HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Burak Sevingen, MA

# You Only Live Once 1937

## Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

OVERVIEW

In *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse*, the last film Fritz Lang directed before his self-imposed exile from Germany, the titular character's henchmen wreak havoc by hurling (off-screen) glass bulbs filled with poison gas. Four years later, in his second film in the USA, Lang takes up the idea again. Poison gas is used to rob a bank in a key scene in *You Only Live Once*. This time, there are no master-villains cooking up grand schemes—instead, the focus is on social issues. *You Only Live Once,* together with *Fury* and *You and Me* that respectively precede and follow it, constitute Lang's trilogy of social critiques.

In a script written by Gene Towne and C. Graham Baker, an ex-con with a thick criminal file tries to live straight. He is—presumably wrongfully—arrested for a bank robbery and is faced with prejudice, media bias and a hasty death sentence. Regretful for persuading him to trust the justice system, she joins her husband after he escapes from prison and the couple goes on the lam.

**The Great Depression.** Great Depression forms the backdrop of the plot—the leading woman Sylvia Sidney was known as the 'face of the Depression" (Sonnet, 170). In her previous films (e.g. *City Streets*; *Mary Burns, Fugitive*; *Fury*) Sidney had "perfected a look of utter devastation" that "appealed to Depression era audiences" (171). The leading man Peter Fonda would star in John Ford's adaptation of the John Steinbeck novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940).

**Public Enemies.** For his films in Germany, Fritz Lang had a penchant for collecting newspaper clippings about incidents that he found interesting (Bogdanovich, 16). His first Hollywood film *Fury* was also inspired by real events, such as a sensational 1933 lynching and the kidnapping of aviator Charles Lindberg's toddler. Similarly, *You Only Live Once* is inspired by the real-life exploits of the so-called public enemies Bonnie and Clyde, who were gunned down by police in 1934.

**Cencorship.** Hays Code's—Hollywood's own mechanism for making sure that films were in line with certain moral standards—enforcer the Production Code Administration singled out *You Only Live Once*'s bank robbery scene for its "brutality and gruesomeness", and stated necessary omissions. The following scenes mentioned by the censor were evidently removed:

> No flash of a man's face contorted with agony, no showing of a woman lying on the sidewalk, no hurling of bombs, no cop lying on the street, his face contorted in pain; no truck crushing out the life of a cop, no terrible screaming, no shots of bodies lying around, no figure of a little girl huddled in death, no shrieks (AFI).

**Gangster Film Cycle.** The first few years of the 1930s marked the premiere of some of the best gangster films. *Little Caesar* and *The Public Enemy* were released in 1931, followed by *Scarface*—just a couple of years before the Hays Code would be fully effective. Parallel to the censors' scrutiny of gangster films, 'couple on the run' scenarios became popular; they provided a means to evade censorship, which targeted traditional gangster portrayals (Munby, 116). Films in this category include *Persons in Hiding* (1939); *They Live by Night* (1948)—based on Edward Anderson's 1937 novel *Thieves Like Us*, which was adapted into film again in 1974 as *Thieves Like Us*; *Gun Crazy* (1950); *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967); *Getaway* (1972); *Badlands* (1973); and *Natural Born Killers* (1994).

**Style and Themes.** Visually, *You Only Live Once* has an affinity to Marcel Carné's *Port of Shadows* (1938) and *Daybreak* (1939). Cinematographer Leon Shamroy (*The Snows of Kilimanjaro; Cleopatra; Planet of the Apes*), a many-time Oscar nominee and winner gives the film its distinctive look that would

be one of the reasons for its retrospective labeling as a proto-film noir. Among *You Only Live Once*'s themes are the stigmatization of ex-convicts, surveillance in modern society, fatalism, and heavy-handedness of law enforcement. It is also a fascinating study in perception, with Lang inviting the viewers to question their commitments to contesting perspectives.

