

**The Aesthetic Politics
of Hollywood's Chain Gang
In FDR's America**

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Introduction

Mervyn LeRoy's 1932 Hollywood film *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* tells the life story of James Allen, a falsely accused, twice escaped chain gang convict, in order to portray the Southern penal system as purely regressive and archaic. However, in fact, the chain gangs represented the South's attempt to participate in Northern economic industrialism. Chain gangs developed roads and infrastructures, enriching the South's economy and expanding its participation in American culture and accelerated networks of communication. My project links *Chain Gang*'s dichotomized portrayal of a modern North and anti-modern South to other arguments the film makes regarding race, gender and American party politics.

In Chapter 1, I use Frankfurt School theory to help focus my analysis of *Chain Gang*'s economic misreading of the Southern penal system. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and T.W. Adorno argue that civilization represses ritual, which then resurfaces in barbarity. This modernity paradigm underpins LeRoy's dichotomized expression of modern industry and penal savagery in *Chain Gang*: both elucidate the repressed violence latent in the connection between outwardly contradictory social forces.

Further, the film was released one week after Roosevelt's initial election to the presidency. Hollywood enjoyed an intimate business relationship with the New Deal office: Roosevelt overlooked the studios' illegal oligopolies in exchange for their extensive propagandization of his administration. I analyze *Chain Gang*'s blatant misreading of the Southern penal system's economic politics as a strategy for promoting the New Deal government. By portraying the Southern penal system as the tangible

villain, *Chain Gang* prevented its viewer from grappling with the larger political implications of 1930s American poverty and social despair, and thereby reinforced the logic of American party politics.

In order to advance its political agenda, the film draws extensively on African-American history and culture. The chain gangs evolved out of structures of Southern penal systems that specifically exploited and brutalized African-Americans. The film's problematic representation of robust black bodies that thrive on the chain gang juxtaposed with emaciated white figures whom the chain gang annihilates exposes its distortion of chain gang racial politics. The film appropriates racially-charged histories and manipulates them to conform to Hollywood's codified visual and narrative market-dictated formulae.

In Chapter 2, I demonstrate how Hollywood's 1930s self-censorship model structured both *Chain Gang's* representations of gender and transgression, and also the film's self-reflexive allusions to its own embeddedness in Hollywood's technological politics. After the rise of the Hollywood sound film in the late '20s and early '30s, cinema's purported verisimilitude compelled audiences to demand greater degrees of censorship. Sound synchronization technology also made it impossible for film exhibitors to edit out transgressive or disruptive content after a film had been distributed to its theaters. Hollywood was eager to codify even more rigorously its aesthetic and narrative standards because this gave the major studios greater control over their product and facilitated their absolute vertically-integrated dominance over the industry.

Through close readings of scenes and images, I demonstrate my argument that Hollywood's business practices during this period tended to foster an aesthetic that

deprived women of meaningful subjectivity. In *Chain Gang*, this gender paradigm is striking. LeRoy fragments female gender, and dichotomizes the film's two principal women characters – Helen is sympathetic and Marie purely unsympathetic – just as he polarizes his representations of race and of Northern modernity and Southern anti-modernity. Women characters even bear symbolic geographical labels: by positioning Marie as the evil/licentious woman, the film portrays her as a metonymic example of the Southern penal system's brutality.

In Chapter 3, I examine *Chain Gang*'s embeddedness in New Deal temporal politics. From its title, *I Am a Fugitive*, which engages the present moment, to its temporal overlap with legal struggles over Robert E. Burns's extradition – he was the real James Allen; the film is based on his memoir – *Chain Gang* exploits a Depression sense of futurelessness thereby paradoxically enabling the New Deal's future political success by responding to the public's bewilderment regarding its own future.

I demonstrate *Chain Gang*'s New Deal-embedded temporal politics through close readings of LeRoy's repeated use of geographical montage to narrate Allen's condensed movement through space and time. The seminal film scholar Andre Bazin theorized the cinematic archive as a defense against time: it wards off fears of death and mortality. I conclude by grappling with the ways in which Bazin's ideas complicate my analysis of the film's temporal politics. This argument reinforces my reading of *Chain Gang*'s profound structural embeddedness in its propagandization of Roosevelt's New Deal Administration, which it achieves at the ethical expense of its representations of race, gender and Depression American economic and political culture.

CHAPTER 1:

Chain Gangs, Race and the New Deal

A plot-level reading of Mervyn LeRoy's 1932 film *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, which depicts Robert E. Burns's autobiographical, dual existence as a falsely convicted prisoner and dubiously lionized entrepreneur, does not inspire faith in the integrity of the Southern chain gang penal system. In its promotional campaign, Warner Brothers – *Chain Gang*'s production studio – publicized H. L. Mencken's condemnation of the chain gang: "simply a vicious, medieval custom...and is so archaic and barbarous as to be a national disgrace" (Lichtenstein 16). Thus, Burns and Warner Brothers launched a national, progressive movement against Southern forced labor which resonated powerfully with a 1932 audience because it linked the chain gang's brutality to bleak realities of Great Depression America.

Yet viewing the film as Hollywood's response to social and economic crises of this period invites skepticism regarding the industry's motivations for advancing such decisively critical arguments. In other words, why would it have been in the studio's interest to align a potentially desperate viewer's sympathies with the film's subversive message? I will argue that *Chain Gang* functioned in a complex network of New Deal agitprop which facilitated Roosevelt's intimate business relationship with Hollywood, most notably with Warner Brothers. If Depression desperation rendered tenuous the dominant industries' power, it would have protected Hollywood's concerns to focus a frustrated viewer's struggles specifically against the chain gangs which the film paints as "so archaic and barbarous as to be a national disgrace." By portraying the Southern penal

system as a tangible villain, *Chain Gang* prevented its viewer from grappling with the larger political implications of 1930s American poverty and social despair.

The New Deal

Of course, a successful Hollywood industry always considers a film's economic potential in conjunction with its political message. In fact, as Roffman and Purdy argue, "It was because the public was receptive to such uncompromised social analysis, that is, because it was good box office, that *Fugitive's* ending was ever allowed" (81). This ending, they claim, "summarizes the paranoia, anger and despair of 1932...the pessimistic fade into darkness is Hollywood's angriest statement on the Depression" (80). The film's ending, which depicts Allen's inability to return to society a year after his second escape, frames the chain gang's injustice in terms of its debilitation of a white male who was once successful at functioning within the capitalist structures of American society from which, by the end, he feels irreconcilably alienated. In a final dialogue, Allen's fiancée asks him how he lives. He replies: "I steal," backs away from her until a slow fade into darkness confronts the viewer with a black screen and the sound of Allen's frantic footsteps as he retreats into an existence of poverty, theft, and constant paranoia to which the chain gang has reduced him. This last scene, which denies its viewer narrative closure, makes the film's condemnation of the unjust Southern penal system exceedingly explicit.

However, *Chain Gang's* subject, which differs radically from a typically feather-light 1932 Hollywood movie, masks the film's implicit politics which indicate perhaps more conservative values. *Chain Gang's* uniquely bleak ending thus yields alternative

readings. By acknowledging diegetically the existence of social problems during the Great Depression – as opposed to alluding to them ambiguously as other 30s Hollywood films tended to do – *Chain Gang* at once appropriates and co-opts the radical political potential that social problems often instigate in reality. This raises a question: how can *Chain Gang*'s self-proclaimed social awareness be viewed as a function of its deeper social denial?

We might begin by taking a closer look at Warner Brothers' longstanding collaboration with FDR throughout his thirteen years of presidency: Roosevelt was first elected to office one week before *Chain Gang*'s release in theaters. As Paul Conkin argues, "After the New Deal, innovations, entrepreneurs and major producers were increasingly more secure in their property, more certain of high profits, less vulnerable to economic cycles, and more heavily subsidized...by the federal government" (Conkin 23). If economic uncertainty and mounting social desperation jeopardized Hollywood's cultural dominance in 1932, *Chain Gang*'s iconoclastic reworking of Hollywood formulae aligned its viewer's plight with the studio's, thereby establishing Warner Brothers as the "socially-conscious studio" and facilitating its maintenance of industry control over mounting societal tensions that posed threats to Hollywood.

Furthermore, Roosevelt gave Hollywood more concrete incentives for promoting New Deal politics. In Hollywood's New Deal, Giuliana Muscio describes the industry's collusion with Roosevelt who allowed Hollywood to maintain its vertically-integrated oligopoly over the film market – which was found unconstitutional by the Supreme Court's Paramount Decision of 1948 three years after Roosevelt's death – in exchange for its help propagandizing his administration. Hollywood's investment in the New Deal

facilitated Roosevelt's assertion of political and economic stability (at least for the already dominant industries), counteracting voices that demanded more revolutionary political changes. In these senses, Muscio depicts Roosevelt politics as rather conservative, in spite of their expression of and appeal to liberal ideologies.

Chain Gang makes explicit its alignment with FDR's platform: both celebrate an individualistic spirit of American ambition, advocate strong centralized government – Georgia struggles for states' rights during the controversy over Allen's extradition, – and make extensive use of a WWI soldier “forgotten man” trope. The subsequent chain gang reform movement that the film inspired also contributed to provoking New Deal-friendly activism. Since *Chain Gang* was released a week after Roosevelt's election to office, and in light of the striking myth-making similarities between *Chain Gang* and Roosevelt's platform, and considering Warner Brothers' especially intimate relationship with Roosevelt, it would be hard to imagine that *Chain Gang* did not play a strong role in aligning American popular culture with New Deal politics.

Although *Chain Gang* channeled American political unrest into a movement for Southern penal reform as part of Hollywood's New Deal propaganda campaign, the film was released after Roosevelt's election to office, and was produced during a time when Herbert Hoover's (Roosevelt's opponent) unpopularity had reached such high levels that the public was inspired to dub the run-down, impoverished migrant worker camps on the side of road, “Hoovervilles.” Then, if not the Republican Party, which potential threats of political resistance did movies like *Chain Gang* subvert?

A.N. Fields of *Abbott's Monthly*, a widely read journal in the 1930s, suggests in a May 1933 article an answer to this question. Fields asserts that “Mr. Roosevelt has

disarmed both the Communist and the Socialist” (45). One can presume from Field’s statement that in November 1932, the month of *Chain Gang*’s release, communist politics – or at least mass social frustration with the potential for inspiring communist insurgency – threatened American legislative stability. Upon closer reading, we can see that *Chain Gang* locates the sources of these political threats in the Southern penal system and further focuses them upon a paramount effort against that system.

Fields reassures his reader that “no one really believes that the strong individualistic spirit of American character can be seduced by communistic or socialistic schemes; yet we all know that it is dangerous to let a hungry hound watch a meat house” (44). LeRoy suggests through the film’s chronology that systems like the chain gang, not American capitalism, hold the greatest degree of culpability for Allen’s hunger. In an early work scene, when Bomber asks Allen “what he’s in for,” Allen replies, “for looking at a hamburger” [figures 1 and 2].

Allen alludes to an earlier scene when a friend he meets at a boarding house, Pete, leads him to a diner to beg for food. Pete tries to hold up the diner and gets shot by the police who apprehend Allen. LeRoy depicts Allen’s hunger with several medium shots of the hamburger meat cooking on the grill and intercut reverse shots of Allen ravenously staring at the food. This scene directly evokes 1932 American poverty, starvation and economic crisis. However, by immediately juxtaposing this dramatic visualization of Allen’s hunger with his subsequent apprehension by the police and imprisonment on the chain gang, *Chain Gang* suggests the Southern penal system as more culpable for the Great Depression than general American politics or corporate economic structures.

Figure 1



Figure 2



Further, what would the character James Allen have done had he not been arrested and sentenced to ten years on the chain gang? Might he have joined a movement for radical social change? After he escapes, James Allen becomes Allen James, work ethic and financial ambitions realized anew. Presumably, had Allen never been sentenced to the chain gang, his swelling internal despair would have been forced to grapple with far broader and less tangible villains than the Southern penal system.

