

SEDUCTION

Karina Longworth on Howard Hughes's Hollywood

by Vince Keenan



The Many Loves of Howard Hughes” was an essential early series of Karina Longworth’s acclaimed podcast *You Must Remember This* about “the secret and/or forgotten history of Hollywood’s first century.” These episodes spotlighting several women involved with the renowned filmmaker and aviator form the foundation of Longworth’s new book *Seduction: Sex, Lies, and Stardom in Howard Hughes’s Hollywood*. Telling the story of the figure who personified the male gaze from the perspective of the women drawn into his orbit proved an ambitious undertaking; after two years of research, Longworth said, “I learned much more than I ever could have predicted.” She unearthed enough material to spawn a six-episode season of *You Must Remember This* diving deeper into subjects only touched on in *Seduction*, including the careers of director Rupert Hughes (Howard’s uncle) and actress Linda Darnell. *NOIR CITY* spoke with the former film editor at *L.A. Weekly* and critic at *The Village Voice* about Hughes’ life and work, beginning with his impact on film noir.



The tempest over Howard Hughes' censor-baiting build-up of his discovery Jane Russell's debut in *The Outlaw* (left) allowed Russell's career to flourish, as did her several films with Hughes favorite Robert Mitchum, including 1951's *His Kind of Woman* (right)

NOIR CITY: Jane Russell emerges as *Seduction's* secret heroine. Many of the actresses Howard Hughes had under contract resembled her physically, and you recount many incidents where she shows initiative and agency, even outwitting him. How was she able to forge her own persona while in his stable?

KARINA LONGWORTH: Obviously, her ability to work while under contract to him was limited to what he allowed her to do, but she does show more agency than a lot of the actresses in that situation. Part of it is that she became more famous, and she does owe that to Hughes. She would probably not have had the career that she had if he had not mounted this many-year-long campaign for *The Outlaw* (1943) with her at the center of it. She was incredibly famous before anyone had ever seen her in a movie. She was able to take the privilege and the platform of fame and build her own persona, as someone who didn't take any bull from anybody and was an independent, ballsy woman. She was unique in that case.

NC: You're so strong on Russell's presence in *Macao* (1952), one of the films she made with Robert Mitchum. In *Seduction*, you include Hughes' quote about the actor, which I suppose is a compliment: "(You're) like a pay toilet—you don't give a shit for nothing." What accounts for Hughes' infatuation with him?

KL: The way it was described by people who knew both of them was in a lot of ways Robert Mitchum was everything Howard Hughes could not be, and that idea of not giving a shit is a large part of it. Howard Hughes was able to foster a public persona as somebody who didn't want publicity, and was a rebel who didn't care about the convention of society. But behind the scenes, he was working very hard and paid a lot of publicists because he cared very much about what people thought about him. There's that, and there's the fact that Robert Mitchum had this incredible physique where he looked like a

boxer without ever actually working out. (laughs) He had effortless virility. He wasn't just Howard Hughes' idol. For a lot of men and women, he was an iconic figure of his time.

NC: Hughes called *His Kind of Woman* (1951) "the best picture I've ever made" and in some sense you agree, describing it as "a B-movie through and through, but it was the most thematically substantive—and possibly personal—movie Howard Hughes had anything to do with." Can you explain why?

KL: *His Kind of Woman* is a hybrid of a couple of different genres. Film noir is one. It's sort of a Hollywood satire and sort of a romance. It's about these people who are walking around behind false fronts and basically negotiating the lies they're telling all the time. (laughs) The version of Howard Hughes I came to know through reading many documents having to do with him was someone who told so many lies he—I don't want to use clinical terms, but he kind of lost his mind. It's dangerous to say somebody was insane when they weren't diagnosed as such, but he lost some semblance of sanity trying to keep all of his lies straight. I don't know what was the chicken and what was the egg; I don't know if he started pathologically lying because he was already having mental problems or if he lost touch with reality because he told so many lies. That's a defining feature of his life from the 1940s on, and it's something that feels like it's pulsating out of the screen in that movie. (laughs)

NC: You shed a lot of light on aspects of Ida Lupino's career that are not well known, specifically her relationship with the FBI during the blacklist era and how that affected what you describe as "the Trojan horse act" she had to engage in professionally. What did you learn about her and how did you learn it?

