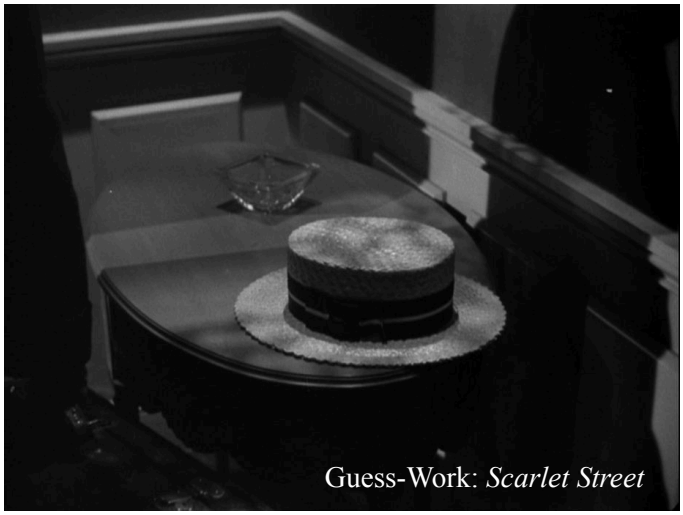

Guess-Work: *Scarlet Street*

> *Any reading of Borges should take into account the ethics that sustains it. For certain readers, the term might seem strange, even dubious. By ethics I mean the honest conduct and conveyance of a text, seemingly deceitful yet aware of its deceptions, admitting to its inevitable traps, confessing to the creation of simulacra it does nothing to conceal.*
>
> (Sylvia Molloy, 1994: 4)

> *Cinema takes metamorphosis seriously, as well as what Elias Canetti calls 'enantiomorphosis', the act of unmasking, bringing to a first identity the whole series of deceptive figures. Lang, Hitchcock: wigs, untinted mirrors, false identities, 'unbelievable truths', various masks.*
>
> (Pascal Bonitzer [1982], 1991: 122)

In a segment of *Scarlet Street* lasting less than thirty-five seconds, Chris Cross (Edward G. Robinson) has a brutal encounter with the awful reality that he has hitherto overlooked – the sexual relationship between his beloved Kitty (Joan Bennett) and her criminal beau Johnny (Dan Duryea), and their ruthless manipulation of him. In a brisk series of shots (seven cuts, but only four separate camera set-ups), we see Chris enter the apartment that he has rented for Kitty. It is dark, but we see Johnny's discarded straw hat – as does Chris, whose alarmed gaze cues a closer insert of it. Then he looks ahead, and before him, in the lounge room, he views the disquieting spectacle of Johnny entering, followed by Kitty, and then their languorous kiss.

There is an intricate fusion of image and sound events across these eight rapid shots. On the fade in, before Chris enters, a record is already playing: it is a male crooner's version of the Burnett / Norton standard 'My Melancholy Baby'. On the insert of Johnny's hat, the record hits a scratch, so that the words 'in love' repeat themselves manically and atonally. Everyone present in the scene makes a noise announcing their entry before they become visible in the frame: Chris and Johnny both open doors; Kitty utters 'Johnny?' from off-screen over a close-up of Chris, cueing a panicked shift of his eyes. As Chris watches the lovers, Kitty murmurs Johnny's name again, and he responds with his nickname for her: 'Lazy Legs'. Over a cut-back to Chris, who is more crushed with every passing second, Kitty adds: 'Jeepers, I love you'.

According to Tom Conley, 'nothing takes place only once' in *Scarlet Street* (1991: 21-22). The nightmarish force of this moment of truth comes from the fact that it is a furious swirl of tiny, compacted repetitions gathered from the eighty minutes of narrative preceding it. Johnny's straw hat lies on the street beside him in the first scene in which he appears, and in several later scenes later it will, having become a fully functioning metonym, announce his nearby off-screen presence in Kitty's swish apartment. The same scratched record of 'My Melancholy Baby' has featured in a scene in the flat Kitty initially shares with Millie (Margaret Lindsay); in both scenes, Johnny deals with the nuisance. In fact, 'My Melancholy Baby' has already appeared on the soundtrack in seven different arrangements, diegetic and extra-diegetic – with male or female singers, and settings designed to cue, variously, suspense, romance, comedy, dread and irony. And all those short, sharp names, nick-

names, catchwords and banalities – *Johnny*, *jeepers*, *Lazy Legs*, *I love you* – have gone around and around in the film's dialogue like another cracked record.

