HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

Scarlet Street 1945

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

Come to me, my melancholy baby,
Cuddle up and don't be blue;
All your fears are foolish fancy, may be,
You know, dear, that I'm in love with you.
Smile my honey dear, while I kiss away each tear,
Or else I shall be melancholy too.

"My Melancholy Baby". In Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street*, a clerk in midlife crises meets a young woman who mistakes him for a wealthy artist. She fleeces him together with her hustler boyfriend, leading to a brutal ending with murder, capital punishment and madness. The song "My Melancholy Baby" plays often in the film. It underscores the leading man's self-deception and disconnect with the raw reality around him. The film's manipulative characters like to listen to the love song but the story involves little romance. It is about lies, tricks, cruelty—and art.

Artists and Paintings. Edward G. Robinson's character is a bored-out cashier whose only enjoyment is painting. "It has something… a peculiar something… but no perspective" a fellow amateur painter remarks about one of his works. As events unfold, the untaught artist's work receives high praise even though he will get no credit for it. Lang reportedly wanted his style to nod to the primitive style of another unschooled painter, Henri Rousseau (Bogdanovich, 69). The artist John Decker created a collection accordingly. The subjects range from pleasant pastoral settings to moody urban ones. They are interesting expressionist works, somewhat simplistic and childish—with a dash of the psychedelic. The paintings are presented as clues to his psyche.

The Sunday painter's masterpiece depicts the woman who would prepare his doom. With her elusive stare, the portrait is a powerful depiction of his object of desire. Decker had created a similarly eerie painting for Jules Dassin's *Brute Force.* His calendar girl picture was hung in Burt Lancaster's character's prison cell.

Another film from the same year also had its spotlight on a painting. Albert Lewin's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* which won an Oscar. *Scarlet Street*'s portrait places it in the company of other films that have enigmatic portrait paintings central to their plots—such as Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* and Otto Preminger's film noir *Laura*.

Art Direction. *Scarlet Street*'s art director Alexander Golitzen (known for his work on many important films including The *Phantom of the Opera*, *Cape Fear, To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Spartacus*) has helped to create frames that allude to Edward Hopper's paintings (Fine). One of the main settings, the artist's studio is a work of art itself thanks to the paintings on its walls created by "the illustrator Tony Rivera"—which recalls the mural painter Diego Rivera.

Film Noir. Lang's previous film, *The Woman in the Window* begins with a professor admiring a painting and then meeting the woman who is the subject of it. The latter happens to be a variation of *Scarlet Street* with the same trio of leading actors playing comparable characters in a plot with similar themes. Edward G. Robinson stars as another middle-aged character whose longing for youthful encounters leads him to briefly flirt with a temptress. He ends up killing her lover in self-defense—which makes him the target of blackmail while the police seem to be closing in on the culprit. Surprisingly, the film has a happy ending—unlike the gloomy conclusion of *Scarlet Street*.

Director of Photography. Both films are classics of film noir, a genre that Lang had already influenced by his German films. Cinematography of Milton Krasner (1962's *How the West Was Won* and *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*) right away signals that we are in film noir landscape, especially the street scenes with their deep shadows, damp pavements, neon signs and light poles.

Principal Cast. *Scarlet Street* is unlike most examples of the genre in that it is devoid of a detective or hardboiled action. Edward G. Robinson was a star of gangster films of the previous decade. Here, his character is presented as an emasculated male. Joan Bennett plays an unusual femme fatale who manipulates him, while enjoying an abusive relationship with her contemptible con artist boyfriend. Sporting a straw boater hat, Dan Duryea makes a memorable villain.

The Script and its Source. Lang directed *The Woman in the Window* and *Scarlet Street* in between other films that dealt with World War II stories. *Ministry of Fear* (1944) was about a Nazi Spy ring; the post-war *Cloak and Dagger* (1946) was set in the last year of the war and revolved around the Cold War's atomic race. The two film noirs are much less concerned with making direct references to the historical background. *Scarlet Street* mostly evades the issue by having its story take place in 1934. The obvious reason for this was that it was based on 1930 novel by Georges de La Fouchardière—adapted previously by Jean Renoir with the same title *La Chienne* (the Bitch) in 1931. Lang and scriptwriter Dudley Nichols change the setting from Montmarte to Greenwich Village. Nichols had written the screenplay of the top grossing film of 1945, *The Bells of St. Mary's* and his credentials included John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939).

