



DOI: 10.2478/abcsj-2014-0022

## A Romanian Jew in Hollywood: Edward G. Robinson

RALUCA MOLDOVAN

Babeş-Bolyai University

### **Abstract**

The present study aims to investigate the contribution that actor Edward G. Robinson brought to the American film industry, beginning with his iconic role as gangster Little Caesar in Mervyn Le Roy's 1931 production, and continuing with widely-acclaimed parts in classic *film noirs* such as *Double Indemnity*, *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street*. Edward G. Robinson was actually a Romanian Jew, born Emmanuel Goldenberg in Bucharest, in 1893, a relatively little known fact nowadays. By examining his biography, filmography and his best-known, most successful films (mentioned above), I show that Edward G. Robinson was one of classical Hollywood's most influential actors; for instance, traits of his portrayal of Little Caesar (one of the very first American gangster films) can be found in almost all subsequent cinematic gangster figures, from Scarface to Vito Corleone. In the same vein, the doomed *noir* characters he played in Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street* are still considered by film critics today to be some of the finest, most nuanced examples of *noir* heroes. Therefore, the main body of my article will be dedicated to a more detailed analysis of these films, while the introductory section will trace his biography and discuss some of his better-known films, such as *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* and *Key Largo*. The present study highlights Edward G. Robinson's merits and impact on the cinema industry, proving that this diminutive Romanian Jew of humble origins was indeed something of a giant during Hollywood's classical era.

**Keywords:** Edward G. Robinson, Hollywood, film industry, *film noir*

### Biographical facts and filmography overview

Edward G. Robinson. The cocky, ebullient tough guy. He was Little Caesar, the quintessential gangster success and failure story. Robinson had defined for the huge Great Depression moviegoing audience the idea of the snarling, immigrant anti-hero – a vicious and repentant underdog going down in a hail of bullets. (ix)

This is how Alan Gansberg, Robinson's biographer, describes the actor in the introduction to his book, *Little Caesar: A Biography of Edward G. Robinson*. I believe that this is the image that most cinema-goers recall when thinking about an actor that rightfully earned his place among the silver screen's most recognizable faces. But what was beyond the tough guy exterior, behind the mask of the seemingly all-powerful gangster? Few people know that Robinson was a liberal democrat and a political activist, as well as an avid art collector – and even fewer are aware of his true origins.

His family, whose history went back about two hundred years, was a typical Romanian Jewish family living in Bucharest near the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; they belonged to the small bourgeoisie and were somewhat assimilated into Romanian culture, although they still retained some of their Jewish traditions, including the Yiddish language. Edward G. Robinson's parents, Morris and Sarah Goldenberg, had already had four sons when another boy, baptized Emmanuel, was born on December 12, 1893; he would eventually be the second youngest son (Gansberg 1; Brook 95; Spicer 262; Mayer & McDonnell 357). According to the biographer, the Goldenbergs, who were "urbanized but far from emancipated", lived in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood "where Jews were assigned to live,"<sup>1</sup> in a "traditional Jewish home" (Gansberg 2). The family placed great value on the children's upbringing, arranging for them to receive a religious education, as well as language lessons in Hebrew, Yiddish, Romanian and German (Gansberg 3). The family were also frequent spectators of the theatre performances staged by the Bucharest Jewish Theatre, a place where many talented actors started their career.

It should be said, at this point, that Romanian Jews at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were still subject to discrimination and persecution – probably the most significant of all being the refusal of successive Romanian governments to grant them citizenship rights. In fact, the issue of naturalizing Romanian Jews had polarized Romanian public opinion and politicians since the end of the war of independence (1878), when the great European powers (particularly France and Britain) wanted to condition the recognition of the independent Romanian state on granting full citizenship rights to its Jewish population. Additionally, spontaneous bursts of violence were not uncommon – for instance, during one of these episodes, one of Emmanuel’s brothers was hit on the head by a thrown brick; he would never completely recover from this injury and would eventually die in America (Gansberg 3). This incident may have precipitated Morris Goldenberg’s decision to leave Romania and emigrate to America, where he hoped that his family would find a better life.<sup>2</sup> The Goldenbergs did not travel all together: first, the father and the oldest three sons left, followed by Sarah and the three younger children, who made their way to Vienna via a kind of “underground railroad” aiding Jews to reach the western European embarkation port of Le Havre. Thus, Emmanuel Goldenberg finally arrived in New York in 1903, at the age of 10. As he confessed in his autobiography, “My mother may have given birth in Romania, but I was born the day I set foot on American soil” (Robinson 4). The Goldenbergs settled in the overcrowded, predominantly Jewish Lower East Side, where the younger boys – including Emmanuel – started school. The young boy knew no English at the time, but he found it quite easy to learn the new language, as he had an obvious talent for it (Gansberg 4). Interestingly enough, Emmanuel (or Manny, as his family called him), went to the same high school later attended by George Gershwin and Manny’s own cousin – another iconic gangster figure, who first portrayed Scarface on film – Paul Muni. Initially, Emmanuel wanted to become a rabbi and started training in this sense, but soon enough, discovering the calling of the stage by acting in high school plays, abandoned the religious path and focused on becoming an actor, hoping to be starring on Broadway one day (Gansberg 10). His dream would come true in 1915, when – after starring in several plays in the New York

