

THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN
Department of History
Semester II: 1977

History 397: The United States, 1917-Present

Mr. Glad

James M. Burns, ROOSEVELT: THE LION AND THE FOX
Thomas C. Cochran, THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND WORLD WAR II
William E. Leuchtenburg, THE PERILS OF PROSPERITY, 1914-32
Lawrence S. Wittner, COLD WAR AMERICA

First Week (January 24-28)

Reading: Leuchtenburg, 1-34

Jan. 25 Introduction: The Course and Its Requirements

Jan. 27 Lecture: Walter Lippmann, Woodrow Wilson and Progressivism

Second Week (January 31-February 4)

Reading: Leuchtenburg, 35-83

Feb. 1 Film: DAWN PATROL (1930, 103m)

Feb. 1 Lecture: The Great Crusade

Feb. 3 Lecture: Wilson and the League of Nations

Third Week (February 7-11)

Reading: Leuchtenburg, 84-139, 158-203

Discussion Sections

Feb. 8 Lecture: America in the Twenties

Feb. 10 Lecture: Politics and Dissent in the Dollar Decade

Fourth Week (February 14-18)

Reading: Leuchtenburg, 140-157, 204-240

Feb. 15 Film: DARK HORSE (1931, 75m)

Feb. 15 Lecture: Expatriates and Fundamentalists

Feb. 17 Lecture: Herbert Hoover and George F. Babbitt

Fifth Week (February 21-25)

Reading: Leuchtenburg, 241-273; Cochran, 1-33

Discussion Sections

Feb. 22 Lecture: A Nation's Nightmare

Feb. 24 EXAMINATION

Sixth Week (February 28-March 4)

Reading: Burns, 3-157

Mar. 1 Film: HEROES FOR SALE (1933, 73m)

Mar. 1 Lecture: FDR and His Rendezvous with Destiny

Mar. 3 Lecture: FDR and Economic Theory

Seventh Week (March 7-11)

Reading: Burns, 161-263; Cochran, 34-67

Discussion Sections

Mar. 8 Lecture: Industry, Agriculture, and the New Deal

Mar. 10 Lecture: The New Deal and the Welfare State

Eighth Week (March 14-18)

Reading: Burns, 264-357; Cochran, 68-131

Mar. 15 Film: THE PETRIFIED FOREST (1936, 83m)

Mar. 15 Lecture: The Culture of the Thirties

Mar. 17 Lecture: The New Deal, the Courts, and Recession

Ninth Week (March 21-25)

Reading: Burns, 358-430; Cochran, 132-165

Mar. 22 Film: THE EDGE OF DARKNESS (1943, 120m)

Mar. 22 Lecture: American Isolationism and the Coming of War

Mar. 24 Lecture: World War II

Tenth Week (March 28-April 1)

Reading: Wittner, 3-85

Discussion Sections

Mar. 29 Lecture: Americans and the Cold War

Mar. 31 Lecture: Triumphs and Troubles of Harry Truman

Eleventh Week (April 11-15)

Reading: Wittner, 86-140

Discussion Sections

April 12 Lecture: Joseph R. McCarthy and the American People

April 14 EXAMINATION

Twelfth Week (April 18-22)

Reading: Wittner, 141-236

April 19 Films: DIVIDE AND CONQUER (1942 short, 15m); ASSASSINATION
(TV episodes from I LED THREE LIVES [1953-55] and
A MAN CALLED X [1956], both 30m)

April 19 Lecture: Eisenhower, Peace, and Moderation

April 21 Lecture: Camelot, Calamity, and the Roots of Conflict

Thirteenth Week (April 25-29)

Reading: Wittner, 237-301

Discussion Sections

April 26 Lecture: Winds of Change across Black America

April 28 Lecture: The Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson

Fourteenth Week (May 2-6)

Reading: Wittner, review 161-165, 226-230, 243-246, 251-254, 257-259,
272-274, 279-284, and read 302-332

May 3 Film: YANKEE COME HOME (TV episode from THE DEFENDERS
[1964], 60m)

May 3 Lecture: The Tragedy of Vietnam

May 5 Lecture: Modernity and Its Discontents

Fifteenth Week (May 9-13)

Reading: Wittner, read 333-373, and review 272-301

Discussion Sections

May 10 Lecture: Nixon and Watergate

May 12 Lecture: Feminist Phoenix

Sixteenth Week (May 16-20)

Reading: Wittner, review 302-332 and read 374-375

Discussion Sections

May 17 Lecture: Americans and Their Environment

May 19 Lecture: The Incredible, the Plausible, and Mankind at
the Turning Point

FINAL EXAMINATION

COURSE PROCEDURE

Classes: While most class sessions are taken up with lectures, considerable time is allocated to discussions. At some of the discussion sessions the class will receive lists of questions. Students may use the discussion periods to obtain clarification of the questions and ideas about appropriate responses to them. The major emphasis of the discussions, however, will be on the assigned readings and other materials that may be related to them.