La Chienne. Renoir's *La Chienne* is introduced by two puppets. They frame the story and comment that "the play that follows is neither a comedy nor a drama… It has no moral whatsoever and proves nothing at all. The characters are neither heroes not villains but plain people like you and me". Whereas Renoir's version has a lighter tone, Lang's interpretation is pessimistic.

December 1945. *The Woman in the Window* begins with the main character meeting a woman after admiring her portrait painting. In *Scarlet Street*, Chris Cross paints the portrait of the woman he loves—and murders. He evades conviction but ends up as a devastated vagabond. In the last scene, the Christmas carol "O Come Ye All Faithful" plays and the street scene shows him among cheerful shoppers—aptly so, since the film was released in December. However, the music is abruptly cut short as he encounters the portrait. The crowd vanishes, only the protagonist is left on the pavement. He stares at it for a moment and continues walking as a broken man. No room here for the optimism of Frank Capra's iconic *It's a Wonderful Life* that would be screened around the same time next year.

Lang's film did manage to get a pass from the Hays Office—for the Motion Picture Production Code, i.e. Hollywood's own mechanism for making sure that films were in line with certain moral standards. In fact it did so without really adhering to the requirements of the code: Chief among its breaches was that it leaves a murder unpunished—no wonder it was censored by three local censorship boards (Bernstein). This subversive film bridges Lang's German and American periods by its focus on expressionism. It continues the social criticism of his first Hollywood films in the 1930s and hints at his preoccupation in the 1950s with themes of justice, corruption and power of the media.

CHARACTERS

Christopher Cross. Cashier and amateur painter stumbles upon adventure on a rainy New York evening. What seems to begin as a romance has deadly consequences for all those involved.

Katherine March. She says she loves her boyfriend Johnny who physically and emotionally abuses her. She misconceives Chris' hobby and assumes that he is a rich painter. Under the guidance of Johnny, she lets Chris believe that they are a couple. In order to make her happy, Chris embezzles from his boss and steals his wife's bonds. Ultimately Kitty gets credit as the creator of Chris' art—and he kills her after realizing that she was willingly deceiving him.

Johnny Prince. Vicious boyfriend of Kitty is a crook searching for ways to exploit people. If only he could raise the capital, he says he would join certain business ventures, “squeeze out” his partners and next thing would be “easy street”.

Adele Cross. Chris’ dominant and whining wife was formerly his landlady. Not much seems to have changed in their relationship. Adele mocks his art and makes life hell for him. She is fond of her memories of her “late” husband Homer Higgins who is believed to have died heroically.

Homer Higgins. Former New York City police detective was thought to have died heroically. He appears later, with no resemblance to the dignified character depicted in the portrait Adele fondly displays. Homer (officially her husband) blackmails Chris to disappear again.

Millie Ray. Former roommate of Kitty is a photo model. She is a well intentioned character who tries to protect her friend from the abusive Johnny. As a working woman she contrasts with the passive and dependent Kitty. She is possibly the only sympathetic character in the film.

J.J. Hogarth. J.J. is Chris’ employer. The opening scene reveals how his employees—not least Chris himself—are envious of J.J.’s extramarital affair. When he learns that Chris had been stealing from him, he fires him but doesn’t press charges.

Damon Janeway. Influential art critic who stumbles upon Chris’ art. He is led to believe that Kitty March is the paintings’ creator and promotes themto be masterpieces of a self-educated genius.

Dellarowe. The owner of the art gallery where the paintings are exhibited. When he learns that his paintings would be exhibited by Dellarowe, Chris is dumbstruck. The final scene shows Dellarowe just completing the profitable sale of Chris’ most famous work, the *Self-Portrait* depicting Kitty.

SYNOPSIS

Middle-aged cashier Chris Cross is bewitched after a chance encounter with Katherine March, whose shady boyfriend Johnny Prince targets him for swindling. Chris is an amateur painter married to the dominant Adele, who is fond of memories of her late husband Homer Higgins. Johnny encourages Kitty to socialize with Chris in order to fleece him and has Chris to finance a rental lease for an apartment—which he finances by stealing his wife’s inheritance money; subsequently he embezzles from his boss. Johnny also takes Chris’ art around and ultimately gets the attention of a prominent critic and a top gallery owner—who are led to believe that the artworks’ creator is Kitty. Chris is only happy about the sensational success of his art and the praise Kitty receives. However, Adele’s husband Homer—who was supposed to be dead—suddenly appears before him. It turns out that he is far from being the heroic character that Adele almost worships. Homer blackmails Chris, assuming that he would want to remain married; on the other hand Chris comes up with a ploy and offers to help Homer get his own life insurance money, by stealing from Adele. Homer follows his instructions and sneaks into the bedroom—only to bump into his screaming wife. The Chris is exultant and leaves the apartment, never to come back.

