

Chapter 15

The Devil's Parody

Horace McCoy's Appropriation and Refiguration of Two Hollywood Musicals

Charles Musser

Have you ever noticed how many films are adaptations? Adaptations are the lifeblood of the film and television business.

Linda Seger, *The Art of Adaptation*

These novels are a kind of Devil's parody of the movies.

Edmund Wilson, *Classics and Commercialism*

1.1 The Hollywood novel and the screenwriting manual boast a shared history. Both have typically been written by those claiming to be Hollywood insiders, whose access gives them behind-the-scenes insights. How-to manuals claim to offer the truth as they reveal little-known tricks of the trade. In explicating the ways of Hollywood (particularly its ways of telling stories), they at least imply that this way of life is "good work if you can get it." They may warn readers of the difficulties that they face, but the very act of writing these manuals presupposes a degree of optimism: that it is possible for readers to succeed in the film industry with talent, perseverance, and effective guidance. When it comes to Hollywood novels, the situation is generally the reverse. Richard Fine has detailed the ways in which those East Coast writers who came to Hollywood in the late 1920s and early 1930s felt profoundly alienated as they abruptly lost control over the fruits of their labor.³ The Hollywood novel was a way for these writers to reassert their artistic integrity outside and in many ways against the Hollywood system. Written against the boss (though McCoy and others were always eager to sell the movie rights back to the studio), Hollywood novels generally offer a highly jaundiced view of the moving picture world out of which they come. (F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* [1940] with its celebration of a studio head modeled after Irving Thalberg is the exception. Far more typical is Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* [1941] with its cynical, angry view of a system that ends up turning out films like sausages.) Taking the form of literary exposés, at least in certain periods these books spoke truth to power, or claimed to. Certainly

this was the case with Horace McCoy's two Hollywood novels, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935) and *I Should Have Stayed Home* (1938).

1.2 The studio-era classical Hollywood film industry was a vacuum cleaner that sucked up stories from a wide variety of cultural practices and turned them into movies: plays, short stories, novels, news items, earlier films, and even comic strips were raw material for studio recycling, cannibalization, and adaptation. The largely uni-directional flow of narrative properties to Hollywood, which characterized the studio era, was due to a confluence of factors.⁴ Some of these cultural forms (for example, short stories) offered a comparatively cheap source of story ideas. Novels and plays were generally more expensive, and the most expensive offered prestige and pre-sold popularity.⁵ One exception to this general pattern of adaptation involved the novelizations of movies. This degraded literary form, of low prestige and modest remuneration, was one of many genres in the vast array of Hollywood ephemera.⁶ Hollywood novelizations are thus closely related to fan magazines: indeed, the first fan magazine, *Motion Picture Story Magazine* (started in 1912) offered its readers short story versions of films. Both novelizations of Hollywood films and fan magazines, which frequently published short stories about Hollywood, had much in common with Hollywood novels. All three are nonfilmic cultural forms that owe their very existence to Hollywood. These affinities are particularly evident with McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935) and *I Should Have Stayed Home* (1938), which cannibalize and borrow from – one is tempted to use the word “adapt” – popular Hollywood films for their own purposes. Aligned with the lowly novelizations of feature films, McCoy's efforts swam against the more respectable flow of literature-to-film adaptation. McCoy's embrace of a nonliterary form was an act of nihilism and rage that echoes the novels' narratives, but he used this process for serious artistic purposes.

The Cultural Life of Adaptation

Most Academy Award- and Emmy Award-winning films are adaptations. Consider these amazing statistics:

85% of all Academy Award-winning Best Pictures are adaptations.

Linda Seger, *The Art of Adaptation*

"I'm working on a football story and I'm running a couple of college pictures in the projection room this afternoon, just to make sure it isn't too similar."

"Which I suppose is a polite way of saying you're looking for something you can beat," I said.

He seemed actually pleased that I saw through his feeble euphemism. He grinned. "You'll be all right out here," he said. "You learn fast."

Budd Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?*

2.1 Adaptation, both as a poetics (a way of making films) and as a reading strategy (a way of interpreting them), has been an area of renewed interest in cultural studies (film, media, and literary studies in particular). This renaissance is doubtless tied to the importance of intertextuality as a theoretical and historical area of inquiry. To shock and so revive what has been widely recognized as, at least until recently, a moribund field of inquiry, scholars have retheorized and reconceptualized the topic in substantively new ways. Robert Stam has been a leader in this process of revitalization, providing us with liberatory ways of reimagining adaptation. As he suggests, "Adaptation theory has available a whole constellation of tropes – translation, reading, dialogization, cannibalization, transmutation, transfiguration, and signifying – each of which sheds light on a different dimension of adaptation."⁹ This has proved invaluable as a way to think about texts (films, novels, and so forth) in relation to their antecedents. Nonetheless, we must also ask ourselves: what are the appropriate limits to adaptation theories? Adaptation involves a sustained relationship between a cultural work and its source or "hypotext." This relationship must not only be sustained and in certain respects systematic, but of a particular kind. Because adaptation is such a central creative process (if screenwriting guru Linda Seger is to be believed), its theorization is important not only in the world of academia but in the broader worlds of culture and commerce. There are other less literary or theoretical ways of thinking about this problem. One involves the nitty-gritty issues of copyright and legal ownership.

In the present intellectual climate, where intertextuality has become of crucial methodological importance for cultural theorists and historians, critics can be tempted to evoke the process of adaptation almost any time they uncover an intertextual reference. Taken to a daring and apparently logical extreme, intertextuality and adaptation are categories that become interchangeable. This has potential consequences in the real world, for media conglomerates are clearly eager to extend the reach of adaptation to include a wide range of textual referencing just as they have sought to extend the time frame covered by copyright. These enhance company revenues. Indeed, as cultural theorists have been busy pushing the traditional boundaries of adaptation theory, so have corporate lawyers.

If adaptation is increasingly understood as an overarching *Ur* category or process, we must then begin to think more carefully about its limits. What should and what should not be considered adaptation? Dudley Andrew has pointed to some ways to limit the domain of adaptation as a process: "The explicit, foregrounded relation of a cinematic text to a well-constructed original text from which it derives and which in some sense it strives to reconstruct provides the analyst with a clear and useful 'laboratory' condition."¹⁰ Although the notion of "striving to reconstruct" might narrow the domain of adaptation too much, it nonetheless provides an important brake on a too-broad use of the term. Citation, limited (or literal) quotation, allusion, evocation are not, in fact, forms of adaptation as we should strictly define the term. They mobilize connections between two texts that are insufficiently sustained to involve adaptation. On the other hand, adaptation may involve a less reverent, more ambivalent, or cynical view toward the source material.

For many filmmakers, a source is merely that – a source, a convenient starting-point. One thinks of the process of adaptation depicted in Nicholas Ray's *In a Lonely Place*

(1950) as well as the actual adaptation of the Dorothy B. Hughes novel of that name (1947). Ray's screenwriter, played by Humphrey Bogart, does not even bother to read the novel before beginning to write his script. He listens to a hat-check girl recount its highlights. The relationship between Hughes's novel and Ray's film is far more complex than the screenwriter's attitude toward his source material might suggest. Both works are set in Los Angeles, but the novel's Dickson Steele is a sociopathic killer posing as a writer, while the film's Dixon Steele is a veteran Hollywood screenwriter burdened with a temper, wartime past, and self-destructive personality. (Their formal first names are spelled somewhat differently, though they have the same nickname – Dix.) The Bogart character is haunted not only by the police but also by the novel. His antecedent becomes the screenwriter's ghost-like doppelgänger.

The fact of adaptation can put two texts in a complex and rewarding relationship. Nonetheless, as a source is reimagined, various possible attitudes – as well as operations – can loosen the bonds that make one indebted to the other. In some respects, there can be a fine line between adaptations that are aggressive and those that are indifferent to their sources. Displacement, condensation, elaboration, and refiguration are among the operations that stretch these connections. Such operations are to some degree inevitable in any process of adaptation. Yet when they are pursued with casual indifference, the random or noncoherent nature of these changes can mean that the claim "x is an adaptation of y" becomes less and less interesting and important. *In a Lonely Place* is an interesting case because the film depicts a situation where the writer violates the wishes of the producer and is indifferent to (or rather contemptuous of) the source material. The film itself may appear to be indifferent and yet, in truth, it is both aggressive and, in some sense, systematic in its reworking. Its strategies of adaptation are anything but casual. *In a Lonely Place* is about the act of writing and other creative, imaginative acts such that the attenuated relationship between film and source generates powerful overtonal meanings. In the gap between what it seems to say, and what it actually does say, there is a powerful artistic statement. We can find aspects of this indirection at work in McCoy's novels as well.

2.2 Certain sustained relationships between one text and its antecedent, such as parody, are generally not considered to be "adaptations." They try to make fun of the original text, to mock it. If parodies do not always destroy the originary text completely, they at least deflate it. When we think of Woody Allen's *Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex* (1972) as an adaptation of the best-selling sex manual of that name (for which he bought the rights), the result is comic. It is funny because the results mock or parody the process of adaptation itself. It forcefully presents this film as the definitive adaptation of a best-seller, only to show that this assertion is ridiculously inappropriate or empty.

Is a given work of art an adaptation of another art work or is it drawing on the prior text in a related but ultimately different way? The answer to such a question may not be easily resolved. It is often the gray areas between adaptation and evocation, generic similarity, parody, or critique that often intrigue us the most. Is Sergio Giral's *The Other*

Francisco (1972) an adaptation of Cuba's first anti-slavery novel, Anselmo Suárez y Romero's *Francisco: The Sugar-mill or the Delights of the Canefields* (1839) as Robert Stam suggests, or is it something else? Because the filmmaker seeks to "deconstruct" rather than "reconstruct" – to turn the novel inside out and deflate its sentimental pretensions – the film may be closer to parody than to traditional methods of adaptation. The film evokes the novel, not to embrace it but to interrogate it.