Yiddish Theatre District – Emmanuel (who had by now changed his name to Edward G. Robinson, in an attempt to make it sound more American and minimize his immigrant heritage – a trait characteristic for many new immigrants who were trying to “blend” into American society) made his Broadway debut in 1915 (Mayer & McDonnell 357).<sup>3</sup> His very successful gangster role in the crime drama *The Racket* brought him to the attention of Hollywood producers, who saw his potential and hoped that his stage persona would translate well to the silver screen. The industry was in the midst of making the transition from the silent films to the talkies and Robinson apparently had all the qualities to successfully negotiate this change, unlike other actors, whose careers were killed by the advent of sound.

Capitalizing on the success of *The Racket*, in 1931 Robinson was cast in the role of the ruthless Caesar Enrico Bandello in Warner Brothers’ *Little Caesar*, one of the very first and most iconic portrayals of the gangster in American cinema (Spicer 262; Hark 12; Mayer & McDonnell 357). It can be argued that this part helped create many stereotypes associated with the gangster hero (not the least of which the typical American rags-to-riches – and, in this case, back to rags – story), stereotypes exploited by the studios that kept casting Robinson in similar roles throughout the 1930s, relying on the public’s familiarity with his mobster persona: *Smart Money*, 1931; *Tiger Shark*, 1932; *Kid Galahad*, 1937; *A Slight Case of Murder*, 1938 (Brook 96; Gates 65; Neale 72). Actually, in the last film, Robinson parodied the character he helped create, by bringing to life a “reformed” gangster in the post-Prohibition period who started a legitimate business (Hark 214). Probably the best-known spin-off role based on the character played by Robinson in *Little Caesar* is John Houston’s 1948 *Key Largo*, where he was cast opposite Humphrey Bogart (Spicer 106). In this film, Robinson played an aging Little Caesar figure, the gangster Rocco (seemingly based on the real-life mobster Lucky Luciano), who wanted to return to America from deportation to start his old ways again (Munby 132); his nemesis was war veteran McCloud (Bogart), who thwarted his efforts. However, the message of the film was that the gangster’s own hubris brought about his downfall (Dickos 118; Studlar 375).

During the late 1930s, Robinson – partly because of his Jewish origins – became an outspoken critic of fascism and Nazism, donating more than a quarter of a million dollars to various anti-Nazi political groups between 1939 and 1949 and hosting the 1938 meeting of the Committee of 56 (made up of various figures from the film industry) who signed a “Declaration of Democratic Independence” calling for a boycott of all German-made products. He even starred in Warner Brothers’ 1939 *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, the first American film that presented the threat posed by Nazism to the United States. The release of this film that outspokenly denounces Nazi ideology is all the more remarkable considering that the Production Code<sup>4</sup> made it almost impossible to release films criticizing foreign powers (Maland 240). Here, Robinson played an FBI agent who investigates a spy network in the US that was stealing military secrets and selling them to Germany; the film employs a semi-documentary style that blends together voice-over narration and authentic footage of Nazi rallies in Germany (Maland 240; Milberg 13-14). Robinson also played a Jewish scientist in the 1940 production of *Dr. Erlich’s Magic Bullet* – the first role in which he was required to portray an explicitly Jewish character (Brook 96). The second Jewish character he played was Paul Julius Reuter in *A Dispatch from Reuters* (1941).

Starting with the mid-1940s, Robinson began to move away from playing the kinds of roles that had made him famous and approached some very different characters in a series of films that would later come to be known as *film noirs*.<sup>5</sup> His supporting role as claims insurance agent Barton Keyes in Billy Wilder’s 1944 *Double Indemnity* revived his career and proved that he was capable of creating diverse and challenging roles; in contrast to his earlier, tough-guy parts, the characters Robinson played in *film noirs* were sensitive, vulnerable, and thoughtful. In his autobiography, Robinson confessed that he did not readily accept the part Wilder offered him in *Double Indemnity*, primarily because it was a supporting role; however, after thinking about this offer for a while, he understood that “at my age it was time to begin thinking of character roles, to slide into middle and old age... I was never the handsome leading man; I could proceed with my career growing older in roles that would grow older, too” (Robinson 236; Mayer & McDonnell 358). In a very

fortunate way, this role paved the way for some of his best-known parts: Professor Richard Wanley in *The Woman in the Window* and Christopher Cross in *Scarlet Street*, both of whom are middle-aged men faced with their own mortality (Irwin 253). The list of Robinson's *film noirs* includes, besides these three undisputed classics, *Night Has a Thousand Eyes* (1948),<sup>6</sup> *House of Strangers* (1949), *The Stranger* (1946), *Vice Squad* (1953), *Illegal* (1955), *Nightmare* (1956) and the sci-fi neo-noir *Soylent Green*, his very last film made in 1973.

