Hollywood’s ‘Naughtiest, Bawdiest Year’

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1933

a series of sixty-six films released in 1933, at Film Forum, New York City, February 8–March 7, 2013

New York’s Film Forum—one of the most enterprising movie theaters in the city—has been throwing a most elaborate eightieth birthday party, comprising sixty-six feature films, and a wealth of selected extras, from the year 1933—a year elsewhere commemorated by recollections of the ascension to power, in January, of Adolf Hitler as German chancellor, and the swearing-in, in March, of Franklin D. Roosevelt as president in the midst of economic disaster. The disaster had by then spread to the previously invulnerable movie
industry, which was beset by bankruptcies and operating mostly in the red.

Yet though signposts of unease—a sense of slippery collapse and the apprehension of worse to come—are all over the place in these movies, what emerges more forcefully is a raucous counterforce of defiant assertion, if only of the right to have fun and make a little noise. Often the life on screen seems like a hyper-energetic paradise of flagrancy. Whatever else American films of that moment may have been, they were overt, keyed-up, ready to start on a dime when the stage manager barked: “All right, girls, snap into it.”

There was a discernible kick just in letting the eye run down the titles on the program—Broadway Thru a Keyhole, Footlight Parade, Roman Scandals, Wild Boys of the Road, Island of Lost Souls, Mystery of the Wax Museum, The Sin of Nora Moran, Laughter in Hell—especially after coming to appreciate how hard they work to fulfill their sensational promises. Whether the promise is to realize the ultimate fantasy of a chorus line of desirable chorus girls shuffling off to Buffalo in 42nd Street or to wallow in the seductive temptations and exotic cruelties of a thoroughly imaginary Orient in The Bitter Tea of General Yen or to plot a harsh vicarious journey into the heart of the economic crisis itself in Heroes for Sale, it is done with no holding back.

Even the most silken nuance—and there is plenty of that, a good deal of it pilfered from the luminous textures of Josef von Sternberg—is laid down hard. The newly emerged stars of the early 1930s—James Cagney, Jean Harlow, Clark Gable, Bette Davis, Mae West, the Marx Brothers—were in different ways emblems of a frankness that had no time to waste. (RKO’s King Kong, tearing the city apart the way the audience might have felt like doing, could be added to the list.) “You don’t say so,” says Harlow when Gable tries out a tired line on her in Hold Your Man, “aren’t you the bright little thing.” It’s a love scene for a moment when hardboiled sarcasm is the language of dalliance.

The 1933 program was only the most recent of a series of retrospectives in which Film Forum’s repertory programmer Bruce Goldstein has refined our sense of the achievements of the era in which the moral restrictions of the Production Code, although on the books, were not yet being rigorously enforced. Goldstein has helped to establish something like a canon, juxtaposing landmarks like Dinner at Eight, 42nd Street, and Duck Soup with other, more obscure films to illuminating effect, restoring in the process a sense of just how jarring even the most familiar items can be. This time around he has enriched the mix by adding not just cartoons, newsreels, trailers, and variety shorts—not to mention a staged reading of the screenplay of the bawdy comedy Convention City, now believed lost—but a small selection, for pointed contrast, of the most original work being done outside America, in France (Jean Vigo’s Zero for Conduct), Japan (Ozu’s Passing Fancy), Austria (Max Ophuls’s Liebelei), and Germany (Fritz Lang’s M, made the year before but released with considerable impact in America in 1933). This was a year in which, for just a little longer before the links started shutting down, the rest of the world was still getting a large part of its entertainment from American movies. Vigo and Ozu were not working in
isolation but in response to what Hollywood offered.

This is film programming at such a level of precision and historical seriousness that it is hard to fault except by asking for more. Roy Del Ruth’s *The Mind Reader*—with Warren William playing a corrupt yet charming carny mentalist with an ambivalence that can only be called mesmerizing—would have filled out the roster of films included here that were scripted by (or at least attributed to) the legendary con man Wilson Mizner in the year of his death: *Hard to Handle*, *The Little Giant*, and *Heroes for Sale*. It is fitting that the name of a self-acknowledged scam artist of Mizner’s proportions should be attached, whatever his actual contribution may have been, to films that chart so intimately the varieties—from carnival hokum and rigged dance marathons to stock fraud and phony patriotism—of American duplicity high and low. Beyond *The Mind Reader* I have nothing to ask but: What, no Kay Francis?

The retrospective was billed as a tribute to Hollywood’s “naughtiest, bawdiest year,” a nod to the looming shadow of the Production Code and to the salty prominence of the year’s biggest star, Mae West, whose *She Done Him Wrong* and *I’m No Angel* set records even in supposedly straitlaced communities. The product of 1933 does often, and with a lot of extra help from Jean Harlow, have an aura of good-humored sexiness never to be quite equaled. The more desolate sordidness and nihilistic violence of just a year or two before—the years dominated by the fallen woman pictures (*Forbidden*, *Shopworn*, *The Strange Love of Molly Louvain*), the gangster pictures (*The Doorway to Hell*, *The Public Enemy*, *Quick Millions*), and the sadistic undertones of the horror cycle—begin to give way to something more deliberately upbeat.

