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## Morality and the Movies Week 4.

### Andrew Graves

#### The Great Depression (1929-1939)

- There were 20 recorded cases of famine in New York City in 1931, and 110 fatalities from hunger in 1934.
- Between 1929 and 1945 there were at least 20,000 deaths due to starvation – The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)
- “Work or starve”
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*“Work or starve. Fulsome evidence of one common experience in the Great Depression, the palpable pangs of hunger afflict screen characters across the genres, men and women alike living hand to mouth, propelled by the basic biological urge to eat, to earn not even a decent day’s wages but just a square meal. Food and eating are more than lemotifs in pre-code Hollywood; people literally faint from hunger”*

**Doherty, T. Pre-Code Hollywood**

- Approximately 4,000,000 individuals were compelled to leave their homes during the Great Depression (1929–1939)
- Sleeping/living in box cars or under bridges
- Some found work of farms in exchange for food etc.
- Others joined criminal gangs out of desperation

#### Al Capone

- Very much the epitome of the 1920’s gangster.
- He was the ‘kingpin’
- Made his money through racketeering and bootlegging
- Managerial and sedentary
- Was eventually caught (tax evasion)
- Riddled with syphilis, he suffered various complications before succumbing to cardiac arrest in 1947

#### John Dillinger

- His criminal celebrity was much shorter lasting just over 14 months
- In May 1933, he broke out of Crown Point jail – deceiving the guards with a wooden gun – he then stole the sheriff’s car
- In what was left of his life he carried out a series of ‘bank raids, shoot outs and hairbreadth escapes’
- He was gunned down by the FBI outside the Biograph Theatre in Chicago after watching gangster movie *Manhattan Melodrama* (1934) in July 1934
- He was much more reflective of the 1930s
- Was seen as the outlaw as opposed to Capone’s organized establishment criminal
- He was ‘independent and provisional’

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### **The Public Enemy (1931)**

- The story of two brothers who become Chicago booze barons

### Jean Harlow (1911-1937)

- The leading sex symbol of the day
- The perfect pre-Code female figure
- The 'bad girl'
- 'The Platinum Blonde'
- 'The Blonde Bombshell'
- 'The Laughing Vamp' persona

"What went largely unremarked was the vicious nature of the relationships between men and women in the gangster genre. The grapefruit James Cagney squashes in the face of Mae Clarke in *The Public Enemy* is the least of the physical assaults..."

**Doherty, T - Pre-Code Hollywood**

*"Since then girls have been slapped, kicked, beaten up, run over, shot, stabbed and raped all in the tradition of mobster violence"*

**Hossent, H. The Movie Treasury of Gangster Movies**

### **Scarface (1932)**

#### **Directed by Howard Hawks**

- The violence in *Scarface* was unprecedented
- Caused shock and outrage with critics, editorialists, politicians and civic groups
- Based on the criminal activities of Al Capone
- The film contains 're-enactments' of actual Capone sanctioned murders
- The shifts in tone from light comedy to brutal violence seemed disturb critics the most
- After a juvenile killer in East Orange, New Jersey claimed to have been influenced by Hollywood, the town's mayor called for a gangster film ban
- In Worcester, Massachusetts the chief of police decided to prohibit the exhibition of gangster films in local cinemas

### **The Death of the Golden Age Gangster**

- Widespread public outrage against gangster films forced Will H Hays to privately put pressure on the studios
- "...no more sawed-off shotgun stuff"
- But also, the gangster film, in that form had really run its course
- "The major industry quit gangster themes because the public tired of them... There was never any real dictum against underworld material properly handled. Commercial more than the moral angle was responsible for sudden gangster surcease"
- Also, American gangster films tended to only sell well in the home country, elsewhere they tended to flop

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## I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang (1932)

### Mervyn LeRoy

- James Allen (Paul Muni) is a returning veteran
- His experiences of the Great War have tainted his view of the American Dream
- Rejecting the dead-end job existence, he instead takes to the road
- The way the film plots his initial journey is reflective of the real-life reality for many who had been forced to seek a new life, and work, elsewhere
- His desperation and near starvation lead him unwittingly to be part of an armed hold up
- The harsh reality of chain gang life is brutally exposed
- The relentless physical grime
- The complete lack of personal space and the crushing sense of confinement
- The rancid slop he is forced to eat in preference to slow starvation

*“Allen scans the faces of his fellow white convicts and of the black prisoners segregated in another truck, and then looks over at the line of mules yoked together. All are dumb brutes in a naturalistic equality – white men and black men, men and mules, all alike chained to the same fate”*

### Doherty, T – Pre-Code Hollywood

- It becomes a shockingly bleak indictment of society as a whole, not just the brutal penal institutions of the south
- Racism/segregation
- Fiscal inequality
- Like the monster from James Whale’s film *Frankenstein* (1931), Allen represents the rank outsider, used and abused by the system
- Just as Karloff’s monster has been ‘man-made’ arguably so has Allen.
- His fate is sealed, an essentially good man made criminal by an explicitly wicked system of inequality