



Hollywood's Risqué Years: Female Body Exposure in Pre-Code Films

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Hollywood's allure has fascinated American audiences since the industry's inception. To some dismay, the silver screen's molding influence surpassed that of traditional centers of influence such as home, church, and school (Griffith & Mayer, 1970, p. 191). Hollywood's power to directly transmit messages to an impressionable population unsettled many over the fear of Hollywood's ability to perpetuate "immoral behavior."

The classification "Pre-Code" describes movies produced prior to the 1934 implementation of Motion Picture Producers and Distributors' Code. The Code banned the portrayal of 'immoral behaviors;' however, prior to 1934 "Hollywood made movies for adults who didn't want to be lied to about human nature. . . [it was] a complex, diverse, socially responsive American cinema (Viera, 1999, p. 6).

In an earlier study Scarborough and Hunt-Hurst (2014) found that actresses' costumes for pre-code movies that focused on exotic themes such as *Wild Orchids* (1928) and *Mata Hari* (1931) exposed the midriff through embellishments that connected the brassiere top to the bottoms. In this research, we analyzed female body exposure in fifteen Pre-Code films spanning from 1925 to 1934 including: *Hula* (1925), *Glorifying the American Girl* (1929), and *The Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933). We asked the following questions: 1) how frequently do pre-Code films exhibit female body exposure? 2) what functions do female body exposure assume in pre-Code films, 3) what degree of female body exposure does pre-Code film embrace, and 4) what social significance does the female body exposure represent? We found that exposure was used to convey exoticism in the movies through costumes used for dancing, swimming, bathing, and circus acts. Midriff or torso exposure was rarely integrated into contemporary dress in the 15 movies studied, if it was used, it was done in a non-direct, subtle way.

Considered "Hollywood's risqué years," this research provides a summary of our findings on the instances of body exposure, its function in the movie, and the degree of exposure. We hypothesize the influence of female body exposure in Pre-Code film on the progression of female exposure found in socially acceptable fashion and dress. It is considered that "American moral and manners were sped up more by the screen than by any other agency except possibly the automobile" (Griffith & Mayer, 1970, p. 198). Thus, the portrayal of females in Pre-Code films can be considered a catalyzing factor in the social emancipation of women at least in the changes in dress.

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