Vice Rewarded

The Wages of Cinematic Sin

Laughing Sinners, *The Road to Ruin*, *Free Love*, *Merrily We Go to Hell*, *Laughter in Hell*, *Safe in Hell*, *The Devil Is Driving*—the titles court not just disgrace but damnation, portending a realm of moral anarchy where reprobates run headlong into perdition, their reckless abandon leading inexorably, though gaily, to ruin. If paid out in the final reel, the wages of sin are less a warning about the costs of the unregenerate life than an advertisement for its compensations.

The censors called them "sex films," but the promiscuous embrace of sex was only the most commercial and carnal element of a broader assault on traditional values. The complete spectrum of vice, not sex alone, infested the films in question, an epicurean spirit of enthusiastic indulgence in activities illegal, forbidden, and stimulating. Antiauthoritarian, adultery-driven, and pleasure-seeking, the vice films surrendered willingly to one or more of the seven deadly sins and discovered that succumbing wasn't necessarily fatal.

Both a cross-generic ingredient and a genre unto itself, vice energized compliant formats (notably gangster films and the backstage musicals) even as it fueled the whole body of the main attraction in "fallen women" and "bad girl" films. In 1932 Warner Brothers made both strategies official studio policy, ordering screenwriters to cultivate the vice film and to spice up the rest of the product line with vice additives on the theory "that an average of two out of five stories should be 'hot' " and that most other films could well be "pepped up a little by adding on something having to do with ginger." *Variety* estimated that during 1932–33 no fewer than 352 of 440 pictures possessed "some sex slant," with 145 having "questionable sequences" and 44 being "critically sexual" at feature length. "In other words," lectured the trade paper, "over 80% of the world's chief picture output was partly, partially, or completely flavored with the bedroom essence. And that flavoring, it is also admitted, has strongly favored the theme of perversion." By way of illustration, consider the immoral tonalities of three ripe and resonantly titled exemplars of vice on the pre-Code screen: *Call Her Savage* (1932), *Love Is a Racket* (1932), and *Unashamed* (1932).

Call Her Savage was conceived by Fox as a comeback vehicle for Clara Bow, lately dismissed by Paramount in the wake of nearly two years of sordid scandal and career mishaps. In 1930 Bow's private secretary Daisy DeVoe had sold the names and tallied up the numbers of Bow's myriad lovers to the New York tabloid *GraphiC*. Though Bow won a civil suit against DeVoe, the torrent of bad publicity led to her nervous breakdown and, worse, box office slowdown. Making the best of the tabloid headlines, *Call Her Savage* invited audiences to link the affairs of the actress with the antics of the lusty hellion she played on screen. As extravagantly profligate as Bow's private life, the film checked off a litany of Code violations: marital infidelity, interracial marital infidelity, sadomasochistic whipping, erotic frolicking with a Great Dane, prurient exposure of female flesh, kept women, femme-on-femme catfights, a demented husband who tries to rape his wife, prostitution, gigolos, and a pair of mincing homosexual waiters.

Yet beyond any single lapse into sin, the vice film projected an off-center world where the moral scaffolding was all out of joint. In *Love Is a Racket*, the ambitious aunt of a callow gold digger murders the gangster who threatens her niece's marriage to a wealthy suitor. A newspaperman in love with the gold digger covers up the crime and his best friend in turn covers up the first cover-up. In the end, the aunt gets away with the killing, the gold digger marries her meal ticket, and the two accessories to murder

chuckle about the brush with homicide, wiser to the ways of women and the world.

Unashamed occupies the same moral dimension. Headstrong society girl Joan Ogden (Helen Twelvetrees) falls in love with a moneygrubbing louse named Harry Swift (Monroe Owsley). "Three million dollars and she's not bad looking," snorts the faithless Harry. After Harry seduces Joan, he is surprised to discover that both Joan's doting father and her very doting brother Dick (Robert Young) prefer Joan with a sullied reputation to him as a member of the family. When Harry threatens scandal, brother Dick's repressed incestuous desire for Joan boils over. He pulls out a pistol and shoots Harry dead.

Unashamed settles into an extended courtroom sequence, with a cynical defense attorney calculating that his guilty-as-sin client will be saved from the electric chair by the "unwritten law" that permits a man to kill when he defends a woman's honor. Despite the fact that the family maid and the defendant perjure themselves on the witness stand, things look bleak for young Dick until Joan decides to sacrifice her reputation. On the witness stand, she acts the part of a shameless hussy, unworthy of the chivalrous act of her stalwart brother. The jury's outrage at the tramp of a sister transfers as sympathy for her noble sibling and results in a verdict of not guilty. After murdering a middle-class social climber and lying under oath, the plutocrats with the slick lawyer get away with murder. "Hallelujah!" squeals the maid for the exit line.

