picture palaces were "white elephants" that were very expensive to operate (building maintenance, huge staff, vaudeville performers, musicians, etc.), and some producers hit upon "**talking pictures**" as a way to increase attendance and revenues.



Al Jolson, 'The Jazz Singer'

A small company, **Warner Brothers**, made the plunge in 1927 with the release of Al Jolson's 'The Jazz Singer' (in which only the musical parts were sound recorded). The other studios were at first reluctant – Joe Schenck was convinced that talking pictures were a passing fad –, but they followed suit within a couple of years. Warners' **Vitaphone** sound synchronization system (the sound is played on a large phonograph record that is electronically synchronized with the projected image) soon gave way to the superior **Movietone** system (the sound is recorded optically on the side of the 35 mm film itself) adopted by most of the other studios.

Sound was a **huge popular success** at the beginning of the Depression. Attendance soared, profits skyrocketed, and dire predictions about the decline of film art from prestigious film personalities such as King Vidor and Lillian Gish were not realized. The participation of New York financial interests in the film industry was increased further when they provided capital for the expensive retooling of film production (e.g., sound stages) and exhibition (projection). Film-making techniques had to be readjusted – clean recorded sound was always a problem – but the industry made the transition with great panache. (A wonderfully entertaining account of the transition from silent to sound pictures is found in MGM's 'Singin' in the Rain' 1952.)



The inimitable Maurice Chevalier

The Hollywood film factory **responded quickly to the challenge** posed by the integration of sound into its films. The rapid progress can be seen by contrasting the filming of the first MGM musical, 'Broadway Melody' 1929 (Academy Award, best film) with Paramount's 'Love Me Tonight' 1932, three years later. Whereas the former's musical numbers manifest performers huddled around a (hidden) microphone to get a smooth recording, the latter uses fluid editing and dubbing of sound. In the famous "**Isn't It Romantic**" number, Maurice Chevalier begins singing the romantic number in a tailor shop in Paris, but then the melody is passed to a

customer, a taxi driver, French soldiers marching in the countryside, then a gypsy violinist in an encampment, and finally with a pan of the camera to the “princess”, Jeanette MacDonald singing the melody on a balcony of her castle. Not only is the song tuneful, graceful and charming, but it has a narrative twist suggesting that the humble tailor Chevalier is destined for romance with MacDonald. An inventive and imaginative use of sound.

b) The **Great Depression** did not affect the movies as much as other industries. People were reluctant to abandon their “dream factory”; in fact, many seemed to need it even more in the midst of Depression hardships. Declining revenues were causing a problem, however, by 1932 when one-third of the movie theaters in the USA were closed and movie attendance was down by about the same proportion. With its large theater chain and its big debt, **Paramount** was the most overextended of the Hollywood studios. Paramount went into bankruptcy in 1935, but emerged successfully from reorganization in the same year: Zukor remained in charge of production on the West Coast, but the hold of New York interests was cemented by the installation of Barney Balaban as CEO. **Universal** also had its problems: it went through difficult times in the early 1930s, and even went into receivership for a time, but it started to turn the corner in 1935 when Laemmle sold his holdings in the company to a group of investors more focused on theaters and customer



**Food Line in the Great Depression**

satisfaction!



**MGM poster in the 1930s**

The **Fox Studio** had an even harder time. Just a few years after an unsuccessful attempt by William Fox to take over MGM (MGM was saved by the influence that Republican Louis B. Mayer had with the Hoover administration and his place in California Republican politics), the Fox Studio went into bankruptcy in 1935. It was bought out by a small production company, 20<sup>th</sup> Century, to form **20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox**, one of the strongest of studios for the next few decades under **Darryl Zanuck**. The story ended on a sad note for William Fox, who went through personal bankruptcy and then did time in federal prison in 1940 for attempting to bribe a federal judge. Meanwhile, Louis B. Mayer continued to prosper at the head of MGM; he must have looked on Fox’s discomfiture with some satisfaction.