KL: Ida Lupino obviously was the star of many great film noirs and



Ida Lupino behind the camera of 1950's *Outrage*. The actress and filmmaker benefitted from a professional partnership with Howard Hughes, but Longworth's research unearthed Lupino's troubling relationship with the FBI during the blacklist era

other films. She was also the only female member of the DGA in the 1950s and the only woman directing mainstream Hollywood movies during that time. But what I discovered through reading her FBI file, which was made available through a Freedom of Information Act request, was that she collaborated with the FBI during the blacklist era. Not only was it a situation where the FBI asked for help, but she volunteered it. She did this at least initially because she was concerned about her own citizenship. She did name names, and all the names she named were people who ended up being blacklisted. I'm absolutely positive she was not the only person to name any of these names. It's very probable all of these people would have been blacklisted if she had not done this. But she did do it. The fact she did it is surprising because she always presented herself as a liberal. Today we see her as a feminist icon because of her directing career. But one thing very clear to me from doing research about her was she never presented herself as a feminist. She was very careful while she was doing this thing that was absolutely pioneering for women to always say, "Oh, it's not a big deal, I'm just a good wife and mother." She played down her professional success as a director and played up the maternal and domestic aspects of what she was doing.

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NC: And you believe she did that because she felt it was a necessity.
 KL: Yes, but it's not like she's the only one. There are several stories in the book of women only being able to wield significant power in Hollywood by aligning themselves with a man. In her career, she was able to get a start as a producer, writer, and director because she married someone who became her producing partner. In terms of the division of labor, Ida was doing much more of the creative work, but she was able to domesticate this work by being part of a husband-and-wife team. That's the way a lot of women were able to negotiate those minefields.

NC: Did learning this alter your opinion of her?
 KL: It's extremely complicated, but it's absolutely a problematic legacy to grapple with. What I tried to do was rationalize it and think logically about why she would have done it.

NC: Hughes' business relationship with Lupino is compelling. He sees a kind of simpatico between her career and his early success with *Scarface* (1932). He respects her ability to tackle socially relevant material while still making money.
 KL: He doesn't care about the social issues. For him, it was 'Do whatever you want to do as long as you turn a profit.' Definitely for him



Hughes was fictionalized during his lifetime by jilted filmmaker Max Ophüls in 1949's *Caught*. Robert Ryan, here with Barbara Bel Geddes, "physically really resembles Hughes," according to Longworth

it's the capitalism, not the social justice aspect. They're simpatico in that he's interested in making money off of controversy. Any stated ideals Howard Hughes had he was stating them for the money.

NC: Howard Hughes became the thinly-veiled antagonist of a film noir in *Caught* (1949), a movie that only exists because of his business practices. What insights does *Caught* offer into Hughes?

KL: It was directed by Max Ophüls, an immigrant filmmaker initially hired by Hughes' then-producing partner Preston Sturges to direct a movie called *Vendetta*, which was supposed to be a showcase for one of Hughes' girlfriends, a young brunette named Faith Domergue. After shooting for a few weeks, Ophüls ran way behind schedule and over budget, and Hughes decided to fire him. Ophüls was then hired to adapt a novel called *Wild Calendar*, and he used that to make a thinly-veiled portrait of his experience with Howard Hughes. He directed screenwriter Arthur Laurents to do a vague adaptation of this novel that was really about the way Howard Hughes treats women. Ophüls pulled from his own experiences and stories he probably learned second- and thirdhand from other women in Hollywood. Arthur Laurents himself spoke to a woman named Lynn Baggett who'd had an interesting experience being flown to Las Vegas to be one of two dozen women who were, unbeknownst to them, competing to be Howard Hughes' date for the evening. The movie ended up starring Robert Ryan as a character named Smith Ohlrig who is pretty clearly based on Hughes. Hughes knew the movie was being made; he had dailies sent to his house every day. He did request some changes to the character, but they were superficial changes, like 'I don't want him wearing tennis shoes because then

everybody will know it's me.' (laughs) Robert Ryan physically really resembles Hughes. They have the same sort of lanky stature and a similar jaw, and it really does feel like you're watching an actor playing Howard Hughes.