To appreciate fully the moment-to-moment brilliance of *Scarlet Street* – one of Lang's most completely systematic films – one must remain alert to its tiniest intrigues and mysteries. It plays on the unpredictability of each new scene – creating a constant, low-level sense of imminent catastrophe. Much of the action is keyed to urgent, everyday questions of identity: who's that knocking at, or coming through, my door? Our first guess is rarely correct. When Kitty and Johnny imagine that Chris has arrived, it turns out to be Millie; later, when Johnny hides from an art world contingent at the apartment door, he imagines they are the cops. Lang begins the scene of Kitty checking out her new apartment with a delicious pause – before Johnny also saunters in through the still open door, unexpectedly. Although Chris' shrill wife Adele (Rosalind Ivan) probably knows full well that there is a visitor in her home when she opens a door dressed only in her underwear and starts complaining of the lack of privacy, later she will have no idea that the man who falls upon her in the dark is her supposedly dead first husband, Homer (Charles Kemper) – just as Chris had no idea, in a previous scene, of the identity of the announced detective waiting for him outside the office. At the story's climax, Kitty, lounging as ever in bed, assumes that the brute making a racket and entering the apartment is a drunken Johnny – and her casual words help to secure her gruesome death by ice-pick-stabbing at Chris' hands.

Lang is fond of dramatic statements – questions or accusations – suddenly hurled from off-screen space, terrifying or paralysing the central character who is in full view. Yet these statements also rarely mean what we, or their troubled hearers, immediately take them to mean. Says smooth boss J.J. (Russell Hicks) to Chris: 'Just caught you in time' – but he has not in fact twigged to the fact of the thieving from the office safe. Says Adele to Chris: 'How long have you known Katherine March?' – but she is not accusing him of adultery, only of artistic plagiarism. Kitty fakes remorse when (in the very next scene) Chris confronts her with: 'How did my pictures get into Dellarowe's window?' – but he is not angry, rather boundlessly, pathetically grateful. When Chris hears J.J.'s stern question, 'what made you do it?', he gestures as if on the verge of admitting to the murder he has just committed – but the inquiry covers only his thievery.

Sometimes even the events right before one's eyes and plainly in one's ears have a secret side that takes a few moments to reveal itself. In the exchange leading up to Chris' impulsive murder of Kitty, she buries her head in the pillow and makes a wretched, sobbing noise. 'Don't cry … I know how you feel', he beseeches her, as he explains that he is no longer chained to Adele and is free to marry again; but then Kitty lifts her head – and she is laughing wickedly. She taunts him – 'How can a man be so dumb?' – and it is yet another moment of awful revelation for the increasingly cornered and haunted Chris.

From his earliest silent films, Lang developed a fondness for beginning a scene with an insert or a detail, before moving the camera further out or cutting to gradually reveal a wider context. Often it is the action of a hand – picking up a letter or a pen, turning over some object, opening a safe – that cues this movement of revelation. As Alain Masson has remarked, such images create instant intrigue, as well as a kind of poetic mystery, because, while seeming direct and easily readable, they are in fact built upon 'intensity, uncertainty and dissimulation' (1982: 65). Even if only for a few

frames, there can be enigma attached to the location or status of a gesture, the intention behind it, and last but not least the precise identity of the person performing it. Many scenes in *Scarlet Street* begin with an object that cannot easily or instantly be placed – such as the flower that Chris is revealed to be painting in his bathroom, or his allegorical canvas of Kitty under a street lamp circled by a snake.