In lieu of the succession of suffering streetwalkers and unmarried mothers, there is Miriam Hopkins in Lubitsch’s version of Noël Coward’s *Design for Living* guiltlessly enjoying a ménage à trois with Gary Cooper and Frederic March. In *Female*, Ruth Chatterton lives out (until a disappointing last-reel comeuppance) an Art Deco dream of female empowerment as an auto executive who, in the manner of Catherine the Great, summons mid-level managers to her bedroom for a night of ecstasy, followed by exile to the Montreal office if they presume too much on this one-time intimacy. Musicals had come back, following an earlier glut that led to audience fatigue, even if they are tough-minded musicals that unfold against a backdrop of chronic joblessness. The geometric convolutions of Busby Berkeley’s glittering chorus lines are the conventional shorthand for that moment in which the Hoover slump was giving way to the burst of New Deal optimism that crops up in direct tributes to FDR in *Gold Diggers of 1933* and *Footlight Parade*.

As things turned out, the political shift coincided with Hollywood’s agreement, in the face of protests, boycotts, and fears of federal censorship under the new administration, to clean up its act. The New Deal notion of everyone pulling together for the common good had affinities, at least from a public relations point of view, with Hollywood’s new-found image
as the beneficent provider of entertainments suitable for the whole family and for every region. The Production Code—agreed to by all the major studios—came down in full strength the following year, but the films of 1933 already register the forces of change at work. One might say that culturally speaking the year came in like *Baby Face*, Alfred E. Green’s lurid account (released only in censored form) of how an exploited working girl sets about sleeping her way to the top, and went out like *Little Women*, George Cukor’s finely crafted Alcott adaptation that provided almost a template for the new style of universally acceptable prestige picture.

Movies that hinted at seething social resentments and ineradicable conflicts—unless they took place during, say, the French Revolution—were soon to be mostly phased out. The Film Forum retrospective swarms with visions of upheaval: the militant strikers and anti-Red enforcers of William Wellman’s uncompromisingly dark *Heroes for Sale*; the reform school inmates rising in violent rebellion in *The Mayor of Hell*; the morally minded teenagers in Cecil B. DeMille’s *This Day and Age* resorting to clean-cut vigilantism, including what looks very much like torture, to crack down on local crime. Most bizarrely of all, in *Gabriel over the White House*, a divinely inspired US president (Walter Huston) gives a Mussolinian spin to the notion of executive power by wiping out gangsterism with firing squads.

It is not that Hollywood had been grinding out deliberately subversive films, not even at Warner Brothers, responsible for the harshest exposés of injustice and neglect. The producers simply took their opportunities where they saw them, one picture at a time, with little regard for philosophical consistency—that would be provided by the prelates and reform-minded sociologists who had begun to analyze the implicit messages of Hollywood films. In the odd sort of culture war that culminated in the Code, social progressives often lined up with the religious crusaders when it came to the movies. The sanctity of free cultural expression was occasionally invoked by Hollywood executives under pressure, but few critics and intellectuals joined in because, for the most part, they didn’t regard Hollywood as a cultural enterprise worth defending.

It was more often seen as an exploitative cultural plague, administered by debauched illiterates who pilfered with vulgar abandon from the real arts of literature and drama. People who cared about the art of film in the early 1930s would more likely be talking about films made in Germany and Russia and France. Hollywood would have entered the discussion as a symbol of the destructive force of capital. There had been great Hollywood movies—Chaplin was a universal culture hero—but that had pretty much ended with the talkies. In 1934 the *New York Times* critic André Sennwald applauded the Legion of Decency for its role in bringing about “a noticeable diminution in the kind of appalling cheapness and unintelligence which filmgoers deplore without regard to private allegiance of faith or creed.”
Sennwald may have been thinking about movies like *Baby Face*, then a byword for noxious vulgarity, now billed by Film Forum as “the *Citizen Kane* of Pre-Code.” The version now so popular was not even seen in 1933, having been subjected to heavy cuts and a drastically changed, morally improved ending in which Barbara Stanwyck, after a life of sin, is condemned to live out her days in the hideous mill town where she started out. In its uncensored form it is about as uplifting as *Moll Flanders*, from the early episode in which Stanwyck’s brutal tavern-keeper father pimps her out to a local politician in return for favors owed to the deleted scene in which, discovered by a guard after hopping a freight train, she exchanges sex for free passage while her friend (played by the wonderful African-American actress Theresa Harris) retires to the back of the car, singing “St. Louis Blues.”