The rest of the studios – MGM, Columbia, United Artists, Warners – weathered the crisis without serious issues. With its string of hits in the early 1930s (e.g., Wallace Beery and Marie Dressler), **MGM** (i.e., Loew’s) was the only studio not to cut its dividend during the Depression. And yet in its publicity it trumpeted its motto “Ars Gratia Artis” (Art for Art’s Sake); “Ars Gratia pecuniae” would have been more appropriate (Art for Money’s Sake).

### **The Motion Picture Production Code (1930) and the Breen Office (1934)**

The **early 30s** thus brought important changes that heated up the controversy over censorship of movies. For one thing, the introduction of **spoken dialogue** into movies made the moral watchdogs even more nervous, since the added dialogue and the increased realism of the sound movies opened up more opportunities for objectionable material – think of off-color dialogue and cursing. In addition, the studios, when confronted by the **Depression** that threatened to bankrupt some of them, began to bend the rules by treating more controversial subjects in their search for bigger movie audiences. The movie industry tried

particularly to cultivate **the male audience**, which had “underperformed” compared to women and children in the 1920s. The result was more movies in the early 1930s with sexual and violent content. All the major studios moved in this direction, but the most pronounced was **Paramount Studios**, since it was the studio having the most severe financial difficulties.

Beginning in the mid-1920s, **Catholic groups** under the leadership of the clergy began a campaign against “indecent” in the movies. In the early 1930s Catholic leaders organized a **Legion of Decency** that sought to get Catholics throughout the country to subscribe to pledges such as the following:

I wish to join the Legion of Decency, which condemns vile and unwholesome moving pictures. I unite with all who protest against them as a grave menace to youth, to home life, to country and to religion. I condemn absolutely those salacious motion pictures which, with other degrading agencies, are corrupting public morals and promoting a sex mania in our land. ... Considering these evils, I hereby promise to remain away from all motion pictures except those which do not offend decency and Christian morality.



Howard Hughes’ ‘The Outlaw’ 1943 (with Jane Russell) was condemned by the Legion of Decency.

The Legion succeeded in persuading large numbers of Catholics (and many Protestants) to boycott – or at least to threaten to boycott – movies that the Catholic hierarchy considered indecent or demeaning to the Church. Looking with terror at the prospect of empty movie theaters, Hollywood was impressed when the Legion gathered **11,000,000 pledges in 1934**.

The result was the **Motion Picture Production Code** that was accepted by the studios in 1930. In view of the crisis brought about by “the rapid transition from silent to talking pictures”, it sought to provide “wholesome entertainment for all the people” and minimize controversial subject matter by detailing many subjects that could not be treated in film. Stating that “the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin,” the Code focused on prohibiting bad language (profanity and obscenity), certain acts of violence (e.g., “brutal killings”), attacks on religion (no aspersions was to be cast on an organized religion or a minister of religion), “sex relationships between the white and black races”, and more than any other subject on **sexuality**.



Barbara Stanwyck slept her way to the top in ‘Baby Face’ 1933

“The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld.” “Adultery, sometimes necessary plot material, must not be explicitly treated, or justified, or presented attractively.” There is to be no nudity, no undressing, no acts of sex, no scenes of childbirth, and the Code insisted that “the treatments of **bedrooms** must be governed by good taste and delicacy.” In later glosses on the Code even married couples were not to be seen sleeping, lying, or even sitting on the same bed. In Code bedrooms the beds were always twin beds (some claim that the reason for this stipulation was the pressure of English rather than American censors).

Any reference to subjects such as crime, adultery or extreme violence was to be limited by “**the dictates of good taste**” and to be allowed only insofar as they were “**essential to the plot**” or character development. The

studios of course were **moderates** in the self-censorship business; they did not want to exclude interesting topics that might appeal to audiences. When subjects like crime or adultery were brought up, the Code insisted that the plot inject “**compensating moral values,**” i.e., the adulteress must learn her lesson, the criminals must pay for their crimes, the murder must die in the electric chair, etc.; “the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.”