Lang's scene transitions demand an equally active response and engagement from the viewer – inference, deduction and retroactive figuring out are important aspects of Langian guess-work. (I coin this term in dual homage to Freud's famous notion of the dream-work [1965] and Thierry Kuntzel's ingenious adaptation of it into the film-work [1978: 38-61; 1980: 6-69].) The step from one scene to the next sometimes creates a moment of mystery, a question as to how much time has passed and how far the plot has

moved forward since the last fade-out – as in the transition from Johnny and Kitty initially looking over the new apartment, to Johnny asleep in bed there, obviously some days or possibly weeks later. Another indeterminate ellipse of this type takes us from the first meeting of Chris and Kitty – via a bridging domestic scene between Chris and Adele – to a scene that opens with a hand (which turns out to be Johnny's) picking up the letter that Chris has, in the meantime, sent to Kitty. In general, Lang makes bold use of ellipsis, often using brief lines of dialogue to retroactively indicate parts or paths of the story left entirely off-screen – as when Kitty refers to the three lunches (none of them depicted) she has had to endure with the unctuous art critic Janeway (Jess Barker).

Another kind of transition characteristic of Lang is the strong link that cuts immediately from a cause to its effect – a form of narrative condensation or immediate association that forces us to recognise this powerful storytelling logic which overwhelms naturalistic, more conventional principles of space, time and narration. In *Scarlet Street* we pass instantly, for example, from Chris regarding the flower given to him by Kitty to the same flower in his bathroom, propped up to be painted; or from Kitty's naming of how

much money she needs – 'five hundred dollars' – to the close shot of Chris furtively counting out this money at the firm's safe. Many films, of course, use similar devices in order to achieve narrative economy, but in Lang, as in Ernst Lubitsch, this economy is pushed to a speedy, hyperstylised, even cartoonish extreme.

At the fastest and most deliriously economic point of the film's narrative velocity, an entire scene – Johnny's trial – is reduced to a purely transitory series of mere points linked by a kind of cumulative or deductive logic: ten shots and statements in all (serving as a kind of thumbnail review of the plot and its logic), the camera progressively moving closer into heads spot-lit against an abstract, wall background, ending with a cartoonish flourish as Johnny looks directly into the lens in close-up and beseeches us with, 'For cat's sake, he's lying!'

If there is something of the order of a moral lesson or a guiding, instructional impulse in Lang's special mode of storytelling, it has everything to do with this constantly and carefully maintained air of cinematic intrigue. In a sense, this lesson is addressed both to the characters who are caught within the fiction, and to spectators who are capable of a broader, more detached analysis. Tom Gunning rightly asserts that 'Lang creates metaphors, riddles and emblems, even within the Hollywood continuity system, which demand to be read and decoded' (2000: 311). Our skills and capacities for guess-work are sharpened by Lang's films; our hasty assumptions as spectators are corrected and chastened. His films plunge us into a world where appearances conceal as much as they reveal, according to vertiginous, ever-shifting principles of performance, fakery and bluff. In short, they ask us to attend to the ways and means of representation – the creation and perpetual transformation of representational illusions (metamorphosis) as well as their unravelling, cancellation and unmasking (enantiomorphosis).

But the characters, too, are involved in a constant process of guess-work: everything depends on what they see and hear, what they deduce on the basis of these sensory perceptions, and what actions their assumed knowledge leads them to perform. In Lang's universe – it has often been said – appearances are deceptive, comprising a trap laid by something resembling malign fate; it is perhaps more exact to suggest that appearances offer a game that his characters struggle to master, fitfully succeeding but eventually ending up as victims. A fine Langian motto can be derived from a much later film made by one of his disciples, Brian De Palma's *Carlito's Way* (1993), where the battling hero Carlito (Al Pacino) wisely reflects, 'When you can't see the angles no more – you in trouble'.

For most of *Scarlet Street*, Chris can neither see the angles, nor hear the telling sounds. Dudley Nichols' superb script comes up with a punning, loaded way to describe his particular problem: he has 'no perspective' as the street artist puts it (Chris later adds: 'Yes, that's one thing I never could master'). Chris' crushing naïveté as a person is mirrored in the technical simplicity of his paintings, his naïve art. For Chris, artistic expression is a matter of pure emotion – 'I just put a line around what I feel when I look at things'. Yet this quality of untutored, sentimental innocence that, within another dramatic context, might have seemed a charming or noble ideal, here tallies with a profound unawareness. Lang, so fond of using the sensory faculties specific to cinema to embody his themes and characters, makes Chris' psychological blindness a literal kind of blindness – an inability to see reality.

