

# “Bombshell,” Hedy Lamarr, And The Duty To Remember

JUNE 8, 2018 / JACK MARSHALL

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BOMBSHELL - THE HEDY LAMARR STORY Trailer



I alluded to Hedy Lamarr in an earlier post about my favorite celebrities, those who manage to be outstanding in multiple diverse fields at once. The glamorous cult actress is a prime example, being known publicly for her pulchritude and in much more rarefied circles as a brilliant inventor. I had been waiting for the release of the documentary—produced by Susan Sarandon!—about Lamarr, called “[Bombshell: The Hedy Lamarr Story](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/bombshell-hedy-lamarr-story-film/9906/)” (<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/bombshell-hedy-lamarr-story-film/9906/>), ever since a friend and commenter here told me that it was in the works. Now it is on Netflix, and I watched it. You should too. I’ll just jot down some loosely connected thoughts about the ethics lessons of Lamarr’s life.

- The sexual exploitation of young women in films may have been worse in the past than it is now, but Lamarr's life is a reminder of how excruciatingly slowly cultures change. She was made infamous as the star of a sensational sex film in Germany, shown naked, and also in an apparently explicit sex scene when she was too young (19) and naive to know what the director was doing.

The episode literally shadowed her life. Yet half a century later, very young actresses like Drew Barrymore and Dakota Fanning were similarly abused by directors, the main difference being that public attitudes now make the resulting stigma less permanent.

- Antisemitism was sufficiently pervasive in the U.S. that Lamarr denied her Jewish heritage for much of her life.

Living a lie is not an ethically healthy existence, but Lamarr had few reasons to trust that she would be accepted for who she was....fewer than most, on fact.

- There are few more vivid examples than Lamarr of a brilliant woman who rapidly learned that she had to rely on the favor of men based on her physical charms to have any chance of succeeding. Yet it is a bargain with the devil, for the price is not being taken seriously. The suppressed resentment and anger Lamarr reveals in interviews is palpable.

Sometimes I think it's a miracle that women didn't rise up and slaughter millions of men while they slept. They deserved it.

- Hedy Lamarr is primarily remembered now as a running joke in "Blazing Saddles."

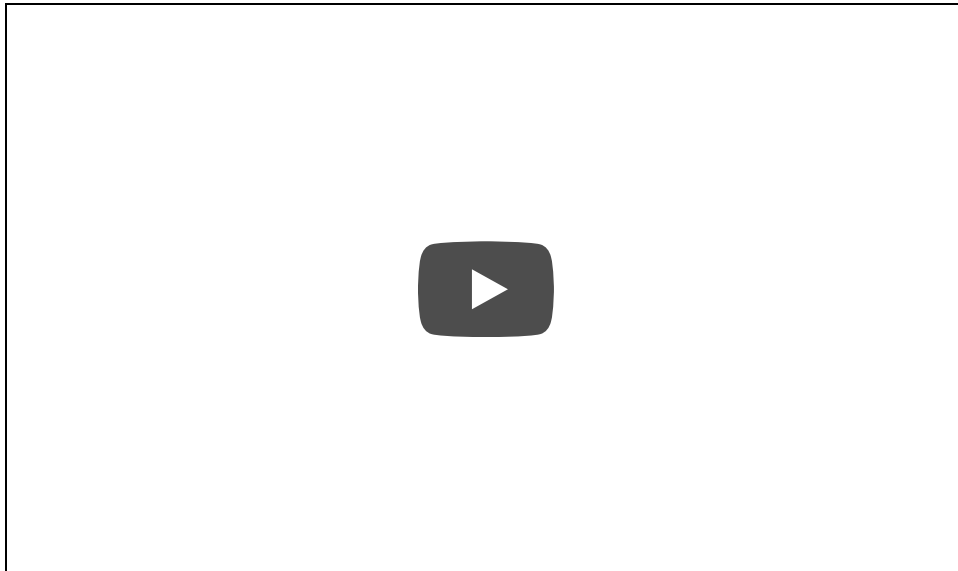
Think about that.

- Lamarr was one of these mutants, like Ben Franklin, Thomas Edison and Walter Hunt, who was born with an innate talent for solving problems with lateral thinking. One example is brought out by the film: when she sought to fight off the years with cosmetic surgery, she suggested methods of hiding the scars that the era's plastic surgeons hadn't thought of yet. Then her surgery became the impetus for the practice's use of techniques that are now the norm, based on her instinctive innovations.

She (and her husband at the time, a musician) developed a unique shifting-frequency method to allow US torpedoes to be guided to targets without being jammed. They gave the process to the Navy to help the war effort, and the Navy spit on it, in part because the inventor was a Hollywood bombshell who obviously didn't know what she was doing. Then the government stuffed it in the same

warehouse with the Ark of the Covenant until the patent expired and they didn't have to pay for it, and used it to advance multiple technologies.