Films and Tapes: This is a course in American history, not a course in music or cinema. Nevertheless sights and sounds play an important part in the semester's work. As indicated on the syllabus, there are seven film viewing sessions. All films are shown at 6 P.M. in 2630 Humanities on the dates indicated. Contemporary films are important because they provide a unique historical insight that may be provocative and revealing. Sounds as well as sights of the past may increase our understanding. The instructors have made several tapes of contemporary music, speeches, and other materials. These tapes are played during the 15 minute interval prior to lectures.

Papers: Because the tapes are run outside of class time, students are not held responsible for materials contained therein. Students who wish to do so, however, may write papers on movies they see in this course. A paper on a given film should evaluate that film as an artifact or historical document. The paper should, in other words, examine what the film reveals about the time in which it was made. The emphasis should be on historical investigation, not cinematic criticism.

The following comments are offered to those who contemplate writing papers on the films. You can do much of the basic research before you see the film. You can learn something about the film itself, and in some cases you can even read the script. More importantly, you can learn much about the time in which the film was made. As you view the film, be alert to relationships between what you know about the historical context and what you see on the screen. Once you have seen the film, you can set about writing your paper. How does the film reflect ideas and attitudes, events and circumstances that were important in the period when the film was released? What insights into that period can be gained from seeing the film? In responding to such questions, you should remember that the relationship between the film and its context may not be obvious or blatant. The revealing exploration of the film as a historical document requires imagination as well as command of factual information. A rehash of the plot or a simple chronology of the period serves little purpose. The film document, like any

other historical document, may be used well or badly. The more you know about its historical context, the more effective your use of the film will be. Attached to this syllabus are copies of student papers on the film, GOLD DIGGERS OF 1933. These papers suggest several possible approaches to a particular film, and they provide models that may be applicable to other films.

Papers should be no more than seven typewritten pages or approximately 2,000 words in length. They are due within one week after showing of the film being discussed.

Examinations: There are two hour examinations and one final examination. Each hour exam includes fifteen identification questions, taken from the readings, and two essay questions drawing upon lectures and discussions as well as readings. One of the essay questions will come from the lists handed out in group discussions prior to exams, and the other is made available during the last lecture period prior to the examination period. The final examination includes three essay questions and twenty identification questions. Students may refer to books, notes, and other materials in writing essays, but such matter may not be used during the identification portion of examinations.

Grading: The final grade should reflect both the quality of a student's mind and the depth of his/her involvement in the course. The grade on a paper or an examination indicates the reader's assessment of that particular piece of work. Film papers and hour examinations carry equal weight in the final evaluation; the final examination is given a double grade. Writing the examinations fulfills the minimum course requirement, but those who meet only that minimum should expect grades no higher than "C". Those who aspire to better things must have completed one or more film papers. "A" and "AB" students will normally write at least two such papers; "B" and "BC" students will normally write at least one. Honors students are expected to write four film papers. At the end of the semester the paper and examination grades are averaged for each student.

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STUDENT PAPERS ON "THE GOLD DIGGERS OF 1933"
The University of Wisconsin, 1976

"The Different World of Depression Musicals" by Carol M. Stirdivant

People of every decade throughout history have dreamed; they have hoped, prayed, pretended, and fantasized. Beyond the membranes of the mind lay a better world where the sun always shines and the grass is always green. Man needs this retreat, his place to forget the problems and disappointments of everyday life--a place to which he can escape.

During the 1930s perhaps more than during any other time, Americans needed a better life even if it had to be artificial. Many could no longer tolerate the bread lines, the hunger, the loss of pride and prosperity. With only a gloomy future ahead of them, there was little to hope for; the good life was only a dream, perhaps a novel or a film. It was without a doubt the film industry that captured, as it still does in some cases today, the emotions and fantasies of all. Motion pictures created celluloid happiness. Song and dance along with countless smiles and kisses could at least temporarily let one forget the pain of hunger and unemployment.