The film's second scene formulates this equation. A somewhat tipsy Chris has lost his way on the wet streets of Greenwich village – the kind of detour from everyday coordinates so common and so consequential in much film noir. As the loud, stylised sound of a passing train moves the scene into an expressionist gear, Chris sees in the distance a scuffle between a man and a woman. His point-of-view shot suggests his instant, romantically tinged interpretation of what he beholds: a beastly man menacing an innocent woman. He holds out his umbrella like a sword and goes charging into the scene, a knight errant. He lunges at Johnny, but immediately – in one of the key images of the film – throws an arm up to shield his eyes and freezes for a few moments. The gesture not only expresses his innate cowardice or nervousness but, more deeply, his will to replace a true vision with a fantasised one: when he lowers his arm, he is instantly entranced by the sight of Kitty. Chris will later say that, for him, 'any painting, if it's any good, is a love affair' – not realising that the only affair or relation

truly in play is the one between Chris and what he projects from his imagination. (Significantly, Chris also rejects the medium of photography – an objective image record – as 'mud', not art, when he glances at the looming portrait of Homer in his loungeroom.) Point-of-view shots often suggest internal, mental imagery (in Gunning's terms, the 'visionary' experience) in Lang's work – such as the disconcerting street-level insert of J.J's date in the opening scene, an unreal point-of-view shot belonging to the men upstairs shouting: 'Get a load of that dame!'

'Nothing takes place only once or from one way of looking at things'. Conley's full remark about the system of *Scarlet Street* tallies with Florence Jacobowitz's claim that 'the audience is privileged to various levels of awareness and a kind of multiple layering' (1992: 152). While both characters and spectators are preyed upon cunningly by Lang – confronted by momentary uncertainties and ruses, constantly having to readjust their assumptions and perspectives – the audience is granted the glimpse of a wider, more inclusive pattern governing the actions and reactions, decisions and errors of these fictional beings. Gunning stresses that the film's 'bleak view extends beyond individual psychology' (2000: 323), instead reaching out to the familiar Langian system of an overarching Destiny-machine that – by this increasingly pessimistic point in the director's career – has flattened, absorbed and co-opted the once-subversive flutters of personal desire.

The film is thus concerned with more than Chris' peculiar blindness and the drama it incites; as usual, Lang eschews the use of a central narrative viewpoint channelled through a single, main character, or rather what Jacques Rivette called (with reference to Lang and Hitchcock) the 'so-called central character' and his or her 'phony central consciousness' (Rosenbaum 1977: 51). *Scarlet Street* may seemingly begin from such a figure, but its strategy is to build quickly other narrative webs around Chris, other plots that delimit the hero's freedom and show the context in which he is a veritable prisoner. Rivette rightly described this process as a 'play with the protagonist … and all that this allows' (51).

In particular, *Scarlet Street* is constructed on a double, intermeshing plot that creates a pattern larger than the consciousness of its two main characters. As much as it traces Chris' lack of perspective, the film equally concentrates on Kitty's delusions – her lack of self-awareness in the masochistic relation to the abusive Johnny, and her literal misunderstandings of the real, underlying conditions of her situation. In an immortal exchange – almost a corrective, in Lang's career, to the tortuous apologia for domestic violence offered in *Liliom* (1934) – Kitty's declaration 'you wouldn't know love if it hit you in the face' is answered by Millie's droll observation, 'if that's where it hits you, you oughta know'. The over-arching narrative form of the film is a 'crisscross' (Lang punningly shows his hand by naming his main character after a formal pattern), inaugurated in the wonderfully crafted dialogue where, firstly, Kitty lets Chris believe that she is an actress, and then Chris lets Kitty believe that he is a wealthy and famous artist – and both beliefs are assumptions, projections. Masquerades then begin in earnest for both characters, each with a secret life to keep hidden from the other, and precarious steps that must be taken in order to keep their respective illusions afloat.