According to the film's diegetic logic, by punishing Allen for his hunger – even though his hunger derives from a lack of job opportunities – the chain gang subverts the very revolutionary politics that hunger and unemployment often inspire (e.g. Marxism). *Chain Gang* depicts Allen's imprisonment "for looking at a hamburger" as blatantly unjust. It is ironic, then, that the film parades the chain gang as counter to its own politics which, as Lichtenstein argues, are deeply imbricated in the Southern penal system's politics. The fight against the chain gang, the diegetic one as well as the national penal reform movements which the film inspired, simplified and popularized "answers" to problems of the Great Depression: resist and overthrow the Southern penal system while watching Hollywood movies and supporting Roosevelt's New Deal Administration.

Fields further indicates Roosevelt's appropriation of national chain gang antipathy to propagandize his New Deal platform: "The President on entering the White House took with him the thought that no stable government could be erected on human bondage, whether that bondage was in physical chains or in the human mind ... he knew that hungry people were dangerous to the security of any government" (Abbott's Monthly 44). Thus, Fields suggests, Roosevelt equated ideologically the physical tyranny imposed

on an individual by the chain gangs with abstract feelings of social oppression experienced by many Americans at the height of the Depression.

The analysis of Hollywood film technique by 1930s American communist presses – *Soviet Russia Today's* analysis for example – supports a reading of *Chain Gang* as anti-Soviet, New Deal agitprop. *SRT* accuses Hollywood cinema of offering “the most unreal, the most absurd inventions and subterfuges ... as ‘life’ [which] are calculated to give the audience in illusion what they lack in reality” (12). What did *Chain Gang's* audience “lack in reality?” On the one hand, LeRoy provoked his audience's Depression anxiety and concentrated these frustrations on a locatable political cause, as opposed to intangible and ambiguously-motivated forces. *Chain Gang* harnessed 1932 American political unrest and channeled it into a focused reform movement. Widespread chain gang antipathy gave Depression society a substitute for what it lacked in reality: a truly culpable figure or group. However, *SRT* insists upon the illusory nature of what a Hollywood film is capable of providing its audience. This analysis generates ambiguities which suggest that the film's depiction of a brutal and archaic Southern penal system not only neglects to address the problems endemic to capitalism, it also fails to reflect accurately the chain gangs' economic, cultural, and historical complexities.

Race

The German philosopher Walter Benjamin reminds us in one of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that “there is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (256). His paradox of civilized barbarism describes the cultural contradictions both inherent in and naturalized by a capitalist system of government. Civilization represses barbarity by attempting to embody its negation.

However, savage brutality does not disappear. Horkheimer and Adorno, contemporaries of Benjamin, explain this as a process of “progress...reverting to regression. That [industries] are obtusely liquidating metaphysics does not matter in itself, but that these are themselves becoming metaphysics, an ideological curtain, within the social whole, behind which real doom is gathering, does matter. That is the basic premise of our fragments” (Horkheimer and Adorno xviii). Benjamin’s and Adorno’s theories, which attempt to elucidate the dynamics of contradictory forces in modern industrial societies, – that is, culture represses ritual which resurfaces in barbarity – seem particularly relevant to LeRoy’s dichotomized expression of modern industry and penal savagery in *Chain Gang*.

LeRoy’s film and Burns’s autobiography both position Southern chain gangs against modernity. However, in many ways chain gangs represented the South’s attempt to participate in Northern economic industrialism. Chain gangs developed roads and infrastructures, enriching the South’s economy and facilitating its participation in accelerated and expanded networks of communication in America. Historian Alex Lichtenstein characterizes his central arguments in *Twice the Work of Free Labor* as “join[ing] a growing number of studies that reject the dichotomy between a modern and antimodern South, and instead seek to link the region’s most appalling features to the process of modernization itself” (xvi). Thus, Lichtenstein’s depiction of chain gangs as trapped between old and new systems (although, he argues, closer to the latter, while occupying a space in the public imagination – thanks largely to Burns’s and LeRoy’s efforts – which links them primarily with the former) reflects Horkheimer and Adorno’s analysis of the Hollywood culture industry. Like Lichtenstein, they argue that

entertainment films – including films like *Chain Gang* which commercialized its own implication in brutality by displaying “real” chain gang torture devices in theater lobbies – generate and exacerbate the very social problems which they purport to address.

As Lichtenstein says, “progress and modernization are not necessarily the salves of injustice” (xix). Further, the perversely counter-regressive changes effected by the South’s institution of chain gangs (e.g. racial integration) complicate their vilification by Northern big media. National cultural and economic fears of desegregation arguably motivated to some degree Northern media’s unified condemnation of the Southern penal system. Lichtenstein observes that “If nearly 90 percent of the felony convicts were black when the chain gang was instituted, two decades later 27 percent of the prisoners were white” (189). The chain gang, which evolved out of nearly all African-American antebellum convict labor systems, ironically represented a uniquely diverse community for the South at the time.

On July 31, 1932, *The New York Times* published concerns regarding the racial integration of the Southern penal system. “Now there are almost as many whites as Negroes and the question of caring for them is becoming a serious problem. There is no place for white prisoners in the chain gangs and prison camps.”¹ As Lichtenstein argues, “the increased visibility of white prisoners began to erode public faith in the benefits and justice of penal labor” (190). *Chain Gang* exploits these national fears about whites experiencing some of the oppression that people of African descent have suffered in America since their arrival in chains during slavery.

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<<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=100782080&Fmt=7&clientId=65345&RQT=309&VName=HNP>>.

Michel Foucault's analysis of the evolution of the western penal system sheds light upon these national fears of Southern racial integration that the chain gangs both facilitated and made visible to the public. The chain gangs, which evolved out of an antebellum convict labor system designed to prolong the racial, economic, and cultural dynamics established through slavery, both facilitated and made visible to the public prevalent fears of desegregation. Thus, Warner Brothers responded to mass anxieties provoked by whites' conspicuous subjection to a mode of punishment perceived to be designed for blacks.

Foucault recounts the replacement of the chain gang in France in 1837 "by inconspicuous black-painted cell-carts ... Punishment gradually ceased to be a spectacle" (Foucault 8-9). However, the lack of visibility of brutality does not displace the sinister effects of a now ambiguously-motivated penal system. Foucault argues that discipline's growing absence of visible manifestations renders the system all the more insidious. For, "punishment, then, will tend to become the most hidden part of the penal process... [and] as a result, justice no longer takes public responsibility for the violence that is bound up with its practice" (9). The chain gang in Georgia was eventually supplanted by a less visible means of penal correction.

I do not suggest of course that a national return to a chain gang penal system would be desirable. Rather, in 1932, the existence of the chain gang was not purely regressive, but complex and deeply imbricated in modernity. The film's structural misreading of the chain gang – a system which in many ways literalizes the studios' symbolic perpetuation of violence and inequality – can thus be read as motivated by Hollywood's fears that representation of the chain gangs will expose its own cultural and

economic complicities. In other words, Hollywood's economic implication in the violent chain gang system extended to its politics of racial representation which both provoked and played off of preexisting national fears of racial integration.

For example, an ad from the March 1932 issue of *Golden Book Magazine* promoting tourism in South Africa suggests how Sebastian, the African American character who frees James Allen from his chains, might have been received by *Chain Gang's* audience. "Near Durban – 'Pearl of the East African Coast' – you will meet the black man in all his native glory – quaint kraals, age-old tribal customs, primitive musical instruments, wild war dances!" [figure 3]. LeRoy's aestheticization in *Chain Gang* of the robust black body that flourishes under forced labor [figure 4], juxtaposed to the emaciated decaying white figures whom the intense labor apparently annihilates [figure 5], reinforces the notion of a Southern penal system designed specifically to contain African-Americans. Further, the film portrays the African-American male as one that thrives under the chain gang's regimented and exhausting forced labor system. *Chain Gang's* mode of racial representation caters to its audience's racial anxieties lest this Hollywood film alienate potential viewers.

Figure 3

SOUTH AFRICA



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The People of the Transvaal



Wildebeest in the Kruger National Park

179

Figure 4



Figure 5



Chain Gang's racial logic, however, was echoed throughout 1930s cultural discourse. In a 1932 *Abbott's Monthly* feature on African culture called "Black Majesty," a caption describes the photo of a regally posed African tribesman: "Here he stands, a true son of the jungle lands of Africa, bronzed like a statue, strong like a trained athlete, and trained in the laws of the jungle" (14). Even positive media coverage of African culture had a tendency to annihilate its profound complexities, positioning it – not unlike the chain gang – as purely savage and different. In the same issue of *Abbott's Monthly*, Hollywood cinematographer Tony Gaudio essentializes the nature of the African-American as a photographic subject. "As a rule, I have found them very gratifying to work with ... because they are very natural and very emotional" (13). Again, even in its praise of blacks, 1932 dominant media presses reify members of the race, denying them the nuanced levels of subjectivity that whites frequently enjoyed.

Chain Gang betrays a primary danger of blacks' reification even when representing them in a positive light. On a visual level, LeRoy suggests that the black man exists naturally and fruitfully under a regressive and exploitative forced labor system. Whereas numerous white characters suffer and plot escape, blacks in the film seem resigned to the chain gang. For example, Sebastian exercises remarkable facility in pounding and loosening Allen's shackles, which he accomplishes in eight strokes. As Sebastian articulates his willingness to help Allen, "I don't want to get in no trouble, but I'd sure like to see you get out of this misery." However, if Sebastian is able to help Allen so easily, why can't he loosen his own shackles as well? Although the act of escaping chains and fleeing Southern forced labor clearly signals black slave histories, Sebastian's submission to his life on the chain gang denies and negates these histories. In terms of its

1932 reception, this racial logic – which suggests that it is less problematic for a black man to remain on a chain gang than it is for a white man – no doubt confirmed many American viewers’ preconceived notions of a relationship between social position and skin color, which evolved dialogically with a variety of media.

Furthermore, although *Chain Gang*’s racial politics can be read as more subtle and complex than those of something like *Abbott’s Monthly*, the film constructs its arguments through the individual example of a white man, even though the injustice of the chain gang system deeply reflects Southern histories of slavery and post-slavery economic exploitation of forced black labor. Thus, LeRoy appropriates black histories to advance the film’s own arguments without acknowledging the profound political impact of Southern forced labor upon African-Americans.

In his article “Georgia History in Fiction,” Alex Lichtenstein discusses the problem of translating arguments that reflect racially-charged political histories into 1932 popular discourse. Lichtenstein explores a complex relationship between the American Communist Party’s use of the chain gangs, Burns’s and Hollywood’s, and John L. Spivak’s documentary novel, *Georgia Nigger*, which was published in 1932 and exposed the chain gangs’ brutality and perpetuation of racial inequalities months before the film’s release.

The Daily Worker, the official publication of the American Communist Party, circulated excerpts from Spivak’s novel, participated in a public outcry against the chain gangs which, unlike Burns’s and Warner Brothers’, attempted to elevate the example to an argument for utopian black/white race relations. Like Hollywood – which overshadowed Spivak’s testimony with *Chain Gang* – the CP distorted Spivak’s bleak

portrayal of the chain gangs' racial politics, conflating them with more general arguments against class hierarchies in an effort to mobilize party politics through a unified movement against the Southern penal system. The CP argued that "by uniting with their white brothers in organized struggled [blacks] can put an end to the whole system of ruling class oppression together with the chain gangs" (4). Again, *Chain Gang* directly challenged groups who advocated political changes far more revolutionary than those instituted by the New Deal.