In the early 1950s, just as his career was taking off again, Robinson came under scrutiny by the House Un-American Activities Committee; he was called to testify before this body three times in 1950 and 1952, after the notoriously racist congressman John Rankin accused him, alongside other Jewish actors, of being a communist sympathizer (Brook 95-96). Robinson was threatened with blacklisting (Spicer 19). He refused to give the names of other communist supporters and took steps to clear his name by allowing an accountant to verify his checkbooks and prove that no funds had been sent to subversive organizations. His reputation was eventually rehabilitated, but his career suffered in the aftermath of this infamous affair, as he started being offered minor and less frequent roles (Spicer 262).

His career was revived in 1954, when legendary director Cecil B. DeMille cast him as the villainous Dathan in his grandiose biblical epic *The Ten Commandments*. In the late 1950s, Robinson started accepting roles in television films and virtually stopped appearing on the big screen. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences awarded him an honorary Oscar in recognition of his merits in 1973; unfortunately, this remarkable honor came too late for Robinson to enjoy: he had died of cancer a few weeks before the ceremony, so the golden statue was conferred posthumously.

Despite unfounded accusations of communism, Robinson remained a liberal democrat all his life, even attending the Democrat Party Convention in Los Angeles in 1962. In contrast to his many tough-guy roles, the real Robinson was a sensitive, soft-spoken and cultured man, who spoke seven languages (including Romanian) and possessed a vast and valuable art collection – a passion he had inherited from his father.

In his half a century-long career, Edward G. Robinson completed 101 films belonging to a wide variety of genres; his very diverse roles bear witness to his tremendous artistic potential and to his remarkable acting skills, as well as to the dedication with which this Romanian Jew served the American public and the noble art of cinema.

The classic ethnic gangster: *Little Caesar*

*Little Caesar* is both the film that made Edward G. Robinson a star and launched the first cycle of gangster talkies in the early 1930s; alongside Mervyn Le Roy's production, one can include here William Wellman's 1931 *The Public Enemy* (starring James Cagney), Howard Hawks's 1932 *Scarface* (starring Robinson's cousin, Paul Muni, born Frederick Meyer Weisenfreund) and Robert Mamoulian's 1931 *City Streets* (Irwin 211; Leich 23; Munby 39). What all these films share is a typical American story: the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches tale of a markedly individualistic gangster who rises high in social hierarchy only to fall to his inevitable doom in the end. These gangsters, inspired from real-life figures who had made a name for themselves during Prohibition (such as Al Capone or Lucky Luciano) and who held a certain fascination for a relatively large portion of the American public (probably because these people – like the mobsters – had worked hard and seen all their wealth ripped away by the Great Depression) were all charismatic, appealing figures (Hark 13; Rubin 72; Rabinowitz 263). That is why scriptwriters were particularly careful to see that these heroes were punished in the end, so as to eliminate any trace of moral ambiguity and to avoid drawing the sympathy of the public on the side of crime, as the Production Code required.<sup>7</sup>

Another trait that distinguished these gangsters is their ethnicity: Rico Bandello (*Little Caesar*), Tommy Powers (*Public Enemy*) and Tony Camonte (*Scarface*) are all “hyphenated Americans” torn apart, to some extent, by the dilemma of living in two worlds and not completely belonging to either (Munby 20).<sup>8</sup> As Jonathan Munby points out, “essential to the drama of these gangster films is precisely the accentuation of hyphenated identity as a competing authentic American condition” (26). None of the three actors came from schools of “high

acting” – instead, they were the product of the ethnic and popular theatrical tradition of New York’s Lower East Side; this, I believe, granted them a biographical proximity to the characters they were playing: these actors, like the gangsters they were playing, wanted to belong, to fit in the American society, to “make it” in this promised land.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the popularity of this genre, critical voices expressed their objections in terms of a moral paradigm (the appealing gangster figure “corrupting” the moral fiber of the American society). However, this moral indignation may have disguised a more complex apprehension towards the ethnic and cultural “other” (Munby 44). Objections to these films were not limited to questions of morality, but also to the representation of the American society that was less than flattering (Munby 107). In *Little Caesar*’s case, for instance, his quest for legitimacy was more than a mere question of building a front to disguise the illegal nature of his dealings; it is also a quest to gain access to the upper social strata (a recurring motif in the film, as Rico confesses several times that he wants to “be somebody”). It is evident for anyone that Rico was “the other”: his name, his accent and behavior betrayed his distinctly ethnic origins.