CHARACTERS

**Eddie Taylor.** Eddie has been convicted three times in the past and under the three-strikes law, faces a life sentence if he were convicted once again. Upon his release from prison, he gets married to Joan and stays away from crime but finds that the transition to middle-class life is not easy.

**Joan Graham.** Eddie's girlfriend is a competent clerk and law-abiding citizen working at the public defender's office.

**Stephen Whitney.** The public defender has a crush on Joan and tries earnestly to help the man she loves. He selflessly goes out of his way to aid the couple, even during their escape. A character criticizes his liberal attitude by calling him a "1936 Abraham Lincoln".

**Father Dolan.** The caring and well-liked prison chaplain is killed while he desperately tries to convince Eddie to leave the prison without his gun.

**Bonnie Graham.** Joan's sister is skeptical about Eddie's intentions. As Joan and Eddie go on the run, she willingly takes responsibility of their baby.

SYNOPSIS

Joan Graham works as a clerk for the public defender Stephen Whitney—who, even though he has a crush on her, helps her secure a pardon for her boyfriend Eddie Taylor. Joan's sister Bonnie is skeptical about Eddie's prospects of leading an honest life—he is a "three-time loser"—which means that he would get a drastically increased sentence if he were to be convicted once again. Eddie is released and greeted by Joan; they head out to a secluded inn for their honeymoon, after which he moves to a boardinghouse. When Eddie gets fired from the transport company, the couple's lease of a new home gets jeopardized. At this point, he is approached by his former gang mate Monk, who is evidently preparing to rob a bank.

Soon, a deadly bank heist takes place; Eddie's hat is found at the crime scene and he becomes a suspect. Joan urges him to surrender to the police. Consequently, Eddie faces hostile media attention and the jury's guilty verdict results in a death sentence. He is extremely bitter about heeding Joan's advice and scolds her. The day Eddie is cleared of the crime, Eddie escapes from prison, not believing the warden when he tells him about the pardon. He shoots Father Dolan, the priest who had always been kind to him, on the way and gets lightly wounded himself.

Eddie and Joan attempt to make it to Mexico; during the trip, they are branded as fearsome bandits. Soon, they run into a police ambush and the car gets sprayed with machine guns. Eddie carries the fatally wounded Joan and kisses her just before he is shot by a sniper's bullet. There is a glimmer of light between the trees and Father Dolan's voice can be heard saying "you're free Eddie, the gates are open".

SCENES

**Public Defender's Clerk.** Joan Graham is an adroit clerk working for the Public Defender. Her boss Stephen Whitney—who has a crush on her—has helped her secure a pardon for her boyfriend Eddie Taylor who is about to be released from prison. Joan's sister Bonnie is skeptical about Eddie's prospects of leading an honest life and tries to discourage her from getting married to him.

**Penitentiary.** In his last moments at the penitentiary, Eddie bids adieu to his cellmate and endures the warden's condescending advice about his status as a "three-time loser"—which would get him a drastically increased sentence if he were to be convicted once again. Eddie is warmly escorted to the gate by the prison's popular priest Father Dolan. The priest and the attorney are unlike most of the other characters in the film. They believe in giving second chances to ex-convicts and support Eddie. Whitney and Dolan represent the social reformers of the 1930s. Once outside the gate, he is greeted by Joan and the two happily set out for their honeymoon.



The scene at the Valley Tavern, with the lovers talking about frogs, has been called "one of the most lyrical love scenes in the cinema" by Lotte Eisner (Eisner, 177)—and the most "lyrical and bizarre" by Wilson (Wilson, 31). Great Depression forms the backdrop of the plot—the leading woman Sylvia Sidney was known as the 'face of the Depression" (Sonnet, 170). In her previous films (e.g. *City Streets*; *Mary Burns, Fugitive*; *Fury*) Sidney had "perfected a look of utter devastation" that "appealed to Depression era audiences" (171). The leading man Peter Fonda would star in John Ford's adaptation of the John Steinbeck novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940).