NC: Is there a Hughes movie you feel is underrated?

KL: I would say *Macao*.

NC: The timing of the book is uncanny. Were you working on it during the revelations about Harvey Weinstein and the rise of the #MeToo movement; and, if so, did they affect the way you wrote it?

KL: The book was almost finished by the time the Harvey Weinstein stuff came out. I turned in the first draft in September 2015. Nothing changed because of the #MeToo movement. There's one line in the introduction I wrote the morning after Trump was elected because I was angry about the idea that a man who had openly abused his power with women was being rewarded for it, so I wrote kind of a statement of purpose in the introduction. ("As we move into an era in which there is frank public discussion of the exploitation, subjugation, manipulation, and abuse of women by men in positions of power, it's time to rethink stories that lionize playboys, that celebrate the idea that women of the twentieth century were lands to be conquered, or collateral damage to a great man's rise and fall.") A year and a half after writing [the book], in November 2016, I woke up and had that sentence in my head.

NC: The contemporary stories we're hearing now are rife with unsavory details, but Hughes' system of exploiting women in his employ



Howard Hughes cut a swath through Hollywood, his paramours including some of the silver screen's most famous faces like Katharine Hepburn, Bette Davis, and, shown above with Hughes, Ginger Rogers

was even more elaborate and controlling. What exactly would happen to a woman who signed a contract with him thinking she was about to become a star?

KL: In most cases, they were really young—maybe eighteen, nineteen years old. They were often accompanied by their mother to Hollywood. Hughes would put them in the Beverly Hills Hotel, the Sunset Marquis Hotel, the Chateau Marmont, or maybe he would get them an apartment. He would have every moment of their lives accounted for. They would be given acting, dance, and voice lessons all day long. At night, they would be required to go out to dinner with Hughes' chauffeur as their date, although these were very chaste dates. Drivers were not even allowed to touch them to help them out of the car. Usually, eventually, the mother would be convinced to leave so the girl's family couldn't exert any control over her because Hughes wanted that control. In most cases, the women would never work; they would stay on this cycle of being "trained to work" for months or even years until they usually figured out how to get out of their contracts and left. In some cases, they would be put into a couple of movies. The book goes into the story of Faith Domergue in detail.

"Ultimately, he was a human being and there's a tragedy in his life that I think is fine to think of as tragic, but I don't think he's a hero."

She believed Howard Hughes was going to marry her. He gave her father and her grandfather jobs, and basically strung her along for five or six years. He did eventually put her in a movie, but it's the movie Max Ophüls got fired from directing (*Vendetta*).

Two or three other directors, including probably Hughes himself, took turns trying to make this movie. It was finally released about ten years after she first met Hughes, and it was a disaster. As far as I can tell, it's not commercially available. I was able to buy a bootleg DVD from Europe. Hughes put a lot of his movies in a vault and then they'd never be in public circulation again. *Hell's Angels*, *Scarface*, the more classic films, they're only in circulation because they were released by his estate after he died.

NC: So how was *Vendetta*?

KL: Not good. (laughs) It's really not good, but fascinating in its way because it's transparently an incest fantasy. So, yet more shades of things Howard Hughes was interested in.