Predictably, that exhilaration was not shared by state censor boards, women's groups, and editorialists. To the moral guardians, the vice films were a personal affront and cultural peril. If the lurid advertising oversold the vice-to-virtue ratio, enough of the film content lived up to the titles and taglines to confirm the impression that an unending stream of decadence flowed from Hollywood.

That the wards of the guardians seemed to prefer low entertainments to high-minded uplift only confirmed the infinite corruptibility of mankind. From the vantage of religious leaders and social reformers, the perverse output was a sorry legacy of the wanton excesses of the 1920s, the corrupt past lingering into the devastated present and preventing spiritual renewal. Not yet awakened to the shift to sterner times, Hollywood seduced the vulnerable with the behaviors and values of a discredited epoch.

Rallying to its own defense, Hollywood posed as a mere service industry willing to purvey whatever genre the public paid good money to see.

"Why should some studios follow out [the Code's] dictates and find themselves with a lot of sweet pictures that will not draw flies at any box office, while others, disregarding the Code, cash in on box office smashes?" asked the *Hollywood Reporter*, whose three-word headline summed up a review of *The Man Who Played God* (1932): "Clean, Wholesome, and Dull." Vice-drenched films might put the bluenoses out of joint, but moviegoers, often young couples, welcomed them with open arms. "As figures at the box office dwindled the boys underline the sex angle the more," *Variety* conceded in 1931. "And who's to blame them?" Not the producers, who considered the censors out of touch with moviegoers who flocked to the very films the censors condemned.

Fortunately for the souls of the majority, a discerning minority stood ready to make the right choices for them. In 1933 Mrs. Thomas G. Winters, a former national president of the General Federation of Women's Clubs and present associate director of public relations for the MPPDA, attempted to explain the virtue gap. "There are more oversexed pictures and more objectionable scenes in otherwise good pictures than the lovers of drama could wish, but the popular taste needs a good deal of education to register its dislike," declared Mrs. Winters. "The many-millioned audience is, after all, largely decent—more decent than the so-called intelligentsia." Mrs. Mildred Lewis Russell, chairwoman of the Better Films Committee of the Daughters of the American Revolution, agreed. "The more thoughtful among us must try to control with intelligence—to impress upon others the importance of selecting our entertainment. We can make unwholesome films so unpopular, so unremunerative, that a greater number of good films will be made." Taking extreme umbrage at what the DAR called the "going-to-have-a-baby cycle," Mrs. Russell abided "no excuse for such films as *Eight Girls in a Boat* [1934] and *Lessons in Making Love* [?]" and charged "such filth is suited for low dives and the people who frequent them." The same admixture of condemnation and self-justification animated the pronouncements from the Chicago Board of Censors. "Illicit relations between the sexes, illegitimacy, disrespect for or ridicule of the marriage state, and other forms of sex immorality" were bad enough, bewailed the Chicao censors in 1931, but more sinister still was the " 'modern' attitude with its elusive standards" that made it "impossible for the large majority of picture audiences to make any distinction between the rightness and the fallacy of that attitude."

As ever for the cultural elites, the common rung of mankind was all too susceptible to the lure of the unregenerate life. If, when tempted, weak-

willed moviegoers lapsed into vice, then more was the responsibility of Hollywood to uplift and ennoble and more the duty of the moral guardian to be vigilant and ensure that Hollywood did what was right.

Packaging Vice

Pre-Code vice came in two packages—or rather, a wrapper and a package. Hollywood dangled the promise of salacious material with lurid advertising and then dodged around, and sometimes delivered on, the enticements of the marketing wraparound. The interplay between the advertising campaign and the motion picture was determined less by the content of the film than the wild imaginations of studio ballyhoo boys. The colorful ribbons and bows festooned about the project on the outside often made the dull prize on the inside a letdown.