In fact, the film begins with Rico expressing his desire to escape his dead-end small town and move to the big city – a sort of a symbolic passage from innocence to corruption that foreshadows his fall from grace. In a sense, the film can also be read a critique of capitalism: the rise of the machine, of industry and technology are a deviation from a simpler way of life that corrupts the soul and produces criminals and rebels (Munby 45-46). Rico rises from nothing to the top, only to die in the gutter at the end, perhaps as a punishment for his attempt to transcend his limitations. What sets *Little Caesar* apart from all the previous Hollywood gangster and crime films is the fact that, for the first time, the public sees the world through the eyes of the gangster; previous crime stories had always been seen through the eyes of society, the criminal was a mere bad guy who had killed somebody and was then punished for his deed (McGilligan 58). As Rico rises through the ranks of the big city criminal gang, his material circumstances notably improve; he pays a great deal of attention to these outer signs of success to the point of ostentation by

wearing elegant suits, smoking fine cigars, displaying flashy diamond rings and collecting fine paintings (Munby 48).<sup>10</sup> The irony is, of course, that although Rico and his distinctively ethnic partners in crime proudly display these signs of success, they have no means of appreciating their real value: for instance, when invited to Big Boy's opulent house (where he clearly feels like a fish out of water), Rico's only criterion for assessing the value of the painting is the presumably huge cost of its massive golden frame.

Another significant moment in this respect is captured in the banquet scene, a celebration organized by Rico's band to celebrate his rise to fame. This actually resembles a parody of a high-society event. Although the participants are appropriately dressed, they have no notion of the sense of protocol that should be observed in such circumstances: no one can give a coherent speech and the event degenerates into a food fight, while the gift Rico receives turns out to be stolen (Munby 48). Despite his best efforts to integrate into mainstream society, Rico is condemned to playing the role of entrepreneur from the wrong side of the law; despite the promise extended to all immigrants that they could become legitimate Americans, Rico is only allowed to mimic legitimacy (Munby 50). Even though both his acolytes and the men of the law admit that Rico "is getting up in the world," his ultimate demise proves that integration into the American society requires more than wealth.<sup>11</sup> No one is more surprised than Rico at the end, when he is gunned down by the police under a poster advertising the next show of his former associate Joe (who left the criminal underworld in order to pursue a legitimate career as a dancer, for which – the film shows us – he was rightfully rewarded). In true tragic hero fashion, he asks the audience in astonishment: "Mother of Mercy! Is this the end of Rico?" (Dickos 115). Of course, Rico could have escaped with his life and live out the same existence he presumably had before becoming famous; but, since the Production Code would have made it impossible to release a film in which the bad guy manages to evade the law, Rico has to pay for his crimes, after he is lured out of hiding by a typically WASP policemen playing on his ego.

Robinson would reprise his role as ethnic gangster in John Houston's 1948 film, *Key Largo*, where his character, Rocco, borrows

quite liberally from the traits with which he had endowed Little Caesar. Whereas both gangsters are undoubtedly strong masculine figures, his roles as Professor Richard Wanley in *The Woman in the Window* and as Christopher Cross in *Scarlet Street* depart significantly from Robinson's established screen persona. In contrast to the impulsive and arrogant gangsters, these later parts show Robinson as a meek, even effeminate man who falls victim to the manipulation of ruthless and selfish femme fatales.

The *noir* hero in *Double Indemnity*, *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street*

*Double Indemnity* (1944) is almost universally acknowledged as the first major *film noir*, marking the beginning of a series of films characterized by expressionist mise-en-scene, low key lighting, and down-and-out characters, in stark contrast to the usually upbeat and proactive Hollywood hero (Rubin 91). The film tells the story of an insurance agent (Walter Neff, played by Fred MacMurray) who conspires with a treacherous wife (Barbara Stanwyck, in a role that set the tone for future *femme fatales*) to murder her husband and get hold of the life insurance money. Edward G. Robinson plays the third lead, Neff's boss and close friend (Barton Keyes), who values following the rules above anything.<sup>12</sup> The entire narrative structure of the film takes place in flashback, as a dying Neff dictates the story of his downfall into a recording machine in the form of a confession to his friend and mentor, Keyes. The two men have a very warm, almost parental relationship, although one seems to be the complete opposite of the other: Neff is tall and handsome, Keyes is short and stocky; Neff smokes cigarettes, Keyes smoked cigars (which Neff always lights for him, as Keyes never carries matches (at the end of the film, Keyes returns the favor and lights a cigarette for his dying friend) (Spicer 78; Duncan 33)). Neff is ultimately a criminal, while Keyes is a man of the law (Naremore 90). Nevertheless, they have a deep mutual respect for each other and Keyes actually represents a sort of father figure to the younger and more impetuous Neff. Still, Neff considers Keyes too

inflexible (Keyes even had his fiancée checked before their wedding and abandoned her when he discovered something shady in her past (Duncan 33)).<sup>13</sup>

The film suggests that, in this case, the male-female relationship is poisonous and lethal (Neff and Phyllis end up killing each other), while the male-male relationship is one of genuine affection and mutual trust and admiration. Neff pays the ultimate price for eventually cheating the insurance company (and implicitly betraying Keyes, as the latter is clearly a “company man”). Ironically, Neff’s deceit is discovered precisely because he returns to his office to record his confession to Keyes (Abbott 149; Naremore 90). Some critics have suggested that the Neff-Keyes relationship is another play on the male-female relationship, in the sense that the masculine Neff would be the male counterpart to the diminutive Keyes’ “feminized” position (Maxfield 32).