Lamarr's invention is now regarded as essential to the development of Wi-Fi, bluetooth, the internet and more, and her now-dead patent is estimated to be worth approximately 30 *billion* dollars. Meanwhile, she died in relative poverty, and as a camp icon because of this, from one of her worst movies...



- Hedy Lamarr deserves to be remembered in our culture and our history books, as both an inspiration to woman and a cautionary tale that has still not lost its relevance. I hope the documentary is the beginning, not the end, of cultural justice.

"bias makes you stupid", Arts & Entertainment, Gender and Sex, History, Popular Culture, Science & Technology, The Internet, War and the Military

**"BOMBSHELL: THE HEDY LAMARR STORY"**  
**ACTRESSES** , **EXPLOITATION** , **HEDY LAMARR** ,  
**HOLLYWOOD** , **INTERNET** , **INVENTORS** ,  
**SEXISM** , **SEXUAL DISCRIMINATION** , **THE DUTY**  
**TO REMEMBER**

## 9 thoughts on ““Bombshell,” Hedy Lamarr, And The Duty To Remember”

### 1. *adimagejim*

JUNE 8, 2018 AT 10:31 AM

Empowered women are essential to the future of the human race in too many ways to count. Ms. Lamarr is just one example

of how myopic some men were and, in some quarters, still are. My wife and I have been partners in all things for over three decades. I would be less well off in every imaginable way without her.

### REPLY

#### 2. *E2*

JUNE 8, 2018 AT 10:32 AM

I saw the documentary. In addition to all of the above, it was interesting that her original patent — if not tossed out by the Navy in 1941 — would have had significant positive impact on US progress in WWII. She basically devised the first 'guided' torpedo — Look at old sub movies: "Shoot!" "Miss!" Wouldn't have happened with Hedy's guidance system.

Worse, the Navy, when they realized what they had, began using it and refining it — but waited until her patent expired so they wouldn't have to pay her.

And when patent was first ignored, she was told by the Navy she would help the nation more if she took her pretty face out to sell War Bonds. She did — in one state raised \$53 million (in 1943 dollars) in two days.

It was ultimately a very frustrating, maddening, and sad documentary, but worth seeing. Interesting that Susan Sarandon was executive producer.

I found it on Netflix. Look for it.

### REPLY

#### 3. *slickwilly*

JUNE 8, 2018 AT 11:01 AM

I have always admired Hedy, once Jack pointed out who she was.

She was brilliant. I will look for the documentary

### REPLY

#### o *slickwilly*

JUNE 8, 2018 AT 9:41 PM

Watched the documentary with family tonight. A great film, and a wonderful, tragic figure

### REPLY

#### o *Jack Marshall*

JUNE 8, 2018 AT 9:58 PM

*Ask ev'ry person if he's heard the story,  
And tell it strong and clear, and wide and far  
Although it seems bizarre*

*There was a gorgeous star  
Whose brilliance sparked the Internet  
The great Hedy Lamarr!*

**REPLY**

4. *Mrs. Q*

JUNE 8, 2018 AT 11:43 AM

Definitely want to see that documentary. I read an article about her last week that noted how Lamar had to hide her intelligence because Hollywood believed smart women wouldn't be sexy enough to sell movies. Not sure if much has changed in that industry, just look at Gwyneth "I steam my vagina" Paltrow & Jennifer Lawrence.

**REPLY**

5. *Alex*

JUNE 8, 2018 AT 1:52 PM

I'm glad you mentioned the guidance system thing. I wasn't sure that was widespread knowledge.

Sadly, in my industry (software and aerospace) few know of her artistic achievements, although some people have said of Ms. Lamar, "isn't she the one semi-famous actress who invented WiFi? What movie was she on?" (facepalm)

**REPLY**

6. *Paul W. Schlecht*

JUNE 8, 2018 AT 6:48 PM

Alas, the halcyon days of yore, when the term **Bombshell** had nothing to do with the news...

**REPLY**

7. *Chris Marschner*

JUNE 8, 2018 AT 8:22 PM

Social stigma was and still is a means to limit the negative social costs of an individual's behavior. Unfortunately, all the things that would be otherwise highly embarrassing are embraced as "good", or at least no big deal such as unwed motherhood, suicide, drug use, binge drinking, etc. Conversely, reasoned debate will stigmatize the person on the "wrong side of history". We are living in upside down world.

I was ready to chime in with "that's Hedley I say Hedley" but you alluded to that reference. I knew she invented a guidance system in the 40's but did not know it was rejected. This practice still remains. Unless you were awarded a DARPA or other DoD grant the likelihood of getting your invention past the gatekeepers.

**REPLY**

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