

BOOK vs FILM



Brian Light

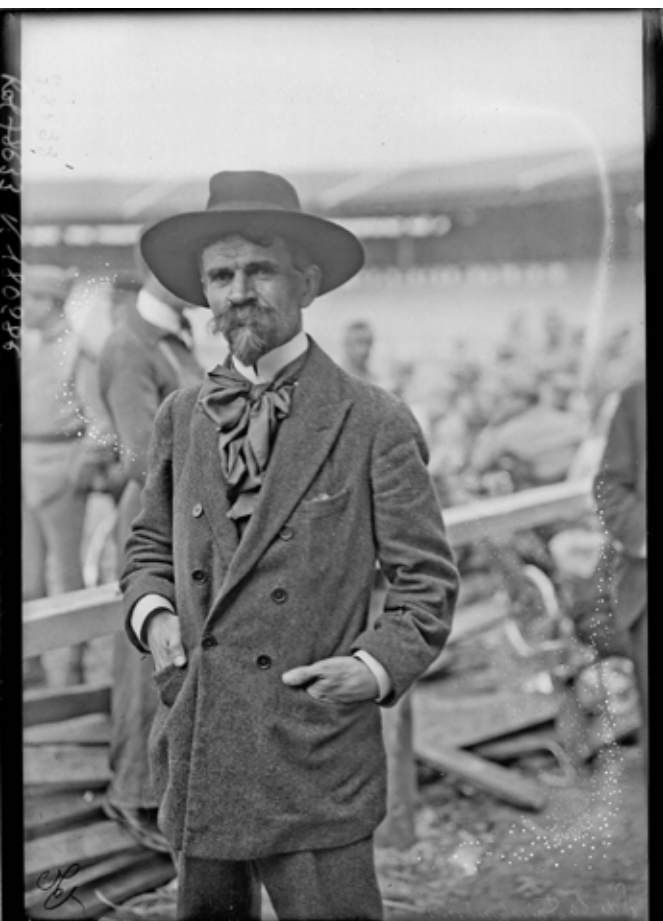
Few French writers in the first half of the 20th century could rival the output of Georges de la Fouchardière. He produced 33 humorous novels and crime thrillers, over a dozen of which were adapted for the screen in the 1920s and '30s. He was a prodigious journalist and devout pacifist who covered WWI and WWII for two newspapers, *La Vague* and *Paris-Soir*, and he also wrote a column for the weekly journal *Paris-Sport*. In 1929, he published *La Chienne* (The Bitch), a Zola-esque, if somewhat pedestrian, story of the entanglement of a prostitute, her pimp, and a love-struck, but naïve, older gentleman. What distinguished *La Chienne* from similar tawdry tales was oil paint on canvas, and the

author's commentary on the incestuous bed-fellows of art and commerce.

In his preface, de la Fouchardière calls attention to the theatrical staging used to set up the narrative structure of the story: "I have chosen a technique borrowed from dramatic art...each of the characters who participate in the story will in turn take the stage and tell in his own way about events in which he has been implicated." In chapters titled "He," "She," and "The Other," we are provided with three distinct points of view. "He" (Maurice Legrand) is the principal storyteller, and, as such, he is depicted with psychological nuance and complexity. "She" (Lulu) and "The Other" (Dédé) are more one-dimensional, possessed of shallow, transparent motivations. De la Fouchardière uses their voices to provide a narrative

counterpoint to the plotline. The book is frank in its depiction of the sordid relationship between Lulu and Dédé and the pseudo romantic/financial arrangement between Lulu and Legrand.

In 1931, Jean Renoir adapted the book to the screen with the same title. An early example of poetic realism, this was only Renoir's second talking picture, and, to his credit, he shot the entire film using actual Parisian street locations. The preceding year Alfred Knopf published an English translation of *La Chienne*, titled *Poor Sap*, which enjoyed a second printing. Paramount Studios—with Ernst Lubitsch at the helm as production chief—acquired the American film rights a few years later. In January 1935, a story conference was conducted with Lubitsch and Joseph Breen to discuss



French novelist Georges de la Fouchardière

a film adaptation with a tentative cast featuring Charles Laughton, Marlene Dietrich, and George Raft. The plot followed the same general outline of the book, and Breen indicated that the relationship between Dietrich and the two male leads would be subjected to further discussion when a treatment was submitted. Several writers were assigned to the adaptation, but were unable to produce a screenplay acceptable to the Production Code. It appears that Universal Pictures subsequently acquired the rights sometime in 1938 because, in October of that year, Maurice Pivar, supervising editor of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, submitted another treatment to Breen, who still deemed it “unacceptable under the provisions of our Production Code.” It went back on the shelf.