**The Valley Tavern.** Carefree lovers remain unaware that bureocracy is carefully keeping track of Eddie's criminal records—this information gets disseminated through various channels of mass communication, such as popular true crime magazines. Unfortunately for the couple, their hosts happen to be true crime buffs. Eddie and Joan are kicked out. The obnoxious proprietors of the inn exemplify social prejudice against ex-cons—the actress Margaret Hamilton would play the "Wicked Witch of the West" in *The Wizard of Oz*). The newlyweds need to leave; Joan takes the bus to go back to living with her sister and Eddie moves to a boardinghouse.



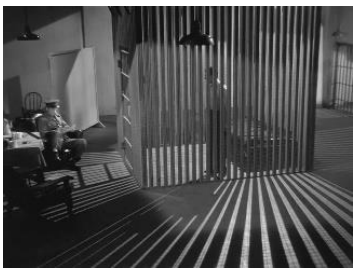



**Second Blow.** Eddie has begun working as a truck driver at Ajax Transport; Taylors sign a lease for a house and prepare to move in. However, their plans are shattered when Eddie gets fired on a whim. Meanwhile, he is approached by his former gang mate Monk, who is evidently preparing to rob a bank.

**The Heist.** An armored truck pulls in front of the Fifth National Bank, which is spied by a pair of eyes from a slit in a nearby car's window. A man sitting in the driver's seat—unidentifiable due to the gas mask covering his face—has by him several grenades and a hat with Eddie's initials. When guards embark with the money bags, they are stunned by a volley of gas bombs. The attack swiftly ends with several people lying around and the masked robber driving away in heavy rain with the armored truck. He doesn't get far though—the hectic getaway ends with the truck crashing into a lake. The heist leaves six people dead and Eddie's hat found at the crime scene makes him the main culprit.

**Arrest and Trial.** Joan is surprised when Eddie shows up at their home soaking wet. When policemen arrive to arrest him, she urges him to surrender peacefully. Subsequently, Eddie faces hostile media attention and the jury's guilty verdict results in a death sentence.

**Eddie's Defiance.** Awaiting his execution at the death row, Eddie rebuffs Joan for persuading him to trust in the judicial system. He brusquely tells her to supply him a gun to help him escape. When Joan reluctantly tries to smuggle one to the prison, she is almost caught by the guards. She is saved by Father Dolan, who discreetly takes away the gun.





Eventually, Joan becomes desperate and contemplates suicide. Eddie remains restless, confined to his cell—Fritz Lang nods to expressionism with a chiaroscuro shot. As Eddie in his jail cell is surveilled by guards, prisoners at the courtyard surveilled from the guard tower—evoking the concept of panopticism as explored by Michel Foucault.

**A Late Pardon.** On the day of Eddie's execution, the bank vehicle is recovered from the lake with the body of the robber inside. Unaware that he has been cleared of the crime, Eddie goes ahead with his escape plan. He uses a gun provided by his former cellmate and takes the prison's doctor hostage. When the warden tells him that he has been pardoned, Eddie doesn't believe him and demands that they let him go. Just as the warden is about to order the guards to open the gates, Father Dolan intervenes and tries to convince Eddie to leave without the gun. The priest gets shot and Eddie manages to break out with a light wound. Policemen in this scene and throughout the film are seen using a variety of firearms including a Vickers heavy machine gun and Thompson submachine guns—scenes notable for their affinity to contemporary notions such as war on crime and militarization of police.





**Lovers on the Lam.** Eddie and Joan meet and begin a perilous journey with Mexico as their ultimate destination. During the getaway, Joan steals drugs from a pharmacy to treat Eddie's wound and they gas up at gunpoint. Crimes committed elsewhere are attributed to the couple; they are branded as fearsome bandits, and the bounty on their heads increases. They become lovers on the lam.



