



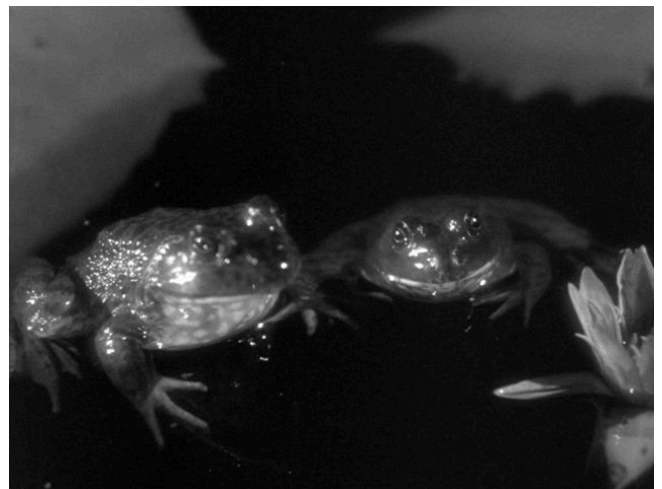
The criminal careers of Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker ended in a police ambush in 1934. *You Only Live Once* (1937) is a version of their story. Screenwriters Graham Baker and Gene Towne had already derived one script from this material in 1935, an earlier Walter Wanger production with Sylvia Sidney in the lead as *Mary Burns, Fugitive* (William K. Howard, 1935). Lang is known to have directed the revision of their first screenplay ('Three Time Loser') for *You Only Live Once*, so he was very possibly responsible for its debt to Ferenc Molnar's play *Liliom*, which he had filmed in France with Charles Boyer in 1933. However Molnar's work would have been extremely well known in Hollywood. Its first Budapest production in 1909 had been poorly received, but since then the play as well as its author had built a great, entirely deserved, international reputation. Success on Broadway in 1920 led to a Hollywood version directed for Fox by Frank Borzage ten years later. The movie that Lang made in France is very remarkable and insufficiently known. It remained, as Patrick McGilligan reports, one of Lang's own favourites (1997: 201). What *Liliom* seems to feed into the outlaw lovers story is a viewpoint that inflects it as the tale of a weak, corrupted man confused by love, struggling and mainly failing to become worthy of the faith of a steadfast woman. Through *You Only Live Once* this theme comes to inform a vital strand of film noir whose finest instance may be Ray's *They Live By Night* (1947).

Anyone who wants to write usefully about *You Only Live Once* has to build on the work of George M. Wilson. A chapter in *Narration in Light* makes a systematic presentation of the movie's narrative strategies, and a detailed reading of key images. Wilson shows how Lang's picture is designed to educate its viewers in the manipulability of the image, and to demonstrate the power of the film sequence to deceive us by obscuring key points in its story and by soliciting preferred readings that the content of the images may not in fact guarantee. The achievement that Wilson uncovers is the more remarkable in that it occurs not in an illustrated lecture but in a fiction movie, one that works to powerful effect within its genre of social protest melodrama.

Wilson's essay opened my eyes to *You Only Live Once*, a movie that I had previously found opaque because, apart from its evident social project, I had not seen a purpose in its meticulous design beyond that of giving power and plausibility to a noticeably contrived tale. In what follows I take for granted the main lines of Wilson's argument in order to develop some remarks on Lang's mise-en-scène in two representative sequences.



I start with the honeymoon episode. One odd feature seems to have passed unremarked. In this rightly celebrated passage a great deal of romantic pathos is generated around the supposed obedience of frogs to ideals of heterosexual monogamy. The husband Eddie Taylor (Henry Fonda) draws his bride Joan (Sylvia Sidney) into a fantasy of fidelity whereby a frog pair will stay together for life. 'When one dies the other dies' he tells her. She reads the image that this makes for her not in the Darby and Joan terms of a couple growing old together but in the perspective of doomed young love 'like Romeo and Juliet'. When she asks how he has come to be an expert on frogs Eddie replies 'I've always known that. I thought everybody did.'



Well, what everybody knows about frogs, or should know, is that their mating sees the nearest thing in nature to a gang-bang. At the season's prompt they assemble at the ponds where successful males clamber wetly aboard the available females to fertilise the spawn. They then go their separate ways and have no further contact either with their mates or with the eggs / tadpoles / froglets that develop from their coupling.