The film is based on a novel by James M. Cain, a well-known American author of hard-boiled fiction. There is one major difference between the book and the screenplay written by another famous American writer, Raymond Chandler: director William Wilder felt that Keyes’ character (which is a relatively minor one in the book) deserved a bigger role – probably one worthy of Edward G. Robinson’s talent (Irwin 249-250; Spicer 78). And Robinson made it into the best supporting role of his career.

*The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street*, both directed by the Jewish German émigré director Fritz Lang in 1944 and 1945, are part of the canon of classic *film noir* and are considered to this day some of the finest examples of their kind (Mayer & McDonnell 446). As Andrew Dickos points out in his history of American *film noir*, the two films can be seen in retrospect as films of temptation sublimated (*Woman in the Window*) and temptation fulfilled (*Scarlet Street*) (26). The plot of both films is triggered by a wrongly taken first step and illustrate the terrible price to be paid at the hands of fate by those submitting to unbridled desire. Both of them feature an unassuming, mild, middle-aged protagonist (played by Edward G. Robinson) trapped in a hopeless love story with a manipulative seductress (Joan Bennett) and driven to murder and despair (Spicer 169; Mayer & McDonnell 447).

In *The Woman in the Window*, Robinson plays a university professor of psychology, Richard Wanley, an “Old World gentleman, the professor who loves art and literature, after-dinner drinks and cigars” (Brook 97), but who is going through a midlife crisis despite the appearance of being in a happy and quiet marriage. Deep down, Wanley still longs for adventure, but is reluctant to give free rein to his impulses (Rubin 50). His contemplative approach to life (illustrated by his habit of gazing in the window of an art gallery at the portrait of beautiful woman) changes completely when the woman in the portrait, Alice, appears right next to him. From this point forward, Wanley starts sinking deeper and deeper into a web of guilty lies after he kills the mysterious woman’s lover in self-defense, following a brief struggle in her apartment. He offers to help dispose of the body, but he commits a number of errors in the process and he is nearly discovered when a policeman stops him for having a broken headlight while the corpse is in the car; he leaves his pen in Alice’s apartment; he hurts himself on a barbed wire fence while leaving the woods where he hid the body (Dickos 26). As it happens, the one commissioned to investigate the murder of the mysterious stranger (who was a controversial, but very rich businessman) is none other than Wanley’s friend, police chief Lalor. He actually invites Wanley to go visit the crime scene with him, a visit during which the professor stops very short of actually confessing to having committed the murder, but makes a number of “Freudian” slips that may indicate a repressed desire to be punished. Nonetheless, the policeman ignores these mistakes as he is convinced that Wanley is too respectable to be a murderer (Mayer & McDonnell 448).

Meanwhile, the dead man’s bodyguard turns up and starts blackmailing Alice, threatening to tell the police everything he knows unless she pays him off. Alice goes to Wanley for money; he is clever enough to understand that this sort of blackmail will never end and, instead, advises Alice to kill him by poisoning his drink with a fatal dose of sleeping pills. Alice fails to carry out the deed, and Wanley understands that there no way out for him now; he takes an overdose of barbiturates, just as Alice hears gunshots outside her apartment. Rushing out, Alice sees the blackmailer, who was the number one murder suspect, lying dead

in the street. She runs back home to phone Wanley, but the phone rings on without any answer;<sup>14</sup> a slow track-in track-out shot reveals Wanley, who had fallen asleep in an armchair at the club where he and his friends usually had dinner, awaking with a start to realize that everything had been a dream (Park 170). This unexpected twist is surprising and unforeseen, but I believe it is a nod to the demands of the Production Code (which required that no bad deed should go unpunished). At the same time, it serves a more complex purpose, making the film appear as a conservative morality play and accommodating the vicarious pleasure of the audience at seeing a middle-aged man acting on his repressed desires and being punished for it, while at the same time rejoicing in a more or less typical Hollywood happy ending (Mayer & McDonnell 448). The last scene shows Wanley walking out of the club and stopping to admire the beautiful woman in the painting and a stylish young woman approaches him asking for a cigarette. Wanley runs away as fast as he can before he can be tempted once more to indulge his fantasies. The film uses its main character as a vehicle to explore the thin line between respectability and morality, between doing the right thing and giving in to one's desires, underscoring how easy it is for any man to be caught up in passion, lies and deceit (Mayer & McDonnell 449). This theme will be further explored in Lang's next film, *Scarlet Street*, whose main protagonist no longer survives through the fortunate dream device employed in *The Woman in the Window* - this time, the full extent of the tragedy resulting from acting on one's repressed desires is revealed in all its grim glory.

*Scarlet Street* was Lang's favorite among all his American films. It is actually a remake of a 1931 French film directed by Jean Renoir, entitled *La Chienne*, based on a novel by Georges de la Fouchardiere.<sup>15</sup> This film continues the idea explored by Lang in *The Woman in the Window* - namely, an upright citizen trapped in a circle of lies and betrayal - with the same cast of characters (Edward G. Robinson, Joan Bennett and Dan Duryea) who deliver some of the finest performances of their careers (Phillips 76-77; Park 163; Mayer & McDonnell 366; Brook 96).