Chris comes across Kitty passionately kissing Johnny; he later confronts her and is mocked. In a fit of rage he stabs Kitty. Johnny is arrested and has a hard time with circumstantial evidence pointing at him as the culprit. Eventually, he is convicted and executed. Chris’ embezzlement is discovered and he soon ends up homeless. Meanwhile, the embezzlement is found out. J.J. fires his cashier but doesn’t press charges. In a hotel room, Chris is haunted by voices of the dead couple—evoking *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*’s ending. He tries to hang himself but is saved at the last moment *Self-Portrait*—signed by Katherine March—is sold for a very high price.

SCENES

Introducing Chris Cross. A limousine pulls up in front of a gentlemen’s club. An organ grinder cranking the tune of Santa Lucia approaches the car and the young woman sitting in the rear seat amuses herself with his pet monkey. Meanwhile, the driver enters the building to get the word to his boss J.J. Hogarth that his date is waiting for him outside. J.J. is having dinner with the employees of his retail

business. They are celebrating the 25th years of service of Chris Cross. J.J. presents a diamond encrusted pocket watch as a gift to his faithful cashier and together they chant “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow”. It looks like the stage is set for an uplifting story.



Sunday Painter in Midlife Crisis. As soon as he receives his driver’s message, an electrified J.J. hurriedly leaves the party. Hogarth & Co.’s clerks rush to the window to get a look at their boss drive away with his much younger mistress. They are riveted by her striking looks—the actress had worked as a stand in for Lana Turner (the Metzinger Sisters). Chris and another older clerk look slightly embarrassed and decide that it is time to leave. They walk under the evening rain to Charlie’s bus. Even though Chris has acted prudently by not joining his ogling colleagues, the age-gap relationship has made a strong impression on him. He ponders about his youthful dreams, about love and how his life lacked it. In his young days he had hoped to be a great artist—another disappointment, with him ending up as a middle-aged Sunday painter. Chris walks home with his workmate following the party; moments before his fateful encounter with Kitty.



Wimpish Clerk Steps into Noir Alley. After his friend rides away, Chris heads to the subway station, walking in the dark and empty streets of Greenwich Village. Suddenly he sees a woman getting beaten by a man wearing a straw hat. He runs to her rescue and knocks down the assailant with his umbrella. While he tries to fetch a police officer, the man vanishes. Kitty—ambiguously—stands waiting, moments after she was battered by Johnny and saved by Chris.

Chris accompanies the charming Katherine “Kitty” March to her home. They stop by a bar for a drink and have a little chat. Talk of Chris’ beloved hobby of painting—as well as his tuxedo and new watch—leads Kitty to mistakenly deduce that he is a rich and famous Greenwich Village artist. As they part ways, Chris is obviously bewitched.



Back to “Happy Household Hour” with Adele. Chris had failed to mention to Kitty that painting is merely his hobby. Also the fact that he is—unhappily—married. At home, his nagging wife Adele takes every opportunity to lash him bitterly. Chris can only paint on Sundays in the bathroom—under Adele’s constant threats to throw his paintings to trash. Even though she is fond of radio shows, her miserly ways prevent her from getting a set and Chris doesn’t earn enough to buy her one. In the evenings, her husband dons a ruffled pinafore apron to take care of chores and Adele drops by the neighbor for her favorite radio show, “the happy household hour” which sounds like anything but Chris’ domestic life. Chris Cross keeps getting whipped by wife Adele under the watchful eyes of her late husband.

Homer Higgins, a Hero. Adele has a habit of disparagingly comparing Chris to her late husband Homer, a posthumously decorated detective of the NYC police force. His large photo portrait on the wall is the centerpiece the apartment. Homer had gone missing as he was trying to save a drowning woman in the Hudson River and his body was never found. Adele had inherited his life insurance—the railway bonds which she keeps by her bedside. In order not to spend them she had rented out a room to Chris who eventually became her husband. “Mud done by a photographer” Chris remarks about the portrait of Homer—who will eventually turn out to be far from a hero.