The Gold Diggers of 1933 brought to life the man every woman wanted and needed. He was handsome and, even in the midst of depression, wealthy. Money! What so many would do for it is hard to explain. Individuals took demeaning jobs which were often far below their abilities and goals. Some sold apples on street corners and others begged. It was not an era of personal accomplishment or high self esteem.

It was an era that belonged to closed banks and foreclosed property. Citizens lived in shanty-towns called Hoovervilles after the president who failed to bring back prosperity. As was brought out in the film, men marched in the rain for doughnuts, stood in lines for soup, and formed "The Parade of Tears."

The gold diggers' antics kept viewers laughing in spite of the underlying tragedy. Comedy was accentuated by the girls' frivolous spending which was at best reminiscent of the twenties. Imagine being able to buy a \$75 hat when most could not afford a 75¢ meal. Such was the dream of many, but the reality of few.

It was true, as it always is, that not everyone suffered from the great depression. Nothing ever includes everyone; there is always an exception or two. And while the grass is often considered greener on the other side, it probably was greener during the thirties. Those untouched by poverty were few, but indeed better off. How nice it was to be rescued, like the gold diggers, from the hell of depression.

Unemployed and stealing milk, they too were reaching the bad times. Show after show closed and there was no money to finance any production. The theater industry was in worse shape than many others since it produced nothing of great importance for survival. Entertainment was a luxury, and food was in higher demand than fun. It was the beginning of a tragic film. Starving starlets marching in bread lines and shivering in the cold could have developed without surprise, but who wanted to see a movie about "real" life?

The Gold Diggers of 1933 opened with an ironic song: "We're in the Money." It showed lavish costumes, pretty girls, and full-scale production until a man announced that the show was closed down because bills had not been paid. The costumes were collected, and one girl commented that it was the fourth show in two months she had been released from. "They close before they open," she remarked. And such was the story of the theater.

Joan Blondell and Ruby Keeler complained about the endless unemployment, the lack of rent money and groceries, and (perhaps worst of all to a showgirl) the lack of anything decent to wear. Even the director of the show, who had ideas by the millions, lacked dollars in the millions to support his plans.

At this point in a typical depression story, the plot took a turn. Instead of dredging up reasons for the crash or cures for it, it skipped the political rhetoric, the presidential change, the New Deal, and all the other everyday problems facing the American people. It fulfilled the American dream of prosperity. As unrealistic as it could possibly be, the story had fantastic entertainment value.

In the middle of depression tragedy, who should appear but the hero? In this case, a man with money was the only one able to fill the role. He entered with some mystery since he had wealth, and he developed into the lost son of some millionaire. Nothing could be more fictitious or more happily accepted.

The film took people into a different world, back to the days of wine and music. The good life that so many had known was relived. Fine clothes and romance created a fairy tale for those who watched. For many it may have been a premonition of what they hoped would come. There was money somewhere (even if it was from a fictitious millionaire) and jobs seemed promising if show girls were being employed.

Money was being spent in that make-believe world, and of course the real world was ready for a change. It had a new president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and no place to go but up. The economy had hit rock-bottom because of over-speculation and then fear. With "nothing to fear, but fear itself" the American people were desperate for a new program.

In spite of its light theme and entertainment purpose as a musical, The Gold Diggers of 1933 carried throughout the bitter reality of 1933. The last number, after everyone should have lived-happily-ever-after, could have brought a tear to many an eye. "My Forgotten Man" was sung in memory of the countless men who had fought for their country and their way of life. It was sung for those men who now marched in bread lines instead of battle lines, and who may have been veterans of the Bonus Expeditionary Force as well as the AEF.

The pathetic finale showed shabby men pleading with outstretched arms for the things and values they held so dearly--for the dreams they had fought for. As they cried, the chorus sang, "Remember my forgotten man--but look at him now."

Bibliography

Dulles, Eleanor, Depression and Reconstruction. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1936.

Ellis, Edward Robb, A Nation in Torment. New York: Capricorn Books, 1971.

Galbraith, John Kenneth, The Great Crash. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1961.