Furthermore, unlike Hollywood's and the CP's, "Spivak's concern ... was almost entirely with black prisoners, and he understood the chain gang more as a form of racial than class oppression" (Lichtenstein, 642). However, Hollywood succeeded with *Chain Gang* in bringing to national attention the appalling practices of Georgia's penal system, a feat which *Georgia Nigger* had failed to accomplish. Lichtenstein suggests that "perhaps [the film] found a wider audience than *Georgia Nigger* precisely because it did not ask Americans to confront their racial caste system that made the chain gang possible" (654). The question of whether *Chain Gang*'s success in "exposing" a corrupt Southern penal system warrants its exceptional misrepresentation of said system generates many complexities which do not point to clear answers. However, if anything, it seems that the chain gang reform movement found more success in inspiring sympathy for New Deal politics than in improving forced labor conditions in the South – whose eventual reform in Georgia in 1946 can just as accurately be attributed to changing power dynamics of the state's legislature (Lichtenstein 657). Furthermore, the social changes effected by *Chain Gang* in many ways discouraged racial political progress as a result of their naturalization of images of blacks on chain gangs.

The Crisis, the official journal of the NAACP, in its March 1933 issue, criticizes the national movements against the chain gangs which appropriated without reflecting upon black history. W.E.B. DuBois argues that “while the Governor of Georgia is frothing at the mouth and the Montgomery, Alabama *Advertiser* is waxing sarcastic over New Jersey and Michigan for refusing to return fugitives to the South, Negroes are continuing to suffer injustice” (68). DuBois addresses an overwhelming mass reaction to LeRoy’s film and Burns’s book as a national distraction from NAACP concerns. Furthermore, these controversies over two white fugitives evoke runaway slave histories: DuBois perhaps most explicitly references the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850 which denied blacks in the North any legal representation after being claimed by their purported owners. Again, this example demonstrates a dominant white culture’s assumption of racially-charged politics, which it used to advance its own concerns while for the most part omitting overt representation of – and even distracting national attention from – African-Americans’.

Thus, *Chain Gang*’s widely accepted status in critical film discourse as a unique example of radical Hollywood politics effecting progressive social changes invites reconsideration. Historically, the film promoted New Deal politics, therefore, also protecting its studio’s economic concerns. Its humanitarian efforts, however, were at best ill-conceived and secondary to its business motivations.

CHAPTER 2:

Gender, Sound and the Codes:

Chain Gang meditates upon its own misreading of the Southern penal system. It is a fallacy that *Chain Gang*'s explicit social criticism transgressed Hollywood's self-censorship codes. In chapter one, I identify Hollywood's – particularly Warner Brothers' – collusion with Roosevelt's New Deal Administration as a revealing sign of *Chain Gang*'s status quo politics. FDR overlooked Hollywood's illegal oligopoly in exchange for the industry's flattering portrayal of the paralytic presidential candidate's image and platform. Working in conjunction with FDR's Fireside Chats, by 1932, Hollywood's relatively polished sound films and newsreels – *Chain Gang* among them – proved profoundly effective campaign mediums for Roosevelt. However, *Chain Gang* subtly resists the very politics it also propagandizes.

LeRoy's film signifies Hollywood's anxieties regarding overly manifest forms of discipline – the chain gangs expose their own violence. Thus, Benjamin's civilized brutality paradox, which suggests that industry conceals rather than negates social regression, can be extended to describe *Chain Gang*'s aesthetic mode. Hollywood cinema does not merely represent what it chooses to make visible while omitting from narrative focus what it opts to conceal; in fact, it often operates under an inverse paradigm. Absences in film bear charged symbolic meanings. For example, LeRoy omits any definitive references to the state of Georgia from his film, though it is openly based on Burns's autobiography, I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!. Particularly during these post Production Code, pre Joseph Breen's² rigid enforcement of said Code years, labeled Hollywood's pre-Code era (1931-33), censorship restricted narrative

² Joseph Breen was appointed head of the PCA (Production Code Administration) on June 13, 1934.

expression of transgression and subversion to a codified language of innuendo and allusive ambiguity.

In her analysis of Josef von Sternberg's interaction with the Hays Office while making *Blonde Venus*, Lea Jacobs concludes that Hollywood's somewhat haphazard self-censorship efforts during its pre-Code years often fostered its cinema's ripeness for alternative readings. Sexual transgression, she argues, became more explicit to *Blonde Venus*' viewer as a result of compromises between von Sternberg and the Hays Office. The "system placed industry censors in a highly tenuous position: they were perpetually winning battles and losing the war, effectively defending the representation of material the Code ostensibly forbade" (Jacobs 105). According to Benjamin's civilized-brutality paradox – which compels a reader or viewer to unearth repressed content – and applied to *Chain Gang*, however, the implications of the film's unambiguously subversive message suggest counter readings that yield distinctly conservative interpretations.

If subtlety and ambiguity surrounding transgression arguably attracted larger audiences – because naïve viewers remain uncorrupted while experienced viewers revel in what is left to the imagination – then, following Benjamin's argument about repressed content, *Chain Gang*'s openly defiant ending in many ways stifles the very resistant politics which it purports to arouse. In the closing scene, LeRoy does not suggest that society has failed the ambitious, white, former war hero James Allen; he argues this quite blatantly. LeRoy assumes a film grammar of gritty realism: no music, only diegetic sound, a disheveled and unshaven protagonist, and the same spare lighting design that haunts *Chain Gang*'s diegesis during the entire film.

After an emotionally-charged final encounter between Allen and his sympathetic fiancée Helen, pushing back tears, Helen asks Allen how he lives, and Allen, alarmed by a distant car noise – an ironic disturbance in light of Lichtenstein’s chain gang modernity argument – backs away from her while a slowly fading key light engulfs his body with darkness. As soon as his image has been consumed by blackness, Allen whispers, “I steal,” and audibly runs away. LeRoy renders the emotional weight of this moment with a blaring and melodramatic orchestral score which immediately succeeds the sound of Allen’s frantic footsteps. The totality of the formula – the foiled romance, the implications of unjustly convicted Allen openly confessing to theft, and LeRoy’s transition from only diegetic sound to a melodramatic score – leaves a viewer little space for alternate readings of the film’s politics. LeRoy does not allude to *Chain Gang*’s subversive message; instead, he makes it very explicit. In Horkheimer and Adorno’s terms, *Chain Gang*’s ending represses its transgressive content.

Thus, Code films that announce their controversial politics as openly as *Chain Gang* does in its ending invite skepticism. As Jacobs argues, the most interesting sites of transgression in these films often emerged accidentally or spontaneously as a result of compromises between a film’s director and the Hays office. The Codes engendered a genuinely transgressive language of allusive ambiguity. For example, when Allen visits his friend Barney in a whore house after his first escape, LeRoy never says explicitly that Allen is in a whore house. He alludes to this message repeatedly: a sign outside the cheap motel advertises rooms for seventy-five cents, even though, earlier in the film, LeRoy focuses on a sign advertising rooms in a boarding house for fifteen cents a night. Why does a room in this equally seedy motel cost an additional sixty cents? LeRoy answers

this question – at least for his “experienced” viewers – when jazz music, alcohol, and a tilt down the length of a woman’s body, which finally stops for a full five seconds upon her feet, greet Allen inside. Whereas the Codes regulated *Chain Gang*’s assertion of Allen’s sexual relations with a series of subtle, or not so subtle, suggestions, the ways in which a Code film openly announces itself subversive often signal the most status quo elements of its politics. Again, *Chain Gang*’s ending enabled Hollywood to assume control over mounting social tensions which posed threats to the industry’s financial stability.

Despite the complex ways in which the Codes engendered subversive meaning, two things can be verified about them: their enforcement was motivated by market incentives, and following this principle, radical content in no way implies a radical aesthetic. Thus, as Richard Maltby emphasizes, “self-regulation...can be understood as a form of market censorship, in which those forces in control of the production process determine what may and may not be produced” (Nowell-Smith 235). Whereas the silent film enabled local theater owners a degree of editing control regarding moral content, Hollywood’s standard sound-on-film technology precluded further editing attempts once a film reached its exhibitor. The industry’s enforcement of the Production Code in 1930 marked Hollywood’s decision to circumvent exhibition controversies once resources had already been invested in a film’s production.

Therefore, despite *Chain Gang*’s lack of narrative closure, which distinguishes it from most other studio productions of this period, the film’s storytelling mode and aesthetic logic betray its status as a recognizable 1932 Hollywood movie. Although *Chain Gang* demonstrates social despair as an alternative to the escapist fantasy of

narrative films with resolved conclusions, it relies upon a highly codified narrative grammar: close-ups that facilitate emotional identification, montage sequences that condense space and time, and villains who personify and render tangible individual sites of injustice – as opposed to collective injustices that root in American racism. In other words, Hollywood was foremost a business, not a medium for communicating radical politics to large audiences. Although the industry’s fallaciously titled pre-Code era leads one to believe that self-proclaimed controversial films like *Chain Gang* from 1931-33 defied morality censorship politics, they in fact functioned very much within the market frameworks of Hollywood’s self-regulation practices.

As Maltby explains, the Codes engendered an especially allusive mode of narrative ambiguity which allowed audiences to read into a film’s meaning on many different levels without tainting a naïve viewer’s expectations of its innocent and wholesome content. *Chain Gang*’s subversion of Hays Code censorship has ironically been attributed to its explicit condemnation of the Southern penal system – even though Roosevelt’s collaboration with Hollywood confirms Warner Brothers’ obvious financial motivations for promoting such a “revolutionary” argument. However, *Chain Gang* conforms to a pre-Code structure which, for financial reasons, fostered the suggestion of transgressive content – as opposed to its explicit enactment – until 1934 when the politics of allusive representation were further restrained to an even greater degree of subtlety. *Chain Gang* articulates an interpretively radical subversion of its own production politics in ways that do not disrupt its conventional and morally acceptable narrative. Rather, they invite alternative readings of it.

In a scene titled “exposure,” Georgia authorities locate escaped convict James Allen in Chicago under his pseudo identity as engineer Allen James. The scene takes place in Allen’s office as he receives the good news of an invitation to appear at the Chamber of Commerce’s upcoming banquet as its principal speaker. The political dynamics of exposure and their relations to technology and commerce in this scene exemplify LeRoy’s diegetic subversion of the Code’s market logic, which impacted his film’s production. This scene meditates subtly upon the ethical implications of Hollywood’s transition to sound, and the 1930 Production Code that the politics of sound films engendered.

In 1927, with its release of *The Jazz Singer*, Warner Brothers pioneered Hollywood’s expensive and relatively rapid conversion to standard sound-on-film technology during the late 1920s – some studios experimented briefly with sound-on-disc which made camera movement exceedingly difficult. Morally concerned viewers argued that sound films, approaching a greater degree of verisimilitude, rendered uncertain or transgressive content both more explicit and more realistic. However, vertically integrated Hollywood’s market distribution practices put pressure on its need for self-regulation. Whereas exhibitors could choose to edit out controversial silent film scenes with few difficulties, once a “talkie” reached its exhibitor, neither the image, music, nor dialogue could be re-edited without risking desynchronizing the entire film. The technological limitations of ‘30s sound apparatus precluded post-distribution editing, giving Hollywood absolute control over every projected version of each of its films.

Further, like American cinema’s conversion to sound, which created production, budget, and exhibition problems for independent filmmakers, the Codes facilitated

Hollywood's centralized control over the market. By agreeing to self-regulation, Hollywood established a cultural contract with its morally concerned audiences. This contract also prevented filmmaking outside of the Hollywood industry by further designating film form and ranges of content that could be deemed suitable for exhibition. Thus, a Hays codified film of the '30s signified Hollywood's monopolistic business practices above its concern for moral censorship.

Chain Gang references many different elements of these sound-Code politics in its ironically titled "exposure" scene. While Allen expresses his gratitude for the invitation to speak at the banquet, his secretary buzzes his office to signal a message. Allen instinctively turns toward his intercom button thereby allowing his secretary's news of his exposure as a convict to permeate his sound space [figure 6]. She informs him: "there are two gentlemen here to see you." Based on information from the previous scene, the viewer can correctly identify these men as representatives from the chain gang. Allen approaches his symbolically-charged intercom button demonstrating grandiose and elegant body movement. Whereas the intercom initially facilitates his appearance of control over his work space, the message relayed through his machine betrays him. LeRoy implicates sound technology's role at this moment in Allen's subsequent return to the chain gang, which provokes his psychological deterioration and permanent social downfall.