The film rigorously alternates these twin plots until finally it draws them together. Chris hides his lowly profession as an accountant and takes to stealing, while Kitty talks Chris into renting her the apartment, enabling her to continue her affair with Johnny (whom she passes off as Millie's boyfriend). It is Johnny's eventual 'knight's move' – taking Chris' paintings to hock them on the black market – that upsets the balance of mutual deception and inaugurates a new set of power games.

We, as spectators, are allowed to see and understand that the characters inhabit a kind of narrative chessboard – a matrix of positions and possibilities that can be turned around and exploited in many, varying ways. The game is a constantly transformative one, full of surprises. Tables are turned, as when Chris gains the upper hand over Johnny – signalled in the rhyming moment where Chris hides under stairs watching Johnny go to his fate, just as Johnny earlier hid waiting for Chris to leave the apartment. Characters suddenly take each other's places, as when Kitty appropriates something of Chris by mouthing his credo about painting to Janeway – and simultaneously becomes at last the actress she has earlier pretended to be. Completely

unexpected events occur – such as the resurrection of Homer, surely one of the most outrageous plot moves in all Hollywood cinema.

No character, however, ever attains the supreme position of the filmmaker or spectator – the ability to see the whole game, the entire board. They can see from only partial perspectives, can grasp only one possible move at a time, can take only makeshift, hastily improvised actions. The consistently dry, ironic humour of the film comes from the fact that all the main players on this board tend to be out for the 'main chance' – whether that be money, love, success or fame – but, for the most part, fail hopelessly, because they can never perceive or foresee any bigger picture.

Consider, in this light, how Chris' paintings (executed by John Decker) circulate throughout the film, and the strategies that this reveals or enables for diverse characters. After Johnny has taken the unsigned canvases to a dealer, he believes that he has exposed Chris as an untalented, unknown charlatan (and he is partly right), and returns smugly to Kitty to trumpet his discovery. When Janeway tells him that the pictures are actually 'good', however, he immediately suspends his judgement of Chris and, in a moment of improvised inspiration, launches a new masquerade, proclaiming Kitty as the unknown artist. Chris, upon learning of this charade, happily acquiesces and actively helps with the scam.

But even Chris, the apparently passive dupe, is capable of bold moves. During the murder trial, Chris brilliantly seizes upon the fact of his artistic anonymity ('My former wife is correct. I really can't paint'), and plays up to the perception that everyone has of him as a nobody and a loser – thus condemning Johnny to the electric chair. Johnny's opening remark on the stand about Chris – 'he's not as dumb as he looks' – is bitterly ironic, in so far as, for everyone else in their now-fixed position on the narrative board, there is no longer any discernible gap between appearance and the easy assumptions to which it gives rise, and the opposite, challenging truth that it hides. The guess-work has ended.

Another way to approach Lang's achievement here is to explore his use of irony. Although the film has sometimes been criticised or dismissed for exactly this aspect (Pauline Kael: 'Lang's emphatic style pounds home the ironies', 1984: 515), *Scarlet Street* offers a veritable primer on the ways, means, forms and resonances of cinematic irony. Taking the simple definition of irony as an aesthetic device in which the literal meaning of a statement, image or event is the opposite of the meaning that comes to be implied, we can certainly find this device at work on every level in Lang's film – in the overall structure of intensive repetition (not least when, in the scene following Johnny's execution, Chris retires to his hotel room and finds himself mindlessly whistling 'My Melancholy Baby' – complete with the scratch on the recording that played earlier!) – and in the smallest details of each scene.