"Symbolism, Escape, and Social Fantasy" by Geraldine Hummer

Punctuated with depression jokes, The Gold Diggers of 1933 is a "pure thirties" movie. No one would mistake this musical for art or even for an attempt to portray American life in the thirties. It can be viewed simply as a good-natured, funny, and in part unbelievable musical comedy. Or it can be viewed as a study in symbolism.

The cast reads like a Who's Who of Hollywood: Joan Blondell, Dick Powell, Ruby Keeler, Ginger Rogers, and Guy Kibbee. All went on to greater fame and fortune in the tinsel glamour town. Wading through the simplistic story line of this and other early Warner Brothers' musicals, one can see that they capitalized on the early golden age of sound and music.

In the early thirties the vitaphone was a proven success which was exploited by lavish song and dance numbers. Later, when the movie-going public became more accustomed to hearing as well as seeing their favorites of the silver screen, more realistic and intriguing plots were put forth. Here, however, the backdrop of the "backstage" boy-meets-girl plot is used as an excuse for extravagant musical numbers. In this way the vulgarity of the big numbers can be justified.

Gold Diggers was a worthy showcase for the choreographic talents of Busby Berkeley. His memorable geometry of patterned chorines is climaxed in the illuminated violin routine. Only true trivia collectors will recall that "there was an earthquake while this sequence was being staged, and several of the wired lovelies were short-circuited."¹ Undaunted, Berkeley continued his big production numbers in a host of movies for a cavalcade of stars such as Carmen Miranda, Gene Kelly, and Judy Garland.

There appears to be an understandable obsession with money throughout the film. It opens against a background of "We're in the Money," with the chorus decked out in coin. The production is swiftly called to a halt as economic duress gets in the way of a Broadway show. Forced once again into poverty and unemployment, the producer lucks out. The problem of staging another show is miraculously solved. What a coincidence that the neighbor next door turns out to be a budding composer, but more important, a man of means who will finance such a risky venture! And what luck that he happens to be currently composing a song that is just right for the "Forgotten" theme!

Luck was a tremendous psychological factor during the Depression. The people who were "down on their luck" were the ones waiting in bread lines. Those who were out of jobs were "out of luck." An enormous sense of ineffectiveness and personal failure prevailed. The American System was not failing, but the individual was. How else to explain the fact that while some people were literally penniless, others were hoarding vast sums of money?

The contrast throughout the film and throughout the thirties was one of economic inequality. When there is money, there is lots of it. Enough to write checks for \$10,000-\$15,000. Enough to enjoy expensive clothes and apartments. Enough to partake in the questionable pleasures of some of the most expensive speakeasies. When there is a lack of money, the lack is tremendous, forcing such practices as stealing milk, sharing clothing, and sneaking around to avoid paying rent.

In this way the two extremes of the time are constantly portrayed. When Roosevelt called for a Banking Holiday it resulted in a "Gold Rush." On Sunday, March 5, 1933, President Roosevelt

informed the nation that the next four days were to be a holiday for all banks and financial institutions of the nation. This was to permit an examination of their soundness before their gradual re-opening. He also prohibited the hoarding of gold. . . . All gold--bars, coins, certificates--was to be turned in for exchange.²

During this four day holiday, the bewildered country responded to FDR's requests. While one business accepted vegetables or IOU's as payment, another was hard pressed to change a \$1000 bill. While some people waited in line in front of banks to deposit their hoarded metal, others waited in line for apples to sell or for jobs that never materialized.

It was a waiting nation that had a lot of time on its hands. It had time to spend, and for those who could afford it, movies became the great time killer and a means of escape.

No medium has contributed more greatly than the film to the maintenance of the national morale during a period featured by revolution, riot, and political turmoil in other countries. It has been the mission of the screen, without ignoring the serious social problems of the day, to reflect aspiration, optimism, and kindly humor in its entertainment.³

What better way to forget your troubles than in an air-conditioned movie house watching King Kong scale the Empire State Building? Men could even forget their frustrations for a while by watching Mae West sass Cary Grant in "She Done Him Wrong."

But for the women of the Depression it was another story. A "woman's inalienable right to work and eat became less precious in consideration of masculine welfare."⁴ Women, no matter what field they pursued, were assumed to be taking some male breadwinner's job. Even the schools in the United States disqualified married women from their teaching systems and fired single women who married while employed as teachers.