Figure 6



As soon as Allen presses the intercom button, LeRoy cuts to a close-up of his secretary's face as she informs Allen that there are two detectives outside his office. Allen at once commands his own technology as well as LeRoy's cinematography. *Chain Gang* often follows this formula: in an earlier scene, Allen receives a frustrating phone call from one of Marie's many illicit lovers – although this one is presumably just a comical flirtation. As soon as Allen picks up the phone, LeRoy cuts to a full shot of a thirty second unmoved frame that reveals Sammy, Marie's gentleman caller, while Sammy unambiguously reveals to Allen Marie's dubious activities. LeRoy depicts this conversation the exact same way he portrays the intercom conversation. In the former Allen picks up a phone – in the latter he pushes a button – both times dictating LeRoy's

cinematography: cut to the source of sound that Allen uses his technology to manipulate. Further, LeRoy comments ironically on the limitations of this technology by ceasing all camera movement as soon as the human agents who signal the intercom and telephone have been revealed visually. Thus, LeRoy conveys a tense and rigid sense of imbrication between sound and image – perhaps a reference to sound film’s material deflection of post distribution editing. Each time, Allen’s control over his own sound technology – his intercom and telephone – dictates and then freezes LeRoy’s camera movement.

LeRoy further depicts the problems generated by Allen’s sound technologies by associating them with Allen’s recapture by the chain gang. After receiving news of his visitors (the chain gang representatives), Allen slowly removes his finger from the button, wills it mechanically into his other palm, and positions his body away from the machine. Allen again releases his hand which drifts out of the unmoved frame into an off-screen space that signals for its viewer a realm of visual uncertainty, pregnant with displaced diegetic tensions and anxieties: fears of the chain gang. However, subtextual anxiety in cinema often fosters greater levels of imagination for its viewer.

Allen’s use of his technology to assume control over his personal space – and over voices from off screen space – betrays him: the sound intercom becomes both iconically and indexically associated with news that foreshadows his re-imprisonment on the chain gang. Allen’s personal intercom machine, a sign of his affluence and success which warrants his invitation to be the Chamber of Commerce’s keynote speaker – the very phrase a pun on the idea of a voice of commerce – can be interpreted as a metaphor for sound film. Sound technology facilitated its industry’s centralized control over the market by precluding a post-distribution resynchronization of sound and image. By

linking Allen's intercom with the film's unremittingly vilified Southern penal system, this sequence subverts Hollywood's own technological and economic innovations. Further, it suggests the formers' implication, as vehicles of modernity, in engendering and exacerbating the latter's corruption and brutality. As Lichtenstein argues, brutal chain gangs represented the South's attempt to participate in modernized Northern industrialism. This scene acknowledges a similar imbrication between modern developments in technology and the politics of barbarity: the two evolved in conversation with one another, as Horkheimer and Adorno argue, the former provoking the latter.

The following sequence – which depicts Allen's media exposure and ensuing controversies over his extradition – literalizes many of the political tensions suggested in the intercom scene. A newspaper montage commences with the headline: "Chicago fights to keep Allen from chain gang!" LeRoy fades into a closer look at Allen's still image, ironically juxtaposing his story, "Citizen who 'made good' faces prison," to the headline, "Head of Friedlander Kunz Banking House suffers paralytic stroke." LeRoy provokes fears of death and punishment through the newspaper medium thereby portraying newspapers and their photographs – (which implicate cinema through association) – as sites of physical detainment and deterioration. LeRoy links these signs of physical mortality, which Depression economic conditions made very real for *Chain Gang's* 1932 viewer, with modern media whose function strives to deny and to resist them. Whereas Allen's sound technology undermines his personal sense of control, Allen's loss of control over said technology motivates and functions dialogically with the media's assertion of command over Allen's story. In other words, these innovations of industry and modernity do not foster Allen's individuality; rather, they fill him with illusory hopes

(mastery of his space) which they twist and manipulate for their own ends: to perpetuate their social role by engendering a publicity spectacle.

LeRoy follows these dueling headlines with a close-up of Allen's picture: an appealing portrait in the Chicago press creates tension alongside the Georgia journal's menacing mugshot of a dejected Allen in prisoner's uniform. By exposing the camera's manipulated and manipulative rendering of the same individual, LeRoy points his own camera against itself thereby exposing to a degree *Chain Gang's* artifice – or raising questions, at least, about how photographic “truth” emerges. Over this close-up of Allen's still mugshot [figure 7], LeRoy superimposes a full shot of Allen behind prison bars in Chicago, dressed in his dignified business attire, and in the process of being photographed by many journalists [figure 8]. Although LeRoy clearly aligns his viewer's sympathies with the Chicago press and represents Georgia's as twisted and fallacious, his reflexivity upon purportedly objective journalism's highly subjective formulation calls into question *Chain Gang's* own aesthetic credibility. LeRoy reveals the media's ability to manipulate Allen's story, in effect inviting consideration of *Chain Gang's* potential to distort Southern penal structures and other diegetic elements which the film naturalizes: its racial politics for example.

Figure 7



Figure 8



A final headline showdown between Chicago and Georgia newspapers stimulates reflection upon *Chain Gang*'s misreading of the Southern penal system as purely regressive and archaic, casting doubt upon the film's apparent denial of modernity's implication in chain gang politics. A Chicago paper quips, "Is this civilization?", followed by a Georgia paper: "What has become of states' rights?" On the one hand, LeRoy argues here that a decentralized form of government is also an uncivilized one, which justifies Hollywood's centralized control over the film market that sound technology, the Codes, and New Deal politics all facilitated. On another level, sound technology's failure to uphold James Allen's performance of Allen James, as well as the media's failure to prevent Allen's extradition, clearly relate to his subjection to Southern penal brutality. LeRoy's subtextual argument, which depicts technology's imbrication in barbaric institutions like the chain gang, echoes Horkheimer and Adorno's modernity thesis, and Lichtenstein's claims that attribute the chain gang's existence to the very processes of modernity which condemn it. In this way, *Chain Gang* raises questions about its own limited reading of the Southern penal system.

In subtle and complex ways, *Chain Gang* refuses to reduce its own politics to simplistic dichotomies between "good" and "evil," rather engaging the ambiguities that make social problems tricky to represent. Leaving a film's subversive politics ambiguous and open for interpretation, however, does not negate the film's ethical responsibilities regarding the claims which it makes explicit.

The claims that *Chain Gang* asserts most explicitly – the film's self-proclaimed sites of resistance – facilitate its often deceptive mode of discourse. Dramatization of a "forgotten man" myth for example – which describes the ex-soldier's struggle re-

acclimating to American society – motivates *Chain Gang*'s iconoclastic representation of American mythologies. In a compelling scene, Allen tries to pawn his WWI medal and finds that numerous destitute ex-soldiers have preceded him in this effort. The well-publicized close-up of a box on the pawn shop shelf that overflows with hocked WWI medals [figure 9] can be read as a metaphor for a generalizable aesthetic logic in this film. *Chain Gang* parades “the forgotten,” rendering hyper-visible what the studio accuses the government of having repressed.

Figure 9



Chain Gang's scathing criticism of a society which fails to accommodate even its former war heroes appears as a central point of its critique of American government. However, it is a fallacy that overtly controversial cinema transgresses Code censorship. If anything, *Chain Gang*'s most explicit sites of social criticism engendered American governmental stability in the '30s by propagandizing New Deal politics, thereby also fostering, according to Horkheimer and Adorno's modernity thesis, the barbarity of Hollywood's corrupt monopolistic market practices. Cinema that transgresses Code censorship – as a function of operating within the dictates of said censorship – more accurately engenders a complex wealth of subtext conveyed through an allusive mode of representational ambiguity. The forgotten man trope, which renders itself a spectacle by parading its own purported repression, effectively distracts its viewer's attention from the genuinely radical arguments *Chain Gang* articulates less overtly.

A closer reading of scenes in *Chain Gang* that provoke racial and sexual tensions reveals the film's Code-engendered subtextual subversion of the film's explicit narrative meanings. In an early work scene, *Chain Gang* seems to suggest that black prisoners are better suited for convict labor than whites. Whereas the white prisoners experience enormous difficulty acclimating to life on the chain gang, the black prisoners seem well-adapted to their environment. While one emaciated white worker faints as a result of fatigue and stomach ailments, LeRoy tracks another with a lengthy and bumpy pan as the white prisoner scrambles into a bush to brush his teeth, and Allen receives a beating for neglecting to ask for permission to wipe the sweat off of his face. Further, LeRoy punctuates this distressed white labor with the sound of asynchronous hammer clinks

which suggest that the whites' presence on the chain gang is both disturbing and unnatural.

Conversely, LeRoy depicts the black prisoners' unified and seemingly unproblematic labor with several cuts to a single unmoved frame in which several vigorous black prisoners hammer in synch with one another. Leroy places Sebastian – the black prisoner who later loosens Allen's chains – at the center of this image. Bomber comments to Allen about Sebastian: "Look at that big buck swing that sledge...They like his work so much, they're going to keep him here for the rest of his life." LeRoy confirms visually Bomber's awed observation. A heavy key light emphasizes Sebastian's robust body which glistens with sweat – which he never asks for permission to wipe off because, unlike the white prisoners whose requests to wipe off sweat LeRoy naturalizes as a routine of their labor, sweat apparently does not cause problems for Sebastian. Further, Sebastian's sledge produces loud and evenly paced clinks which clash with the frenzied hammering of the many struggling white prisoners around him – he seems fully integrated into a mechanized system.

LeRoy's editing in this scene foreshadows Allen's escape plot. Bomber's narration of the chain gang daily labor routine causes Allen to associate Sebastian's reliable and powerful labor with the white prisoner who gets permission to run into the bush for two minutes to brush his teeth – because making use of the bathroom does not exist in the '30s Hays codified diegesis. Meanwhile, Allen plans his escape: Sebastian loosens his chains which he removes during his two minutes in the bush, and then runs away. Thus, LeRoy's editing directs his viewer to sympathize with Allen when Allen contemplates Sebastian's permanent enslavement as a vehicle for his own liberation.

Allen, like the state of Georgia, depends on Sebastian's confinement to the space of the chain gang in order to facilitate his escape and to pursue his social and economic ascension.

However, during the inverted liberation role-play scene when Sebastian loosens Allen's shackles, the irony of the black man's emancipation of the white man, layered with the implications of his enactment of physical violence against the white man – which would be represented unfavorably or omitted in almost any other context – establishes a resistant energy ripe for alternative readings. LeRoy positions a bent-over Allen at the center of the frame so that Allen's body conceals all but Sebastian's powerful pounding limbs and hammer. LeRoy repeats this shot, cutting back and forth between close-ups of the sledge hammer as it strikes Allen's ankle – a visual euphemism for implied sexual activity which LeRoy emphasizes with the ringing clatter of the hammer against metal – and the original image of Allen as he winces in pain from each blow.

LeRoy's blocking, which situates Allen in a submissive position while Sebastian stands behind him wielding a hammer, betrays its own strong sexual connotations [figure 10]. The implications of LeRoy's suggestion of homosexual miscegenation would have struck a typical 1932 Hollywood viewer as deeply scandalous. Although *Chain Gang* provoked controversy during its release, interracial sodomy did not play a significant role in the critical debate it instigated. LeRoy's especially subtle mode of innuendo in this scene reflects precisely the level of transgressive discourse that the Codes fostered. Sebastian has presumably – as one can gauge from his facility with the hammer – spent many years of his life on an all-male chain gang.

Figure 10



If absences bear charged meanings in Hollywood Code cinema, the conspicuous lack of women on the chain gang – at a time when social convention restricted even the 1930 Production Code’s discussion of homosexuality to a vague category titled “sex perversion” – further urges meditation upon possible outlets for displaced sexual energy in this all-male environment. Through a complex dialogue between LeRoy’s Code-engendered simultaneous repression of and allusion to *Chain Gang*’s subversive content, *Chain Gang* lends itself to arguments which tend to conceal and to repress its historical impact: it fostered New Deal politics, regressively – or even barbarously, to return to Horkheimer and Adorno – failing to promote civil rights and for the most part suppressing radical social change.

In its adherence to codified Hollywood aesthetic standards, *Chain Gang's* depiction of sexuality parallels its historically inaccurate vilification of the Southern penal system as described above. Like the chain gangs, which the film articulates through both modern industry and penal brutality, *Chain Gang* implicates its female characters, particularly Marie, in an unstable aesthetic that oscillates between excessive visibility and a diegetic repression of female subjectivity. Such visual logic in the classical Hollywood tradition is by no means unique to this film.

Laura Mulvey theorizes the gendered gaze as fundamental to classical Hollywood grammar in her seminal 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Mulvey posits as a paradigm of this cinema that woman's "meaning ... is at an end, it does not last into the world of law and language except as a memory that oscillates between memory of maternal plenitude and memory of lack" (Stam and Miller 483). What is significant about Mulvey's pairing of female lack and maternal plenitude is that each term implies the other's negation. Mulvey emphasizes lack in her discussion of maternal plenitude. The plenitude (fetus), which represents an obvious physical excess, is "raised into the symbolic" after birth, thereby becoming, to the mother, a sight of lack, plenitude's opposite. The paradox inherent in this lack (its reciprocal relation to plenitude) reinforces a fundamental Code-engendered narrative logic: overstated meaning often works to distract viewers from total lack of said meaning. For example, *Chain Gang's* self-announced subversive ending in fact concealed the conservative political and economic motivations which it belied.

Although Mulvey raises a maternal plenitude / fetus-phallus symbolic lack dichotomy in order to illustrate the ethical implications of a viewer's psycho-sexual

identification with the logic of a classical Hollywood diegesis, her model bears striking similarities to Benjamin's civilization-brutality paradox that the chain gang's representation in this film reflects. Just before Marie exposes Allen as a convict, Allen firmly establishes the gendered rhetoric of penal brutality when he accuses her of making their marital existence no better than life on the chain gang [figure 11]. Thus, Marie – whom LeRoy frequently eroticizes, thereby illustrating her as a metonymic example of threats posed by female sexuality – is also compared to a system that the film portrays as “so archaic and barbarous as to be a national disgrace.”

Figure 11



Further, Marie's romantic jealousy motivates the risk of Allen's exposure as an escaped convict, and thus drives *Chain Gang's* narrative. When Allen attempts to move out of Marie's boarding house in order to evade further relations with her, she manipulates him into marriage by revealing a letter from Clint (Allen's brother) that divulges Allen's secret existence as a fugitive convict. Marie accuses Allen – "when a fellow wants to ditch a girl, he'll do most anything, provided it doesn't land him back on the chain gang where he probably belongs" – and then removes Clint's letter from inside the chest of her low-cut v-neck blouse. By making Marie's chest the physical source of her ominous revelation, LeRoy reinforces this connection between the danger of Allen's exposure and the threat posed by Marie's transgressive sexuality.

LeRoy's representation of Helen as a romantic ideal / alternative to Marie both compromises Helen's individual subjectivity and – as a function of Helen's fragmented formulation – emphasizes Marie's unsympathetic nature. *Chain Gang's* narrow idealization of Helen reinforces the relationship the film establishes between Marie and the chain gang. Allen first meets Helen at Club Chateau – literally Club House/Home – a name which references the space of domestic stability and security that Allen's life with Marie lacks.

Further, when Allen leaves his childhood home at the beginning of the film to pursue his quest for freedom and mobility, *Chain Gang* equates his domestic space with the oppressive and monotonous routine of Allen's factory job, which the space of the chain gang and of life with Marie later signify. Whereas the thought of home initially provokes Allen's unrest and wanderlust, by the time Allen meets Helen, his traumatic experiences on the chain gang and disappointing marriage with Marie have physically

and psychologically manipulated his desires to conform to conventional American expectations of domestic and familial stability. However, LeRoy at once foreshadows problems regarding Allen's evolution to seeking domestic stability.

LeRoy opens a scene portraying Allen's last evening at home with a close-up of his empty plate and chair, from which LeRoy pans to reveal Allen's mother while she gazes intently at his empty seat. When escaped Allen James meets Helen at Club Chateau, LeRoy references this early dinner table scene. Allen and Helen sit on opposite sides of a crowded table, and appear to one another only after everyone else has spontaneously arisen and departed for the dance floor. After Allen approaches Helen, and moves to an empty seat next to her, LeRoy films their ensuing conversation from a less than intimate angle: a long-medium shot from across a dinner table cluttered with wine glasses, bottles, and a bulky bouquet of flowers as its centerpiece, also revealing out-of-focus dancing bodies in the background, which further clutter the image. Allen and Helen's first encounter at Club Chateau is thus ridden with the same domestic spatial tensions that drive Allen toward the chain gang at the beginning of the film. Although LeRoy positions Helen – and the stable existence she signifies for Allen – as the antithesis of the rigorously controlling and oppressive space of the chain gang – and through association, Allen's early home life, his experiences during the war, and his existence with Marie – he at once signals the impossibility of this alternative domestic peace and stability.

Further, Helen and Allen never experience any personal conflicts in their relationship. Helen represents purely an alternative to the oppressive space of the chain gang, or to a falsely motivated marriage with Marie. However, life with Helen must be

impossible for Allen to attain because Helen's existence remains in many ways an illusion. Although Helen signifies a hope of happiness for Allen, her character never transcends this narrative need. *Chain Gang* thus constrains Helen to the role of an ideal or to a promise of a better future – an important Depression cultural theme – never explaining her history, or allowing Helen her own space in which to experience individual desires and dramatic tensions. She must be satisfied to exist, according to Mulvey's gendered reading of classical Hollywood cinema, purely as an extension / projection of Allen's (and the viewer's) patriarchal needs and desires.

LeRoy positions Helen as Marie's alter-ego: Helen's narrow and static portrayal lends dramatic emphasis to Marie's villainy. As a result of the film's dichotomized good-woman / bad-woman mode of discourse, Allen elevates sincere love – which he purports to express toward Helen – to a level of such supreme importance that his falsely motivated marriage with Marie appears to him no more desirable than his penal enslavement. Thus, the chain gang functions as a structural extension of Allen's relationships with women. The perpetual threat of the chain gang gives force and meaning both to Marie's persona as an eroticized villain, and to Helen's fragmented existence as a romantic ideal.

Chain Gang aligns Marie with vilified social forces, thereby linking revelations about Marie's sexual promiscuity to general chain gang anxieties that the film provokes. The chain gangs – which embodied a tense conflict between Southern modernity and lingering effects of its post-slavery economy – rendered racial tension and physical violence spectacles, thereby generating national anxiety which posed threats to established cultural and economic hierarchies, with Hollywood at the high end.

Therefore, the film's production was arguably motivated by Hollywood's fears regarding the chain gang's mode of cultural and economic self-exposure.

The chain gangs evolved out of a Southern antebellum slavery economy that exploited black labor. Although the chain gang facilitated the South's economic development and modernization, the film positions it as purely regressive. The Codes – which, like Hollywood's argument against the chain gang, proclaimed themselves morality regulators despite their economic motivations – fostered a narrative aesthetic that tends to deprive women of meaningful subjectivity. The film, operating under the visual logic of the Codes, vilifies Marie partly for her explicit sexual promiscuity which feeds into her frustration of Allen's quest for happiness and stability. Marie flaunts her power over Allen by exposing him as well as herself: she alludes to her sexuality by removing Clint's letter from her chest. Thus, Marie, in a sense, literalizes the visual anxieties of self-exposure that the chain gang system posed for Hollywood and American capitalist industries, which experienced general economic anxiety in 1932. If the chain gang implicated modern industry in its conspicuous enactment of brutality, this would have generated, by extension, a site of threat to the studios' stability.

Like the chain gangs, the Codes were economically motivated. Hollywood instructed the American public in 1932 to interpret both chain gang reform and film censorship as motivated by moral and ethical principles. Thus, through *Chain Gang*, Warner Brothers not only subverted mounting Depression political tumult by depicting an industry which less adroitly reflected its own functioning as purely savage, but made this message more compelling for its audience by framing a female principal character's

moral dubiousness – she succumbs to her own primitive sexual urges thereby signifying her unsympathetic nature – as parallel to the chain gang’s backwardness.

In effect, *Chain Gang* can be read as condemning the Southern penal system for straying from Hollywood’s own example of industry: characterized by discretion. Michel Foucault describes the evolution of the penal system toward discretion and concealment of its own violence as “the normalization of the power of normalization” (296). This brutality implicated in the ascension to economic and cultural power never disappears; rather, it is repressed. When signs of this repression manifest themselves through systems like the chain gang, caught between colonial slavery and modern industry, or through tensions surrounding female sexuality – which Depression society, in reaction to the excesses of the Jazz Age in the ‘20s, also tended to repress – Hollywood, a powerful industry, denies both by explaining one in terms of the other. *Chain Gang*, in a sense, frames the licentious woman as culpable for the violent Southern penal system, and vice versa. Moreover, the studio conveys this message through a highly codified set of narrative signs which discreetly naturalize their own dominance by purporting to represent sites of resistance to the very oppressive power they simultaneously enact.

LeRoy engages ethical questions regarding *Chain Gang*’s gender politics – which equate Marie with the chain gang and reify Helen – through a similar mode of subtextual narration which subtly challenges and resists its explicit arguments. Just as woman’s absence from the chain gang does not preclude her impact on the politics of that space, the film contemplates the repression and concealment of female sexuality at other moments even when women appear to be unimportant to the plot. LeRoy literalizes this trope through a highly subtle yet uniquely allusive play on the word “silence.”

In the middle of the geographical montage sequence when Allen traverses the country while failing to find work, right after he tries to pawn his WWI medal, Allen goes to a boarding house where he meets the man who later gets him into trouble holding up the diner. In the previous scene, LeRoy emphasizes a close-up of the box that overflows with pawned war medals of now “forgotten” men, thereby instructing his viewer to pay closer attention to the aspects of the image that render themselves hyper-visible. He directs his viewer’s gaze to focus on the most blatant aspects of the image, as opposed to on its subtle and concealed elements. Therefore, he instructs his viewer to read the following shot, a “SILENCE” sign [figure 12] – the word’s capitalization literally a symbol of its hyper-visibility – outside the boarding house which also advertises beds and meals for fifteen cents and baths for five cents, the same way s/he has read the box of medals: focusing on the square shape at the center of the close-up which seems to contain to most compelling and plot-relevant visual information.

Figure 12



The edges of a drawing of a presumably naked woman border the sign, enacting and alluding subtly to what *Chain Gang*'s plot, mise-en-scène, editing and cinematography literally conceal. "SILENCE" here engenders a wealth of interpretations. Whereas the market-driven Production Codes forced filmmakers to seek a new language for expressing sexuality, denotations of the word "SILENCE" and connotations of its ironically hyper-visible form in this image imply a similar relationship. According to this analogy, the list of prices (i.e. money) manipulates formally the content or meaning of the image of the woman's body suggested beneath it. This image can be read as a metaphor

for the Hays Codes' assumption of morality and gender-related issues to serve its own financial interests, and thus as a meditation upon the ethical implications of *Chain Gang's* narrative and aesthetic. Although this image's highly subtle nature did not interfere with the vast majority of its 1932 audience's reading of the film, which reduced *Chain Gang's* politics to blatant and inaccurate propaganda, it also marks a tense site of *Chain Gang's* internal self-resistance.

The "SILENCE" sign's juxtaposition to the list of prices, which both covers and suggests various alternative readings of the woman sketched beneath it (whose wardrobe is left to the viewer's imagination) at once asserts the woman as a prostitute, conceals this suggestion, and mocks its own absurd degree of discretion. This image marks a deeply self-reflexive moment for LeRoy because he alludes to the problems generated by Hollywood's – and thus also his own – self-imposed mode of exceedingly subtle allusion: although it subverts the film's appropriation and misrepresentation of its racial, sexual, and self-proclaimed radical politics, its absurd level of discretion also diminishes the significance of its self-resistance. It reduces *Chain Gang's* genuinely radical politics arguably to the hallucination of a viewer who must scrutinize the film in order find them. Thus, *Chain Gang* self-admittedly challenges many of its own arguments, but does so discreetly enough to keep its genuinely subversive potential always at an arm's length.

Chapter 3:

Cinema and Temporality

In its promotional trailer for the film, Warner Brothers advertises *Chain Gang* as a “story of a man who has lived a thousand lives in one,” played by “Paul Muni: sensational star of the hour,” thus evoking contradictory attitudes toward the film as an experience that is at once brief and saturated, ephemeral and paradoxically time-consuming. *Chain Gang* appeals to its audience’s fascination with a compact temporality: its desire to undergo a satisfying duration of life within a relatively short temporal span. *Chain Gang*’s full-short time market pitch, which facilitated to a certain degree its financial success, suggests a Depression attitude of skepticism regarding the future. Impoverished, unemployed, and hungry viewers had difficulty looking far ahead in time, when foreseeing the next day, or even the end of the present one, posed its own set of complications.

In his analysis of pre-Code Hollywood, Thomas Doherty provides insight into the cultural implications of these Depression feelings of despair regarding the future. Doherty explores the emergence of a prevalent freight-train-riding youth culture during the early ‘30s. Children and teenagers left impoverished homes to ride illegally on freight trains across America. Doherty asserts that “adults of the Great Depression understood perfectly why their children were acting up. Given the present, who could blame them for behaving as if they had no future?” (168). From its promotional trailer, which targets its viewer’s desire to abbreviate full life experiences, to its title, *I Am a Fugitive*, which engages the present moment, to its temporal overlap with legal struggles over Burns’s extradition, *Chain Gang* exploits this “futureless” mythos thereby paradoxically enabling the New

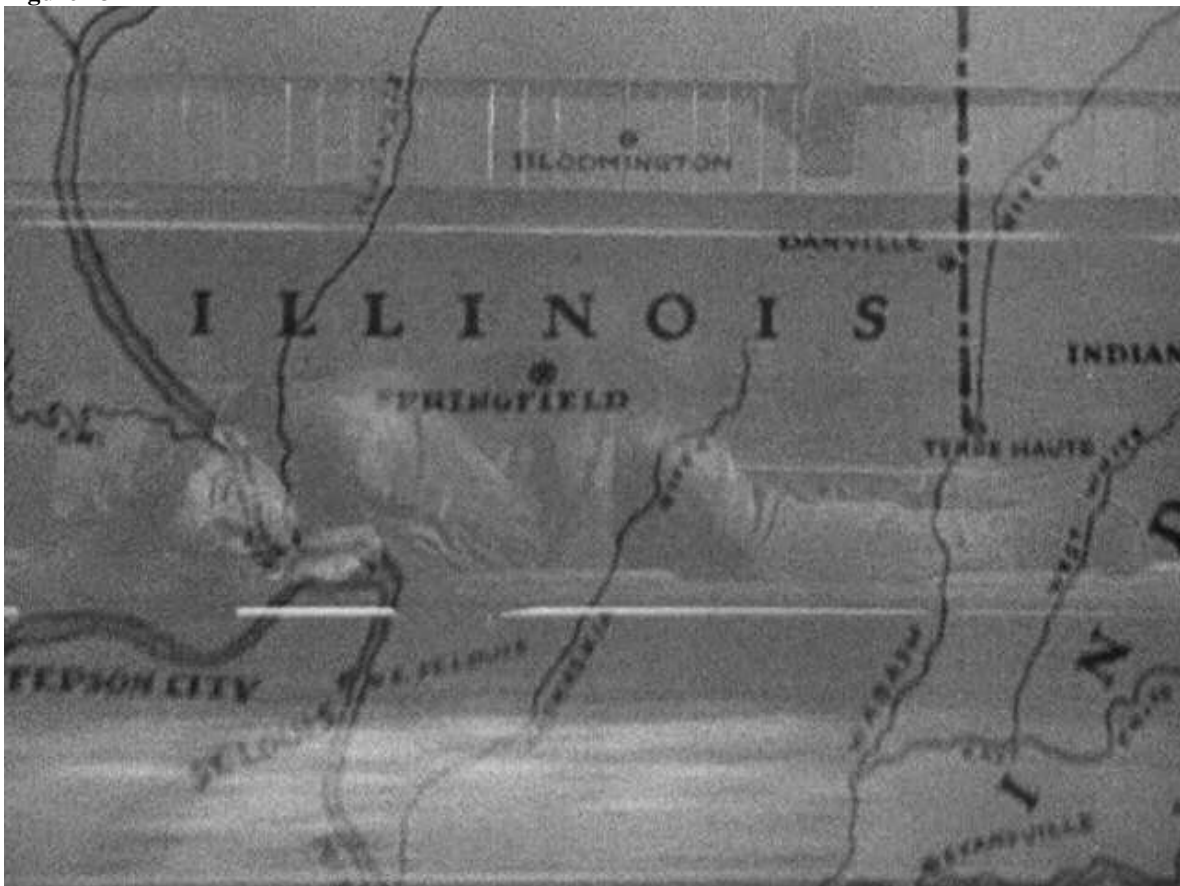
Deal's future political success by responding to the public's bewilderment regarding its own future.

Doherty's example of youth freight-train culture to illustrate Depression social despair inadvertently points to a different but related field of cultural tensions. Although Doherty uses the example to convey the restlessness of youth within perturbed familial structures, young Americans' freight-train journeys, layered with the iconicity of the train as a symbol of speed, progress, and the taming of nature by human civilization in modernity, both parallels and complicates Alex Lichtenstein's civilized-barbarity chain gang argument in *Twice the Work of Free Labor*. According to Burns's and Hollywood's representations, the chain gang epitomized a regressive and archaic South. However, Lichtenstein's argument that Southern penal violence was deeply imbricated in its efforts to modernize gives Allen's freight-train-hopping activity in *Chain Gang* a perverse and ambiguous resonance when applied to Doherty's train analysis.

Like the culture of freight-train-hopping – which symbolized speedily and purposefully going nowhere in particular – Allen's movement by train across the country condenses while over-narrating *Chain Gang*'s temporality. LeRoy narrates Allen's movement through several geographical montage sequences of the image of a moving train superimposed over a pan across a map of the U.S. [figure 13]. These montages abbreviate Allen's spatial and temporal movement through diegetic spaces, while drawing explicit attention to their act of doing so, in that they gloss over other plot-relevant aspects of the narrative during these sequences. For example, they do not visualize Allen's physical existence inside of the trains. Further, just as the train marked for '30s American culture a tense, contradictory site of technological progress and

economic stasis or deflation, as a visual superimposition during *Chain Gang's* montage narratives, the train functions as a location of simultaneous temporal stasis and acceleration: the montage, in a sense, annihilates diegetic time by accelerating it and glossing over it.

Figure 13



For Lichtenstein, as for Horkheimer and Adorno, the effects of a social and economic clash between tradition and modernization emerge in visible and physical sites of violence. *Chain Gang*'s superimposed train montage narration, however, articulates a subtler but related sense of symbolic temporal violence. The sight of the train – freight-hopping as a last resort – provokes its 1932 viewer's cultural anxieties. These tensions, overlaid with the train montage's temporal frustration in the context of the narrative – by eliding time, it distrusts its own ability to narrate stories – convey a sense of repressed temporal violence. The irony of the montage, its accidental clash of intention and subtextual meaning here, conforms to dynamics similar to those of the iconic status of the chain gang in this Hollywood film: both parade their own coherence in order to frustrate alternative readings.

Although *Chain Gang*'s use of montage represents a 1932 Hollywood trope, its position within *Chain Gang*'s politically-charged narrative complicates its status as a formulaic editing technique. By rendering its condensation of space and time hyper-visible, while simultaneously repressing its protagonist's story, *Chain Gang*'s montage structurally parallels its problematic political arguments: that the Southern penal system represents a uniquely culpable force in American culture. Thus, LeRoy's geographical-temporal montage narration, by matching its dichotomized hyper-visible/invisible visual paradigms, further corners its viewer into a total identification with the film's New Deal-friendly political arguments against the Southern penal system.

In her analysis of cinematic temporality, Mary Ann Doane theorizes early cinema's cultural function regarding the rationalization and standardization of thought, economy, and social hierarchies. In the context of *Chain Gang*'s technique for

manipulating its representations of time and space, Doane's treatment of cinema's essential role in archiving, ordering, and thus dictating cultural memories sheds light on LeRoy's use of montage to structure *Chain Gang's* diegetic meaning. Doane describes early cinema's participation in regulating time, which fostered the stability of the capitalist economies that produced and engendered its technological evolution.

Doane argues that whereas "the flow of time, in a capitalist economy, is increasingly regularized, systematized, [and] normalized" (106), the notion of a present moment – which signifies a realm of chance and uncertainty – "also and simultaneously poses a threat, that of meaninglessness, pure and uncontrollable contingency" (106). Cinema's indexicality, its claims to reproduce recorded absent moments for its viewer, according to Doane, facilitates the medium's simultaneous fascination with and its threat of subversion of a totalized rational order. Thus, cinema's archival function, its ability to contain and to historicize these threats of uncertainty and of contingency within a present moment, harnesses and asserts control over the material it records. Cinema, by at once parading its ability to render the present moment, and perpetually haunting its purported reproduction of that present moment with its essential and immediate past-ness, structures its own mode of discourse around the ideals of capitalism: hierarchy, reason, and order. The present instant, cinema's chief fascination, is always illusory.

Chain Gang's geo-temporal montage sequences illustrate Doane's ideas, and give them force and relevance when applied to the temporal politics of early '30s Depression, burgeoning New Deal American culture. LeRoy weaves together *Chain Gang's* episodic narration with repetitive montage sequences that primarily explore Allen's journeys through different spaces, or his progressions through time while confined to closed

spaces. The most elaborate of these in the film occurs after Allen's initial departure from his home in New Jersey to travel across the country with the ultimate goal of finding work on a construction site. The montage progresses through a series of images of moving trains across open landscapes, or steamboats through water, superimposed over pans across regions of a map of the U.S., which trace for the viewer Allen's rapid, although scattered, movement through the country. LeRoy intercuts between these images clips of Allen visiting construction sites in different cities where, each time, he fails to find stable or long-term employment.

Chain Gang articulates a mounting tension here between the film's spatial condensation of American geography – trains and boats parallel LeRoy's cinematography and speedily deliver Allen from New Jersey, to Boston, to New Orleans, to Lake Michigan, to St. Louis – and its intermittent disruption of its own narration. By making *Chain Gang's* harnessing and containment of space and time here the focus of its protagonist's story, the film relapses into a reflexive and essentially anti-plot mode of narrative which begs the question of cinema as a spatially and temporally regulative archival medium. The montage naturalizes cinema's essential, as Doane would argue, capitalism-friendly capacity to condense and to regulate space and time. LeRoy does not merely cut from city to city, and depict Allen's plot-relevant attempts and failures to find work at multiple, geographically dispersed construction sites; Allen's physical movement – or rather, the train's, boat's, and camera's movements – occupy the substance of the narrative duration and visual content of this montage. LeRoy focuses on these modern machines – which accelerate travel and communication through vast distances– thus

elevating cinema's essential time/space capacities in the montage to a greater level of narrative importance than Allen's personal story.

Further, this montage's contextual embeddedness in tenuous Depression economic realities both parallels and complicates Doane's insight into the threat of contingency with which a present moment confronts ordered capitalist society. If codified cinema's structured logic functions to subvert and to deploy this threat of contingency, *Chain Gang's* meta-cinematic – in that it reflects upon the implications of film as a mode of modern discourse – use of montage contemplates its own participation in structuring and propagating its capitalist logic. LeRoy's montage at once naturalizes its ordered narration of the human-driven condensation of time and space, and meditates upon it, thereby, in a sense, provoking questions about it. However, a closer reading of Allen's participation in LeRoy's depiction of his journey across the country further complicates this interpretation.