Because Suárez y Romero's novel is in the public domain, we do not have to be unduly concerned with defining the relationship between it and Giral's film with legalistic precision. It can be immensely useful to think of the relationship between the two texts as one characterized by adaptation. The assertion of adaptation activates a relationship between a text and its antecedent(s). This enables the scholar (or spectator/reader) to emphasize the parallels in order to explore the differences. It becomes a form of play, of liberation from too-familiar ways of analyzing. These issues, however, have had different implications with Alice Randall's novel *The Wind Done Gone*, a re-imagining of *Gone with the Wind* (1939). If this is an "adaptation," which the Margaret Mitchell estate has argued that it is, then the estate could have blocked its publication by legal means. Because of its far-reaching deconstruction (labeled "a parody") of Mitchell's novel (and the David O. Selznick film adaptation), the courts decided that it did not violate copyright. If it can be productive to think of a film as a kind of adaptation even when it is not, sometimes – given copyright laws – it is necessary to take what we now commonly call an adaptation and imagine it as something else.

2.3 Genre is another factor that limits the domain of adaptation. If one looks narrowly or naïvely at two films in the same genre, it may seem that one film is "stealing" a great deal from another. When examined generically, these correspondences are revealed to be less unique, less specific, less sustained, and so less close. As a result, the relationship between the two works may not be best – or most appropriately – characterized as one of adaptation.

Generic considerations are among the more respectable practices to limit the field of adaptation. Film cycles, studio style, fashion, fads, imitations, scriptwriting by committee, a profound absence of creativity, all haunt both Hollywood and the process of adaptation. Is "adaptation" truly the "lifeblood" of the movies or has the term been used to mask a wide range of less attractive and even more pervasive practices that were (and are today) routine in Hollywood? Whether these represent a cultural apocalypse or "the genius of the system" is an evaluation that remains much in debate. For our purposes, we merely note that many of these practices inform (or haunt) a full understanding of *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*

At the very least it can be heuristic to think of Horace McCoy's novels *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935) and *I Should Have Stayed Home* (1938) as adaptations of Hollywood films. Certainly, to the extent to which these stories and the ways they are told often evoke processes of adaptations, McCoy encourages us to think along these lines. Nonetheless, Horace McCoy's estate owes Warner Brothers nothing for copyright

infringement even though *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* appropriates numerous elements from at least two of that company's films. In the end, its engagement with these films is perhaps something else: refigurations of tropes, characters, star personas, visual symbols, and figures of speech that reside not only in these films but in Hollywood culture more generally. Looked at from a slightly different perspective, McCoy's novel employs Hollywood's well-established practices of cannibalizing, recycling, and reworking elements from film to film. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno would identify and condemn this "constant reproduction of the same thing" in their essay "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception."¹¹ Material is endlessly recycled, recombined, and repeated so "nothing changes" and "nothing unsuitable will appear." McCoy understood not only the nature of this repetition but its radical potential, and he reprised or borrowed materials from films while giving them an acerbic, unexpected twist. Put another way, in writing novels about Hollywood, McCoy employed the methods of Hollywood against itself.

Sources and Intertexts

Literally hundreds of persons who are unable to imagine plots or who, at least, are unable to imagine plots worth while, turn to adaptations that they may become participants in the wealth that is supposed to be gained through photoplay work.

Epes Winthrop Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*.¹²

Talents can get you just so far . . . Then you got to start using your head.

Budd Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?*¹³

3.1 Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* and *I Should Have Stayed Home* use similar approaches to refigure high-profile Hollywood films of the 1930s and perform radical acts of "adaptation" that become forms of demystificatory critique.¹⁴ *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* reworks *42nd Street* (Lloyd Bacon, 1933) and *Gold Diggers of '33* (Melvyn LeRoy, 1933), while *I Should Have Stayed Home* does much the same for *A Star is Born* (William Wellman, 1937). These films were box-office hits: *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of '33* were the second and third top grossing pictures of 1933, while *A Star is Born* became the top grossing film of 1937 even as it was nominated for numerous Academy Awards.¹⁵ Perhaps it is not entirely coincidental that these films were already part of an intertextual web based on a succession of adaptations and cannibalizations. As J. Hoberman details, *42nd Street* (the film) was an adaptation of the novel of that name by Bradford Ropes, though Rick Altman maintains that its plot was derived from *On with the Show* (1929).¹⁶ In a clear case of cross-fertilization, *Gold Diggers of '33* recycled elements of *42nd Street* in combination with another, earlier Warner Brothers' film: *Gold Diggers of Broadway* (Roy Del Ruth, 1929). *Gold Diggers of Broadway* was

a sound version of *The Gold Diggers* (Harry Beaumont, 1923). All three films were thus indebted to a David Belasco play, *The Gold Diggers: A Comedy in Three Acts* (written by Avery Hopwood), which was a Broadway hit in 1919. *A Star is Born*, which somewhat ironically won the Academy Award for "Best Original Story," is a reworking of *What Price Hollywood?* (George Cukor, 1932) and to a greater or lesser extent, a film à clef, incorporating incidents of Hollywood life. *I Should Have Stayed Home* is not only a systematic refiguration of *A Star is Born*, it recycles and reworks numerous elements of McCoy's *They Shoot Horses*. Drawing on some real-life elements from the author's own experiences, it was part of McCoy's own literary cycle as well. Certainly, the intersection of multiple sources makes faithfulness to, or straightforward adaptation of, any one source more problematic. (Cross-fertilization and multiple sources force a more complex, attenuated notion of adaptation. In a culture that privileges monogamy, faithfulness to more than one source is an oxymoron.)

3.2 In interpreting a film or novel, critics and historians must consider the ways in which that work has been constructed by or through its intertexts. Sources are often but not always active intertexts, just as there are many intertexts that are not sources. We can ask if a text's relationship to its source(s) is more or less explicitly acknowledged and how important this relationship appears to be for the spectator seeing the film or reading the novel. For example, credits clearly indicate that the movie *42nd Street* was an adaptation of the novel of that name by Bradford Ropes. Nonetheless, criticism of the time and subsequent scholarship suggest that knowledge of Ropes's novel would be unlikely to significantly enhance our understanding or enjoyment of the film. Ropes's novel was neither a bestseller nor a critical success. The fact that few copies of the novel survive tends only to confirm its negligibility. In his study of *42nd Street*, J. Hoberman gives us an interesting case study of the way in which a Hollywood studio went about the process of adaptation. He also demonstrates how a familiarity with the novel does little to enhance our appreciation of the film.

Many Hollywood film adaptations functioned quite differently from that of *42nd Street*, often by operating simultaneously on two levels. A general audience can view a given film as a more or less self-sufficient text, independent of any familiarity with its source. Indeed, many regular moviegoers consider other kinds of intertextual relationship to be much more compelling; for instance, generic considerations or the prior films of its stars. In others instances, viewers who lack direct acquaintance with a film's source may see the picture as an opportunity to gain useful cultural knowledge of its prestigious antecedent. (This is one reason why the issue of faithfulness and accuracy haunts studies of film adaptation.) At the same time, some of these pictures also address or acknowledge audiences that are already familiar with the source material. Interviews with the director, studio publicity, and film criticism all informed prospective moviegoers that Ernst Lubitsch's *Lady Windermere's Fan* (Warner Bros, 1925) could be better savored if they had read or seen the Oscar Wilde play. Spectators were actively encouraged to compare Lubitsch's visual wit with Wilde's verbal wit. Rather than a naïve, self-enclosed

viewing of the film, this required an active comparison between the film and its source. Likewise, numerous moviegoers would have seen *Gold Diggers of '33* only a few months after *42nd Street*. One pleasure in seeing that second film came through an appreciation of the numerous variations, inversions, substitutions, repetitions, and differences with its immediate predecessor.

Not all aspects of a work's intertextual references are made explicit. Sometimes the intertexts are purposefully concealed by the author(s) as a kind of inside joke or private pleasure.¹⁷ Or a clue may be half hidden. Like a stone half-submerged by windblown sand, it awaits discovery. In some cases this discovery is never made before it is completely buried underneath the sands of passing time. That is, to abandon the metaphor, the passage of time often obscures key intertextual connections, which the historian can help retrieve or occasionally even discover. For instance, the delay in a film's release or a book's publication may efface these connections before they are ever made publicly. Given the various clues (or cues) in McCoy's novel, a reader might be expected to relate *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* to Warner Brothers' backstage musicals *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of '33*. Nonetheless, given the delay in publication (though essentially completed by November 1933, the novel was not published until 1935), the ever-shifting matrices of ephemeral culture had changed sufficiently so that these connections were no longer evident. And literary critics did nothing to reclaim them. Perhaps they were uninterested. Because most literati did not consider movies to be significant cultural works, these sources or intertexts went either unrecognized or unreported. Literary critics have customarily understood a novel in relationship to other novels not in relation to films.

3.3 Horace McCoy is a key figure in the emergence of that specialized genre of literature known as the Hollywood novel. *They Shoot Horses* and *I Should Have Stayed Home* were written and published before Nathaniel West's *The Day of the Locust* (1939) and Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run* (1941).¹⁸ These Hollywood novels require their own intertextual framework for understanding: one in which knowledge of stars, films, the movie business, and recent gossip are as important as serious literature. Literary critics look at Horace McCoy as a writer of short stories and novels, while traditional film scholars tend to look at him as a struggling actor and screenwriter, who wrote novels (when they mention him at all). Yet McCoy not only moved freely between the realm of literature and film, he also had important experiences in the theater. To understand his oeuvre (to use a now quaint phrase) and any individual work within it requires moving across these too familiar disciplinary boundaries. It is not insignificant that the two films that McCoy sought to engage, *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of '33*, are both about the theater.

Neglecting the relationship of a cultural artifact to its intertexts and sources can profoundly affect our understanding of that work's style as well as its meaning, scope, and ambition. It not only impoverishes our grasp of the artist's aspirations and achievements, it frequently distorts our understanding. The problem here is a basic but still familiar one. Period criticism promptly aligned McCoy's with the "hard-boiled" writings of James

Cain and Dashiell Hammett. Reviewing *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* for *The New York Times*, Robert van Gelder predicted that it "will be seen as both the best and worst of the hard-boiled novels."¹⁹ This framework for interpretation was reiterated by subsequent commentators. Even today, the most influential criticism of *They Shoot Horses* and *I Should Have Stayed Home* probably remains Edmund Wilson's essay "The Boys in the Back Room," written in 1940 and expanded with a postscript in 1941. Wilson and other critics before and since situate McCoy squarely in the "tough guy," "hard-boiled" school of writing. Wilson calls Cain and McCoy "the poets of the tabloid murder"; certainly, murder, death, and suicide permeate the novels of both writers. The emphasis is on action and society's underbelly. The writing is lean. John Thomas Sturak, whose dissertation remains the definitive biographical study of McCoy, finds Wilson's characterizations of McCoy's fiction often misleading, but acknowledges that his novels were "hard-boiled" if that meant that he wrote "In a terse, objective, impersonal and implicational style."²⁰ Sturak does note the flashback style, another feature of some hard-boiled fiction and much *film noir*, as well as the novel's repetitive, circular structure, which mimes the "merry-go-round" circularity of the marathon dance.²¹ Yet, the novel's style is hardly objective or impersonal. It is, I will argue in the following pages, metaphorical and grotesque – a fact most clearly seen in the relationship of the novel to its film sources.

