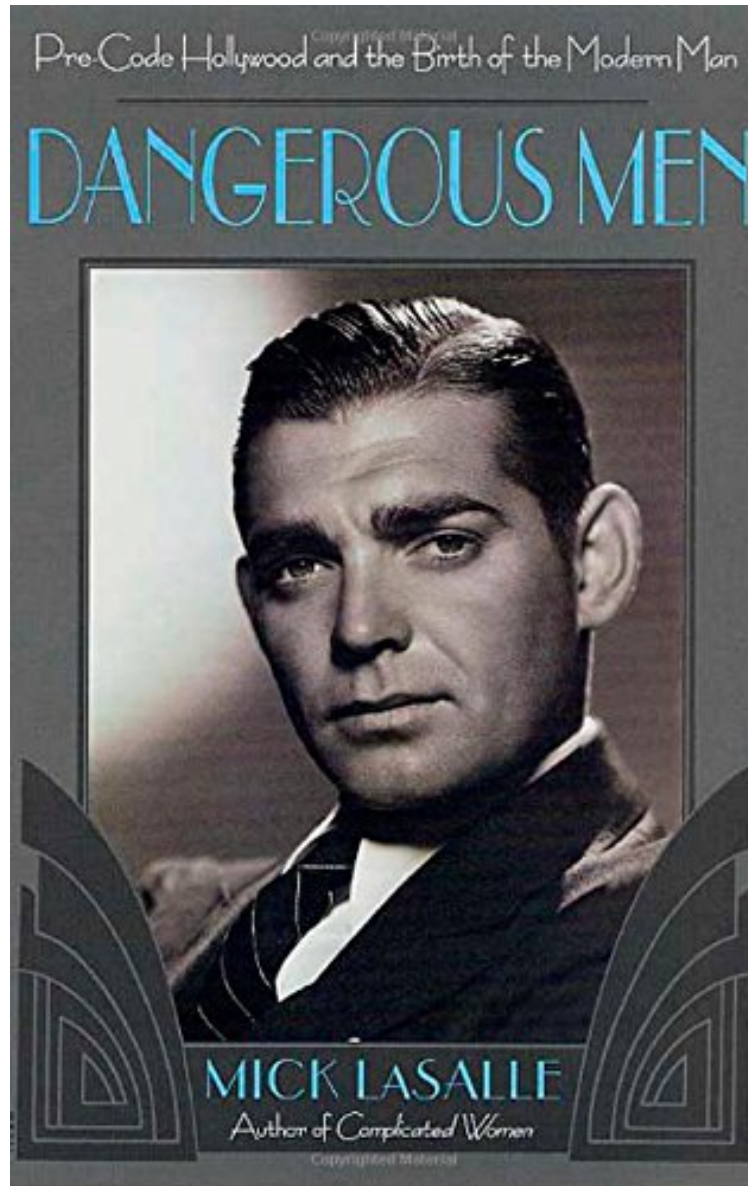


[Read ebook] Dangerous Men: Pre-Code Hollywood and the Birth of the Modern Man

Dangerous Men: Pre-Code Hollywood and the Birth of the Modern Man

Mick LaSalle

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Using the same mix of accessibility and insider knowledge he used so successfully in *Complicated Women*, author and film critic Mick LaSalle now turns his attention to the men of the pre-Code Hollywood era. The five years between 1929 and mid-1934 was a period of loosened censorship that finally ended with the imposition of a harsh Production Code that would, for the next thirty-four years, censor much of the life and honesty out of American movies. *Dangerous Men* takes a close look at the images of manhood during this pre-Code era, which coincided with an interesting time for men—the culmination of a generation-long transformation in the masculine ideal. By the late twenties, the tumult of a new century had made the nineteenth century's notion of the ideal man seem like a repressed stuffed shirt, a deluded optimist. The smiling, confident hero of just a few years before fell out of favor, and the new heroes who emerged were gangsters, opportunists, sleazy businessmen, shifty lawyers, shell-shocked soldiers—men whose existence threatened the status quo. In this book, LaSalle highlights such household names as James Cagney, Clark Gable, Edward G. Robinson, Maurice Chevalier, Spencer Tracy, and Gary Cooper, along with lesser-known ones such as Richard Barthelmess, Lee Tracy, Robert Montgomery, and the magnificent Warren William. Together they represent a vision of manhood more exuberant and contentious—and more humane—than anything that has followed on the American screen.

From Publishers WeeklyOne would be remiss, San Francisco Chronicle film critic LaSalle points out, in taking the sappy naivete of many of the Hollywood films of the 1930s, 40s and 50s as a faithful barometer of a more innocent time. Instead, this world of simple black and whites (both visual and moral) was forced upon the motion picture industry by a restrictive Production Code that reigned in Hollywood from 1934 to 1968, censoring "dangerous" ideas and characterizations from the final edits. Before the Code was imposed, "Hollywood would specialize in heroes who were shady, crooked or outright criminal"; after it, films were stripped of the messy humanity that gave the "pre-Codes" their life and boiled down to unsophisticated good guy vs. bad guy plot lines. LaSalle (*Complicated Women*) outlines the heyday of the pre-Code era, which lasted from the advent of talkies in 1929 until mid-1934, when actors such as Jimmy Cagney, Lon Chaney and Clark Gable made their mark playing flawed, tough, yet respectable characters. These earlier movies featured "men who reveal the truth about the difficulty of manhood in the modern age" and, as such, helped define American masculinity for the rest of the 20th century. 16 pages bw photos Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Library JournalLaSalle, a film critic at the San Francisco Chronicle, believes that the leading men of Hollywood's pre-Code era represent a distinct break from their wimpy or exaggeratedly heroic predecessors in the silent era. They could truly be called "dangerous," both to others and to themselves, because they lived (and frequently died) by their own rules. Whether good guys or villains—they were sometimes an intriguing combination of both—they reflected the social chaos going on around them, caused largely by the Depression and Prohibition. Even the slimiest of gangsters, often played by Warner Bros. stalwarts Edward G. Robinson and James Cagney, could be admired because they were their own men. Besides those obvious choices, LaSalle includes some actors who would not seem to fall into the same category, including Richard Barthelmess and the suave Warren William. Although the author's admiration for this era's films is unmistakable, his insights often seem shallow and derivative, and his style can be somewhat pedestrian. If *Complicated Women*, LaSalle's earlier study of women in pre-Code Hollywood, was popular in your library, you can safely purchase; otherwise, you can pass. Roy Liebman, California State Univ. Lib., Los Angeles Copyright 2002 Reed Business Information, Inc. From BooklistOld Hollywood never dies. In a worthy mate for his *Complicated Women* (2002), LaSalle argues that the filmic ideal of modern man derives from leading men of the "pre-Code era," between the full acceptance of sound in 1929 and the imposition of the notorious Hays Production Code in 1934. That era, says La Salle, was dominated by two assumptions: "If you played by the rules, you'd lose," and "if you were shrewd and brave enough, you could beat the system." This dandy theoretical footing, though, is secondary to what's really appealing here: smart vignettes about the stars, their films, and the era. The usual suspects—Cagney, Cooper, Gable, et alia—receive their due, but also limned are the now-shadowy Warren William, Ramon Novarro, and John Gilbert. LaSalle, once again expert in selecting the telling anecdote about a subject, makes his love of his subject evident throughout a highly readable work of film history. Mike Tribby Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved