




2023

## THE REFLEXITVE FRITZ LANG: META-CINEMATIC AND GENRE CRITIQUES IN HIS AMERICAN FILMS

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Digital Object Identifier: <https://doi.org/10.13023/etd.2023.168>

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THE REFLEXITVE FRITZ LANG: META-CINEMATIC AND GENRE CRITIQUES  
IN HIS AMERICAN FILMS

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By  
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Lexington, Kentucky  
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2023

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### THE REFLEXIVE FRITZ LANG: META-CINEMATIC AND GENRE CRITIQUES IN HIS AMERICAN FILMS

Director Fritz Lang is best remembered and most celebrated for the films he made in Germany, including *Metropolis* (1927) and *M* (1931), between 1919 and 1933. But he spent over half of his career working in Hollywood. This dissertation is a reconsideration of his American films, focused on how Lang used various Hollywood genres to question and critique the way Hollywood films and genres functioned, as well as trends within those genres. This dissertation is a roughly chronological reading of twelve of Lang's American films, sorted by genre. We can see how his thinking about the function of film and genre developed throughout his American career, and the ways he developed his critiques within genres. His prewar and wartime crime films examine the ways American films construct criminals and critique the mandated moralizing and static narrative patterns of the Hollywood crime film. His Westerns critique the American mythmaking project of the genre by revealing the fabrication inherent within Westerns. His combat film extends his criticism of Westerns into the WWII combat film, expressing concern about America turning its mythmaking project beyond its borders. His postwar crime films express deep cynicism with the development of the crime film and the parasitic nature that had arisen between news and entertainment media.

KEYWORDS: American film, Fritz Lang, film genre

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04/24/2023

Date

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: *FRITZ LANG'S REFLEXIVITY – META-CINEMATIC CRITIQUE IN HIS AMERICAN FILMS*

### 1.1 AN OVERVIEW OF LANG

Fritz Lang was born Friedrich Christian Anton Lang on December 5, 1890, in Vienna, Austria. He was working as a painter in Paris in 1914 when the Great War broke out; as an Austrian, he was seen as an enemy in France, so he went back to Austria and enlisted in the army. While recovering from combat injuries, Lang began writing screenplays. After leaving the military, he was hired by film producer Erich Pommer to work at the German film studio Decla. Lang started as a story editor and occasional editor, then worked his way up, becoming a writer and occasional actor, and eventually a director.<sup>1</sup> He became one of Germany's premier directors. During his years in the Germany film industry (1917-1933), he made some of his (and early German cinema's) most acclaimed films, including *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* (1922), *Die Nibelungen* (1924), *Metropolis* (1927), and *M* (1931). In 1933, Lang fled Nazi Germany, eventually arriving in Hollywood, where he worked steadily for twenty years.

Lang's cinematic inventiveness earned him a sizeable reputation. French critics hailed him as an auteur.<sup>2</sup> In America, Andrew Sarris classified Lang as one of the, "Pantheon Directors . . . who have transcended their technical problems with a personal vision of the world. To speak any of their names is to evoke a self-contained world with its own laws and landscapes" (39). Included in the "technical problems" that Sarris

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<sup>1</sup> For Lang's version of his biography see Peter Bogdanovich, *Who the Devil Made It* 175-177; Lotte H. Eisner, *Fritz Lang* 9-15. For more on Lang's early life and career, see Robert A. Armour, *Fritz Lang* 17-22; Paul M. Jensen, *The Cinema of Fritz Lang* 9-12; Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang* 5-57; Nick Smedley, *A Divided World* 88-89; David Wallace, *Exiles in Hollywood* 33-34.

<sup>2</sup> The French adoration of Lang is epitomized in Jean-Luc Godard's *Contempt* (1963), in which Lang played a version of himself.

speaks of are the restrictions and power structures of the Hollywood studio system, something which Lang struggled to work within after leaving Germany.

Although Lang's American films represent over half of his career, scholars generally focus on his German films, especially those from what Lotte H. Eisner has dubbed his "First German Period," from *The Spiders: Episode I: The Golden Sea* (1919) to *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933) (Eisner 139). Tom Gunning voices the opinion shared by many Lang scholars: "Lang's strongest work was made in Germany before 1934" (204). During his first German period, Lang exerted his greatest influence over cinematic storytelling, creating landmark films, such as *Destiny* (1921), *Metropolis*, and *M*, that helped define the visual language, and later the audial potential, of film. Not surprisingly, when scholars discuss Lang's American films, they tend to favor those most like his German films, particularly *Fury* (1936), *You Only Live Once* (1937), *The Woman in the Window* (1944), *Scarlet Street* (1945), and *The Big Heat* (1953). Many of Lang's other American films, although lacking the striking imagery and cinematic inventiveness of his German films, have been unfairly neglected.

Given the nature of studio filmmaking, Lang could not be the sole creative voice in his American films—although he also was not the sole creative voice in his acclaimed German films, most of which were written by Thea von Harbou. Lang's films were shaped by his vision, as well as by the contributions of screenwriters, producers, actors, editors, and the numerous other creative personnel who worked on studio films. Although Eisner claims that in Hollywood Lang, "attempted as much as possible to follow his practice in Germany of maintaining something of a repertory company of technicians and actors," this was not the case (368). There were some similar personnel among films

made at one studio (likely because studio bosses assigned personnel),<sup>3</sup> but, according to scathing comments by those who worked with him, Lang frequently alienated his collaborators. Spencer Tracy, Henry Fonda, and Marlene Dietrich hated working with Lang, and Peter Bogdanovich, who had a complicated friendship with Lang and interviewed him several times, notes, “Over the years, not many people I met had a nice word to say personally about Lang” (*Who the Devil* 172). Even when Lang established a multi-film relationship with collaborators, as he did with Sylvia Sydney, Joan Bennet, and Walter Wanger, his demanding behavior eventually alienated them. Lang, Nick Smedley notes,

acquired a reputation as “difficult”; he was a truculent, arrogant man, used to getting his way and not a skillful networker or negotiator. In America, he hardly ever worked with the same cameraman, producer or writer more than once . . . Lang made enemies easily. He would often take the credit for other people’s work, and had an equal facility for blaming others for his own mistakes. (*A Divided World* 90-91)

Lang’s irascible behavior, combined with his refusal to sign a long-term contract, caused a frequent turnover of cast and crew and gave him a liminal status in Hollywood. He wanted to make American films, which meant that he needed to work with, and often in, the studios. Because his films were not profitable enough for him to go independent, as his ill-fated Diana Productions proved, he relied on the studios and producers he despised.<sup>4</sup> Lang’s frequent battles with studio bosses and producers stemmed from his

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<sup>3</sup> Take, for example, John Carradine’s appearance in the 20th Century Fox films *The Return of Frank James* (1940), *Western Union* (1941), and *Man Hunt* (1941), but his absence from any other Lang films.

<sup>4</sup> Lang co-founded Diana Productions with actress Joan Bennett and her husband, producer Walter Wanger. Lang made two films for Diana, *Scarlet Street* (1945) and *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947), but his



desire for total control. Many American directors figured out how to gain control within the studio system, but Lang kept wanting a level of control comparable to that which he had enjoyed in Germany.<sup>5</sup>

If Lang kept wanting what he sacrificed when he left Germany, it is worth thinking about why he left. Lang left Germany in 1933 because of the rise of Nazism, but he told a self-aggrandizing version of events that precipitated his departure. According to Lang, he fled Nazi Germany after an interview with Joseph Goebbels. Goebbels and Hitler, as Lang told it, were both impressed by Lang's *Die Nibelungen* and *Metropolis*, and they thought he would be the great filmmaker of the Third Reich. Goebbels asked him to head the Nazi film propaganda department, and Lang politely nodded along, thinking that he needed to get money out of the bank before closing time, and watching the clock hoping he would get out in time. At the end of the meeting, Lang said he needed time to think about it, and, because he was dismissed after the bank closed, he grabbed all the valuable personal belongings he could carry and fled Germany that night. This story, however, has been disproved by Lang's passport, which shows that he left and returned to Germany several times in the months after this alleged incident (McGilligan 179). Lang developed this story, Patrick McGilligan has shown, while promoting his second anti-Nazi film, *Hangmen Also Die* (1943) (287). Although the story is fictional, Lang's repeated retelling and frequent refinement and embellishment of it can provide a useful key to interpreting his American films. Gunning, for example, treats the story as a biographical fiction with critical value: he focuses on the detail Lang often included

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ego and continued fights with Wanger and Diana's distributor, Universal/Universal-International, led to the company's collapse. For more on Diana, see Matthew Bernstein, "Fritz Lang Incorporated"; McGilligan 315-364.

<sup>5</sup> See Gunning 204-206.

about watching a clock, which Gunning combines with other comments Lang made about clocks and time, including a story about visiting a mental asylum while researching *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), where he saw a man who believed that he was a grandfather clock.<sup>6</sup> Gunning uses Lang's details about clocks in the stories in order to look at time, and specifically the mechanical representation of intangible concepts (much like clocks are a physical representation of the otherwise largely abstract concept of time and its passing) to reframe ideas of fate in Lang's films.

Gunning is right to treat Lang's Goebbels story as a useful insight into the director's imagination. But I focus on a different aspect of the story, the professed reason for the meeting, in order to identify and interpret Lang's meta-cinematic critiques in his American films. The professed reason for Lang's meeting with Goebbels was the Nazis' plan to treat film as propaganda. Lang's story about potentially heading a Nazi film propaganda department can be interpreted as reflecting Lang's misgivings about the form, function, and power of film. When Lang began telling the story, he had seen how Goebbels's film propaganda department had created propaganda films and manipulated previous German films, including Lang's *M*, to advance Nazi ideology.<sup>7</sup> Although Lang did not make film itself the explicit subject of his films, he experimented with film and

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<sup>6</sup> Lang claimed that he was assigned *Caligari* but was removed from it to direct the second episode of *The Spiders*. He also claimed that he came up with the idea for the frame story in *Caligari*, in which viewers learn that the narrator is a patient in a mental asylum. For Lang's account of this, see Gretchen Berg, "The Viennese Night" 58; Bogdanovich, *Who the Devil Made It* 177; Gene D. Phillips, "Fritz Lang Remembers" 177; Kristin Thompson, "Dr. Caligari at the Folie-Bergère" 129. This story has been repeated by critics. See Armour 20, 93; Mike Budd, "The Moments of Caligari" 8; Eisner 407; Gunning 147, 293; Vinzenz Hediger, "'I'd Like to Own That Painting'" 370; Jensen 12; McGilligan 60-61; Gene D. Phillips, *Exiles in Hollywood* 23. Scholars have also disputed the validity of Lang's claim. David Robinson thinks there is enough evidence to dismiss Lang's claim, preferring to credit *Caligari*'s director, Robert Weine, with the idea of the frame story (30-31). See also Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After* 62; Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* 65-66; Thompson 132.

<sup>7</sup> Beckert's final plea in *M* was used in the Nazi propaganda documentary *The Eternal Jew* (1940), purportedly to show the danger and inferiority of Jews.

genre conventions in ways that question popular assumptions about how films tell stories and how audiences interpret, understand, and respond to film stories. In his American films, he encouraged viewers to question their trust in cinematic narratives and their acceptance of genre conventions. In *The Big Heat* (1953), for example, Lang criticized the increasing violence of Hollywood crime films. His dark humor underscored his message: the last line of *Big Heat*, “Keep the coffee hot, Hugo,” off-handedly evokes two earlier, brutally violent coffee scalding scenes.

Critics have overlooked the ways Lang worked with and subverted various genre conventions because they typically reduce discussion of Lang to one genre, film noir. Vincent Brook calls Lang “the father of film noir,” and Reynold Humphries goes so far as to claim that most of Lang’s American films cannot be understood outside of the film noir framework (Brook 58; Humphries 13-18). Although Lang indisputably worked in noir (even if the style/genre was not known as such at the time), it is reductive to see all of his films as noir. Lang worked in several genres, and he expressed his critiques of cinema in different ways in several of these genres, such that understanding those films within the context of their nominal genres is essential to recognizing and understanding Lang’s critiques.

Because critics have overlooked Lang’s meta-cinematic critiques, they have regarded his violations of genre conventions as lapses or flaws that reveal his misunderstanding of genre, or as signifiers that the film(s) in question should be considered as a different genre. Take Humphries’s reading of *Hangmen Also Die*, for example, in which he insists that the film is should be read as a gangster film or a film noir instead of a war, espionage, and/or an anti-Nazi film (14-15). It seems clear that,

when taken as a whole, Lang's American films used genres to analyze film's functions. As Florianne Wild notes, "As a genre filmmaker, Fritz Lang constantly theorizes the medium he champions. His films in general tend to overturn habitual perceptions and presuppositions, allowing us to see how partial and tenuous they are" (26). Lang used genre conventions, in other words, in ways that often questioned the use of those conventions. Several critics have recognized Lang's misgivings about film, but scholarly works that touch on the topic of Lang's reflexivity are limited to individual films, which means that they miss how Lang's meta-cinematic critique informs his American oeuvre.<sup>8</sup>

Lang had already embedded media and film criticism in his German films, as early as *The Spiders*, and in other silent German films, such as *Destiny*, *Metropolis*, and *Spies* (1928). Lang continued this in his German sound films, with *M* building on undercurrents in *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* regarding criminality, the public, and the media, specifically how the media, in creating sensational stories about crime and criminals, romanticize criminals in the public imagination.<sup>9</sup> After he left Germany, he began to focus more on these concerns. The change in his cinematic approach to feature more prominent criticism and analysis of the media is evident in the first film that he made after he left Germany, the French *Liliom* (1934), in which he makes film a tool for divine judgement. Lang's focus on media in his American films, therefore, follows a long

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<sup>8</sup> For readings that touch on the meta-cinematic aspects of some of Lang's films, see Lutz Koepnick, "Not the End: Fritz Lang's War"; Joe McElhaney, *The Death of Classical Cinema* 27-84; Mark Rappaport, "The Woman in the Window"; Theodore F. Rippey, "By a Thread: Civilization in Fritz Lang's *Fury*"; Phil Wagner, "Furious Union"; Wild.

<sup>9</sup> McElhaney reads Lang's final film, the German *1,000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* (1960), as Lang's attack on media, crime, and government. In doing so, he makes passing mentions to those elements in other Lang films, but he relies mostly on Lang's German films, and thus does not look at how Lang worked with genre and developed his critique throughout his American career.

trend in his work. In Hollywood, he embarked on a systematic analysis of film's power, using genre as a structuring device to precisely target his criticism.

What follows is a roughly chronological reading of twelve of Lang's American films, sorted by genre. We can see how his thinking about the function of film and genre developed throughout his American career, and the ways he developed his critiques within genres. Chapter 2 looks at Lang's prewar and wartime crime films.<sup>10</sup> In these films, Lang examines the way American films construct criminals and critiques the mandated moralizing and subsequent static narrative patterns of the Hollywood crime film. Chapter 3 looks at Lang's Westerns, in which Lang critiqued the ways the genre promoted a uniquely American mythology.<sup>11</sup> He puts aspects of this mythmaking onscreen in order to draw attention to the fabrication of such stories. Chapter 4 looks at Lang's sole combat film, *American Guerrilla in the Philippines* (1950), which is an extension of his critique of Westerns. Lang saw that the WWII combat film had come to serve the same purpose as the Western in advancing a nationalist mentality, and he undermined that sentiment within the combat genre. Chapter 5 looks at Lang's postwar crime films, focusing on those he made in the 50s.<sup>12</sup> In these films, Lang's cynicism comes to the fore as he critiques postwar developments in film and other types of new and entertainment media, using the crime film to indict the media that had made crime into entertainment.

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<sup>10</sup> *Fury* (1936), *You Only Live Once* (1937), *You and Me* (1938), and *The Woman in the Window* (1944).

<sup>11</sup> *The Return of Frank James* (1940), *Western Union* (1941), and *Rancho Notorious* (1952).

<sup>12</sup> *The Big Heat* (1953), *The Blue Gardenia* (1953), *While the City Sleeps* (1956), and *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956).

## CHAPTER 2. CRIME FILMS 1: *PREWAR AND WARTIME CRIME*

### 2.1 CRIME OVERVIEW

Crime is one of the oldest and most popular subjects of narrative films. It emerged in the chase films that began almost immediately after the invention of the motion picture camera and grew into a guiding narrative form in films such as *The Great Train Robbery* (1903).<sup>13</sup> Filmmakers, realizing that audiences were interested in seeing crime and punishment, began making films about criminals committing crimes and then being apprehended, and/or about the authorities tasked with apprehending criminals. Crime, consequently, became a central theme in many narrative movies across genres.

The prevalence of crime related stories in Hollywood films, however, creates a problem of classification. “Crime films do not constitute a genre (a group of films with similar themes, settings, and characters) as Westerns and war films do,” Nicole Rafter notes (6). Many of the things associated with Westerns—gunfighters, outlaws, sheriffs, shootouts—are also associated with crime films, although the costumes and settings are often different. Crime films, then, could be said to “constitute a *category* that encompasses a number of genres,” Rafter contends (5). “Like the labels *dramas* and *romances*,” she explains, “*crime films* is an umbrella term that covers several smaller and more coherent groupings” (6).

Hollywood crime films, particularly during the studio era, almost always punished criminals, and hence the films were morality plays. In criminal-focused films, such as classic gangster films, the key theme “was one of regeneration,” John E. Petty explains,

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<sup>13</sup> See David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* 160, 174-175; Charles Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon* 253-260.

“that is, the possibility that, through the steadfast and honest love of a good person . . . the wicked gangster could be reborn – or regenerated – into a worthwhile and productive citizen” (73). Because the gangster is typically unaware of his tragic flaw, however, he cannot repent and thus cannot be redeemed. But in revealing the gangster’s tragic flaw, the films are didactic.<sup>14</sup> Early gangster films were, according to Petty, “pure morality plays,” with, “a simple message of ‘Crime does not pay’” (88).<sup>15</sup> *Little Caesar* (1931) exemplifies, at least superficially, a Christian morality story. It opens with a quotation from the Gospel, in which Jesus tells his disciples, “for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword,” foreshadowing the ending, in which a gangster is brought low by violence. Nonetheless, Christian groups, including the Catholic Legion of Decency, saw such films as celebrating the underworld. After 1934, when all the major studio heads agreed to conform to the Production Code, under the strict enforcement of Joseph Breen, all criminals were punished, law-enforcers were uniformly portrayed as upstanding public servants, and criminal acts and lifestyles were not glorified.<sup>16</sup>

A further complication is that, as Thomas Leitch explains, “By definition crime is an aberration, a disruption to the normal workings of society; yet crime films invariably treat crime as normal even as they observe the ways it undermines the social order” (12).<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, “Crime films all profess to solve the criminal problems they present by means of a happy ending; yet the frequency of crime in such films suggests that the

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<sup>14</sup> See Petty 73-74; Jack Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends* xv, 7.

<sup>15</sup> See also Sarah Casey Benyahia, *Crime* 34, 38-39; Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored* 145; Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends* 29, 57-58.

<sup>16</sup> For more on the Production Code in the 30s, see, for example Black, *Hollywood Censored*; Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*; Richard B. Jewell, *The Golden Age of Cinema* 113-143; Richard Maltby, “The Production Code and the Hays Office”; Jonathan Munby, *Public Enemies* 83-114.

<sup>17</sup> See also Benyahia 1; Rafter 11-12.

more general problems posed by crime will never be solved” (Leitch 12). The ostensibly happy ending, particularly of the type mandated by the Production Code, is something Lang took issue with (despite writing a 1948 essay, “Happily Ever After,” in which he defends such endings), and which he often questioned and subverted in his American films. Although he would present an ending required under the Code, he would frame it in ways that complicated and frequently ridiculed such endings.

Although Hollywood had become the global center of filmmaking after WWI, American filmmakers frequently looked abroad for inspiration. Paramount and MGM joined the German studio Ufa in what became known as Parufamet as a production and distribution agreement between two Hollywood studios and a German studio. American studios were also eager to lure foreign talent, as shown by their recruitment of many European filmmakers—German directors Ernst Lubitsch, F.W. Murnau, and Joe May, for example, preceded Lang in leaving Germany for Hollywood.

Lang’s earliest surviving films, *The Spiders* (1919/1920), *Harakiri* (1919), and *The Wandering Shadow* (1920), all take the form of the crime adventure film, with most of the characters flat and hastily sketched.<sup>18</sup> *The Spiders*, however, in its antagonist Lio Sha (Ressel Orla), gives an early version of the Langian master criminal, a character type he would return to several times. Lang’s most notable master criminal is Dr. Mabuse (Rudolf Klein-Rogge), who was the subject of three films: the two-part *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* (1922), *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933), and, at the end of Lang’s career, *1,000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* (1960); and a variation of whom was the villain, Haghi

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<sup>18</sup> This is a type of film Lang would return to in his American film *Moonfleet* (1955) and in his later German films *The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The Indian Tomb* (both 1959).



(Rudolf Klein-Rogge again), in *Spies* (1928).<sup>19</sup> In *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler*, Mabuse oversees a vast network of criminals and illicit enterprises that traverse different classes of crime. As a stock trader, Mabuse is the face of seemingly legitimate business, while his criminal network illegally manipulates the stock price and exploits the market for his personal gain.

Two of Mabuse's other guises encourage us to read the films as meditations on the form and function of the crime film. As a psychoanalyst, Dr. Mabuse gives public lectures on psychoanalysis and consults with the prosecutor to throw him off the trail of the "mystery man," whom we know is Mabuse. He suggests the prosecutor see the show of a hypnotist, who is actually Mabuse, so that Mabuse can hypnotize him. Lang represents this hypnosis as the illusion of people walking out of a motion picture. Tom Gunning describes this as a "sort of super-cinema, appearing first on the curtain then expanding into three-dimensional haptic space" (112).<sup>20</sup> Mabuse is thus a surrogate for Lang, manipulating perceptions while hiding himself behind the illusions he creates.

In *Spies*, Rudolph Klein-Rogge, the same actor who played Mabuse, plays Haghi, another master criminal. Like Mabuse, Haghi oversees a massive criminal organization that ranges from street crime to assassination to market manipulation. He is also a banker who profits from the chaos his men create, and he uses stolen documents to blackmail foreign governments. Haghi, like Mabuse, is also a showman. At the end of the film, while performing costumed as a clown, Nemo, he realizes that the police have him trapped, so he kills himself on stage, but the audience thinks the suicide is part of his act.

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<sup>19</sup> For comparisons of *Spies*'s Haghi to Mabuse, see Nicole Brenez, "Symptom, Exhibition, Fear" 63-64, 68; Paul Dobryden, "*Spies*" 77; Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang* 118-121; Stephen Jenkins, "Lang" 71; Joe McElhaney, *The Death of Classical Cinema* 45; David Phelps, "The Medium's Re-Vision" 120.

<sup>20</sup> See also Phelps 114.

When he says “curtains” as he dies, the curtains close and “Ende” comes on screen. Gunning notes that with this end, “In contrast to Mabuse who appears to have lost all power in the last shots of the film,” when he has gone insane in his counterfeiting workshop at the end of the second film, “Haghi maintains the possibility of not only a final act, but a final dramatic production, a final control over his performance, a final illusion. Nemo [Haghi] crumples on the stage, but the last shot of the film shows the curtain closing, obeying his orders, as members of the audience leap to their feet in tumultuous applause” (137-138).<sup>21</sup> “There is no more deeply ironic ending in film history,” Gunning contends, “The end of Nemo’s act is the end of the film” (138). Crimes that Haghi has set in motion continue, despite his death, and the conclusion of the film itself has, in a manner of speaking, also been controlled by a diegetic character in disguise.

Although the master criminal was important to Lang’s German career, he began dismantling that character type in *M* (1931). *M*’s protagonist, Hans Beckert (Peter Lorre), is an unsympathetic child murderer. Furthermore, we do not see him until well into the film, which up to then had focused on one of his victims, scared citizens of the city, police inspector Lohmann, and, eventually, other criminals. “The film’s lack of an immediately identifiable protagonist who organizes the points of view of the film marks its greatest difference from previous Lang films,” Gunning observes (164).<sup>22</sup> “The film

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<sup>21</sup> See also Dobryden 89; Jenkins 72-73.

<sup>22</sup> See also Samm Deighan, *M* 8; Paul M. Jensen, *The Cinema of Fritz Lang* 95-96.

does pivot around Hans Beckert, but around his absence rather than his presence, around the search for this mysterious and initially elusive figure” (164).<sup>23</sup>

The film not only dismantles the master criminal, but also deconstructs the narrative form of the crime film. Although *M* is structured around the search for a murderer, it, as Gunning points out, “is not a murder mystery. We, the viewers, gradually learn the name and face of the guilty one, long before the other characters do. Rather than identifying the murderer from a range of suspects, the film traces the process of constructing an identity for the obviously guilty one, giving him both a name and a body” (184). The film, instead, is a ‘whydunit,’ and thus, as Samm Deighan explains, “not concerned with whodunnit,” but rather in exploring “the killers’ motivations and the ways in which [the killer is] brought to justice (or not), and often how this pursuit of justice transforms and often corrupts other characters within the narrative” (41).<sup>24</sup> Beckert’s crimes put a whole city on edge, and Beckert, recognizing the power he wields, writes to the newspapers to stir up more fear. He is outside the world of organized crime, as we see when the city’s various criminal guilds come together to hunt the killer. We are left to wonder who, if anyone, to root for, and if justice can be achieved at all, be it through the police or the criminals.

Such questions seem to be at the core of the film, with Lang wanting us to wonder about what we are watching, as well as why we are watching it. In the film, citizens eagerly read about the murders, such that, as Stephen Brockmann notes, *M* shows “that

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<sup>23</sup> See also Vincent Brook, *Driven to Darkness* 58, 72-73; Joseph S.M.J. Chang, “*M*” 303; Deighan 33, 38-39; James Harold, “Mixed Feelings” 287-288; Anton Kaes, *M* 35-38; Colin McArthur, *Underworld U.S.A.* 71.

<sup>24</sup> See also Brenez 71; Kata Gellen, “Indexing Identity” 426-431; Horst Lange, “Nazis vs. the Rule of Law” 170-171; Douglas Pye and Iris Luppá, “*M*.”

murder is entertainment (as in the crime thriller that Elsie's mother purchases around the time that Elsie is being murdered, or the gruesome counting song from the movie's opening sequence). In other words, murder horrifies the residents of the city, but it also fascinates and entertains them" (145).<sup>25</sup> *M* thus also indicts its audience, who is supposedly getting a thrill from watching a story about abhorrent crimes. "The viewers of *M* no less than Mrs. Beckmann have become unwitting participants in a mass culture that lives off crime," Anton Kaes contends (*M* 28). "Serial novels turn transgression (real and imagined) into sensationalist fiction; they titillate, arouse and entertain by exploring areas where desire and discipline cross" (28).

Although Lang was often less experimental in his American crime films, he none the less continued questioning and critiquing the way the crime film had developed, the way it presented its characters, and the way it told its stories. Many of the films have an undercurrent of commentary about the conventions of the Hollywood crime film, particularly as it was constrained by the Production Code. His first two American films, *Fury* (1936) and *You Only Live Once* (1937), critique the way the news and entertainment media construct criminals, and how the public believes what they read about such criminals. *You and Me* (1938) ridicules the didactic crime film, hollowing out the mandated message that crime does not pay by presenting the message so literally as to be laughable. *The Woman in the Window* (1944) upends the narrative patterns of investigation and detection integral to the crime film.

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<sup>25</sup> See also Chang 308; Harold 287; Kaes, *M* 28.

## 2.2 *FURY* (1936) AND *YOU ONLY LIVE ONCE* (1937): CONSTRUCTING THE CRIMINAL

The significant critical attention both *Fury* and *You Only Live Once* have received is likely due, in part, to them being the films on which Lang had the most creative control during his Hollywood career. Because of the creative freedom Lang enjoyed, Nick Smedley claims, these films' "dissection of the American dream ventured into places normally avoided by Hollywood's traditional celebration of the spirit of the New Deal. In his first films, Lang clearly wished to examine the powerful rhetoric of American ideology and determine what it meant in reality" ("Fritz Lang's Trilogy" 17). Lang recognizes that the news media are among the most prominent forums for rhetoric on American ideology. In *Fury*, he looks at the cinematic branch of news media, the newsreel, and, as Gunning notes, "Movies and movie watching are a recurring theme throughout *Fury*" (226).<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in *You Only Live Once*, Lang is concerned with media consumption and, more specifically, how news and entertainment media construct the identities of their subjects. Will Scheibel argues that the film constructs protagonist Eddie Taylor through various reflections and reproduced images, such as his mugshot and photographs. Showing Eddie in reflections, Scheibel contends, and withholding information about Eddie's actions and thoughts, means that, "the film plays with the mediation of Eddie's identity, self-reflexively commenting on the public role of cinema in the image-making of modernity" (331). Eddie is "labeled guilty by the entire spectrum of modern communication forms: photography, newspapers, popular magazines,

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<sup>26</sup> See also Stella Bruzzi, "Imperfect Justice" 15-18; Lotte H. Eisner, *Fritz Lang* 161, 173; Reynold Humphries, *Fritz Lang* 54, 58; Anton Kaes, "A Stranger in the House" 55-57; Theodore F. Rippey, "By a Thread" 80, 86-87; Norman Rosenberg, "Hollywood on Trials" 353; Ticien Marie Sassoubre, "The Impulsive Subject and the Realist Lens" 329-330, 354-355.

telephones, loudspeaker systems, and, if we count the film itself, cinema” (334). In this way, Scheibel argues, Lang’s point “is impossible to miss: Social structures of power punish the very criminals they produce” (329).<sup>27</sup> In both *Fury* and *Live Once*, the protagonist falls victim to public prejudices, informed by media presentations of him, and each is, in a sense, made into a criminal by the symbiotic forces of media and public hysteria.

*Fury* and *Live Once* both fit, as many critics have observed, into the social problem film boom of 1930s Hollywood.<sup>28</sup> Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy explain that the focus of the 30s social problem film is “very specific: the central dramatic conflict revolves around the interaction of the individual with social institutions (such as government, business, political movements, etc.)” (viii). Social problem films responded, as the name suggests, to recent social issues. Thus, when economic hardships hit the nation in the early 30s, concern with widespread unemployment inspired films like *Wild Boys of the Road* (1933) and, later, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940).<sup>29</sup> Concerns about unemployment could be combined with other social concerns, such as society’s mistreatment of veterans and/or desperate citizens resorting to crime, as well as institutional issues, such as corruption in the prison system and/or the shortcomings of the criminal justice system, resulting in complex social problem films, including *Hell’s*

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<sup>27</sup> See also Robert A. Armour, *Fritz Lang* 107; Gunning 239, 248; Jensen 122; Gavin Lambert, “Fritz Lang’s America, Part One” 18, 20; Smedley, “Fritz Lang’s Trilogy” 9-10; George M. Wilson, *Narration in Light* 17-18, 24.

<sup>28</sup> Critics often include *You and Me* (1938) with these two films to form Lang’s “Social Problem Trilogy.” For more on *Fury*, *You Only Live Once*, and/or *You and Me* as social problem films, see Armour 103-111; Tino Balio, *Grand Design* 294-295; Gunning 212-260; Humphries 61; Jenkins 98; Jensen 111, 116-124; Kaes, “Stranger in the House” 53-54; Lambert, “Fritz Lang’s America, Part One” 18-21; Leitch 95-96; Frederick W. Ott, *The Films of Fritz Lang* 183; Gene D. Phillips, *Gangsters and G-Men on Screen* 83; Smedley, “Fritz Lang’s Trilogy”; Wilson 16.

<sup>29</sup> And, in an unusual combination of social problem film and musical, *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933).

*Highway* (1932), *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (1932), and *Heroes for Sale* (1933).<sup>30</sup> Like these films, *Fury* briefly touches on economic concerns. One of the films' main characters, Katherine, has to leave town and her fiancé, Joe, so she can get a job and start saving money for her wedding. The film soon turns its focus, however, to shortcomings in the justice system and the problems of extrajudicial violence. It is based, in part, on a recent lynching in San José, California,<sup>31</sup> and during the trial in the film, the DA gives a speech about the prevalence of lynching in the United States.<sup>32</sup> *Fury* explores how mass hysteria can overtake the justice system and how the system could be exploited for revenge. Just as *Fury* concentrates on social responses to criminal acts, *You Only Live Once* attends to social attitudes toward ex-convicts.

Classic gangster films, such as *Little Caesar* and *Scarface* (1932), look at individuals who are committed to crime, while social problem films, such as *Hell's Highway* and *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang*, indict the justice and prison systems.

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<sup>30</sup> For more on the development of the social problem film in the 1930s, see Balio 280-298; Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood* 39-67; Roffman and Purdy 11-162.

<sup>31</sup> Lang told Peter Bogdanovich that he found a newspaper story about the San José lynching "a few years before I made the film, and we used many newspaper clippings for the script" (*Fritz Lang in America* 16). For more on the film being based on the San José case, see Paul Bergman and Michael Asimow, *Reel Justice* 153; Bruzzi 7; Carlos Clarens, *Crime Movies* 159-160; Eisner 161; Kaes, "A Stranger in the House" 50-51; Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang* 223; Sassoubre 348-351. Kaes notes that the kidnapping element of the case in *Fury* may have also been inspired by the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby. Even if this was not the intention, Kaes notes, it would resonate with contemporary viewers because the convicted kidnapper was executed two months before *Fury* was released ("A Stranger in the House" 42).

<sup>32</sup> He states: "in the last 49 years, mobs have lynched 6,010 human beings by hanging, burning, cutting, in this proud land of ours. A lynching about every three days. And of the many thousands that comprise these mobs, only 765 were ever even brought to trial, because their supposedly civilized communities have refused to identify them for trial." Lawmakers had already begun paying attention. "A total of 130 anti-lynching bills were presented in Congress between 1934 and 1940," Roffman and Purdy note (166). Lynching was in the public consciousness, and Hollywood was addressing the problem, with *Fury* and, the next year, *Black Legion* (1937) and *They Won't Forget* (1937). Lang told Bogdanovich that he was offered *They Won't Forget*, but he turned it down because he did not "want to become an expert on lynching films" (*Fritz Lang in America* 34). For more on lynching in American culture and film at the time, see Matthew H. Bernstein, *Screening a Lynching* 1-121; Roffman and Purdy 165-178. For more on the DA's speech and the contemporary problem of lynching, as addressed in *Fury*, see Bruzzi 17; Jensen 114-118; Kaes, "A Stranger in the House" 49-50; Rippey 85-86; Sassoubre 340-341, 347-351; Smedley, "Fritz Lang's Trilogy" 4-5.

In their overlap of crime film and social problem film, *Fury* and *Live Once* stake out their own ground by focusing on society more broadly. In this regard, they are akin to *The Public Enemy* (1931), which, in its foreword, says it is about “an environment that exists today.” *Public Enemy*’s closing text says that the film was concerned with “a problem that sooner or later **WE**, the public, must solve.” In this context, we can see Lang is interested in a problem in the crime film, that it typically focuses on individuals engaged in crime rather than the ways that society creates its criminals—even *Public Enemy* ultimately indicts its protagonist, Tom Powers (James Cagney), more than the larger environment that pushed Tom to his criminal career. Lang’s films contend that the problem of social perception, and often misperception, of criminals has been exacerbated by the fact that the news media have failed the public by not fulfilling their primary responsibility of reporting on crimes objectively. Instead, reporters sensationalize their coverage, which causes the public, whose impressions of criminals is largely shaped by news coverage, to view not only criminals but people merely accused of crimes with disdain and disgust.

*Fury* tells the story of Joe Wilson (Spencer Tracy), an innocent man who is arrested for kidnapping while he is traveling through the midwestern town of Strand. With only circumstantial evidence, Sheriff Thaddus Hummel (Edward Ellis), seeing public outrage about the case, holds Joe for trial. When news of the arrest spreads, Hummel tries to protect Joe from a lynch mob, and the mob, unable to extract Joe, burns down the jail. Although Joe narrowly escapes from the fire, he is presumed dead. Seeking legal revenge—unlike the illegal vengeance the mob attempted—Joe convinces his brothers, Charlie and Tom (Frank Albertson and George Walcott), to ask the District



Attorney, Adams (Walter Abel), to charge twenty-two of Strand's citizens with murder. Adams is interested in the case, but he tells Charlie and Tom that he cannot bring charges because he cannot find anyone to attest that Joe was in the jail when it burned down. Charlie and Tom get Joe's fiancé, Katherine Grant (Sylvia Sidney), who arrived in Strand in time to see Joe's face in the window of the burning jail, to serve as the witness Adams needs. Like the attempted lynching, the trial is a media sensation, and Joe eagerly uses the coverage to advise his brothers about what to tell and ask Adams to make the best case. In building his case, Adams encounters the same problem he did initially, the townspeople's refusal to share incriminating information. Each defendant he calls testifies that he or she was somewhere else when the jail burned, and the witnesses, including the sheriff, all provide alibis for the defendants or tell inaccurate versions of the events. Adams then uses newsreel footage of the attack to incriminate the defendants and discredit the witnesses. In the end, however, Joe, wracked by guilt, visits the courtroom on the day the verdicts are announced, proving he is still alive and thus exonerating the defendants.

*Fury* occasionally uses media artifacts as exposition. Although the use of headlines had already become a common cinematic convention, *Fury* uses this technique in a new way.<sup>33</sup> "*Fury* skillfully uses the press as a device to advance the story," Reynold Humphries points out, "while at the same time showing that such a device is never there just to communicate a preexisting event" (68). The first mention of the kidnapping comes via a newspaper headline, but it is shown in passing, not in close-up, as is traditional in

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<sup>33</sup> The convention began in the silent era, when close-ups of newspaper headlines and articles could replace title cards, and it was continued even after the adoption of synchronized sound rendered title cards (mostly) obsolete.

such cinematic exposition. While Joe is on his way to meet Katherine, he reads a local newspaper, the front page of which bears the headline “Kidnap Ransom Paid” [Figure 2.1]. Although the story is on the front page of the paper, Joe just looks at the headline, then opens the paper, commenting, “War and crime. Strikes, taxes,” but saying nothing about the kidnapping.

The kidnapping becomes Joe’s focus the next morning, however, when a deputy, Bugs Meyers, (Walter Brennan), takes him into town for questioning. During the questioning, Joe professes his ignorance about the case, and he only pieces together the evidence as the sheriff shows him public and police information, including a wanted poster and a telegram. Although Joe fits the description on the poster, both he and the sheriff know the description is so vague it could apply to many men. However, the peanuts in Joe’s pocket correspond to information, shared in a telegram to the sheriff, that the ransom note had traces of salt and peanut husk. After Bugs searches Joe’s wallet and finds one of the bills paid as ransom, the sheriff arrests Joe. When Bugs then prepares to search Joe’s car for more of the ransom money, he sees the potential for public attention and comments, “man, is this gonna be a sensation!” The sheriff, knowing that public interest in the case is high, tells Bugs not to talk about the case, but, when Bugs visits the barber shop, he mentions Joe’s arrest. Gossip about the arrest quickly spreads through Strand, exaggerating the story to the point that Joe’s guilt becomes settled fact, as underscored by a shot in which gossipers point to the newspaper headline, “Kidnap Ransom Paid!,” as if it proves Joe’s guilt.

Public officials who fear the potential repercussions of unfavorable headlines make Joe’s situation worse. When Strand’s citizens march to the jail, Sheriff Hummel

tells them that the National Guard is on the way. Lang cuts to soldiers waiting to deploy to Strand, but a messenger announces, “orders to stop, sir, telephoned from the governor.” The Governor’s advisor, Will Vickery (Edwin Maxwell), tells the Governor (Howard Hickman) that he cancelled the deployment,

Because people always resent troops moving in on ‘em. Hurts their pride. When the papers phoned me about this little ruckus in Strand, I was able to calm them down all right. But knowing how conscientious you are, Bert, I came right over. And mighty good thing I was in time to stop you, too. You know, you could cut our political throats with this ‘tin soldier’ stuff in an election year.

Vickery is advising that they sacrifice Joe’s life to avoid negative publicity and political repercussions. Later, Vickery shares congratulatory telegrams he received after he made his statement to reporters. The news media is thus treated as an apparatus which canny politicians manipulate. After the jail is destroyed, the Governor, complaining that an innocent man has been killed, refers to a newspaper headline, “Kidnapers Caught; Confess/ G-Men Nab Whole Gang,” and says the story is “on every wire in the world right now.” He is more upset, in other words, about the story being on the wire and that Vickery’s plan backfired, than that an innocent man was killed. Concern about Joe does not emerge until it becomes a newspaper headline, “Innocent Man Lynched; Burned Alive by Mob!”

Vickery, nonetheless, was right in his suspicion that the story would attract media attention. As the riot at the jail begins, Lang cuts from Strand to the roadside diner where Katherine is waiting. While the cook delivers orders to a bus driver, a group of passing

journalists asks for directions to Strand. The bus driver comments, “Them newsreel guys are sure on their toes. They must have found out about this before it happened.”

The journalists arrive in Strand in time to cover the climax of the attack on the jail. During the attack, Lang includes a shot of a reporter filming the action from a balcony. As the reporter captures the footage, he rubs his hands together and boasts, “what a shot this is. We’ll sweep the country with this stuff.” He then runs out of film and goes inside to get another reel. Because the sun has set but the reporter wants more coverage, he instructs another camera man, “be sure and use the hypersensitive film” and “get me that two-inch lens.” The changing of the film reel shows the general way media coverage is necessarily mediated. “This pause in the filming and the subsequent brief exchange speak volumes,” as Anton Kaes explains:

while the newsreel lays claim to an authentic and objective recording of an event, the audience knows that a camera cannot record the entire event for the simple technical reason that film stock runs out. What if a decisive moment was missed during the reloading of the camera? What we see is not only dependent on technology (the speed of the film and the power of the lens), but also on lighting and framing, on the camera’s distance from the action and its chosen angles, as well as on editing. In this way photography and film are not infallible, passive and impassioned eyewitnesses. Lang is aware of the problematic nature of photography’s claim to the whole truth and nothing but the truth. (“A Stranger in the House” 55-56)

As Kaes points out, Lang is playing with the idea that the camera objectively records what is in front of it. Furthermore, given that running out of film creates a gap in the record, there will be the further mediation of editing the individual shots and footage into one film for exhibition, which, as Ticien Marie Sassoubre contends, “reminds us of the artificiality of all moving pictures, which are not just produced by the apparatus of the camera but spliced together out of individual frames in a way that creates the impression of continuity” (355).<sup>34</sup> The cameraman chooses what to shoot based on what he thinks will be most exciting. When he changes the reel and the lens, he is aware of the potential for better shots, which suggests that he is also thinking about how he will edit the footage together into the most exciting newsreel. In this way, the cameraman is closer to a cinematographer than a journalist.

The resulting newsreel is brought up twice in the film. When Joe, after his supposed death, first visits his brothers’ apartment, he tells them he spent the day “in a movie. Watchin’ a newsreel of myself getting burned alive. I watched it ten times, or twenty maybe. Over and over again, I don’t know how much. The place was packed. They like it. They get a big kick out of seeing a man burned to death. A big kick!” The theater has become two different things for Joe: a place where he can sit in a darkened theater, anonymous and safe, and a publicity machine making him famous by projecting his face onscreen.<sup>35</sup> The Joe represented on screen, however, is not “cast” as a suffering and murdered human being, but as a punished villain. The newsreel thus conflates factual reporting with conventional entertainment so that Joe sees the audience cheering at his

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<sup>34</sup> See also Bruzzi 15-16; Humphries 58; Rippey 86; Rosenberg 355.

<sup>35</sup> Lang used this idea again in *Hangmen Also Die* (1943), when Svoboda (Brian Donlevy) hides from the Gestapo in a movie theater while news that someone (him) shot Prague’s Nazi overseer travels through the audience.

supposed incineration as if they were celebrating the screen death of a monster.<sup>36</sup> The audience, as described by Joe, also recalls the rapt attention of the mob as they watched the jailhouse burn. The flickering light from the flames on the faces of some in the mob admiring what they have done, moreover, echoes the reflected light from a movie screen, suggesting how watching the fire resembles watching a movie—and the movie of the fire which Joe watches.

The newsreel is also central to the trial, where the DA uses the newsreel footage as evidence that the defendants are guilty of perjury. The DA “posits newsreel footage as thoroughly empirical evidence,” Norman Rosenberg explains, even though that is “problematic in terms of verisimilitude—this kind of photographic proof would likely have been inadmissible in any courtroom in 1936” (355).<sup>37</sup> “I didn’t know very much about procedure in an American trial,” Lang explained to Peter Bogdanovich, “so M-G-M gave me a few experts and all of them were opposed to showing the films in court and, later, the stop-frames on exhibit. I took the liberty of doing it, and, afterwards, in many actual cases, it was permitted in court” (*Fritz Lang in America* 29). Lang’s use of film as trial evidence was ahead of its time, but, as he noted, it was prescient. “On July 2, 1937,” Thomas Doherty explains, when the U.S. Senate investigated a riot which was captured on newsreels, “the self-censored pictures were screened to a packed Senate hearing room, the first instance of newsreel film being submitted into evidence before either body of the U.S. Congress” (*Hollywood and Hitler* 262). Newsreel footage was later admitted as trial evidence in 1945: “when the Allies compiled evidence for the Nuremburg trials, the brief

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<sup>36</sup> As they may cheer the fiery deaths of The Monster in *Frankenstein* (1931) or Griffin in *The Invisible Man* (1933).

<sup>37</sup> See also Armour 105; Bergman and Asimow 153; Eisner 161-162, 173; Sassoubre 353-354.

for the prosecution included not only wrenching eyewitness testimony and a voluminous paper trail but, for the first time in the history of jurisprudence, a motion picture was called to the stand to bear witness” (Doherty, *Hollywood and Hitler* 368).

The DA in *Fury* uses film to prove the truth. The judge and the defense attorney agree to let him show the footage, and neither object to his claim that the film is “a true film record taken at Strand by Ted Fitzgerald, in course of employment as a news cameraman.” The DA announces each of three defendants and his or her alibi as he shows footage of said defendant’s participation in the attack. “Lang’s spectacular use of incriminating evidence not only presents those three defendants witnessing their own guilt as a movie,” Gunning states, “but, as in *Liliom* [1934], the incriminating moments are actually presented as freeze-frames . . . a technique sparingly used in the 30s. The stopping of the action fixes the images of the defendants at their most incriminating moments” (224). The freeze-frames, and the footage from which they are isolated, however, show, as Gunning explains, “actions which were not shown before in the film, the tossing of firebombs at the jail and the preventing of the fire department from putting out the flames” (224-225). Furthermore, the newsreel, Kaes observes, “has point-of-view shots and close-ups that could not have realistically come from the news camera that we see at work in the film. Lang is less concerned with verisimilitude than with the film’s power to convince and convict” (“A Stranger in the House” 56).<sup>38</sup> The newsreel also repeats events we saw before, such as men using a battering ram to break down the jail’s door. During the attack, the assault is shown first with a high angle shot, and then with a medium shot from behind the men. In the newsreel, however, the first shot of the men

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<sup>38</sup> See also Bruzzi 15-16; Jenkins 46.

with the battering ram is from in front of and slightly to the side of the men. This angle shows the men's faces, from which the DA identifies the face of one defendant, Kirby Dawson (Bruce Cabot). Other events are shown for the first time in the newsreel, such as Sally Humphries (Ruth Renick, uncredited) throwing the torch that starts the fire outside the jail,<sup>39</sup> and Frederick Garrett (Morgan Wallace) destroying fire hoses. This means that Lang, too, withheld some material to prevent us from getting a complete picture of the attack.

Lang further subverts the idea of the film as truth both by the shots he includes in the newsreel and by the way the newsreel footage looks. It looks the same, in terms of grain, lighting, angles, and framing, as the scenes we saw during the attack. During the attack, however, the images were shown as if they were shots Lang made to create the film's diegesis, not shots being captured by a character within that diegesis. "The one perspective we see established but do not assume here is that of the newsreel camera," Theodore F. Rippey suggests (80). Right before he cuts to the newsreel photographer, Lang shows Bugs throwing smoke bombs to disperse the crowd, but each shot of Bugs is followed by a reverse-angle shot of the bombs exploding. This is standard Hollywood continuity editing, not the capture nor presentation of newsreel footage. The newsreel footage used at the trial is edited in the same pattern: a close-up of Sally whirling then throwing the torch is followed by a shot of a pile of furniture as the torch hits it and starts

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<sup>39</sup> The shots of Sally swinging and throwing her torch allude to a similar scene in *Metropolis* (1927), in which a woman lights the fire that will burn the robotic Maria. The DA says that Sally threw, "The first brand that transformed that jail into a blazing stake for Joseph Wilson." His language is figurative, but it describes what was literal in *Metropolis*, in which the robotic Maria was burned at the stake by an angry mob.



the fire. Thus, the newsreel footage, shot and edited just like the feature film, is indistinguishable from the film's reality.

When the DA exhibits the newsreel footage, he “literally transforms the courtroom into a cinema,” Rippey notes (86).<sup>40</sup> “We, the subjects of the enunciation,” Reynold Humphries explains, “relive that night *in the same way as the people in the courtroom*, for the simple reason that the cinema screen brought into the court fills exactly the cinema screen we are watching, that of *Fury* itself. In this way *Fury* is explicitly assimilated to the newsreel—and vice versa” (58, emphasis in the original). We not only watch the newsreel film, but also the audience watching the newsreel, so that as we watch the newsreel, we are of two minds: like those in the courtroom, we view the newsreel as an accurate, unbiased representation of the events of the diegesis, while, at the same time, because we have seen the photographer run out of film, we must be aware of the editorial construction of the newsreel, and thus of the fact that the audience, who are both the viewers of the newsreel and its subjects, are also complicit in validating fictionalized versions of their actions. Consequently, when “the wife of an accused man leaps to her feet and screams hysterically, ‘No, it’s not true!’,” Rippey notes, “she is technically correct, though she herself does not know it” (86).<sup>41</sup> “The casual observer is likely duped: no one in the courtroom (and only the rare spectator) notices the discrepancies,” Rippey continues, “The fingerprints the images bear, therefore, are those of the omniscient artist” (86). Lang shows a film within a film, and both the film *Fury*

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<sup>40</sup> See also Gunning 223-226; Humphries 54; Kaes, “A Stranger in the House” 56; Rosenberg 355; Sassoubre 329.

<sup>41</sup> Similarly, in *Liliom* (1934), when the protagonist, Liliom (Charles Boyer), is on trial, he sees a film of a moment in his life—a moment that we have already seen. When the film is played again, this time with voice-over of Liliom's thoughts. Liliom, knowing the thoughts make him look bad, shouts, “These are all lies!”

and the newsreel film are presented as visually synonymous. The similarity of the shots makes clear that audience perceptions are shaped by the filmmaker, even when viewers are also the subjects in the film. The question of justice, then, is one that cannot be answered, as Stella Bruzzi notes, and the justice system is “revealed as ineffectual, wayward and capricious” (1). The film questions the underlying assumptions of the justice and news media systems, such as “the stability of character, the relationship between evidence and conclusion or between representation and ‘truth’, with celluloid itself and the supposedly irrefutable visual evidence it can provide taking on a distinctly uncertain status” (Bruzzi 8). Lang not only questions the authenticity of news footage, but his making the newsreel a type of entertainment to a diegetic audience by making the newsreel look like a Hollywood film provides the first instance in his American films of the conflation of news and entertainment media that typifies his work.

Newsreel footage is not the film’s only news medium. *Fury* features radio coverage of the trial, underscored by several shots of microphones in the courtroom [Figures 2.2-2.3]. During the DA’s opening statement, a montage of citizens around town listening to live radio coverage concludes with a shot of Joe listening to the broadcast. This live broadcast is unusual, given that trials at the time were usually recorded, edited, and broadcast later in the day.<sup>42</sup> Throughout the trial, Joe listens to the proceedings, and after he hears the defense lawyer state, “the law is that the *corpus delicti* must be established, at least by fragments of that human body or of articles known and proved to have been worn by the deceased,” in order to stop the case from being dismissed, Joe

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<sup>42</sup> See Clifford E. Simon, Jr., “The Suppression of Radio and Newspaper Comment on Pending Criminal Trials” 51, 56; Charles W. White, “Newspaper and Radio Coverage of Criminal Trials” 308; Paul J. Yesawich, Jr., “Televising and Broadcasting Trials” 704, 707-708.

sends the judge his ring, which was given to him by Katherine, along with a note in which he claims he is a concerned citizen who found the ring in the ruins of the jail. Joe, in other words, achieves his goals by using information he gathers from the media, and he composes the note, included with the ring, from letters cut out of newspapers.

Lang also shows short scenes of radio broadcasters summarizing the proceedings and commenting on the trial during the live broadcast, and numerous newspaper reporters rush out of the courtroom to call their newspapers when a woman faints while watching the newsreel. The results of these calls are shown in a montage of headlines superimposed over a shot of the reporters on their phones: “Identity of 22 Proved/ Coup Creates Sensation as Case Nearing Jury,” “Movies Identify Defendants [sic] in Wilson Lynching Trial,” “22 Face Death!/Judge Hopkins Clears Court Room.” When Katherine testifies that she gave Joe the ring which was sent to the judge, one of the defendants, consumed by grief, confesses, “I helped kill him! I’m guilty! We’re all guilty!” As she is led out of the courtroom, she is surrounded by photographers. The next day, a headline proclaims, “Gallows Loom for Lynchers!” The trial is made real, to Joe and to the public, through the media. Members of the public, particularly Joe, eagerly consume the courtroom coverage, just as many of them eagerly watched the attack on the jail and, later, the newsreel in the theater in which Joe hid.

In *You Only Live Once*, protagonist Eddie Taylor (Henry Fonda) is similarly the victim of the version of him that is constructed and spread by the press. Although it is true that Eddie committed crimes in his past, he becomes fully defined by those crimes when the media promote an image of Eddie as dangerous and unrepentant, creating a public that believes the worst about him.

Eddie Taylor is a “three-time loser” who will be imprisoned for life if he is convicted of another crime. The day he leaves prison, he marries Jo Graham (Sylvia Sidney), who has patiently waited for him and who believes he will go straight. On their honeymoon, however, they are kicked out of their hotel because the innkeeper, Ethan (Chic Sale), finds Eddie’s picture in a true crime magazine. Eddie gets a job with a trucking company thanks to the influence of the prison chaplain, Father Dolan (William Gargan), but his boss, Mr. Williams (William Pawley), has the same prejudice as Ethan. When Eddie is late reporting to Williams because he was showing Jo a house, Williams fires him, noting, “no ex-con is gonna jazz up a schedule to me.” When Eddie cannot get another job, he talks to his old gang members, including Monk (Walter de Palma), who tries convincing him to help rob a bank. When Monk robs the bank, he uses gas bombs to incapacitate the police, so his face is obscured by a gas mask. During the robbery, he steals an armored car and kills several police officers. He also leaves Eddie’s monogrammed hat, which is the only clue about the robbery and murders, at the crime scene. When newspaper stories claim that the hat belonged to the murderer, Eddie is arrested, convicted, and sentenced to death. While awaiting execution, another prisoner, Buggy (Warren Hymer), tells him that a gun is hidden in the mattress in the hospital bed, so Eddie cuts his wrists, and while in the prison hospital, uses the gun to take the doctor (Jerome Cowan) hostage and demand that the warden (John Wray) open the prison gates, which the warden refuses. During the standoff that follows, the warden learns that police have found the stolen armored car with Monk inside, which exonerates Eddie. The warden tells this to Eddie, who thinks it is a trick, and when Father Dolan attempts to convince him, Eddie shoots at Dolan, after which the warden opens the gates and Eddie

escapes. At a diner, he overhears customers and learns both that the warden was telling the truth and that Dolan died from the shot. Eddie and Jo go on the run together, but after Jo gives birth, they realize the constant police threat is too dangerous, so they arrange to leave the baby with Jo's boss, Stephen Whitney (Barton MacLane), and her sister, Bonnie (Jean Dixon), and head for the border. The police, tipped off by a hotel manager, set up a roadblock and fatally wound both Eddie and Jo when they try to run through it.

The film continually presents competing views of Eddie. We are encouraged to sympathize with Eddie and believe he will go straight, both because he is a loving husband and because other characters, including Jo and, later, Whitney, refute attacks made against Eddie's character. At the same time, Ethan, Williams, and the police insult Eddie because he is an ex-convict. The film is also structured to raise doubts about Eddie's innocence in the bank robbery and murders. Before the robbery, Eddie meets Monk, and right before the robbery, he fights with Williams and comments, "and I wanted to go straight." Gunning claims that "Lang's interrogation of viewpoints in *You Only Live Once* intersects with his longstanding interrogation of the construction and deconstruction of identity with modern systems" (245). Gunning, V.F. Perkins, Scheibel, and George M. Wilson have each focused on Lang's camera work and the questions the film raises about Eddie's honesty.<sup>43</sup> Looking at the film from a different perspective, Vincent Brook argues, "It is the justice system itself, with the media's complicity, that is the protagonists' arch nemesis" (92). Although the justice system may be, as Brook claims, one of Lang's targets, the film focuses more intently on how the news-related media are the primary creators and disseminators of Eddie's image and reputation, such

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<sup>43</sup> See Gunning 235-260; Perkins, "*You Only Live Once*"; Scheibel 322-339; Wilson 16-38. See also Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 81-82.

that his honesty is of secondary concern—especially after we learn that he is innocent of the bank job for which he is sentenced to death. In the film, the stories about Eddie are circulated in these outlets to create his guilt and lead to his destruction. When Eddie is released from prison at the start of the film, he tells the warden that he wants to go straight, “if they let me,” but the newspapers and true crime magazines do not let him. After the media represents Eddie as a public menace, the people he meets respond to him as if he were the person they have read about. Because media fearmongering causes the public to view Eddie as an unrepentant criminal, the news media are the film’s actual antagonist.

Throughout the film, Lang shows how headlines, many of which accompany stories that mix news and opinion, construct Eddie’s image. The crime magazine picture that motivated Ethan to kick Eddie and Jo out of the hotel is accompanied by the headline, “PUBLIC! BEWARE/ Desperados Soon To Be Pardoned!” [Figure 2.4]. Ethan and his wife are the first in a series of characters, Gunning notes, who act “as the minion of a process of surveillance which average citizens delight in aiding” (238).

Newspapers also push Eddie back to crime when they assert his guilt after the bank robbery. Because, in order to put on a gas mask, Monk took off the hat he was wearing and left it in his car, a newspaper headline reads, “Bank bombed -- Six Dead!/ Hat Clue to \$1,000,000 Killer.” A caption above the photo of the hat states “Whose Hat is This?/ Answer that Question/ You Find the Murderer” [Figure 2.5]. In this instance, Wilson claims, “the ridiculously circumstantial nature of this inference is being mocked” (21).<sup>44</sup> The arrow pointing to the initials and the way the initials stand out from the

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<sup>44</sup> See also Gunning 247-248; Jenkins 91-92.

shadow make clear that the image has been altered. Eddie is aware of the power the media wields to make this circumstantial evidence definitive. After news of the robbery breaks, Eddie shows Jo the newspaper and tells her that now the police will think he is guilty. Eddie thinks it is his hat, but that does not mean that he committed the crime. But he knows that, because of his record, the police will not give him a fair chance to prove his innocence. It seems, then, that Eddie knows that average citizens who could serve on the jury will be biased by the news coverage. Jo convinces Eddie to turn himself in, but before he can, he is arrested. One of the arresting officers tells Jo to let Eddie reach for his gun to “save the state the expense of a trial,” expressing the prejudice Eddie feared.

Eddie is also right in doubting that a jury will believe he is innocent. His trial is not shown, so we learn the verdict through headlines from potential frontpages for a newspaper Extra. Lang cuts from Eddie’s arrest to a newspaper front page with a headline that reads, “Taylor Freed in Massacre/ Three Time Loser Beats Bombing Rap.” The text is accompanied by a photo of Eddie smiling, above which is the caption, “Eddie Taylor—He Beat the Rap!” A camera pan reveals a new front page, headlined “Taylor Jury Deadlocked/ Huge Mob Throngs Court for Verdict,” with a photo of Eddie bearing a neutral expression, captioned “A Jury Weighs His Fate!” The camera then pulls back to reveal the two newspapers hanging, with a third front page mock-up, in an editor’s office as the editor (Dick Elliot, uncredited) talks with one of his printers. Scheibel contends that, “the direction of the camera deliberately misleads the viewer,” by initially cutting to the page proclaiming Eddie’s innocence, thus making us believe that Eddie been exonerated in the trial, before the pan to the second front page reveals that the newspaper is not being used to share the verdict with us, as would be typical of such exposition, but

instead to show one potential front page for publication after the verdict is decided (332).<sup>45</sup> The printer (Don Brodie, uncredited) remarks, “I hope that jury will bring in a verdict before our deadline,” to which the editor responds, “That verdict is our deadline.” The editor receives a phone call and, after listening to the caller, points to the third front page, which the camera zooms in on, with the headline “Taylor Guilty/ Chair Awaits Killer,” accompanied by a photo of Eddie looking angry [Figures 2.6-2.9]. The newspaper does not just announce the verdict: the editor, through his selection of photos and phrasing of the headlines, uses the newspaper to confirm, to himself and to his readers, what he sees as the truth. Thus, “Taylor’s identity is composed in the newspaper office as an appropriate image which will naturalise, and therefore justify to the readers, Taylor’s fate,” Gunning argues (247).

When the reporters outside the courthouse try to get a statement from Eddie, he shouts at the crowd, “Go ahead, take a good look, you monkeys! Have a good time! Get a big kick out of it! It’s fun to see an innocent man die, isn’t it!” Amid the crowd are cameramen and photographers, who take pictures of Eddie’s snarling face. Eddie’s words about people getting a kick out of “seeing an innocent man die” also seem to echo directly Joe’s comment in *Fury* about the theater patrons enjoying the newsreel of him being burned alive.

The news media continue to construct the public perception of Eddie after his jailbreak. Eddie and Jo are defined “by the machinery of public image circulation,” Scheibel contends, “which prescribed them a role that they are now able to perform,” creating a “self-fulfilling prophecy” (336). After Eddie and Jo flee, a montage shows

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<sup>45</sup> See also Humphries 69-71; Wilson 18-19, 22.



them committing petty thefts, including holding-up a gas station only to get a full tank of gas. After they leave the station, however, one attendant calls the police, and while he is on the phone, the other attendant whispers in his ear, then the first attendant adds, “they robbed the cash register, too,” making clear that the attendants will take the cash and blame the robbery on the Taylors. In the next scene, Whitney comments that Eddie and Jo are “being blamed for every crime committed in the country.” Later, a citizen comments, “From all they’ve stole, they must be millionaires by now. Probably hiding in a swell place, having a good time.” Lang cuts from this comment to Eddie driving his old car, with a broken window, during a rainstorm, with Jo, in the passenger seat, wrapped in a blanket. While the media play up an image of them as millionaire outlaws, they, because of the media’s work, have no choice but to stay outlaws scraping by on the run. The media lie, but Eddie and Jo suffer the consequences.

### 2.3 *YOU AND ME* (1938): THE PROLIFERATION OF CRIME AND THE CONTRIVANCE OF HOLLYWOOD CRIME FORMULAS

*You and Me* has proven somewhat difficult for reviewers, audiences, and critics, in part because it is, as Gunning calls it, “a ‘cinematic hash’: experimental cross-breeding among the Hollywood genres” (261).<sup>46</sup> Smedley, similarly, calls the film “an unsatisfying mixture of social analysis, conventional romance, realistic setting and artistic experimentation” (“Fritz Lang’s Trilogy” 14).<sup>47</sup> The “social analysis” Smedley recognizes has caused him and other critics to discuss *You and Me* as a social problem

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<sup>46</sup> Gunning borrows the term ‘cinematic hash’ from Russell Malone’s *New Yorker* review.

<sup>47</sup> See also Jensen 124; McGilligan 254.

film. Because the social problem the film deals with is the trouble ex-cons have reintegrating into society, some critics have read the film as an alternative take on, or a pseudo-sequel to, *You Only Live Once*.<sup>48</sup> As part of its social criticism, the film touches on two of the causes of criminality, America's consumerist society and the capitalist ethos that undergirds the American consumerist mentality, both of which were thrown into doubt by the Great Depression. The "crimes are seen to be inextricably bound up with the materialist society which formed" the criminals, Smedley observes, "and there is an implicit suggestion that the American market economy is different from organized crime only in the legality of the former" ("Fritz Lang's Trilogy" 12).<sup>49</sup> But, to Smedley, "the film failed to realize its potential social criticism, largely because Lang buried it in a hackneyed love story" (12).

Although the film's combination of diverse genre tropes can make it difficult to understand as a genre film, the presence of seemingly incompatible generic elements, such as musical numbers with gangster and prison film characters and settings, also can be seen as elements of the film's critique. The film, through its combination of genres, demonstrates that American films, across genres, advance the same ideology about crime. Lang bookends the film with the typical Hollywood crime film message that crime does not pay, but he frames the message such that it seems comic, thus lacking the earnestness mandated by the Code.

*You and Me* focuses on two ex-convicts, Joe Dennis (George Raft) and Helen Roberts (Sylvia Sydney), who are both on parole. They work at Morris Department Store,

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<sup>48</sup> See Eisner 191, 195; Gunning 264-265; Jenkins 98; Jensen 124, 127-128; Lambert, "Fritz Lang's America, Part One" 18; Smedley, "Fritz Lang's Trilogy" 1, 12, 14.

<sup>49</sup> See also Gunning 262.

the owner of which, Jerome Morris (Harry Carey), hires former convicts to give them a chance to get back on their feet. He also protects their privacy by not letting the employees know that many of their co-workers are ex-convicts. Joe is open with Helen about his criminal past, but Helen keeps her past secret. Joe, thus, does not know he is breaking his parole by fraternizing with another parolee. When he finishes his parole, he and Helen get married, which breaks her parole, a condition of which is that parolees do not get married. Thinking she can keep the marriage secret until her parole ends, she tells Joe they must not reveal they are married because Morris does not like his employees marrying each other. Joe, however, suspecting that Helen has an ulterior motive for keeping their marriage secret, begins to resent her. His domestic life deteriorates, and he grows sullen and self-absorbed. Things come to a head at a Christmas Eve party where Joe refuses to join a planned robbery with some of his old gang members, and they tell him that Helen is on parole. When Helen admits the truth, Joe returns to his gang and helps plan to rob Morris's store, where most of them work. The night of the robbery, Morris, tipped off by Helen, interrupts the robbery, but promises not to have the men arrested if they listen to Helen's lecture about the futility of crime. Helen successfully persuades them the expected haul and the associated costs prove that the job would not pay, especially when compared with the salaries the men receive from Morris. When Joe goes home to forgive Helen, she is gone. With the help of the gang, Joe finds her at a hospital preparing to give birth to their son. The film concludes with Joe and Helen getting married now that her parole is complete.

*You and Me* is equal parts romantic melodrama and crime film, with a dash of the musical, a genre associated with romantic comedy. The film opens with a montage of

scenes within the department store, accompanied by the song “You Cannot Get Something for Nothing” (a.k.a. “The Song of the Cash Register”). This song and its accompanying montage seem, initially, like an ode to consumerism, but it quickly becomes a commentary on crime, such that Helen’s lecture at the end of the film could easily feature a reprise of the song. The song’s first words, “You cannot get something for nothing,” begin right after the credits and start over a black screen, after which an iris reveals the sign for “Morris Department Store.” This shot dissolves to show customers crowded into the store and shopping as we hear the song’s third line, “Whatever you see, that you really want, you may have, provided you buy it.” As the song catalogs the many things, including jewelry, cars, and food, that people can buy, we see the referenced items. Throughout the montage, however, the images of things to buy are punctuated by periodic shots of cash registers, and later money, as the song reminds us, “Remember they cannot belong to you until you pay for them/ You cannot get something for nothing.” At this point, the song morphs from an ode to consumerism into a moral lesson on the cost of all things. It cannot be an advertisement for the store because the song mentions, and the montage includes shots of, several things, including cars, airplanes, trains, and movie sets, that the store could not sell. It even challenges the idea that there are things that are free: “You seek the things that money cannot buy/For instance, can you name a few? Just try.” “Beauty, to attract the man you love, you have to buy,” the song continues, “Gems of thought, to cultivate the mind, you have to buy/ Even vim and vigor and good health you have to buy/ Sunny skies and mother nature’s wealth you have to buy.” This cataloging thus presents a somewhat despairing commentary on how America has monetized every aspect of life. “The analysis of consumer society and its

devious game of stimulating desire and yet insisting on consumers paying the price,” Gunning claims, “gives this film its social bite and satire” (263). The song ends, however, with a close-up of a woman touching a blouse, then hiding it in her coat. Helen sees the woman and tells her to give the blouse back, but when Helen’s supervisor approaches, Helen makes up a story about the woman’s complaining about a spot on the blouse. If the film thus starts with an attempted crime, here, as throughout the film, the crime’s commission is prevented and the punishment both minimized and not typically administered by legal authorities.

The film clearly challenges notions about crime common to contemporaneous crime films. In the first scene with the store’s owner, Morris’s wife, Mary (Cecil Cunningham), complains about being around convicts after seeing an employee, Patsy (George E. Stone), demonstrate a can opener as if he were cracking a safe, but Jerome insists that the former convicts have been recommended by their probation officers. When Mary worries, “if the public ever finds it out, your business won’t be worth a nickel,” Jerome says there is no way for the public to know, because ex-cons are such a small part of his workforce, and because he does not let people know about it; many of the ex-cons do not know each other, and none are told who among their coworkers are ex-cons. Jerome explains that he does not want them “set apart” or “stared at like sideshow freaks just because they’ve made one or two mistakes that any of us might make.” Jerome understands that crime, although it may result from personal failings, can also come from momentary slips or unfortunate circumstances which anyone may make or find themselves in. He explains that he hires ex-cons because “no matter how good a person’s record has been in prison, they can’t get out on parole unless they have a job to

come to. Now if somebody doesn't give those poor guys a chance to go straight, how they gonna stop bein' criminals?" Mary, however, does not agree with Jerome, contending that "there's no use trying to change them." Mary clearly subscribes to the bad seed mentality, reflected in gangster films such as *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, or *Scarface*, the same mentality that ruined Eddie in *You Only Live Once*. Jerome, however, believes in redemption. The film, then, is working, in this regard, with the same themes as *Angels with Dirty Faces* (released later that year) or *Dead End* (1937), both of which focused on youths, whereas *You and Me* is interested in reforming adult criminals.

When Joe returns to his gang, the film makes one of its most interesting comments on the nature of the 30s crime film in another song, "Stick to the Mob" (a.k.a. "The Knocking Song"). As Joe enters the basement hangout of the gang, the men welcome him with a chant song. Frustrated with their lack of discernible domestic lives and dissatisfied with their jobs, these men prefer their old lives, as shown by their use of old criminal tricks when trying to sell merchandise. Cuffy (Roscoe Karns), for example, threatens a little girl so that the girl will act as though she wants her mother to buy a toy for her; and Gimpy (Warren Hymer) shortchanges a customer. The men reminisce about their time in prison, and talk about the things, such as Christmas chicken, which they would fantasize about while in prison. Even though they can now have those foods, they are not as satisfying as they were in prison. Smedley claims that the "dark cellar [where they have gathered] serves as the base for an imaginative leap into a world of long prison corridors, dark areas scoured by shafts of strong light" ("Fritz Lang's Trilogy" 16). "Lang lights the reminiscing convicts' faces with the impression of the bars of the cellar, distorting their expressions with shadows and framing them in extreme close-up to

emphasize the agony of their memories,” leaving viewers “with a powerful vision of the horror of the prison world and the devastating effect it has on those whose lives it touches” (16-17). But what Smedley sees as despair in the faces of the men can also be read as nostalgia [Figure 2.10]. Although remembering how horrified they were to learn that a crime boss, “Number One,” had been sentenced to five years, they still fondly recall their time behind bars.

The perception of prison as somehow more ideal than the outside world is touched on again when Morris thwarts the attempted robbery. He tells the men, “and to think, that the law says that eight useless guys like you have to be put into a nice, comfortable prison and fed at the taxpayers’ expense. Well, you’re not gonna get off that easy. My taxes are high enough already. You’re gonna work for your livin,’ the same as I do.” Morris’s speech touches on a fundamental aspect of the didactic American crime film, the enforced and repeated message that Americans should be good, law-abiding citizens who work hard and pay their taxes. Morris’s speech, however, also has a sinister undercurrent. He ends his speech with a threat: “if any one of you leaves this room before Miss Roberts says he can, you’ll be put in jail for breakin’ in here tonight. Now I know who you all are, and I want to see every one of you back on the job tomorrow morning at eight o’clock. And that doesn’t mean three minutes after.” Morris decides, as Humphries explains it, “rather than send them to prison to be fed at the expense of the community, he will force them to work, just as he does. Hence, from being a right, work becomes a duty, and unemployment, by extension, becomes a purely individual matter, a personal failing” (20).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The duty of work in prison was debated in a number of 30s prison films, from being a forced obligation to being a prison privilege. See, for example, the differing discussions and presentations of work in the

The prison film, however, had made the idea of returning to prison seem somewhat preferable to struggling in the outside world. Prison films are, according to Rafter, “essentially fantasies, films that purport to reveal the brutal realities of incarceration while actually offering viewers escape from the miseries of daily life through adventure and heroism” (163). “In many films,” Rafter explains, “prison becomes a metaphor for the state or some other oppressor that controls and limits the hero, sapping his potential” (168).<sup>51</sup> If going to prison signifies personal failings, those failings reflect an outside world skewed against someone. Inmates in prison films typically have a certain camaraderie. Prisoners look out for each other, and those who violate their code are dealt with severely.<sup>52</sup> These films allow us “to participate vicariously in perfect friendships,” Rafter explains, with inmate friends who are “more loyal and true than any on the outside” (170-171).<sup>53</sup> This is why Joe returns to his former gang members and inmates. For Joe, who is in an unstable mental state, the stability and relative certainty of his gang is comforting. For the dissatisfied gang members, the stability of prison begins to seem more comforting than the outside world; in prison they knew where they stood and whom they could trust.<sup>54</sup>

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films *The Big House* (1930), *Hell's Highway*, *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang*, *20,000 Years in Sing Sing* (1932), *San Quentin* (1937), *Each Dawn I Die* (1939), and *Sullivan's Travels* (1941).

<sup>51</sup> See also Roffman and Purdy 25-26.

<sup>52</sup> As shown in films such as *The Big House*, *The Criminal Code* (1931), *The Last Mile* (1932), and *20,000 Years in Sing Sing*, in which prisoners look out for each other, refuse to rat on other prisoners, and endure punishment—even execution—rather than betray a fellow prisoner.

<sup>53</sup> See also Clarens 49-51.

<sup>54</sup> For more on prison films, see, for example, Clarens 47-52; Alison Griffiths, *Carceral Fantasies* 55-109; Brian Jarvis, *Cruel and Unusual* 164-245; Rafter 163-188; Roffman and Purdy 25-30; Jack Shadoian, “Michael Curtiz’ *20,000 Years in Sing Sing*”; Kristen Whissel, “The Spectacle of Punishment and the ‘Melodramatic Imagination’ in the Classical-Era Prison Film”; David Wilson and Sean O’Sullivan, “Re-theorizing the Penal Reform Functions of the Prison Film.”



The gangsters may reminisce about their time in prison, but, thanks to Helen's intervention, they do not return to prison. The film's ending complicates the didacticism of typical Hollywood crime films. Instead of showing the terrible consequences of crime, it exposes the fantasy behind such moralizing messages. The ending, on the surface, seems like a concession to the Production Code. If the Code mandated that crime not pay, *You and Me* demonstrates that literally, using a financial lecture. As Helen acknowledges at the start of her lecture, "What I have to tell you isn't hard to explain. . . . It's something you've heard all your life and laughed yourself sick at. You've heard it from long-winded reformers. You've read it in hot air editorials. The oldest chestnut in the language. It's that, well, crime doesn't pay." When the gangsters laugh at this, she retorts, "I don't mean because you get caught by the law and punished, because sometimes you're not. I don't mean because it kills something decent inside of you, because a lot of you wouldn't care about that. What I mean is it doesn't add up in dollars and cents." After Cuffy says they were going to get \$30,000, Helen quickly retorts that they can expect to only get 15% of that value from the fence. She then asks the would-be thieves how much they spent on expenses for the job, such as paying off security guards, buying a getaway vehicle, and hiring trucks to haul the stolen goods. As she breaks down the numbers, it is clear that the job returns a pitiful payout of \$113.33 for each of the men. Gimpy, who had called Helen to warn her about the job so she could talk to Morris, says he is convinced by Helen's argument, and he asks Joe, "why didn't you tell us like Helen just did? That's talk we can understand." The film thus teaches the Code's lesson, but in such a comically literal way that we are tempted to do just what Helen said, laugh ourselves sick over it.

#### 2.4 *THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW* (1944): EXPOSITORY FORM AND DETECTION IN THE CRIME FLM

*Woman in the Window* focuses on criminal psychology professor Richard Wanley (Edward G. Robinson), who visits his social club when his wife and children go on a vacation. On the way, he stops outside a gallery and admires a portrait of a woman in the front window. Two of his friends, District Attorney Frank Lalor (Raymond Massey) and Dr. Michael Barkstane (Edmund Breon), tease him about it, but Wanley insists he is admiring the artistry of the portrait, not the woman, and that if he were to meet the woman, he would probably just “clutch my coat a little tighter, mutter something idiotic, and run like the devil.” That night, he falls asleep at the club. After an attendant wakes him, Wanley heads home, again pausing outside the gallery to admire the portrait, where he sees the portrait’s subject, Alice Reed (Joan Bennett), reflected in the glass. Wanley escorts Alice home, and while he is looking at sketches, another man, Claude Mazard (Arthur Loft), arrives and attacks Wanley. Alice hands Wanley a pair of scissors, with which he kills Mazard in self-defense. Alice gets worried, saying nobody will believe their story that it was self-defense. “Even if they did [believe us],” Wanley points out, “we wouldn’t be much better off . . . Whatever they believe, I’m ruined, my whole life.” He proposes that they dump Mazard’s body in the woods and destroy evidence, both of them confident no one can tie them together nor either of them to Mazard. After Mazard’s body is found, Frank, the District Attorney put in charge of the case, discusses the developments with Wanley, who accidentally points out coincidences that Frank laughs off, attributing Wanley’s speculations to his expertise in criminal psychology. Wanley begins to think he is in the clear until Alice informs him she is being blackmailed by Mazard’s former bodyguard, Heidt (Dan Duryea). They plan to poison Heidt, but

when Alice calls Wanley to tell him Heidt refused the poisoned drink, Wanley poisons himself. As Wanley dies, Alice hears gunshots, then discovers that Heidt has been killed in a shootout with the police. Finding Mazard's pocket watch in Heidt's pocket, the police conclude that he killed Mazard. Wanley, however, is too weak to answer the phone when Alice calls with the good news. As he appears to be dying, a hand shakes him awake in a chair at his club, and the murder is revealed to be a dream. On the way home, he again looks at the portrait, but this time, when he sees a woman reflected in the glass, he turns down her request for a light. "Not for a million dollars," he mutters while running away.

Critics frequently discuss the ending of *Woman in the Window*. That the bulk of the film turns out to be the protagonist's dream was seen by contemporary reviewers as a too-convenient way out of the film and as a way for the film to avoid making the protagonist face consequences for the crimes he committed.<sup>55</sup> Gavin Lambert, for example, says "the ending, which reveals the whole adventure to have been indeed a dream, is surely indefensible" ("Fritz Lang's America, Part Two" 94). And Paul M. Jensen calls the ending "a cheat used to rescue the director" (156).<sup>56</sup> Lang felt the need to defend the ending, both in interviews and in a short essay, "Happily Ever After."<sup>57</sup> He explained:

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<sup>55</sup> For discussion of the critical reception, see, Armour 151; David Fine, "From Berlin to Hollywood" 289-290; Gunning 292-293; Lang, "Happily Ever After"; Humphries 100-101; McGilligan 312-313; Eddie Muller, *Dark City* 94.

<sup>56</sup> See also Armour 151; David Bordwell, "Happily Ever After, Part Two" 4, *Narration in the Fiction Film* 159; Gunning 292-293, 305; Florence Jacobowitz, "The Man's Melodrama" 66; McGilligan 312-313; Gene D. Phillips, *Exiles in Hollywood* 45-46; Don Willis, "Fritz Lang" 5-6.

<sup>57</sup> See Bogdanovich, *Fritz Lang in America* 63; Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg, "Interview with Fritz Lang" 111-112; Gérard Langlois, "Fritz Lang" 128-129; Gene D. Phillips, "Fritz Lang Remembers" 185-186.

If I had continued the story to its logical conclusion, a man would have been caught and executed for committing a murder because he was one moment off guard. Even were he not convicted of the crime, his life would have been ruined. I rejected this logical ending because it seemed to me a defeatist ending, a tragedy for nothing brought about by an implacable Fate—a negative ending to a problem which is not universal, a futile dreariness which an audience would reject.

Defending the ending, David Fine contends, “the film explores what Lang explores in his more expressionistic films: the roles fantasy, dream, and projection play in the lives we construct, the ways we shape reality from within” (289-290).<sup>58</sup>

Robert A. Armour complains that the revelation that most of *Woman in the Window* was a dream, while not being the outright cheat Jensen feels it is, nonetheless is not adequately motivated by the preceding film, in that we are not adequately prepared for the revelation. In other films which reveal that the bulk of the story was a character’s dream, such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (1961), Armour suggests, “the audience on reflection can understand that there had been clues throughout the film that what they were watching was hallucination of some sort” (151).<sup>59</sup> “As we think back over the two films, we realize that we overlooked

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<sup>58</sup> See also Eisner 247; Humphries 101; Andrew Klevan, “The Purpose of Plot and the Place of Joan Bennett in Fritz Lang’s *The Woman in the Window*” 16; Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street* 162; Mark Osteen, *Nightmare Alley* 118-119; Steven Rybin, “Joan Bennett, Fritz Lang, and the Frame of Performance” 343.

<sup>59</sup> Armour’s choices seem a little arbitrary, even considering Lang’s claimed involvement in *Caligari* and its frame story. Armour, for reasons he does not explain, looks outside of Hollywood for his examples: *Caligari* is a German film from 1919, and *Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* is a French short film from 1961. Other critics have found different Hollywood films to compare to *Woman in the Window*: Mark Osteen compares *Woman*’s ending to the endings of *The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry* (1945) and *The Chase* (1946), but both of those films were made after *Woman*. David Bordwell contrasts *Woman in the Window*’s ending to that of *Sh! The Octopus* (1937). He claims that *Woman*’s ending does not work

the clues and have only ourselves to blame for being surprised at the revelation of the dream/hallucination. In *The Woman in the Window*, however, the clues are not there” (151).<sup>60</sup>

Armour is right in claiming there are no explicit clues that the film is entering and then within Wanley’s dream, but Gunning suggests that there is, in retrospect, a slight clue in the overlap-dissolve cut before the dream. An overlap-dissolve transition shows time elapsing as Wanley enters his club, and another overlap-dissolve shows time elapsing after Wanley sits down and begins to read, but in retrospect we can see that second dissolve as the entrance to the dream (Gunning 288, 291). Although the dissolve was used as early as Georges Méliès’s *The Christmas Dream* (1900) to signal entry into a dream world, there is no indication in *Woman in the Window* that the dissolve is being used in this way. Gunning identifies two examples of this editing technique, one in which the dissolve is an ellipsis, and one in which it is both an ellipsis and, according to Gunning, a signal of the entry into the dream. There is not a difference between the first dissolve and the second, though, so Gunning’s reading of the second dissolve as a clue must ignore its potential implications in its first use; that is, such a reading must interpret the same thing different ways in order to support a predetermined solution. Furthermore, lap dissolves are frequently used as ellipses throughout the film. The two instances Gunning identifies both start the new scene with a shot of the clock in the club, but Gunning does not explain what makes them different. Furthermore, Lang seems to joke about the technique being the type of clue Gunning sees it as later in the film. After

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because it “is stridently out of place in a crime thriller, and the resolution jars us by its triviality,” as opposed to such an ending working in a comedy, like *Octopus* (“Happily Ever After Part Two” 4).

<sup>60</sup> *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) seems to be a clearer example of what Armour is talking about, and it would be more pertinent, given that it is a Hollywood film from five years before *Woman*.

Wanley gets his prescription from a pharmacy, Lang fades to black, and the next shot, taking place the next day, starts with a fade in on a clock. Lang thus seems to have foreseen potential clue-seekers like Gunning and is playing with the idea of dissolves and/or fades on clocks signifying something more.

The film frustrates us with a lack of clues, or with redundant but contradictory clues, like lap-dissolves for time or dream transitions, much as the characters within the film are frustrated by clues. The film, then, is interested in the fallibility of clues and their interpretation. Although the characters, particularly Frank and the police, are keenly interested in clues, they seem unable to recognize or interpret the clues. “Whodunit suspense is discarded in favour of a gradual reassembling of the crime by the detective in conversation with the perpetrator who becomes inescapably suspended between assistance and resistance,” Andrew Klevan observes (16). But Frank is not able to reassemble accurately the crime because he refuses to see the signs of guilt Wanley inadvertently, and later deliberately, shares.

When we first see Wanley, he is lecturing on the psychological aspects of homicide. Through Frank, he also has inside information on police investigations. After Wanley kills Mazard, he instructs Kitty on how to destroy evidence. He tells her to disassemble the scissors—the murder weapon—and boil them to remove the blood, and he similarly instructs her on how to clean the carpet with the caveat that lab tests can reveal traces of blood in the carpet fibers. Alice follows these instructions with care, and her thoroughness is later noted by Heidt when he searches her home for clues. “Not a finger mark anywhere,” he comments, “Not even where you think they’d be naturally.”

Although Wanley advises Alice meticulously, he is not as careful himself. When he is dumping Mazard's body, he leaves his headlights on, which leads to him being pulled over by a police officer. At the dump site, he leaves tire tracks, which Franks says are like fingerprints, and footprints, which Franks says can help identify the economic circumstances of the killer. He also leaves blood and fibers from his coat on the barbed wire fence. Because he forgets to leave Mazard's hat with the body, he must burn the hat, and when he learns fibers from his coat have been recovered, he burns that as well.

Most significantly, Wanley keeps giving himself away to Frank, who only laughs about Wanley's trying to insert himself into the case. Although Frank, as Michael, notes, "has an uncanny instinct for things like that. The old head goes up like a bird dog's," he ignores Wanley's clues. When Frank shares information that Mazard is missing and that the authorities are worried about the disappearance, Wanley comments that a man going missing is no reason to suspect that he has been murdered, but Frank had said nothing about murder. Later, Wanley reveals he knows where the body was found. After Frank says the killer cut himself dumping the body, Wanley, amused by Frank's lack of suspicion, shows him his cut, received from the barbed wire where he dumped the body, which had been infected by the poison ivy growing along the fence. When he asks Frank if the cut suggests anything, Frank dismissively states, "it suggests very strongly that you're eaten up with envy. You see my name on the front page of every paper, so you make a desperate effort to elbow your way into my case by insinuating that you're the guilty man."<sup>61</sup> If Wanley's slips may suggest an unconscious desire to confess, they also

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<sup>61</sup> In this scene, Gunning explains, Frank "lays out the evidence which points to the perpetrator, not noticing that the height, weight, economic circumstances and general description match that of his friend. Repeatedly Wanley completes a bit of evidence in classic examples of self-incrimination . . . which appear

reflect mistakes typical of an amateur criminal.<sup>62</sup> Since Wanley, as a professor of criminal psychology, frequently speculates on criminal behavior, moreover, his propensity further inclines Frank to overlook his slips. Wanley spends his time thinking about crime in the abstract, whereas Frank, as an attorney, works in the practical world.

When Wanley accompanies Frank to the woods, the detective in charge of the case, Inspector Jackson (Thomas E. Jackson), also laughs off the coincidences, hiding whatever suspicions he may have behind jokes. “If you’ll only confess professor,” Jackson jokes as they leave, “we can wrap up this whole case before noon.” At the end of the film, Jackson comments about Heidt’s apparent guilt, “That’s very funny. I was beginning to get an entirely different idea about this,” indicating that the seemingly obvious evidence of Heidt’s guilt has led him to discount any possible suspicions Wanley may have evoked.

Jackson’s conclusions are the last in a line of false conclusions in the film. When Frank says that he has found a woman believed to be involved in the murder, Wanley is worried it is Alice. He accompanies Frank to the place the body was found, but when he learns that the woman will meet them there, he goes back the car so that Alice does not recognize him. The woman, however, turns out not to be Alice. False leads and misinterpreted clues are also present at the end of the dream. When the police find Mazard’s watch in Heidt’s possession, they think it is proof that he murdered Mazard, but they have no idea that Heidt took the watch from Alice. Furthermore, because Heidt started shooting when an officer told him to halt, it was easy for Jackson to conclude that

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as additional unguarded moments of self-betrayal,” or possibly even “an unconscious desire to confess” (299). See also Jensen 155; Osteen 117-118.

<sup>62</sup> As he tells Alice after their plan to kill Heidt fails, “We’re just not very skillful at that sort of thing.”



Heidt was worried about being arrested as the murderer. The logic of the police explanation, traditionally valorized in crime films, is thus repeatedly revealed to hinge on incorrect assumptions.

We see the typical police work and the incorrect assumptions of evidence through Frank's discussions. In one scene, he tells Michael and Wanley about the clues the police found and about the assumptions he is making, some correct and some off base. Frank thinks a man visited his mistress, saw her with another man, attacked the man, and was killed in the fight. After the couple disposed of the body, they began to hate each other, each fearing the other would go to the police. The story has been complicated, Frank notes, by the news that a former police officer, hired by Mazard's associates to keep an eye on him, has also gone missing. The man "is hot," Frank notes, because he has a history of blackmail. Although Frank's story resembles what happened, he has changed it into a piece of pulp fiction pivoting on a romance between the killer and the woman.<sup>63</sup>

The clues, then, cannot be read by the characters in the film who should be able to do so. By showing the logical but incorrect reading of clues, *Woman in the Window* comments extensively on a definitive tenet of crime films: that logically organizing clues reveals the conclusive evidence of guilt. Its invitation to misinterpret evidence and its

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<sup>63</sup> It is closer to *Double Indemnity* (1944) or *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946) than to what we have seen. Those two examples are also complicated by their endings. In *Double Indemnity*, we learn that the woman was using the protagonist to get rid of her husband so she could collect the insurance money, and in *Postman*, the protagonist ends up convicted for a murder he did not commit (killing his lover, Cora, was an accident, a case of vehicular manslaughter, not murder), instead of the murder he did commit (that of Cora's husband, Nick). It is unlikely that the film is directly responding to those films, given that *Double Indemnity* was released only four months before *Woman* (although it, like *Woman*, starred Edward G. Robinson), and *Postman* was made after *Woman*. Both of those films, however, are based on James M. Cain novels which were published well before *Woman*, *Double Indemnity* first published in 1936, and *Postman* in 1934.

failure to provide satisfactory narrative closure reveal the contrivances of the Hollywood crime film.

The ending exposes two flaws in the narrative patterns of Hollywood crime films. For one, it lets a killer go unpunished. Even though this was all part of a dream, such a cop-out was not generally allowed under the Production Code.

It also undermines another part of the Production Code: that police do not correctly solve the crime. *Woman in the Window*, Sheri Chinen Biesen notes, “shows the process of crime, the cracking of a case, a couple trying to get away with murder and evade fate, and blackmailers and authorities to accommodate Breen’s ‘compensating moral values’” (167). But, in *Woman in the Window*, the crime is not cracked. The police think they have a solution, but we know they are wrong, even if we are happy to see Heidt dead and Alice and Wanley free from suspicion. They conclude that Heidt was Mazard’s killer, and assume the case is closed, but it is a case closed on incorrect assumptions.

One of the “working principles” of the Production Code, regarding the depiction of crime, however, was that “Law, natural or divine, must not be belittled, ridiculed, nor must a sentiment be created against it” (qtd. in Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood* 351). But the resolution, in which the police reach an incorrect conclusion, could be said to be ridiculing how the police solved Mazard’s murder, especially given that we have seen Wanley mock Frank with incriminating evidence that Frank dismisses. The authorities, from beat cops to detectives and even the DA, all look like fools. Even if it was all a dream, the police’s inability to solve the crime is still being ridiculed in Wanley’s “dream” about incompetent police.

*Woman in the Window* is not the only film in which Lang subverted the narrative patterns mandated of the Hollywood crime film. He was similarly subversive in several subsequent films, including *Scarlet Street* (1945), *Clash by Night* (1952), and *Moonfleet* (1955). Of these, *Scarlet Street* stands out for the way it not only reflects many of the concerns of *Woman in the Window* but also adds a criminal who is not repentant. In *Scarlet Street*, Chris Cross (Edward G. Robinson), trapped in a loveless marriage, falls in love with Kitty March (Joan Bennett). In order to support Kitty and her demands, Chris embezzles money from his employer. When his wife's former husband, Homer (Charles Kemper), who was presumed dead, returns to blackmail Chris, Chris arranges for his wife, Adele (Rosalind Ivan) to see Homer, because she still loves him, and, presumably, Homer's reappearance will render Chris's marriage invalid. But when Chris goes to Kitty's apartment, he is humiliated when he hears her professing her love to her boyfriend, Johnny (Dan Duryea). When Chris returns after Johnny leaves, Kitty laughs at him, and, in a fit of rage, Chris kills Kitty with an ice pick. Johnny, who returns after Chris has left, is arrested for Kitty's murder, and the police are unconvinced by Johnny's explanations for the many pieces of circumstantial evidence against him. Called as a witness at Johnny's trial, Chris lies to save himself, and after the trial he attends Johnny's execution, hoping for closure. However, a reporter Chris meets on the train tells him, "No one escapes punishment. I figure we have a little courtroom right in here," he explains, pointing to his chest, "judge, jury, and executioner. Well, murder never solves anything . . . The problem just moves in here, where it can never get out. Right here in solitary. So what? So you go right on punishing yourself. You can't get away with it, never." In his apartment, haunted by the memory of the final conversation he heard between Kitty and

Johnny, and especially by Kitty's saying, "jeeppers, I love you, Johnny," Chris tries to hang himself, but he fails when a neighbor comes into the room.

If Chris's actions may reflect guilt about killing Kitty, the words that haunt him, as Eisner points out, suggest he is motivated more by humiliation than guilt, especially because they haunt him years later, when, unemployed and homeless, he wanders the street.<sup>64</sup> As Chris leaves the park, one officer asks who Chris is, and the other officer responds, "He's got a crazy idea he killed a couple of people five or six years ago. Can't get it off his mind. Always trying to give himself up. Wants to be tried and executed. You know these nuts." In this way, the film makes prophetic the reporter's speech, which concluded, "I'd rather have the judge give me the works than have to do it to myself." Although Johnny unquestionably deserved punishment—he abused Kitty, was a petty criminal, and encouraged Kitty to con Chris—he committed no capital crimes. As the police did with Heidt in *Woman in the Window*, they use a criminal record and circumstantial evidence to arrest an innocent man, while once again a killer goes unpunished.

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<sup>64</sup> See Eisner 264-266. See also Armour 154-155; Gunning 335-339; Jacobowitz 72; Jensen 157-159; Osteen 125-126.

## 2.5 CRIME 1 SCREENSHOTS



Figure 2.1 *Fury*: Joe reads a newspaper while camping. This is the first we learn about the kidnapping for which Joe will be arrested, but Joe does not comment on the story.



Figure 2.2 *Fury*: Close-up of a microphone. Lang makes clear that this is for the radio by cutting from this shot to shots of people gathered around radios and listening to the trial.



Figure 2.3 *Fury*: One instance of the microphone in the courtroom during the trial. (Microphone in red circle; circle added)



Figure 2.4 *You Only Live Once*: Ethan discovers Eddie's picture in a true crime magazine.



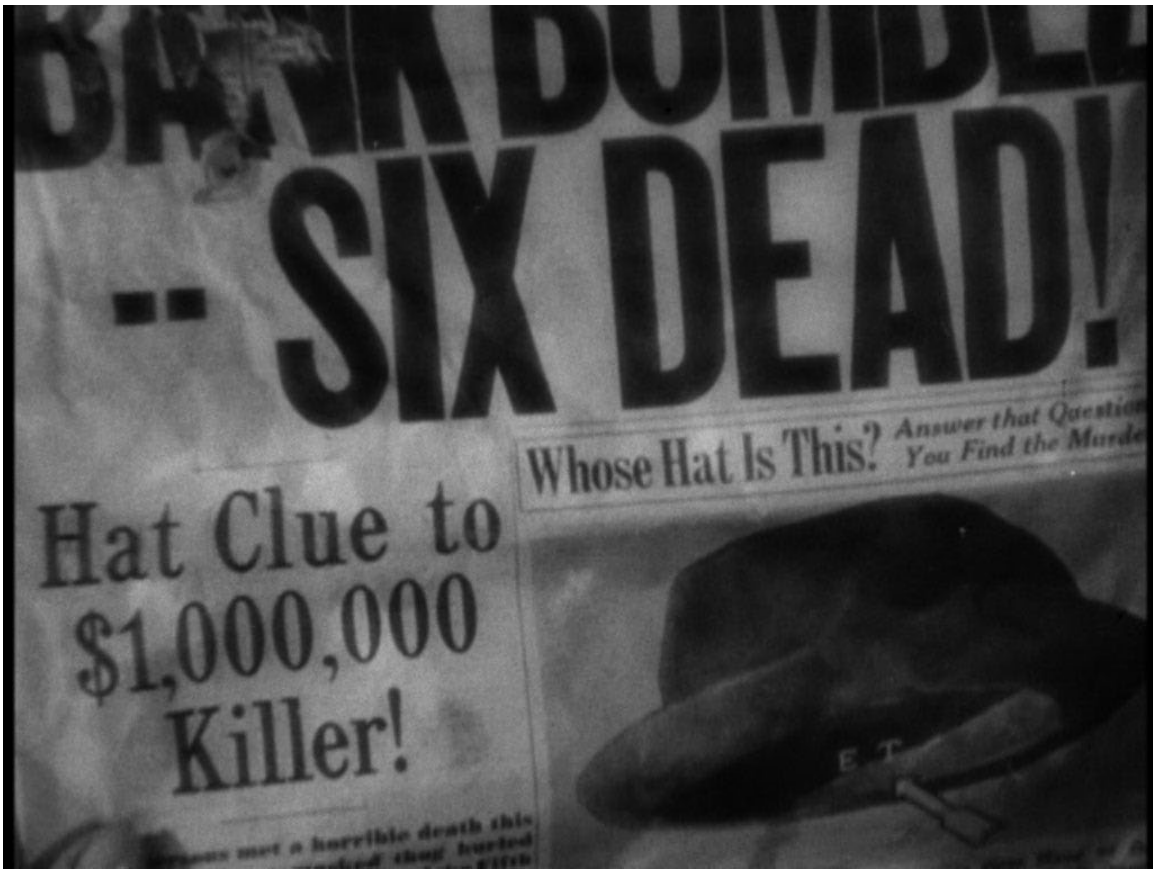


Figure 2.5 *You Only Live Once*: A newspaper front page after the bank robbery. The photo of Eddie's hat states that the hat's owner is the murderer.



Figure 2.6 *You Only Live Once*: First verdict front page mockup.



Figure 2.7 *You Only Live Once*: Second verdict front page mockup.

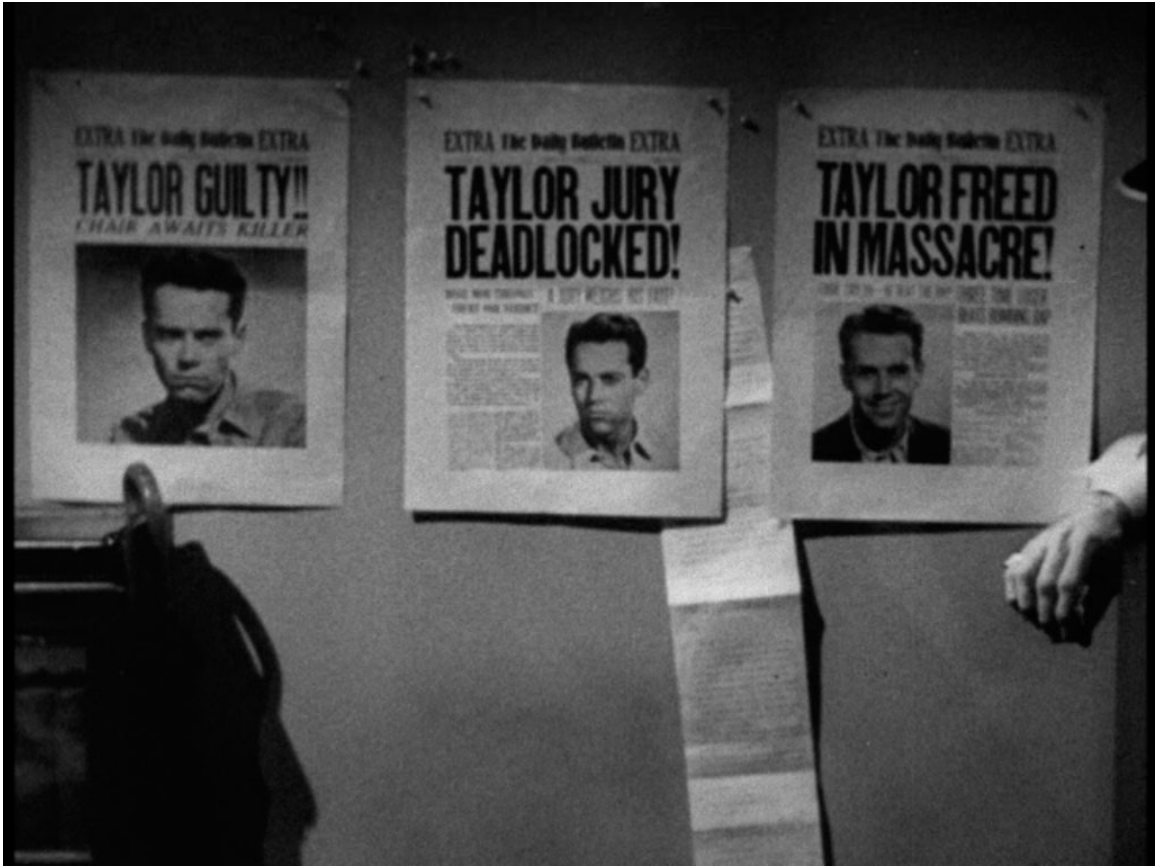


Figure 2.8 *You Only Live Once*: All three verdict front page mock-ups.



Figure 2.9 *You Only Live Once*: The final verdict front page mockup.



Figure 2.10 *You and Me*: The gangsters wistfully reminisce about their time in prison.

## CHAPTER 3. WESTERNS: *EXAMINING THE CONSTRUCTION OF WESTERNS' MYTHOLOGY*

### 3.1 WESTERNS OVERVIEW

The Western is one of cinema's oldest narrative genres. André Bazin notes that "The Western is the only genre whose origins are almost identical with those of the cinema itself" (140). Defined largely by its setting, the Western is set in a sublime American west that is filled with grand vistas, rolling plains and prairies, imposing mountains, hazy deserts, thick forests, harsh rock formations, and small towns; it is a vast and varied landscape that reflects myths about an expansive country and lands of abundant resources and possibilities. This makes the West a loosely defined site of changing American frontiers, from the pre-Revolution and Revolutionary War-era New England and Midwest through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' southwest and Pacific northwest. In addition, a number of Westerns approach contemporary settings as though they were still adhering to the conventions of the "Old West" as defined by film and television; these include *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), *No Country for Old Men* (2007), and *Hell or High Water* (2016). In classic Hollywood Westerns, however, the definitive era is an approximately 30-year period during and following the Civil War through the "closing" of the frontier, decried by Frederick Jackson Turner, in 1890.<sup>65</sup> Will Wright states the "crucial period of settlement in which most Westerns take place lasted only about thirty years, from 1860 to 1890" (5). This period is attractive to filmmakers because it was a time of great expansion for the country and for American industry. According to Jim Kitses, "from about 1865 or so . . . we can

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<sup>65</sup> See Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Frontier in American History."

count a number of frontiers in the sudden rash of mining camps, the building of the railways, the Indian Wars, the cattle drives, the coming of the farmer. Together with the last days of the Civil War and the exploits of the badmen, here is the raw material of the western” (8).<sup>66</sup> The Western takes place in a quasi-historical, mythical time in a developing country. “Where the Westerner lives,” Robert Warshow flippantly remarks, “it is always about 1870—not the real 1870, either, or the real West” (111). The Western is about the myths of Manifest Destiny and the triumph of an American way of life across a tough country—although, as Richard Dyer points out, there “is a teleological narrative (a destiny), energetically and optimistically embraced, in the name of race (breeding, heterosexual reproduction) . . . The West shows the construction of a (white) national identity centred on men and in the face of an indigenous ethnic other” (33-35).<sup>67</sup> Westerns romanticize the past in order to construct and sell mythologies of American exceptionalism and identity, as well as to reinforce those ideas in American minds. “In the westward expansion of the United States,” Alan Nadel points out, “the West—understood simultaneously as history, destiny, and mythology—signified the fact of transcontinental nationalism as well as the means by which that fact was established” (188).<sup>68</sup>

Despite popularity in the silent era, the Western fell out of favor shortly after the movies transitioned to synchronized sound, and the genre was relegated to B films for most of the 30s. In 1939, however, each major studio made at least one A Western,

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<sup>66</sup> From the first edition of *Horizons West*.

<sup>67</sup> For more on ideas of whiteness within Western mythology, see Reginal Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*; Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence and Gunfighter Nation*.

<sup>68</sup> For more on the definition and mythology of Westerns, especially Western films, see, for example, Richard Aquila, ed. *Wanted Dead or Alive*; Edward Buscombe, ed. *The BFI Companion to the Western*; John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique and The Six-Gun Sequel*; Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*.



successfully revitalizing the genre with such films as *Destry Rides Again*, *Jesse James*, and *Stagecoach*.<sup>69</sup> Although Lang's first two American films, *Fury* (1936) and *You Only Live Once* (1938) were critically successful, they were only minor hits, and his third film, *You and Me* (1938), was a flop.<sup>70</sup> Desperate to prove that he could work in Hollywood, Lang turned to the revitalized genre when he accepted an offer from 20th Century Fox that allowed him to make two Westerns. As a result, many critics have viewed Lang's first two Westerns, *The Return of Frank James* (1940) and *Western Union* (1941), as minor Lang films. Peter Bogdanovich claims these films lack the style and themes typical of other Lang films, saying, "one could imagine Henry King (who made the original *Jesse James*, to which Lang's film was a sequel), or DeMille (whose successful 1939 *Union Pacific* no doubt led Fox to produce *Western Union*) making the same projects" (*Fritz Lang in America* 12). *Rancho Notorious* (1952), the only Lang Western to receive significant attention, is typically discussed in relation to Lang's noir trajectory, rather than as a film invested in the conventions of the Western.

But, in fact, Lang had a lifelong love of Westerns. From childhood, his love of the genre was fostered by Western novels, especially those by German pulp novelist Karl May: "Karl May was Lang's ticket to the Wild West—in a sense his first escape from Vienna" (McGilligan 17).<sup>71</sup> His biographer, Patrick McGilligan, says that Lang's personal library was filled with "Max Brand, Eugene Cunningham, Zane Grey, Ernest

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<sup>69</sup> Other 1939 A westerns include *Dodge City*, *Drums Along the Mohawk*, and *Union Pacific*. For more on the 1939 Western revival, see, for example, Tino Balio, *Grand Design* 193-195; Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 255-312; the documentary *1939: Hollywood's Greatest Year* (2009).

<sup>70</sup> See Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang* 234-236, 246-247, 254, 266-267; Lotte H. Eisner, *Fritz Lang* 191, 197, 204.

<sup>71</sup> For more on May and his potential influence on Lang, see Phil Wagner, "Furious Union: Fritz Lang and the American West" 219-228.

Haycox, and other Western novels—many of them well-thumbed paperbacks. This was Lang’s genre since boyhood. He *loved* the Western conventions” (383). Lang found further Western fantasies when he saw Buffalo Bill’s Wild West:<sup>72</sup>

The boy’s infatuation with American frontier mythology must have reached euphoria when Buffalo Bill and his Wild West Show arrived in Vienna, during the troupe’s farewell European tour, in 1905. . . . Though he was nearly fifteen, he always remembered his brief glimpse of Buffalo Bill, one of his towering Western heroes, with the awed eyes of youth.  
(McGilligan 17)

Lang’s love of Westerns can be seen in the Western imagery of a sequence in his early German film, *The Spiders: Episode 1: The Golden Sea* (1919): protagonist Kay Hoog travels to Mexico, where he visits “A cantina in Cuicatlan” that is filled men dressed in stereotypical western garb as cowboys and Mexican vaqueros. This longtime love likely had special significance in his first Western, *The Return of Frank James*: Lang “reportedly told Henry Fonda, ‘I thought the James boys were the greatest heroes since Robin Hood—I used to cry over Jesse’s death’” (McGilligan 17).