There is, therefore, a more innovative dimension to Edmund Wilson's commentary. In his brief survey of fiction by Hollywood writers, he focuses on James Cain (*The Postman Only Rings Twice* [1934], *Serenade* [1937]) and several of his contemporaries. Discussing Cain while throwing in Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses* and *I Should Have Stayed Home* for good measure, he remarks, "These novels are a kind of Devil's parody of the movies." He goes on to explain that "All the things that have been excluded by the Catholic censorship: sex debauchery, unpunished crime, sacrilege against the Church – Mr Cain has let loose in these stories with a gusto of pent-up ferocity that the reader cannot but share."²² Moreover, he suggests that certain storytelling techniques endemic to Hollywood movies are mobilized in their novels. They turn the Hollywood-style story upside down and inside out. These novels mock the product of Hollywood itself, in terms of form and content.²³ And yet while Cain focused on those tawdry elements of Los Angeles other than Hollywood, McCoy took Tinseltown as his subject. When Wilson claimed that McCoy's novels only "trifle with the fringes of Hollywood,"²⁴ he missed the many literary clues that signaled otherwise.

3.4 McCoy, an ex-journalist, short-story writer, and theater actor, had moved to Hollywood in 1931. After two years struggling to make a living as an actor and/or writer, he finally landed a job at Columbia Pictures, then little more than a poverty row studio. During this period he wrote short stories about Hollywood, including one on marathon dancing that survives in two versions neither of which was ever published. He also tried to turn the idea into a screenplay. According to Sturak, who has read these manuscripts, they were short and largely underdeveloped, though McCoy had come up with the book's title (*They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*) by late 1932. In the course of 1933–4,

he radically expanded and reworked that story, turning it into the tour de force that was finally published as a short novel in 1935.²⁵

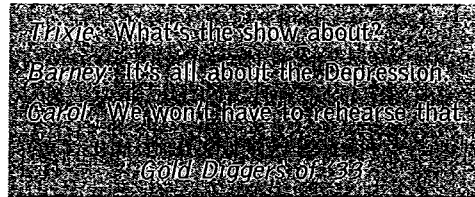
Hollywood was a dream factory at a time when the American dream had seemed to come to an end. Drawn to Hollywood by fantasies of success, McCoy and his characters found only failure.²⁶ Both *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* and *I Should Have Stayed Home* take a critical look at the dream factory, in ways that show it to be nothing less than a nightmare. They reveal not just the tinsel that passes for glamor but the desperation underneath the tinsel. Seen in the day under the hot sun, Hollywood was "a cheap town filled with cheap stores and cheap people."²⁷ *They Shoot Horses* is the story of two aspiring extras, desperate to eat and just as desperate to be discovered. They sign up for a brutal dance marathon. Hollywood stars come to gawk at their tired, desperate performances, but it ends badly for all concerned. The novel's protagonist, Robert Syverten, finally shoots Gloria, his dance partner, because she finds life unbearable and asks him to "pinch hit for God." In his hallucinatory, sleep-deprived state, he recalls his youth on a farm: when horses are no good anymore, they shoot them, don't they?

I Should Have Stayed Home has another male protagonist, Ralph Carston, a man quite similar to Robert Syverten in name and personal qualities. (That their first names begin with R and their last names end in N only underlines the obvious.) Equally desperate, Ralph has a chance to move up into the Hollywood power scene by becoming the kept lover of an aging, well-connected Hollywood matron. He proves unequal to the task: when a friend quickly steps in and masters the situation, he ends up back on the streets, desperate to be discovered, perhaps ready to join in a dance marathon. These novels can be read as exposés of a world glamorized by the media: this is their manifest content. They mock the Hollywood version of this world – the one of fan magazines and films. In this way the term "Devil's parody" is apropos, but this phrase and the ways it applies to McCoy's novels can be pursued further than Wilson, a man of letters, realized. For McCoy is hardly derivative of Cain. And where he is "derivative," it is not of other writers, but of the movies. McCoy's two Hollywood novels mock "the lifeblood of the film and television business" (to use Linda Seger's phrase) because they evoke and pervert the very notion of adaptation. Their sources are simultaneously obvious and repressed. Even when their half-hidden sources are revealed, their status as adaptations is corroded.

Two Warner Brothers' Musicals

During a recession, audiences probably won't want to watch films about a stock market crash.

Linda Seger, *The Art of Adaptation*²⁸



4.1 At first glance, McCoy's decision to direct his acerbic attention to two Warner Brothers' musicals might seem surprising. Warner Brothers has been regularly characterized as the most progressive American motion picture studio of the early 1930s, one which made films that often acknowledged the Depression and the dislocations accompanying it. Films such as *Little Caesar* (Melvyn LeRoy, 1931), *The Public Enemy* (William Wellman, 1931), and *I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (LeRoy, 1932) expressed and resonated with at least some of the alienation felt by many Americans. The backstage musicals *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of '33* seem to acknowledge the desperate conditions facing many ordinary people in general and aspiring actors and chorus girls in particular. For the young women at the center of these two musicals, a job on the chorus line could mean the difference between a decent life (food, clothes, and romance) and a fall into prostitution. Yet even those who were fortunate enough to have employment often gained or retained it through an informal (and usually continuing) exchange for sexual favors.

Darryl Zanuck proudly described *42nd Street* as a musical exposé that "dramatically endeavors to lift the curtain and reveal the strenuous, heart rending efforts of a well-known Broadway producer [Florenz Ziegfeld] to stage a musical comedy in this year of depression."²⁹ Andrew Bergman, who took the title of his book on Depression America and its films (*We're in the Money*) from the opening number of *Gold Diggers of '33*, has hailed the two films' Depression theme while simultaneously noting their celebration of success, with the Depression just increasing the stakes. That is, their criticism of American life is obviously softened somewhat as all ends happily: the romantic leads achieve both success and true love, while the secondary women characters find charming sugar daddies.³⁰

42nd Street and *Gold Diggers of '33* clearly spoke to Americans as meaningful entertainment. Although these two musicals can easily be criticized for their ideological conformity (their suggestion of dreams fulfilled, of pluck, luck, and talent rewarded), they are complex, "ambiguous" texts that acknowledged the severity of the Depression and offered glimpses of the economic and sexual predicaments that confronted numerous people.³¹ Moviegoers could readily generate diverse, even progressive interpretations, particularly when they interpreted the films somewhat against their narrative trajectory by placing them in relationship to their own lives. Indeed, audience recognition translated into box-office success, producing a whole cluster of Warner Brothers' backstage musicals usually starring Ruby Keeler and Dick Powell: *Footlight Parade* (1933), *Dames* (1934), *Gold Diggers of '35*, and *Gold Diggers of '37*.

4.2 As a group, *42nd Street*, *Gold Diggers of '33*, *Footlight Parade*, *Dames*, *Gold Diggers of '35*, and *Gold Diggers of '37* pose interesting questions as to their relational definition. *Gold Diggers of '33* is certainly not a sequel to *42nd Street*: at least, the principal characters appearing in the former film do not reappear as "the story continues." But *Gold Diggers of '33* is clearly something more than just another film in a cycle of backstage musicals. Nor is it a traditional adaptation. In many respects it is a reconfiguration of *42nd Street*. Its relation to the earlier film involves a series of substitutions, displacements, and refigurations that closely bind the two films together. Certainly this enjoyed Hollywood precedent: for example, with the earlier DeMille grouping of remarriage comedies, such as *Don't Change Your Husband* (1919), *Why Change Your Wife?* (1920), *Bluebeard's Eighth Wife* (1923), and *Changing Husbands* (1924).³² Although Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer have seen these kinds of films as pastiche that signal Hollywood's cultural bankruptcy (the industry's signal lack of originality), this analysis misses the ways that these reworkings could be playful and pleasurable, related to puns, word play, and jokes.³³

4.3 The pleasures of textual reconfiguration from film to film is only one area of textual dynamics that the spectator can mobilize in the process of watching a film such as *Gold Diggers of '33*. There are other kinds of correspondences, both within the film and between the film and the world beyond it. In fact, the *intertextual* refigurations that one finds in the movement from *42nd Street* to *Gold Diggers of '33* are consistent with the *intratextual* structures of each film. One set of substitutions involves the musical numbers. In *42nd Street*, the theatrical showstoppers from *Pretty Lady* resonate with, refigure, and abstract the world of those backstage. The song "Young and Healthy" certainly speaks for the chorines, Billy Lawler, and Pat Denning (if not for Julian Marsh or Abner Dillon). The many pairings of characters – with marriage in the wings – is articulated in "Shuffle Off to Buffalo." At the same time the initial pairings on stage do not match those backstage (Dick Powell is with Toby Wing in the "Young and Healthy" number, while Keeler is with the male ingénu (Clarence Nordstrom). Only in the final number, "42nd Street," do Peggy Sawyer and Billy Lawler get together and embrace. Indeed, this reflects a storyline in which preliminary pairings of characters (Denning/Brent with Sawyer/Keeler and Brock/Daniels with Dillon/Kibbee) are eventually reshuffled. Only at the film's conclusion does the central couple on stage coincide with the central couple backstage (i.e. Keeler and Powell).