Paradoxically, the early films of the thirties showed vigorous, independent working girls: throaty dames who knew what they wanted out of life and then went after it. They worked by their wits and their beauty. At least in The Gold Diggers of 1933 they are cast in a role no man could fill: the chorus girl who sang, marched, and danced to the tune of the "Forgotten Man." The most haunting song and dance number of the film is this finale. As Carol (Joan Blondell) sings against a backdrop of marching veterans--jobless men--the poignant scene reaches a climax of emotion.

The relentless march of the jobless men was what the producer of "Forgotten Melody" wanted. The marching, marching, marching of the

men--forgotten men. Men who had suffered and fought for their country and for freedom in World War I, and who now were forgotten by that same country. First coined by FDR in his 1932 campaign for the presidency, "The Forgotten Man" was one to whom Roosevelt promised, "I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people."⁵

Pushing the symbolism of the movie even further, one can perhaps find a parallel between Brad (Dick Powell) saving the show and FDR saving the nation. The success of the show depends directly on Brad as he finances, composes, and stars in it. The success of the nation as a capitalistic society depends directly on FDR and his programs as he finances, composes, and stars in them. Without Roosevelt's personal magnetism and his war reassurances one can only guess what fate would befall the country. And after years of despair and bewilderment, apathy and loss of confidence, a firm leadership was necessary.

Many types of symbolism and metaphor can be found in this movie, and indeed in any movie if one looks hard enough. Rather, I prefer to view the Gold Diggers of 1933 simply for what it was: a raucous musical comedy, produced in an era of depression, used to help people forget their troubles, and yet, at the same time, to make them realize that they were not alone in their plight. The tinsel and glamour of the beautiful girls and their elegant drapings, the contrived plots inundated with chance happenings, the heroes and heroines of this and other depression musicals--all were designed to entertain a public in desperate need of social fantasy.

Footnotes

- ¹Pauline Kael, Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1968), p. 273.
- ²James D. Horan, The Desperate Years (New York: Bonanza Books, 1962), p. 98.
- ³Marjorie Rosen, Popcorn Venus (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1973), p. 174.
- ⁴Ibid., p. 135.
- ⁵Frank Freidel, America in the Twentieth Century (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), p. 297.

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- Freidel, Frank, America in the Twentieth Century. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965.
- Horan, James D., The Desperate Years. New York: Bonanza Books, 1962.
- Jarvie, I. C., Movies and Society. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1970.
- Kael, Pauline, Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1968.
- Rosen, Marjorie, Popcorn Venus. New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1973.
- Tanner, Louise, All the Things We Were. New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1968.

"The Great Depression and the Gold Diggers" by Jim Roth

The Gold Diggers of 1933 was and is a thoroughly entertaining movie. But if one endeavors to explore beneath its shiny veneer of frivolity and lightheartedness, it is easy to find stark and realistic references to the Great Depression of the 1930s. The movie itself is set in and made during the Depression and therefore is a good reflection of the history of the 1930s. More specifically and to a major extent developed in this paper, the movie accurately mirrors attitudes of people suffering the effects of the Great Depression.

It is not surprising that in 1933 this movie ranked second in box office revenue. People living at that time could readily identify with the chorus girls losing their jobs and scraping to eke out an existence. Furthermore, people enjoyed identifying with a plot that made fools out of a rich upper class who regarded the lower class with total disdain.

A reason for this can be found in the falling from favor of big business and its lords among the middle and lower class people of the 1930s. As stated in Leuchtenburg's The Perils of Prosperity, "Businessmen who had claimed credit for the prosperity of the 1920s were now blamed for producing the depression of the 1930s. As federal deficits mounted, Andrew Mellon, who was all but canonized in the 1920s, was mocked as 'the greatest secretary of the treasury since Carter Glass.'" Men who were formerly exalted as financial messiahs, men such as J. P. Morgan, Ivar Kreuger, and Samuel Insull were by the end of 1932 the objects of disgust and disgrace after being exposed as swindlers. So it is obvious that audiences would thoroughly enjoy the outright mockery of the likes of J. Lawrence Bradford and Faneuil Hall Peabody in the Gold Diggers of 1933. It was a case of vicariously obtaining sweet revenge against the barons of big business by a 1933 audience that viewed these men as corrupt and unfeeling after being led to believe they were virtuous and sensitive.