In Hollywood, instead of just indulging his childhood love of the Western, Lang used the genre to question how cinema, as a cultural storyteller, constructed a Western mythology; in other words, to question what gave the Western its cultural power. To do so, he subverted studio and genre conventions by inserting moments of self-

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<sup>72</sup> Buffalo Bill’s Wild West is one of, if not *the*, most influential source of Western films’ imagery and mythology. For information on Buffalo Bill and his Wild West Show’s impact on western perceptions, see, for example, Buscombe, *The BFI Companion to the Western* 19-22, 91-93; Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*; Don Russell, *The Lives and Legends of Buffalo Bill*; Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 63-87; Louis S. Warren, *Buffalo Bill’s America*; R.L. Wilson and Greg Martin, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West*.

consciousness in the films. Even though, as David Bordwell notes, classical Hollywood narration tends to be “only moderately self-conscious. That is, the narration . . . seldom acknowledges its own address to the audience,” Lang’s Westerns contain an unusual number of self-conscious moments that draw attention to how Westerns construct a Western mythology (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 160). *The Return of Frank James* examines the theatricality of Westerns’ versions of history, as well as how Western figures fight for control of their myths. *Western Union* interrogates perceptions perpetuated by Westerns, especially those of Native Americans. *Rancho Notorious* analyzes several narrative frames used to construct Western mythology.

### 3.2 *THE RETURN OF FRANK JAMES* (1940): WESTERNS’ HISTORICAL PERFORMANCE

Critics often view *The Return of Frank James* as a minor film because, as Edward Gallafent states, “it is thought of as a predetermined product, being a sequel to a previous Fox Western, *Jesse James* (Henry King, 1939)” (22).<sup>73</sup> Critics typically focus on Frank as a doomed character battling his own past, “in a struggle against his fate, in the vein of the films from Lang’s German period,” as Robert A. Armour claims (121).<sup>74</sup> Breaking with this trend, Phil Wagner contends that Lang presents a “meta-discourse on generic expectation,” in which he “reflexively picks apart the social engineering of the Old West’s historical memory” (234). Wagner claims that Lang tried, “to insinuate the

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<sup>73</sup> For further comments on the conformity and lack of Lang’s personality in *Frank James*, see Bogdanovich, *Fritz Lang in America* 12; Tom Gunning, *The Films of Fritz Lang* 204; Paul M. Jensen, *The Cinema of Fritz Lang* 129; McGilligan 265, 267; Wagner 238, n. 3.

<sup>74</sup> See also Jensen 130-132, Wagner 232-233; Martin M. Winkler, “Fritz Lang’s Mediaevalism” 136-137.

essential theatricality of American life,” in the process of which “Lang distances himself from the genre’s historical world through enunciative gestures that sustain a coherently ironic commentary on western blood codes and pleasure contracts” (221). Although Wagner ultimately repeats fatalist arguments about Lang’s films, he identifies and explains a reflexive undercurrent in the film, and thus provides a useful foundation for considering *Frank James*’s examination of the ways media construct Western mythology.

Instead of examining what Wagner calls “the essential theatricality of American life,” however, I will focus on *Frank James*’s statements about the theatricality within Westerns (221). *Frank James* examines how performances construct Western mythology, with all the significant characters performing their own idealized versions of history, in the process exposing how Western stories fabricate American mythology and disguise that mythology as history. “Don’t forget the Western is not only the history of this country,” Lang told Bogdanovich, “it is what the Saga of the Nibelungen is for the European. I think the development of this country is unimaginable without the days of the wild West” (*Fritz Lang in America* 40). To Lang, Westerns presented an image of history that “lived up to certain dreams, illusions,” which combined to create what viewers wanted to believe about the west (44).

*The Return of Frank James* starts with Bob Ford killing Jesse James, in a scene reused (with minor cuts) from Henry King’s *Jesse James* (1939). Frank James (Henry Fonda) is farming, under the assumed name “Ben Woodson,” when his adopted son, Clem (Jackie Cooper), tells him that Bob and Charlie Ford (John Carradine and Charles Tannen) killed Jesse. Frank says he will let the law punish the Fords, but when the governor pardons them, Frank sets out for revenge. Learning that McCoy (Donald Meek),

the president of the St. Louis Midland Railroad, negotiated the Fords' pardon, Frank robs a railroad express office to finance his search for the Fords. During the robbery, Clem, who followed Frank despite Frank's orders that he tend the farm, interrupts the robbery. Frank sends Clem home, but Clem accidentally fires his gun and draws the attention of the townspeople, who accidentally kill the watchman while trying to stop the robbery. This results in Frank being wrongfully accused of murder. Although Frank and Clem escape, they are wanted men.

To stop the pursuit of the law and also draw out the Fords, Frank designs a bit of theater: Clem rides up to the porch of the Denver House hotel, where he sees Frank, whom he addresses as his old friend, "Mr. Woodson." After Clem tells "Woodson" that he saw Frank James killed in Mexico, Woodson is paged by an aspiring reporter, Eleanor Stone (Gene Tierney), who wants a more detailed account of Clem's Frank James story, so that she can write as an exclusive story for her father's newspaper, the *Denver Star*. Clem tells her a story about Frank's heroic death in a gunfight in a Mexican bar, where Frank died protecting a young girl from a gang of ranch hands. Eleanor's story runs in her father's paper and is then carried nationally by the telegraph. When Frank and Clem subsequently find the Fords starring in the theater show "The Death of Jesse James," Frank makes sure Bob sees him, which causes Bob and Charlie to flee. Frank and Clem pursue them into the mountains, where Charlie, confronted by Frank, plunges to his death in a ravine. Bob, however, escapes, and Frank and Clem return to Denver, where Eleanor tells Woodson that she has learned that he is Frank James. She also reveals that Frank's servant, Pinky (Ernest Whitman), was arrested and sentenced to death as an accomplice in the express office watchman's murder. When Frank is tried for murder after turning

himself in to save Pinky, his defense relies on the sympathies of the judge and the jury. On the trial's last day, Bob Ford visits the courthouse, expecting to see Frank sentenced. However, when the jury, without leaving the jury box for deliberation, declares Frank "not guilty of anything," Bob flees the courtroom. Spectators stop Frank from pursuing Bob, but Clem, waiting in the courtyard, wounds Bob, who then kills Clem. Frank follows Bob into a livery barn, where he finds him dead in the hayloft. The governor pardons Frank, who begins considering a future with Eleanor.

Lang used performances in numerous ways to exemplify Westerns' historical revisionism. One of the most prominent ways is the Fords' show, "The Death of Jesse James," in which they reenact the action that made them famous. When Frank and Clem arrive in the town, they see three advertisements for the show: a banner stretched across the street, a sign over the theater, and a poster outside of the theater [Figures 3.1-3.3]. These advertisements attest to the show's authenticity. One says, "The men who killed the noted bandit show you *exactly how they did it*" [emphasis added; Figure 3.2], claiming the historical accuracy crucial for many western shows, most famously Buffalo Bill's Wild West. As Richard Slotkin explains, Buffalo Bill supported his claims with "letters of recommendation from leading military officers published in the Program and by the use of figures publicly recognized as actual participants in the making of history" (*Gunfighter Nation* 68). "Despite its battery of authentications," however, "the Wild West wrote 'history' by conflating it with mythology. The re-enactments were not re-creations but reductions of complex events into 'typical scenes' based on the formulas of popular literary mythology" (69). The Fords' show's advertisements similarly make claims for authenticity by focusing on the use of the real Ford brothers, but it also relies on the

theater's (and later film's) focus on stars, with the second ad highlighting Nellie Blane as "the most beautiful woman in the west."

Conforming to Buffalo Bill's tradition of reducing history to fiction formulas, in the show, once Nellie Blane's father leaves her to guard the family's "farm money," the James Brothers break into the house, harass the damsel, and try to steal the money, before the Fords save her, killing "Jesse" and scaring away "Frank." This melodrama is advertised as an exact recreation of Jesse's death, even though at the start of the film we see that Jesse was actually shot in the back when he stood on a chair to remove a needlepoint sampler from the wall—no damsel in distress, no gunfight, and no Frank.<sup>75</sup>

The stage show thus draws attention to how, in the tradition of Western revisionist myths, melodramas valorize western figures, particularly outlaws. At the same time, it suggests how Jesse and Frank James grew in the popular imagination.<sup>76</sup> In *Jesse James*, newspapers and farmers who lost their land to the railroad celebrate the James Brothers, and newspaper headlines at the start of *Frank James*, eulogizing Jesse and vilifying the Fords, reiterate this valorization. *Frank James*'s Fords, however, promote their own celebrity. Although they are treated coldly in Liberty after they are pardoned, even after they offer to buy drinks for everyone in a bar, they find a warm reception further west, where they dramatize their version of the story.

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<sup>75</sup> This is all that is shown at the start of *Frank James*. In *Jesse James*, the Fords visited Jesse to convince him to join them in a robbery in which they arranged for him to be killed, but Jesse refused to help with the robbery. Jesse planned to start a new life with his wife, Zee, and son, Jesse, in California. Jesse dismissed the Fords from his home and started packing to leave, and then Bob shot him. *Frank James* shows the murder, but it removes the context. Producer Darryl F. Zanuck likely trusted viewers would remember the details from the successful *Jesse James*, but Lang does remind viewers of the Fords' motives by opening the film with a "Wanted" poster that promises a \$10,000 reward for Jesse, "Dead or Alive," right before the murder scene.

<sup>76</sup> Many western figures created their own reputations through the media, particularly in shows and dime novels, efforts that continued after the west was settled, most notably in traveling shows, such as the one the real Frank James joined. See Buscombe 162; Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 235.

When Frank goes to the Fords' show, he orders Clem to stay with the horses. Clem asks him, "You gonna shoot 'em right on the stage," but Frank tells him, "No, first I'm just gonna scare 'em to death." Clem does not believe Frank and sneaks into the theater. Clem knows the Fords created their own history, and he wants to see Frank violently force them to undo their revision; as he tells Frank later, "I wanted to see ya give it to 'em." However, Frank disrupts the play without announcing that the play is a lie, nor that he is Frank James.

In the film, Frank watches the Fords' deaths almost as though he were a spectator, which undermines Western genre conventions by providing Frank revenge without agency. When Frank and Clem chase the Fords from the theater, the chase moves from a town through landscapes out of the Western imagination: through green meadows, a stream, a ravine, and into the mountains, taking the audience on vicarious trip to an idealized, unsettled West, where, conventionally, despite this being the "wild West," characters follow the genre codes [Figures 3.4-3.9]. The mountain shoot-out between Frank and Charlie, after they are thrown from their horses, begins with Charlie shooting at Frank, who is lying helplessly on the ground. Frank then grabs his own gun and shoots, through his holster, at Charlie. Frank then chases Charlie up the mountain, but before the men can engage in anything resembling a fair fight, Charlie loses his footing and falls into a ravine. As Wagner points out, "Lang discourages the vicarious catharsis traditionally associated with the western revenge narrative" (233). Because Frank then returns to Denver, the Western set piece, sandwiched by two urban scenes, seems out of place, almost as if Frank and Charlie needed to travel to a Western set to play Western parts. Charlie, in other words, attempted to play the version of himself he enacted on the



stage, even though the realities of the gunfight dispute the heroic narrative of the play. Frank, on the other hand, refused to play a part, either as a revisionist historian, like Charlie, or as an honorable gunfighter.

Lang makes a similar point with Bob Ford's death. After Bob and Clem exchange shots in the Liberty courthouse courtyard (a confrontation that happens offscreen: the shots are heard inside the courtroom, where Eleanor is shown pleading with Frank not to kill Bob), Frank pursues Bob into a stable; as with Charlie's death scene, the men move from an urban setting—downtown Liberty—to a barn that suggests the agricultural aspects of traditional Westerns. The darkness and silence in the barn, moreover, reflect the environment of a movie theater [Figures 3.10-3.12]. Although Frank enters the barn in broad daylight, little of that bright light filters into the barn. Additionally, the town is full of people, many of whom are right outside of the barn, but Frank does not hear them once he enters the barn. This scene echoes the earlier theater scene in the way that Bob attacks Frank, while Frank only pursues Bob. Bob, like Charlie, seeks the high ground, in this case a hayloft. If in the play Bob played a fictionalized version of himself, in the barn, he tries to live up to the play's fiction. In this private theater, Frank lets the action happen around him: he does not return Bob's gunshots, but slowly tracks Bob's retreat to the hayloft, where he finds Bob dead. Frank watches Bob as though Bob was a character in a western show, in a theater complete with the iconic details of the genre, including hay bales, a stagecoach, and a horse, as well as harvesting tools, such as scythes, which should be unnecessary in a town's livery.

Lang also presents the courtroom as a western theater that showcases Westerns' theatricality and historical revisionism. During the trial, Frank's lawyer, Major Cobb

(Henry Hull), presents Frank as a man pressed to extremes by the railroad's greed. Although the State of Missouri, not the St. Louis Midland Railroad, is the prosecuting party, Cobb repeatedly refers to the prosecution as the railroad and/or railroad president McCoy—and the conflation is easily made, given that McCoy sits with and prompts the prosecutor. Vilifying the railroad, Cobb wins over the jury by reminding them how the railroad deprived them of their land and livelihood. He knows that all the jury members are Confederate veterans, as is the judge, in contrast to the Yankee prosecutor, and he uses this to his advantage while defending Frank. When he discusses Frank's revolver, which the prosecution entered into evidence as the murder weapon, Cobb focuses on how Frank used the gun when he joined Quantrill's Militia to fight off invading Yankees—and one of the farms Frank saved belonged to one of the jurors.<sup>77</sup> One defense witness, Confederate Colonel Breckenridge Jackson, praises the judge as a noble Confederate officer and taunts the prosecutor as a Yankee. Jackson provokes the prosecutor into saying he does not want to "refight the entire rebellion," which causes the judge to refer to the "late unpleasantness between the states" as the "War for the Southern Confederacy," which he insists is the court's official name for the Civil War. By tapping into the judge and jury's underlying resentment about the war's outcome, Cobb transforms the courtroom into a space where the Civil War is reddecided in favor of the South.

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<sup>77</sup> When Cobb discusses Frank's military service, he inadvertently brings into question Frank's earlier claim, as Ben Woodson, to Eleanor, that "Frank James never killed nobody." If Frank fought with Quantrill, he almost certainly killed some soldiers. Cobb acknowledges this when he says, during the trial, "There is no *innocent* blood on this weapon" (emphasis added). However, in *Jesse James*, Frank killed at least two people during the ill-fated Northfield Bank robbery (one in the bank and one on the street), with suggestions that he killed several others, none of whom have been established as guilty of anything other than defending their town and/or property.

Clem also engages in performing Western myths. At the Denver House, Clem gets two chances to tell a new Frank James story. On the porch, he loudly announces that he saw Frank James killed in a “shooting scrape” in Mexico, an announcement that gets the attention of the men on the porch. Because Clem relishes telling his Frank James story, he is thrilled when Eleanor asks for more details. He tells her about Frank’s rescuing a girl from a gang of rowdy ranch hands in a bar, fighting “twelve or fifteen” men, and killing several, before dying himself. While Clem tells this story, he acts out key parts—Frank, some of the hoodlums, and their leader, Red—clearly getting excited by his telling of the story.

Eleanor’s excitement encourages Clem’s sensationalized storytelling, and she further perpetuates the mythmaking by converting Clem’s oral tale to the more durable and wide-reaching written word. Because she is anxious to be a newspaper reporter, Eleanor is excited about getting the exclusive story of Frank James’s death. She takes notes when Clem starts the story, but as he becomes more animated and she gets more engaged, she stops. She cheers at the fictional Frank’s heroics and jeers at the despicable behavior of the hoodlums. When she writes the story, she valorizes Frank with the headline “Frank James killed/ Dies Bravely in Gun Battle Below the Border.” Eleanor perpetuates Clem’s story, and she likely embellishes it with her own flourishes, derived from her sense of the truth of Clem’s story, to make up for the sections she left out of her notes. Eleanor’s story runs in the *Denver Star* and gets telegraphed (and likely republished) across the country, converting Clem’s tale from a single performance to a printed legend. After the story spreads, McCoy’s detective, Runyan (J. Edward Bromberg), investigates the account and discovers that the story is false, and that

Woodson really is Frank James. A rival newspaper, *The Denver Globe*, publishes a story denouncing Eleanor's story as "a Hoax," which causes Eleanor's father to note that the newspaper will need to print a retraction, but by then the story has entered the public imagination. This situation typifies Western legends. Once stories gain traction in the public imagination, myth trumps truth, and Western figures are overshadowed by their legends. Eleanor's story, printed in the newspaper, becomes a type of proof, restating, embellishing, and canonizing Frank James legends, many of which had been mostly transmitted orally from various sources and embellished from sparse news reporting and editorials, such as those written by Major Cobb for Liberty's newspaper.

### 3.3 *WESTERN UNION* (1941): WESTERN PERSPECTIVES

*Western Union*'s treatment of Native Americans has been regarded as an important aspect of the film, despite disagreement about the film's attitude toward indigenous peoples. Lotte H. Eisner, for example, claims, "Even if the script at one point speaks of 'savages,' the Indians are presented sympathetically. Their chief, Spotted Horse, has a calm dignity; the Indian party which raids the camp does so only after they have been made drunk by corrupt white men" (208). Patrick McGilligan, on the other hand, feels that,

The film's Oglala Indians, whom Lang professed to revere, come off here as embarrassing stereotypes. Their stumbling-drunk behavior, the clichéd drumbeat whenever they appear, a routine where they are tricked into grabbing telegraph wires to shock themselves electrically—these were

unforgivable lapses of reason as well as taste. No doubt all of this was in Zanuck's master plan, but Lang showed no hint of subversion. (275)

The film's contrast of white and Native American characters nevertheless draws attention to Western conventions: "In *Western Union*," Phil Wagner points out, "as in much of Lang, artifice reveals essential diegetic truths. . . . Lang's disorienting scene construction of the false powwow . . . activates a genre memory, in this case the casual redfacing of white actors" (234-235). If the depiction of Native Americans exposes the underlying hypocrisy of Westerns and the American ideology they perpetuate, Wagner is correct that it is part of Lang's "meta-discourse on generic expectations," and Lang is questioning the ethos of Hollywood Westerns (234).

*Western Union* begins when Vance Shaw (Randolph Scott), hiding from a police posse, finds a wounded man, Edward Creighton (Dean Jagger), whom he takes to a nearby stagecoach depot for medical care. A few months later, when Creighton leads an expedition to build the Western Union telegraph line between Omaha and Salt Lake City, he assures Shaw, who is now the company's livestock manager and scout, that he will not mention Shaw's shady past. Shortly after the crew leaves Omaha, Shaw discovers that the "Indian" rustlers who stole the company's cattle are actually white men, led by his brother, Jack Slade (Barton MacLane). The telegraph construction is also interrupted by drunk Native Americans, who search the wagons and saddlebags for alcohol. When they find none, their chief, Indian Leader (Chief Thundercloud), tries taking the theodolite essential to surveying the line. When Indian Leader draws a knife on Shaw, Blake (Robert Young), a man initially seen as an "Eastern Dude," shoots him. In response,

Shaw punches Blake, but the Native Americans retreat, and the crew learns that Indians<sup>78</sup> are raiding the main camp and stealing horses. When the crew returns to camp and disperses the Indians, however, they discover that many of the dead are white men disguised as Indians. Creighton pressures Shaw into replacing the slain foreman, despite Blake's doubts about the way Shaw stood up to the Native Americans. At the next town, Creighton buys the rustled horses from Slade, but threatens legal action if his gang continues to harass the company. As Creighton, Shaw, and Blake leave town, they learn that Chief Spotted Horse (Chief Big Tree) will not let the telegraph wire run through the Oglala Sioux's land because Blake had wounded his son, Indian Leader, who had only raided the wagons because white men had gotten him drunk. When they meet Spotted Horse, Creighton, Blake, and Shaw trick some Oglala braves into getting electrically shocked by the telegraph wire, after which they are granted permission to run the wire. That night, one of Slade's men lures Shaw away with the story that Slade is dying; the real reason the messenger tells him this is to protect Shaw when Slade's gang burns down the camp. Although Shaw returns to camp in time to help some men escape, Creighton fires him. Shaw then goes to confront Slade, killing three of Slade's gang members before being killed by Slade, who subsequently dies from his wounds.

Lang structures the plot in several ways that encourage viewers to reconsider the representation of screen Native Americans by contrasting Native Americans with their white imitators. Although Zane Grey's novel, *Western Union*, on which the film is based,

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<sup>78</sup> My terminology for indigenous peoples is meant to distinguish the groups named. When I refer to authentic indigenous people, I use the currently preferred term Native Americans. When I refer to characters who are white men who masquerade as indigenous people, I use the term Indians, both because that is the term used in the film and to clearly denote those individuals as different from authentic Native Americans. The one exception is the character Indian Leader, a Native American character played by Native American actor Chief Thundercloud; I call him Indian Leader because that is the character's name in the credits.

does not include white men dressing as Native Americans, Lang overstated things when he said, “nothing from [the book] was used except the title” (Bogdanovich, *Fritz Lang in America* 45).<sup>79</sup> In addition to using some names from the novel, he and the screenwriters also adopted and crucially repurposed some key set pieces.

One of the repurposed set pieces is the electric shock received by some Native Americans. In the novel, while some Crows are destroying the telegraph line, lightning strikes a pole and runs through the wire, shocking some of the Crows and frightening the others. The film’s electrical shock scene occurs during Creighton’s meeting with Spotted Horse’s Oglala. Spotted Horse will not let the telegraph wire run through his land, so Creighton demonstrates the wire’s power: he asks ten braves to hold the wire, then cues Blake to turn on the electricity, thus shocking the braves. This demonstration wins Spotted Horse’s respect, and he lets the wire run through his land.

Another repurposed set piece is the fire that burns out the Western Union camp. In the novel, the fire, which occurs mid-way through the book, is a prairie fire, seemingly caused by lightning. Although the fire damages some of Western Union’s equipment and injures many of the men, Creighton regards it as “Only an incident of construction work on the Western Union” (146). In the film, however, Slade and his gang, without their Indian disguises, start the fire. The fire takes place near the end of the film, and it is the incident that compels Creighton to fire Shaw. Whereas Grey treats both the electrical shock and the prairie fire as exciting set pieces in an episodic story, Lang and the screenwriters unify the story elements, making these incidents parts of the concerted efforts of Slade’s gang both to mimic and to control the Native American characters—

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<sup>79</sup> The screenplay is credited to Robert Carson. For more on the film’s departures from the novel, see Armour 122; Jensen 132; Nick Smedley, “Fritz Lang Outfoxed” 292-296.

after all, Spotted Horse opposed the wire because Blake shot his son, Indian Leader, who had been manipulated by Slade.

Although the conflict in *Western Union* is between the telegraph men and white outlaws, the outlaws initially appear disguised as Pawnees. Lang used redface on Slade's gang to call attention to Hollywood's tradition of casting white actors as Native Americans. The white characters enact on-screen, in other words, a standard extra-diegetic Hollywood practice.<sup>80</sup> Because the major Native American characters are played by Native American actors, they present a Native American image that explicitly contrasts with Slade's gang of white actors, who perform what they think it means to be Indians.

Although Native Americans have long been associated with Westerns, their depiction on film, "is predicated on constantly shifting binary oppositions and paradoxes along a vast circuitry of representations" (Raheja 36). Western stories, "reduced [Native Americans] to a set of contradictions: noble and ignoble, pitied and praised, censured and celebrated. In such a way Americans justified and bolstered their own barbarism" (Bataille and Silet xxi). These contradictions are part of Native Americans' traditional roles as both impediments to white Manifest Destiny and bestowers of wisdom on advancing settlers. In an effort to consolidate these contradictions into one instantly recognizable image, "Hollywood created the instant Indian: wig, warbonnet, breechclout, moccasins, Hong Kong plastic beadwork. . . . Hollywood produced the homogenized Native American, devoid of tribal characteristics or regional differences. As long as an

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<sup>80</sup> For discussions the complicated history of Native Americans on screen, see, for example, Gretchen M. Bataille and Charles L. P. Silet, eds., *The Pretend Indians*; LeAnne Howe, Harvey Markowitz, and Denise K. Cummings, eds., *Seeing Red*; Armando José Prats, *Invisible Natives*; Michelle H. Raheja, *Reservation Reelism*; the documentary *Reel Injun: On the Trail of the Hollywood Indian* (2009).



actor wore fringed pants and spoke with a halting accent he was an Indian” (Bataille and Silet xxiii). Hollywood’s “instant Indian kit” thus both costumed Native American actors and turned white actors into screen Indians.<sup>81</sup>

Lang used the instant Indian kit in order to draw attention to redfacing. When Shaw looks for the Pawnee who supposedly rustled Western Union’s cattle and he sees men in breechclout, headbands, feathers, and war paint sitting around a campfire, he assumes they are Pawnee. “We’re willing to accept the suspicious verisimilitude of Jacks’ appearance,” Wagner explains, “because we’ve similarly done so in the past. And then, *voilà*, Lang brings the genre’s compulsory artifice into uncanny focus with Jack’s delayed exposure” (235). In this regard, Lang signals the artifice of Hollywood Indians by making the costumes—especially the headbands—stand out. Instead of the earth tones and beadwork typical of screen Native Americans, Slade’s striped headband looks like a necktie, and another gang member has a polka-dotted headband [Figure 3.13]. These headbands make the costumes look impromptu and underscore the idea of white people using their own clothing to present the white vision of Native Americans.

The Indian kit costuming of Slade and his gang contrasts with the costuming of the Oglala Sioux. At first, bare-chested and wearing feathers, they look like Slade’s Indians, but when we get a closer look, we see that they wear no face paint, and, truer to Native American custom, they have woven the feathers into their hair instead of wearing

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<sup>81</sup> For more on the Hollywood “Indian Kit,” see, for example, Ward Churchill, Mary Anne Hill, and Norbert S. Hill, Jr., “Examination of Stereotyping”; Vine Deloria, “The American Indian Image in North America”; James F. Denton, “The Red Man Plays Indian”; Ralph E. Friar and Natasha A. Friar, “White Man Speaks with Split Tongue, Forked Tongue, Tongue of Snake”; Harmut Lutz, “Indians/Native Americans” 156; John A. Price, “The Stereotyping of North American Indians in Motion Pictures”; Raheja 1-101; *Reel Injun*; Stanley Vestal “The Hollywood Indian.”

colorful headbands, a Hollywood device chiefly employed to secure the actors' wigs.<sup>82</sup> When Creighton, Blake, and Shaw subsequently meet Spotted Horse, the Native Americans wear white war paint, the most prominent color for actual Native Americans, as opposed to the red paint prevalent on Slade's Indians. Spotted Horse wears bison horns and his war party wear headdresses and buckskin trousers and shirts. Unlike the headbands worn by Slade's gang, the headwraps are wider, single colored, and not patterned [Figure 3.14].

The film, moreover, makes redfacing an explicit plot element. During the attack, to save Doc Murdock (John Carradine), Charlie (Victor Kilian), the Indian fighter, throws a tomahawk at an Indian. But when Doc thanks Charlie for saving his life, Charlie responds, "I wouldn't mind so much if he was only an Injun, but he ain't . . . no Injun ever looked like that." Doc rubs the man's chest and looks at his now reddened fingers, then pulls off the headband to reveal a white forehead [Figure 3.15]. This revelation exasperates the conflict between Blake and Shaw because Blake, who felt Shaw was being too gentle with Native Americans, now thinks Shaw may be conspiring with the disguised outlaws. When Creighton, following up on Blake's concerns, asks Shaw about the Pawnee encounter, Shaw responds, "They looked like Indians to me." In this way, the film underscores its distinction between the costuming of the Native Americans and the Indians, further underscoring Hollywood's construction of Native Americans' image.

*Western Union's* white men hold a wide range of attitudes toward Native Americans. Hired because he knows Native American customs and languages, Shaw treats Native Americans respectfully, in contrast with the crew members who express

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<sup>82</sup> See Friar and Friar 95; *Reel Injun*.

biases against Native Americans. Although Charlie, like Shaw, knows Native American customs, he views Native Americans with hostility, so he gets excited when the crew enters hostile territory because his pay increases and because he wants revenge for a partial scalping he once received. Western stories often mixed Charlie's aggressive attitude with the cook Herman's (Slim Summerville) fear to spread the idea of the fearsome Indian. Blake learned about the west from such stories, so, in his fear, he shares Charlie's attitude of meeting Native Americans with violence, and he thus does not understand Shaw's attitude.

The first scene with Native American characters dramatizes the conflicts of the genre's attitudes and presentation of Native Americans. While Blake surveys the line, he sees, through his theodolite's telescope, Native Americans approaching, and he calls for Shaw. Shaw looks through the telescope, and a corresponding POV shot shows the approaching Native Americans. When Indian Leader finds the theodolite, he looks through the eye piece, but this time there is not a corresponding POV shot. Armando J. Prats contends, "the Western never accords the Indian anything like a perspective of his own. . . . He may look, but he has no perspective of his own" (74-75). Although Prats does not discuss *Western Union*, he articulates a point that Lang recognized and dramatized here. The theodolite is akin to a camera viewfinder, a device that determines framing and shooting. Thus, the theodolite represents both a surveying tool and a means for controlling perception, and white men and Native Americans are fighting for possession of that device. Lang's inclusion of Shaw's POV shot, but withholding of a similar Native American perspective, underscores the white authorship and authority of Western mythology.

In the final confrontation between Shaw and Slade, Lang highlights the theatricality of Western shootouts, as he had done in *Frank James*. Slade and his gang watch Shaw ride through town through a barbershop's window. One of the gang members says, "Maybe he didn't see us." The comment suggests that he feels protected, as he would be watching the action from a theater seat, with the window as the movie screen. However, Shaw dispels this illusion when he returns to the barbershop and kills Slade's accomplices. However, he falls for the illusion when he uses the window as part of his cover, and it again proves fatal when Slade kills him. As Shaw dies, he falls past the window, and the camera holds on the window instead of following Shaw's body. As Shaw falls from the frame, Slade shoots a bullet through the window; by focusing on the window and this piercing shot, Lang emphasized the analogy between the window and the movie screen [Figures 3.16-3.18]. The bullet ruptures the window as Shaw's death dispels a Western (screen) illusion: the good guy does not win, nor survive. Slade and his gang and Shaw use the window as protection and a way to separate themselves from danger, but they are fooling themselves: the window is permeable, and therefore incapable of providing a safe, privileged viewer position.

This scene exemplifies one of Lang's favorite stylistic devices, the use of onscreen frames. He learned to use this device in Germany and continued to use it in America, as Joe McElhaney observes:

The very conception of the frame-within-the-frame is one that often involves an intensification and doubling up of the basic desire to seize an image. Lang's origins in Weimar cinema created an especially fruitful environment for a décor, which not only establishes setting, but which also

self-consciously frames, reframes, and reflects images . . . if the shattered mirror is an emblem of postwar cinema, it is equally evocative of more classical forms of narrating. The very gesture of shattering a mirror is a grandiose melodramatic one, a destruction of an element of décor that looks back at and negatively reflects on the individual. This is part of Lang's heritage. (*The Death of Classical Cinema* 81-82)

Lang here dispels screen illusions through the melodramatic gesture of shattering a window. Tellingly, Slade leaves the barbershop to make sure Shaw is dead, and, in the street, he is confronted by Blake. Blake at first just looks at Slade, but when Slade shoots at him, he ducks into a doorway, and the two shoot at each other. When Blake runs out of ammo, Slade prepares to shoot, but collapses, dead. Blake, who had admitted "I guess there's a lot about the West I never will understand," sees Shaw die, and now he learns a truth about the real west: shootouts are messy, and this one is won by luck, not skill, far from the glorious, honorable fights typical of Westerns.

#### 3.4 *RANCHO NOTORIOUS* (1952): WESTERN NARRATIVE FRAMES

Critics typically discuss *Rancho Notorious* as an exemplary case of Lang's fatalistic and film noir qualities. Critics often focus on Vern's destructive revenge quest, the phrase "wheel of fate" from the film's song, and Bogdanovich's rewriting of the song's refrain as "Fate, Murder, and Revenge" to make Vern yet another doomed Lang hero (*Fritz Lang in America* 6).<sup>83</sup> *Rancho* also features many film noir conventions,

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<sup>83</sup> See also Armour 125-127; Eisner 301-302, 311-312; Gunning 392-393; Winkler; Robin Wood, "Rancho Notorious" 273.

including doomed characters, a self-destructive hero on an ill-fated revenge quest, and a femme fatale.<sup>84</sup> “The relationship (in many respects a close one) between *Rancho Notorious* (1952) and *The Big Heat* (1953) proves the intricate interrelatedness of the Hollywood genres,” says Robin Wood, “a further proof of the foolishness of regarding them as discrete and fully autonomous on the grounds of their defining iconography” (“*Rancho Notorious*” 261).<sup>85</sup> Wood’s reading of *Rancho* as a mix of noir and Western recalls Humphries’s claim that Lang’s American films are all indebted to film noir (Humphries 14). Martin M. Winkler also notes the connections of noir and Western in *Rancho*: “Two quintessentially American film genres, the Western and film noir, have been more strongly influenced by European literary and cinematic traditions than all others. . . . virtually all of Lang’s American work is in the tradition of film noir, with whose origins he had been familiar since his days in the UFA studios in Berlin” (135). However, these readings overlook how, in *Rancho*, Lang continues to examine the theatricality of Western mythology in Western films.

In *Rancho*, Lang drew attention to the narrative frames of Western storytelling. *Rancho* uses on-screen frames, flashbacks with diegetic storytellers, and a narrative ballad to draw attention to the act of telling Western stories and the way narrative retellings construct Western myths.

*Rancho Notorious* follows the quest of Vern Haskell (Arthur Kennedy), a Wyoming ranch hand, to avenge the rape and murder of his fiancé, Beth. Vern finds one of the men, Whitey, who the other man, Kinch (Lloyd Gough), shot. The only clue

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<sup>84</sup> See Buscombe 292; Tom Conley, “It Was a Horserace Sorta”; Eisner 301-312; Reynold Humphries, *Fritz Lang* 90-62; Stephen Jenkins, “Fritz Lang” 47-49; Jensen 174-178; Winkler 137-139; Wood, “*Rancho Notorious*.”

<sup>85</sup> See also Eisner 329; Jenkins 40-41.

Whitey gives Vern before dying are the words “Chuck-a-Luck.” Vern searches for the meaning of “Chuck-a-Luck,” but an outlaw, Ace McGuire (Fred Maguire, uncredited), warns him to stop because Altar Keane would not like it. In the fight that follows, Ace, who Vern knocks through a barbershop window, dies from his injuries, but because Ace had a reward on his head, Vern is not charged. Subsequently, Vern hears rumors that Altar (Marlene Dietrich) is hiding with her beau, gunfighter Frenchy Fairmont (Mel Ferrer). Learning that Frenchy was recently arrested in Gunsight, Vern travels there and vandalizes a bar in order to get arrested, but he refuses to share a cell with corrupt politicians so that he can share one with Frenchy. The sheriff, a crony of the politicians, smuggles a lock-pick into the jail in a bottle, which is given to Vern. After Vern and Frenchy escape, Frenchy takes Vern to Chuck-a-Luck, Altar’s horse ranch, where outlaws hide from the law. Although Vern suspects each of the outlaws may be Beth’s murderer, he is most suspicious of Wilson (George Reeves) because Wilson has two scars on his left cheek and chin, which Vern attributes to Beth’s fingernails.

The day after he arrives at the ranch, Vern sees Altar at her birthday party, wearing Beth’s brooch. He works hard on the ranch and begins flirting with Altar in an attempt to learn the brooch’s provenance. Kinch, who is at the ranch, is suspicious of Vern because he keeps asking questions. Kinch also thinks Vern looks familiar and, when he remembers that he saw Vern the day he killed Beth, he suspects that Vern is hunting him. On a ride with Vern, Altar confesses her feelings for him, but tells him that he must leave the ranch. Vern, Frenchy, and the other outlaws rob a bank, during which Kinch shoots at Vern, but misses, and in the ensuing gunfight, Frenchy is wounded. The gang does not return to Chuck-a-Luck, but Vern takes Altar’s cut to her. Continuing to flirt

with Altar, Vern requests that she wear her best dress and jewelry, and he learns that she received the brooch from Kinch. Hearing this, Vern condemns Altar for the deaths she has caused by protecting killers. Then he takes the brooch and leaves to find Kinch. He finds Kinch in a bar, but Kinch refuses to draw his gun. During the standoff, the sheriff arrives, and he arrests Kinch after Vern tells him about Beth's murder. Several outlaws rescue Kinch from the sheriff, then go to Chuck-a-Luck to confront Altar and Frenchy. Vern joins Frenchy in defending Altar against the other outlaws. In the shootout, Frenchy kills Kinch, Vern kills Wilson, and the other outlaws surrender, but Altar is fatally wounded protecting Frenchy.

To present Vern's revenge narrative, Lang employs sundry frames. In Lang's Westerns, especially *Rancho*, frames draw attention to Westerns' theatricality. In *Rancho*'s barbershop scene, for example, several shots of the fight between Vern and Ace are shown in mirrors. Lang thus draws attention to the violence as a framed act and uses mirrors to suggest how the actual scenes are mirrored and amplified in the popular imagination. The mirrors only literally reflect the fight while the reflections double the action [Figure 3.19]. The mirrors also suggest a medium of spectatorship, as do several shots of the barber peeking through the curtains to see the fight. The fight ends when Vern knocks Ace through a window, creating a ruptured frame that echoes the shattered mirror at the start of the fight [Figures 3.20-3.21].

*Rancho* also draws attention to several types of narrative frames. Flashbacks are especially prominent. Flashbacks show three stories about Altar. The first, narrated by a deputy, establishes Altar's reputation as a saloon girl; the second, told by Altar's old friend, Dolly, explains Altar's background and her fickleness in romance; and the third,



told by a town gossip, explains how Frenchy helped Altar cheat her former boss out of a small fortune and left him to financial ruin. These flashbacks both mythologize Altar and question how stories construct the past. The first two flashbacks are short and relate events that the storytellers could know firsthand. The gossip who tells the third story, however, admits, “I don’t swear this is true, because I wasn’t here, but here’s the way they tell it: the story runs that . . .” After the gossip’s story, another man says, “I was told a story” about Frenchy and Altar reuniting, and he finishes by saying, “I don’t know how much of it is true, but it sure sounds romantic.” The flashbacks and rumors present the characters’ histories as Vern imagines them. Thus, when Vern seeks Altar, he seeks a legend, unsure if there is an actual woman. As he acknowledges when he meets her, “I’ve heard so many different stories about you I wasn’t certain there was any Altar Keane.” When Altar asks him if he thought she was a pipe dream, he responds that this is “the first time I’ve ever met up with a real, live pipe dream, especially one with grease on her arm.” With this conjoining of “dream” and “grease,” Lang thus simultaneously affirms Altar’s legendary status and deglamorizes it.

*Rancho*’s most prominent narrative frame is its theme song, “The Legend of Chuck-a-Luck.” The song has received substantial critical attention, in part because, as Eisner states, “the ‘theme song’ used as a continuing and integral commentary was at this time new (Lang invented its use in a film a year before *High Noon* was released)” (302). Most critical readings of the song focus on the phrase “the wheel of fate,” but these fatalist readings overlook the song’s meta-cinematic critique. Verses from “The Legend of Chuck-a-Luck” open and close *Rancho*, and others, typically sung over interlude montages, gloss story elements. Because dialogue in the subsequent scenes repeats the

information in the song, Wood claims that the song fulfills a “Brechtian function of reducing suspense and emotional involvement and concentrating the spectator’s analytical intelligence,” such that the song’s superfluous quality calls attention to the story (“*Rancho Notorious*” 270). However, the song also highlights the ways Westerns create and perpetuate their own American mythology.

The song takes the form of a ballad. Winkler contends that the song works to “reinforce the story’s legendary nature and present it as if it were an old oral folktale,” akin to German folk songs and the tales sung by medieval minstrels (139). The song’s first words emphasize this connection to oral roots: “Oh *listen. Listen well./ Listen* to the legend of Chuck-a-Luck, Chuck-a-Luck/ *Listen* to the song of the gambler’s wheel” (emphasis added). After these reminders about listening to stories, the song connects the ballad’s function as a mythmaker to the film’s:

*A souvenir from a bygone year,*  
*Spinnin’ a tale of the old frontier, and a man of steel,*<sup>86</sup>  
And the passion that drove him on, and on, and on.  
It began, *they say*, one summer day,  
When the sun was blazin’ down,  
*’Twas back in the early seventies,*  
In a little Wyomin’ town.  
So, *listen to the legend* of Chuck-a-Luck, Chuck-a-Luck,  
Listen to the wheel of fate,

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<sup>86</sup> Serendipitously, the words “man of steel” are sung when George Reeves’s name is on screen, and Reeves soon afterward became famous as TV’s “Man of Steel,” Superman, in *Adventures of Superman* (1952-1958).

As round and round with a whisperin' sound

It spins, it spins, the *old, old story* of

Hate, murder, and revenge. (emphasis added)

The lyrics not only establish the setting, but they also state a historical provenance for the story: the singer is retelling a legend. Lang highlights this story frame to draw attention to the distortions of narrative retelling. Westerns' narratives are loosely based on a history repeated with elements of nostalgia and sensationalism, which creates a romanticized world that never was.

The song's final verse, which ends the film, again questions Western conventions: "Two men rode away from Chuck-a-Luck,/ And death rode beside them on the trail,/ For they died that day, so the legends tell,/ With empty guns, they fought and fell,/ And so ends the tale, of hate, murder, and revenge." The phrase "so the legends tell" reminds listeners of the mythic nature of Western stories, and it reinforces the story's provenance as an old legend. However, the lines also question the story that is visually presented: the lines, "For they died that day . . . with empty guns they fought and fell," reflect nothing that happened on screen. In the final shootout, Vern and Frenchy were allies defending Altar. The film hints at a showdown between Vern and Frenchy over Altar, but Vern concedes that she preferred Frenchy. Wood contends this ending provides, "an extreme example of closure . . . but not the kind to which the Hollywood cinema has accustomed us . . . the final verse of the ballad is quite unambiguous about it: the two men who rode away from Chuck-a-Luck die under a hail of bullets before the day is over" ("*Rancho Notorious*" 274). But the ending is more ambiguous than Wood suggests, in that the reason for the last gunfight is unclear and the climactic confrontation is unseen. Vern and

Frenchy must die because the Production Code decreed that criminals needed to be punished. However, the song's final image of Vern and Frenchy falling in a gunfight contrasts to the screen's final image [Figure 3.22]. This contrast draws attention to the typical construction of Westerns about outlaws, particularly those made in accordance with the Production Code. Lang presented two, seemingly mutually exclusive, endings: the screen image shows the men riding away triumphant, whereas the audio says they died. Thus, neither is asserted as truer than the other, highlighting the disagreement between reality and legend typical of Westerns.

### 3.5 WESTERNS SCREENSHOTS



Figure 3.1 *The Return of Frank James*: An advertisement for the Fords' show hanging over the street of an unnamed town. Frank and Clem are the two men on horses at the bottom right.

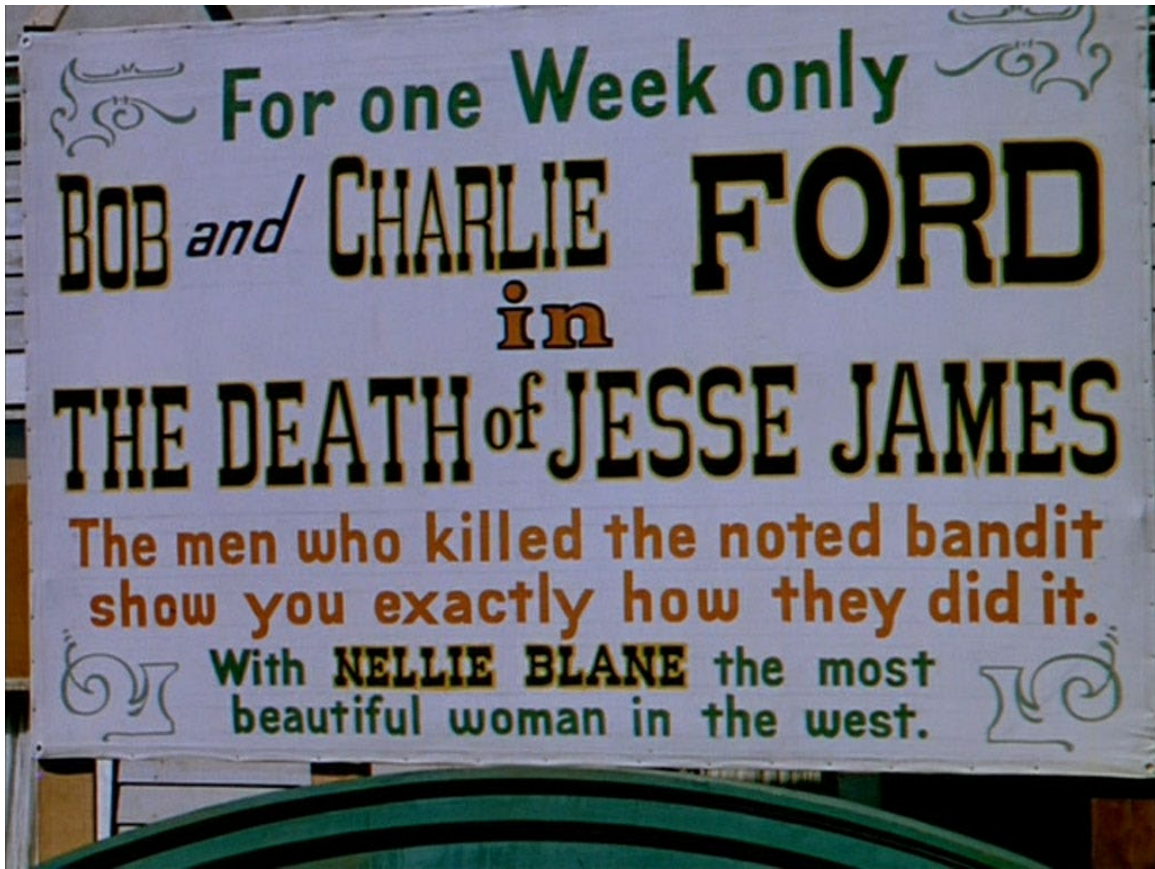


Figure 3.2 *The Return of Frank James*: The second advertisement for the Fords' show; this one hangs over the theater.

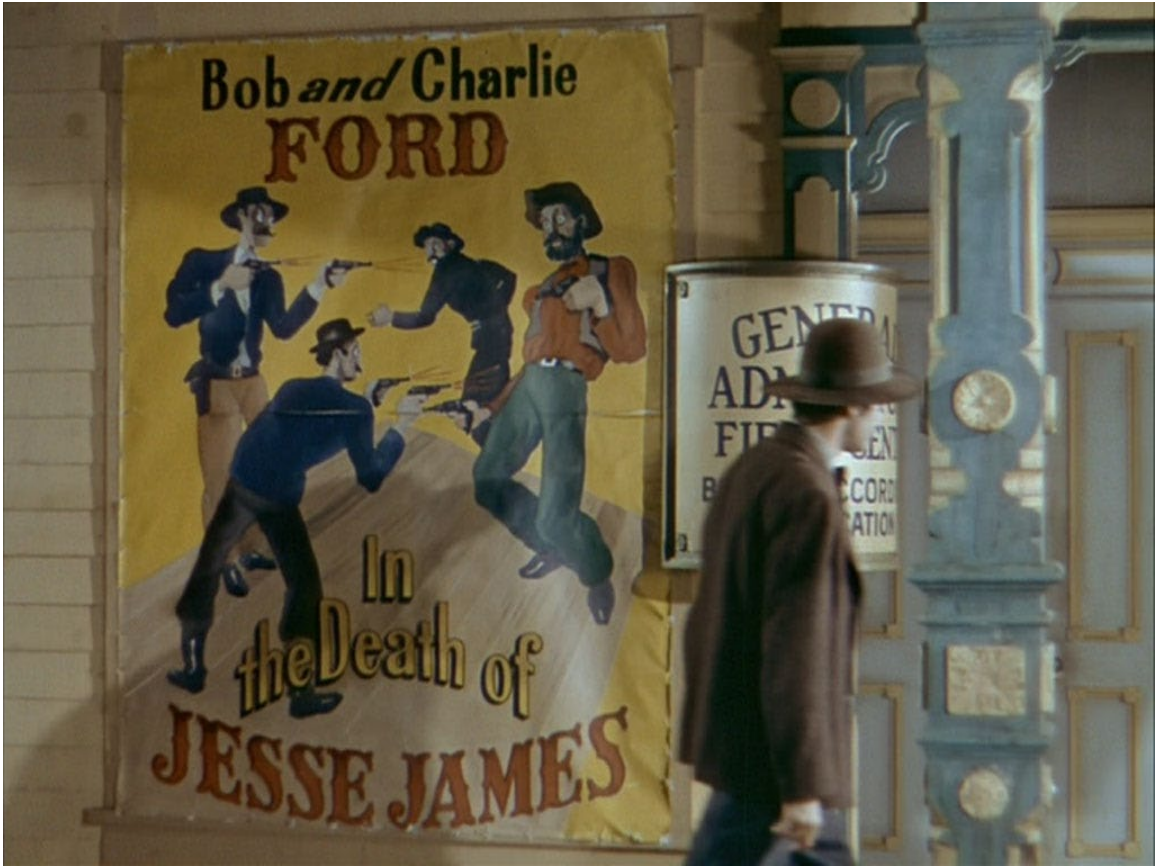


Figure 3.3 *The Return of Frank James*: The third advertisement for the Fords' show, this one is next to the theater's entrance. Frank passes the poster as he enters the theater.





Figure 3.4 *The Return of Frank James*: Fords' Pursuit—From the theater in town...



Figure 3.5 *The Return of Frank James*: Fords' Pursuit—through open country...



Figure 3.6 *The Return of Frank James*: Fords' Pursuit—through open country...



Figure 3.7 *The Return of Frank James*: Fords' Pursuit—into sparse vegetation in foothills...



Figure 3.8 *The Return of Frank James*: Fords' Pursuit—through a ravine and over a river .  
..



Figure 3.9 *The Return of Frank James*: Ford's Pursuit—to a rocky, almost desert, area for a shootout, in a visual metaphor for the mental journey and mindset of Westerns' viewers.



Figure 3.10 *The Return of Frank James*: Frank follows Bob to a livery stable after Bob shoots Clem.



Figure 3.11 *The Return of Frank James*: Frank looks in the barn in which Bob is hiding. The bright sunlight behind Frank contrasts with the darkness inside the barn.





Figure 3.12 *The Return of Frank James*: Frank inside the dark barn, into which filters little of the bright light from outside. The entry into darkness and silence transforms the barn into a theater for Frank and Bob.



Figure 3.13 *Western Union*: Slade and members of his gang in redface. Slade (right) wears a striped headband, and another gang member (middle) wears a polka dotted headband. Note also the feathers stuck in the headbands and the red war paint.



Figure 3.14 *Western Union*: Chief Spotted Horse (center, on white horse) and his Oglala Sioux. Although aspects of the costuming uphold screen Native Americans stereotypes, subtle differences in their costumes separate them from Slade's Indians.



Figure 3.15 *Western Union*: Doc reveals that a dead Indian is a white man in disguise—the white forehead contrasts with the rust-colored make-up on the face.



Figure 3.16 *Western Union*: Shaw is shot—note the three bullet holes in the window.



Figure 3.17 *Western Union*: Shaw dies.



Figure 3.18 *Western Union*: Shaw's death as another bullet pierces the window.



Figure 3.19 *Rancho Notorious*: One example of the mirror continuing to reflect action during the barbershop fight.





Figure 3.20 *Rancho Notorious*: Vern in the barbershop mirror as he starts to fight with Ace; the mirror has been shattered in the middle by Ace's bullet.



Figure 3.21 *Rancho Notorious*: Vern knocks Ace through a window, rupturing the frame as the spectacular fight ends.



Figure 3.22 *Rancho Notorious*: The final shot, with Vern and Frenchy (lower left) riding off together, while the lyrics sung over this image say, “They died that day, so the legends tell/ With empty guns they fought and fell.”

## CHAPTER 4. AMERICAN GUERRILLA IN THE PHILIPPINES: *POSTWAR TRANSITION AND CYNICISM*

### 4.1 *AMERICAN GUERRILLA IN THE PHILIPPINES* (1950)

Throughout his twenty years working in Hollywood, Lang worked in several of the major Hollywood genres, including the Western, the espionage film, the adventure film, and several crime subgenres, including the social problem film, the journalism film, the domestic crime melodrama, and the psychological crime film. He even dipped his toe, albeit shallowly, into the romantic comedy musical. What is unusual, given Lang's four WWII-related espionage films, made as part of Hollywood's war effort, is that Lang only made one combat film, *American Guerrilla in the Philippines* (1950), and that was made well after the war ended.

Lang, unlike a number of other Hollywood directors, did not enlist in the military when America entered WWII. Later in his life, he said that he tried to join the Office of Strategic Services but was rejected because of his eyesight.<sup>87</sup> But Lang, who served in the German cavalry in WWI and was wounded three times in combat, knew well the realities of warfare.<sup>88</sup> One suspects, therefore, that, unlike other directors, including John Ford, Lang had no desire to fight or even to document military action. *Man Hunt* (1941) did, however, encourage America's entry into WWII, and Lang was happy to make films supportive of the war effort.

When, several years after the end of the war, he made *American Guerrilla*, his sole combat film, it was largely because he was intrigued with the idea of shooting on

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<sup>87</sup> See Peter Bogdanovich, *Fritz Lang in America* 71.

<sup>88</sup> See Lotte H. Eisner, *Fritz Lang* 12-13; Paul M. Jensen, *The Cinema of Fritz Lang* 10; Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang* 34-44; Frederick W. Ott, *The Films of Fritz Lang* 15-16; Gene D. Phillips, *Exiles in Hollywood* 20; Nick Smedley, *A Divided World* 88.

location in the Philippines.<sup>89</sup> In this postwar film, Lang returned to many of the themes he had explored earlier, especially his concern in his prewar Westerns<sup>90</sup> with how that genre created and perpetuated American mythology. He saw that combat films, wartime and postwar, like Westerns, perpetuated that celebratory mythology, a practice he almost certainly distrusted, given his firsthand knowledge of how film helped instill a sense of German nationalism that motivated and justified Nazi aggression. His historical fantasy *Die Nibelungen* (1924) had even contributed to that national ethos.

While *American Guerrilla* may seem to participate in a postwar revival of the WWII combat film celebrating American triumphalism, the film should more appropriately be read as an expression of the cynicism that would become increasingly prominent in Lang's films throughout the 50s. Therefore, Robert A. Armour's claim that the film "is about America in her age of political innocence" misses the ways the film consistently undermines this sentiment (143).

*American Guerrilla* begins with Japanese planes sinking a US Navy ship in the Philippines early in 1942. When the survivors hear that "Bataan has fallen," they try getting to the nearest US airstrip so they can fly to Australia, where they will be reassigned. When two of the sailors, Chuck Palmer (Tyrone Power) and Jim Mitchell (Thomas Ewell), reach an army base, they learn that the military has been ordered to surrender. Because Palmer does not want to surrender, he, Mitchell, and several other service men try to sail to Australia, but a storm destroys their boat, and the injured, exhausted Americans are rescued by Filipino villagers. After they recover, the Americans

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<sup>89</sup> Or because, as he told Bogdanovich, "It was also offered to me—and even a director has to make a living! . . . Even a director has to eat" (*Fritz Lang in America* 75). See also Eisner 295; McGilligan 372-374.

<sup>90</sup> *The Return of Frank James* (1940) and *Western Union* (1941)

search for another way to reach Australia. In one village, they find a group of American conmen soliciting donations to prepare for MacArthur's return. Palmer, thinking they are legitimate, volunteers to help them, but when the leader (Jack Elam) turns him down, Palmer realizes they are frauds and denounces them. This denunciation gets the attention of a Filipino resistance leader, Juan Martinez (Juan Torená), who then asks Palmer to contact another resistance leader, Col. Dimalanta (Eddie Infante, uncredited), who sends Palmer to Col. Phillips (Carleton Young, uncredited), an American organizing guerrilla efforts in the Philippines. Phillips convinces Palmer to stay in the Philippines to help develop the guerrilla resistance, puts him in charge of the guerrilla radio network that coordinates guerrilla efforts, and instructs Palmer to transmit intelligence about Japanese naval movements. When the Japanese soldiers use the radio signals to locate Palmer, the Americans prepare for a last stand, but the battle ends prematurely with the arrival of MacArthur and the returning American troops.

Although the film is part of what Jeanine Basinger identifies as the third wave of WWII combat films (which ran from November 1949 to the end of December 1959), which consciously used the genre to create a cinematic reality, *American Guerrilla* eschews the tropes of the genre (140). Typical third wave films, Basinger notes, "seem to provide a ritual in which the American audience can watch the war together, celebrate its satisfactory completion, reenact its combat, and come together in their understanding of it" (141). "To do this," Basinger explains, "the films re-create earlier films more than reality, even though they provide real historical reference points" (141). Even by the last years of the first wave of WWII combat films,<sup>91</sup> in a film like *Guadalcanal Diary*

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<sup>91</sup> Basinger classifies the first wave as those films made between December 7th, 1941 and December 31st, 1943 (111).

(1943)—like *American Guerrilla*, scripted by Lamar Trotti—soldiers learn how to behave, at least in part, from war films. In *Guadalcanal Diary*, a marine, preparing to shoot a Japanese soldier out of a tree, licks his thumb and wipes his gunsight, in the manner of Gary Cooper in *Sergeant York* (1941). The marine next to him asks, “Who do you think you are, Sergeant York or Gary Cooper?” The shooter then gobbles like a turkey to get the enemy’s attention, as had Cooper’s Alvin York.<sup>92</sup>

*American Guerrilla* features multiple allusions to earlier combat films, especially those set in the Pacific Theater, and particularly those set in the Philippines. Unlike most third wave combat films, however, its allusions draw attention to how it differs from earlier films. Basinger says about the film, “It’s as if the cast of *They Were Expendable* [1945] were picked up where they left off at film’s end, and put into *Back to Bataan* [1945]” (281). If the film’s nominal adherence to the tenets of the combat film, mixed with its rejection of the genre’s key elements, such as sensational combat sequences, makes the film difficult to classify, classification is further compounded by its conflation with Westerns. This is especially so because, unlike the war films of John Ford or Raoul Walsh, which often took the ethos of American exceptionalism and adventure from the Western onto the battlefield, *American Guerrilla*, like Lang’s Westerns, questions that construction of American identity. The film also criticizes the grafting of espionage onto the combat genre, a combination which had become common in WWII films.

When America entered WWII and studios began working with the Bureau of Motion Pictures (BMP) and Office of War Information (OWI), filmmakers wanted to capitalize on the timeliness of war-themed movies and contribute, in their own way, to

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<sup>92</sup> See Basinger 66 for more on this scene.

the American war effort.<sup>93</sup> The hasty efforts to retool initially meant that wartime themes were grafted onto existing genre formulas, such as espionage being grafted onto crime film formulas, and sometimes into established crime series.<sup>94</sup> After Hollywood established formulae and templates for wartime genres, filmmakers would still often combine genre tropes, as in several Raoul Walsh/Errol Flynn collaborations, which freely mixed elements of espionage and combat films.<sup>95</sup> The service men-cum-spies in such films easily rise to the demands of this new work. In *Destination Tokyo* (1943), for example, a submarine crew is tasked with surveying the Japanese coast to gather, and later transmit, information for an American aerial bombing mission. The men, despite receiving no training in espionage, succeed with only minor complications.

In *American Guerrilla*, on the other hand, Palmer, who had been monitoring and reporting on Japanese naval maneuvers, is wholly unprepared for the demands of espionage, a fact obscured by the convenient rescue at the film's end. When Palmer is asked to set up a radio network, he freely admits his ignorance about radios. Although he gets a manual on radios, he relies on other men to operate the equipment. This can be viewed, from one perspective, as an instance of the realism that became part of the third wave of combat films, which, unlike the more propagandistic earlier waves, could treat

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<sup>93</sup> See, for example, Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War*; Ralph Donald, *Hollywood Enlists*; Clayton R. Koppes and Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Goes to War* and "What to Show the World"; Robert L. McLaughlin and Sally E. Parry, *We'll Always Have the Movies*; Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust* 131-149.

<sup>94</sup> Examples include Sherlock Holmes, amidst his series, stymying Nazis in *Sherlock Holmes and the Voice of Terror* (1942), *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon* (1942), and *Sherlock Holmes in Washington* (1943), and, late in the war, Nick Charles, in *The Thin Man Goes Home* (1945), uncovering a spy ring. See Alan R. Booth, "The Development of the Espionage Film" 143-145; Wesley A. Britton, *Onscreen and Undercover* 66-67; Richard B. Jewell, *The Golden Age of Cinema* 245-246; McLaughlin and Parry 35-37; Schatz 199, 241.

<sup>95</sup> See *Desperate Journey* (1942), *Northern Pursuit* (1943), *Objective, Burma!* (1945). We can also think of prewar films, such as *Wee Willie Winkie* (1937) and *Gunga Din* (1939), which established a precedent and the rudimentary template for such films.



soldiers “like fallible human beings who are rising to the occasion out of the instincts of survival” (Basinger 142). But Palmer, who seems ignorant of the dangers involved in his espionage efforts, does not rise to the occasion. Instead, he openly broadcasts the information he gathers about Japanese naval maneuvers, using only the thinnest coding of football terminology, seemingly oblivious to the possibility that the Japanese could hear the broadcasts and use the signals to find the Americans. In *Destination Tokyo*, the men broadcast in Japanese, and they are aware of the possibility of being found, which is why they leave the cave from which they are broadcasting as soon as they send all the necessary information. Palmer, on the other hand, does not prepare for the possibility of discovery, so when the Japanese find him, he and his men are forced into a hasty retreat, requiring them to prepare for a last stand from which they are saved by chance.<sup>96</sup>

*American Guerrilla* also takes issue with several other tropes of the combat film. The film ends with the exhibition of national pride common to third wave combat films. Basinger notes that the films of this wave, which began in 1949, were designed to let Americans be proud they won the war by revisiting the conflict:

The reexploration process would help us understand what happened, to whom it happened, and how it happened, and it would also help us understand how it changed and affected us, and to justify what we did during those years. The subject could now be presented for earned national pride, understanding, and justification—not just propaganda. We could *resolve* the war, finish it off once and for all. (140)

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<sup>96</sup> Lang is, in a way, returning to the concerns of his first four WWII-related film, that of the often incongruous and sloppy ways Hollywood handled espionage before and during the war.

In *American Guerrilla*, however, the celebratory flag-waving that concludes the film, typical of earlier WWII films, is emphatically both figurative and literal, with a crowd of Filipinos waving American and Filipino flags. Lang, Armour contends, “quite seriously allows this film to make a statement about the duty and right of America to be involved in the struggles of foreign nations” (143). Armour sees the film, therefore, as part of the propaganda effort of Hollywood war films. Such films celebrated an image of America and Americans as global heroes:

The final scenes of the film leave the viewer with a strong feeling of nationalism. As the Americans take over control of the Philippines and drive the Japanese out, the Filipinos help the Americans raise a United States flag over the island and cheer as the Americans parade down Filipino streets. The American guerrillas are given bottles of Coke (the ultimate mythical symbol for America) while the Filipinos wave small American flags at the victors. This naiveté captures well the spirit of America in the 1950s . . . *American Guerrilla* is part of the myth-making process that created that spirit. (143-144)

Armour identifies the effects of WWII films and, by implication, the impact of the OWI on Hollywood’s production of patriotic and pro-war messaging during WWII. After the war, the OWI no longer mandated pro-war messaging, but third wave combat films nonetheless celebrated America’s victories. The new messaging, impelled by filmmakers rather than a government agency, still served a propagandistic purpose. The films, tailored for a nation engaged in the Cold War, used consumer products as symbols for American superiority (Basinger 146). Thus, in a film like *Battleground* (1949), America

is associated with “a typical American’s knowledge of popular culture,” Basinger explains, and Americans can identify themselves from the Germans infiltrating their ranks “only through questions about baseball, movies, and comics” (146). Fittingly, in *American Guerrilla*, Americans become associated with consumer goods, specifically cigarettes, chocolate, and Coca-Cola.

Palmer and his men see MacArthur’s promise, “I shall return,” emblazoned on cigarette packs [Figure 4.1]. These cigarettes, along with the chocolate bars the Americans pass out, symbolize, to Filipinos, what American liberation would bring to the Philippines. The association of Americans with cigarettes, chocolates, and other consumer goods had already become part of the combat genre. In *The Story of G.I. Joe* (1945), for example, when the Americans enter a town, a kid follows them, asking for cigarettes, and one soldier gives him a chocolate bar. And in *Battleground*, American soldiers use chocolate bars as currency to win the goodwill of Belgian villagers and to thank them for their help. In those films, American consumer goods are valuable assets. Lang, on the other hand, uses them to suggest the danger in the globalizing of American commercial products. This danger is thematized twice in *American Guerrilla*, when they endanger the Americans by revealing their presence to the Japanese. When Palmer and his men are wandering the jungle after their failed attempt to sail to Australia, a Japanese patrol soldier finds a smoldering cigarette, which causes the Japanese soldiers to shoot into the jungle, and, at the end of the film, the Japanese figure out the Americans are hiding in a church when they see the wrapper of a chocolate bar a Filipino boy is eating as he wanders out of the church [Figure 4.2].

In *American Guerrilla*'s denouement, Coca-Cola is added to the consumer goods the film uses to represent America. As Mitchell, Palmer, and Palmer's lover, Jeanne (Micheline Prele), watch MacArthur's troops parade by, a Filipino boy offers Palmer two bottles of Coca-Cola. When Palmer politely declines, Jeanne takes them and gives them to Palmer and Mitchell. "I wouldn't care if they were boiling," Mitchell comments, and Palmer confesses, "For three years now I'd have sold my soul for one of these." *American Guerrilla*, in moments like this, seems to respond to the combat film *Back to Bataan* (1945), where an American teacher (Beulah Bondi) who works in a Filipino village asks her students, "what would you say America gave the Philippines?" The students respond, "soda pop, hot dogs, movies, radio, baseball!" The principal (Vladimir Sokoloff) then explains, "America taught us that men are free, or they are nothing." If the children are thinking of the tangible things they associate with America, the adults suggest that those consumer goods and comforts are the end products of a system built around ideas of individual liberty, so that, in *Back to Bataan*, consumer goods become the ultimate symbol of freedom. In *American Guerrilla*, however, the symbolism ends at the materials, omitting discussion of freedoms and an ideology, with Coca-Cola signifying the freedom enjoyed by the Americans, not Filipinos.

*Back to Bataan*'s brief speech about freedom exemplifies the type of speech almost mandatory in WWII films: an explanation of why Americans were fighting and what would be gained by both Americans by others when the Allied powers won the war.<sup>97</sup> The only time *American Guerrilla* presents such a speech is when the conmen are

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<sup>97</sup> For more on the presence and importance of such speeches in WWII films, see Basinger 55, 57; Donald 118-121; Koppes, and Black, *Hollywood Goes to War* 100-103, "What to Show the World" 94-95; McLaughlin and Perry 11-14, 55-66, 216-217.

fundraising in a Filipino village. Their leader reminds the villagers of MacArthur's promise to drive the Japanese from the islands. "There aren't many of us," he says, "and we haven't got much to give: no guns, no bullets, no medicine, not even a place to sleep. Nothing but faith in what we're fighting for, the freedom of the Philippines!" The crowd cheers. "If you love your country as much as we do, if you want your children and their children to be free, now's your chance to prove it! Give us the money to buy the things we need, and we'll do the rest." The speech not only convinces the villagers to donate their money and goods, but also seduces Palmer's men. "These guys got something," Mitchell says, and another says they look like "the real stuff." However, when the speaker tells them he is not taking enlistments and immediately leaves the village, Palmer complains, "Somebody always tries to make a buck out of every war," denouncing the false patriotism of a patriotic speech that echoed those of earlier combat films.

In addition to recontextualizing the jingoistic speeches that typified WWII films, *American Guerrilla* rejects the narrative structure typical of the combat film. "Lang's only film featuring GIs in action," Lutz Koepnick notes, "treated military action as if war was more a matter of holding out than of violent contingencies and ongoing life-or-death decisions" (416). Many WWII combat films, such as *Bataan* (1943), *Guadalcanal Diary*, *Destination Tokyo*, *Story of G.I. Joe*, *They Were Expendable* (1945), and the contemporaneous *Battleground*, focused extensively on waiting and preparing for battle in order to help us understand the characters and care about how they fare. In *Sahara* (1943), for instance, the periods of waiting allowed the soldiers—strangers assembled from various units of the Allied nations—to get to know each other after they had come together to travel with the American tank unit upon which the film is focused. The

moments in which we learn about the characters allow us to feel sad when they are killed, and thus give gravitas to the brief comments at the end of the film, when their commander, Joe Gunn (Humphry Bogart), eulogizes their sacrifices. These films were built around a central mission which typically climaxed in a final battle. In *Sahara*, it is defending a dry well in the desert. Although *American Guerrilla* is comparably filled with waiting, we get so little information about the characters that we do not even know the names of several of them.

In addition to being bereft of identities, the men are also deprived of clear mission or goal. In films such as *Manila Calling* (1942) or *Bataan*, even though the story is told in many small episodes, a clear, overriding goal prevails. In *American Guerrilla*, however, each completed task only creates a new task. Palmer and his men only start helping the Filipino resistance so they can get a boat to go to Australia. When Col. Phillips asks Palmer to stay, he explains, “what General MacArthur wants is a spy service, a civil government, intelligence, a people’s army ready to act when we’re ready, and not before.” Even though Palmer accepts the mission, its open-endedness leaves him and his men filled with uncertainty. In *Bataan*, on the other hand, it is clear why the men are fighting and why it is important to keep fighting, even when the men know they will die. *Bataan* establishes this in the opening text: “When Japan struck, our desperate need was time - - - time to marshal our new armies. Ninety-six priceless days were bought for us - - with their lives - - by the defenders of Bataan.” *American Guerrilla* provides no such explanation. Although Palmer’s voice-over throughout the film updates us on his thoughts and plans, his ultimate purpose remains as unclear to him as to us.

If *American Guerrilla* does, like most combat films, technically feature a final battle, it is anticlimactic. The Americans retreat to a church, where they evacuate as many congregants as they can. Several worshipers, however, volunteer to help fight, and the Americans arm them. In the ensuing firefight, Lang shows close ups of Americans and Filipinos returning Japanese fire, then retreating to the yard behind the church after the Japanese enter it, to lie in wait for the Japanese. The episode, thus far, resembles a typical combat film battle sequence, with an early skirmish that will give way to a last stand. As the Americans wait, however, Palmer hears heavy artillery, and then Mitchell sees planes. The men realize these are American forces returning to the Philippines. So do the Japanese, who quickly retreat. There is no last stand. Mitchell asks Palmer if they should go reinforce MacArthur's assault. "Listen sailor," Palmer responds, "for three years we've waited for him. Let him come to us," reflecting an attitude opposite of soldiers in earlier combat films. In *Objective, Burma!* (1945), for example, a group of American soldiers, led by Captain Nelson (Errol Flynn), hold a hilltop from Japanese soldiers. After their success, they wonder what awaits, and are thrilled when they see planes which they know are part of the Allied invasion of Burma. One commander, as he prepares to land in Burma, comments, "If Nelson's still alive, he'll join us," and Nelson and his men do go to meet the arriving forces. *American Guerrilla*, in contrast, provides no such scenes acknowledging Palmer's efforts.

In this way, *American Guerrilla* more closely reflects the conventions of the Western genre at the same time that it investigates cinematic mythmaking through the genre subversion that characterized Lang's Westerns. While making *American Guerrilla*, Lang had the Western genre on his mind. Before Lang made *American Guerrilla*, Patrick

McGilligan explains, he “had a yen to do another Western” (351). Although Lang eventually made *Rancho Notorious* (1952), before he could do that, he made *American Guerrilla*, returning to Twentieth Century–Fox, the studio at which he made his two previous Westerns, *The Return of Frank James* (1940) and *Western Union* (1941). *American Guerrilla*, while ostensibly a combat film, has some narrative similarities to several of John Ford’s postwar Westerns, particularly *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and his Cavalry Trilogy, *Fort Apache* (1948), *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (1949), and *Rio Grande* (1950), which had followed, in part, the episodic narrative structure Ford had used in his WWI combat film *The Lost Patrol* (1934) and his late WWII combat film *They Were Expendable*. While *American Guerrilla*’s narrative may, at times, resemble that of other combat films, particularly those set in the Pacific Theater, at other times it is closer to a Western focused on frontier colonization amid the persistent threat of a malicious force—although in this case the antagonists are the occupying Japanese forces, not the indigenous Filipinos, who ally themselves with the Americans.

*American Guerrilla*’s episodic structure shows a debt to several epic Westerns. *The Covered Wagon* (1923), *The Iron Horse* (1924), *In Old Arizona* (1928), *The Big Trail* (1930), and *Cimarron* (1931), for example, are composed of vignettes built around a loose central narrative, such as the construction of the transcontinental railroad in *The Iron Horse*. Lang had already copied aspects of *Iron Horse* in *Western Union*, which is largely composed of scenes in the construction of a transcontinental telegraph wire. John Ford found a balance of vignettes and driving narrative in his prewar Western *Drums Along the Mohawk* (1939), which was, like *American Guerrilla*, written by Lamar Trotti. *Drums* starts with a series of scenes in the early marriage of its protagonists, then, in the



second half, focuses on warfare between the American colonists and the Native Americans hired by the British to fight in the American Revolution. *Drums* climaxes with the colonists defending themselves in a fort. The civilians and soldiers eventually make their last stand in the fort's church,<sup>98</sup> exactly as the soldiers and Filipinos do in *American Guerrilla*, and, in both films, the besieged characters are saved by the arrival of American soldiers.

*American Guerrilla*'s structure seems more firmly indebted to Ford's first postwar Western, *My Darling Clementine*. *Clementine* sets a goal for the protagonist, Wyatt Earp (Henry Fonda), early: the youngest Earp brother is murdered, and Wyatt and his brothers determine to find the killer and get revenge. The film then features many incidents in the lives of the characters, with Wyatt and his brothers seemingly losing sight of their goal as they become part of the fabric of Tombstone. In this film, Jim Kitses notes, "the progress towards vengeance is less a drive than a leisurely circuit of indirection, the audience primed for action only to have gratification postponed" (55).<sup>99</sup> In *American Guerrilla*, Palmer's goal to reach Australia is never achieved. Furthermore, after Palmer's men first kill Japanese soldiers and he says they have found purpose, instead of hunting Japanese soldiers, they continue wandering, still determined to get to Australia. Similarly, when they start helping the resistance, it is first with the promise of getting to Australia, and then with the more vaguely defined goal of helping prepare for MacArthur's return.

The critique of American jingoism in the combat film genre, with which Lang ended *American Guerrilla*, can thus be extended to the Western. Although Lang's prewar

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<sup>98</sup> Ford would make a church the site of a final shootout again in *Rio Grande*, released the same year as *American Guerrilla*.

<sup>99</sup> *Horizons West*, New Edition.

Westerns, *Frank James* and *Western Union*, had been critical of the development and dissemination of American mythology within Western tropes, those films did not have the darkness of Lang's final Western, *Rancho Notorious*, which, as we have seen, denounces the Western mythologizing project altogether. Although John Ford's Westerns tended to become darker after the war,<sup>100</sup> with his *Fort Apache* calling into question the mythologizing of Western figures, Ford ends up favoring the mythologized version, even after revealing the process of fabrication, deciding, like the editor in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend." Lang's endorsement of this attitude, however, was extremely qualified in his films of the 1950s, the dark undercurrent of which revealed how hollow Lang seemed to think such Hollywood endings were. Thus, when Lang returned to the Western genre for *Rancho*, the conclusion which showed the heroes riding away was immediately undercut by the information that both Vern and Frenchy died in a gunfight. This darkness pervaded his 50s films, such that the return to normality at the end of *The Big Heat* (1953) reminds us of the impossibility of such a thing, and in Lang's final film, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956), normality cannot even be nominally restored.

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<sup>100</sup> See, for example, Kitses, *Horizons West*, New Edition 39-41; Sue Matheson, *The Westerns and War Films of John Ford*; Joseph McBride, *Searching for John Ford* 416-519; Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 334-343.

## 4.2 AMERICAN GUERRILLA SCREENSHOTS

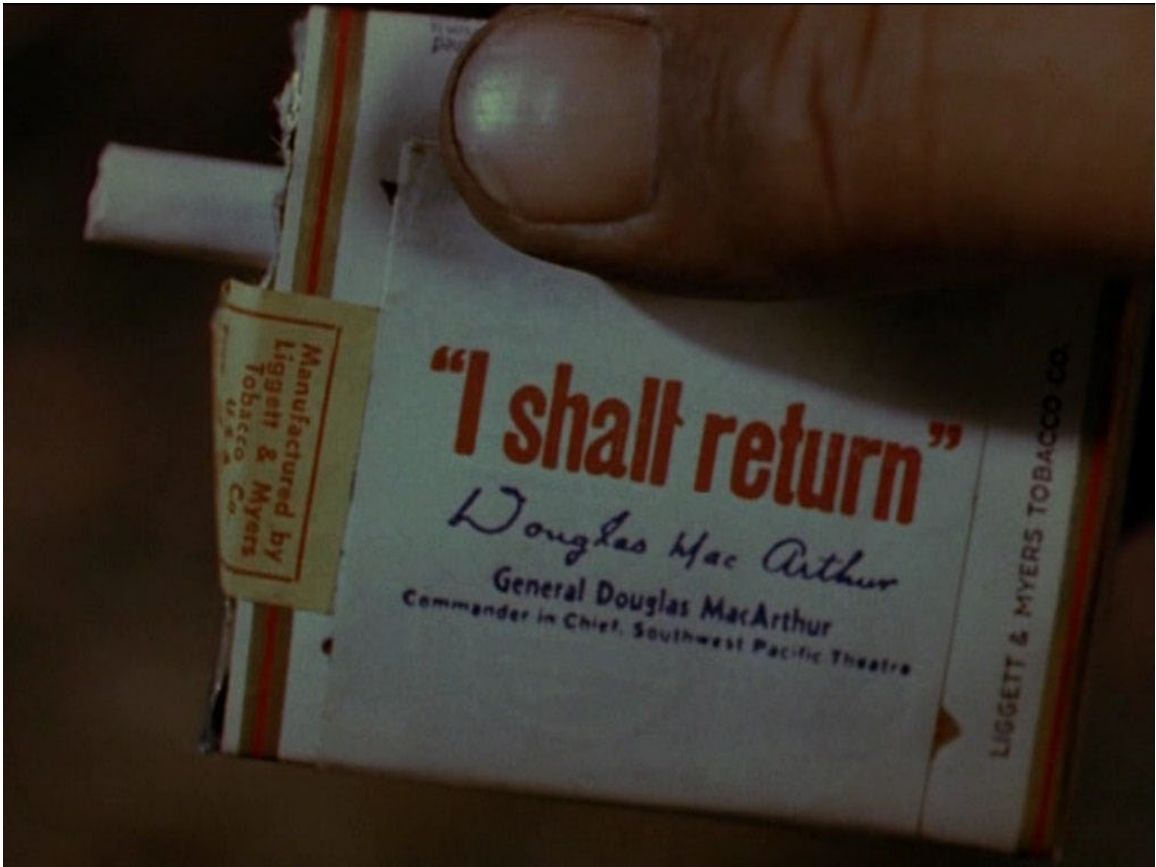


Figure 4.1 *American Guerrilla in the Philippines*: A cigarette pack containing General MacArthur's promise.



Figure 4.2 *American Guerrilla in the Philippines*: An American chocolate bar. When Palmer and his men enter a village, children gather around them, and Palmer gives away the chocolate bars.

## CHAPTER 5. CRIME FILMS 2: *POSTWAR CRIME AND MEDIA MOVIES*

### 5.1 POSTWAR CYNICISM

Lang was productive during the 50s,<sup>101</sup> but he was frustrated with the Hollywood studio system. As the decade started, he was smarting over the collapse of his production company, Diana Productions, blaming producer Walter Wanger for the dissolution.<sup>102</sup> Having worked for the Poverty Row studio Republic for *House by the River* (1950), Lang was happy to return to the majors, but his fights with producer Darryl F. Zanuck over *American Guerrilla in the Philippines* (1950) left a bad taste in his mouth.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, he was angry that producer Seymour Nebenzahl remade *M* (1931)<sup>104</sup> without his permission.<sup>105</sup> His fights with producers continued, including intense battles with Howard Hughes and Howard Welsch during the production of *Rancho Notorious* (1952).<sup>106</sup> He then had a period of inactivity which he described as time on the blacklist.<sup>107</sup> Once he got work, he found brief stability making two films, *The Big Heat* (1953) and *Human Desire* (1954), for Columbia, but he knew that was thanks to the benevolence of studio boss Harry Cohn, who had also arranged for Lang to make *The Blue Gardenia* (1953).<sup>108</sup> The relationship, as was characteristic with Lang, did not last.

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<sup>101</sup> *House by the River* (1950), which he made in 1949, was released early in 1950. Between 1950 and 1956, Lang directed nine films in America. He then went to India to direct two German films, *The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The Indian Tomb* (both 1959), then to Germany to direct his final film, *1000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* (1960).

<sup>102</sup> See Matthew Bernstein, "Fritz Lang, Incorporated" 46-49; Patrick McGilligan, *Fritz Lang* 362-364.

<sup>103</sup> See McGilligan 371-374, 376-377. Consequently, Lang would often disavow the film.

<sup>104</sup> Nebenzahl produced Lang's original *M* (1931) and the American remake, *M* (1951), directed by Joseph Losey.

<sup>105</sup> See Peter Bogdanovich, *Fritz Lang in America* 75-76; McGilligan 375.

<sup>106</sup> See Bogdanovich 78-79; Lotte H. Eisner, *Fritz Lang* 301-302; McGilligan 384-388.

<sup>107</sup> See Bogdanovich 84; Eisner 321-322; McGilligan 395-397.

<sup>108</sup> See McGilligan 397-403.

Lang kept trying to get work, which led to him partnering with producer Bert E. Friedlob, working with whom permanently soured Lang to directing American movies.<sup>109</sup>

Thus, when Lang made his best-known film of the 50s, *The Big Heat*, he was already fed-up with Hollywood, and had little patience for the changing production trends of the decade. Although *Big Heat* is not explicitly about media, in the way several of his other 50s crime films are, the film is nonetheless concerned with trends in the contemporary crime film.

## 5.2 *THE BIG HEAT* (1953): EXCESSIVE VIOLENCE IN THE POSTWAR HOLLYWOOD CRIME FILM

*The Big Heat* is popular with critics in part because it exemplifies film noir: its protagonist's life crumbles around him in a world of sadistic villains and *femmes fatale*, in settings that, in the Expressionist mode, reflect his deteriorating mental state; and it has a fatalistic narrative drive that makes the fate of the characters seem inevitable from the outset.<sup>110</sup> *Big Heat* is "the ultimate angry cop noir, its tale of vengeance rendered with almost tantalizing perfection," Eddie Muller claims, with a "cold brilliance that electrified genre conventions, and the exhilarating union of brooding Germanic fatalism and Wild West ass-kicking" (43). Critics frequently discuss the violence to which Muller

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<sup>109</sup> See McGilligan 415-420.

<sup>110</sup> The film was not, however, classified as noir in Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton's seminal study of the genre. Instead, Borde and Chaumeton put the film in the categories "Gangsters" and "Police documentaries" (161, 163). This could be because, as Tom Flinn observes, "*The Big Heat* has almost nothing in common visually with the postwar film noir" (25). "In a genre noted for its low key photography," Flinn continues, "*The Big Heat* contains remarkably few shadow scenes," with an "anomalous visual style" that is "characterized by comparatively high key lighting, liberal use of closeups, and numerous supple camera movements" (25). See also Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* 171; Grant Tracey, "Narrative Strategies to Contain and Punish Women in *The Big Heat* (1953) and *The Big Combo* (1955)" 122.

refers because it is integral to the film's storytelling. The violence, Tom Gunning claims, "primarily takes on the melodramatic role of exerting pressure on the surface of reality [in] order to make it yield up its truth" (428).<sup>111</sup>

What is left unexamined, however, is what the depictions of violence, and the film's focus on the reactions to and ramifications of violence, say about the postwar crime film and its depictions of increasingly sadistic acts of violence. *Big Heat* was made while the Production Code's control over the content of Hollywood films was starting to slip. Although the Production Code had limited the types and extents of violence that could be shown on screen, WWII saw filmmakers putting more, and more stylized, violence on screen, and they saw no reason to stop after the war, especially because the use of violence allowed filmmakers to differentiate their products from what Americans could see on television.

The thrill of watching violence was consequently becoming a prominent part of crime films. Two clear inspirations for the violence in *Big Heat* are Henry Hathaway's *Kiss of Death* (1947) and Anthony Mann's *Raw Deal* (1948). Both of these films feature heavies who delight in violent behaviors, particularly those directed against women. In *Kiss of Death*, hitman Tommy Udo (Richard Widmark), in the film's most famous scene, pushes a woman, in a wheelchair, down a flight of stairs. In *Raw Deal*, gang boss Rick Coyle (Raymond Burr), upset that a female partygoer spills a drink on him, throws a flaming flambé dish on her, and when he wants to get information from another woman,

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<sup>111</sup> For varied readings of the film's violence, including the repeated violence against women, see Robert A. Armour, *Fritz Lang* 161-162; Sheri Chinen Biesen, *Blackout* 217; Eisner 337; Peter William Evans, "The Big Heat" 43-48; Flinn 24-25; Gunning 428-432; Stephen Jenkins, "Lang" 123; Paul M. Jensen, *The Cinema of Fritz Lang* 185; Paul Joannides, "Aspects of Fritz Lang" 5-6; Colin McArthur, *The Big Heat* 50, 68-76, *Underworld U.S.A.* 74-80; Joe McElhaney, *The Death of Classical Cinema* 65; McGilligan 405; Walter Metz, "Keep the Coffee Hot, Hugo"; Gene D. Phillips, *Exiles in Hollywood* 54-55; Don Willis, "Fritz Lang" 10; Robin Wood, "Creativity and Evaluation" 17-19, "Rancho Notorious" 262-269, 273.

he plays with his cigarette lighter as he threatens her.<sup>112</sup> If, by 1953, this postwar exploitation of violence was becoming commonplace, Lang decried such excessive violence by focusing on its repercussions.

*Big Heat* focuses on police detective Dave Bannion (Glenn Ford) as he investigates the suicide of fellow police officer Tom Duncan. Tom's former mistress, Lucy Chapman (Dorothy Green), tells Bannion that Tom wanted to make public the corruption within the police department, of which he was a part, but Bannion dismisses her. When, after meeting with Bannion, she is tortured and killed, Bannion takes her allegations seriously and discovers the corruption extends to the police commissioner, Higgins (Howard Wendell), and a gangster, Vince Stone (Lee Marvin), who works under crime boss Mike Lagana (Alexander Scourby). Lagana tries getting Bannion to drop the investigation, but when Bannion confronts Lagana, he orders Vince to kill the cop. The bomb planted in Bannion's car, however, kills his wife, Katie (Jocelyn Brando), instead. Bannion pursues revenge, even after he is suspended from the police force for accusing Higgins of taking orders from Lagana. Bannion ingratiates himself to Vince's abused girlfriend, Debby (Gloria Grahame), and after Vince scalds her face with boiling coffee for lying about meeting with Bannion, she tells Bannion everything. After Debby kills Tom Duncan's widow, Bertha (Jeanette Nolan), which will precipitate the release of Tom's confession, a violent showdown in Vince's apartment leaves Debby dead and Vince burnt, wounded, and arrested. Bannion, vindicated, is reinstated on the force.

*Big Heat* can be read as reflecting the way movie studios, in their efforts to compete with television and make greater profits, made increasingly violent crime films.

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<sup>112</sup> Flinn suggests that Rick's "pyro tendencies" prefigure "Vince Stone's obsession with torture by fire" (24).



“If Lang is the Hollywood cinema’s most rigorous moralist,” Robin Wood suggests, “the moral system embodied in his work is far removed from that of capitalist orthodoxy. What is ultimately denounced in the films as immoral is patriarchal capitalism itself” (“*Rancho Notorious*” 273). Much like *Big Heat*’s Bannion, Lang saw himself as a man railing against the system in which he worked. Similar to how critics frequently identify the character of Mabuse in Lang’s earlier Mabuse films—*Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* (1922) and *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933)—and, to a lesser degree, Haghi in *Spies* (1928), as stand-ins for the director,<sup>113</sup> we can see Bannion as a stand-in for Lang. Although Bannion does not resemble Lang as a director of the events on screen, he lashes out at and fights to fix the system in which he works, much as Lang does in his meta-cinematic critiques. Bannion is frustrated by the decadence, and, later, the corruption that he associates with his superiors and with Lagana, and he defies orders once he believes Lagana and Stone control the commissioner. “You’re a corn-stepper by instinct,” Bannion’s supervisor, Lt. Wilks (Willis Bouchey), tells him. When Bannion is finally vindicated and reinstated, he is clearly respected by his colleagues, who view him like a conquering hero, much like Lang likely wanted to be welcomed by studios.

Even though *Big Heat* is structured around acts of violence, Lang, in keeping with the film’s condemnations of violence, frequently claimed “I hate violence” (von Bagh 151). “I am against violence,” he told Peter von Bagh, “I always try to depict scenes which have nothing to do with that kind of violence that you see in Westerns and movies of that genre” (151). He told Peter Bogdanovich that he preferred to “show the *result* of

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<sup>113</sup> See Martin Blumenthal-Barby, “Faces of Evil” 326-327; Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After* 153-156; Lucy Fischer, “Dr. Mabuse and Mr. Lang” 24-26; Francis Guerin, “While Not Looking” 43, 48-50; Gunning 109-113, 121-123, 134-140; David Phelps, “The Medium’s Re-Vision” 120-135.

violence,” in order to make “the audience a collaborator, to make them feel” (*Fritz Lang in America* 87-88).<sup>114</sup> Tom Flinn suggests that “Lang wanted the viewers to experience *The Big Heat* vicariously and enjoy the cathartic effects of its violence” (24). But, given the attitudes Lang later expressed about violence, it seems more likely that Lang was encouraging viewers not to enjoy the violence, but to question the vicarious thrills they may experience from watching it.

*Big Heat*'s opening scene establishes the film's template for dealing with violence: keep it off screen but show its brutal ramifications. The first shot after the credits is a close-up of a revolver on a desk. A hand enters from the left of the screen and picks up the gun. The camera pulls back slightly, without revealing the person lifting the gun. A gunshot rings out, and a body collapses onto the desk. The film thus opens with the offscreen suicide of Tom Duncan. “There was much discussion of this scene in the pre-production phase,” Colin McArthur explains, “with producer Robert Arthur indicating that the Production Code Administration . . . had expressed disquiet about the scene as written” (*The Big Heat* 24, 50). The PCA likely had misgivings about the scene because international censors had expressed concern about the graphic violence that had begun appearing in Hollywood movies (McArthur, *Big Heat* 24-25). Arthur sent Lang a memo proposing shooting the scene in a manner “very much as it appears in the finished film” (McArthur, *Big Heat* 50).<sup>115</sup>

This opening shot thus subtly suggests a critique of earlier crime films. The close-up of a handgun on a desk with a hand reaching into frame almost exactly copies the first

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<sup>114</sup> See also Michel Ciment, Goffredo Fofi, Louis Seguin, and Roger Tailleur, “Fritz Lang in Venice” 96-97; William Friedkin's documentary/interview *Conversation with Fritz Lang* (1975); Alexander Walker, “Interview with Fritz Lang” 79-80.

<sup>115</sup> See also Eisner 329-330.

shot of *Kiss of Death* [Figures 5.1 – 5.2]. The difference between these two openings, however, speaks volumes about the central concerns of each film. Because *Big Heat* is about the repercussions of violence, there is no delay in the gun's being fired.<sup>116</sup> In *Kiss of Death*, however, the gun is not fired; it seems to reappear on the protagonist's table as he waits for a hired killer, but it is not used, even in the final confrontation with the killer, because *Kiss of Death* is about anticipating violence and the pleasure Udo gets from it. In *Big Heat*, on the other hand, violence comes with little or no warning. Because the violence, moreover, is always integral to the story, the film stands in explicit contrast to the increasing gratuitous violence designed as spectacles rather than as narrative elements.

Bannion decides to look into Tom's connections with organized crime after he sees Lucy's body covered in cigarette burns. If Vince's violence drew Bannion into the case, Vince thinks violence can also get Bannion to drop it, but Bannion meets the violence with violence. When his wife, Katie, is clearly shaken by a threatening phone call, Bannion visits Lagana and is denounced for bringing "dirt" into his house, to which Bannion responds by asking why it is okay for Lagana's men to threaten Katie and thus bring dirt into his home. When Lagana dismisses this, Bannion hits the thug Lagana tasks with removing him from the house. Thus, the film's first overt act of violence is, notably, perpetrated by a police officer, just as the trigger in the opening shot is pulled by a policeman, rather than any of the film's numerous criminals.

The car explosion that kills Katie also occurs off-screen. Katie goes to the car and, while Bannion tells their daughter, Joyce (Linda Bennett, uncredited), the story of "The

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<sup>116</sup> It is almost as if Lang is parodying the idea of Chekov's gun.

Three Little Kittens,” an explosion lights up the window and shakes the house while the roar dominates the soundtrack. Bannion rushes outside and forces the destroyed car’s door open so he can extract Katie’s body. We can see the grief on Bannion’s face and follow the bombing’s repercussions through the film, as they systematically upend Bannion’s life. After Katie’s death, Bannion sends Joyce to stay with his in-laws. The shot of him wandering his now empty house has an Expressionist feel—just as Bannion feels hollowed out, he is leaving the hollowed-out house.<sup>117</sup> In the hotel room into which he moves, he refrains from adding any personal touches, such that when Debby visits him, she calls the décor “early nothing.”

When Vince punishes Debby for lying about seeing Bannion, again, most of the violence is implied. We see Vince twist Debby’s arm, then yell at her; we hear the coffee boiling, then see the pot on the hot plate. Vince reaches in from the left of the screen, echoing the hand grabbing the gun at the beginning of the film, and we hear the coffee sloshing as Vince throws it, followed by Debby’s screams. As she rushes from the room, screaming “My face! My face!,” she keeps her face covered, so we cannot see exactly what has happened to her.

We see the aftermath of Vince’s action later in the film. Debby, after visiting a doctor, visits Bannion to tell him about what happened, but Bannion barely pays attention, until she mentions Larry Gordon, because he knows a man named Larry was involved with Katie’s murder, and therefore that Debby can implicate Vince in Katie’s murder. As a result, Bannion gets rough with Debby to force her to reveal everything she knows about Larry. Bannion’s aggressiveness towards Debby is part of a series of violent

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<sup>117</sup> See also Flinn 24; Gunning 421-422; Tracey 122.

acts, begun when Tom killed himself, and in which Bannion became an active participant when he punched Lagana's thug.

In the film's climax, we finally see Debby's scarred face. She visits Vince's apartment to get revenge by throwing boiling coffee on his face, and Vince screams in pain, just as Debby had. She then taunts him—"It'll burn for a long time, Vince. It doesn't look bad now, but in the morning your face will look like mine"—and removes her bandages to reveal that the left side of her face is a mangled mass of melted flesh [Figures 5.3 – 5.4]. "Look at it. It isn't pretty, is it?" she asks Vince. "You'll walk through side streets and alleys so that people won't stare at you."

Vince's violence against Debby was foreshadowed. When Bannion is at the criminal hangout, The Retreat, he sees Vince burn a woman with his cigar. One of Vince's thugs stops another patron from confronting Vince, but Bannion shoves the thug, then threatens Vince. When Bannion makes Vince and the thug leave the bar, he wins Debby's admiration at the same time that he sets in motion the events that will lead to her burning and, eventually, her death. This scene of violence revolving around a woman is given additional meaning by the soundtrack. As Bannion leaves The Retreat, the band starts playing an instrumental version of "Put the Blame on Mame," a song recognizable to many viewers as the song Gilda (Rita Hayworth) sings in *Gilda* (1946), a film organized around the persistent threat of violence, which co-starred Glenn Ford.<sup>118</sup> The song, furthermore, puns on the word "Mame," since "maim" could describe what

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<sup>118</sup> *Gilda* begins with Glenn Ford's character, Johnny Farrell, throwing dice and getting desperate, somewhat like Vince in this *Big Heat* scene. After Johnny leaves the craps game, he is mugged, but is saved when another man, Ballin Mundson (George Macready), interferes. The relationship between Johnny and Ballin thus starts with violence. Ballin hires Johnny to work for him, but as Johnny falls for Ballin's wife, Gilda, the threat of violence is just below the surface. After Johnny walks in on Gilda singing the song, tensions begin to grow between Ballin and Johnny as Ballin suspects Johnny has feelings for Gilda.

happens to several of *Big Heat*'s characters. At the end of *Big Heat*, as Debby is dying, she tells Bannion, "Vince should never have ruined my looks. It was a rotten thing to do."

We can thus put the blame for Vince's fate on his maim(ing) people.

Bannion uses violence again when he visits Larry (Adam Williams), punching him as soon as he opens the door. When Larry refuses to answer Bannion's questions, Bannion begins strangling him until Larry complies, after which Bannion spreads the word that Larry talked, which leads to Larry's being killed. In this way, Bannion's on-screen violence precipitates fatal off-screen violence. Because Bannion got answers when he strangled Larry, he tries it again when he visits Bertha. Frustrated by her obvious lies, he grabs her collar, pushes her against a wall, and reaches for her neck, threatening further violence if she does not cooperate, from which she is saved only because two police officers arrive.

Bannion's complaints to Debby about Bertha's unwillingness to talk result in an even more egregious act of violence. Bannion gives Debby a gun, saying it is for protection, but "Bannion's remarks here are tantamount to asking Debby to kill Bertha Duncan," McArthur claims (*Big Heat* 73-74).<sup>119</sup> When Debby goes to Bertha's house to talk with her, she does what Bannion would not.

Two moments of dark comedy in the ending make clear that we are supposed to read many of the film's moments of violence as critiques of violence in crime films. After Bertha's death, Tom's letter to the District Attorney is released, and the information in it enables the arrest and indictment of Lagana and his associates, as we learn in a newspaper headline: "Lagana, Higgins Indicted!/ Duncan Confession Exposes Crime

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<sup>119</sup> See also Gunning 430-432; Tracey 124.

Syndicate/ Governor to Appoint Special Prosecutor.” As Bannion settles in at his desk on his first day back on the force, he tells an office boy to get him a cup of coffee, then gets a call about a new homicide and has to leave. As he does, he says, “Keep the coffee hot, Hugo,” reminding us of the two scenes in which characters were scalded. He then walks past a poster that reads, “Give Blood Now” [Figure 5.5], a reminder that the film, although violent, has been largely bloodless, but perhaps “now” that too will change.<sup>120</sup>

### 5.3 MEDIA MOVIES

In the 1950s, Lang made three films, *The Blue Gardenia* (1953), *While the City Sleeps* (1956), and *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (1956), which belong to the crime subgenre of the newspaper/journalism film.<sup>121</sup> Journalism became a popular topic for films shortly after the introduction of sound, largely because, as Thomas Doherty explains, “the heightened profile of media messengers in the pioneer decade of mass communications made [journalists] figures of prestige and charisma fit for screen celebration” (*Pre-Code Hollywood* 187). To adapt to the implementation of synchronized sound in the late 20s and early 30s, Hollywood studios hired writers familiar with dialogue, many of whom were New York and Chicago journalists. These journalists-turned-screenwriters often “invested their screenplays with a wisecracking conviviality that aggrandized the profession they abandoned” (Doherty 187). Some of the resulting

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<sup>120</sup> Critics have commented on the poster, but typically only as an aside in their discussion of the ending showing a cycle beginning again, with Bannion back on the force but murder and its investigation continuing. See Gunning 432-433; McArthur, *Big Heat* 77-78; Tracey 125.

<sup>121</sup> For more on this type of film, see, for example, Alex Barris, *Stop the Presses!*; Matthew C. Ehrlich, *Journalism in the Movies*.

films, such as *The Front Page* (1931), *It Happened One Night* (1934), and *His Girl Friday* (1940),<sup>122</sup> poked fun at the sensationalistic tendencies of the profession.

Other newspaper films were more serious in their criticism of the state of journalism. Thirties newspaper films often presented reporters as lacking scruples or empathy, hungry for sensationalist copy. In Mervyn LeRoy's *Five Star Final* (1931), for example, reporters go to any length to get a sensational story, but when their coverage causes two people to kill themselves, the editor, Randall (Edward G. Robinson), quits out of frustration and guilt about what the system has become and what it has made him. But Randall is an exception. Reporters in this type of film are desperate to feed the public's "voracious appetite for stories about corruption and murder," Peter Roffman and Jim Purdy observe (40). "To attack the public for its apathy may be accurate, but the press films never indicate the deeper reasons behind this apathy. It's simply 'the spirit of the times and no connection is made between the failure of society's institutions and the cynicism of its citizens'" (Roffman and Purdy 44). Furthermore, "social unrest was to be seen as the result of an inflammatory and manipulative press acting on a public eager for violence. In this way the films continued to narrow and thereby evade social issues" (44-45). "Even when movies portray their journalist as a scoundrel and the press as corrupt," Matthew C. Ehrlich points out, "they still tend not to challenge seriously the idea that the press can and should play a central role in society" (9). "By presenting morality tales in which wayward reporters are duly punished for their sins, the films also highlight rules of proper professional and personal conduct" (Ehrlich 9).

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<sup>122</sup> *His Girl Friday* is a remake of *The Front Page*.



Lang's films, however, are exceptions to these trends. They focus on the media's obligations to the public and the ways journalists violate the public trust, often by stoking public frenzy as much as, if not more than, feeding into an existing appetite. Lang also emphasizes the toll sensationalized news coverage takes on the reporters who are engaged in creating and perpetuating such attention-grabbing stories.

Throughout his career, Lang included moments in his films in which he critiqued news and entertainment media. In *Spies* (1928), for example, the protagonists, while racing to catch their enemies, seek help from a newsreel photographer, who just gestures to his camera, suggesting that he thinks capturing events on film is the most important thing he can do.<sup>123</sup> In the opening sequence of *M* (1931), Lang juxtaposes three scenes to establish the mood and the city's concerns about a criminal: 1) children talk about the crimes they have heard about, 2) news headlines posted throughout the city discuss missing and murdered children, and 3) a mother receives the latest installment of serial fiction just before she realizes that her daughter is missing. In this sequence, Anton Kaes argues, "Lang intimates how imagined murder displaces and, literally, shields us from real murder, which ironically itself will become grist for the media only minutes after the deed," when newsboys sell newspaper Extras about the child's disappearance (*M* 28). Thus, "Murder and its mass-marketed representations feed on each other in constant serial repetition" (28).<sup>124</sup> The film suggests, therefore, that reading serial crime fiction is much like reading crime reporting. Or, as Kaes claims, "Serial killing and serial fiction

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<sup>123</sup> See Paul Dobryden, "*Spies*" 89-90; Gunning 128-130; Adrian Martin, "Machinations of an Incoherent, Malevolent Universe" section on "Communication."

<sup>124</sup> See also Stephen Brockmann, *A Critical History of German Film* 144-145; Samm Deighan, *M* 42; Eisner 121-123; Kata Gellen, "Indexing Identity" 428-430; Gunning 168-172; Kaes, *M* 10-14, 26-29; Douglas Pye and Iris Lupp, "*M*" 7; Olga Solovieva, "The Portrayal of a Murderer in Fritz Lang's *M*" 54-55.

echo each other with cruel irony: the crime that is committed already exists in fiction” (28). Real crimes subsequently become a sort of mythology, as evidenced by the song the kids sing, in the opening scene, about a man coming to kill them.<sup>125</sup> Later in the film, we see people rushing to buy Extras about the latest crime, after which Lang cuts to the killer, Beckert (Peter Lorre), writing a letter, which we later see in the newspaper. We learn that Beckert has followed the newspaper coverage of his crimes, that he has written to the police, and that he is now writing to the press because he wants the public to fear him.<sup>126</sup> Lang also features news coverage in many of his American films. Aspiring newspaper reporter Eleanor Stone (Gene Tierney), in *The Return of Frank James* (1940), for example, believes and publishes a false story about Frank James’s death. And Professor Wanley (Edward G. Robinson), in *The Woman in the Window* (1944), listens to the radio and reads the newspapers to know what evidence to destroy to avoid suspicion and arrest for murder.

When featuring news coverage in his films, Lang often conflates news and entertainment media, as in *M*, in order to show the symbiotic relationship between the two. This conflation of news and entertainment was especially prominent in his 50s films. Lang started the 50s with *House by the River* (1950),<sup>127</sup> which focuses on a failed writer, Stephen Byrne (Louis Hayward), who accidentally kills his maid, Emily, and gets rid of her body by sinking it in the nearby river. When he sees the public is interested in

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<sup>125</sup> The lyrics of the song, as translated in the subtitles on the Criterion release, are: “Just you wait, it won’t be long/ The man in black will soon be here/ With his cleaver’s blade so true/ He’ll make mincemeat out of you!” The film clearly equates this “man in black” with the murderer soon after: a poster asking “Who is the Murderer” fills the screen, and a man, Beckert (Peter Lorre), enters from the right, but all that is seen of him, at first, is his shadow cast onto the poster. Subsequently, throughout the film, Beckert, the killer, is always shown, when in public, wearing black.

<sup>126</sup> See Gunning 176-178; Kaes, *M* 32-33.

<sup>127</sup> Lang made *House by the River* in mid-1949, and the film was released in early 1950 (McGilligan 368). Although production occurred in 1949, the film shows the concerns Lang would explore in the 50s exposés.

Emily's disappearance and, subsequently, the mystery about her murder after her body is discovered, he gives his picture to the newspapers to run with stories of the case. Realizing that the public is now interested in him because his maid was murdered, Stephen capitalizes on the new attention by holding book signings of his past books, which are now selling after flopping when first released. The book signings also function as advanced publicity for the book he has begun writing, a novel about the case, which also serves as a veiled confession. Taken together, Lang's three postwar news media exposés, *The Blue Gardenia*, *While the City Sleeps*, and *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, argue that the news and entertainment media are deeply intertwined. News media use the tools of entertainment to sensationalize their coverage of crimes to gain attention and greater sales. Similarly, entertainment media, recognizing the public's interest in contemporary crime subjects, take subjects from the news, sensationalize them, and fictionalize the details for opportunistic, "ripped from the headlines" stories.<sup>128</sup>

Lang uses the crime genre's framework for his media exposés in order to question one of the key tenets of the genre, that in the end justice is served and the status quo is justified. His films reveal that this form, particularly as it was formulated to fit into the guidelines of the Production Code, is inherently flawed and, in some cases, self-defeating. "Crime films (except at their most naïve) often close on a note of temporary truce" Carlos Clarens claims, "which subsequent crime films invariably compromise.

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<sup>128</sup> Timeliness was sometimes used to sell that entertainment. The trailer for *Bullets or Ballots* (1936), for example, states that the producers "Raid the headlines for another dramatic scoop." In *Our Daily Bread* (1934), the timeliness is announced in the credits, which proclaim "Inspired by Headlines of Today." To have it both ways, *I Cover the Waterfront* (1933), like *The Front Page* before it, designs its main titles as if they are printed in a newspaper, and, when crediting the source book, call it "The unique and personal experiences of a newspaper reporter covering a Pacific waterfront." And M-G-M's "Crime Does Not Pay" series of short films (50 films from 1935-1947) claimed to be based on real incidents discovered by the M-G-M crime reporter, who introduces the films (although he is not given a name and is played by many actors over the course of the series).

Even those thirties paeans to the G-man admitted that fighting crime was an unending struggle . . . There is no feeling of resolution, only of a society in flux, and of an industry within it” (13). In Lang’s media exposés, there is not even a temporary truce. Not only is the cycle of crime unending, but it is perpetuated, and often intensified, by the news media exploiting and sensationalizing crime for their own benefit. The news media, therefore, betray the public and make crime seem like a normal occurrence about which the public should be constantly on edge, and the media then profit from selling information, and a temporary sense of security, from those same dangers, the fear of which they are also selling.<sup>129</sup>

Lang began his criticism of American news and entertainment media in his first American films, *Fury* (1936) and *You Only Live Once* (1937). Although journalists are not major characters in these films, the cynicism Lang articulates in them informs his 50s media critiques. *Fury* and *Live Once* show the power of the media over the public. They critique the news media’s drive to sensationalize the news, and they track the ramifications of media sensationalism on the subjects of such reporting. After over a decade living and working in America, Lang, by the 50s, was familiar enough with the American landscape to target the journalists who had previously been on the margins, albeit integral, to many of his earlier films. *The Blue Gardenia* reveals how news media can be consumed as entertainment and how the use of entertainment techniques in news reporting creates false perceptions of guilt. *While the City Sleeps* presents the

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<sup>129</sup> Although Lang was critical of this sensationalism by the 1950s, in the past he had been part of it. *M* ends with a plea to the audience by the mother of one of the victims: “This will not bring our children back. One has to keep closer watch over the children!” Lang meant to stir up public paranoia. He told Gero Gandert, “the tenor of the film is *not* condemnation of the murderer but rather a warning to mothers: You have to take better care of the kids.”

sensationalism of the news media as dehumanizing both the criminals covered by sensationalized stories and the reporters who create those stories. *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* makes the case that sensational news coverage can be used to not to expose criminals, but to create alibis for them. Lang thus examines the ways that the media not only report on, but also sometimes produce, criminals. In doing so, his films suggest how, in sensationalizing the news, reporters can become complicit with—and virtual accomplices to—the crime upon which they report.