**Cuba or Mexico?** Joan gives birth and leaves the baby to the care of her sister Bonnie. Public Defender Whitley urges Joan take a boat to Havana by herself—in order to give him time to clear her name. She refuses and rejoins Eddie to resume their drive towards the border. Soon, they run into a police ambush and the car gets sprayed with machine guns. Eddie carries the fatally wounded Joan and kisses her just before he is shot by a sniper's bullet. There is a glimmer of light between the trees and Father Dolan's voice can be heard saying "you're free Eddie, the gates are open".

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Eddie Taylor – Closed** (Ambiguous); Emotional (Bitter); Agreeable (Virtuous Victim)
**Joan Graham – Open** (Competent, Wacky, Defiant)

**EDDIE TAYLOR**

Eddie has been convicted three times—for auto theft, grand larceny, and finally for being a getaway car driver (this was after he began dating Joan). He spent three years in the prison for his last crime and was pardoned thanks to Joan's efforts and her belief in his transformation.

*Illustrative moments*

**Ambiguous (Closed)** Waiting in anticipation of the court verdict, editors use Eddie's three photos—with charming, neutral and bellicose expressions—for the alternative versions of the newspaper's front page. Which one represents the character more accurately? Peter Fonda plays the role with subtlety to suggest that Eddie may not be definitively innocent.

**Bitter (Emotional)** As Eddie is released from prison, the warden tells him to make good of his freedom. "If they let me", he responds. His experience of social prejudice has made Eddie pessimistic about his prospects, and events confirm his perspective.

**Virtuous Victim (Agreeable)** Eddie tells Joan that he was sent to juvenile detention because of beating up another kid who tortured frogs. As opposed to the media and society labeling him as a hardened career criminal, Eddie is presented as an innately good person, who is a victim of circumstances.

**JOAN GRAHAM (Open)**

Joan has a middle class background, a secure job and (initially) a seemingly absolute faith in the justice system. Unlike Eddie, it is her choice to clash with the law—which is a consequence of her love.

*Illustrative moments*

**Wacky.** "I love being wacky" Joan tells her sister half-jokingly. Her decisions surprise people around her, but she is confident about them and isn't bothered by social pressure.

**Competent.** The first scene introduces her at the office, handling multiple tasks competently. She is obviously an asset at the office of the Public Defender—regardless of the latter's attraction to her.

**Defiant.** Once Joan decides that they have no choice but to run away, she shows unflinching resolve.

THEMES

**Society** – (News Media, Surveillance, Panopticism, Paradox of Modernity, Technology, Religion)
**Justice** – (Social Integration of Convicts, Militarization of Police)
**Psychology** – (Fatalism)
**Quest** – (Narrative)

**SOCIETY**

**News Media.** News media play an important role in hastening Eddie's wrongful conviction. Newsreel reporters assemble in front of the courthouse to await his sentencing. As he is taken to jail, Eddie yells at them: "Go ahead! Take a good look! Monkeys! Have a good time! Get a big kick out of it! It's fun to see an

innocent man die, isn't it?" This scene recalls *Fury*, with Joe Wilson observing that newsreel viewers were getting "a kick out of" watching the footage of the lynching.

**Surveillance.** The scenes at the prison show Eddie under unrelenting surveillance. Eddie's cell is in the middle of a spacious room and is transparent from all sides to his keepers. Guards watch him incessantly to make sure he doesn't have a chance to commit suicide before his execution. Despite all the surveillance, Eddie manages to injure himself in order to be moved to the hospital's isolation ward—where he expects to find a gun planted for him. A lengthy scene shows him slashing his wrist with a piece of tin while the guard's eyes are locked on him.

**Panopticism.** Fritz Lang casting the spotlight on the penitentiary antedates its formulation as a metaphor of modern panoptic society by Michel Foucault. Accordingly, the system of panopticism extends beyond the jail cells. Citizens monitor each other—e.g., the proprietor of the Valley Tavern is a true-crime buff who collects information about wanted criminals; Joan and Eddie's demise comes when she is spotted by a motelier (who has her wanted poster on his wall) as she buys cigarettes from a vending machine.