Until its utopic conclusion *42nd Street* underscores the slippage between life and representation – the lack of literal correspondences between the screen world and the "real world." (Just as the musical numbers are themselves transformed by Busby Berkeley and the cinematic technique.) In these films, the musical numbers gravitate toward the arch-typical, the abstract, and the utopic, while the backstage interactions are more mundane and depicted in a more realistic mode.³⁴ If the correspondences are mediated, it is not entirely clear which has precedent. Is there a certain natural order of things, which the stage musical articulates and to which the backstage world of the main

characters naturally conforms? Or, does the musical world evolve organically from the world of its performers? Chronology and narrative might support the former, but the issue is never explicitly addressed. Utopically, they merge. It is the discovery of correspondences between these two modes of representation that provides the viewer with many of the film's pleasures.

Both *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of '33* are built around substitutions and displacements that oscillate between correspondences that are textual and others that point to the world beyond the screen. In *42nd Street*, Julian Marsh (Warren Baxter), the producer/director, is a fictionalized version of Florenz Ziegfeld. Peggy Sawyer, played by Ruby Keeler, thus becomes a kind of stand-in for Keeler herself, since she had recently been a popular chorine for Ziegfeld Follies. Having come out of the chorus line, helped first by her mobster boyfriend and later in the movies by her lover and then husband Al Jolson, Keeler strengthened and enriched these parallels between life and art, even as the film offered a sanitized version of events.³⁵ Dick Powell, who had been singing at a Warner Brothers' theater in Pittsburgh, was finding his way to stardom in a manner not unlike Billy Lawler. Beyond this particular *film à clef*, in which the world on film refers to a prior world in the theater, *42nd Street* can be read allegorically in others ways as well. For instance, there is an implied self-referentiality: in a way that was already a well-established convention, the theater world portrayed in the film serves as a substitute for the film world, in particular the world of Warner Brothers. Thus Peggy Sawyer gets her big break in the theater even as Keeler gets a big, "real life" movie break by debuting in this film. The songwriters for *Pretty Lady*, who protest about having their song thrown out, are played by Harry Warren and Al Dubin, the actual song writers for *42nd Street* (and therefore of the stage musical as well).³⁶ Likewise in a kind of wish fulfillment, the theatrical producer (Marsh/Ziegfeld) has his counterpart in Darryl Zanuck at Warner Brothers. These films, it was said, helped rescue Warner Brothers from being broken up, much as *Pretty Lady* saved Julian Marsh. Moreover, Ginger Rogers did have a rather active sex life, not unlike the character she plays (Anytime Annie), at least according to Melvyn LeRoy.³⁷

4.4 There are still other levels of substitution, allegory, or identification in which the film moves beyond the world of theater and/or film to establish a synecdochic relationship to the larger society as a whole. Ruby Keeler is thus a kind of every girl. Perhaps cute, she is hardly a beauty. More than her talent, Keeler's charisma and her persona's friendly yet somewhat innocent determination provide the basis for success. Shop girls in the movie seats could pretend, that is imagine, they were *like* Sawyer/Keeler – that their life contained the possibility for that same larger-than-life drama. (I am looking for another term for, or a particular way of thinking about, the concept of "identification.") Dorothy Brock/Bebe Daniels offers another viewing position, which somewhat older women might occupy, authorizing them to give up work in exchange for a family (a choice relatively few actually had the luxury to make). Billy Lawler and Pat Denning (George Brent) perhaps played similar roles for men, though viewer mobility between characters and across

gender should not be minimized. Certainly Julian Marsh is a Franklin Roosevelt-like figure, a strong benevolent leader who works his cast hard, but only so that he can rescue them – and himself. If others pair off, he is the solitary leader, hanging out by the stage door to overhear the parting remarks of opening nighters (like a man waiting for a handout).

Gold Diggers of '33 replaces many of the real-world correspondences evident in *42nd Street* with textual ones, in a way designed to enhance and sustain spectatorial pleasure. The producer is Barney Hopkins, played by Ned Sparks who was also Barry, one of the producers (Jones and Barry) of *Pretty Lady* in *42nd Street*. A minor player in the earlier film, he becomes more prominent as the director/Julian Marsh character (now the dance director, Robert Agnew) withdraws into the background. Barney has a vision of putting on a musical about the Depression (like the film, which presents itself as being about the Depression). Ruby Keeler is now Polly Parker as opposed to Peggy Sawyer, though it is hard to keep the characters' names straight. (Please note that Keeler's characters share the same first and last letters of their full names – just like Robert Syverten and Ralph Carston.) Likewise, Dick Powell is now Brad Roberts as opposed to Billy Lawler. Here, both characters share the same first letter of their first names. The fact that Brad Roberts is a "stage name" for Robert Bradford draws further attention to the name game in these films and so McCoy's novel. And so on, and so on.

Gold Diggers of '33 still retains its own distinct series of substitutions, which continue along a serious, quasi-historical trajectory. The chorus line displaces the bread line, which is a successor to the marching columns of soldiers from World War I – all of which the stage musical now presents as representations.³⁸ The hard work of the chorus line (in conjunction with the vision and entrepreneurship of Barney Hopkins as well as the money and talent of Brad Roberts) is offered as the way out of the Depression for these characters – and synecdochically for America. The perfect coordination of the chorusline dancers looks toward the productivity of the assembly line and prosperity. Likewise, the rich Bradfords from Boston find happiness and vitality with the New York based chorines. The haves and have-nots come together and find a way to work together in a new synthesis that overcomes the Depression. Of course, many of the interpretations readers can apply to *42nd Street* continue to work for *Gold Diggers of '33*, though not always with the same effectiveness and exactitude. (As briefly discussed above, McCoy adopts the same strategy with *I Should Have Stayed Home*.)

McCoy's Textual Engagement

Dramatic structure of the screenplay may be defined by the linear arrangement of related incidents, episodes, or events leading to a dramatic resolution.

Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*

Brad: I just got the idea for it last night. I was down on Times Square watching those men on the bread line. Standing there in the rain, waiting for coffee and donuts. Men out of a job. Around the soup kitchen.

Barney: Stop. That's it. That's what this show is about. Men marching, marching in the rain. Donuts and quillars. Men marching, marching. Jobs. Jobs.

Gold Diggers of '33

5.1 Recognizing the textual dynamics operating in *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of '33*, Horace McCoy appropriated and perverted them in his Hollywood novel *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* Like Barney, he wanted to create a work "about" the Depression; unlike Barney or his Warner Brothers' surrogates, he did not want to pull his punches. What authorizes us to see *They Shoot Horses* as an engagement with, and repudiation of, these two musicals? I confess that a single passage in the novel started me on this train of thought. But it was a powerful one. A variety of real-life Hollywood stars are given cameo appearances in *They Shoot Horses*, but only one stands out as much more than a kind of name dropping: Ruby Keeler. Well into the marathon and roughly halfway through the novel, Keeler makes an appearance in the stands. She shoots the gun that starts the dancers on their first derby, a nightmare race around the oval that will test their endurance; each night a derby will result in the elimination of a couple from the marathon dance contest. Keeler also provides a \$10 prize for the couple that comes in first. She self-consciously functions as a role model for those in the marathon dance. Perhaps they, like she, can be discovered – or can find a sugar daddy; for, as McCoy slyly notes, she is not accompanied by her very successful husband, Al Jolson, at this event. Her trajectory is one that both Gloria Beatty and her marathon partner, Robert Syverten, hope will happen to them. "A lot of producers and directors go to those marathon dances. There's always the chance they might pick you out and give you a part in a picture," Gloria tells Robert (p. 10).⁴⁰ One might be discovered. In this respect, the marathon dance is the poor person's version of the chorus line. Being picked out seems unlikely to happen to Gloria, who radiates negative energy; but it almost happens to Robert.

Forging a key link between films and novel, McCoy splits and refigures the Ruby Keeler character. While retaining Ruby Keeler herself, he also creates his own Ruby. She is Ruby Bates (Ruby B, the second Ruby). Ruby is a veteran marathon dancer. She and her husband James have already won at least one marathon, taking home \$1,500. Even though Ruby is noticeably (and soon disturbingly) pregnant, she and James seem poised to win the derby. They are routinely in first place (p. 96). Eventually, however, her condition offends the Mothers' League for Good Morals, whose leaders insist that she be ejected from the contest. It does not seem to concern them that her participation is a sign of obvious desperation. They have no wish to help her; they just want her out of sight. This Ruby is, McCoy subtly suggests, a real down-to-earth star; in fact, the *real* Ruby; that is, a real jewel. Likewise her husband James provides her with physical and moral support. He is with her constantly – in contrast to the absent Jolson.⁴¹ Ruby Bates

is a more fitting model for the ordinary American woman, McCoy seems to suggest. And when the reader pretends to be like Ruby Bates, it cuts much closer to the bone. It is less flattering, but more truthful. James Bates is the kind of person that Robert aspires to make a film about – “the life of an ordinary man – you know who makes thirty dollars a week and has to raise kids and buy a home and a car and a radio – the kind of guy bill collectors are always after” (p. 69). Robert Syverten is also, of course, a variant of Ruby (their first names share the same first letter).⁴²

5.2 Both *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of '33* devote considerable attention to the chorines' hopes of being discovered and/or finding a sugar daddy. In *42nd Street*, Dorothy Brock (Bebe Daniels) is able to star in *Pretty Lady* because she is sleeping with the musical's sole backer, Abner Dillon (Guy Kibbee). When she self-destructs, it appears that Dillon's new mistress, Anytime Annie, will take her place in the musical. Instead, Annie recognizes Peggy's talent, steps aside, and tells Marsh to cast Peggy/Keeler in the lead instead. Annie gets her sugar daddy, and Broadway gets its star. Success is possible because the two roles (performing in bed and performing on stage) are finally separated. In each case the best person gets the job.⁴³ In *Gold Diggers of '33* producer Barney Hopkins (Ned Sparks) overhears music wafting from a neighboring apartment and, courtesy of Polly Parker (Ruby Keeler), meets struggling composer Brad Roberts (Dick Powell). Barney quickly decides to use his music. Brad, who it turns out is rich, backs the musical – provided that Polly has a starring role. Now Robert Syverten appears to have exactly such a sponsor – Mrs Layden.