Sometimes we share a sense of irony with one character vis-à-vis another – creating an effect of comic complicity that often has a cruel tinge. When Kitty poses on the balcony as an artist, repeating to Janeway the remarks about art as love and feeling previously made to her by Chris, the arrangement or mise-en-scène of this theatrical deception is superbly stylised: Kitty (aided and abetted by Johnny) has chosen the location and the seductive, mock-naïve bodily postures, and Lang has, as it were, merely heightened the effect by rolling appropriately syrupy musical accompaniment (stock 'Hollywood movie music' in romantic-sentimental mode, laced with dark reprises of 'My Melancholy Baby') at the very moment that Kitty gets wise to the hoodwinking game she is able to play in this situation. Our complicity with Kitty's game here has a wicked, superior dimension – we are happy to see this pompous, pretentious critic, whose theories about the gender of art we know to be far from the truth, fooled and exploited. At the same time, such cruelty mixes with pathos, since we are also reminded that the other pawn in Kitty's game – namely, Chris – is even more ruthlessly victimised by this act of expropriation, and that his status as the perennial, alienated, abused loser can now only worsen.

A rich example of the film's extensive irony is the closely related pair of café-restaurant scenes between Kitty and Chris that take place within the first half hour. In the first scene, at night after their initial encounter, Lang subtly insinuates his pictorial mockery of Chris' perspective by employing a small camera move that reframes Kitty with a candle and flowers in the foreground of the shot. In the

second, daytime scene, an atypically flamboyant, opening crane shot down from the trees to the couple, synchronised with a particularly florid arrangement of 'My Melancholy Baby' that mixes trilling flutes with the diegetic sound of manically twittering birds, expands the register of mockery concerning Chris' romantic idealisation of Kitty. The dual

masquerade that arises from the mutual misunderstanding and projection in these scenes spins an extraordinary web of ironies in the dialogue: Lang's découpage of shot and reverse shot (more complex in its moves than a casual viewing would suggest) creates an intense volley-effect in rela-

tion to the spectator, as each new line calls upon and enriches our complicit understanding of both characters.

Joan Bennett's performance is insistently and deliciously ironic here and throughout the entire film – one of the chief sources of the 'emphasis on artifice, stylisation and all that is not natural' which Jacobowitz celebrates in the film (1992: 158). But, on close inspection, this irony bifurcates and works on two simultaneous levels. Bennett articulates the manoeuvres of Kitty's deception (the way she lowers her voice or strikes poses that are variously angelic and seductive), as well as her split-second double takes of amusement whenever Chris' eyes are lowered. But we also see details that betray the klutziness of Kitty's (not Bennett's) performance, moments of brusque vulgarity that tear at the seams of her act (as when she flicks her cigarette away, blows smoke, suddenly loses control of her vocal tone, or walks in a too-quick, vampy manner). In the film's

central ensemble, Bennett's mode of irony is carefully contrasted with Duryea's – whose performance expresses the utterly self-possessed mastery of a smooth, oily operator, always gesturing theatrically with his hands and arms, or slapping people with false chumminess on the back. Both are distinguished from Robinson's largely non-ironic, highly naturalistic playing, with its stooped postures and incessant stammering.

The café scene shows how Lang constructs not a single track of irony, but a shifting, multi-layered ironic structure. We may sometimes laugh (however uneasily) with Kitty as she gets the upper hand in her various games, but at other moments she will become the butt of someone else's ironic joke, reference or gesture (like Millie or Johnny) – and this rotating principle effects every main character in turn.

The pervasive irony in *Scarlet Street* exists to remind us that there is always someone who is in a position to view an event from the outside – to size it up, make a decision, take action. In the multi-layered structure of the film, characters inhabit such a position only fleetingly and partially. They negotiate the complexity and deceptiveness of appearances by fudging truths and launching masquerades, but are always ultimately subject to the way of the world, to forces (social or metaphysical) that are above and beyond them. They are all, in a profound, dramatic sense, stupid: unable to grasp the deep logic of the systems that construct and fix them in place. They are the damned, losers one and all, precisely because the hidden meanings, the extra dimensions, the fatal ironies are out of the reach of their consciousness, beyond their capacity for wily adaptation and negotiation. It is to us, the spectators, that Lang gives his gift of a larger insight into the systems and structures that rule his mere characters.

In the tight thematic (one could even say architectural) construction of the film, four particular domains – time, hierarchy, art, and money – constitute the large, logical structures which the characters see only intermittently and which Lang is at pains to reveal to us as viewers. Our gradual, unfolding perception of these structures, separately and in concert, is built through the devices of repetition, irony, perspective and deduction. It is from this multi-layered construction that the film acquires its special force, tone and significance.