Web of Deceit and a Dangerous Couple. Chris had let Kitty picture him to be someone other than who he was. Following scene reveals that Kitty was just as deceptive when she claimed to be an actress. Her attacker that evening was in fact her abusive boyfriend and con artist Johnny Prince (in the Renoir adaptation, it is explicit that she is a prostitute and he is her pimp). Kitty ignores her best friend Millie’s urges to cut Johnny loose, evidently because of their powerful sadomasochistic bond.

Chris' Letter—and Art. Hoping to see her again, Chris sends Kitty a letter. Johnny reads it, sniggering at its adolescent tone and the older man's naïve admiration. Once Kitty leads him to believe that Chris' paintings have exuberant price tags, Johnny begins scheming. In the realm of art, Chris' painting of the elevated bridge depicts the eventful evening. It features a snake that apparently symbolizes Johnny—in this scene, Lang superimposes his image on it)



A Cunning Scheme. With his keen eye for exploiting the weaknesses of others, Johnny quickly comes up with a plan to take advantage of Chris' unrequited love. He persuades Kitty to swindle money from him. Accordingly the two begin to see each other.

Fleecing Chris. Although she is visibly repulsed by him, Kitty lets Chris think that they are in a platonic relationship. For his part, Chris is aware that he can get her attention only by continuing to pose as a successful artist. When he awkwardly admits that he is married, the news comes in handy as it lets Kitty keep him at a distance. She has him believe that they could have been a couple if he did not already have a wife. Chris is happy.

Moving to a Fancy Apartment. Not before long, she manipulates Chris to finance a rental lease for an apartment. He is lured by the idea of visiting her there and also use it as his studio. Since he has no money, the cashier initially deliberates stealing from his firm's vault to secure the funds but gives up the idea. Instead, he turns to his wife's inheritance money and helps himself with some of her bonds. Subsequently, Kitty and Johnny settle into an expensive apartment. Johnny and Kitty try to make sense of Chris's art—and ponder the possibility of exploiting it.



An Ill-fated Love Triangle. Johnny tries to keep a low profile to avoid Chris—unsuccessfully, since Kitty can't do without her brutish lover. Soon Chris runs into Johnny and doesn't get a good vibe from him—but fails to associate him with that eventful evening. More encounters leave Chris annoyed and he gets increasingly suspicious.

Hidden Talent Discovered. Johnny inveigles Kitty to squeeze more money from Chris. This time the clerk resorts to embezzling from his boss. Even that does not satisfy Johnny, who decides to sell the paintings. He leaves a couple of them with a street vendor for consignment sale. It doesn't take long before they are bought by the influential art critic Damon Janeway. Highly impressed by the paintings, Janeway tracks their creator and arrives at the con couple's apartment. Johnny tells him that the artist is none other than Kitty herself. Dellarowe takes a closer look at the paintings while Johnny watches (theapartment's wall displays the work of "Tony Rivera.") A deal for an exhibition is made at the prestigious Dellarowe Gallery and samples of Chris' work are placed on display.



Chris is Dumbfounded. Pretty soon, Adele passing by the gallery recognizes the paintings that she had always detested. To her surprise, they are signed by Katherine March. Back at home, she scornfully mocks Chris for copying someone else's artwork. The docile Chris gets increasingly devious and begins to hint at his dangerous side.



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Chris Paints, Kitty Signs. The humble Sunday painter is unable to figure out how his works ended up at Dellarowe. Doubly perplexing for him is Kitty's name coming up, so he runs to her place to see what is going on. She cunningly explains that she was desperate for money and had no recourse but to sell the pieces. Instead of getting angry, Chris is delighted that his work has somehow made it to the high-end gallery. He tells her that he would like her to



continue taking the credit for his art. The arrangement seems to have fueled his delusion that they are a couple. With the boost to his self-esteem he paints Kitty's portrait and names it *Self-Portrait*. Chris paints and Kitty signs—but the partnership won't last long.



Stirring the Art Scene. The exhibition opens up shortly and the new sensation rocks the Greenwich art scene. Janeway's introduction in the paper endorses her art as the "most exciting thing that has occurred in this decade of painting in the United States". Chris is exhilarated by his artworks attaining a level of fame that he had never imagined. On the other hand, Johnny and Kitty enjoy their new-found wealth pouring from the sales of paintings. The trio seems to be content with the web of deceit they created. The positive outlook is not to last long however. *Self-Portrait* and *Man with Umbrella,* two of Chris' paintings are showcased in a review of Katherine March's art.