In many ways the movie also reflects a prevailing attitude in the late twenties and early thirties that if everyone pulls together and sacrifices then things will turn out all right. This attitude is best exemplified in the movie when Brad agrees to take the part of the leading man when on opening night the regular, Don, comes down with lumbago. Brad hears Hopkins tell Don, "Mind over matter," and Trixie launches into a sermon on how Brad's conscience will have to bear the blame for causing the whole company to be thrown out on the street penniless and jobless. Brad then acquiesces, after concluding that his risk was small compared to the consequences, in terms of human lives, if he did not take Don's place.

This highly idealistic attitude was much more prevalent early in the depression when Herbert Hoover enlisted the resources of private charity to do lonely battle against the ravages of the depression. An elaborate system of distributing leftovers in restaurants was masterminded by John B. Nichlos of the Oklahoma Gas Utilities Company, and in New York Bernarr MacFadden claimed he made money by serving six-cent lunches to the unemployed. Local communities started drives called "Give a Job" or "Share a Meal," but in the end these campaigns were doomed to failure. Caroline Bird writes in The Invisible Scar that the will was there, if not the way. "But there was more talk than help. A great, great many people spent a great deal of energy urging each other to give, to share,

to hire."

So it is here where reality and the movie part company. Brad and his sacrifice ultimately lead to happiness for all involved in the movie, but as Bird writes regarding the success of private charity in battling the depression, "the well of private charity ran dry."

Throughout the depression many people maintained a strict personal policy whenever faced with begging or accepting a handout. Some accepted begging and handouts on grounds that they were necessary for survival. Many others, however, possessed fierce personal pride that did not allow them to accept this "charity." Many felt less damage to their pride if they stole. In the movie, this comes up when Trixie steals a bottle of milk and lamely explains her reasons for doing so: "The dairy company steals it from the cow." This episode, therefore, makes light of a very real problem for many people during the depression. Either accept handouts, or beg and sacrifice personal dignity, or steal and accept the consequences.

The fact that some people found begging absolutely impossible is brought home by a New York Times article on December 24, 1931. The story tells of a starving young couple found by a constable after he spotted smoke coming from the chimney of a supposedly empty cottage. A part of the article reads:

The couple, Mr. and Mrs. Wilfred Wild of New York, had been unemployed since their formerly wealthy employer lost his money, and several days ago they invested all they had, except 25¢ for food, in bus fare to this region in search of work. Finding none, they went into the cottage, preferring to starve rather than beg. They said they had resigned themselves to dying together.

Another story is told of a couple with four sons who preferred to starve rather than accept public charity. They lived on a regular meal that consisted of flour mixed in water which was cooked in a frying pan. This story was told by the mayor of Youngstown, Ohio, who found work for one of the sons after a journalist made him aware of the family's plight.

Although these stories seem sensational they serve to illustrate the burdensome problems that almost hopelessly widespread poverty posed to government leaders and concerned, well-to-do citizens during the Great Depression.

Dixon Wecter, in his book, The Age of the Great Depression, notes that frustration and rebellion mounted when the hungry man observed "shops bursting with food and farms smothering in their own productive surplus." Wecter tells of a newspaperman hearing murmurings of "revolution" in towns and backwoods of North Carolina. Wecter quotes a citizen from a Michigan town telling a Federal Emergency Relief official:

I don't believe you realize how bad things were getting before this set up started. . . . They all said that if things got any worse and something didn't happen pretty soon they'd go down Main Street and crash the windows and take what they needed. They wouldn't pick on the little stores. They'd go after the big stores first. . . no man is going to let his wife and children starve to death.

Wecter further expands on stealing before starving in quoting Daniel Willard, president of the Baltimore and Ohio railroad, as saying to the Wharton School of Finance in 1931 "that capitalism was out of joint," and that "I would steal before I would starve."

The horror stories that coincide with poverty during the depression go on and on. What is phenomenal and almost unbelievable is how long the problem of poverty was taken lightly or virtually ignored. This attitude can in large part be attributed to carryover optimism that obstinately remained from the 1920s. For a long time people refused to admit their plight or the plight of others.

Evidence of this attitude surfaces very early in the movie. The gold diggers heartily sing "We're in the Money," only to have the police storm in and close down the show because of producer Barney Hopkins's debts. This episode can be tied to the naive optimism clung to by high government officials and economic experts at a time when recognition of the worsening situation was crucial. Leuchtenburg tells us that in New York, Mayor Jimmy Walker asked movie theaters to show only cheerful films. Periodic bulletins were issued by government officials declaring that the depression would be over in 30 or 60 or 90 days.