#### 5.4 *THE BLUE GARDENIA* (1953) AND MEDIA GUILT

Critics have highlighted the ways Lang, in *Blue Gardenia*, plays with gender conventions in crime films. Both E. Ann Kaplan and Janet Bergstrom, for example, note how the film is, in Kaplan's words, "a challenge to critics," because Lang, "turns noir conventions upside down . . . by presenting two separate discourses – that is, two modes of articulating a vision of reality," switching from the male point-of-view prevalent in noir to focus the story primarily through the perspective of a female protagonist (Kaplan, "The Place of Women" 81).<sup>130</sup> *Gardenia* is also the film in which Lang first clearly articulates his concern with the role of journalists and news media in America's public discourse. In *Gardenia*, "the figure of the newspaper reporter," Gunning observes, comes "to the centre for the first time in a Lang film" (395).<sup>131</sup> "In many of Lang's films a

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<sup>130</sup> See also Janet Bergstrom, "The Mystery of *The Blue Gardenia*" 107-111, 113-114; Gunning 397-400; Reynold Humphries, *Fritz Lang* 67-68; Jenkins 40, 49; Mark Osteen, *Nightmare Alley* 169; Douglas Pye, "Seeing by Glimpses" 78, 82.

<sup>131</sup> Lang almost made his first film focused on journalists a decade before *Blue Gardenia*, when he was assigned to direct *Confirm or Deny* (1941), a film about an American reporter working in London during the Blitz. Lang started working on the film, but, as he told Bogdanovich, "I directed practically nothing. I never liked the picture, but I couldn't do anything because I was under term contract to 20th Century-Fox"

newspaper headline or a journalist plays the role of a sort of chorus. But in a number of Lang's major 50s films the theme of bringing a story before the people becomes central. . . . The journalists' motives are always at least ambiguous, and sometimes venal" (395). The venality Gunning identifies has also been identified by other critics, such as Reynold Humphries, who calls *Blue Gardenia* "that most bitter of films," and Bogdanovich, who calls it "a particularly venomous picture of American life" (Humphries 67; Bogdanovich, *Fritz Lang in America* 84).<sup>132</sup>

Critics have also noted the film's meta-discourse on cinema. The film examines, in Douglas Pye's words, "the potential of film narration to mislead by offering a deliberately partial but apparently conclusive view of events" ("Seeing by Glimpses" 75).<sup>133</sup> Pye underscores how the film targets the media and the ways the news and information media mediate, or create, the public's perception of reality. *Gardenia*, Pye points out, "increasingly enforces on us a sense that the ways of seeing the world which these systems create are grotesquely limiting" ("Seeing by Glimpses" 82). Furthermore, the "formal conventions of narrative film and the expectations they evoke are shown to belong to the same ideological complex that contains the photographs, drawings, paintings and newspapers that surround the characters" (82).<sup>134</sup>

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(*Fritz Lang in America* 132). Thanks to "a gall bladder attack," Lang needed to take eight days away from the film, so the studio replaced him with Archie Mayo (132). McGilligan notes that production records show that Lang "filmed scenes for at least two weeks of the ten-week schedule" while he dealt with "periodic gallstone attacks" (283).

<sup>132</sup> See also Philippe Demonsablon, "The Imperious Dialectic of Fritz Lang" 20.

<sup>133</sup> See also Jenkins 109; Jensen 181. Critics, including Gunning, Will Scheibel, and George M. Wilson, have identified early versions of this narrative ambiguity in *You Only Live Once*, in which, for at least part of the film, it is unclear if Eddie is guilty of the bank robbery and murders for which he is sentenced to death. See Armour 109; Eisner 182-183; Gunning 241-245; Humphries 29-36; Jenkins 90-91; Will Scheibel, "Fritz Lang's Modern Character" 331-334; George M. Wilson, *Narration in Light* 17-23.

<sup>134</sup> See also Gunning 395-398, 405; Humphries 67-68.

*The Blue Gardenia* examines how the media sensationalize violent crimes, and, in the process, make both the victims and the perpetrators into celebrities. The film exposes the news media's parasitic nature and condemns the audience which hungers for such sensational reporting. The public, the film contends, becomes desensitized to the horrors of crime and begins following the news as if it were pulp fiction.

*Gardenia* focuses on Norah Larkin (Anne Baxter), a telephone operator who lives with two coworkers, Crystal (Ann Southern) and Sally (Jeff Donnell). Norah, distraught after her boyfriend breaks up with her on her birthday, accepts a date at The Blue Gardenia with artist and playboy Harry Prebble (Raymond Burr). Harry gets Norah drunk and takes her to his apartment, where he forces himself on her. To rebuff his advances, Norah swings a fire poker at him, after which she blacks out. The next day, learning that Harry had been murdered the night before, she believes she was his killer. When she reads a newspaper story by columnist Casey Mayo (Richard Conte) in which he promises legal help to the killer in exchange for an exclusive interview, she arranges to meet with Casey. She asks him if he was serious about helping the killer, and when Casey assures her that he was, Norah confides in him, but not completely. She says it is a friend of hers, not her, who thinks she may be the killer, but whose brain has blocked out the murder. Although Casey tries to protect Norah, when they arrange a meeting between him and the fictitious killer, the police arrive and arrest Norah right after she reveals that she thinks she is the killer. Casey, who still wants to help her, is assigned to cover a story out of town, but, while waiting at the airport, he hears a Wagner composition over the stereo and recognizes it as the record on the phonograph at Prebble's apartment, even though Norah had insisted that Prebble played Nat King Cole's "Blue Gardenia." Casey

convinces police detective Sam Haynes (George Reeves) to take him back into Prebble's apartment to look for new clues, and after they find the Wagner album, they visit the record shop where Prebble bought it. One of the store's associates, Rose Miller (Ruth Storey), attempts suicide when she learns the police are looking for her. In the hospital, she confesses to being a spurned lover who killed Prebble out of jealousy.<sup>135</sup>

Although Norah is innocent, Lang structures the film so that we believe she is guilty.<sup>136</sup> We do not see Norah kill Harry, but the cuts from her swinging the poker, to Harry trying to defend himself, to her blacking out, fit the editing patterns of Production Code-era crime films, in which graphic violence could not be shown.<sup>137</sup> The film's limited point-of-view further reinforces the perception of Norah's guilt.<sup>138</sup> Most of the scenes focus on Norah, who, believing she is guilty, destroys evidence of her supposed guilt, or on Casey, who also assumes Norah is guilty, based on the evidence at Prebble's apartment and on Norah's story. The film thus gives us evidence to conclude that Norah is guilty, because, in classical Hollywood, David Bordwell explains, it is rare for a film to use narrative strategies that "make us jump to invalid conclusions" (*Narration in the Fiction Film* 165). Some critics try to fit the film into the classical Hollywood formula,

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<sup>135</sup> There is also a suggestion that she is pregnant. Early in the film, Rose calls Harry and tells him that she is in trouble and needs his help, but Harry brushes her off. During her confession, we see a flashback to her visiting Prebble's apartment, where she pleads, "I can't go through with this alone, Harry . . . Are you or aren't you going to marry me?" Although this question of marriage, in this context, suggests a pregnancy, the Production Code would not allow this to be explicit, given that Harry and Rose are not married. Janet Bergstrom notes that the script made this clearer, but Lang cut the lines, possibly out of concerns about censorship (105-107).

<sup>136</sup> The narrative mislead is similar to that used in *Mildred Pierce* (1945), in which we are also led to believe, for most of the film, that the protagonist is the killer, although in that case the story is narrated by Mildred, who is lying to protect her daughter.

<sup>137</sup> Even though the enforcement of this had relaxed by the early 50s, which Lang critiqued in his own way in *Big Heat*, the pattern fits the depictions and suggestions of violence typical of Hollywood crime films of the 30s and 40s.

<sup>138</sup> This play with point-of-view and selective exclusion of exposition is something Lang returned to, in an even more elaborate way, in his final American film, *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*.



claiming that the early phone call from Rose to Harry is enough to give away the ending and, thus, to make us believe in Norah's innocence throughout the film. The reviewer for the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, for an early example, claims "the real killer is so obtrusively planted that one has few doubts about the outcome" ("The Blue Gardenia" 175).<sup>139</sup> The film, however, does not give the phone call much weight, and the rest of the film suggests Norah's guilt.

Although Norah's blackout is initially explained as a result of intoxication, Norah later tells Casey that she thinks her brain may have blocked the memory of the murder because it was too terrible to remember. As Lotte H. Eisner points out, the original script ends the scene of Norah blacking out with a shot in which "in the remaining piece of glass we see the reflection of two vague and indefinite figures moving," a shot that would have made it clear that someone else came into the apartment (324). "Lang's cinematic instinct," Eisner contends, "told him that to show the audience the clever distortions, the ringing, knocking, entering of another person and so on would have killed every bit of suspense and revealed the solution" (324).<sup>140</sup> Consequently, Lang plays "on the spectator's response, to incorporate the film's own means, its narrative and narrational strategies," Pye argues, "so that the spectator's perceptions, and some of the conventions which sustain them, are subjected to scrutiny" ("Seeing by Glimpses" 75).<sup>141</sup> We believe, like Norah, that Norah is guilty, and we watch her try to stay ahead of the investigators who are searching for clues as to her identity. Thus, we understand, and believe, the

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<sup>139</sup> See also Armour 158-159; Jenkins 115; Jensen 181.

<sup>140</sup> See also Bergstrom 105.

<sup>141</sup> See also Gunning 402.

police's conclusion that the shoes they find in Harry's apartment, which we know are Norah's, belong to the killer.

As Sam conducts his police investigation, Casey gets information from him which he writes about in his column. At the same time, Casey keeps out of the paper much of the information he uncovers from conducting his own investigation, such as the size of the shoes, because he hopes the killer will contact him, and he can use the confidential information to prove her identity. He does, however, publish some of the information along with his suppositions, such as his belief that the suspect wore a black taffeta dress. But to the public, the facts and the suppositions all appear to be real evidence. Thus, because Norah thinks her dress proves she is the killer, she burns it.

If Casey's columns make the case a public sensation and turn the mysterious killer into a celebrity, his own celebrity is equally important to him, and to his paper, as established in an early scene in which Casey visits a telephone company's office. As he walks through the building's lobby, he passes a newsstand. Lang frames the shot of Casey waiting for an elevator with Casey in the background, at the right of the screen, while in the left foreground an advertisement on the newsstand bears Casey's picture and the text, "Daily . . . in the CHRONICLE! Casey Mayo/ Los Angeles' Favorite Columnist" [Figure 5.6]. When Casey visits the switchboard, the telephone operators around Casey also treat him like a celebrity.

Emphasizing his desire for attention, Casey tells coworkers about his interest in the case. "Everybody wants to read about murder," he tells an office boy, "Even when an unknown doll kills a guy nobody ever heard of before. Sudden death sells papers son," to which his photographer, Al (Richard Erdman), adds, "Lesson number one in modern

journalism.” “Lesson number two,” Casey replies, “add the element of sex.” When the office boy mentions the “Blue Gardenia Girl,” Casey immediately recognizes the sales power of a catchy nickname for the killer and, realizing the story’s sensational potential, he is eager to get more involved. After his first story is a public sensation, Casey seeks to capitalize on the public interest, stating, “I need an angle. An angle that will bring that dame into this office before the cops get to her. . . . She’s hot copy. She’s one out of a hundred murder cases that broke all the wire services. . . . I’m a newspaper man! I live on headlines! I wanna be the guy to nail her!” He decides to write a “Letter to an Unknown Murderess,” offering his help. The montage of Casey writing his open letter to the killer, the newspaper being printed and distributed, and Norah reading the story, Gunning points out, “conveys a discourse mediated through public institutions and mass readership” (405). Casey’s stories are how the public learns the details of the murder, and it is the images he creates of the killer and the victim which inform public perceptions.

Norah’s roommate, Sally, is one of the many newspaper readers who gets wrapped up in reports about the investigation. When she reads about the murder, she comments, “I didn’t like Prebble when he was alive. But now that he’s been murdered, that always makes a man so romantic.” This romanticized view of the murder victim is informed not just by Casey’s reporting, but also by pulp fiction, of which Sally is an avid reader.<sup>142</sup> When we first see Sally, she is reading a pulp novel while Harry flirts with

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<sup>142</sup> Sally is one of several Lang characters who like pulp fiction. Others include: the boy, Gustav, in *Woman in the Moon* (1929), who is inspired by pulp science fiction to stow away on a rocket; Mrs. Beckmann, in *M*, who receives the latest installments of serial pulp fiction just before she realizes that her daughter is missing; the innkeeper, Ethan, in *You Only Live Once*, who finds Eddie’s picture in a pulp true crime magazine; Kitty (Joan Bennett), in *Scarlet Street* (1945), who reads a pulp romance magazine called *Love Stories*; and killer Robert Manners in *While the City Sleeps*, who reads both horror and crime comics. This character trait likely appealed to Lang because of his own love of pulp fiction, which started when he, as a teenager, discovered issues of the pulp serial *The Phantom Robber* (McGilligan 17). He boasted, in a 1945 interview, that he still kept up with “ze pulp” (qtd. in McGilligan 17).

Norah and Crystal. Later, when Sally excitedly talks about the plot of the new Mickey Mallet novel, she vicariously acts out the roles of both killer and victim.<sup>143</sup> When she reads Casey's first story about the murder, she says, "Listen to this, he's almost as good as Mickey Mallet!" She talks about the "Blue Gardenia Girl" case as she would a pulp crime story.<sup>144</sup> "We are meant, clearly, to find Sally funny but also pathetic," Pye explains, "yet in context it becomes difficult to see her sensibility as aberrant; we may come to see the mechanical (and comic) link between her reading and her view of life as only a more obvious version of a predominant condition" (79).<sup>145</sup> She is also convinced that this murder investigation will follow the formulas of pulp fiction. She believes that the police will solve the case because, as she tells Norah, they always get their man thanks to small bits of evidence overlooked by the killer. And Sally is not the only reader who begins viewing those involved in the murder as characters instead of as people. When news of Prebble's murder breaks, a news vendor comments, "got him with a poker. Hmm, old fashioned," indicating he sees sensational news stories not only as if they were fiction, but clichéd fiction.

The film's ending, which reveals we have been misled, also reveals Lang's mediation and control as a filmmaker. "The final explanation," Paul M. Jensen contends, "based completely on chance, blames the deed on a character who had hardly even existed in the film beforehand. It is an anticlimactic and unconvincing 'deus ex Victrola'" (182).<sup>146</sup> Jensen notes that the ending twist feels like a cheat, but he fails to explain what

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<sup>143</sup> She is thus like Clem, in *Frank James*, who acted out the parts while telling his made-up story about seeing Frank killed.

<sup>144</sup> "Sally lives vicariously through an endless succession of pulp murder stories," says Pye, "which effectively dominate her life and structure her view of the world" ("Seeing by Glimpses" 79).

<sup>145</sup> See also Bergstrom 82, 85; Gunning 402-403.

<sup>146</sup> See also Gunning 398.

he recognizes as Lang's intentional "rejection of the narrative qualities of mystery and suspense" (181). The ending not only rejects but also scrutinizes the expectations of many crime films. "In telling the story of the crime and the investigation," Sarah Casey Benyahia explains, "crime films create a structure which functions as a predictable narrative pattern for the spectator" (100). In *Gardenia's* ending, justice is served, but not in a manner in keeping with the conventions of crime films because the capture of the criminal happens by chance rather than through diligent police work. The police only realize their mistake because Casey—a journalist, not a policeman—notices a discrepancy in the stories. Even though we should be relieved that Norah is innocent, her innocence invalidates what the film has presented about its characters. But, importantly, the image of Norah was created for the characters, as well as for us, in part through Casey's writing—the newspaper created an image of a criminal, just as the film gives us a false image of a presumed criminal.

### 5.5 *WHILE THE CITY SLEEPS* (1956): MEDIA COMPETE

Because *While the City Sleeps* focuses on a serial killer whose crimes become a public sensation, critics often compare it, unfavorably, to *M*.<sup>147</sup> When they look at the film favorably, critics typically discuss Lang's cynicism about the ruthlessness of American professionals' ambition. Humphries, for example, asserts that, to the film's journalists, "the only thing that matters is one's career, with no holds barred" (68). Similarly, Kaplan claims that the journalists "are cynical, disillusioned and only out for

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<sup>147</sup> See Armour 164; Gunning 438-440; Jensen 192; E. Ann Kaplan, "Patterns of Violence" 55-56; Thomas Leitch, *Crime Films* 94; Frederick W. Ott, *The Films of Fritz Lang* 60; Solovieva 52.

themselves. No longer believing in social responsibility, they seek only to outwit others on the way to success” (“Patterns of Violence” 57).<sup>148</sup> Joe McElhaney argues that the film comments on the changing culture of Cold War America, such that “The locked doors in the film (mainly those of real and potential female victims of the serial killer) are flimsy, easily available to be manipulated, the reflection of a conception of space in which public and private are collapsed” (*The Death of Classical Cinema* 81).<sup>149</sup> Such observations accurately note how the film contends that private life is being abolished by the growing importance and reach of public, and particularly professional, life.<sup>150</sup> Scholars often overlook, however, the ways in which the film focuses on the media’s role in how public life both infiltrated and overtook private life. In *City Sleeps*, sensationalized journalism not only undermines the ideal of journalism as a public service, but also destroys those who produce it.

*While the City Sleeps* begins with the murder of Judith Felton (Sandy White) by a young man, Robert Manners (John Barrymore, Jr.), who returned to her apartment after making a delivery there. When the head of the news media corporation Kyne Inc., Amos Kyne (Robert Warwick), dies shortly after instructing his employees to make the murder a big story, his son, Walter (Vincent Price), with little interest in running the company himself, creates a competition among three department heads. The men focus their attention on solving the Felton murder because they think that is the key to winning the promotion. Two of them, newspaper editor Jon Day Griffith (Thomas Mitchell) and newswire director Mark Loving (George Sanders), try to enlist the help of Amos’s

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<sup>148</sup> See also Bogdanovich, *Fritz Lang in America* 14; Eisner 351.

<sup>149</sup> See also Eisner 352; Gunning 436-437; Carlos Losilla, “Suspended Modernity” 485.

<sup>150</sup> This had also been the concern of two of Lang’s recent films, *The Big Heat* (1953) and *Human Desire* (1954).

protégé, Ed Mobley (Dana Andrews), the television news anchor, Mark going so far as asking his girlfriend, Mildred Donner (Ida Lupino), a columnist at the paper, to seduce Mobley.

Although Mobley does not align himself with any of the men, he investigates the case with help from his detective friend Burt Kaufman (Howard Duff), who thinks another murder was committed by the same person. Using information from Burt, Mobley connects the second murder to the first in a television broadcast, taunting the killer before, in a personal note, announcing his engagement to Nancy Liggett (Sally Forrest), to use her as bait while arranging for her to have police protection. As a result, Robert begins following Mobley, and thus he witnesses Mildred's attempt to seduce Mobley. Although Mildred is unsuccessful, she spreads stories about what they did together, driving a wedge between Mobley and Nancy. At the same time, Harry Kritzer (James Craig), the third man in the competition, is hoping that Walter's wife, Dorothy (Rhonda Fleming), with whom Harry is having an affair, will help him win the job. During one of Harry and Dorothy's romantic rendezvous at their secret apartment, which is across the hall from Nancy's apartment, Robert, while making a delivery to Dorothy, sees flowers Mobley sent to Nancy outside of Nancy's door. He then waits until Nancy is home and, failing to force his way into her apartment, turns his rage upon Dorothy, who had opened her door to see what all the noise was. Again unsuccessful, Robert flees, but he is apprehended and, subsequently, confesses to several murders and burglaries. Mobley then phones Jon, who puts out an Extra. However, Mobley, remorseful for using Nancy as bait, quits. The film concludes with Walter appointing Mobley editor of the newspapers, in hopes of luring him back to the paper.

*City Sleeps* examines the conflict in a news corporation between public service and profit, which can lead to reporters sensationalizing news stories. This conflict is introduced in the first scene at Kyne headquarters. When news comes over the Associated Press newswire about the Felton murder, the story notes a unique clue: the message “Ask Mother” written in lipstick on the wall. Amos, seeing this story, excitedly calls a meeting of his department heads and complains, of his reporters, that the murder is “a lulu, and they’re blowing it!” When Amos asks Mark why it is not on the Kyne newswire, Mark says, “It’s just another murder,” to which Amos responds, “I suggest the life of a human being is not beneath your consideration.” Amos’s demeanor and his words about the importance of human life contrast with his excitement when he first saw the story. Amos reveals why he was excited by the story when he talks to Jon about putting the story in the newspaper. Jon wants to include it on page two, but Amos disagrees. “How many women in the United States wear lipstick?” Amos asks. “I want every one of them scared silly every time she puts any on. Call this baby ‘The Lipstick Killer,’ smack across the front page.” In a subsequent conversation with Mobley, however, Amos shares a different view about newspapers. He says newspapers bear “the responsibility of the free press to the people. In this country, it’s the people who make the decisions. If they’re to make their decisions right, they have to have all the facts that we—,” but his last words are cut off by a blaring television. Although Amos expresses noble ideals about the press’s responsibility, the speech comes off as insincere given his demands about sensationalizing a woman’s murder. “Rather than simply conveying information,” Gunning notes, “the media in *While the City Sleeps* mime the murderer’s actions, determined to terrify the public in order to sell more papers” (439). Walter’s competition



for a new job makes the search for the Lipstick Killer the primary focus of the men in the newsroom, and the resulting coverage turns the story into a public sensation, in much the same way as Casey's reporting did for the Blue Gardenia.

Although Amos is confined to a bed, his bed is in his office. He tells Mobley that he has two regrets: his son Walter, whom he "killed with kindness" by giving him money instead of love, and Mobley, who professes no lust for wealth or power and who is therefore uninterested in taking over the business. Walter later complains that his father never really took to him and did not teach him the business, as most fathers would. According to Walter, Amos viewed Mobley as a son. Amos's employees follow his lead when it comes to putting work first, and their focus on the Felton murder and the potential promotion causes their personal lives to suffer. When Mobley takes Nancy home the night the Felton story breaks, Nancy will not let him into her apartment, but Mobley toggles the button lock on her door—just like Robert did when he delivered an order to Judith Felton—so that she cannot lock him out. When he enters the apartment, he ignores Nancy and calls the newspaper's crime reporter, Gerald Meade (Ralph Peters), to ask if Felton had a button lock on her door. He then calls Jon to share his insight about the lock, and Jon suggests that Mobley watch the police's interrogation of a suspect the next day.

Mobley's plan to trap the killer completely intertwines his work and personal lives. During his news broadcast, Mobley calls the killer "a mama's boy." He then announces his engagement to Nancy and runs the engagement announcement in the newspaper alongside an article that repeats what he said about the killer [Figure 5.7]. After Nancy goes home, however, Mobley and Burt realize that the killer may be waiting

for a chance to be more brazen, such as killing a woman while she is guarded, and they rush to Nancy's apartment just in time to chase Robert. Despite Robert's subsequent capture, the episode underscores the way in which Robert's brazenness was complementing Mobley's, a point that becomes apparent to Mobley himself.

Kyne employees are so deeply defined by their jobs that they appear to have little contact with anyone who is not a Kyne employee or otherwise connected to their work. Most of the Kyne employees we see are dating and/or flirting with coworkers: Nancy works as Mark's secretary and gets engaged to Mobley; Mark flirts with Nancy, even though he is dating Mildred; Mildred and Mobley flirt, and she tries seducing him so he will help Mark get the promotion; and Harry is having an affair with his boss, Walter's, wife, Dorothy. The characters know each other through work and become personally intertwined, but their relationships often appear transactional. When Mark asks Mildred to seduce Mobley, for example, Mildred initially seems unsure of what he is asking, but he assures her, "Mildred, we're adults. I love you very completely. Now anything you might do for me will make me love you all the more." Mark thinks this is a play that will help him because he knows that Mildred routinely flirts with Mobley—and the first time we see Mildred, she flirts with Mobley. It is clear that Mildred is enticed by Mark's request, although she tries to conceal her interest. Mark also has his own flirtations. When we first see him, he is flirting with Nancy. Mobley, upon seeing this, calls Nancy and jokes, "tell that boss of yours to stop purring over your shoulder while he dictates." Mobley jokes about Mark flirting with Nancy, but he nonetheless enjoys flirting with Mark's girlfriend, Mildred, which Mark has observed, which is why he asks Mildred to

seduce Mobley. Although Mobley and Mildred do not sleep together, at least according to Mobley, they do flirt and, while Mobley is drunk, they make out in a taxi.

Lang uses the nominal form of the crime film to argue that the media corporations that report on crime are corrupt. Kyne's reporters privilege their personal interests and professional status over the supposed professional obligations of journalism. None of them is interested in justice or helping the public, just in helping themselves and burnishing their professional reputations. All of the reporters, even Mobley, who is not angling for the promotion, pursue their self-interest, in one form or another, through some form of dishonesty or cheating. The contest for the promotion becomes the locus of much of the corruption, in that it gives the reporters a clear goal that informs their approach to reporting on the murders. But the contest is itself corrupt because its goal is not to find the best Executive Director, but instead to allow Walter to retain authority without competence or effort by technically taking the decision out of his hands. He wants to exploit his power and the social position his job as owner of a media conglomerate grants him without his needing to take responsibility for the outcome. This is clear when Mark puts Meade's report about the evidence against the janitor of Felton's building over the newswire before vetting it. When he shares the initial bulletin with Jon and Walter, both Mark and Jon realize the problem and Mark rushes to kill it before it can be shared by other news services. Jon and Mark then explain that, because the statement was made by an officer who was not under oath, it is not privileged, and thus if it is not true, the janitor could sue Kyne for libel. Mark ran the bulletin right away because of the contest, and Walter got upset about the potential repercussions he, by creating the contest, was responsible for, but he blames Mark (who in turn blames Meade). Later, when Jon issues

his Extra about Robert's confession before giving the news to the wire, Walter says he wants "a little more cooperation around here." It is his contest, that is, his way of avoiding responsibility, that has created this problem, but he lashes out and blames the reporters for the situation he created.

The fact that the contest is Walter's way of cheating the corporation (and his father's legacy) is consistent with Dorothy's cheating on him and Harry's using Dorothy to cheat in the contest. Cheating thus lies at the core of the new Kyne, and it is clearly central to the contest, as Harry is not the only cheater. Mark uses Mildred to cheat in the contest by encouraging her to seduce Mobley, which would cause Mobley to cheat on his fiancé, Nancy, with whom Mark flirts. This also gives Mildred an excuse to cheat on Mark with Mobley, to whom she is clearly attracted. Mobley is willing to cheat with her—even if it is, as he contends, just a little kissing in a taxi (as opposed to Mildred's taking him back to her apartment and lying naked on her bed, as in the novel, almost certainly cleaned up to comply barely with the Production Code)<sup>151</sup>—just as he is willing to manipulate the contest, in which he is not a contestant, by controlling the time and manner of releasing scoops and by suggesting to Jon, with whom he shares information, whether Jon should share the information with Mark right away or wait. The only innocent party in all of this is Nancy, although she is not frequently read as sympathetic—Kaplan, for example, acknowledges that Nancy represents "the only innocence (good) in the film," but says that "everything about Nancy is hard, tight, clipped, prissy" (although she blames Lang for this presentation, and thus her perception,

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<sup>151</sup> In the novel, *The Bloody Spur* by Charles Einstein, Mobley clearly understands what Mildred is angling for. When he turns down this clear invitation for sex, he says, "Tell Loving to blackmail me in the morning," understanding that there is no way for him to come out of the situation unscathed (139).

of Nancy) (“Patterns of Violence” 56, 59).<sup>152</sup> Nancy neither cheats nor plays the games of newsroom politics, and she thus becomes collateral damage. She is forced to endure Mark’s flirtations and Mobley’s snide comments about those flirtations; she is humiliated by the stories of Mobley and Mildred’s night together; and, although she agrees to play her part in Mobley’s plan, it is only after Mobley has started the plan in motion, so she becomes a target for the killer, without her initial consent, so that Mobley can achieve his own ends.

The film’s limitation of character interaction mostly to other Kyne employees is also part of the film’s construction of a closed world. Joe McElhaney observes that the film’s New York City “is used as though it were a small town in which virtually the entire cast of characters seems to live and work within a three-block radius of one another” (*Death of Classical Cinema* 74). *City Sleeps* is thus an extreme example of what Leo Braudy calls “the closed film,” in which, “the world of the film is the only thing that exists; everything within it has its place in the plot of the film—every object, every character, every gesture, every action” (46). Although Braudy does not mention *City Sleeps*, he regards Lang as the defining practitioner of this type of film (44).<sup>153</sup> Even when the Kyne employees leave the office, they often visit The Dell, a bar next to the Kyne building. These characters have no lives or identities apart from their work, and they thus can only find company with fellow employees. If the crime film, particularly

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<sup>152</sup> See also Eisner 354-355; McGilligan 416-417.

<sup>153</sup> Braudy is right to identify Lang as a practitioner of closed films, but he also claims, “in the closed films of Lang and Hitchcock, any self-conscious reference to filmmaking itself would destroy the illusion of sufficiency, feeling that there is no other world, which is essential to their aesthetic goals” (47). As I have been arguing, Lang’s films are self-conscious in ways scholars have largely neglected. The self-conscious moments in Lang’s films, rather than destroying Lang’s aesthetic goals, instead reveal Lang’s concerns about how Hollywood genres function. Lang creates closed films in order to unobtrusively present genre tropes in ways which, when looked at in a broader context, are shown to challenge the ways genres function.

under the Production Code, had developed to decry the criminal behavior in the audience's world, as *The Public Enemy's* (1931) proclamation that the film was concerned with "a problem that sooner or later **WE**, the public, must solve" claimed, then having a hermetically sealed, "closed" film seems wholly at odds with the genre's goals. Coupled with the fact that *City Sleeps* is focused on a news corporation, that is, an entity meant to inform audiences about the larger world, the idea of a closed, media-focused film seems like an inherent contradiction. *City Sleep*, then, argues that the news media created a self-fulfilling, and self-serving, system in which participants had lost sight of the public they were purportedly serving, and the coverage of crime had become a fearmongering exercise more than an effort to inform the public. Thus, it becomes logical, in the world of the film, for Kyne to produce news by weaving an elaborate plot about a murder rather than just report on what Burt tells Mobley.

Although *While the City Sleeps* focuses on the search for a murderer, it almost wholly discards the narrative form of the crime investigation drama. The film is not a whodunit because we know the killer from the start. Furthermore, there is little suspense in the search for the killer, as there would be in a crime film focused on a killer trying to outwit and avoid the police. Robert does not seek attention for his crimes, as *M's* Beckert had by writing a letter to the press, nor does he seem to want his crimes to be connected. He leaves different types of clues at different scenes: at Felton's apartment, he wrote on the wall with lipstick, whereas at Kelly's home he left a comic book. Mobley, thinking this is part of the killer's game, tells Burt, "he left the book here deliberately, to laugh at you, Burt. And every time, he'll leave a different clue." Instead of chronicling the killer's further murders or his efforts to avoid capture, or the efforts of the police to piece

together the clues and apprehend the killer, the film focuses on the reporters, whose relationship to the crimes is parasitic. The police are only seen in their interactions with reporters who are sensationalizing stories about the crimes. We learn about developments in the investigation when Mobley talks about them with Burt and when he reports them. We thus learn some of the information, such as much of what Mobley shares in his newscast, at the same time, and in the same manner, as the public and the killer.

By focusing on reporters who cover the murder in order to get a promotion, the film treats the murder like a McGuffin, and the reporters treat it in a similar manner: they are only interested in the crime for what it could do for them. Whenever they discuss the case, it is never out of concern for saving lives or upholding justice, but for how solving the case can advance their careers. For that reason, they do not freely share the information they find—meaning they are potentially hampering the investigation—and instead try to figure out how they can use that information for professional advantage.

The reporters have lost touch with their humanity, as evidenced by how they view the stories on which they report. The most prominent example of this is how they turn the search for a killer into a contest. The dehumanization of these men is clearest after the police have caught Robert. While the police finish their interrogation, Mobley calls Jon to share the news. When Jon worries that other outlets will see the police arrest report and run with the story, meaning Kyne will not have the scoop, Mobley reassures him: “Don’t worry, Jon. It’ll get on as an ordinary precinct arrest, ‘man molesting a woman.’ Happens every day. No paper will bother to pick that up.” Although Mobley may be right that other papers will ignore a routine police arrest, the way he prefaces the likely news report, “man molesting a woman,” reveals that he sees these people as characters in a

story rather than as human beings. He clearly is thinking about the potential profits Kyne can reap from the story, and Jon shares this view. Therefore, he assembles a small team, instructing them to work secretly, to put together an Extra, but he keeps the news from Mark until after the Extra is printed. Jon justifies his behavior by telling Walter and Mark that, because he waited to share the information with the wire, people will buy the Extra, and Mark will still be the first to have the story on the newswire. Jon, then, is not just reporting the news, but controlling who learns what, as well as when and how they learn it, putting his professional ambitions above the need to inform the public.

The reporters have also lost sight of how their reporting can be read and perceived by the public, including potential criminals. While Mobley and Burt discuss Felton's murder, they note that the lipstick clue is like a clue from a previous murder, at which the killer wrote, "Catch me, I can't control myself?"<sup>154</sup> Burt blames reporters, like Mobley, and entertainment media for putting information out for the benefit of potential criminals: "Anyone who leaves fingerprints nowadays, even on his first homicide, can't even read. You know how much stuff is written and published for the instruction of potential lawbreakers? Take the so-called comic books, sold to kids of all ages in drugstores."

Burt is right in thinking that Robert learned about committing crime from the media. Robert, like Polly in *Gardenia*, eagerly consumes both news and entertainment

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<sup>154</sup> The film's source novel was loosely based on the case of William Heirens (McGilligan 415-416). In 1946, Heirens confessed to two murders, although he later recanted his confession and alleged it was given under duress (Douglas Martin 19). At the site of the second murder, "someone had used lipstick to scrawl on the wall: 'For heaven's sake catch me before I kill more. I cannot control myself'" (Martin 19). This clue led the press to create the moniker "The Lipstick Killer" for the murderer. In the novel, Robert's lipstick message at Felton's apartment was "HELP ME FOR GOD'S SAKE," drawing a clear connection to the message in Heirens's case (Einstein 32). In *City Sleeps*, the message closest to Heirens's, which both Mobley and Burt mention, is not one left by Robert, but instead a clue from a previous case, which is almost certainly a reference to the Heirens case. Lang, in an interview with Bogdanovich, recalled the real killer's message as "Please catch me before I kill more" (*Fritz Lang in America* 102). See also Eisner 352; Gene D. Phillips, "Fritz Lang Remembers" 187.



media about murder, and the media he consumes influence his thoughts and behaviors. When Mobley addresses the killer in his broadcast, for example, Lang cuts from Mobley looking into the television camera to Robert watching. Gunning analyzes this scene as a continuation of what he identifies as Lang's "idea of television as a network connecting a number of people and places" (442).<sup>155</sup> Although it does connect Mobley and Robert technologically, Lang underscores how news media combine public and private lives. "Mister unknown," Mobley says as he makes Robert's private life part of the public discourse, "you will not, for very long, remain unknown." The Lipstick Killer is already a public figure whom Robert enjoys reading about. That killer seems to be a persona Robert constructed from entertainment media artifacts: his clothing choices seem inspired by the movie *The Wild One* (1953), and his preferred murder method, strangulation, seems inspired by the comic book *The Strangler*, which we see him reading and which he leaves as a clue at the Kelly murder scene. When Harry designs a newspaper front page which features a blank male head and a headline asking readers to draw the killer, Robert gleefully draws himself as he wants others to see him [Figure 5.8]. He, like the reporters, dissociates his work life, that of a delivery boy, from two aspects of his private life, being a killer and supporting his mother. But Mobley, in his public address to the killer, starts to break down the barriers Robert has created between those aspects of his life.