During the majority of the montage, the speedy trains and boats which shepherd Allen from city to city occupy the entire frame of the image. Thus, the machines make Allen disappear as an individual body: his existence and movement is implied in theirs. However, the last train sequence – which depicts Allen's travel from Lake Michigan to St. Louis – reveals Allen's body huddled furtively at the bottom of the train superimposed over another pan across a map of the United States. Presumably, Allen's depleted financial resources and his failure to find work have forced him, like many of *Chain Gang's* 1932 viewers, to ride illegally while occupying a space in the train not intended for human passengers. This moment, which depicts Allen's visual reappearance in a space designated solely for the machine, also provided *Chain Gang's* Depression

viewer a heightened opportunity for identification and self-recognition. In effect, Allen's poverty prevents both his physical disappearance, and his story's depersonalization and replacement by images of machines that instantiate abstract time-space meta-narratives. Further, it reintroduces the importance of structured and human-focused narrative in the space of *Chain Gang's* montage.

According to a Doanian reading, however, Allen's poverty ironically forces *Chain Gang's* montage to conform further to a capitalist structural logic. The montage's initial depictions of moving trains and boats superimposed over a U.S. map ostensibly render an anti-plot narrative, signaling cinema's essential ability to condense space and time.

Whereas this montage forces *Chain Gang's* diegesis to revert to a gimmicky '30s Hollywood editing trope, Allen's physical reappearance weaves LeRoy's meditation upon the role of the machine in modern society back into the protagonist's story. By portraying the map, the train, and the individual (Allen) in a single image, during a particularly resonant moment for a Depression viewer, LeRoy perversely guides his audience to conflate a reflection of their own image – or of an image powerfully embedded in their cultural symbols – with a less plot-oriented depiction of the role trains and boats, and, through its similar position in modern technology, cinema as well, play in taming and compressing nature and vast spaces.

These ideas reflect Horkheimer and Adorno's argument that the tension engendered by modernity's repression of tradition and ritual resurfaces in barbarity. Lichtenstein extends this analysis to the politics of the chain gang. In the context of the montage sequence, the relevance of these modernity arguments is manifest: a visual repression of Allen's physical body from the space of the train during the first two thirds

of the sequence results in his subsequent violent and awkward deployment to the train's cargo. Doane's temporal theory both reinforces and raises questions about this argument. If the beginning of the montage, which omits Allen's body from the train/map superimposition, also signifies an anti-narrative contemplation of modernity's role in condensing time and space, then the disruptive resurfacing of Allen's body here arguably aligns itself with the montage's defiance of what Doane calls "the lure of contingency" (107). She explains this as "the fascination of a present moment in which anything can happen, [being] safely deployed. The present—as the mark of contingency in time—is made tolerable, readable, archivable, and, not least, pleasurable" (107). Allen's physical reappearance, which results in a humanized narrativization of the train/map superimposition, effectively disrupts this threat of contingency that the human-less machine/map images pose.

Although the dehumanized images of moving trains and maps seem to conform to Doane's idea of an archivable present moment that subverts its own threat of contingency, I would argue that they achieve an inverse effect. By disrupting and distracting a viewer from her/his identification with Allen's physical presence, they announce, and thereby circumvent, their preoccupations with time and space. In this way, the time-space montages function similarly to the film's representation of a forgotten man trope. By paradoxically rendering itself a spectacle, the forgotten man myth in *Chain Gang* distracts its viewer's attention from what it at the same time makes hyper-visible: its "subversive" politics. A featured close-up during the pawnshop scene – which LeRoy

sandwiches between two geographical montage segments – of a box of WWI medals functions to disrupt its viewer's reading of the film's subtler alternative politics.³

In *Chain Gang*, the montage's reflection upon its own implication in modern temporality/spatiality is embedded in this New Deal propaganda logic: the montage visually and functionally reflects the image of the war medals. However, the montage's theoretical implications are radically different. Whereas LeRoy's narrative emphasis on the political importance of the forgotten WWI heroes facilitates *Chain Gang's* New Deal propaganda function, its montage time-space contemplations make abstract its narrative responsibilities. Employing a technique similar to the one he uses for the geographical montage, LeRoy illustrates the passing of Allen's time on the chain gang, on the construction site, and in other confined or localized spaces with repeated long-take close-ups of month pages falling off calendars. Again, by glossing over Allen's personal story and replacing it with self-aware accelerations of his temporal existence and condensations of his movement through space, the film provokes a heightened contemplation of its own contingency. Particularly in their culturally and economically unstable Depression context, when many viewers were bewildered by the notion of their futures, these montages reveal the anxiety and uncertainty they no doubt provoked for much of their audience.

Although LeRoy harnesses these intermittent montages, weaving them into *Chain Gang's* story, their resonant articulations of time/space anxieties point to another central fear that has paradoxically shaped trajectories of film and photographic theory since its birth: the fear of death. LeRoy's aesthetic techniques during these montage sequences associate themselves with other non-montage moments during the film through their

³ See Chapter 2 for my analysis of this scene.

repeated use of superimpositions. In a scene on the chain gang, LeRoy references death explicitly while making a visual comparison to the corpse-like position of Allen's body when he is huddled under the train, superimposed over the map during the montage sequence. Allen and his fellow prisoners watch their friend Barney's release from the chain gang through their barred windows. LeRoy introduces this scene with a fade from a close-up of a calendar page that says "June 5" to a full shot of the men peeking through their barred slit of a window [figure 14]. Thus, LeRoy emphasizes this scene's diegetic temporal position from its opening image.

Figure 14



Further, the image of the men looking through time foregrounds a self-reflexive moment for the film's viewer. The superimposition of the calendar quickly fades, exposing the men's ability to look through time as illusory. Like the cinematic viewer's temporary ability to transcend her/his own spatial/temporal limitations, Allen's and the men's ability to look through time emerges as a visual editing trick. The calendar image disappears and, yet again, an image of backlit prison bars that cast dramatic shadows on the men's faces confronts *Chain Gang's* viewer.

Chain Gang subsequently literalizes and complicates these themes of illusory temporal escapism. After Barney leaves, the men observe a different alternative to serving out a full sentence on the chain gang: Red – the prisoner whose individual frailty LeRoy emphasizes during the earlier work scenes – has died, and several guards remove his coffin. LeRoy cuts from a view of the prisoners calculating their remaining time on the chain gang to a full shot of Red's coffin as guards haul it onto a truck to remove it from the premises. However, as the guards slide the coffin across a wooden plank, LeRoy reminds the viewer whose body it contains by superimposing a flashback to an earlier image of Red, passed out, his emaciated and unmoving body sprawled across the ground, over the image of the coffin [figure 15]. As an alternative to the Expressionistic, angularly backlit, bleak space of the prison quarters, the image of Red's coffin initially strikes its viewer as serene and as aesthetically pleasing. Further, LeRoy presents the coffin in a positive context. As Bomber later remarks to Allen before Allen's first escape, "no matter what happens, it's better than this." The film thus presents death as an appealing alternative to the excruciating existence of life on a chain gang – a meaningful argument in the context of tumultuous and desperate Depression society.

As Doane asserts, the role of narrative for the cinematic archive is deeply imbricated in film's function as a means of disrupting or redefining contemplation of physical death and decay. However, the coffin/live-corpse superimposition expresses a rejection of the power of the coffin as a coherent referent. LeRoy does not trust his viewer to make a connection between the coffin and the deteriorating body of Red on the chain gang. LeRoy disrupts the image of the coffin as a coherent signifier, and fragments it, superimposing a visual explanation of what the coffin signifies over its own image. The coffin – soon to serve as a literal vehicle for recently released Barney on his way to town, and as a physical surface for Barney to light a match for his cigarette – vehicularizes the idea of Chain Gang's anti-narrative, and its suggestion of death as something outside of a story: death as an alternative to grappling with unsettling Hollywood and real-life experiences. The image of the coffin alone apparently does not suffice for LeRoy to narrate the story of Red's murder by the chain gang.

Further, this living corpse/coffin superimposition inadvertently literalizes a central trope of film theory: Andre Bazin's idea of a mummy complex. In his *Change Mummified*, Philip Rosen describes Bazin's idea as grappling with a cultural "need for some fantastic defense against time... 'Civilization cannot cast out the bogey of time.' It can only construct modes of coming to grips with it, of engaging it, of countering it. The mummies thus supply Bazin with a carefully chosen symptom, a founding desire" (21). Bazin theorizes the cinematic archive as fulfilling an essential collective need to record and to preserve time as a defense against underlying fears of death and of obscurity. This concept also resembles Horkheimer and Adorno's modernity argument in its theorization of civilization and technology's violent and barbaric morbidity. In other words, cinema's

archiving of temporality exemplifies the *Dialectic's* observation regarding how civilization and technology repress custom and ritual.

Chain Gang's montage illustrates this notion of cinema as a temporally repressive medium. When Allen reemerges amidst the film's depersonalized train/map narrative – which essentially suspends the plot as a result of over-narrating it – he appears neither vital nor animated. Rather, he is dirty, disheveled, and crouched in a corpse-like position – which LeRoy further plays off of with Red's coffin/living-dead body superimposition – underneath a moving train. Further, applied to Doane's argument that cinema's repressive codification of its own temporality fosters the logic of a capitalist economy, Allen's morbid reappearance as an impoverished hobo – which also visualizes the figure of a mummy – reasserts *Chain Gang* as an example of New Deal propaganda. By provoking for its viewer a lure of contingency, and then restructuring these Depression temporal anxieties to conform to a story of Allen's financial and physical decline, *Chain Gang* appealed to its 1932 audience, even on abstract temporal/spatial planes, as recognizing and addressing problems of widespread poverty and economic instability. However, *Chain Gang* deceptively manipulates its own appeal, on many levels, to foster the very capitalistic structures which engendered Depression America's cultural and economic problems.