This film represented a serious challenge to the conventions established by the Production Code, in the sense that it lets a murderer go

unpunished for his crime and instead lets another take the fall. The protagonist, Christopher Cross, is the classic fallen hero,<sup>16</sup> a rather pathetic character and a genuine victim of fate who develops an all-consuming passion for a woman of questionable morals and is ultimately driven to murder and insanity by her. Cross bears some resemblance to the character played by Robinson in his earlier film, *The Woman in the Window*; both are men of “effeminate manners, artistic leanings and elaborate deductions” (Brook 11). Moreover, Cross is a Sunday painter who describes his relationship to his art as a “love affair,” while Wanley fell for a woman portrayed in a painting.

*Scarlet Street* opens with a company party celebrating Cross’ 25 years of loyal service. This scene bears some similarities with the banquet scene in *Little Caesar* (Robinson seated at the center of a long dinner table, smoking a cigar in the manner of his famous Rico character), so a viewer familiar with his gangster screen persona might get the impression that Robinson is the head of a criminal organization (Grant 2007: 73). In fact, nothing could be further from the truth: he is nothing but a meek, repressed, law-abiding cashier. This scene is the only one in the film in which Cross seems valued by his peers and is safe from a ruthless world in which his timidity and naiveté render him vulnerable (Chopra-Gant 170). He reveals the emptiness and frustration of his life when he sees his boss leaving the party with an attractive young woman, clearly not his wife, and wonders what “it is like to be loved by a young girl like that.” Soon enough, wandering the streets of Greenwich Village at night (the street – usually at nighttime – is a recurring motif in *film noir*, a menacing, dangerous labyrinth, an eerie environment where evil lurks in the shadows) (Ryall 166-167), Chris happens upon a young woman being brutalized by someone she claims is a thief, but who is, in fact, her brutal and insensitive boyfriend, Johnny. He chases him away with his umbrella, perhaps imagining himself to be a kind of medieval knight using his spear to rescue a damsel in distress, and runs off to find a policeman (Grant 2007: 73). The composition of this scene reveals to the viewer much about Christopher Cross’ personality: the frame is dominated by the massive stature of the policeman, while Cross appears diminutive, submissive, emasculated and humble (a role that – as we find out later in the film – he

also assumes in the presence of his shrill and domineering wife, Adele).

The girl, Kitty March, pretends to be an actress, while Cross leads her to believe that he is a successful and wealthy painter (so they both lie to each other from the very start). Chris, trapped in a loveless, unhappy marriage, becomes infatuated with Kitty almost immediately – a fact speculated by Johnny, who forces Kitty to demand more and more money from him, until Cross is forced to steal money from his company (Phillips 79). He sets Kitty up in an apartment where he comes to paint and to escape his bleak domestic life, while she continuously makes demands for more and more money. Johnny tries to sell one of Cross' paintings and, when the art dealer is fascinated by the qualities of the work, he pretends that Kitty is the mysterious painter. She then becomes a celebrated artist whose paintings are exhibited in a prestigious New York art gallery. Upon discovering this deception, Chris – instead of being angry – sees Kitty's appropriation of his work as a symbol of the bond between them. What he fails to realize, however, is that by allowing her to take credit for his work, he actually foregoes his own identity, letting Kitty control him to the point where he no longer has a will of his own (Phillips 80).<sup>17</sup>

Robinson's character is similarly dominated by his wife, Adele; at home, we see him wearing an apron and performing domestic chores. Adele is such an obnoxious character that the viewer half-expects Cross suddenly to lose his calm and kill her. In fact, there is one scene in the film where Cross appears to borrow from Robinson's earlier portrayal of Little Caesar, as the director teasingly raises the public's expectations when Cross advances towards his wife with a long kitchen knife in his hand. These expectations are not fulfilled here, however, as the scene ends without any violence (Grant 2003: 122; Phillips 80).

When Adele's presumably dead first husband shows up,<sup>18</sup> Cross realizes that he is now free to marry Kitty and runs to tell her the good news, only to realize the full extent of her deception: she lied to him all along, as Johnny was the only man she ever loved. In a fit of rage, he stabs her in her ice-cold heart with the most appropriate weapon, an ice pick. He then frames Johnny for the murder so that the latter is condemned and executed for a crime he did not commit.<sup>19</sup> However, Chris is fired from his job when his boss discovers his embezzlement and is left

homeless, and destitute. He is forever haunted by his guilt and by Kitty's voice, as well as by the realization that he allowed her and Johnny to be reunited in death and tries to hang himself, only to be found and rescued by neighbors at the last minute (Phillips 81). The end scene shows Cross, now a pathetic bum sleeping on park benches, witnessing his final humiliation: his portrait of Kitty sold by Adele (Spicer 269). He walks on, a broken and tormented man, while the city slowly fades and melts away around him (Gustafsson 57; Phillips 82-83).<sup>20</sup>

The fact that Cross walks free at the end of the film is not quite as subversive to the Code as it appears; even though Johnny was executed for a crime he did not commit, he was hardly innocent, while Cross will be forever tormented by his own "inner court" and condemned more severely than any tribunal could have done (Mayer & McDonnell 367; Grant 2007: 75). Thus, Fritz Lang skillfully used the downbeat medium of *film noir* to explore once more one of his favorite themes, the nature of guilt, and his view of an implacable fate that no one can escape (Grant 2007: 75).