**Paradox of Modernity.** After Eddie slashes his wrist with a piece of metal, the prison hospital's personnel scramble to keep him alive and blood transfusion is rapidly performed. Lang highlights the efficient utilization of science to save a life—only to be able to execute him a few hours later. The doctor informs the warden that he won't have to postpone the execution, as the prisoner "is weak but he would be strong enough by then". Eddie's former cellmate—Buggsy, a nutty and comic character—mockingly remarks on the paradox as he serves Eddie his meal: "first they kill the chicken, Taylor eats the chicken, then they kill Taylor. If I wasn't crazy, I would worry about that".

**Technology.** Besides the blood transfusion kit, various modern advances are showcased. These tend to be associated with control. During Eddie's escape attempt in the foggy night, the warden uses loudspeakers to offset his failure to see. Also, there is an early metal detector at the prison that Father Dolan describes as "an electric eye which detects metal".

**Religion.** Father Dolan is a popular figure at the prison. He is a humanist who thinks that "every man, at birth, is endowed with the nobility of a king; the stain of the world soon makes him forget even his own birthright". Dolan and the liberal public defender constitute a minority among authority figures with their belief in giving convicts a second chance. Then again, Dolan's intervention during Eddie's prison escape is good-intentioned but leads to disastrous consequences.

**JUSTICE**

**Social Integration of Convicts.** As an ex-convict, Eddie is faced with obstacles as he tries to adjust to life outside the prison. He gets kicked out the Valley Tavern and is fired on a whim from the trucking company. He is almost pushed to return to a life of crime. While it could be argued that he participated in the robbery, it appears more likely that he was innocent. In any case, given how limited his options were, Eddie's resumption of a criminal career would not have been unthinkable.

**Militarization of Police.** Plenty of firearms are seen and these mostly used by the police: A Vickers heavy machine gun overlooking the prison courtyard and rifles carried by bank guards are examples. Eddie and Joan are ambushed by a group of officers who spray them with Thompson submachine guns and Eddie is killed by a bullet from a rifle with telescopic sight.

**PSYCHOLOGY**

**Fatalism.** During their short stay at the Valley Tavern, Eddie and Joan stand by a pond and chat about a couple of frogs. He tells her that if "one dies, the other dies" too. To this she responds, "like Romeo and Juliet". Later, when Eddie's execution seems inevitable, Joan asks Father Dolan to tell Eddie that she hasn't "forgotten about the frogs"—which is meant to convey to him that she would be committing suicide. The earlier scene prepares the viewer for the ending and suggests that a sort of fatalism is at

work in *You Only Live Once*. As Eddie is about to be executed, the warden coldly remarks that “Eddie's been pounding on the door of the execution chamber since birth”. With all the odds stacked against him, the grim ending of the film comes as little surprise. Yet, Eddie keeps fighting anyway—which is what really counts, according to Fritz Lang (Bogdanovich, 35).

**QUEST**

**Narrative.** “We all look at life through the same eyes but we don't see the same thing” remarks Father Dolan during a discussion about the innate nature of good and evil. The film’s general approach is similar—with Lang exploring alternative viewpoints (e.g. was Eddie one of the bank robbers? is he telling the truth?). We as viewers struggle with the “failure of perception” and come to realize the problematic nature of a single perspective” (Wilson, 36). According to philosopher John Wilson,

> The narration explores with elaborate care the ways in which film may enhance and complicate our difficulties of seeing the world accurately by leading perception and conviction astray with methods of its own (39).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What are some of the clues that indicate Eddie has nothing to do with the bank robbery? On the other hand, what clues has Fritz Lang planted in the plot to suggest that he might actually have been one of the robbers?

At the end, Father Dolan is heard saying that “the gates are open”. Keeping in mind the film’s title. what is your interpretation of the ending, Would you consider the representation of the Catholic priest to be overall positive? Why or why not?

Some commentators have labeled this film a proto-film noir. Which scenes and themes would support such a categorization?

What is Lang’s approach to 1930s discourse on public enemies?

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