In 1944, as Fritz Lang was basking in the success of *Woman in the Window*, he was also in the process of extricating himself from a contentious contract with David O. Selznick, and simultaneously forming an independent production company with Joan Bennett and her husband, producer Walter Wanger. Diana Productions—an adjunct to Universal Pictures—was created in the spring of 1945, and



Michel Simon played the amateur painter in Renoir's 1931 version of *La Chienne*

it was indeed a sweet deal for Lang. Not only was he designated the company president, he would also be given a “Produced and Directed by” title card for every feature. In addition, Lang could take full advantage of Wanger’s connections at Universal Pictures, which would also handle distribution.

For their first feature, they decided to tackle *Poor Sap*, and undertake the daunting process of crafting a treatment that would appease the Production Code. Lang admired Dudley Nichols’ screenplay for *Manhunt*, so he sent him the book to read. Nichols was

intrigued by the novel’s narrative structure and, in less than two months, he crafted a treatment for what would become *Scarlet Street*. Milton Krasner, who shot *Woman in the Window*, would once again man the cameras, and from the beginning Lang had Edward G. Robinson earmarked for the lead. He greatly admired Robinson’s emotional range and regarded him as the American Peter Lorre. Joan Bennett and Dan Duryea also returned in what was shaping up to be a distorted mirror image of his previous film. This was Bennett’s third film for Lang, and while he had little regard for her acting abilities, he was clearly infatuated with her, doting endlessly on her costumes and performance. As recounted by Patrick McGilligan in Fritz Lang, *The Nature of the Beast*: “Edward G. Robinson recalled a time during the filming of *Scarlet Street* when the director spent an hour ‘rearranging the folds in Joan Bennett’s negligee so she would cast a certain shadow he wanted.’ Editor Marjorie Fowler recalled another day ‘...where Bennett was lying across a bed, and Fritz was fascinated. He had to have a particular take that showed the rise of her breasts. And he was very articulate about it! That was the take we were going to use, and we were going to play the hell out of it.’” Lang and Duryea got on well together, as McGilligan explains: “...on the set they held long discussions on what it means for an actor to base his career on playing ‘the incarnation of evil.’ ‘The audience always remembers the villain,’ Lang assured Duryea.”





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As for Lang, this was also a transitional period in Robinson's career. He had become a free agent in August of 1943 after negotiating a payout from his contract with Jack Warner. Leading roles were harder and harder to come by and he was struggling to distance himself from his *Little Caesar* persona. Adding to this was the discord in his personal life—a rebellious, maladjusted son and an emotionally unstable wife—all of which might account for his low regard for the film, and his performance in it. In retrospect, it seems to have been the role he was destined to play. By this point, Robinson had amassed one of the most prestigious collections of French Impressionist paintings in private hands. His love for art was such that not only did he open his home galleries for his Hollywood friends, but as a vehement supporter of America's Armed Forces, he also graciously welcomed military personnel into his home to view his paintings. He, like his character Christopher Cross, was a self-

described “Sunday Painter” whose devotion to daubing continued throughout his life.

Lang also had a refined artistic sensibility; he studied painting in Munich and Paris where he had an exhibition of his own artwork in 1914. For the film, however, Lang

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tapped his friend and fellow émigré John Decker, the Hollywood portraitist, to paint the canvases that would play a pivotal role in the movie. An artistic chameleon, Decker was able to replicate the technique and styles of the old masters. As Stephen Jordan details in *Bohemian Rogue: The Life of Hollywood Artist John Decker*: “Throughout his life he passed off his own paintings as original van Goghs, Rembrandts, and Rouaults, among numerous other famous painters of the past. He made thousands of dollars in the process. These magnificent works fooled the most celebrated art critics and art collectors of his era.” Decker, however, was known to lament: “I can paint like any other painter, but I still haven't found my own style.” In addition to famous portraits of John Barrymore and W.C. Fields, he painted twelve portraits of Charlie Chaplin in twelve different styles. He also supplied the portrait of Barbara Stanwyck in *The Two Mrs. Carrolls*. For *Scarlet Street*, Lang encouraged Decker