Nominally, the major studios were signatories to the Advertising Code, an addendum to the Production Code that mandated decent copy and demure illustrations. "Every person of any competency in the advertising profession knows that the immorally suggestive twist in advertising copy leads to no good result," blustered Martin Quigley of *Motion Picture Herald*. "It is simply a confession of the writer's inability to prepare copy with attention-wrestling value without leaping over the borderline of good taste and common decency." Long experience had taught studio publicity flacks just the opposite: that the "immorally suggestive twist" led audiences in a straight line to the box office. As with the Production Code, then, the Advertising Code was stretched, sidestepped, and violated. Titles, taglines, poster art, and publicity photographs titillated with indiscretion and misdirection.

As the biggest words on the theater marquee, titles were the first and best advertising hook for the vice film. Studios regularly held in-house contests for employees to come up with the best title for a screenplay and orchestrated nationwide competitions for moviegoers to do the same. The practice is satirized in *Footlight Parade* (1933) when a fey fussbudget tries to obtain a showbiz job as a "title thinker-upper." The competition for timely and magnetic catch phrases was fierce enough to inspire the MPPDA to establish a Title Registration Bureau to file claims by member producers on surefire titles. The moral tone of the suggestions was low enough to warrant a separate section in the Production Code: "Salacious, indecent, or obscene titles shall not be used."

Merrily We Go to Hell (1932) defied the rule, passing muster with the Hays Office but not the editors of respectable newspapers who refused to print so gleeful an outlook on so unholy a destination. Likewise, producer Howard Hughes was deaf to pleas to change the virile title of his airborne adventure *Cock of the Air* (1932). *The Half-Naked Truth* (1932), a story of an exotic dancer and carnival hokum, also slipped by, probably because the title was not even half accurate. "For every person who is brought in by a borderline title, there are probably a couple of more who are kept away," insisted Martin Quigley uncertainly. Yet so widespread were the borderline titles that by 1931 the Hays Office was giving special scrutiny to "lurid, ultra-sexy, and misleading titles" with words such as "Hell," "Devil," "Hades," and "Damn" deemed the most troublesome vulgarities. In consequence, some of the most arousing title pitches never saw the light of a marquee. Fox floated the title *Sandy Hooker* for Clara Bow's follow-up to *Call Her Savage*, but the prostitutional pun was forbidden. One producer spent years unsuccessfully suggesting the title *Pink Chemise*, another the fetishistic *Virgins in Cellophane*.

Exclamatory advertising copy stretched the naked truth by more than half, spouting breathless exclamations and posing interrogatives for overactive imaginations. "Who are they? What are they?" badgered the copy for *Leftover Ladies* (1931). "Why are they called leftover ladies? A pulsating story of modern women's ruthless sacrifice for freedom—and what *is* this new freedom?" (*Answer:* divorced women who spurn alimony payments.) "Why do a million men leave home every year?" asked the copy for *Convention City* (1933), answering its own question. "Join in the daffy doings of one of those convulsing conventions where big business makes hey-hey—and farmer's daughters make hay! Make the rounds with the boys—make whoopie with those dazzling convention sweeties!" *What Men Want* (1930) clarified the declaration of the title with a tagline: "She gambled all—and lost all!"

An eyebrow-raising come-on might make even the blandest film fare sound tantalizing. "We could not have shown this picture ten years ago. We'd have been put in jail," claimed an ad for *Life in the Raw* (1933), not a nudie film but a fully clothed and very tame western. D. W. Griffith's reverent biopic *Abraham Lincoln* (1930) pledged a picture of Mary Todd unknown to history: "She taught Lincoln how to love—and to like it!"

Amazingly, a few taglines delivered on the promise. "If your Aunt Minnie from Duluth happens to be in town next week, don't invite her to *The Story of Temple Drake*," warned the ads for the most notorious vice film of 1933. "That is, if she happens to be an old-fashioned Aunt Minnie who shies from gin and sex." *Baby Face*, a close second to *The Story of Temple Drake* in

Violating the Advertising Code: a publicity still from *Tarzan and His Mate* (1934). (Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art)

notoriety, traced its plot outline in first-person confessional prose: "I don't want to keep on living like a dumb animal! So I'm getting out. My father called me a tramp. And who is to blame? A swell start he gave me. Ever since I was 14 men have been trying to paw me!"

A vintage advertising ploy was a practice known in the trade as "pinking," that is, to advertise a film as "recommended for adults only!" or "no children under 16 admitted!" in order to send up a red flag about sexual content. *Baby Face* profited from the reverse psychology with "an ad campaign that's bringing in the kids by warning them to stay away; also the

grown-ups in paying numbers," reported *Variety*. "It's the same old gag and it's working again." Besides luring in the prematurely mature, the "adults only" banner served as cover against charges of corrupting the young. "I played this to adults only and was glad I did on two counts," gloated an exhibitor done right by Mae West in *She Done Him Wrong* (1933). Ballyhoo boys for *Unguarded Girls* (1929) pulled another old gag, but along gender not generational lines, with "men only" and "women only" screenings.