Mrs Layden is a cross between Abner Dillon in *42nd Street* and Brad Roberts in *Gold Diggers of '33*. Like Brad Roberts, Mrs Layden seems poor but is actually quite wealthy – just slumming or rather moving about under cover so that people will accept her for who she is. Like Abner Dillon, she is much older in age. Certainly she prides herself on her eccentricity. It is not clear to Robert or us if this “angel,” who seems ready to fund his direction of a small independent film, is expecting a sexual quid pro quo or not. (It was not clear to Dorothy either until Abner Dillon makes the exchange explicit.) Mrs Layden does seem earnestly concerned about his future – a good woman, perhaps too good for this world. And so she dies. She is killed by a stray bullet from a gunfight in the Palm Garden – shot right between the eyes. The benevolent angel – which both Abner Dillon and Brad Roberts become for their respective Ruby Keeler characters – is too good to survive in McCoy's novel. She is killed in a *deus-ex-machina* fashion. She literally becomes an angel.

The trading of sex for money and the good life is pervasive in both films. Gold digging appears to be a highly enjoyable game for these chorines. In *Gold Diggers of '33* Carol King (Joan Blondell) digs money out of J. Lawrence Bradford (Warren William), and they discover mutual love in the process. Even the aging comedienne Trixie (Aline MacMahon) finds a safe haven with Fanny Peabody (Guy Kibbee). Both gold diggers ultimately succeed in marrying their well-to-do men, with these calculated exchanges softened by romantic and comic overtones. This happens, in a somewhat different way,

to Geneva Tomblin in McCoy's novel. She is "discovered" by her future husband – a modestly well-to-do skipper who will marry her at once. Here such "happy outcomes" are made real. Geneva is marrying a man she does not know to live on a bait barge anchored three miles out in the Pacific Ocean. To the world desperate for romance and happy endings, she is presented as one of the lucky ones. To embrace such a choice, however, says something about Depression desperation that is excluded from the films.

Another variation on this type of arrangement is also depicted in these backstage musicals: in *42nd Street*, Loraine Fleming (Una Merkel) is having an affair with the assistant director or stage manager, Andy Lee (George Stone). Although this alliance secures her position in the chorus line, it also appears to be more than just a calculated exchange of favors. The other assistant stage manager, MacElroy (Allen Jenkins), lacks a steady girlfriend; he suggests that a little night work could help one or another chorine on her way to success. The objects of his sexual interest greet such propositions with different levels of credibility or cynicism – perhaps merely content to have a backstage protector. In *They Shoot Horses*, these two assistants are refigured as Rocky Gravo and Rollo Fingers, the assistant managers (announcer and floor judge, respectively). Fingers uses his position to extract a quickie from Gloria and other female marathoners amidst the filth and total darkness of the space under the grandstands. The romance and/or the fun as well as the benefits of this sex trade are, we might say, demystified. (In *42nd Street*, when Dorothy Brock wants a quickie on the side with her boyfriend, Pat Denning, it happens in all the comfort of her sugar daddy's luxury car.)

One of the few people seemingly not interested in sex is the marathon promoter, Vincent "Socks" Donald. Very much like the Julian Marsh and Barney characters, he is focused on pulling off the show. He is sleazier but knows his business. He is not evil, but skillfully exploits the participants in a logical, business-like, almost benevolent way. Gloria and others want "Hollywood" to come down to the dance hall on Santa Monica pier: it is the only way to be discovered. So they agree to the derby. In this respect, he is not the evil con artist of Sydney Pollack's 1969 movie adaptation. The marathon producer in that film is really a liar and deceiver (like Presidents Johnson and Nixon): Pollack's promoter has sex with the female contestants and never intends to pay the winner. McCoy deheroicizes the role of the promoter but he does not destroy it. A successful producer finds a way to attract an audience, saving "jobs" and putting food on the table. "Socks" Donald thus retains certain elements of benevolent paternalism. McCoy's novel is about survival and subsistence. Pollack's film is about something else (Vietnam).

5.3 The contrasts between the backstage world constructed by the "dream factory" and the brutal realism of the dance marathon is the fulcrum around which McCoy builds his critique of Hollywood. The musicals offer a series of linear structures: the chorus line itself but also the films' narratives. Desperate though not dispirited men and women come together, share talent and resources, and ultimately overcome adversity. They learn about life and love. The films move toward a happy resolution as amateur actress Peggy Sawyer/Ruby Keeler becomes a chorus girl, then a star, and finally finds romantic fulfillment

with Billy Lawler/Dick Powell. The star (Dorothy Brock/Bebe Daniels) finds herself by acknowledging her true love and throwing in her lot with her old partner (Pat Denning/George Brent). Anytime Annie/Ginger Rogers finds a sugar daddy (Abner Dillon/Guy Kibbee). And so on. All these individual solutions occur within the larger framework of the show's success. While acknowledging the Depression, the film offers an upward, upbeat trajectory.

They Shoot Horses has a circular structure which parallels the oval around which the derbies are run. In certain respects, it is not unlike Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: from the outset, we know how the story will turn out. Chapter 1 begins where the last chapter (number 13) ends, with Robert Syverten condemned to death for the murder of Gloria Beatty. In this opening chapter (one page), Robert recalls the moment he did Gloria a favor and shot her. It was the one moment he saw her happy and relaxed. Her intense despair and desire to end her own life are then threaded throughout the story. His present fate – his imminent execution for shooting Gloria – is also repeatedly interpolated throughout the book. We are never allowed to forget it. Hope, a linear unfolding of events, and the possibility of some upward trajectory are eliminated. Even the marathon, which might yield some victor who would walk away with \$1,000, is terminated without any resolution. The organizers promise to divide the money among the remaining contestants – tomorrow. But tomorrow never comes in this novel, and it is quite possible that the organizers will skip town. Yet even if they do deliver the money or there had been a winner, it seems that nothing would really change for anyone. James and Ruby once won \$1,500 (more than the present marathon) and yet they are as desperate as ever. As Gloria puts it, this whole business is a "merry-go-round." "When we get out of here we're right back where we started" (p. 44). The tone and flashback structure of *film noir* is fully developed in this novel.

The worst that *42nd Street* has to offer still contains a silver lining. Julian Marsh (Warren Baxter) tells his cast: "I'm going to work you day and night until you drop." In fact, our young trooper, Peggy Sawyer/Ruby Keeler, does pass out and is carefully carried back to a bench where she is ministered to by a number of concerned people, including the very debonair Pat Denning/George Brent. Held gently, she is handed a glass of water and sips it gratefully. Brent then takes the Keeler character out for dinner and, having lost her lodging room, back to his apartment where he gives her his double bed for a good night's sleep (she locks the door keeping him on the other side). Sawyer/Keeler is "dead tired," but clearly not in the way that Gloria or even the other dance marathoners are dead tired. Working on the chorus line gives the cast members a sense of community – of possibility enmeshed with danger and romance, of sex and money. (They are members of a cast – not outcasts.)

The marathon is a kind of waking nightmare that literally goes on endlessly as one sunset succeeds another, giving a new and more concrete meaning to Marsh's declaration: the marathon contestants do literally work day and night until they collapse. Every two hours the contestants are allowed to stop for ten minutes and eat/shave or sleep (and on cots rather than Pat Denning's double bed). They are awakened by ammonia. When contestants pass out after the derby, as Robert Syverten does at one point, they are dropped

into a tub of water cooled by a 100-pound block of ice. This assistance, which Robert seems even to appreciate, can be contrasted to the attention that Peggy Sawyer/Ruby Keeler receives under comparable circumstances (the dainty glass of water). (As one observer of Syverten's dousing remarks, "that ice water fixes 'em right up" [p. 62].) Syverten is tossed into the tub and when he gets out, another contestant quickly follows. If there is a straight line in McCoy's novel, it is only the line of unconscious contestants waiting to be dunked so they can get back on the merry-go-round. Will Ruby lose her job if she takes that needed break after passing out – apparently not (and if she does, Pat Denning assures her that there will be something else). In the marathon, if you can't come right back, it is all over.

Something always happens at a marathon declares Rocky Gravo, the announcer, and passing out is part of the show. The contestants' agony is much of what people come to watch. That is why the derbies are the high points of each day. (Like the nightly Broadway performance for the chorines, they come at the end of the day.) Life, rehearsal, and show time are collapsed in the world of marathon dancing. People sleep and eat while dancing. They have sex within the ten-minute breaks they get every two hours. During the derbies, contestants are pushed to the very limits of endurance. They fall, collide, and keep the house doctor busy. Pain becomes spectacle. People come to see others who are more desperate than themselves, to see people struggle to stay standing, to ward off collapse. This spectacle is different from, indeed the reverse of, the spectacle offered by Warner Brothers' musicals. Not pain but pretty ladies with sexy legs, sexual vitality and utopic possibilities are on display. If the process of selecting dancers for the chorus line involves what is known in the business as a "cattle call," Syverten/McCoy suggest that the dance marathon is like a bull fight (p. 20). And the contestants are the bulls.

5.4 Endings are important in cultural works. Neither *42nd Street* nor *Gold Diggers of '33* ends with a kiss, a choice that foregrounds the studio's social conscience and relates these personal solutions to the larger resolution (the show's success, the ending of the Depression). *42nd Street* ends with Julian Marsh alone, outside the theater, overhearing the reactions of the opening-night crowd. They are enthralled and the play is a success. He and his company are safe. In *Gold Diggers of '33*, the successful mounting of a musical that acknowledges the Depression (with "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?") merely reverses the film's opening number ("We're in the Money") which hides it. Admitting that there is a crisis (like Franklin Roosevelt) is better than denying it or its severity (like Herbert Hoover). Only then can the community resolve it. In both cases, however, the kiss is shown or implied in the penultimate scene. Romantic union and marriage remain central to the resolution of the narrative (which involves a larger union – that of classes as well as performers and audience members).

Rather than the conventional Hollywood happy ending, McCoy's novel ends as it begins, with the protagonist shooting his dance partner (this occurs in both instances as a flashback recalled while the protagonist is being sentenced to death by the judge). The couple is united by death rather than by a kiss. And yet, the gunshot to the head is like

a kiss: Robert sees Gloria's murder as the single most loving act that he does for her, fulfilling her deepest held desire – to die quickly. Moreover, like marriage, it is an act that unites Robert and Gloria – not until "death do us part" but in and through death. The judge's pronouncement of the death sentence is like that other pronouncement often spoken by the judge: the wedding ceremony in which he pronounces a couple man and wife. Narrative resolution is bleak, indeed.