NC: Hughes goes from dating women of substance like Katharine Hepburn and Ava Gardner to being "so secretly afraid of failure that he couldn't approach a woman unless he was certain she was a sure



The July 1946 crash of the Hughes XF-11 reconnaissance plane prototype in Beverly Hills almost killed Howard Hughes; the accident would have long-term physical and psychological effects on the movie mogul and aviator

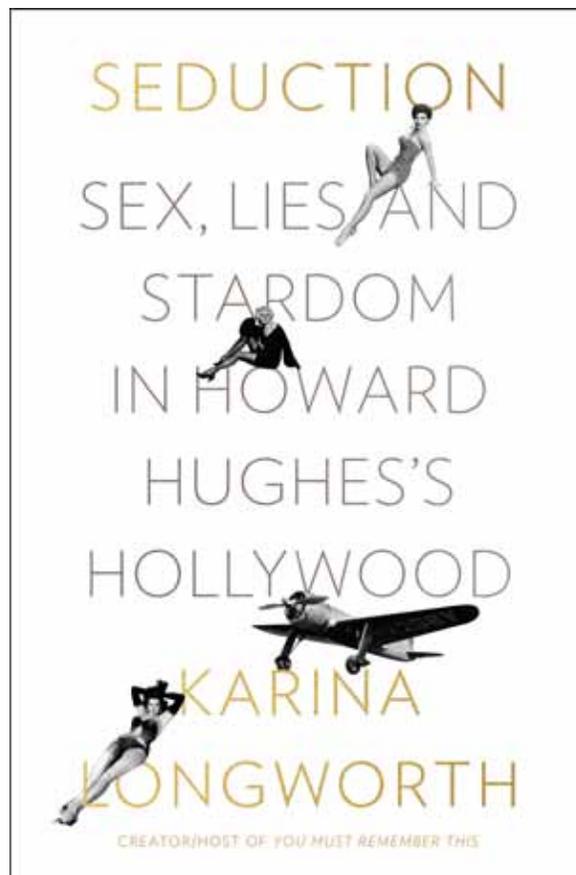
thing.” What accounts for that transformation? Was it his age and insecurity or something more?

KL: It’s probably a combination of things. He had an ideal of himself that was larger than life, which he did a very good job of putting out there in the media, but his actual personal life was increasingly hermetic over time. This really increased after 1946, when he had a major plane crash in which he should have died. He had horrible injuries, but he’d already been in a lot of crashes by that point and this wasn’t just another head injury. I personally believe some of the things that look like mental illness in him maybe were that, but you can’t have that many head injuries over the course of your life and come out unscathed. I talk about half a dozen car and plane crashes in the book.

NC: Hughes has been the subject of multiple films, viewed variously as heroic and tragic. What is his legacy?

KL: One of the reasons why I wrote that sentence in the introduction is I didn’t want anybody to think I was saying, “Wacky Howard Hughes, that crazy playboy!” I think that’s some of the way he’s remembered or perceived. “What a weirdo, but he had sex with a lot of dames!” Ultimately, he was a human being and there’s tragedy in his life that I think is fine to think of as tragic, but I don’t think he’s a hero.

People may recall him as an aviation pioneer, but don’t remember specifics. Certainly, he wanted to be remembered that way, but there isn’t a great record he held onto or a single major achievement people could easily point to. He developed airplanes during a period when some of the innovations he designed or paid for led to the rise of the jet age, but you can’t say Howard Hughes specifically invented this.



NC: The book and your podcast use contemporary references to help make these movies relevant to audiences coming to them for the first time: speculating on how many Instagram followers Billie Dove would have, calling out Hughes for “negging” women. What do you want these newer and younger generations of film viewers to take away from Golden Age Hollywood?

KL: I just want them to watch these movies. I want [these films] to not disappear. If I have an undying and unquenchable enthusiasm for anything, it’s being able to continually discover new films and be excited by this trove of material. I keep thinking I’m going to run out of stuff, and then I don’t. (laughs) There’s so much to be excited about. And if talking about things in modern terms will make someone watch *His Kind of Woman*, that’s great. That would make me happy and feel like I had done my job. I’m happy people listen to the podcast, but I hope they seek out the movies. ■