A Ghost from the Past. Chris has an unexpected visitor. Adele's former husband Homer—who was supposed to be dead—suddenly appears before him. It turns out that he is far from being the heroic character that Adele almost worships. According to his own recap of his disappearance, Homer was busy collecting bribes when he saw a woman commit suicide at the river. He had jumped after her, grabbed her purse and found it to be full of money. Subsequently he had hopped on to a steamer and was soon out of the country. His reappearance would legally invalidate Chris and Adele's marriage but Homer assures the cashier that he has no such desires. He assumes that Chris would want to remain married, so there he is extorting him to keep things the way they are.

An Astounding Ploy from Chris. Chris abruptly comes up with a shrewd proposition. He offers to help Homer get his own life insurance money. He says that in the evening Adele would leave to go to a movie. He tells him to wait for his signal, come over and take the bonds. When the prearranged time comes, Homer follows his instructions and sneaks into the bedroom—only to bump into his screaming wife. The trick comes as an unexpected move from the docile man we have seen so far. Chris is exultant and leaves the apartment, never to come back.

Shattered Dreams. Chris goes to Kitty's apartment to share the good news that he is now single and free to marry her. There, a surprise awaits him as he sees her passionately kissing Johnny. Chris leaves in shock and calms himself with a few drinks at a bar. The sight of a temperance union preacher on the street seems to encourage him to give Kitty another chance.

Kitty Hisses, Chris Goes Berserk, Johnny Gets the Chair. He returns to the apartment to find her alone and tells her that they now have no obstacles for marrying. Instead of becoming happy, she unleashes her contempt and delivers a salvo of insults with a derisive laughter. Stunned, Chris gets hold of an ice pick and stabs Kitty. He runs away and returns to his regular routine. Johnny is arrested and has a hard time with circumstantial evidence pointing at him as the culprit. Eventually, he is convicted and executed.

Trial by Conscience and Descent into Melancholia. Meanwhile, the embezzlement is found out. J.J. fires his cashier but doesn't press charges. In a hotel room, Chris is haunted by voices of the dead couple—evoking *Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*'s ending. He tries to hang himself but is saved at the last moment.



The Self-Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman. Five or six years pass, and we see Chris as a homeless man wandering in the city. He happens to be passing by Dellarowe Gallery just as his *Self-Portrait*—signed by Katherine March—is sold for a very high price. As the painting is taken to a car, it passes by him and for a fleeting moment he stares blankly at Kitty's glazed eyes as he depicted them.cThe portrait is sold for a high price and the homeless Chris stares after it.

Scarlet Street begins with the happy melody of "Santa Lucia" and almost ends with the Christmas carol "O Come Ye All Faithful"—the joyful tune is cut short and Chris walks alone as a devastated man.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Christopher Cross – **Closed** (Naïve, Henpecked, Bottled up);
Disagreeable (Dangerous, Devious, Wicked)
Kitty March – **Emotional** (Masochistic, Ruthless Actress, Laughing, Indolent Child-Woman)
Johnny Prince – **Disagreeable** (Reptilian)

CHRISTOPHER CROSS (Open, Disagreeable)

Chris Cross' name sounds like crisscross—"boys sometimes tease me about it but I don't mind" he tells Kitty. The driven artist versus the timid and repressed clerk—aspects of his identity intersect and conflict in such a pattern.

Illustrative moments

Naïve. "You must be robbing the cradle" Johnny teases Kitty when he reads Chris' love letter. Chris has a childish way of interacting with others, which is best illustrated by his naïve paintings.

Henpecked. After starring in gangster films as a tough guy, Edward G. Robinson here plays an emasculated male. In between Adele's naggings, he puts on his ruffled pinafore apron and takes care of the housework.

Bottled Up. Chris is a good natured and underwhelming character. In an early scene, he tells Kitty how he "keeps everything bottled up". His repressed nature gets increasingly more noticeable. During one of Adele's scoldings, he impulsively says that he feels stuck. This is a first time and his wife demands to check his breath—she thinks that he must be drunk to talk back to her like this. More hints to his darker side follow soon.