5.5 McCoy, a marginal Hollywood scriptwriter, directed his rage at Hollywood and its invidious ideological project: its pretense to heroically depict the Depression even as it pulls its punches. Refiguration, his means of ideological indictment, is systematic and devastating. Legs are a central and recurring motif in both *42nd Street* and *They Shoot Horses*. This is acknowledged by the very title of McCoy's novel, which as a question at least implies an explanation as to why or when they shoot the horses. When the horse has broken a leg, when it is in pain, and when it can no longer work (pp. 76–7). Gloria is in pain, she wants to get off the merry-go-round of life which is like the merry-go-round of the derby. Metaphorically, she has broken a leg and is, as she says, no good. In *42nd Street*, Dorothy Brock/Bebe Daniels also breaks a leg and is no good. She cannot perform for *Pretty Lady*, nor is she willing to perform for her sugar daddy. She soon realizes that this is a piece of good luck: her broken leg has actually saved her from a hypocritical situation. She is reunited with her true love, with Pat Denning/George Brent. Breaking a leg ensures her happy ending.

In the theater, of course, the expression "break a leg" is used to wish someone luck. Breaks and broken legs can move in opposite directions. People are broke but looking for a break.⁴⁴ This means looking for a good break – a breakthrough. But there are bad breaks, some of which leave people irredeemably broken. Bad luck or good luck. Ruby gets a break, a chance to star. She is told she cannot fail, she cannot "fall down." Even in the final, thirteenth chapter of McCoy's novel, Robert Syverten is still hoping for a break – that Mrs Layden's assistant will still help him out. Gloria mocks him: "Always tomorrow . . . The big break is always coming tomorrow" (p. 116). And so in McCoy's novel, a broken leg is what it is. People are treated like animals and some, like a horse with a broken leg, are killed. Not just by Robert in a sleep-deprived hallucinatory state. The state performs these acts as well. *They Shoot Horses* starts with the judge intoning, "The prisoner will stand." Syverten acknowledges that when it comes to his case, he "doesn't have a leg to stand on." His leg is also broken (metaphorically), and he too will be killed.

Dancing is a leg sport. The chorines' jams are the objects of Abner Dillon's delight. "I don't know about contracts, but it looks good to me," Dillon remarks at the beginning of the film as he looks at one of Dorothy Brock's legs in the mirror. During the cattle call, Julian Marsh starts out by looking at the girls' legs. After three weeks, Dillon has changed his tune: "A leg is nothing but something to stand on." Nonetheless, the Busby Berkeley production numbers focus on and fetishize the legs of the chorines, in keeping with the film's motif. The dance marathoners also depend on their legs. Their

legs are not spectacles – at least until the derbies when they are put in shorts and made to run around the oval. Their legs are simply to stand on, to dance on, and to run on. Their worth is measured by their durability, valued like the leg of an animal – for the work they can deliver. The marathoners' legs swelled painfully during the first week, but no one sees them. (To avoid overheating, the women do shed their sweatshirts during the derbies, providing audiences with the spectacle of breasts bouncing in skimpy brassières [p. 63].)

Joblessness and bankruptcy – being broke and broken – haunted the Depression. Robert S. MacElvaine notes that crime and suicide were two responses to this desperation: both are present in the Warner Brothers' musicals and McCoy's novels. In *Gold Diggers of '33*, Polly Parker and her roommates have no reason to get up because there is no work. The alarm sounds and they turn over and go back to sleep. They steal a bottle of milk from the neighbor's fire escape. In McCoy's novel, the crimes are more serious. Giuseppe Lodi robbed a drug store and killed the elderly proprietor. Perhaps, like Robert, he was just being nice – pinch hitting for God. Suicide rates rose in the 1930s; and, for many, it "seemed the only solution." "Can you be so kind as to advise me as to which would be the most human way to dispose of my self and my family, as it is about the only thing that I see left to do," wrote one advice seeker.⁴⁵ Although few actually took the fatal step, many considered it. Gloria thinks of it constantly. At the beginning of *42nd Street*, when Jones and Barry are talking to Marsh, the director tells them that he is broke and will give them a hit or die trying. Barry remarks that if he dies, there will be a triple funeral. That is, their situation is so desperate that they see suicide as the inevitable result of failure. If success is so important in these musicals, it is because the Depression grinds everyone down even as it keeps everyone on edge. Even a highly successful director like Marsh must risk everything on one roll of the dice. And the odds against him had never been higher, but not nearly as high as the odds against Gloria or the other marathoners. McCoy shifts the question of suicide from the well-to-do producers to those living truly on the edge. Socks Donald may fail, but he lives to try again. Failure to mount a successful dance marathon in no way seems to threaten his future. In contrast, a desperate contestant such as Gloria comes to recognize that there is no way off the merry-go-round but death.

If despair and suicide are pervasive, it becomes all the more urgent to produce the life-affirming events of love and marriage (but, as the pregnant Ruby Bates shows, not babies). *42nd Street* moves from casual if pragmatic promiscuity by the leading characters to more permanent pairings with marriage in the wings, echoed in the musical numbers ("Shuffle Off to Buffalo" and the section of "Young and Healthy" in which the chorines are all dressed in wedding gowns). Likewise in *Gold Diggers of '33*, the shift is from gold digging and seduction to serious involvement and marriage. In *They Shoot Horses*, marriage is a recurrent obsession. Despite the grind of the marathon, the promoters are eager to show that even here, under such circumstances, romance and marriage can flourish. They try to arrange a public wedding between one of the couples – tapping Robert and Gloria who refuse. When another couple accepts, they are

protected from elimination in the nightly derbies. As already noted, the marriage of a contestant (Geneva) to a spectator (the skipper of a bait boat) is also ballyhooed. The promoters are too cynical to believe it. That is why Rollo Fingers gets knifed: he seduced a woman whose partner believes her to be his fiancée. Indeed, James and Ruby had a public wedding at an earlier marathon. *They Shoot Horses* does not rule out the possibility (McCoy married the daughter of a wealthy oil man in late 1933), but it exposes the hype – the commodification of marriage. Fairy-tale endings rarely occur – least of all in the midst of a marathon dance or a Depression.

As Robert Stam reminds us, "Central to the transformational grammar of adaptation are permutations in locale, time and language."⁴⁶ McCoy handles such displacements and substitutions in a variety of ways. If the marathon dance is a refiguration of the chorus line as a trope, McCoy sets his story in Hollywood to which the films so obviously allude. McCoy thus reverses one of the substitutions (New York for Hollywood or the world of theater for the world of film) on which the films are based, bringing the metaphorical signifier closer to the actual signified. Many of the dance marathoners are would-be extras who had used their legs walking from studio to studio looking for a job, hoping to be discovered but always on a treadmill. They cannot even get listed in Central Casting. Some are desperate enough so that they take the marathon because it offers food and a bed (even if it is only a bed for ten minutes every two hours). At least by being in a marathon, they can be extras – extras in so many ways. When the need arises, the marathoners are easily jettisoned: whether Mario, Freddy and the under-aged Manski girl, a pregnant Ruby Bates, or the anonymous couples eliminated by the derby on a daily basis.

Ideology and Style

If you must kill off your main character (and I do not take the view that you must never do this – just be aware that it's a risky decision), make sure that there is some other emotional center to your story.

Linda Seger, *The Art of Adaptation*⁴⁷

All you got to do to that story is give it the switcheroo.

Budd Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?*⁴⁸

Chapter 15

6.1 If *They Shoot Horses* is an anti-Hollywood novel, if McCoy takes *42nd Street* and turns the musical inside out, then it makes sense that the movie stars come down to the dance hall on Santa Monica pier to watch the people who normally would watch them on the big screen – contestants like Gloria, who came to Los Angeles because of the stories she read in a fan magazine. Out of curiosity or just a desire to reverse looking relations, they watch these ordinary people trying to succeed – to become like themselves.

Alice Faye, who was in the chorus line when she was discovered by Rudy Vallee, comes first. Vallee had her star in *George White's Scandals* (1934). Ruby Keeler is followed by many others. Some are stars like Bill Boyd, who had appeared in *Lucky Devils* and *Emergency Call* in 1933. He had been a popular star until another actor of the same name was involved in a gambling and liquor scandal, tarnishing his image. (His career began to revive in 1935, starring in the Hopalong Cassidy series.) Ken Murray, who had appeared in *Disgraced* and *From Headquarters* in 1933, would not have another major screen credit for the next three years. June Clyde – whose 1933 credits included *A Study in Scarlet*, *Her Resale Value*, and *Forgotten* – would be in England by 1935. She was in a group with her future husband, Thornton Freeland, who was known for his light, lively comedies and musicals. Sue Carol appeared in *Secret Sinners* (1933) and Tom Brown was in *Laughter in Hell* (1933) at Universal.

Many of these actors in the grandstands were themselves on the edge of Hollywood's star system – players with a handful of credits who could, and in some cases would, disappear, losing their livelihood in the film industry. They are watching ordinary people, whose efforts to stay standing perhaps can serve to remind them of their own struggles to stay afloat, while providing enough distance to put their own uncertainties in a more favorable light. If movie viewers frequently pretend that they are like people on the screen, characters who are idealized and upwardly mobile versions of themselves, these actors pretend that they are unlike these marathoners. They deny or suppress their affinities. They see these marathoners as distopic, grotesque versions of themselves. Although purportedly there to watch the dance marathon, they are still there to be looked at – by the more ordinary people in the seats as well as by the marathoners themselves. Those struggling to stay standing still aspire to be like them – like those celebrities in the grandstands who can sit, whose breaks have been of a different kind. Certainly the sense of community, which as Jane Feuer reminds us is constructed in the musical, is undone.⁴⁹

6.2 *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* is a complex literary achievement. On an immediate level, McCoy's novel seems to offer a gritty realism related to its "hard-boiled" style. As Edmund Wilson remarked: "the first of his books is worth reading for its description of one of those dance marathons that were among the most grisly symptoms of the depression."⁵⁰ This documentary-like aesthetic can be highlighted for the contemporary reader by situating McCoy's novel against historical accounts of marathon dancing, such as the one by Carol Martin.⁵¹ Nonetheless, *They Shoot Horses* is carefully constructed and highly stylized. Consider its use of numerology. There are thirteen chapters, for instance. The numbers assigned to the couples are also telling. James and Ruby Bates are "unlucky," drawing number thirteen: they lead the derby but are forced to quit by nosy reformers (the Mothers' League). Number 22 is Hollywood's lucky number: remember Rick (Humphrey Bogart) tells one young woman to play 22 at the roulette wheel in *Casablanca* (1942): she plays it twice and wins both times. The number 22 makes similar appearances in other, earlier Warner Brothers' films. Robert and Gloria are couple no. 22 in the marathon. Robert meets his female counterpart from that other lucky number: couple number 7