The new Production Code was not at first adequately enforced. Numerous violations of Code between 1930 and 1934 (cf. films such as “Golddiggers of 1933”, Marlene Dietrich’s “Blonde Venus”, Ernst Lubitsch’s “Trouble in Paradise” (1932), and Mae West’s “I’m No Angel” (1932)) and the campaign of the Legend of Decency resulted in the creation of the **Production Code Administration** in 1934 under the Catholic journalist Joseph Breen. From now on the system was formal: before a studio could start shooting a script, it had to submit its finished script to the **Breen Office** for prior approval; the final product was also subject to scrutiny, but completed films were not affected as often. Hollywood had clearly a strict system of self-imposed censorship that was to last until the mid-1960s. It was enforced very strictly at first, and then relaxed somewhat by the late 1930s; it became even more frayed around the edges by the middle 1950s, and then disappeared with the creation of the ratings system in 1966.



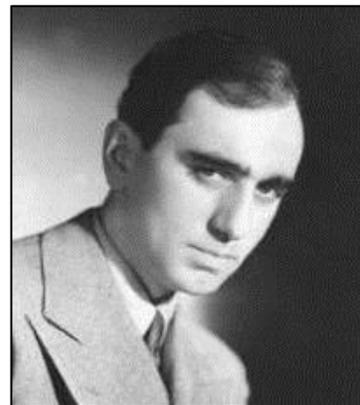
**Joe Breen and his wife in 1935**

**The impact** of the Breen Office on Hollywood films is open to controversy. Certainly it greatly limited the subject matter open to treatment by filmmakers (no overt sex, excessive violence, anti-religious comedies, etc.); and there can be little doubt that the code helped films in the late 1930s and early 1940s to be more supportive of mainstream American values, the official interpretation of the American social contract, etc. Some writers such as Sklar and Mick Lassalle, film critic of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, think that Hollywood films after this date were more dull and unimaginative. But there was still a great store of creativity in American movie-making through at least the end of the 1950s, and it is even possible that the enforced limits actually stimulated the ingenuity and inventiveness of Hollywood filmmakers.

### **The Studios Reach for an Audience**

In response to the economic crisis of the early 1930s, the studios developed movie specialties that they hoped would bring the crowds back to the theaters.

A good example of Hollywood flaunting former standards before 1934 were the musicals produced by Warner Brothers to appeal to Depression Era crowds, particularly men: ‘42<sup>nd</sup> Street’ 1932 (directed by Lloyd Bacon) and ‘The Golddiggers of 1933’ 1934 (directed by Mervyn Leroy); they both featured choreography by the celebrated **Busby Berkeley**. These movies illustrate several things: the popularity of **musicals** in the years after the invention of sound movies; the artistry of Busby Berkeley, who made a great reputation as a choreographer of spectacular dance routines (huge, lavish sets, large numbers of dancing girls, complex choreographed routines often photographed from above to make interesting abstract patterns); the flaunting of formerly accepted standards of sexual content; and the commitment of **Warner Brothers** to musicals, despite its emphasis on gangster movies (see below).



**Hollywood choreographer  
Busby Berkeley**



tenor voice, and lots of liveliness. Other theme is the scheming women, who use their sprightly beauty to trap wealthy men so they won't have to struggle any longer to make a living. Joan Blondell is the cutest, peppiest of the women, but all of them are pretty lively and pretty including Ginger Rogers and Ruby Keeler. Movie is fairly risqué (references to nudity; dancers obviously bare chested behind translucent screen; references to being in bed with a man, etc.); also makes reference to marijuana ("What have you been smoking?"). This movie could not have appeared without major changes after 1934.