Some people seemed to be living in another world. Charles M. Schwab urged, "Just grin, keep on working." Julius Rosenwald expressed fears that there might soon be a serious labor shortage. Buttons reading, "I'm sold on America. I won't talk depression," were worn by thousands in Cincinnati. Hoover announced a decline in the death rate and declared, "No one has starved."

The dilemma was perhaps most aptly stated by the mayor of Youngstown, Ohio:

Everyone will remember the assurances that were freely given out in November and December, 1929, by the highest authorities in government and business. The country, we were told, was "fundamentally sound." Nevertheless, general unemployment continued to increase through the winter. Then in the spring of 1930 it was predicted that we might expect an upward turn any minute. Yet the summer slid past with hope unfulfilled. Winter came again, and conditions had grown steadily worse; still nothing was done, because we were reluctant to face the truth. Our leaders, having made a bad guess at the beginning, have been unwilling to admit their error. With the foolish consistency which is the hobgoblin of little minds, they have persistently rejected reality and allowed our people to suffer by pretending that all will be well in the morrow.

But the people and the government did come around. Leuchtenburg claims that Hoover should receive more credit for trying to check the depression through an unprecedented use of government power. Unfortunately, much of what Hoover did either came late or did not have the necessary power or punch to rescue the nation from the throes of its depression.

Just as the song, "We're in the Money," reflected an attitude of the times, so also did "Remember My Forgotten Man." This second song might be taken as a reference to the bonus marchers who converged on Washington in the spring of 1932. The song asks that some concern and

compassion be shown for the situation of the bonus marchers.

Herbert Hoover could not understand the bonus army, but rather feared it greatly. The bonus marchers numbered about 8,000 when they marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in support of the Patman Bill, which proposed immediate payment of a bonus that World War I veterans were originally to get in 1945. Hoover suspected they were infiltrated with crooks and communists, although his fears were unfounded. After the Patman Bill was defeated, the bonus marchers swallowed their disappointment and sang "America." The marchers stayed in empty federal buildings and pitched tents on mud flats of the Anacostia from spring until early July, 1932. Then Congress voted to pay for the impoverished marchers' return home. When all did not leave, President Hoover ordered General MacArthur in late July, 1932, to disperse them. What ensued was needless violence initiated by the government troops, and it resulted in the death of two bonus marchers.

This incident stands as a tragic reminder of how out of touch the upper echelons of government can be with simple reality. Historians agree that the bonus army was a harmless group of destitute, but supremely loyal and patriotic veterans. They were not revolutionaries. Instead of being treated with the decency and respect they deserved, they were treated as if they were an uncontrollable and dangerous mob. The unfortunate episode in the early 1930s only served to emphasize how at times the government can be mistaken about segments of the national public and callous about realities that people must face.

In conclusion, The Gold Diggers of 1933 provides excellent insight into the history of the Great Depression. It reflects the attitudes Americans and the American government had about big business, poverty, and how the depression could be solved. The movie also mirrored early beliefs about the depression by use of the song, "We're in the Money," and it referred directly to history in the case of the bonus marchers. The tone of the song, "Remember My Forgotten Man" gave some indication of public sentiment toward the marchers and about how the situation was handled by the government.

Bibliography

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"A Cinema Extravaganza" by Thomas E. Schmitt

A Busby Berkeley musical number can fool you. It will open modestly, with two people such as Dick Powell and Ruby Keeler singing together on stage. Then gradually the frame seems to expand, introducing one chorus line, then another, and suddenly the screen is engulfed with hundreds of dancing girls dressed in eye-catching, glamorous

fashions, all moving as one in rhythmic, flowing designs.

Musicals of the 1930s were indeed extravaganzas of sound, light, form, and movement. They delighted the senses and beckoned you to share in the world which they created. The plots were generally simple and the characters well-defined. Stars such as Greta Garbo, Ginger Rogers, Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, Mickey Rooney, and Judy Garland became idols for the American population to hold up as symbols of all that is good and right in a time when goodness and righteousness were hard to find.

According to Sydney Bernstein in Footnotes to Film, "the audience's approach to a musical during the Depression is one of identification. For him the hero is the hero is the answer to his own day-dreams and the picture--a world which causes the realities around him to dissolve for awhile. The musical is a release from the frustrations of a dull day."