If the images conjured by words left little to the imagination, pictures were a thousand times better. Lurid posters sketched orgiastic tableaux and degrees of décolletage exposed nowhere on screen. Pen-and-ink drawings filled in, or left out, material that no actual photograph could depict without being legally actionable. Throughout the 1930s and beyond, the nonphotographic publicity picture remained popular in one-sheets and ad mats because illustrations could undrape actresses and flaunt cheesecake more explicitly than photographs.

Of course risqué photographs, distributed to the racier fan magazines and to markets overseas, delivered a higher-definition form of titillation. Besides the high-tone gloss of studio portraiture that bathed the stars in shimmering lights and strategic shadows, revealing photographs of lesser known actresses, presumably in featured sequences but in actuality nowhere to be seen on screen, were distributed by press agents and publicity departments. Though in clear violation of the Advertising Code, the practice was widespread and subsidized by the publicity departments of the major studios. A case of "considerable gravity" concerned the publicity stills of a near-naked Doleres Muray circulated by RKO to advertise *The Common Law* (1931), a film in which the actress seems not to have appeared either dressed or undressed. Such "pornographic stills," lectured *Motion Picture Herald*, damaged the good repute of the industry and offered disturbing evidence that the studios were "continuing to go merrily thumbing their noses at both the Production Code and the Advertising Code."

Along with the avid moviegoers who were the prime targets of motion picture advertising, a less susceptible audience monitored the billboards and newspaper ads. For the moral guardian, vice-drenched exploitation was a doubly convenient target of opportunity, presenting irrefutable evidence of Hollywood decadence while allowing the pure of heart to gather it without being sullied by direct exposure to impure cinema. In 1932, during an address to the Women of the First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the Reverend Clifford Gray Twombly had only to scan the pages

Leg artistry: Barbara Stanwyck poses for a cheesecake photograph and Jean Harlow reveals herself in pen and ink.

of the local paper to cull examples of shameless advertising copy. "Alluring, pursued by many men! Experimenting with love, wild passions, gay parties!" the reverend intoned to the—shocked?—Presbyterian ladies. "It tells who really pays for those ladies known as expensive."

In December 1933, Hays tried to extinguish the flash point of lurid advertising. In an emphatic memorandum whose anatomical precision well describes the kind of material being routinely circulated, he issued a set of twelve commandments to rein in the libidinous flow of pictures and words. Adopting the tones of a biblical command come down from Mount Sinai, *Variety* published the bans. The first seven regulated still photography:

I. Thou shalt not take or cause to be taken any photography in which girls are shown posed in underwear, fancy lingerie, teddies, scanties or drawers.

II. Thou shalt not photograph girls in scenes in which the femmes pull up their skirts to show a lengthy display of legs and the unfastening of a garter.

III. Thou shalt not photograph girls in salacious or bending over postures which show the legs above the knee or displaying a sec-

tion of the thighs, whether covered or not, at which other persons in the photograph are pointing or making fun of.

IV. Thou shalt not photograph the so-called fan dance type of photograph in which delicate parts of the anatomy are covered by fans, feathers, lace, or other types of scanty or peek-a-boo material.

V. Thou shalt not photograph groups of chorus girls in scenes in which legs, thighs, or outline of body is shown through the transparency of the outer garment.

VI. Thou shalt not photograph scenes of a bawdy nature, in which the only appeal is to the salacious minded.

VII. Thou shalt not photograph kissing, necking, or any type of love-making scenes in which the principals are in a horizonal position. In any kissing scene the pose must be standing, or sitting.

The last five regulated the prose of advertising copy:

VIII. Thou shalt not cause to be written, photographed, or sketched any advertising that is a misrepresentation of facts.

IX. Thou shalt not use the word "courtesan" or words meaning the same in any advertising copy used for the exploitation of pictures.

X. Thou shalt not reprint sections of dialogue from a picture that would convey a different meaning to the picture than is contained in it.

XI. Thou shalt not suggest to exhibitors the use of salacious copy or the misrepresentations of facts in order that he might appeal in his advertising copy to persons seeking the unclean in pictures.