From the ruthless gangster of *Little Caesar* and *Key Largo* to the mild-mannered heroes of *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street*, from the Jewish scientist of *Dr. Erlich's Magic Bullet* to the principled insurance manager of *Double Indemnity*, Edward G. Robinson infused each and every one of his roles with memorable traits that speak of his unmatched talent, profound understanding of his characters and respect for the public that admired him for over five decades.

### Notes:

---

<sup>1</sup> I believe that the biographer's information may be erroneous in this point, as the Jews were not "assigned" (i.e., forced) to live in certain parts of town; rather, they chose their residence based on their business interests – as many were merchants or shop keepers – or on where their relatives lived. The biographer mentions that this was "not a ghetto in the classical sense" (Gansberg 2).

<sup>2</sup> In fact, this attitude was quite common among Romanian Jews at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Statistics show that about 70,000 Romanian Jews emigrated to America between 1900 and 1906 (Gansberg 3).

<sup>3</sup> Edward G. Robinson's autobiography actually begins with how he changed his name while at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts: "it was suggested to me, ever so tactfully, that Emmanuel Goldenberg was not a name for an actor. Too

long, too foreign and, I suspect, though no hint was made of it, too Jewish” (Robinson 15).

<sup>4</sup> The Production Code was a form of self-censorship in the film industry that required all released films to have the seal of approval. The Hays Office, responsible for implementing the Code, approved the film for release in theatres; of course, this was a voluntary, rather than a compulsory measure, but films released without the approval of this institution were rarely picked up by movie theatres for exhibition and were thus guaranteed box office failures. Film content was checked for any overt sexual references, outright violence, offensive language, etc.

<sup>5</sup> The term “film noir” was coined by French film critic Nino Frank in 1946 and it was used to refer to a number of American films made between 1944 and 1945 (including here *Double Indemnity* and *The Woman in the Window*, both of which starred Edward G. Robinson) characterized by a visual style inspired by German expressionism and featuring down-and-out, unheroic characters. For more details, see Raluca Moldovan, “From *Caligari* to *The Big Heat* and Beyond: European Influences on Classical American Film Noir”, in *Transylvanian Review*, vol. XXII, Supplement no. 3/2013: 58-70; Brook 99.

<sup>6</sup> Although Robinson considered this film as an “unadulterated hokum that I did for the money” (Robinson 254), critics applauded his performance as Triton, a reclusive aging man who has the capacity to foresee events, but is powerless to stop them from happening and is therefore met with disbelief. It is possible that Robinson made use of his own similar experience from his efforts to combat blacklisting and accusations of communist affiliation (Irwin 261-262).

<sup>7</sup> The existence and the regulations of the Production Code are probably the main reason why this classical cycle of gangster films was so short-lived.

<sup>8</sup> The actors playing these characters would have known this dilemma very well: Powers was an Irish-American gangster played by an Irish-American actor (Cagney); while Bandello and Camonte were Italian-American gangsters played by Jewish-American actors from the Lower East Side (Robinson and Muni) (Munby 39).

<sup>9</sup> One clear indicator of this fact is the Anglicization of their names.

<sup>10</sup> Interestingly enough, Rico, just like the characters played by Robinson in *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street*, is very fond of paintings; unlike his later roles, however, Rico values only art that he knows is expensive, probably so he can impress his peers. It is well-known that the actor himself was an avid and refined art collector.

<sup>11</sup> In fact, it could be argued that “Rico” achieves integration and acceptance in one of his later films, *Bullets or Ballots*, where he plays a man of the law who goes underground to infiltrate the mob (a plausible fact if we consider how the film plays on the audience’s familiarity with his former criminal roles).

<sup>12</sup> Keyes claims to have a “little man” inside him who warns him whenever something is wrong (usually when someone tries to commit insurance fraud).

<sup>13</sup> Some critics have argued that the warm and, sometimes adversarial, relationship between Keyes and Neff mirrors the film’s volatile but creatively

successful partnership between director Billy Wilder and scriptwriter Raymond Chandler (Brook 142).

<sup>14</sup> Although Joan Bennett plays the femme fatale in both *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street*, there is a notable difference between the two characters: while Alice appears to be genuinely concerned about Wanley's welfare, Kitty March is nothing but a duplicitous seductress who has no qualms about using her charms to manipulate Christopher Cross into funding her lifestyle and then humiliating him at every turn.