Dangerous. A newspaper story about a wife killer animates him, which in turn annoys Adele. Later, she accuses him for stealing the art of someone else. This makes Chris clutch the knife that happened to be in his hand—this gets Adele retreating to her room. Whether she realizes it or not, Adele is indeed in peril. Chris keeps suggesting to Kitty that he might be free to marry her if "Adele d…"—he doesn't get to complete the sentence and doesn't need to, Adele's official husband resurfaces, consequently invalidating Chris and Adele's marriage.

Devious. The new Chris surfaces when he tricks Adele's former husband Homer to steal her bonds. It is a crafty move on Chris's part to come up with such a plan to get rid of both of Adele and Homer. The ultimate manifestation of Chris' capacity for evil is his testimony in the trial. By denying that he was a painter, he points to Kitty as the real artist. This move points to Johnny as the person who would benefit financially from her death and thus gets him convicted.

Wicked. Towards the end, he enters his hotel room. He has been fired from his job but that doesn't bother him since Johnny—his object of hate—has been electrocuted. In this scene, he is happily whistling a tune from the song "My Melancholy Baby*"* which Kitty liked so much.

KATHERINE "KITTY" MARCH (Emotional)

Kitty callously manipulates Chris and Johnny is all she cares about.

Illustrative moments

Masochistic. On the surface, Kitty appears to be a romantic. She is fond of the song "My Melancholy Baby" and likes to read the *True Love* magazine. She says she loves Johnny and it is clear that she enjoys his abuses. Even Chris could have made a better impression on her if he was not so gentle—"If he were mean or vicious, or if he bawled me out or something I'd like him better" she says. The puzzling Kitty anticipates Isabella Rossellini's nightclub singer in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986). Spanish distributors of *Scarlet Street* had chosen to spotlight the film's theme of sadomasochism when they released it with the title *Perversidad* (Perversity).

Ruthless Actress. In their original meeting, Kitty evasively tells Chris that she is an actress. While this may be a lie, she is actually very good at acting. It is hard to tell when she is lying and faking emotions. Only momentarily does she reveal her disgust with Chris who is too trustful to notice her gestures.

Laughing. When Chris shyly confesses that he is married, Kitty tries hard to stifle a chuckle. Up until the end, she manages to hide her true feelings, until the finale when she bursts out laughing—"I wanted to laugh in your face ever since I met you!" she cries. Her coarse and self-destructive laughter recalls the Nazi collaborator Chaka giving himself away by laughing out loud to a joke—to make himself a target—in Lang's *Hangmen Also Die!*

Indolent Child-Woman. Kitty decorates her apartment with several plush toys and her folding screen has a cute animal pattern. Her childish ways seem to be part of her appeal to Chris. She is messy and doesn't like to take responsibility. Johnny calls her "lazy legs" with some accuracy because her passivity is one reason she keeps her abuser around.

JOHNNY PRINCE (Disagreeable)

Mr. Prince has unique way of gesturing with his hands and he waves like a royal. He also has a distinctive way of talking, repeating phrases such as "I might" and "could be". Dan Duryea's small time crook Johnny is a memorable movie villain. His trademark straw boater hat is a visual cue suggesting that the story is taking place in the previous decade (Professor Rollmops).

Illustrative moment

Reptilian. Johnny is a dreamer. The only problem is, he dreams of wrecking other people and he knows no limits. He steers Kitty to fleece Chris and he was prepared to blackmail him if Chris stopped being obliging. "The pipedreams you have" Kitty teases him. He could have made a rich businessman—if only they gave him a break, as he screams on his way to the electric chair.

THEMES

Society – The World of the Artist, Masterpieces, Modern Art and Expressionism, Realism, Art as Commodity, Gatekeepers of Art, Art and Value, Authorship, Consumerism, Fashion.
Justice – Law Enforcement, Justice

SOCIETY

The World of the Artist. *Scarlet Street* is saturated with references to artists. The name of Paul Cézanne pops up early on. Kitty has seen one of the master's works featured at the Dellarowe gallery. Later, after ripping off Chris, Johnny and Kitty move to an apartment previously occupied by "Tony Rivera" (the painting on the walls hinting at the mural painter Diego Rivera). Rivera had painted some of the walls and turned the apartment into a work of art. When his wife mocks him for copying postcards Chris refers to Maurice Utrillo—"Utrillo or whatever his name is" Adele rebuffs. Similarly, Kitty pronounces Cezanne as "Seesan" highlighting Chris' superior knowledge. The henpecking wife and enchanting femme fatale want to possess things like radio, clothes, diamond ring while Chris dreams of owning a masterpiece of modern art.