Both Lang's version and Renoir's depict the final, fatal comeuppance of the scarlet woman who manipulated and betrayed her naive idolator

to produce paintings in the spirit of Henri Rousseau. Rousseau was a completely self-taught artist, like Cross, and thus regarded as the embodiment of the "Primitive" school of painting. This created a tangle of parallels. Decker would reproduce the painting style of a historic self-taught painter for a fictitious self-taught painter, who in turn would allow these paintings to be exhibited and sold as the work of a fraud—an artistic inverse of Decker's real-life forgeries. For the film, Decker produced 13 striking canvases, some bordering on Surrealism, which were reportedly exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in the spring of 1946. However, this may simply be apocryphal as there is no record of any such exhibition in MoMA's archive. Lang and Robinson studiously examined each painting from every different angle to insure they would all read well on film.

Though the setting was changed from Paris to New York's bohemian Greenwich

Village, *Scarlet Street*, as written by Nichols and realized by Lang, followed the novel virtually scene by scene. Renoir's *La Chienne* would share the same structural framework, but the two films could not be more dissimilar in tone. Renoir's film opens with a playful puppet show... a nod to the "dramatic" underpinning in the novel. "The play that follows is neither comedy nor drama...it has no moral whatsoever," the puppets proclaim. "The characters are neither heroes nor villains, just plain people like you and me." *Scarlet Street* begins with a decidedly more cynical tone. After a company dinner honoring Cross' loyal service, the boss J. J. Holgarth graciously exits the party to meet his mistress who's waiting in a car downstairs. As the men crowd the window like schoolboys to catch a glimpse,



we see an organ grinder's monkey dancing on the sidewalk, entertaining the delighted mistress (a grim foreshadowing of Cross' soon-to-be relationship with Kitty.)

In the book, Legrand prowls the streets after the dinner to find a prostitute, which he often does with a mixture of lust and self-loathing. *Scarlet Street*, as dictated by the Production Code, had to sanitize this scene along with the relationships between Kitty, Johnny, and Cross. In both book and film, the three principals meet in similar fashion. After some wooing, Kitty/Lulu is eventually



Edward G. Robinson subconsciously threatens his shrewish spouse, played by Rosalind Ivan

set up in a studio apartment along with the pivotal paintings. Dédé is quite the cad on the page, and Duryea portrays Johnny with the requisite reptilian charm—a detail not lost on Decker. One of Decker's paintings recreates the scene where Cross first meets Kitty under an elevated train rail, but with a large, menacing snake coiled around the girders. In a later scene, Lang visually links the two in a beautiful dissolve. We see Johnny hiding from Chris under the steps of the apartment, as gradually the snake is superimposed over him and the painting comes into full view.

Like Legrand, Cross discovers that two of his paintings—signed by Clara Wood in the novel/Katherine March in the film—are on display in the window of a major art gallery. In the book, Legrand stumbles into the dealer's shop, and without revealing that he is the artist, inquires as to the value of these paintings. Wallstein, the dealer, eyes him rather dismissively, and upbraids him for not recognizing the name of the famous Clara Wood. De la Fouchardière expresses his contempt for art dealers through the rationale of Legrand. When Lulu confesses that she sold the paintings, he muses:

I thought that if I myself had had that same idea ten years ago, and the resolution to carry it out, I would be today as well-known as Madame Clara Wood. But something deep within me tells me that if I had presented myself to Wallstein with my pictures under my arms, I would have got just the same contemptuous reception as I did with my arms dangling empty. Something lies upon the failure in life like the brand of predestination; his frustration is due to his physical appearance—his flea-bitten look, his timorous carriage. It is inborn, it is hopeless. But a pretty girl like Lucienne, with her gay manner and her gracefulness, could no doubt focus interest and sympathy at once.

On the screen Cross acknowledges this irony, but eagerly accepts the new fame his paintings have afforded Kitty, and declares, "It's like we were married." Lang subverts the traditional marital union

by having Cross adopt Kitty's name, thus enabling Cross to embrace the concept of joint property...artistic property in this case. Not only does Kitty appropriate Cross' artistic identity, but when he asks to paint her, she subjugates his masculinity by ordering him to paint her toenails, proclaiming with sinister relish: "They'll be masterpieces!" In the book, Lulu embraces her role in the masquerade with body and soul! Not only does Dédé order her to sleep with Legrand, but also with the art dealer, the art critic who promotes her work, various prominent art collectors, and other assorted wealthy patrons. On the page, Legrand paints pictures with religious symbolism, but there is no portrait of any significance in the book. Renoir depicts Legrand painting his own self-portrait in *La Chienne*, but in *Scarlet Street*, Lang injects a shrewd reversal of the "self-portrait" as Cross paints Kitty, to further perpetuate the illusion.