The complex web of references to time in its many forms and meanings has been discussed by Reynold Humphries (1989: 164), Gunning (2000: 314, 317, 333-334) and Jacobowitz (1992: 160-161). From the watch that J.J. gives Chris in the opening scene, via Chris' discussions with Charlie about growing old, to the fine 'timing' displayed by Homer, the film's insistence on time asks us to reflect on a life force variously squandered, seized or exploited. Time is used by the characters, it enables an operative space for their games and manoeuvres; but it is never, ultimately, on their side. This is what Gunning makes clear in his linking of the Destiny-machine to the all-pervasive technology of the clock or time-piece – and modernity's tendency to turn its citizens into human clocks (2000: 313-317). Mastery of the forward march of time – guess-work applied to its potential outcomes – is illusory. Chris, in the final scene, is left only with the hellish eternal return of his memories, shut out altogether from the ongoing temporality of the real, workaday world.

Like everything in the film, time is subject to the brutal exercise of social power – and such power depends on carefully maintained hierarchies. Jacobowitz observes that 'Chris' adventure … is precisely situated within a hierarchical masculine system of power and exploitation' (1992: 158). Lang literally structures the film upon hierarchical lines, movements and chains of command: from the message conveyed to J.J. by his chauffeur and the watch gradually passed down the table to Chris in the opening scene (Lang cleverly withholds even a frontal view of the underling's face until after the boss' speech), to the many instances where one character towers over another, most strikingly in the overhead shot where J.J. summons Chris up the stairs in order to fire him.

Art, in a variety of guises, figures crucially in the film. Chris' perspective-less paintings – his vehicle for pure feeling as opposed to the photographic realism (with actual

medals attached!) of Homer's portrait – express more than the limitations of his character and his fantasy-projections of innocence and evil: as a result of the twists in the plot, they also come to represent his utter self-alienation. The painting of Kitty that he merrily titles 'Self Portrait' becomes first a work of art in a gallery, then a mug shot in a newspaper account of the murder, and lastly a horrid, haunting token of the masquerade which Chris can never leave. The existence of diverse art works in the film also cues another, determining social context – the art world of critics, curators and dealers, the hierarchical order of the latter reflected in the sequence in which Johnny visits them, from the small-time entrepreneur, with his open-air stall and the black marketeer crook in his secret lair, right up to the sophisticated trader in upwardly mobile aesthetic value, with his gallery on a main thoroughfare.

The carting away of Chris' self portrait, before the film's last shot of Chris tramping down the street as Christmas revellers disappear like phantoms, also concludes the money talk that has punctuated the narrative: Dellarowe comments, 'I really hate to part with it', and the buyer replies, 'For ten thousand dollars, I shouldn't think you'd mind'. Tellingly, these last lines spoken within the story do not register with Chris. Money embodies the always compromised, politicised, material reality of which Chris never becomes aware. At the beginning of his relationship with Kitty, she marvels at 'all that money' he supposedly makes as an artist, while he muses: 'You can't put a price on masterpieces'. But everything in this story has a price, and market value is the context that ultimately determines each human transaction – as suggested in the superbly economic and droll camera movement that prefaces Kitty's ironic, masquerading seduction of Janeway with the nitty-gritty business talk discreetly, chummily being pursued by her 'manager' Johnny and Dellarowe about the valuation of Chris' paintings. This theme is summed up most caustically when Homer reveals that he was not a hero who drowned, but a coward who made off underwater with a dying woman's purse.

Scarlet Street is a pitiless, corrosive film. From the first scene, we are introduced to the crushing awfulness of a system, and the grimly ironic place that an innocent will inevitably inhabit within it. Chris' romanticism, in art as in love, equals delusion; the world of money and power is the only real world, and it takes a witheringly materialist eye to see that world for what it is. Lang's sensibility – or at least the part of it that reaches full expression in this film – creates a cinema of disenchantment. But it is a lucid disenchantment, and one driven by a potent, black humour that demands to be reckoned with.