<sup>15</sup> Initially, Lang wanted to use the English translation of the French original (*The Bitch*) as the title for his film, but the Production Code did not allow him to do so, so he finally settled on *Scarlet Street*, having in mind the biblical passage in the Apocalypse where the whore of Babylon is described as a scarlet woman (Phillips 77).

<sup>16</sup> Even his name carries a special symbolism: on the one hand, both Christopher and Cross are clear allusions to Christ the Savior and to his martyrdom (Brook 99); on the other, the name alludes to how he was double crossed by Kitty and Johnny and how he double crossed them in turn – an effective act of crisscrossing (Grant 2007: 74; Phillips 81).

<sup>17</sup> It is evident in the film that all of Cross' paintings lack perspective, which may be an indicator that he does not see the depth of his own inner nature (Grant 2007: 74).

<sup>18</sup> Adele's first husband was presumed dead before she and Cross got married, but – as the plot shows – he had staged his own death to escape some mobsters, without anyone (including Adele) knowing about it.

<sup>19</sup> It is Cross' evidence at the trial that proves decisive in Johnny's death sentence, as he declares that he did not paint any of his works of art, but merely copied them from paintings done by Kitty (an idea also supported by Adele's testimony).

<sup>20</sup> Lang uses this expressionistic visual metaphor to emphasize the fact that Cross has completely withdrawn from human contact and has condemned himself to life of isolation, perhaps in repentance for his guilt (Phillips 83).

## Works Cited

- Abbott, Megan E. *The Street Was Mine. White Masculinity in Hardboiled Fiction and Film Noir*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. Print.
- Brook, Vincent. *Driven to Darkness. Jewish Émigré Directors and the Rise of Film Noir*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009. Print.
- Chopra-Gant, Mike. *Hollywood Genres and Postwar America. Masculinity, Family and Nation in Popular Movies and Film Noir*. London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2006. Print.
- Dickos, Andrew. *Street with No Name. A History of Classic American Film Noir*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002. Print.
- Duncan, Paul. *Film Noir*. Harpenden: Pocket Essentials, 2006. Print.
- Gansberg, Alan L. *Little Caesar: A Biography of Edward G. Robinson*. Lanham:

- Scarecrow Press, 2004. Print.
- Gates, Philippa. *Detecting Men. Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006. Print.
- Grant, Barry Keith, ed. *Film Genre Reader III*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. Print.
- . *Film Genre from Iconography to Ideology*. London: Wallflower, 2007. Print.
- 1941–1991. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996. Print.
- Gustafsson, Henrik. “A Wet Emptiness: The Phenomenology of Film Noir.” *A Companion to Film Noir*. Eds. Andrew Spicer, Helen Hanson. Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2013. 50-66. Print.
- Hark, Ina Rae, ed. *American Cinema of the 1930s. Themes and Variations*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007. Print.
- Irwin, John T. *Unless the Threat of Death Is behind Them. Hard-Boiled Fiction and Film Noir*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. Print.
- Leich, Thomas. *Crime Films*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004. Print.
- Maland, Charles. “Movies and the American Culture in the *Annus Mirabilis*”. *American Cinema of the 1930s. Themes and Variations*. Ed. Ina Rae Hark. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007. 227-52. Print.
- Maxfield, James. *The Fatal Woman: Sources of Male Anxiety in American Film Noir*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996. Print.
- Mayer, Geoff, and Brian McDonnell. *Encyclopedia of Film Noir*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 2007. Print.
- McGilligan, Pat. *Backstory: Interviews with Screenwriters of Hollywood's Golden Age*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986. Print.
- Milberg, Doris. *World War II on the Big Screen*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2010. Print.
- Munby, Jonathan. *Public Enemies, Public Heroes. Screening the Gangster Film from Little Caesar to Touch of Evil*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999. Print.
- Naremore, James. *More than Night. Film Noir in Its Contexts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008. Print.
- Neale, Steve. *Genre and Hollywood*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Park, William. *What Is Film Noir?* Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011. Print.
- Phillips, Gene D. *Out of the Shadows: Expanding the Canon of Classic Film Noir*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012. Print.
- Rabinowitz, Paula. “Gang Wars: Warner Brothers’ *The Roaring Twenties* Stars, News, and the New Deal.” *A Companion to the Historical Film*. Eds. Robert Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu. Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2013. 257-82. Print.
- Robinson, Edward G., with Leonard Spiegelgass. *All My Yesterdays: An Autobiography*. New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973. Print.
- Rubin, Martin. *Thrillers*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Print.

- Ryall, Tom. "Film Noir, American Painting and Photography: Questions of Influence." *A Companion to Film Noir*. Eds. Andrew Spicer, Helen Hanson. Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2013. 158-74. Print.
- Spicer, Andrew. *Historical Dictionary of Film Noir*. Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2010. Print.
- Studlar, Gaylyn. "A Gungel Is Being Beaten: Gangster Masculinity and the Homoerotics of the Crime Film, 1941–1942." *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film*. Eds. Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet, and Peter Stanfield. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005. 120-45. Print.