### **American Sound Comedy in the early 1930s.**

Hollywood responded to the coming of sound with a great variety of very funny movies in the early 1930s that relied mainly on **dialogue**. In this period American comedy was quite disruptive, disorderly, and even subversive; it clearly calmed down and became more respectable and conventional after the Breen Office began censoring scripts in 1934. The early period was also one of great aesthetic inventiveness.

### **Ernst Lubitsch**

Lubitsch was part of Paramount Studio's campaign to win back audiences.

Lubitsch, a German actor and producer brought to Hollywood by Mary Pickford in 1923, had a brilliant career in the USA as director and producer of sophisticated sex comedies in both the silent and sound eras. He was perhaps the most successful example of a European brought to Hollywood to inject sophisticated sexual, comedic content into American movies. He was the master of the "**Lubitsch Touch**," defined by one critic as "The subtle humor and virtuoso visual wit in the films of Ernst Lubitsch. The style was characterized by a parsimonious compression of ideas and situations into single shots or brief scenes that provided an ironic key to the characters and to the meaning of the entire film."

Lubitsch's films in the 1920s were successful silent comedies, but he had no trouble making the transition to sound movies. He specialized in musicals (such as 'the Love Parade' 1929) and clever comedies characterized by an inventive use of the camera ('The Lubitsch Touch') and sparkling, suggestive and often hilariously mannered dialogue.



**Ernst Lubitsch with trademark cigar.**

There can be no better example of a **piquant sex comedy** than his 'Trouble in Paradise' 1932. This film was also produced by **Paramount Pictures**.

**Trouble in Paradise** (1932) directed by Ernst Lubitsch (Paramount) is a classic, very formalistic comedy, and good example of **open treatment of sexuality** before Hays Code enforcement. Acting style quite "stilted" due to the director's insistence. Hopkins and Francis both delicious, with Hopkins using her southern accent, and Francis looking very elegant and sexy with slinky 30s dresses, lots of jewelry and very low cut dresses. Sets are an orgy of early art deco. Dialogue is delicious and constantly suggestive of sex in the wing. Very witty cutting, e.g., of clocks in KF's house. Lots of visual play with beds. It is obvious that Lubitsch does not want to do anything the regular way. Personal favorite scene is **initial dinner** between Hopkins and Marshall, when a series of mutual thefts and pickpocketings serve as sexual foreplay (Lubitsch adds one of his famous "Touches" when Marshall gets up from the table, locks the door, closes the curtains,

and then...shakes Hopkins energetically ... to make her wallet fall out of her dress), and then after further double entendres and sexual banter, they rush into one another's arms; the message is that crime is fun, and that for some people theft is an erotic turn-on.

Horton and Ruggles are pretty dull, although Ruggles' routine about 'taking his pleasure and leaving it' is fairly amusing.

Another entertaining scene is **Marshall's seduction of Kay Francis**, who is looking for a secretary; through most of the scene Marshall is looking for money in Francis' safe; after finding it, Marshall sits with Francis and reproves her for being careless with her money and threatens to spank her; Francis grins and says "You're hired!". **Movie ends** with Marshall taking his leave of Kay Francis, and as he walks out the door, melodramatically tells her that she doesn't know what she is missing; since she obviously takes it as a sexual remark and indicates that she does know, Marshall retorts "No, you don't," and then extracts the priceless pearl necklace that he has lifted from her (neck?). Marshall and Hopkins then make their getaway in a taxi; they repeat the mutual pickpocketings of the earlier scene, and then embrace laughing. It is apparent that **crime does pay**, that stealing is a sexual turn-on, and that the criminal adulterers will go on to other pleasures.

A masterpiece of an unusual, highly personal blend of brilliant visual touches, suggestive dialogue, and an urbane, "continental" treatment of sexuality (without nudity).



**Groucho Marx and Cigar**

### **The Marx Brothers**

There is nothing sophisticated and sexy about the Marx Brothers.

