The smart, witty and frank sex comedies of the impudent 1930s – notably the ‘bad girls’ cycle of the day – are as fondly celebrated today as when they originally delighted audiences. Crackling with untrammeled sexual energy, their freedom to treat such subjects as prostitution was later prohibited, abruptly ended by the introduction of the Hays Code under its folksy but steely progenitor, Will Hays, the voice of the church. The Code’s draconian restrictions brought about a new age of enforced innocence for the cinema, which was to last for two decades. But the Hay’s Code was not the only opponent of freedom in the cinema, as we shall see. The British establishment, uneasy with the frankness of films, had no ideological arguments with the Code’s strictures.

An early sortie in the sex war had been the notorious *Ekstase*, which sported the skinny-dipping, youthful Hedy Lamarr making love in a cottage during a rainstorm and showing the clear effects of orgasm. This Czechoslovak film (directed by Gustav Machaty in 1933) is generally considered to be the first time in which sexual intercourse was shown, although with no details of genital contact, and it was seized by the US customs in 1935 and prosecuted for obscenity. As well as being the first major film to depict the sex act and to show female pubic hair, it became the first to initiate the use of customs laws to stop a film entering the US. The film was also an example of a director seeking to enhance the erotic experience of the viewer by utilising other elements such as nature, with couples making love in sylvan settings, although any sense that there is a kind of pantheistic communication with nature as part of the sex act is rarely attempted after *Ekstase*.

Sex in film would prove to be a battlefield, and America would be where the real conflicts would take place. However, one woman
encapsulated a free-and-easy attitude to sex – and powerful religious organisations knew that she had to be dealt with.

**Come up and see me sometime**

To modern eyes, Mae West suggests a broad, camp parody of the femme fatale, with her massively exaggerated drawl, jutting false eyelashes (now firmly back in favour in various regions of the UK), skin-tight dresses and, above all, her pronounced hips – the latter, in fact, were padded; West was always a construct, and she was fully aware of this. But, in West’s case, the vision of carnality coded for 1930s and 1940s audiences is straightforward: what we see is what we get. West is essentially saying: ‘Don’t take this slyly ravenous man-eater seriously – I don’t.’ And while it is not surprising that Mae West is something of a favourite today among gay audiences with her awareness of and enthusiastic celebration of camp (something she virtually invented), the reasons for her following among feminist viewers are also easy to discern. The standard male prerogative of the movies – the sexual advance that overcomes initial feminine resistance – is turned on its head: it is West who makes the running when it comes to getting her conquests into bed, and her frank physical appraisal of her possible paramours is also specifically masculine. It is particularly fun to see her seducing a young Cary Grant in Lowell Sherman’s *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), given that the urbane male actor will, from this film onwards, generally be the instigator in scenes of seduction.

**Modern viewpoints**

West’s attitude to sex itself in her films is a surprisingly modern one in an era in which sexual repression was the order of the day. The actress’s mastery of the double entendre and her knowing self-caricature initially served her well for the stage and films, and there is no question that she enjoyed something of an *auteur* status, being largely responsible for the screenplays of many of the films she worked on – and frequently voicing dissatisfaction with the contributions of others. After the exuberant stage show *Diamond Lil* in 1928, which established her take-no-prisoners sexual persona, more commercial success was to follow in the 1930s. But the days when she could indulge in risqué material – which was what she had specialised in – were numbered. Having spotted the potential star quality (not to mention the good looks) of a very young Cary Grant doing physical exercises when an unknown in Hollywood, she inaugurated his career by using him as the detective in Salvation