XII. Thou shalt not use adjectives in advertising description that will lead a reader to believe that one playing a sympathetic part in a picture is base, dishonest, profane, unholy or otherwise an undesirable person.

As soon as Hays issued the strict guidelines on the "leg art" and cleavage in studio publicity stills, the ad-pub departments figured out how to sidestep the restrictions. They simply told magazine editors to send around their own photographers and "we'll supply the girls."

Ultimately, the come-hither copy and lurid images that baited moviegoers proved to be hooks that caught the studios on their own lines. Scanning newspapers, handbills, and billboards, moral guardians were alerted to the

awful doings in films they would never have been aware of otherwise. In 1934 a racy billboard so infuriated Philadelphia's Cardinal Dougherty that he launched the motion picture boycott that helped bring about the Production Code Administration. Outside his residence, a provocatively painted and leeringly taglined billboard for a Warner Bros. melodrama daily affronted his eyes. Finally, his Christian forbearance spent, the cardinal went to the pulpit and announced his crusade. If Hollywood had kept quieter about the vice quotient, real and imagined, and depended more on word of mouth to pass along the details, it would not have drawn as much attention to its jaunty detours from the path of morality.

Models of Immorality

Having lured audiences with the tonic of sin, vice films diluted the damnation with a dose of redemption. An end-reel restoration of official morality or the climactic revelation that a sordid suspicion was all a terrible misunderstanding atoned for eighty minutes of wanton mischief. The taglines for *Young Sinners* (1931) neatly summarized the arc from turpitude to rectitude: "Hot youth at its wildest . . . loving madly, living freely . . . tamed by life's realities—and coming through gloriously!" After sowing wild oats, reformed sinners reap the rewards of respectability, wiser but not necessarily sadder.

Yet if what was promised seldom matched what was seen, pre-Code Hollywood presented visions and upheld values that violated the laws of God and man without contrition or consequence. The trade press summed up Hollywood's variations on vice as "the eternal triangle" and "fallen woman and straying girl themes." The division singles out the sites of opportunity and the gender of the perpetrators: the institution of marriage and the character of woman.

The most sacred bond torn asunder was holy matrimony. Marriage was a contract open to redefinition, amenable to renegotiation, and easily terminated by mutual consent. In *The Prodigal* (1930), an unloved wife considers forsaking her virtue by running off with a smarmy suitor. Saved from dishonor by her brother-in-law, she and he fall hopelessly in love, but "there are some things one must not do," says he chastely after kissing his brother's wife. When the husband rejects a divorce, the lovers accept their fate—until the mother of the men intervenes to save the young lovers, not the institution of marriage. She orders her bad son to get a divorce and tells her good son and good daughter-in-law (present and future) that, having found

true love, they deserve to keep it. "This is the twentieth century," she declares. "Go out into the world and get what happiness you can."

Adultery can be a normal enough, even salutary passage in a marriage that stands the test of time. In Frank Borzage's *Secrets* (1933) gubernatorial candidate Leslie Howard betrays his devoted wife (Mary Pickford) with a raven-haired signorina and, he confesses, a few others. The other woman publicizes the affair to ruin both his marriage and political career. But Mary knows that her man has never really stopped loving her. She withstands the bad patch in the marriage with wifely forbearance and forgives her serial adulterer husband, as do the voters who elect him governor.

Cecil B. DeMille's *Madame Satan* (1930) not only tolerates adultery but prescribes it as shock therapy for a marriage in trouble. "Love can't be kept in cold storage," says philandering husband (Reginald Denny). "It's a battery that's got to be recharged every day." Learning that an energetic jazz baby named Trixie is the new power source in her husband's life, his "below zero" wife resolves to win him back by adopting a sizzling new persona, the sexy "Madame Satan." At a bizarre costume ball aboard a zeppelin floating over Manhattan, the identity confusion and spousal straying works out as marriage counseling.

Outside of marriage, throngs of female libertines flirted and coupled for fun and profit. For an in-depth reading of the sexual contours of the extramarital vice film, the best template is Paramount's *The Story of Temple Drake*, the screen version of William Faulkner's sensational novel *Sanctuary*. Originally titled *The Shame of Temple Drake* and taglined as "a love story understandable to every woman . . . pulsing with all the emotional power of *A Farewell to Arms*," the film depicted rape, prostitution, and perversity among the lowest orders of stunted hicks and seedy patricians. Despite the attempt to link Faulkner's lurid tale with Hemingway's more conventional romance, the odor of sleaze hung over the project from the start. "What is the function of the Hays Office if it doesn't keep projects like this off the screen?" demanded the *New York News*. That a major studio undertook so disreputable an enterprise is an index both of Paramount's financial straits and the lure of the vice film as a quick fix in the early 1930s. George Raft was under contract to play the lead in the film but refused, saying it would be "screen suicide." This from an actor who built his career impersonating gangsters.