Masterpieces. In the final scene, Chris passes in front of Dellarowe Gallery, having lost everything and tormented by his conscience. At this moment he emptily stares at his highly regarded *Self-Portrait* which has just been sold. The other painting on display is Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Part*—Chris' art is in the same league with masterpieces now. This could be Lang joking with Edward G. Robinson—the actor was an art collector himself who reportedly said that he spent years visiting Renoir's painting and plotted ways of stealing it (Leonard Maltin).

Modern Art and Expressionism. "I just put a line around what I feel when I look at things" Chris tells Kitty. John Decker's creations for the film have a naïve style depicting scenes from nature and the city. The ones with animals most directly resemble the work of Henri Rousseau as per Lang's vision. A couple of them are stills of wildly fanciful flowers. One of the urban compositions alludes to the moment Chris first saw Kitty being battered. She stands under the elevated railway and Johnny is represented by a menacing snake on the support beam. His *Self-portrait* depicting Kitty alludes to the works and style of Tamara de Lempicka (Shaidla), Frida Kahlo, and Rosa Rolanda (Stecyck). Overall, it is an intriguing expressionist collection that provides some insight into Chris' identity.

Realism. As opposed to expressionism, realism stands out as a deficient method of representation e.g. Homer's portrait in Cross' apartment. The stately image shows him to be dignified and commanding. It is a touched up photo which Chris calls "mud". Perhaps rightly so—the portrait is a complete misrepresentation of the actual person. When Homer shows up, he wears a fake eye patch and shabby clothes. The tale of heroism about him losing his life while trying to save a woman turns out to be a load of baloney. He was a venal policeman and had even stolen from a woman as she was committing suicide. Homer had simply used the incident to fake his own death in order to evade an investigation into his corruption.

Art as Commodity. Kitty recounts her bewilderment at the price of the Cezanne painting. Chris explains that it is normal, "you can't put prices on masterpieces like that. They are worth… well, whatever you can afford to pay for them". His cool approach shapes Kitty's conviction that he must be wealthy. References to art are frequent and they often come with specific dollar tags attached. Amateur artists' works have an opening price of $25 at the street market. At the other end of the spectrum, Cezanne—an eye-opener for Kitty—fetches $50,000. When the art community discovers Chris' works, individual pieces are quickly sold for about $500. At the finale, the self-portrait is reportedly purchased for $10,000.

Gatekeepers of Art. Dellarowe Gallery's manager tells Johnny that "prices will have to be built up" (which sounds similar to Chris's line that paintings are completed as the "feeling grows"). In this process, the film acknowledges the role of two gatekeepers, the museum and the critic. "Yipes they've got pictures worth a million bucks" Kitty remarks about the Metropolitan Museum. Accordingly, Johnny plans to take the pictures to this ultimate authority—but they are sold before he can do that. Critic Janeway buys them and he is the driving force behind the popularization of the collection. The trend-setter commands considerable power in the art scene—happily abuses it too as he is quick to flirt with Kitty, who in turn manipulates him.

Art and Value. Thinking of more ways to milk the supposedly accomplished artist, Johnny comes up with the idea to sell his art. "They are not even signed" he observes contently—the humble amateur has never felt the need, since it didn't occur to him that his work could be exchanged. Johnny takes them to the pawnbroker where he is accustomed to sell other—most likely—stolen merchandise. Point blank, the shady character makes his appraisal by spitting on the paintings. The big surprise for Johnny is that while the pawnbroker would happily buy anonymous jewelry, he is not crazy about nameless art. Johnny wanted to learn the intrinsic value of a painting and the man tells him that it is "the price of the canvas".

Authorship. Things change when Kitty gets recognition as the paintings' creator. She mesmerizes the eminent art critic by dramatically reiterating what Chris had earlier told her about his approach to painting. Her brilliant storicizing makes "a great deal of difference", as Chris remarks with surprise and delight. The

enigmatic and attractive artist's works quickly become the talk of the town and command high prices in the market.

Consumerism. Mass produced items are everywhere in *Scarlet Street*. Products of modern life appear mostly as household items. Electrical devices like the toaster in Cross' dining table and gramophone in the living room (a turntable in the young couple's apartment) are featured prominently. There are also tokens of consumer goods like the Lux detergent. Another cleaning agent is the Happy Soap which is the sponsor of a popular radio show. Cross' don't own a radio set, so the wife drops by the downstairs neighbor to listen to *Happy Household Show*—an obvious pun on the couple's miserable domestic life.