(Rosemary Luftus).⁵² She is well bred and apparently comes from wealth. Robert and she have an instant connection and drift rapidly toward the dark area under the grandstands, only to be interrupted by the sexual activities of Gloria and Rollo Fingers. This attraction, however, is never again pursued. Surviving takes priority. In fact, there is no clearer indication that *They Shoot Horses* is an anti-Hollywood novel than that the couple wearing 22 suffer the greatest series of blows. If they find luck, it is – as Gloria maintains – only in a quick death. Perhaps then they did get a good break after all.⁵³

Hollywood is thus indicted in this novel. As a Hollywood allegory, *42nd Street* seems to say that, with a little luck, hard work, and some sexual quid pro quo, an extra can become a star – or at least live reasonably happily and comfortably. But the main characters in *They Shoot Horses* cannot even get extra work. They are not even eligible for walk-on parts as members of the chorus line in *42nd Street* (or any other backstage musical) because they cannot join Central Casting. (If the reader will allow me to indulge in an anachronism I've generally kept to the epigraphs, here is a real Catch-22.) Instead, these aspiring extras perform the only roles available to them. With food, a cot, and the faint hope of prize money as their only payment, they play themselves – objects of spectacle and pity for members of the Hollywood community whose films affirm the ideology of success, hard work, talent, and luck. They are the stars' alter egos: their opposites who are nonetheless acting out their drama of success. The systematic, extended nature of these oppositions forces a further reassessment of the novel's apparent realism. Rather than involving a simple correspondence with, description and assessment of, and engagement with the real world, McCoy employs a mode of description or writing that is situated in relation to, and stands in stark opposition to, Hollywood glamor.⁵⁴

McCoy's novel is written in the style that Michael Denning has called the proletarian grotesque, an engaged and critical literary style of the Depression.⁵⁵ It is the grotesque, not realism that stands in strongest opposition to Hollywood glamor. Dumping contestants into bath tubs filled with 100-pound blocks of ice, and marathoners having sex amidst the dark filth under the grandstands, goes beyond realism, even as a realist component retains a credibility that is crucial to the impact of the novel. In fact, the Warner Brothers' musicals, by focusing on the lowly chorines and the cavernous backstage areas, provide a realism that ultimately supports the glamor.⁵⁶ Romantic realism is shared by both films and novel. Beyond that they move in different directions. McCoy responded to his desperate encounter with Hollywood by countering its depiction of the world (Hollywood glamor) with the grotesque. And the grotesque, Kenneth Burke argues, is a style most appropriate to moments of crisis, one in which "the perception of form is perceived without smile or laughter."⁵⁷ The tendency to associate McCoy with the hard-boiled writing of Cain and Dashiell Hammett has also concealed the extent to which McCoy's first novel can be seen as part of the proletarian movement that "produced a counterculture to Fordism and its nascent machinery of advertising, journalism, and broadcasting."⁵⁸ Syvertsen, certainly an author surrogate, aspires to make a film about "the life of an ordinary man." With McCoy's novel, we can see how this variant of proletarian literature confronted the Hollywood dream factory and its way of depicting the world. In this respect, it is

crucial that McCoy directed his devil's parody of the movies not at an easy target but at meaningful entertainment that claimed to be about the Depression.

Quotation, Appropriation, or Adaptation

Why, I knew a guy who made a nice little pile out of one of De Maupassant's stories just the other day. And all he had to do was switch the hooker from a French carriage to a Western stagecoach. If you were smart you'd try to hit on something like that and write yourself an original.

Budd Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?*⁵⁹

7.1 To see the relationship of *They Shoot Horses* to the Warner Brothers' backstage musicals of 1933 as one of caustic transformation – of profound reconfiguration and even radical adaptation – is crucial to our understanding and full enjoyment of the novel. And yet, as I have already suggested, I feel some discomfort in situating this novel within theories of literary or filmic “adaptation,” even as an inversion of Hollywood practices. Some of my unease can be explained by the history of its writing: the fact that earlier drafts were written even before these films were in production (as discussed above). At the very least, McCoy did not begin by secretly encoding and transforming these Warner Brothers' musicals into *They Shoot Horses*. Rather the films provided McCoy with crucial literary traction: a series of symbols, motifs and tropes, an ideology, and some characters that he could work with and against.

In making a case for or against *They Shoot Horses* as adaptation, the story itself is a crucial consideration. Even if we accept the transpositions of Los Angeles for New York and a dance marathon for a Broadway musical, there is real uncertainty or ambiguity here. Although all three works have people coming together to put on a show or a performance, this aspect is something that they share with many other backstage musicals. There are also a very large number of Hollywood films in which boy meets girl, boy and girl strive to make their lives or their projects a success, and, after twists and turns, boy gets girl. As in many Hollywood films, these backstage musicals involve a double movement in which work and romance are intertwined. The problems in one area interact with those in the other. Although there were some exceptions (for example, *I'm a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* and, in a less unexpected way, *Little Caesar*), most Warner Brothers' films – most Hollywood films – had a happy ending in which success and romance are achieved, more or less simultaneously (a double orgasm, if you will). *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* is, at the very least, a story of double failure: an inverted romance and an inverted success story – a devil's parody of conventional Hollywood narratives. With the death of his sponsor, Syvertsen loses his chance to chase his dream and perhaps direct a film. The bullet he sends into Gloria's brain is a kiss of death and a negation

of hope rather than an affirmation of life. Nonetheless, it is possible to assert that these two movie musicals offer a paradigm of one popular type of Hollywood story. Despite the numerous evocations of *42nd Street*, it is this paradigm that McCoy is engaging. Indeed, *42nd Street* is but one substantiation of it.

7.2 At what point does quotation or appropriation become extensive enough to merit the term "adaptation?" And is refiguration necessarily adaptation? We have seen the various tropes and symbols that McCoy has appropriated and turned inside out as well as perhaps upside down: the break, leg art and breaking a leg, the wedding, the show, hard work, sex, success, stardom, sugar daddies, the producer, Ruby Keeler, and so forth. If Hollywood films are always simply reworkings and reconfigurations of what has been done before, as Adorno and Horkheimer insist in their analysis of Hollywood movie-making and Budd Schulberg suggests in his Hollywood novel *What Makes Sammy Run?*, then classical Hollywood filmmaking in general can be understood as a degraded and derivative substantiation of the process of adaptation. Genres, star personas, story lines, and so much else were constantly reworked and rehashed. If so, Edmund Wilson was right. McCoy does more than offer us a parody of the movies or, even, of this one movie (*42nd Street*). He takes the essence of Hollywood movie-making, its "lifeblood," and mocks it even as he brilliantly employs it against all that Hollywood represents. It is this perverse dialectic – McCoy's brilliant execution and simultaneous disparagement – that provides a devil's parody of, among other things, Hollywood adaptation.

Notes

- 1 Linda Seger, *The Art of Adaptation: Fact and Fiction into Film* (New York: Henry Holt, 1992), p. xi.
- 2 Edmund Wilson, "The Boys in the Back Room," in *Classics and Commercials* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1950), p. 22.
- 3 Richard Fine, *West of Eden: Writers in Hollywood, 1928–1940* (1985; Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).
- 4 In today's post-classical, postmodern world, the direction of adaptation across media and forms has become more complex: new musicals are now more likely to be based on movie classics than the other way around (for example, *The Sweet Smell of Success*, *Sunset Boulevard*, and *The Producers*). Narrative properties shuttle back and forth between film and television (e.g. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Clueless*, and *Star Trek*).
- 5 See, for instance, Mikhail Iampolski, *The Memory of Tiresias: Intertextuality and Film* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 80–1, who explains the use of literary sources this way: "The cinema needs to refer to the Book as its source in order to legitimate its own textual status. A text acquires social authority only if it is produced by an author who enjoys a specific social and cultural credibility. The literary text has a particularly close link to the authorial instance. Unlike literature, a film produces photographic texts whose index of authorship is lower. Its credibility is based on the photographic self-evidence of what it shows. Yet

this photographic self-evidence is not enough, within the framework of traditional cultural assumptions (above all in the early stages of film history), to secure cinema its legitimacy. It is precisely this that might explain, at least to some extent, why films generally acknowledge the book and writer that inspired them: both project onto the film the aura of additional legitimacy that written texts have enjoyed in our culture."

- 6 These adaptations are rarely considered by cultural historians. To offer one example: Arline de Hass, *The Jazz Singer: A Story of Pathos and Laughter* (London: The Readers Library Publishing Company, n.d.) from the play by Samson Raphaelson.
- 7 Seger, *The Art of Adaptation*, p. xi.
- 8 Budd Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941; London: Allison and Busby, 1992), p. 46.
- 9 Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," in James Naremore (ed.), *Film Adaptation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), p. 62.
- 10 Dudley Andrew, "Adaptation," in Naremore (ed.), *Film Adaptation*, p. 29.
- 11 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944; New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 134.
- 12 Epes Winthrop Sargent, *Technique of the Photoplay*, 3rd edn (New York: The Moving Picture World, 1916), p. 244.
- 13 Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?*, p. 139.
- 14 Robert Stam discusses aspects of these radical acts of adaptation in "Beyond Fidelity," p. 63.
- 15 "Box Office Champions of 1933," *Motion Picture Herald* (February 3, 1934), 16–17. (In fact, *Gold Diggers of '33* was tied for second and *42nd Street* was tied for third in this listing.) Patricia King Hanson (ed.), *The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States, Feature Films, 1931–1940* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 2043–4.
- 16 J. Hoberman, *42nd Street* (London: British Film Institute, 1993); Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1987), p. 228.
- 17 Sometimes the author or filmmaker will feel the need to point out a textual reference that others have missed. Godard is one such example. See Iampolski, *The Memory of Tiresias*, pp. 31–2.
- 18 Although Bruce Chipman fails to mention *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* in *Into America's Dream-dump: A Postmodern Study of the Hollywood Novel* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999), he considers *I Should Have Stayed Home* as the last of the "early Hollywood novels" (p. 45). The novel is dealt with in some depth in John Parris Springer, *Hollywood Fictions: The Dream Factory in American Popular Literature* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), pp. 152–7.
- 19 Robert van Gelder, *The New York Times* (July 25, 1935), 17. Writing in the Sunday book review section of *The New York Times*, Edith H. Walton remarked, "in pace and violence it may be inferior to the Cain–Hammett opuses, but its implications are far more deadly": "They Shoot Horses, Don't They?" (July 28, 1935), 6F. See John Thomas Sturak, "The Life and Writings of Horace McCoy," unpublished PhD dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 1966, p. 272.
- 20 Sturak, "The Life and Writings of Horace McCoy," p. 273.
- 21 If attentive to elements of the novel's style, Sturak concludes that "more than a symbolic comment upon the desperate socio-economic condition of the Western world in the thirties,