A semi-comic interlude occurs in both the book and film when Adele's husband—





Lang may not have appreciated Joan Bennett as an actress, but, by all on-set accounts, he doted on her in an almost fetishistic manner

long thought to be dead—suddenly reappears, legally releasing Cross from his marital ball and chain. Excited to share the news that he is now a free man, Cross happens upon Kitty and Johnny in a clinch. Throughout the film, Lang employs the musical theme of *My Melancholy Baby* to underscore Kitty's scenes; in this scene, as in a preceding scene, it's sourced from a phonograph. And for the second time, the needle gets stuck on the same lyric ("in love") which repeats over and over. Emotionally poleaxed, Cross retreats to lick his wounds. At this point, novel and the film diverge slightly. We read the news about the murder of Clara Wood from different sources, and Legrand is brought in for questioning concerning his relationship to the deceased. Here the author savagely impugns the integrity of the art world. While Legrand is not under suspicion, he overhears Wallstein scheming with Lulu's family to "discover" more of her pictures—which would no doubt be considerably more valuable given the lurid circumstances of her death. When her mother complains that they don't have any of Lucienne's pictures, the dealer explains: "As to the pictures, I'll get them done. In our profession that's the ordinary practice." Renoir depicts Wallstein as simply inquiring about any remaining pictures, but in *Scarlet Street* there is no corresponding scene at all.

Cross—as Legrand does in the novel—ruminates that, like he, Kitty must be the victim of Johnny's evil machinations. So he returns to "rescue" her. The murder scene plays out in exactly the same man-

ner in each source, only with different weapons: Cross stabs Kitty with an ice pick, Legrand uses a Japanese paper cutter. In the book, however, the murder is recounted in flashback by Legrand within the penultimate chapter. Johnny becomes the prime suspect, as does Dédé in the novel. Both get convicted and executed; Johnny gets the juice, Dédé, the guillotine. Both Cross and Legrand savor their short-lived revenge. Both are busted for embezzling and get dismissed, but

serve no jail time, and without a wife or home to go back to, they become shiftless.

In the book, Legrand holes up in a cheap hotel where he's tormented every night by a reoccurring dream:

It comes about, when I go down into the abyss full of monsters and dreadful possibilities...the two lovers separated by death come back to torture me. The same two lovers, who haunt me as well when I am awake...I wander in a graveyard...I walk as one walks in dreams, hoping to meet her [Lulu] as a tender phantom, as a little diaphanous shade, as a soothing apparition. I stand before her tomb. I lift the heavy stone that covers her, as easily as one might lift the lid of a cigar box. . . . She appears to me, but she is not alone. They are

together still, clasped together in the rotten casket as in a bed. I fling myself upon her body, to win her back to me. I kiss her An abomination! A worm crawls on my lip. I awake with a scream.

Legrand finds himself on the banks of the Seine contemplating

Lang regarded *Scarlet Street* to be the American film that most closely approximated the autonomy he enjoyed at the UFA studios in Germany.

suicide, but he doesn't have the guts to take the plunge. After Johnny's execution, Cross is tormented by waking nightmares when he realizes Johnny and Kitty are now reunited in death. Driven to the point of madness, he hangs himself, but he's cut down before escaping his mortal coil.

In de la Fouchardière's final assault on art, he takes aim at connoisseurship. Legrand wanders past Wallstein's gallery when he spots two paintings in the window attributed to Clara Wood, which *he* did not paint. He recognizes that the art dealer's nefarious scheme with Lulu's family is underway. Legrand goes in and exclaims that he could paint pictures, not only better, but much closer in style to Clara Wood. Skeptically they humor him, and he methodically creates two new original paintings. But when he presents them to the art dealer and critic, they proclaim: "My poor friend! You'd have to learn painting and draftsmanship first... They look about as much like Clara Wood's as I look like the pope." Wallstein then callously informs Legrand that not only did he know Clara, he slept with her as well.