Fashion. When Chris sees her for the first time under the El Bridge, Kitty is wearing a clear plastic rain coat over her alluring dress. Women appear to be more eager consumers. Kitty tells Chris that "a face doesn't mean a thing, it's clothes, perfume… an actress needs at least $1000 to get a decent wardrobe. Her friend and former roommate Millie models girdles for catalogues. "If corsets ever come back, I'll quit modeling" she says. Costumes appear to belong to the film's actual time with the exception of the hustler's straw hat—"a hilarious reminder of the flapper age" and "early years of the Great Depression" (Conley, 1099). Joan Bennett's glamorous wardrobe for *Scarlet Street* was designed by Travis Banton who was influential in creating the iconic image of Marlene Dietrich (The Metzinger Sisters).

JUSTICE

Law Enforcement. Police's involvement is kept at a minimum, when officers appear they tend to be unlikable characters, paralleling the previous year's *The Woman in the Window*. For instance, J.J. decides not to press charges for Chris' embezzlement and easily secures the consent of two officers by presenting them a moderate bribe—a box of expensive cigars. Another example is the ending with its patrolmen at the park who approach the now homeless Chris sleeping on a bench. They aggressively swinging their batons and appear to be too willing to use them on the helpless man. The worst case is Adele's first husband, an ex-policeman and a corrupt one—he could have been active in the force if he had not chosen to flee.

Justice. The court trial is a miscarriage of justice. If it was not for his own conscience, his murder of Kitty would have no consequences for Chris. Johnny Prince may well be a detestable individual but he was innocent of the homicide charge. Nonetheless, he ends up being electrocuted.

<u>Parallels with Lang's Other Films</u>

In the court trial sequence of *Scarlet Street,* the witnesses speak to the camera in rapid succession and the verdict is delivered right away. Compared to the court scenes in Lang's other films, it is quite condensed. In *M* the kangaroo court is marked by Beckert's monologue and a lengthy speech from his defender. The ambivalence calls to question the prosecutors' (the city's underworld) own morals. In *Fury*, the court becomes a setting for Joe's lawful revenge from the lynch party. In *Secret Beyond the Door* there is another monologue, the difference being that it is in the character's imagination. He becomes both prosecutor and defendant, while the jurors and judge are all faceless silhouettes. *House by the River* (1950) also has a court scene which ends with a faulty verdict. Set in rural America at the turn of the century, an idle novelist murders a maid and frames his own brother. The trial doesn't come close to unearthing the truth. In the Western *The Return of Frank James* (1940) The titular James brother seeks revenge for the murder of Jesse. The film has a court scene in which the railroad—big business—attempts to manipulate justice.

Discussion questions

How would you compare this film with Renoir's *La Chienne* which was another adaptation from the same novel?

Matthew Bernstein recounts how Scarlet Street was censored in three US states. "The New York State Censor Board banned *Scarlet Street* entirely, relying on the statute that gave it power to censor films that were 'obscene, indecent, immoral, inhuman, sacrilegious' or whose exhibition 'would tend to corrupt morals or incite to crime'". It was also banned in Milwaukee and Atlanta—where the censor declared it "licentious, profane, obscure and contrary to the good order of the community" (Bernstein). What could have disturbed the censorship boards—particular scenes, relationships, ideas, characters?

Does Lang encourage us to appreciate Chris' paintings and his talent as an artist or is it the opposite?

What do you think about the direct or indirect references to famous artists (Cezanne, Rousseau, Utrillo, Renoir, Rivera) in this film? Do you think they are arbitrarily selected or serve a specific purpose?

Given that *Scarlet Street* and *The Woman in the Window* not only share the same principal cast but also have similar characters in parallel situations, how do the two films compare? Generally, *Scarlet Street* is regarded as the more successful film. It is also considered to be darker as opposed to the somewhat hilarious *The Woman in the Window*. Do you agree with it being the superior—and more pessimistic—film?

It is known that a key scene of *Scarlet Street* was deleted by Lang himself (Bogdanovich, Gunning). In this scene towards the end of the film, Chris Cross goes near the prison complex to witness Johnny's execution from a distance. He doesn't get to see the electrocution but makes sure that he is there when it takes place. What could be the purpose of such a scene? Why do you think Lang removed it? If it was included, how would it change the story and characters?

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