The Marx Brothers (Groucho, Chico, Harpo, and – when he was there – Zeppo) were the most “**subversive**” and **anarchic** of the comedy stars in Hollywood in the early 30s. Coming out of the New York comic scene, they had successful shows on Broadway before signing a contract with **Paramount** in the late 1920s. Their movies with Paramount were popular and **chaotically** effective; they moved to MGM in 1934, where they made a couple of funny, although more respectable, movies with other stars, romantic plots (!) and musical interludes (where the viewer has to listen to Harpo play the harp and Chico play the piano with his knuckles) under Irving

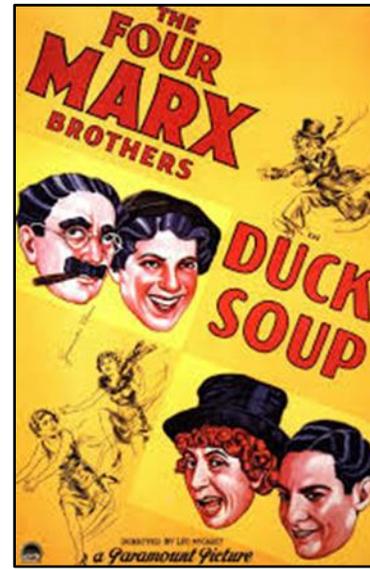
Thalberg, but their style declined thereafter. Their act was a mixture of traditional visual comedy (Groucho's cigar and eyebrows, Harpo's pantomime antics such as climbing on young women) and verbal comedy (bad puns, double entendres, insults (especially of women), Groucho's New York accent, etc.).

**Duck Soup** (1933) was one of their most effective and funny satirical comedies, although it was reportedly the least successful of all their Paramount films. The movie has the usual mix: bad puns, nonsense, and (often anti-female) **verbal aggression by Groucho; bad puns** and other verbal contributions by Chico; often (innocent seeming) lustful, always childishly disruptive routines by Harpo performing pantomime; teamwork by all three (or four when Zeppo is present) in reducing cherished American institutions – a football game, a horse race, a hospital, a college classroom, an opera performance – to ruins; some songs and production numbers; in the Paramount Period the plot provided only a pretext for the antics of the performers.

The scene at the beginning when Groucho is introduced as the new prime minister of Freedonia illustrates many of these points. He plays with words shamelessly; he insults people around him, including the

ambassador and particularly **Marguerite Dumont**, his long-suffering, stuffy, society matron foil that appears in most of the Paramount movies and who is in love with him in this one; he makes suggestive sexual remarks to attractive young women. The episode also includes a production number mocking American patriotism, and a song in which Groucho tells the citizens of Freedonia that, now he is their leader, they can expect husbands to be shot, their taxes to go up, and things in general to get worse. An excerpt from Groucho's song, "Here Are the Rules of My Administration":

If any form of pleasure is exhibited,  
Report to me and I will prohibit it.  
The last man nearly ruined this place.  
He didn't know what to do with it.  
If you think this country's bad off now,  
Just wait 'til I get through with it.



**Review: Horse Feathers** 1932 Norman McLeod 4.0

Marx Brothers, Thelma Todd (despite popularity she has squeaky non-expressive voice). Very funny anarchic (perhaps even more so than their other great movies) Marx Brothers comedy written at Paramount explicitly for the screen. Only the thinnest of plots, namely Groucho as president of Huxley College, pulls out the stops (inefficiently) to field a winning football team. A little satire of higher education, since Groucho is clear that his main job is a winning football team, not academics. A bit of music including Harpo's and Chico's usual (boring) solos, but Groucho in the beginning sings witty song to the trustees "I'm against it," and all the boys take a crack at corny "I love you." Comic personae are classic Marx Brothers – Groucho's sarcasm and word play – free association, high velocity, off color, self-contradiction, cruel insults, uncouth, bad puns, play on literal and metaphorical meaning of words and phrases, Chico's word play ("wool over my ice," 'falsetto voice' becomes 'false set of teeth'), Harpo's lunatic pantomime; Zeppo sings creditably, but doesn't try to be funny. Funniest scenes: 1) Groucho trying to get into the speakeasy with the "swordfish" password (Baravelli: "Hey, what's-a matter, you no understand English? You can't come in here unless you say, "Swordfish." "Now I'll give you one more guess." Harpo "Honk") 2) classroom scene with bad puns, mocking the solemn professor, making passes at girls, Groucho's lecture on blood, end with brothers fighting with bean shooters; 3) the canoe scene, where Groucho serenades Todd, mocks her use of seductive baby talk, (Todd: "If Icky baby