As overture to Temple Drake's story, stormy music fills the soundtrack and flashes of lightning illuminate a dilapidated house in the back country, its shattered exterior and busted windows shimmering eerily. After the cast takes

a curtain bow, the scene shifts to the bright interiors of the Dixon County Courthouse, presided over by crusty old Judge Drake (Sir Guy Standing). In chambers, he talks with Stephen Benbow (William Gargan), the idealistic young defense attorney whom he wants to marry his wild daughter, Temple. "She's a good girl, Steve."

The first glimpse of Temple (Miriam Hopkins) belies the old man's faith in Southern womanhood. From the interior of her father's mansion, the unseen Temple is heard flirting with a beau, who entreats her for more than a kiss as she teases and pouts ("I said no!"). Rushing inside, leaving the beau frustrated on the front porch, she smiles at her talent to spark and then smother his ardor. "What hour of the night is this to come home?" scolds Judge Drake. Temple slinks her way out of the reprimand. "Darling," she coos, turning her back to him, "won't you unhook me?"

A montage of small town commentary gives the backstory on the flighty Temple. "The girl made a sucker of me," grouses the crestfallen beau. "You're not the only one," chimes in a companion, another victim of Temple's temptations. Downstairs in the Drake mansion, a black maid fingers Temple's torn chemise and shakes her head over the judge's naive trust in his daughter. "If he done the laundry, he'd know more about that child." Spinsters cluck about Temple's wild streak and the genetic predisposition of the Drake family to spawn sexual renegades.

Stephen will listen to none of the town gossip, but Temple's modus operandi is all too clear. She teases the polite young men of the town, works them into a tumescent lather, and then leaves them hot and bothered. "It ain't fair," whines a victim. "Fire a man all up then—poof!—put him out." "Do I do that—sho' nuff?" warbles Temple. Later, with loyal Stephen, she confesses, "I'm no good," but shows no interest in not being bad. In the men's bathroom, Stephen angrily erases some poetic graffiti that has it about right: "Temple Drake is just a fake / She wants to eat and have her cake."

Driving through dark and dangerous back roads with a drunken boyfriend, Temple and the sloshed driver careen off the road. Shaken but unharmed, they regain consciousness as a scary figure with a flashlight shines the beam on Temple's shapely figure. The lecher is a well-dressed gangster named Trigger (Jack LaRue) who, according to his feeble-minded hillbilly companion, shoots dogs for target practice. Trigger and the hillbilly escort the frightened couple through the stormy woods to the ramshackle house of the title sequence. A trembling Temple wants to leave, but the wind and the rain make escape impossible. She must go inside where the backcountry trash are liquoring themselves up on moonshine. The men leer at Tem-

Just comeuppance: Ruby (Florence Eldridge) watches as Trigger (Jack LaRue) threatens Temple (Miriam Hopkins) in *The Story of Temple Drake* (1933). (Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art)

ple and slur out suggestive remarks. "Sit here kid—right in my lap." The threat of sexual violation is thick in the air, from Trigger, from the drunken hicks, perhaps from them all.

Ruby Lemarr (Florence Eldridge), the lone woman in the shack, is initially gruff to Temple ("you pretty-faced little fool!"), but she offers comfort and protection from the crude males. "Take off those wet things," she orders, when the two are alone. Temple strips to her chemise and dons a man's overcoat, a layer of protection she must relinquish when the owner barges in and orders her to give him back his coat. Removing it, she cowers beneath a blanket. Ruby brings Temple to the safer regions of a barn to sleep, where the hillbilly boy pledges to guard her for the night.

At dawn Trigger creeps to the barn, the camera following his feet, implicating the spectator in the pursuit of the object of his desire. Looming over Temple from above, he spies her reclining figure crisscrossed with beams of light shining in from between the planks of the barn wall. Trigger

shoots her hillbilly protector and inches forward, ablaze with lust, looming into the camera for a tight close-up. Temple screams.