In 1933 more than 80 million people--65% of the total population of the United States--went to the movies. Those dull days were apparently growing longer for the average citizen. Because of this tremendous influx of movie goers, all of whom demanded to be entertained each week, coupled with the threat of a depression within the movie industry itself, Hollywood was forced to mass produce a number of safe mediocrities for the screen. What the audience liked they received in large doses. Examples of this mass production can be seen in the series of Gold Digger films of the thirties, produced by Warner Brothers, Paramount's Big Broadcasts of 1932, 1936, 1937, and 1938, and M-G-M's Broadway Melodies of 1936, 1938, and 1940. The studios merely made the same films over and over again.

Such is the style of the hit musical, Gold Diggers of 1933, directed by Mervyn LeRoy and Busby Berkeley. The story is a simple one which typified the "backstage musicals" of the 1930s. The struggling young composer--who happens to be a millionaire but wants to make it on his own--teams up with a group of chorus girls, falls in love with one of them, and everyone gets his/her big chance in what becomes the most successful show on Broadway.

The theme is one which the audience of Depression times could hardly relate to but could only dream of and hope for: success, love, and money. These three little virtues were in great demand during the thirties but were impossible to find for the majority of the audience--until the silver screen found it for them.

According to the New York Times Film Review of 1933, the drama and storyline of the film "is of no greater consequence than is to be found in this type of picture." Indeed, all of the Berkeley musicals were highly separated mixtures of the blandest, thinnest dramatic sections and the most dazzling visual style for the musical sections. The reasoning behind this is simple. People did not seem to want drama, but preferred the pomp, splendor, and glamour of the musical numbers. Everything about a musical number--especially one of Busby Berkeley's--seemed to point to better times and had the air of a dream. One of the elements which helped create this effect was Berkeley's use of sets which appeared to extend to infinity and steps which began nowhere and reached for the heavens. For the Depression-stricken citizen, a nickel was well-spent at the movies.

Despite their obvious lack of dramatic merit, the musicals of the 1930s were very well attended. This is best explained by Gerald Mast in A Short History of the Movies. "Inherent in almost all the films was the view that the sincere, the sensitive, the human would inevitably triumph over the hypocritical, the callous, the chaos of social machinery. American movie audiences, escaping from the realities of the Depression outside the theatre, ran inside it to see human grit triumph over suffering, and human kindness triumph over financial, political, and moral chicanery."

These are the very conflicts which are born and resolved in the Gold Diggers of 1933. And it is the very fact that the conflicts are resolved that the people of the thirties turned out in such great numbers to view in the film.

In many ways the Gold Diggers of 1933, in trying to convey some sense of the Depression, tended to misrepresent it purposefully. People who attended the show saw girls making a game out of stealing milk, while hundreds of people were searching garbage cans for something to eat. The girls went through every crisis with a smile or a song, something the audience could only see by coming to the movies. But the trying times of the Depression were quickly forgotten by both the characters and the audience as the lights and the music of "The Shadow Waltz" and the impressive choreography of "Pettin' in the Park" gradually unfolded. The comfortable seats and the silver screen provided a much better world than what lay just outside the theatre.

According to William Kuhns, author of Movies in America, "in the hardest of times the 'escapist entertainment' that the movies offered became a necessity. People were discovering that, not only did they like movies, they needed them." The movies catered to this need by making series of musicals, some of which have already been mentioned. In mass producing films, studios forced their directors to direct any number of totally unrelated forms of films. Mervyn LeRoy, director of Gold Diggers of 1933, also directed twenty other films ranging from journalism pictures to homespun comedies to musicals from 1930 to 1933. What this policy brought were conventional studio films that tended to reflect the general moral assumptions and human values of the era as a whole rather than that of any individual director. In Gold Diggers the morality and humanity are very poignant. The old theme of "love conquers all" is revived, together with a pointed argument concerning the personal value of the individual. Of course, these themes as portrayed in the movie were refinements of daily life, but the important thing is that they were what the people wanted to see.

The one aspect of the Gold Diggers of 1933 which sets it apart from being just another musical by Busby Berkeley or just another form of escapist entertainment is the song "Remember My Forgotten Man," sung by Joan Blondell in the last act of the show. Perhaps unwittingly, this song became the standard for the audience. It gave a voice to the American public, to the hundreds or thousands of people who were "forgotten." And this truly was an extravaganza.

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