In the final chapter in the book, eight years have passed and Legrand finds himself standing alongside Adele's first husband outside a Salvation Army shelter. They are both homeless and destitute. Legrand laments that he was recently ejected from an art auction where one of his "Clara Wood" paintings sold for 40,000 francs. Then the doors open, and from within someone bellows: "Room for everyone!" Legrand exclaims: "A bed . . . some hot soup . . . What's the matter with life, anyhow?"

It's this abject resignation, and ultimate acceptance of his lowly—yet carefree—station in life that Renoir builds on to create his *denouement*. His final sequence is an exercise in unsentimental naturalism layered with comic irony; Legrand and a fellow drifter stroll along the boulevard in bright daylight, they pass the art gallery, as his self-portrait—just sold—is carried out to the waiting car of a wealthy patron. It's placed in the back seat, facing toward the vehicle's rear end, but Legrand does not see it, only we the viewers do. He stumbles toward the car, gets a tip for opening the door, and obliviously marches off declaring: "Twenty francs! Life is good!"

Lang eschewed these ameliorative conclusions. In *Scarlet Street*, he doubles down and deals out the blackest of spades. The final sequence is a masterstroke of existential retribution, and it links Cross with a leit-motif in Lang's *oeuvre*: man as an agent of destiny. Lang's final *mise-en-scène* parallels Renoir's with two important distinctions. Cross, a solitary drifter, is repeatedly dismissed when he confesses to the crime, thus denying him the punishment he desperately seeks. When he happens upon the art gallery, he's forced to come face to face with the "self-portrait" of Kitty slowly being carried out of the shop. He's galvanized by the image—now a death mask—and the anguish it represents. He then slowly continues to creep along the busy sidewalk as the crowd



The program from the French release of Lang's film

gradually dissipates, left utterly alone in his own inescapable hell with only the cooing voices of Kitty and Johnny to keep him company. It's dark, pessimistic, and uncompromisingly grim—the veritable apotheosis of noir.

The Production Code, surprisingly, did not object to an innocent man being executed while the guilty man escaped punishment. In later interviews, Lang claimed he convinced Breen that the fate Cross was left to endure for the remainder of his life was infinitely worse than jail or execution. So the film was given the seal of approval. After its release, however, three cities disagreed: New York, Atlanta, and Milwaukee all banned the film. Lang was already elbow-deep in his next film (*Cloak and Dagger*) so Wanger sprang into action. He flew to New York with film editor Arthur Hilton and negotiated an agreement, which involved two edits. The ice pick stabbing would be reduced from seven stabs to one, and the elimination of the question Johnny asks—"Where's the bedroom?"—when they take a tour of the new studio apartment. Subse-

quent public domain copies, and the newly restored edition, depict four stabs, and retain Johnny's salacious question. Not only did Breen publicly support the integrity of the film, but he also supplied a written affidavit to be presented in the Atlanta hearings. *Scarlet Street*, benefiting from the advanced publicity, opened at New York's Loews Criterion setting box office records for five straight weeks.

Despite a few minor edits Wanger made in Lang's absence, the director has always regarded *Scarlet Street* to be the American film that most closely approximated the unfettered autonomy he enjoyed at the UFA studios in Germany. Lang was quick to credit Dudley Nichols, with whom he worked closely on the screenplay, but from inception to completion, it was entirely Lang's vision. As Tom Gunning astutely observes in *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity*: "*Scarlet Street* stands as possibly Lang's Hollywood masterpiece partly because it offers his most complex view of the process of art making and the identity of the artist/author (an issue that Renoir's film, and especially his filming of the ending, basically ignores.)"

As for the artist so closely tied to *Scarlet Street*, time was limited for Decker and his abundant-though-dubious artistic talents. Far too many endless parties at his Bundy Drive studio in Alta Loma, pounding down cocktails with his besotted buddies (Errol Flynn, W.C. Fields, Tom Mitchell, and Anthony Quinn, among others too numerous to mention.) In May 1947, he was hospitalized for advanced cirrhosis, and despite over a dozen blood transfusions from Quinn, he died at the age of 52, a year and a half after the movie was released. There was another sad post-script for Robinson as well. After repeated requests from his wife Gladys, he finally agreed to a divorce in 1957. As a condition of the agreement, Robinson was forced to sell 58 of the 72 paintings in his precious collection. He would eventually buy back only 14 of these, but he never fully recovered from the loss. ■