Figure 15

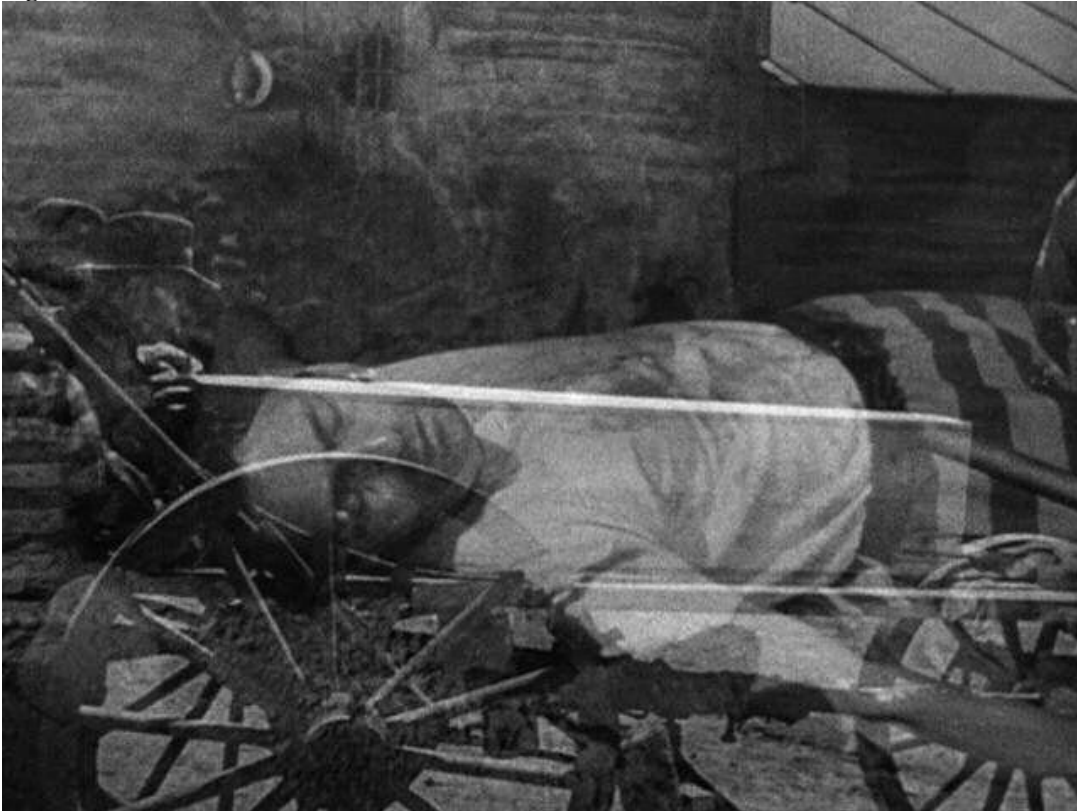
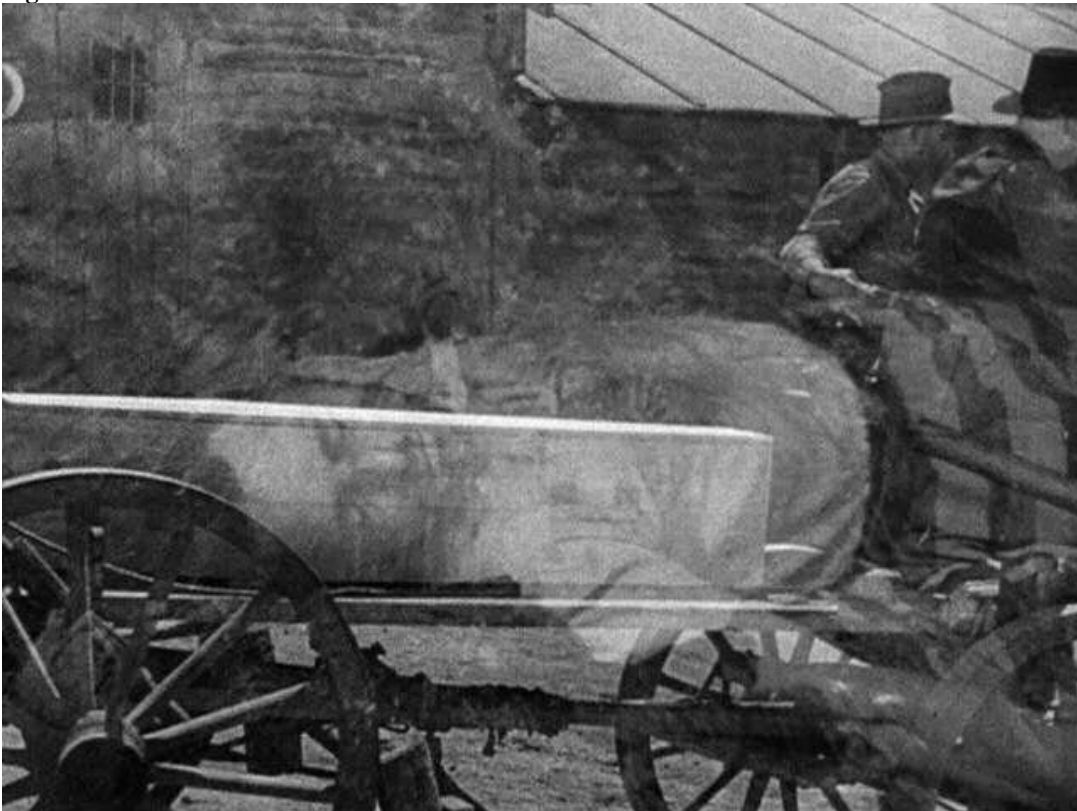


Figure 16



Further, these superimposition comparisons provide more nuanced textual insight into the propaganda-charged final scene, in which a beleaguered Allen disappears from his own story. When the superimposition of Red, unconscious, on the chain gang, first appears, Red's indistinct comatose figure resembles Allen. In this way, Red's image invites its accidental misinterpretation, thereby providing a visualization of Allen's own death. However, the image becomes immediately recognizable when a guard splashes Red's body with water, enabling its viewer to locate the nondescript white figure within its narrative context, and to identify him correctly as Red [figure 16]. The superimposition, then, accidentally suggests and then annihilates Allen's dead body from the image: narrative memory of the splashing water precludes the possibility of the body as Allen's, forcing dead Allen's disappearance. Just as in the final scene, Allen's body becomes invisible, but not forgotten.

Whereas the superimposition of Red's image – which contains a suggestion of Allen's corpse – disrupts the coffin's narration of Red's death, Allen's disappearance from the frame in the final scene literalizes *Chain Gang's* tensions between contradicting ideas of death/contingency and narrative. The scene opens with an image of a crumpled up newspaper [figure 17], thereby visualizing the growing public irrelevance of Allen's story. The article asks: "What has become of James Allen?—Is he, too, just another forgotten man?" The clash between Allen's forgotten-ness and his persistent public visibility alludes to the WWI medal scene, which, as I argue in chapter 2, functions within a complex network of New Deal propaganda. However, here, LeRoy aestheticizes Allen's news story's obscurity with a dimly lit close-up of the crumpled up newspaper.

Thus, this image of his genuine societal repression further complicates the paradox inherent in a publicly hyper-visible forgotten man.

In Chapter 2, I read this final scene as eliciting and co-opting its viewer's resistant political energy. However, in the context of the film's contemplations of death and narrative, Allen's visual disappearance from the frame [figure 18], and his story's disappearance from *Chain Gang's* diegetic public's attention yield slightly different, but politically analogous, readings. Although, at the end, Allen disappears from his own story both visually and biographically, the paradoxically heightened level of dramatic intensity that LeRoy renders during this final scene parallels *Chain Gang's* temporal strategy. Like the film's earlier use of montage and superimpositions to fragment its story's cohesion, which simultaneously strengthen its narrative authority, its closing scene cements the totality of this formula: Allen's disappearance from visibility seems paradoxically to strengthen his story's cultural importance and narrative authority.

Figure 17

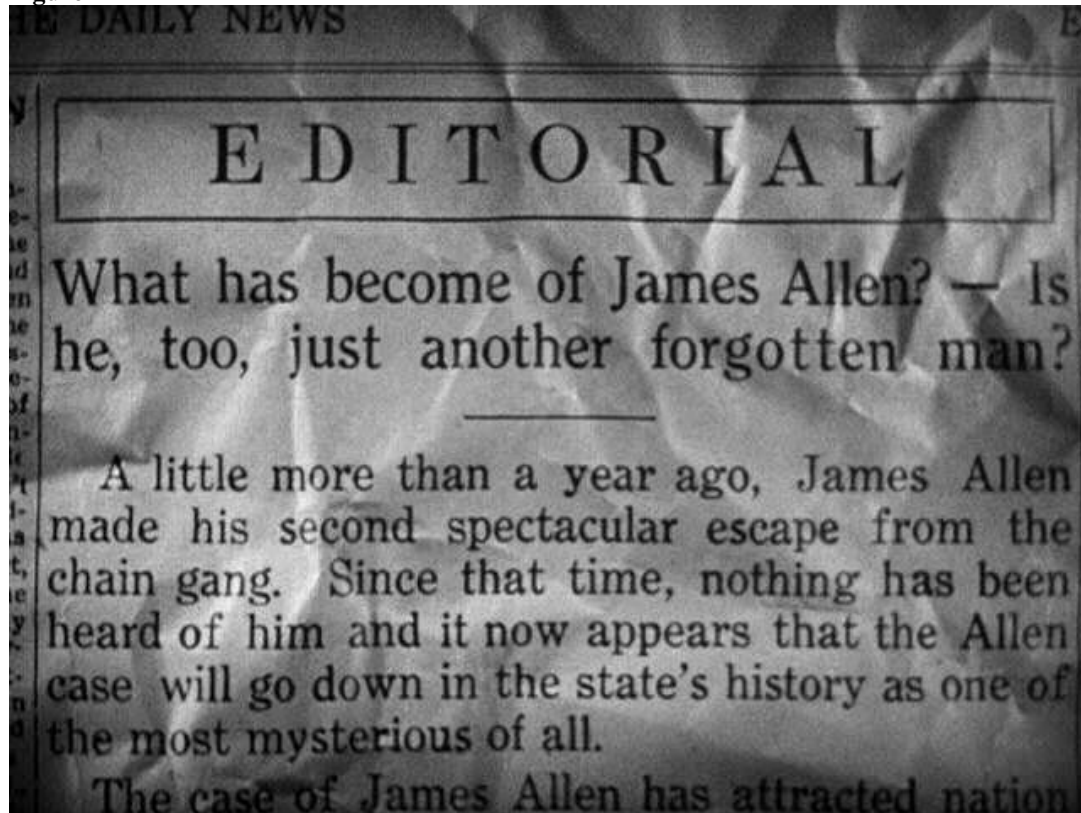


Figure 18



The film concludes with an assertion of uncertainty regarding Allen's financial, romantic, and temporal – how much longer will he even survive as a mendicant? – futures. To reinforce these senses of uncertainty, a gradually pitch black image engulfs Allen's disheveled and deteriorating body while he backs farther and farther away from his fiancée, Helen, and thus also from a stable existence in modern civilization – the ensuing lack of light is itself a metaphor for a society without cinema. In other words, the end of *Chain Gang* parades its narrative – as well as its own medium's – contingency.

However, the scene's opening image, the crumpled up newspaper headline's formulation of Allen's perplexing disappearance, sheds light on the film's closing emphasis of its own contingency. The article asserts that since Allen's second escape, “nothing has been heard of him and it now appears that the Allen case will go down in the state's history as one of the most mysterious of all.” However, the ignored appearance of the newspaper suggests how proclaiming Allen's story, at last, a mystery, enacts its own sense of narrative closure. Thus, the ending of *Chain Gang* repositions Depression experiences of uncertainty and modern contingency, aligning and conflating them with notions that narrative necessarily provides stable and coherent final conclusions.

Although the film appears to annihilate the existence of its protagonist, *Chain Gang*'s ending functions very much under the logic of its New Deal propaganda. The film's purported cultural iconoclasm only disguised its perpetuation of pre-existing Western, capitalistic myths. In its final assertion of despair, *Chain Gang* culminates its sustained fascination with its self-destructive tendencies: James Allen erases his existence by inverting his identity to become engineer Allen James, and then later explodes and

destroys the bridges he once participated in constructing after his identity has relapsed back into James Allen.

Cinema's imperceptible but essential absence of authentic movement further illustrates *Chain Gang's* deceptive articulation of a self-destructive paradigm. Film creates the appearance of movement by projecting onto a screen a succession of still photograms at no less than twenty-four frames per second. Garrett Stewart describes film's stasis as a negation of its apparent movement. "Since film is like language...it also rests in this sense upon a double negation. Just as the reversed transparency is the negative of the still image, the photogram on the track is the negative imprint of cinematic movement" (Stewart 82). In other words, a photogram's furious spinning in reels compensates for its underlying stasis to produce the illusion of movement.

Just as the material projection of James Allen's story in *Chain Gang* enacts cinema's fundamental physical illusion, Allen's repeated and final disappearances – from both the image and the meta-narrative – culminates this illusion. *Chain Gang* parades its narrative, visual, and temporal contingency in order paradoxically to enable New Deal propaganda strategies. Therefore, *Chain Gang's* composition is so deeply embedded in its promotion of New Deal propaganda, that this embeddedness impacts the film's structure, from its story, to its montage editing, to its cinematography and special effects superimpositions, to its lighting design in the final scene, and to its temporality. In the context of the arguments I make in chapters 1 and 2 regarding *Chain Gang's* appropriation of racial, gender, and communist political issues to advance its New Deal propaganda, the ways in which the film's political message shapes even its structured temporal language can only strike *Chain Gang's* critical reader as deeply problematic.

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