We see Robert's reactions to the information Mobley provides, ranging from him joyously re-enacting his strangling of Kelly, to his shock that Mobley has linked his murders and at the personal details about him that Mobley shares, then to anger at Mobley calling him a "mama's boy." Mobley follows this insult with psychoanalytic

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<sup>155</sup> See also Losilla 489-490.

speculation: “the normal feeling of love that you should have toward your mother has been twisted into hatred for her and all of her sex.” The subsequent scene validates Mobley’s Freudian speculations. Robert turns off the television when he hears his mother (Mae Marsh) approaching his room, and what follows is the film’s only scene that really focuses on Robert. Robert starts his conversation with his mother by complaining about working late. When she tries to sympathize with him by saying she knows how hard it has been for him since his father died, he retorts, “he’s not my father, and you’re not my mother.” She is clearly hurt, telling him “don’t say that,” but Robert continues: “why not? It’s true, isn’t it? When you adopted me, you wanted a girl, didn’t you, and he wanted a boy. Well, neither one of you was satisfied, were you?” She tells him that she has poured all of her love into him, then asks, “don’t you love your mother?” He puts his hands on her shoulders and asks, “shall I show you how much I love my mother,” before moving his hands to her head, then slowly moving them toward her neck, suggesting he is again thinking of strangulation, before she moves his hands so she can get his breakfast. The pain and surprise on her face when Robert says some of those things make it clear that this is not a conversation they have had before, which suggests that Mobley’s comments pushed Robert to the state of psychological turmoil from which he feels he needs to lash out. He seems to be trying to disprove the assertion that he is a mama’s boy, while at the same time clearly demonstrating the hate that Mobley said he must feel toward his mother. The scene is then bookended by Robert turning his television back on so he can hear the end of Mobley’s address. This short scene makes it clear that Mobley, while stirring up the killer to a state where he will eventually walk into Mobley’s trap, is also stirring up the killer to lash out in dangerous ways that Mobley could not predict.

## 5.6 BEYOND A REASONABLE DOUBT (1956) AND THE MEDIA AS ALIBI

The fact that *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* was Lang's last Hollywood film has been central to its critical discussions. "It is tempting to see this final Hollywood film as one that ultimately coalesced into an encore of Fritz Lang's American films," Patrick McGilligan states, before cataloguing how the film reuses elements from *Fury*, *You Only Live Once*, and *Scarlet Street* (1945) (417).<sup>156</sup> Lang, however, did not know that *Reasonable Doubt* would be his last American film. *Reasonable Doubt* "signed Lang's death warrant as far as Hollywood was concerned," Humphries contends, "because the film refused to play the game, showing explicitly what would await the main characters we have identified with" (172). Chris Fujiwara, similarly, notes the way the spectator and his/her identification with the characters becomes a core part of the film: "Lang requires the spectator to discover and draw out the philosophical implications of *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* and to become responsible for the movement of the idea in the film" (162). Consequently, as Carlos Losilla argues, the film can be read as "a kind of reproach to the audience," almost as if Lang were criticizing viewers for engaging with the film's protagonist (482).

*Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* is, in its narrative structure, almost a photo negative of *The Blue Gardenia*. The "opposition between the ostensible 'point' of the narrative being the filling of a gap in the spectator's knowledge," Stephen Jenkins claims, "and the narrative constituting a representation of a spectacular process," in *Blue Gardenia*, "is

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<sup>156</sup> See also Chris Fujiwara, "*Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* and the Caesura," 163, 172.

taken to extremes in *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*” (115). *Gardenia* is built around the assumption that Norah is guilty of murder, and it thus tracks her increasing fear of arrest, which leads to her destroying incriminating evidence. The film shows the accumulation of evidence of Norah’s guilt before, in its twist ending, revealing that she is innocent. *Reasonable Doubt*’s Tom Garrett (Dana Andrews), on the other hand, fabricates circumstantial evidence that incriminates him in a murder in order to get arrested so that he and newspaper editor Austin Spencer (Sidney Blackmer) can argue against capital punishment. The film’s final twist, however, reveals his guilt. The film is structured, as Losilla observes, as “a representation inside a representation that is the film itself, a lie within another lie” (481).<sup>157</sup> The film is thus structured so that viewers believe the central lie, that Tom is innocent, while we see Tom construct evidence of his guilt as part of a media stunt. The film proves media’s powerful influence and the audience’s trust in the media. The film contends that the media can, as *City Sleep*’s Burt claimed, educate potential criminals, and can, furthermore, be used by criminals to create alibis. Media, then, can both make innocent men into criminals, as was the case in *Fury* and *Live Once*, and, in this film, make a guilty man seem innocent.

Austin wants to prove what he sees as the injustice of capital punishment, that an innocent man can be executed on the basis of circumstantial evidence. He devises a plan to frame Tom for the murder of a showgirl, Patty Gray. Austin and Tom use the information they get from their police contacts, along with newspaper stories, to plant evidence that incriminates Tom, while Austin meticulously photographs the process, so that he can prove Tom’s innocence. The plan, however, falls apart during Tom’s trial.

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<sup>157</sup> See also Gunning 448-450.

Austin, while taking the photographs to the DA's office, is killed in a car crash that also destroys the photos. Tom explains the situation to his lawyer, but because there is no tangible evidence, Tom is sentenced to death. Tom also explains the situation to his fiancé, Susan Spencer (Joan Fontaine), who takes it upon herself to prove Tom's innocence. Tom is seemingly saved when the executor of Austin's will presents the DA, Roy Thompson (Philip Boureuf), with a handwritten letter, from Austin, which explains the whole plan, and Thompson arranges for Tom to be pardoned. When Susan meets with Tom to discuss the forthcoming pardon, while complaining that no one would listen to him, Tom accidentally uses Patty's real name, Emma, which a detective had shared with Susan. When Susan asks him how he knew Patty's real name, Tom says he read it in the newspapers, but because the name was never published, Susan accuses Tom of the murder. He then confesses that he killed Patty/Emma because they were married and that she was blackmailing him. As the governor prepares to pardon Tom, Susan calls the prison and shares the news, causing the governor to cancel the pardon.

When rewatching *Reasonable Doubt*, we can see clues of Tom's guilt, but the film is structured so that Tom and Austin's scheme explains them away. "The knitting together and subsequent unravelling of plots and motivations, intentions and apparent authorship, hidden guilts and over-obvious alibis," Gunning claims, "make *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* seem more like a demonstration of Langian narrative principles than a film in itself" (454). Nonetheless, Lang's narrative carefully manipulates the viewer. Because we see Tom planting evidence to make an innocent man look guilty, we assume his innocence while appreciating how cleverly he makes himself look guilty.

Tom, however, is simultaneously creating clues to his fictional guilty while cleverly covering up any potential clues to his actual guilt. Tom learns from another showgirl, Dolly Moore (Barbara Nichols), which type of body makeup all the showgirls wore, and that Patty removed her makeup at home. He then buys some makeup and, under the watchful eyes of Austin and his camera, rubs it onto the seat of his car, taking care to work it into the seams so that, after his arrest, a police search would discover it. Tom also wipes down the dashboard and steering wheel, saying, "Police will naturally be looking for Patty Gray's fingerprints. Since we can't give 'em hers, it should make 'em suspicious if they can't find any fingerprints at all."<sup>158</sup> Austin is taking pictures of Tom creating evidence of his fake guilt, which will be used to prove Tom's innocence, while Tom is destroying actually incriminating evidence, such as Patty's fingerprints.

But we do not catch this in a first viewing because Lang does not include any scenes of Tom with Patty or talking with her on the phone. Lang is using what Pye identifies as the film's "suppressive narrative." "Our 'evidence' is incomplete because of what Lang withholds," Pye points out, "but, at the same time, we are inevitably subject to the whole battery of rhetorical processes that characterize popular narrative and to the expectations we bring with us to the act of viewing" ("Film Noir and Suppressive Narrative" 102). "Lang uses both," Pye continues, "to implicate us in processes which bear closely on the film's more obviously dramatized concerns" (102). We only realize the truth about Tom's guilt when Susan does.

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<sup>158</sup> This line recalls the comments the blackmailer, Heidt (Dan Duryea), makes in *Woman in the Window*. When he visits Alice's (Joan Bennett) apartment searching for evidence of her guilt in a murder, he says there is "not a finger mark anywhere. Not even where you think they'd be naturally."

Austin's documentation is crucial to his plot. The plan, however, is at odds with his concerns about the power of the press. In an early scene, he complains about the fundamental injustice of capital punishment, that many men are convicted on circumstantial evidence, which leaves room for reasonable doubt, and thus means the state could execute innocent men. But when Tom tells Austin to voice those concerns in his newspaper's coverage of the cases, Austin says his opinions should be confined to his editorials, while the news coverage should be presented dispassionately and free of his (or his reporters') opinions. Austin's scheme depends on the public trusting the newspaper and, by extension, his ethos as an editor. If readers distrust the editor, the whole thing could look like a stunt to sell papers.

While Austin is carrying out the scheme as part of a moral crusade, Tom sees the opportunity to weaponize the press for his own ends. While Tom and Austin photograph their process, they include a newspaper in the shot to prove the evidence was planted after the crime. When Tom throws his engraved lighter near the crime scene, for example, he poses for a photo before throwing the lighter, and in the photo, he holds up a copy of the newspaper, which bears a front-page story about Patty's murder [Figure 5.9]. He thus uses media artifacts as proof of his alibi at the same time that he uses the media to construct that alibi.

After Austin's death, Tom's plan to weaponize the press is taken up, albeit unwittingly, by Susan. Tom's trial is a media sensation: television cameras capture the proceedings in the courtroom, highlights of which are broadcast each day, and regular updates and commentary are broadcast over the radio.<sup>159</sup> Susan takes over the newspaper

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<sup>159</sup> This use of radio coverage of trials is more in keeping with contemporary trial coverage than was the live broadcast in *Fury*. Television recording and broadcasting of trials, however, was anomalous at the

after Austin's death, and when Tom's appeal is denied, she uses the newspaper to fight for him. Knowing that public interest in the case is high, she tells her editors, "use the newspaper in every way you can: editorials, feature series, anything to arouse public opinion in support of Mr. Garrett." One editor objects, "Your father told us to handle this case the way we would normally. I don't know how he would've felt about our taking sides," but Susan insists. In the next scene, Thompson and his investigator, Bob Hale (Arthur Franz), note that public opinion has turned in Tom's favor, because, as Thompson complains, "That girl has used the paper to arouse everyone's emotions." Susan succeeds in her use of the newspaper for personal ends, culminating in the headline "Garrett is Innocent/New Evidence Proves Mis-carriage of Justice." However, as she subsequently learns, she had become part of Tom's plan to evade the law. Although justice is served when Susan tells the governor what she knows, Susan's leadership made the newspaper an accomplice in the attempted cover-up of a murder.

*Reasonable Doubt* is, like *City Sleeps*, interested in corruption within the news media. In this film, instead of corrupting the public's perception of crime, as had been the case in *City Sleeps*, the newspaper becomes a source of crime. In other words, if *City Sleeps* represents the media as unethical, *Reasonable Doubt* represents it as outright criminal. Tom, a former newspaperman, commits murder; the newspaper, through Austin's plot and Austin's involvement in Tom's actions, destroys evidence and obstructs

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time—although it seems likely that Tom, if given the choice, would want the television coverage because it would make the later reveal of his innocence more sensational and would potentially help sway public interest more toward Austin's view of abolishing capital punishment. For information on the debate on televising trials in the early 1950s, see Paul J. Yesawich, Jr., "Televising and Broadcasting Trials." For more on the debates over radio coverage of trials up to the early 1950s, see "Controlling Press and Radio Influence on Trials"; Charles W. White, "Newspaper and Radio Coverage of Criminal Trials." For more on the use of cameras in the courtroom in *Reasonable Doubt*, see Fujiwara 171; Pye, "Film Noir and Suppressive Narrative" 103.



justice; and, through Austin's plot and, later, Susan's efforts to exonerate Tom, the newspaper commits what is tantamount to libel. In this light, it seems more than coincidental that Dana Andrews plays the lead character in both films. Andrews, in *City Sleeps*, portrays Mobley, the television newscaster; in this regard, he can be said to be the face of Kyne, thus endowed with a certain public power. Whereas Andrews's Mobley risks his fiancé's life in *City Sleeps*, his Tom kills his estranged wife in *Reasonable Doubt*, and uses his connections with the heads of a newspaper—Austin and then Susan—to save himself.

Andrews plays both Mobley and Tom in a similar manner, relying on limited movement and few facial expressions. This could be read, unsympathetically, as an inevitable result of Andrews's limitations as an actor, but that is not a fair assessment of his abilities. Although he was dealing with alcoholism which seemed to make his face impassive and impart a woodenness to his performance, he had shown throughout his career that he was capable of emotional range and expression in his varied screen roles.<sup>160</sup> He had range,<sup>161</sup> but that is not on display in his two films for Lang. Instead, his impassive face and limited movements make him into a type more than a character. "Andrews is a minimalist actor," Gunning notes, and, when coupled with the shady and duplicitous nature of his characters in Lang's final two films, "one is slightly unclear whether to feel Andrews' performance perfectly fits this distance, or, rather, that

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<sup>160</sup> See Gunning 434-435; McGilligan 418; Muller 89.

<sup>161</sup> We can remember, for example, how his face expressed anguish in *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943), *A Walk in the Sun* (1945), and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946); how his face expressed that he was falling in love—and was internally conflicted about falling in love—in *Laura* (1944) and *Best Years*, and his romantic struggles and heartbreak in *Daisy Kenyon* (1947); how his anguished expression, and his attempt to hide that pain, invited us to empathize with his struggles with post-traumatic stress in *Best Years* or blindness in *Night Song* (1947); and how he could also give exaggerated expression, playing it broad to make us laugh, in comedies like *Ball of Fire* (1941) and *Up in Arms* (1944).

Andrews' lack of engagement with the audience exaggerates Lang's intentions" (434-435).<sup>162</sup>

Andrews thus becomes the stand-in for the impassive media, a representative of this faceless entity who is willing to risk, or even kill, those closest to him for momentary gain.<sup>163</sup> In *City Sleeps*, if Andrews is the face of Kyne, his hollow expression aptly signifies the ways in which Kyne is bereft of all humanity, a banal mask to hide the media corporation's rotten core. In *Reasonable Doubt*, we see Andrews's Tom framed in some shots in the same way as Mobley is during his telecasts, but in *Reasonable Doubt*, Tom does not have control; instead, he is the object of the television cameras' gaze while the cameras capture the proceedings of his trial. After Dolly testifies that Patty wore the same type of body make-up that was found in Tom's car, the broadcast cuts to a shot of Tom doodling on a pad, then tearing up the page, after which he looks into the camera. We can conclude that this is included in the broadcast because the television editor wanted the audience to think Tom is indifferent to the proceedings, and Tom's neutral face invites us either to agree or to ascribe whatever motivations we choose to a blank slate [Figures 5.10 – 5.12]. Tom's doodling is like his neutral expression: neither means anything, but they become enigmas onto which the viewer can project anything. Was he doodling because he was bored or because he needed to do something to focus his mind and get his thoughts in order, and is he impassive because he does not care or because he does not want to reveal too much? In his broadcast, Mobley stares into the camera, and thus at the audience, and in one instant, he directly addresses a member of the audience,

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<sup>162</sup> See also Jenkins 60; Fujiwara 171-173; Losilla 482; Pye 107-109.

<sup>163</sup> For a reading of these films that focuses on Andrews's performance and behind-the-scenes relationships, particularly his respect for and working relationship with Lang, see Carl Rollyson, *Hollywood Enigma* 218-221.

Robert, whom he assumes is watching. Tom, likewise, stares into the camera, and at an audience he assumes exists. His unaddressed stare is not just at the diegetic television audience, but at us as well. Mobley stares into the audience to taunt Robert with his revelations, while Tom, a murderer, stares into the camera to challenge us to figure out what he is hiding and why he is behaving the way he is. On first viewing, we may think this is part of Tom's playing the part according to Austin's plan, but subsequent viewings suggest that his performance masks his guilt. Tom's blank expression returns when he accepts his fate at the end of the film [Figure 5.13]. "His face is just a mask," Fujiwara observes, "a surface, an image. Dana Andrews was never better than in this last shot of him in *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*, because in it the viewers must create his performance for themselves" (173).

The casting of Andrews seems to be, furthermore, Lang's way of underscoring how Tom is the logical extension of Mobley, the bottom of a slippery slope that begins with media fashioning reality to maximize profits. This theme goes back in Lang's oeuvre at least as far as *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* (1922), and it crops up again in his Westerns, particularly *Frank James* and *Rancho Notorious*, as well as in Quive-Smith's plot to use London's police and public to hunt Thorndike in *Man Hunt* (1941). It does not seem like a big leap from using newspapers to create an "Empire of Crime," to quote the title of Mabuse's treatise in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933), in order to gain public power, to then using the media to create an identity that obscures crimes, as Tom does in *Reasonable Doubt*. His methods are markedly different from Beckert's in *M*. Although Beckert also tried writing his letter to the newspapers to create a public perception of himself, in order to stir up more terror and confusion among the public, he did not try to

obscure who he was. Instead, he tried to create a public perception of himself that differed from who he actually was, a psychotic coward. In his regard, it seems appropriate that the first time we see Beckert's face, he is making faces in a mirror, seemingly trying on different images of himself.<sup>164</sup> Tom's careful planning puts him more in the tradition of Lang's early master criminals, Mabuse (*Dr Mabuse, the Gambler*, *Testament of Dr. Mabuse*) and Haghi (*Spies*), both of whom had far more control over their public and private personae. Tom, although not as flamboyant as earlier Lang master criminals, nonetheless goes further than Mabuse or Haghi in an important way. Whereas those characters hid their criminal acts behind their public alter-egos as performers, Tom manages to stay himself, using the newspaper to obscure his past and construct the reality he wants everyone else, including his fiancé, to believe is true while he acts with impunity—and, if his plan had succeeded, he would have gotten away with murder. Tom, then, is completely different from *Fury's* Joe Wilson or *Live Once's* Eddie Taylor, both of whom were victims of identities created by the media. Those characters fought and succumbed to the media images of themselves and the resulting public attitude. Tom is the inverse of that, cannily using the media to create his own innocence and the version of himself he wants to be true, both to the public and to himself.<sup>165</sup>

Tom's simultaneous fabrication and destruction of evidence also separates him from *Woman in the Window's* Richard Wanley and *Blue Gardenia's* Norah Larkin, both

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<sup>164</sup> For more on this scene in *M*, see David Fine, "From Berlin to Hollywood" 283-284; Gellen 433-434; Gunning 179; Kaes, *M* 53-57; Pye and Luppá 5-6; Solovieva 53-54. Beckert can thus be read, as critics have, as a precursor to *City Sleeps's* Robert, who also tries to fashion a specific image of himself, as seen in his clothing choices and the picture of himself that he draws in the newspaper.

<sup>165</sup> Even an earlier Lang hero, Siegfried in *Die Nibelungen* (1924), needed others, particularly the Bard, Volker, to spread his legend. One can also think here of how, in *Rancho Notorious*, storytellers spread the legend of Altar Keane, and the film's framing narrative ballad served, in a way, to spread Vern's legend. But Tom seemingly has total control over his image creation, until his verbal slip changes him from nominal hero to villain.

of whom are so obsessed with the fear that evidence will give them away that they destroy evidence. Although Norah has help from the press in the form of Casey Mayo, Casey is not creating a new identity nor reality for her; he wants to find the killer, and even though he likes Norah and withholds information from the police, he is not a party to her destroying evidence, and he does not use his column to try to prove her innocence. When Casey tries to save her, he has evidence, albeit circumstantial, and he succeeds not because he fabricated or destroyed evidence but because he worked with existing evidence, and with police help. Even when characters like *Scarlet Street*'s Chris Cross of *House by the River*'s Stephen Byrne destroy evidence and lie on the stand, they are eventually brought low by mental torment.<sup>166</sup> Although Tom is brought low by his own slip of the tongue, he does not express the type of guilt manifest in the auditory hallucinations of Chris or the visual hallucinations of Stephen—or even the paranoia of the innocent Norah, who is convinced she cannot remember killing Prebble because her mind thinks remembering the event would destroy her. Tom thinks he has pulled off the perfect crime, and he is brought low by his over-confidence.

With *City Sleeps* and *Reasonable Doubt*, it is clear that Lang had extended the implications of the Hollywood crime film to their logical limits and had grown intensely frustrated with both Hollywood's genre formulas and the Production Code's contrived moralism. Thus, with these two films, Lang rejected traditional crime film forms to focus instead on journalists involved in criminal investigations. Instead of offering the comfort

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<sup>166</sup> We can also think of Mark Lamphere (Michael Redgrave) in *Secret Beyond the Door* (1947). Although he does not kill his wife, Celia, we are led to think he did. After the supposed murder, Lang shows Mark imagining the murder trial, in which he questions himself during a trial. He defends himself against the charges of murdering both Celia and his first wife, eventually saying, "if Celia were here, I'd still have to kill her." He is thus tortured by what we presume is guilt for murdering Celia until Celia returns and we realize Mark did not kill her.

of showing justice served and the status quo upheld, Lang shows the ways the media outlets on which the public relied for information about crime and its investigations have been corrupted.

Even though Lang did not know he was making his final American films when he made these pictures, it is hard to imagine what he could have gone to next: he had already hollowed out the crime film, and, with *Rancho*, had clearly shown the limits and illusions of the Western, as he had with his only combat film, *American Guerrilla in the Philippines* (1950). It should be no surprise, then, that his three remaining films looked to his past: his Indian diptych, *The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The Indian Tomb* (both 1959), reworking a pair of 1921 films which he had written with Thea von Harbou, returned him to the serial adventure film of *The Spiders* (1919/1920). And his final film, *1,000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* (1960), revisited his master criminal Mabuse. But this Mabuse is not the hypnotist of the first film, nor a psychiatrist possessed by Mabuse's spirit as in *Testament*, but instead a phony psychic, Cornelius, obsessed with the legend of Mabuse.<sup>167</sup> Lang's cynicism in *1,000 Eyes*, moving from the mystical elements of the first Mabuse films to a comment on the postwar corporatization of society, reflects an attitude that might possibly have served him well for a comeback amidst the increased cynicism of the late 60s and early 70s, but by then his health and eyesight were failing.<sup>168</sup> But his influence goes on, be it in the Westerns of Sergio Leone and Clint Eastwood,<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Cornelius's determination to resurrect and avenge the past recalls the motivations of Kriemhild in the second *Nibelungen* film, *Kriemhild's Revenge*. Cornelius's determination to conquer death also recalls *Destiny* (1921) and two of Lang's early scripts, *Hilde Warren and Death* (1917, directed by Joe May) and *The Plague in Florence* (1919, directed by Otto Rippert).

<sup>168</sup> For more on the changes, including increasing cynicism, in Hollywood movies in the 60s and 70s, see, for example, Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*; David A. Cook, *A History of Narrative Film* 669-690, *Lost Illusions*; Mark Cousins, *The Story of Film* 333-352; Paul Monaco, *The Sixties*; Robert B. Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema* 247-368; Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*.

<sup>169</sup> See the conclusion to my article "The Western through a Monocle."

the science fiction of George Lucas and Ridley Scott,<sup>170</sup> the crime films of Arthur Penn and Martin Scorsese,<sup>171</sup> and beyond—as in remakes of his films, including *The Blue Gardenia* remade as *The Morning After* (1986) and Peter Hyams’s version of *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (2009).<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> *Metropolis* (1927) is the Lang film that has clearly influenced these directors. Compare C-3PO, in Lucas’s *Star Wars* (1977), with the robot Maria in Lang’s film, or the design of the city in Lang’s film with the Los Angeles of Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982). See, for example, Thomas Elsaesser, “Innocence Restored” and *Metropolis* 7-8, 57; Gunning 53; Karen Naundorf, “The Metropolis Mystery” 27; Peter Wollen, “Delirious Projections.”

<sup>171</sup> See, for example, Carlos Clarens 328-329; Pauline Kael, “The Frightening Power of *Bonnie and Clyde*.”

<sup>172</sup> *The Morning After* does not credit *Blue Gardenia*, meaning the filmmakers did not view it as a remake, and enough pieces are changed the case could be made for it being a quasi-original story. Kristen Moana Thompson, however, refers to it as a remake of Lang’s film in *Crime Films* (57).

We can also consider the ways Lang’s films have impacted the non-cinematic world, as with the influence on rocketry of *Woman in the Moon*. See, for example, Tom Gunning and Katharina Loew, “Lunar Longings and Rocket Fever”; David Kirby, “The Future is Now” 53-57; McGilligan 144.

5.7 POSTWAR CRIME SCREENSHOTS



Figure 5.1 *The Big Heat*: The first shot, a revolver on a desk





Figure 5.2 *Kiss of Death*: The first shot, a revolver on a stack of papers. The similarities between this and the first shot of *Big Heat* suggest that Lang was commenting on this film.



Figure 5.3 *The Big Heat*: Debby with the left side of her face covered in bandages after Vince disfigures her with boiling coffee.



Figure 5.4 *The Big Heat*: Debby showing Vince her disfigured face after she scalds him with boiling coffee.



Figure 5.5 *The Big Heat*: The final shot. Bannion (walking through the door on the left) leaves to investigate a new homicide. He tells Hugo (right) to “Keep the coffee hot” as he passes a poster reading “Give Blood Now.”



Figure 5.6 *The Blue Gardenia*: Casey Mayo walks past an advertisement for his newspaper column.

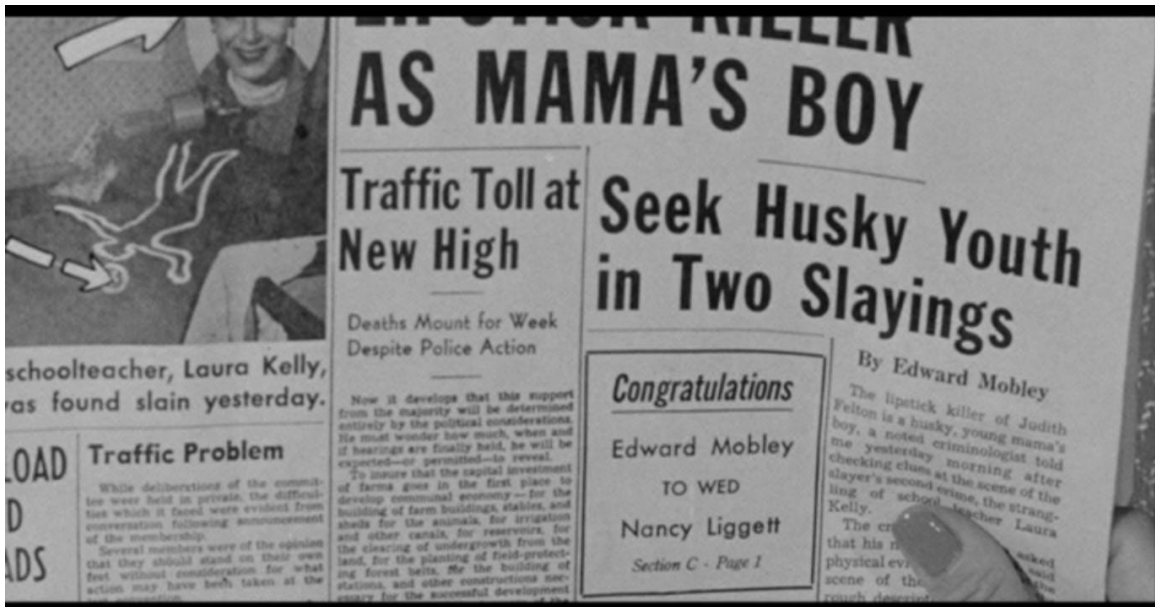


Figure 5.7 *While the City Sleeps*: The announcement of Mobley's engagement to Nancy, set alongside Mobley's story, which reiterates much from his television address to the killer, in which he taunts the killer.



Figure 5.8 *While the City Sleeps*: Robert draws himself, as he wants others to see him, in the illustration that runs on the front page of the newspaper.



Figure 5.9 *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*: Tom poses with the day's newspaper before putting his engraved lighter at the site where Patty Gray's body was discovered. Offscreen, Austin takes a polaroid as evidence of Tom's innocence.



Figure 5.10 *While the City Sleeps*: Mobley, in the studio, begins a broadcast with his address to the killer.



Figure 5.11 *While the City Sleeps*: Mobley, on the TV, ends his address to the killer. Although here we see a slight smile, given the news of his engagement, we see a relatively neutral expression on his face, as we see throughout most of the film.



Figure 5.12 *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*: Tom's impassive face as he looks into the camera after tearing up a piece of paper on which we saw him doodling.





Figure 5.13 *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt*: Tom's face remains impassive as he learns his pardon will not be signed. In both *City Sleeps* and *Reasonable Doubt*, Dana Andrews's impassive face becomes a mask for the media and screen for our projections.

## APPENDIX

### FILMOGRAPHY

- Adventures of Superman* (1952-1958) [Television series]  
*American Guerilla in the Philippines* (Fritz Lang, 1950)  
*Angels with Dirty Faces* (Michael Curtiz, 1938)  
*Back to Bataan* (Edward Dmytryk, 1945)  
*Ball of Fire* (Howard Hawks, 1941)  
*Bataan* (Tay Garnett, 1943)  
*Battleground* (William A. Wellman, 1949)  
*Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (Fritz Lang, 1956)  
*Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* (Peter Hyams, 2009)  
*The Big Heat* (Fritz Lang, 1953)  
*The Big House* (George Hill, 1930)  
*The Big Trail* (Raoul Walsh, 1930)  
*Black Legion* (Archie Mayo, 1937)  
*Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982)  
*The Blue Gardenia* (Fritz Lang, 1953)  
*Brokeback Mountain* (Ang Lee, 2005)  
*Bullets or Ballots* (William Keighley, 1936)  
*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* [*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*] (Robert Weine, 1920)  
*The Chase* (Arthur Ripley, 1946)  
*The Christmas Dream* [*Le rêve de Noël*] (Georges Méliès, 1900)  
*Cimarron* (Wesley Ruggles, 1931)  
*Clash by Night* (Fritz Lang, 1952)  
*Confirm or Deny* (Archie Mayo, 1941)  
*Contempt* [*Les Mépris*] (Jean-Luc Godard, 1963)  
*Conversation with Fritz Lang* (William Friedkin, 1975)  
*The Covered Wagon* (James Cruz, 1923)  
*Crime Does Not Pay* (1935-1947) [short film series]  
*The Criminal Code* (Howard Hawks, 1931)  
*Daisy Kenyon* (Otto Preminger, 1947)  
*Dead End* (William Wyler, 1937)  
*Desperate Journey* (Raoul Walsh, 1942)  
*Destination Tokyo* (Delmer Daves, 1943)  
*Destiny* [*Der Müde Tod*] (Fritz Lang, 1921)  
*Destry Rides Again* (George Marshall, 1939)  
*Dodge City* (Michael Curtiz, 1939)  
*Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944)  
*Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* [*Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler*] (Fritz Lang, 1922)  
*Part I: The Great Gambler: A Picture of Our Time* [*Der Grosse Spieler: Ein Bild der Zeit*]

*Part II: Inferno: A Play of People of Our Time [Inferno: Ein Spiel von Menschen unserer Zeit]*

*Drums Along the Mohawk* (John Ford, 1939)  
*Each Dawn I Die* (William Keighley, 1939)  
*The Eternal Jew [Der ewige Jude]* (Fritz Hippler, 1940)  
*Five Star Final* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931)  
*Fort Apache* (John Ford, 1948)  
*Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931)  
*The Front Page* (Lewis Milestone, 1931)  
*Fury* (Fritz Lang, 1936)  
*Gilda* (Charles Vidor, 1946)  
*Gold Diggers of 1933* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1933)  
*The Grapes of Wrath* (John Ford, 1940)  
*The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903)  
*Guadalcanal Diary* (Lewis Seiler, 1943)  
*Gunga Din* (George Stevens, 1939)  
*Hangmen Also Die* (Fritz Lang, 1943)  
*Harakiri* (Fritz Lang, 1919)  
*Hell or High Water* (David Mackenzie, 2016)  
*Hell's Highway* (Rowland Brown, John Cromwell, 1932)  
*Heroes for Sale* (William A. Wellman, 1933)  
*Hilde Warren and Death [Hilde Warren und der Tod]* (Joe May, 1917)  
*His Girl Friday* (Howard Hawks, 1940)  
*House by the River* (Fritz Lang, 1950)  
*Human Desire* (Fritz Lang, 1954)  
*I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1932)  
*I Cover the Waterfront* (James Cruze, 1933)  
*The Indian Tomb [Das indische Grabmal]* (Fritz Lang, 1959)  
*In Old Arizona* (Irving Cummings and Raoul Walsh, 1928)  
*The Invisible Man* (James Whale, 1933)  
*The Iron Horse* (John Ford, 1924)  
*It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934)  
*Jesse James* (Henry King, 1939)  
*Kiss of Death* (Henry Hathaway, 1947)  
*The Last Mile* (Samuel Bischoff, 1932)  
*Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944)  
*Liliom* (Fritz Lang, 1934)  
*Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931)  
*The Lost Patrol* (John Ford, 1934)  
*M* (Fritz Lang, 1931)  
*M* (Joseph Losey, 1951)  
*Man Hunt* (Fritz Lang, 1941)  
*Manila Calling* (Herbert I. Leeds, 1942)  
*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962)  
*Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927)  
*Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945)

*Moonfleet* (Fritz Lang, 1955)  
*The Morning After* (Sidney Lumet, 1986)  
*My Darling Clementine* (John Ford, 1946)  
*Die Nibelungen* (Fritz Lang, 1924)  
     *Part I: Siegfried* [*Siegfrieds Tod*]  
     *Part II: Kriemhild's Revenge* [*Kriemhilds Rache*]  
*Night Song* (John Cromwell, 1947)  
*1939: Hollywood's Greatest Year* (Constantine Nasr, 2009)  
*No Country for Old Men* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 2007)  
*Northern Pursuit* (Raoul Walsh, 1943)  
*Objective, Burma!* (Raoul Walsh, 1945)  
*An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* [*La rivière du hibou*] (Robert Enrico, 1961)  
*Our Daily Bread* (King Vidor, 1934)  
*The Ox-Bow Incident* (William A. Wellman, 1943)  
*The Plague in Florence* [*Pest in Florenz*] (Otto Rippert, 1919)  
*The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946)  
*The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931)  
*Rancho Notorious* (Fritz Lang, 1952)  
*Raw Deal* (Anthony Mann, 1948)  
*Reel Injun: On the Trail of the Hollywood Indian* (Neil Diamond, Catherine  
     Bainbridge, and Jeremiah Hayes, 2009)  
*The Return of Frank James* (Fritz Lang, 1940)  
*Rio Grande* (John Ford, 1950)  
*Sahara* (Zoltan Korda, 1943)  
*San Quentin* (Lloyd Bacon, 1937)  
*Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932)  
*Scarlet Street* (Fritz Lang, 1945)  
*Secret Beyond the Door* (Fritz Lang, 1947)  
*Sergeant York* (Howard Hawks, 1941)  
*Sh! The Octopus* (William C. McGann, 1937)  
*Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon* (Roy William Neill, 1942)  
*Sherlock Holmes and the Voice of Terror* (John Rawlins, 1942)  
*Sherlock Homes in Washington* (Roy William Neill, 1943)  
*She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (John Ford, 1949)  
*The Spiders* [*Die Spinnen*] (Fritz Lang, 1919/1920)  
     *Episode I: The Golden Sea* [*Der Goldene See*] (1919)  
     *Episode II: The Diamond Ship* [*Das Brilliantenschiff*] (1920)  
*Spies* [*Spione*] (Fritz Lang, 1928)  
*Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939)  
*Star Wars* [*Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*] (George Lucas, 1977)  
*The Story of G.I. Joe* (William A. Wellman, 1945)  
*The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry* (Robert Siodmak, 1945)  
*Sullivan's Travels* (Preston Sturges, 1941)  
*The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* [*Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse*] (Fritz Lang,  
     1933)  
*They Were Expendable* (John Ford, 1945)

*They Won't Forget* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1937)  
*The Thin Man Goes Home* (Richard Thorpe, 1945)  
*1,000 Eyes of Dr. Mabuse* [*Die 1000 Augen des Dr. Mabuse*] (Fritz Lang, 1960)  
*The Tiger of Eschnapur* [*Der Tiger von Eschnapur*] (Fritz Lang, 1959)  
*20,000 Years in Sing Sing* (Michael Curtiz, 1932)  
*Union Pacific* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1939)  
*Up in Arms* (Elliott Nugent, 1944)  
*A Walk in the Sun* (Lewis Milestone, 1945)  
*The Wandering Shadow* [*Das wandernde Bild*] (Fritz Lang, 1920)  
*Wee Willie Winkie* (John Ford, 1937)  
*Western Union* (Fritz Lang, 1941)  
*While the City Sleeps* (Fritz Lang, 1956)  
*Wild Boys of the Road* (William A. Wellman, 1933)  
*The Wild One* (Laslo Benedek, 1953)  
*The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939)  
*Woman in the Moon* [*Frau im Mond*] (Fritz Lang, 1929)  
*The Woman in the Window* (Fritz Lang, 1944)  
*You and Me* (Fritz Lang, 1938)  
*You Only Live Once* (Fritz Lang, 1937)

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