**Groucho playing football in 'Horse Feathers' 1932**

don't learn about the football signals from the big stwong man, Icky baby gonna cry!" Groucho: "If Icky girl keep talking that way big stwong man gonna kick all her teeth right down her throat!") and then dumps her into the water and throws her a candy life saver; **the final football game** stands out: Harpo and Chico focus on playing... pinochle, eating hot dogs and bananas (latter used by Harpo to cause defense men from catching him), Groucho wearing tailcoat over his uniform with a cigar in his mouth, Groucho and Chico playing pinochle on the field, Chico always giving away the play when he calls the signals, Harpo's shtick about "tackling the man who has the ball" (referee and player on the opposing team), Harpo's eating a hot dog with mustard while he runs with the ball

and then handing the ball to defenders when he is cornered, and in grand finale Harpo and Chico drive garbage (Roman!) chariot through defenders for the winning touchdowns (somehow Harpo has got hold of several footballs; every time he grounds one in the end zone, the scoreboard chalks up another touchdown)! All the brothers make salacious remarks in the presence of Todd; all three wed her at the

end, and then they jump on her! Only thing missing from an inspired version of Paramount formula is Marguerite Dumont.

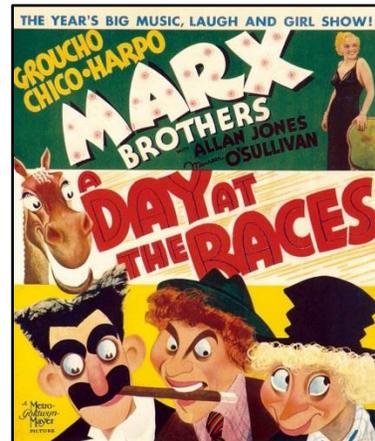
**Night at the Opera** 1935 Sam Wood 3.5 Marx Brothers, Sig Ruman, Kitty Carlisle, Allan Jones. MGM version of a Marx Bros. Movie that mixes destructive, anti-Establishment Marx humor with syrupy romantic plot, music (both the opera, which isn't too bad, and the boring piano and harp of Chico and Harpo), and a more or less consistent plot. Thalberg insisted on this genre; but compare to *Duck Soup*, where the comedy completely dominates, and which is much funnier and more subversive on the subject of patriotism. Consistently funny and mildly subversive (it makes fun of the upper classes and their characteristic pastimes, e.g., traveling in luxury on ocean liners, going to operas), although Groucho's wisecracks are pretty dated and corny. Great scenes are the contract, where negotiation leads to tearing most of the document up; the **stateroom scene** on the boat where practically everyone crowds into the brothers' cabin and Harpo has ample opportunity to molest the young women; and of course **the opera scene** at the end, which is extremely funny for



**The famous stateroom scene**

people who don't like opera, since the boys completely disrupt/destroy the performance – swashbuckling Harpo with his violin bow conducts a 'swordfight' with the conductor's baton, he leads the orchestra in an abbreviated rendition of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame", Harpo disrupts the performance by randomly lowering and lifting the scene backdrops, he then destroys much of the scenery by swinging back and forth on ropes, tearing the backdrop scenery, etc.