In the next scene, Trigger is driving down a road with the traumatized Temple in the front seat of his convertible. "Fix yourself," he orders, and takes her to a brothel. "I spotted you the minute I seen you," Trigger sneers, moving in for another monstrous close-up. "You holler and you faint—[unspoken: but really you like what I do to you]."

While investigating the murder of the hillbilly boy, Stephen comes upon Temple in the brothel, apparently Trigger's prostitute. "Are you—[unspoken: working here]?" he sputters. "Did you—[unspoken: sleep with him]?" Temple sees Trigger going for his gun to kill Stephen, so she acts the part of the fallen woman to save him. She *wants* to be with Trigger, she insists, kissing her rapist and blowing cigarette smoke at Stephen. Yet when Stephen leaves, Temple musters the courage to walk out. "I got your number and you know it," insists Trigger, who prepares to assault her again. Grabbing his gun, Temple shoots him dead and flees back home.

Temple's ordeal is not over. Stephen must call her to testify in the murder case of the innocent backcountry man accused of the hillbilly's murder. "Leave me out of this," she pleads, suddenly sensitive to her reputation. "It'll all come out and I'll be disgraced." But though Stephen must put her on the stand, he cannot bring himself to ask her the question that will force her to confess her tainted status. So she sobs out the story of Temple Drake herself. "He attacked me—Trigger did," she cries. "I went to the city with Trigger and stayed with him until this week." "And stayed there a prisoner, you mean?" asks the court. "I killed him!" she shouts, and then faints, leaving the question unanswered. Stephen carries her from the courtroom and delivers the exit line: "Be proud of her, judge—I am."

The Story of Temple Drake is a model of pre-Code immorality in at least three ways. First, the open questions posed by the narrative would neither be raised nor answered under the Code. Did Temple enjoy the rape? Did she willingly prostitute herself for Trigger? The inquiries alone are invitations to profane thoughts, occasions for sin at the moment of utterance. Second, the questions are truly open, unanswered, not closed by the narrative. The degree of Temple's complicity in her rape and culpability for Trigger's murder is unresolved. Third, the one lesson taught by the story of Temple Drake is the poetic justice in unlawful vengeance. In being raped, Temple receives just comeuppance for her sexual teasing, for advertising promiscuity while being "just a fake." The rapist-murderer Trigger is the agent of an unholy but

just retribution, an avenging angel who shows this girl that she can't have her cake and eat it too. If Temple doesn't enjoy her degradation, the audience should.

Figurative Literalness

Though each sex might well partake of the cinematic sexual preferences of the other, the taste for vice films tended to split along gender lines. The lascivious male gaze focused on the sight of the female form laid bare and filled in the outlines with the offscreen suggestion of her nudity. The fertile imagination of women preferred a more cerebral kind of vice, conjuring violations of the marriage bed and the forbidden pleasures of sleeping in another without needing the details affronting their eyes.

Finding innovative ways to reveal women in states of undress and dishevelment was a creative challenge pre-Code Hollywood met unblushingly. Coeds pranced about in lingerie, chorines danced in translucent costumes, and society girls waltzed around in diaphanous gowns, low-cut dresses, and form-fitting silks. A scientific interest in female undergarments justified leering mise-en-scène and lavish montages of nylons and garters donned and cast off. *Night Nurse* (1931) concocts repeated occasions for Barbara Stanwyck and Joan Blondell to disrobe, slipping from civilian clothes into nurses uniforms and back again. In *Red Headed Woman* (1932) director Jack Conway choreographs a peek-a-boo sequence that pans back and forth between Jean Harlow and Una Merkel, from the bare legs of the one to the bare shoulders of the other, exposing a fleeting glimpse of Harlow's breast as the women undress and exchange pajamas.

The backstage musical ecstatically celebrated the female form—dozens of female forms actually—in production numbers showcasing geometric patterns and curvaceous figures while also affording ample opportunity to glimpse the girls changing between numbers and prancing up spiral staircases. As the financial backer of the stage show in *42nd Street* (1933), a wide-eyed Guy Kibbe relishes his role as audience surrogate, sitting front and center during rehearsal to inspect the chorus line. Jiggling, bouncing, and sashaying, pre-Code women flounced about with a freedom of movement that extended to all points on the body, fore and aft, port and starboard.