- McCoy's marathon *danse macabre* is also an universally applicable parable of modern man's existential predicament" (Sturak, "The Life and Writings of Horace McCoy," p. 268). He wrongly concludes, I think, that McCoy "consciously minimized topical allusions to the Depression" (p. 269). Such approaches tend to examine the novel separately from both social and cultural contexts.
- 22 Wilson, "The Boys in the Back Room," p. 22.
 - 23 While offering impressive insights, Wilson's essay also has serious limitations. Despite its publication date, McCoy had written *They Shoot Horses* long before the publication of Cain's *The Postman Only Rings Twice* (Sturak, "The Life and Writings of Horace McCoy," pp. 273–8). He also overlooked important works, notably *Double Indemnity*, which appeared in serial form in the mid-1930s, though it was not published as a novel until 1943. Likewise, he appears unaware of Horace McCoy's second novel, *No Pockets in a Shroud* (London: A. Barker, 1937), published only in England. More problematically, Wilson sees McCoy as secondary and subservient to Cain, making him, along with Richard Hallas (Eric Knight), a member of the Cain "school" of fiction, which he suggests is indebted to Ernest Hemingway.
 - 24 Wilson, "Boys in the Back Room," p. 48.
 - 25 Sturak, "Life and Writings of Horace McCoy," pp. 257–61.
 - 26 Jopi Nyman, *Hard-boiled Fiction and Dark Romanticism* (Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 1998), pp. 57–8.
 - 27 Horace McCoy, *I Should Have Stayed Home* (1938; London: Midnight Classics, 1996), p. 5.
 - 28 Seger, *The Art of Adaptation*, p. 218.
 - 29 Rudy Behlmer (ed.), *Inside Warner Bros (1935–1951)* (New York: Viking, 1985), p. 10.
 - 30 Andrew Bergman, *We're in the Money* (1971; Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1992), pp. 62–3.
 - 31 See Noel Burch, "Double speak: de l'ambiguïté tendancielle du cinéma hollywoodien: cinéma et réception," *Réseaux* 99 (2000), 99–130.
 - 32 Charles Musser, "DeMille, Divorce and the Comedy of Remarriage," in Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins (eds), *Classical Hollywood Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 282–313. Griffith's films for Biograph might offer an earlier example of these principles.
 - 33 Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (London: Hogarth Press, 1960).
 - 34 For an examination of musicals and the utopic, see Altman, *The American Film Musical*, esp. pp. 69, 77, 206. See also Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1982), p. 17.
 - 35 See Herbert G. Goldman, *Jolson: The Legend Comes to Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 157–8, 184, and Michael Freedland, *Jolson* (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), pp. 124–5. Nancy Marlow-Trump, *Ruby Keeler: A Photographic Biography* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1998), pp. 44–5, 50–2, offers a cleaned-up account of Keeler's love life and rise. This conflation between life and art echoes an earlier Warner Brothers' film, *The Jazz Singer* (1927): Jake Rabinowitz (aka Jack Robin) evokes the story of Al Jolson, who also happens to be playing the role.
 - 36 Gary Marmorstein, *Hollywood Rhapsody: Movie Music and its Makers 1900 to 1975* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), p. 57.
 - 37 Melvyn LeRoy as told to Dick Kleiner, *Melvyn LeRoy: Take One* (New York: Hawthorn, 1974), p. 104.

- 38 Springer, echoing Sturak, suggests that McCoy's removal of references to bread lines in the novel version of *They Shoot Horses* (as opposed to the earlier short story) moves away from the specifics of the Depression to a more universal story. On the contrary, with bread lines mentioned in the Warner Brothers' musicals, these references became redundant and unnecessary (Springer, *Hollywood Fictions*, pp. 152–7).
- 39 Syd Field, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, expanded edn (New York: Dell, 1994), pp. 14–15.
- 40 Horace McCoy, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935; London: Serpent's Tail, 1995). Subsequent quotations by page number in parenthesis in the text will be to this edition.
- 41 Gaspar Gonzalez-Monzon, "Barnstorming American Culture: Traveling Entertainment as Work and Performance," unpublished PhD thesis, Yale University, 1999.
- 42 Their names share other letters as well, though there are some gaps (Robert Syvertsen lacks the "U" to have all the letters in "Ruby"). Robert has the potential to be a Ruby, but lacks something – perhaps luck, perhaps common sense or street smarts.
- 43 In this respect, it is crucial for both films that the director (Marsh) and producer (Barney) are asexual, without romantic attachment or interest.
- 44 As Al Jolson told *Motion Picture Classic Magazine*, "Not that I don't have a lot of fun in life, understand me. I'm always kidding. If I break a leg I enjoy that experience. If I make a million I enjoy that one" (quoted in Freedland, *Jolson*, p. 123).
- 45 Robert S. MacElvaine, *The Great Depression* (New York: Times Books, 1984), p. 174.
- 46 Stam, "Beyond Fidelity," p. 69.
- 47 Seger, *The Art of Adaptation*, p. 7.
- 48 Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?*, p. 73.
- 49 Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, p. 17.
- 50 Wilson, "The Boys in the Back Room," p. 20.
- 51 Carol J. Martin, *Dance Marathons: Performing American Culture of the 1920s and 1930s* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Mississippi Press, 1994).
- 52 In Sidney Pollack's film adaptation of this novel, the couples also wear numbers. The principal characters wear the numbers 65, 66, 67, and 68 – the years of the Vietnam War.
- 53 It is perhaps worth noting another difference between the McCoy novel and the Pollack film adaptation. In Pollack's film, the horse is running free when it falls in the hole and breaks a leg. In the novel, it is pulling a plow.
- 54 It has always intrigued me that the unemployed chorine played by Ruby Keeler at the beginning of *Gold Diggers of '33* wears perfectly applied lipstick in bed. Even though she is without a job and so without a reason to get out of that bed in the morning, her character must retain a glamorous sheen.
- 55 Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 118–21.
- 56 The realist thrust of *42nd Street* and *Gold Diggers of '33* is evident if we contrast them to later backstage musicals such as *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) or *Band Wagon* (1953).
- 57 Kenneth Burke, "Revolutionary Symbolism in America" (1935), quoted in Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 122.
- 58 Denning, *The Cultural Front*, p. 121.
- 59 Schulberg, *What Makes Sammy Run?*, p. 62.

Chapter 15

The Devil's Parody

Horace McCoy's Appropriation and Refiguration of Two Hollywood Musicals

Charles Musser

Have you ever noticed how many films are adaptations? Adaptations are the lifeblood of the film and television business.

Linda Seger, *The Art of Adaptation*

These novels are a kind of Devil's parody of the movies.

Edmund Wilson, *Classics and Commercials*

1.1 The Hollywood novel and the screenwriting manual boast a shared history. Both have typically been written by those claiming to be Hollywood insiders, whose access gives them behind-the-scenes insights. How-to manuals claim to offer the truth as they reveal little-known tricks of the trade. In explicating the ways of Hollywood (particularly its ways of telling stories), they at least imply that this way of life is "good work if you can get it." They may warn readers of the difficulties that they face, but the very act of writing these manuals presupposes a degree of optimism: that it is possible for readers to succeed in the film industry with talent, perseverance, and effective guidance. When it comes to Hollywood novels, the situation is generally the reverse. Richard Fine has detailed the ways in which those East Coast writers who came to Hollywood in the late 1920s and early 1930s felt profoundly alienated as they abruptly lost control over the fruits of their labor.³ The Hollywood novel was a way for these writers to reassert their artistic integrity outside and in many ways against the Hollywood system. Written against the boss (though McCoy and others were always eager to sell the movie rights back to the studio), Hollywood novels generally offer a highly jaundiced view of the moving picture world out of which they come. (F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* [1940] with its celebration of a studio head modeled after Irving Thalberg is the exception. Far more typical is Budd Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* [1941] with its cynical, angry view of a system that ends up turning out films like sausages.) Taking the form of literary exposés, at least in certain periods these books spoke truth to power, or claimed to. Certainly

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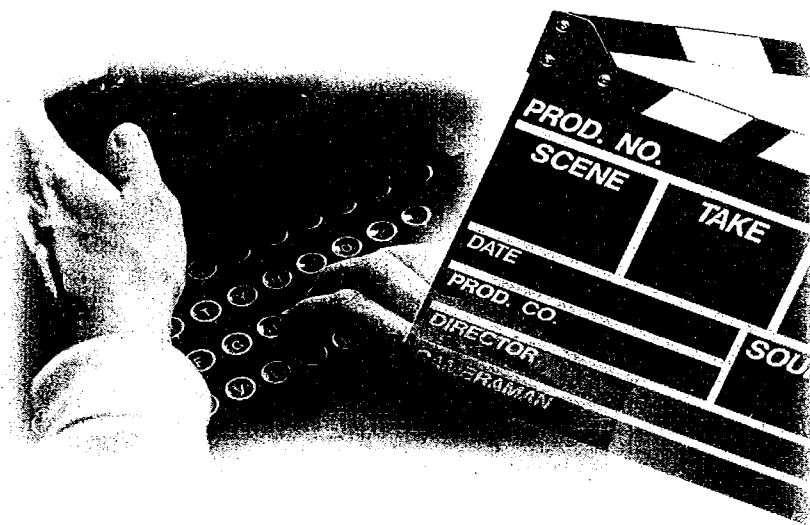
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Edited by

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