**A Day at the Races** 1937 Sam Wood 4.0 Groucho as Dr. Hackenbush, who is really a horse doctor; Chico, and Harpo; Allan Jones with cloyingly sweet tenor voice spends most of his time smiling; Maureen O'Sullivan cute, pretty shallow with fake accent as owner of the Florida sanitarium; Margaret Dumont as foolish wealthy hypochondriac patient in the sanitarium, as usual in love with Groucho (with her clueless smile); Douglas Dumbrille as the heavy putting pressure on O'Sullivan to sell the sanitarium; Sig Ruman as Viennese doctor with bulging eyes. One of the very best Marx Brothers comedy; perhaps they benefited from the first-class MGM treatment that Thalberg gave them. Takes place in a sanitarium and on the race track under the sunny skies of Florida. Plot is a throwaway: will the lovers, Allan and O'Sullivan, get over their spat and live happily ever after (of course they do), and will the couple with the help of the Marx Brothers and the horse Hi Hat be able to save the sanitarium from the clutches of the evil Dumbrille (of course they do). The Brothers are of course the stars of the show; they have funnier and better developed long comedy sketches than in their other films. 1) The long horse-in-code gag, in which Chico persists in selling code book after code book to Groucho, is subtle and long, but ingenious and funny, depending on Chico's trickster/con man and Groucho's (a bit incredible) gullibility and long-suffering patience. 2) Phone call gag is hilarious depending entirely on Groucho's silly imitation of various voices (with Southern accents) and the gullibility and frustration of the sanitarium's business manager. 3) The seduction scene with sexy Esther Muir is perhaps the funniest with Groucho's put-down of distinguished pronunciation ("Thank Yah!"), Harpo and Chico jumping on the girl, Groucho's good-humored frustration that seduction is getting nowhere, chaos introduced by the dogs and then Chico and Harpo hanging the wall paper on top of the couple sitting on the couch. 4) The physical examination of Margaret Dumont where the boys return several times to sterilize their hands, they attempt to shave the



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woman, they confuse the words “pulse” and purse” (Harpo takes Dumont’s purse instead of her pulse) and also the words “x-ray” and extra”, and they finally ride out of the examination room on their horse. 5) The horse race scene, which is more exciting than it is funny (Hi Hat jockeyed by Harpo must win the race in order to save the clinic): the boys fill the racetrack with parked cars, they change the fence to make the horses run off the track, and they encourage Hi Hat (who cannot abide the sight of Douglas Dumbrille) to run faster by putting the voice of the Dumbrille on the loud speaker. A lot of irrelevant music, some of which is bad – although smoothly performed, Allan’s extremely drippy ballads, the ballet, the song by the white vocalist –, and some of it pretty good – the long number featuring Harpo on the flute and the performances of the African-American Ivie Anderson and the Crinoline Choir who stomp around with a rousing version of “All God’s Chillun Got Rhythm”. Groucho’s and Chico’s one-liners, bad puns, and insult humor don’t seem up to the quality of some of the previous films; Harpo’s horny, hyper-excitable pantomime remains amusing. A delightful viewing experience in which the Marx Brothers continue to play on their subversive demolition of American behavior and institutions even within the tamer confines of the MGM studio.



Mae West

### Mae West

Mae West was as popular as the Marx Brothers and equally subversive. She had also had a successful career on Broadway, where after producing her play “Sex” she was brought to court for obscenity and spent ten days in jail. She was signed by **Paramount** to make her first film in 1932. She was known for her salacious remarks, all of which she wrote herself; she had a sashaying, strutting walk, and she lisped and slurred her words and talked out of the side of her mouth as she delivered her **double entendres** (statements that have both a respectable meaning and a second disreputable sexual one). Her sayings such as “Why don’t you come up and see me sometime” or “It’s not the men in my life that count; but the life in my men” were often repeated and parodied in popular culture. The bottom line was that she was just as **interested in sex** as the man (men) in her life,

perhaps more since not only does she gets sex, she also gets the man and his money! In 1935 she was the highest paid woman in the United States. She **steps out of women’s respectable roles** in the era, but she isn’t exactly a feminist, since her main objective is to make her way through life with a man (men).