Lang's film elaborates the frog reference aurally as well as visually – through the croaking that makes Eddie and Joan hear them as crooners. Imagination is here taking freedom to roam transformatively over any of the world's ordinary phenomena, touching them with a beauty soft-focused by tears. Perhaps Eddie is more knowingly exploiting this freedom than Joan. After all his tale of frog-fidelity follows on from his first frog story, and Joan's warm response to it. Eddie is a convict just released from his third stretch in jail. The sight of the frogs draws from him, if it does not suggest to him, a back story where his descent into criminality began with a gallant attempt to prevent cruelty to the croaky critters:

When I was a kid we used to catch them in the sewer-drains ... I got my first rap protecting a frog's life. It's the truth! I caught a kid [torturing] a frog once. I beat him up and his mother sent me to reform school.

A detached listener might suppose that it would have taken a good deal more than one blacked eye to get the young Eddie locked up. But Joan is too full of sympathy and desire to probe the darker aspects of his tale. She does not hear its hints that Eddie leans towards both violence and self-justification. She accepts Eddie's attitude along with his account of the facts, just as she will accept and embellish his information about star-crossed amphibians. Eddie's 'It's the truth' here anticipates 'I thought everybody knew that'; both claims have the potential to alert us to other possibilities.

But only the potential. Eddie may be telling the truth in the first instance. In the second he could simply be mistaken. It is not unusual for people to be convinced by pure nonsense. Nothing either confirms or contradicts Eddie's hard luck story, but the film has not put us in a mood to ask ourselves whether he is being truthful or merely plausible. *You Only Live Once* is meticulously constructed to make us prefer the most indulgent view of Joan and Eddie, while it also puts in plain sight much detail that could carry us in a different direction. For instance, when Joan meets Eddie at the jail she is prompted to ask if he had not believed her promises to be there to greet his release. Eddie replies 'I do now', speaking with joyful warmth. Joan is reassured and the moment is lost in the swirl of succeeding action. One has to be very sharp to catch that 'I do now' is an alternative form for 'That's right. I did not believe you'. Keeping sharp would involve reading against the dominant tones of the scene.

Similarly here. So much supports an emotional investment in – particularly – Joan's happiness. We are guided this way by narrative structure, by genre, by performance and star-power, by aspects of visual style and, most blatantly, by a musical score that follows Tchaikovsky to evoke the beauty of sadness and the sadness of beauty. This film about prejudiced vision, and its consequences in action, works hard to prejudice its viewers in favour of the newly-weds. They are young, attractive and in love. In these respects the film makes them unique. It offsets them against a drab world in which the reigning passions are greed and

self-righteousness; and it makes them the victims of that world.

The film's time-process colludes in the victimisation. The honeymoon scene has barely started before we are taken away from Joan and Eddie to meet the proprietors of the Valley Tavern. All the earnest talk of love and fidelity will be heard under the shadow of the knowledge that Hester Parmenter (Margaret Hamilton) has challenged her husband Ethan (Chic Sale) to find the mugshot of Eddie that he is convinced he has seen somewhere in his stockpile of True Crime magazines. 'I'll find it' Ethan has vowed 'if I have to sit up all night'. The success of his mission will provide the movie's first instance of the fatality of Eddie's image.

When Ethan speaks of his grim pursuit as his way of spending the night we can hardly fail to register the contrast with a honeymooning couple who have waited three years to be together. Lang does everything to make the differences between the two couples work in favour of the threatened lovers. Their softly confiding voices bracket a scene where the Parmenters shout their hostilities in the language and tones of a backwoods Punch and Judy. In the role of Hester, Margaret Hamilton could almost be reading for her most celebrated appearance as Miss Gulch / the Wicked Witch in *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939). She is dressed in widow's black, with her hair lying flat on her head to heighten the severity of her features. Her looks are designed to ward off tender words and intimate approaches. They suggest a strategy to keep Ethan well away on his side of the room, his side of the bed. But then, looking at Ethan we can see Hester's point. He is servile. His thin frame is dowdily dressed in a shrunken waistcoat and saggy cardigan as if he seeks a cheap escape from chill. A bow-tie droops from his neck like the souvenir of a long-defeated aspiration to style.