Occasionally, a naked woman might be spied in part or whole. Inspired by expeditionary films that exposed native girls in a state of nature, the studios sought to extend the custom to white women in exotic environments,

often underwater. In *Bird of Paradise* (1932) the immovable Hawaiian lei adorning native girl Dolores Del Rio serves as a protective bodice, but a nude underwater swim sequence is more generous with dorsal exposure. Likewise, in *Tarzan and His Mate* (1934), an extended nude underwater swim sequence drapes Johnny Weismuller in a loincloth and a body double for Maureen O'Sullivan in nothing.

Before the Production Code put offscreen space under the same strict surveillance as onscreen images, mental pictures of what lay just beyond the edges of the film frame were vividly outlined. In *The Common Law* artist's model Constance Bennett stands before Joel McCrea in nothing but a towel. He tells her to drop the towel. She does. Bennett is shot from the shoulders up, but McCrea's appraising eye shows he sees what can be readily imagined. Similarly, in *Cabin in the Cotton* (1932) a purposeful Bette Davis doesn't wait to be told to expose her offscreen self to a shocked Richard Barthelmess.

Unlike the dull male spectator, who required the image (or most of it) before his eyes for erotic arousal, women preferred the exercise of imagination. Falling short of the overt teasing of the male gaze was a female-friendly diversionary tactic known as "figurative literalness." Where clumsily prurient directors might run afoul of even pre-Code strictures, stylishly sophisticated directors more cleverly tried to "exemplify in their work the teachings of the Code and yet inculcate in their finished releases risque matter, etc., possessed of all the emotion pep and range, without the Hays finger being able to descend on a single foot of their exposed film." That is, just as the edge of the film frame served as a beckoning "No Trespassing" sign (for the male gaze), a timely detour into offscreen space could infuse the onscreen narrative with otherwise censorable material for the female imagination.

In *Ann Vickers* (1933), director John Cromwell's version of the Sinclair Lewis novel about a feminist penologist, Ann (Irene Dunne) dines in the hotel room of the ardent Captain Resnick (Bruce Cabot), a Great War soldier with but one more week of furlough before transfer overseas. She must go, he gets her coat, and they embrace for a good-bye kiss. The camera frames the pair and then moves downward, catching the image of Ann's coat falling to the floor. In a continuous pan, the camera leaves the embracing couple and moves to the hotel window where, backframe, a neon sign outside advertises *Joan the Woman*. After a slow dissolve, the marquee title changes to *Shoulder Arms*. Ann has surrendered to her lover and spent the week with him in his hotel room, the amount of time it takes the motion

picture program to change from Cecil B. DeMille's religious melodrama to Charles Chaplin's comedy.

Likewise, in John Ford's *Arrowsmith* (1931), the consummation of desire between the beautiful Joyce Lanyon (Myrna Loy) and the married Dr. Arrowsmith (Ronald Colman) is suggested through the subtlest of visual cues. Smitten with the doctor's dedication and matinee idol looks, Joyce proclaims her love for him, knowing it can never be. Arrowsmith retires alone to his room and sits at the foot of his bed, bathed in light, smoking a cigarette, thinking, and glancing sideways at the wall of her room. From an adjacent room, in crosscut action, Joyce fiddles with her nightgown. Her eyeline somehow seems to meet his gaze through the walls. Arrowsmith remains sitting, smoking, thinking. Backscreen, a small rectangular patch of light spills through the door to his room. A shadow flutters onto it. Fade out. When the couple encounters each other the next morning, the slightest of significant glances passes between them.

More literal was the figurativeness in *Laughing Sinners* (1931). On a windswept, rainy night Joan Crawford drives up to a train station to meet her traveling salesman boyfriend. Her face is ecstatic, ravenous with sexual passion: only the most naked lust could compel a woman out on a night like this. She leaps on the train, embraces him, and runs down the train corridor arm in arm with her lover.

According to MPPDA secretary Carl Milliken, the need for suggestive inventiveness spurred creative ingenuity. "The Code provides the laws of art for motion pictures and every art must have its laws," Milliken declared approvingly in 1931. "The Code is making dramatists out of writers." In other words, as long as the immoral intimations were subtle, tasteful, and mainly offscreen, they were cleared for release. After the imposition of the 1934 Code, "figurative literalness"—though now more figurative than literal—would be the preferred, often the only, way to smuggle impure thoughts and deeds onto the Hollywood screen.

Queer Flashes

The imputation of homosexuality, played usually for laughs, sometimes as threat, and most subversively as alternative, was the most scandalous vice element. When *Variety* spoke of strong flavorings of "the theme of perversion" in the "bedroom essence" of vice films, the homosexual hovered as the unnamed culprit.