**Review: I’m No Angel** 1933 Wesley Ruggles (wr. Mae West) Paramount 3.0 Mae West as Tira, Cary Grant as very rich third boyfriend who decides to marry her, Gregory Ratoff as lovable lawyer, Edward Arnold as the circus impresario. West has good bluesy voice that she uses to good avail in several songs. Mae West as sexy circus performer on the make. Her walk – strutting, sashaying, swaying and bouncing in a parody of sexiness; pudgy and not young; relishes men including by innuendo their physical charms; a gold-digger sick of her jealous, low-life boyfriend; says her life is ruled by her horoscope which she is constantly consulting; loves the high life and lots of money; mumbles a fair amount, talks out of the side of her mouth, when she delivers lines. 2) “Am I making myself clear, boys? (Suckers)” 3) Fortune teller “I see a man in your life.” “What? Only one?” “I see a change of position.” “Sitting or reclining?” 4) “Don’t let one man worry your mind. Find ‘em, fool ‘em and forget ‘em.” “Don’t worry. I only want to feel his muscles.” Been married five times; “I suppose wedding bells sound like an alarm clock.” Believe in marriage? “Only as a last resort.” 7) Arnold, “Tira, I’ve changed my mind.” “Does the new one work any better?” 9) Now performing as lion tamer (whip and revolver); puts head in lion’s mouth. “When I was born with this face, it was the same as striking oil.” 10) “We really enjoyed your performance.” “Coming from a woman, that’s a real compliment.” 11) Refer to man’s cane, “You mean you planted that stick?” Man “I’m not half bad.” “If you’re half the man I think you are, you’ll do.” She strikes it rich

with Lawrence. West laughs it up with four black women. Beulah, “I don’t see how any man can help loving you.” “They don’t need any help. They can do it themselves.” “I’m getting the impression that you is a one-man woman.” “Yeah, one man at a time.” West doesn’t get along with any woman except for her maids, who are constantly giggling with her. 12) After throwing rival out of her stunning Art Deco apartment, “Beulah. Peel me a grape!” 13) Old boyfriend has sworn to stop pick pocketing, “Do you want me to swear?” “Never mind, I can do that for myself.” 14) Grant shows up. “Do you mind if I get personal?” “Go right ahead. I don’t mind if you got familiar.” Grant says goodbye: “Goodbye. You’ve been wonderful.” She holds on to his hand, “You’ve been kind of wonderful yourself.” To Grant, who is of course extremely good-looking, “You have started a new train of thought in my mind. I’ll think it over and let you know what I decide.” “You fascinate me. You better go.” 15) Grant, “You were wonderful tonight.” “I’m always wonderful at night.” “I mean you were especially wonderful.” “When I’m good, I’m very good. When I’m bad, I’m better.” Grant, “If I could only trust you.” “Oh, you can, hundreds have.” Now, Clayton and Tira plan to get married! But enemies break it up, and Mae sues Grant for



**Early photo of Cary Grant**

breach of promise (she seems to want him back?). She interrogates own witnesses at trial; after Grant concedes, reporter’s questions, “Why did you admit to knowing so many men in your life?” “It’s not the men in your life (that count), but the life in your men.” 24) Juror #4 contacts her after her victory: She, “I want to thank you for those beautiful flowers. They were lovely. And don’t forget, why don’t you come up and see me sometime.” She tears up Grant’s check. He “I’m glad it wasn’t the money you wanted.” “There are a lot of other things it takes to make a woman happy.”

As they think about their honeymoon, she pauses. He “What are you thinking about?” She “The same thing you are.” Last remark is essential to West – she openly **desires sex as much as any man**. Film interesting exclusively for persona of West and her infamous wisecracks.