Some of Lang's critical champions have a problem – now more than ever, I suspect – in attributing any sort of morally positive or socially progressive value to such a film. *Scarlet Street* offers no obvious reassurance, finding little cause for hope in the future of the society it delineates. Jean-Louis Comolli's and François Géré's summary of the sensibility evident in *Hangmen Also Die* (1943) resonates here: 'All convictions are crushed and chastened, any enthusiasms punished: ideological or emotional adherence to 'good causes' along with the desire for the truth, illusions about justice along with identifications' (1981: 146). *Scarlet Street* corresponds well to this bleak picture. Nobody wins, and no value represented within the chess-game world of the fiction is affirmed as in any way positive or redemptive.

Must we settle then, for a merely existential celebration of Lang as the one who stared into the abyss and brought back his withering portrait of man's dark side, eternal and unchanging? For all its non-negotiable aspects, Lang's black comedy perhaps has other uses. *Scarlet Street* belongs to a tradition of what Ross Gibson describes as 'provocatively amoral' films, a tradition that today includes the work of David Lynch, De Palma, the Coens and Paul Morrissey. Lang was an ethical artist – the practitioner of an ethics without illusion, as Molloy argues for Borges – since *Scarlet Street*, in Gibson's terms, 'by virtue of its provocative absence of virtue (…) sets up a complex analysis of ethics and values' (1987: 12). And as well, an equally complex analysis of representation itself, which – in its manifold lures, systems, and the guess-work necessary to navigate and perhaps subvert it – mirrors, via metaphor, the structure of the real, social world.

How far can Lang's critique of representation really go? Peter Lehman suggests that *Scarlet Street* 'critiques both the notion of a fixed relationship between the body and masculinity and between realist representation of the body and its referent' (1993: 100) – since Chris, the small, supposedly castrated and feminised man, is eventually capable of murderous violence, while Homer the real man turns out to be nothing like the noble, law-abiding patriarch depicted in his portrait. Yet Lehman also asserts that there is a limit to this radical insight, since the film at the same time 'participates in perpetuating the very assumptions of realist representation it seeks to critique' (100). Referring to the putatively 'reflexive' zip pan that compares the real flower in the glass to its abstract representation in Chris' painting, Lehman concludes: 'What we as spectators are really doing is comparing a representation with a representation within a representation' (101).

Yet Lang – with his 'wigs, untinted mirrors, false identities, 'unbelievable truths', various masks' (Bonitzer) –

can be seen to be playing a somewhat different game in and with the Hollywood system. Far from being the mere perpetuator of realist codes of representation (how could any mainstream, storytelling filmmaker escape these codes without ceasing altogether to be a mainstream filmmaker?), he opens up that vertiginous and labyrinthine game-space in which the world is seen as a tissue of simulacra, precisely an entire and self-enclosed 'universe … of pure representation' (to use Roger Tailleur's description of Frank Tashlin's films: 1973: 26). The stylistic strategies of repetition and irony stress the brittle artificiality of this mock world.

The characters in *Scarlet Street* ceaselessly confront each other with masks, ruses, poses, quotations. Many act as if they want to be on stage (Kitty) or in the movies (Johnny) – and Lang, with his framing, lighting and musical cues, is ever happy to redouble and render ironic their self-theatricalised fantasies. Isn't this another of Lang's happy prefigurings of our contemporary, postmodern, mannerist cinema – including the films of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Pedro Almodóvar, Raúl Ruiz and Joe Dante – this conjuring of the fictional world as a social stage already fully saturated by the myths, stereotypes and clichés of mediatised representation, where the drama and comedy always arise from 'comparing a representation with a representation within a representation'?

For Lang's characters, this pre-postmodern truth multiplies the passing opportunities for bluff, deception, scheming and evasion, creating a fleeting margin of freedom without ever guaranteeing ultimate survival, salvation or self-knowledge. For us more protected spectators, carefully schooled in the Langian lessons of audio and video guesswork, another kind of insight becomes possible: an aerial view of this deadly hall of mirrors called society, and a privileged glimpse into its insidious, unethical logic.

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