The first words we hear from him are 'You know, Hester, I've seen that fellow's face somewhere before – and I don't like it'. (The face in question is Henry Fonda's.) To give emphasis to his declaration Ethan holds aloft the match that he has just struck on the seat of his pants, tightening the trouser-fabric by jerking up his right knee as if to fire off a fart. His wife glowers fixedly, making no reaction to these



gestures; she seems wearily familiar with such displays and not at all entertained by them. 'Land of pity, Ethan ...' she replies, getting in a reference to neglected chores in the manner of an exasperated grandmother. She is sitting upright in an armchair with an unyielding wooden frame and she interrupts her reproof to attend to an itching ankle. She rubs at it with the heel of the other foot. These gestures of Hester's and Ethan's entail contact only with their own



bodies. Through them the actors construct a version of intimacy far removed from Joan and Eddie's. It is the intimacy of people who know each other all too well and who no longer wish or think to present themselves to one another with the decorum that they observe in public. There's more of the same gross physicality when Ethan lets his match fall to the parlour floor and sticks his unlit cheroot back in his mouth as a tacky comforter.

Lang's images give a graphic extension to the aspects of caricature in the performances. The space is hard edged, cramped and comfortless. There are none of the softening curves of flower and leaf so effective in the images of Joan and Eddie. The stiff lines of the decor are stressed by hard lighting that casts a grotesque shadow of Hester's profile onto the wall beside her. After an opening image that shows them as far apart as the space permits, Ethan and Hester are seen in separate shots or heard in voice-over as the camera presents first the shelves stacked with back numbers of Ethan's favourite reading, and finally the magazine pages turning under his determined inspection.



It is from this image that the film dissolves back to Joan and Eddie. The turning pages reinforce Ethan's '... up all night' as a projection forward into the time of the lovers' conversation. Throughout this Joan and Eddie are always in the same frame and always close when not touching. Their talk fills in the background to their relationship, but it does so entirely in terms of Joan's experience and feelings. So it glides over, even as it states, the awkward fact that Eddie's third crime was committed after Joan had become his sweetheart. At its end Eddie sweeps Joan into his arms and carries her up the steps towards their room.

From this action, with its across-the-threshold implication, a dissolve returns us to the pages of Ethan's magazine, stilled under the weight of a reading glass. The clearest picture in a four-convict spread is a mugshot of Eddie Taylor.



This dissolves to a shot that looks down on the Parmenters and pans with them as they climb the stairs to confront the honeymooners. Ethan has loosened his tie and Hester is now wearing, over a nightdress, what looks like a man's dressing gown. Eddie's criminal record, represented photographically, has supplied the bridge between Joan and Eddie's ascent to the wedding chamber and an ascent that aims at their ejection.

The construction of the sequence is characteristic of Lang's method in the alternation of detailed realisation with ellipsis. Typically the elided material is resumed in a single,

concentrated image. So the whole process between Eddie's arrest for murder, his trial, his conviction and the judge's sentence will be compressed into one vignette in the editorial room of a newspaper where the verdict is awaited. Lang retains the option of leaving gaps in the story unfilled; for example, as Eddie's misfortunes pile up, the movie will keep a veil over the circumstances of his reunion with Monk, an old partner in crime. In the Valley Tavern sequence the static magazine image resumes the lengthy fulfilment of Ethan's quest, adding via the reading glass a mocking reflection on his self-image as Sherlock Holmes. The following dissolve covers Ethan's rousing Hester from her bed and their joint decision to expel their guests.

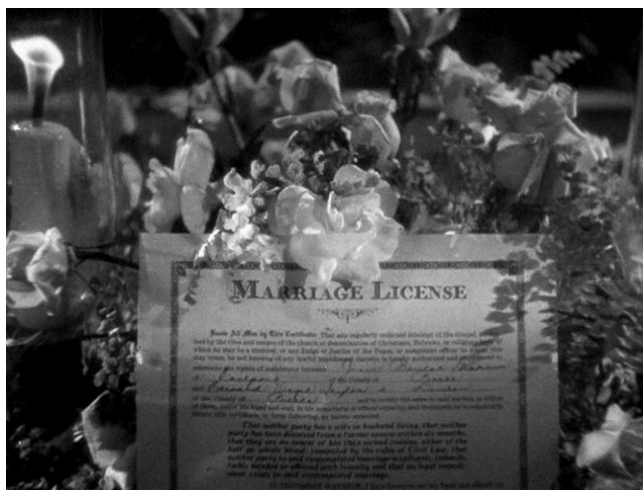
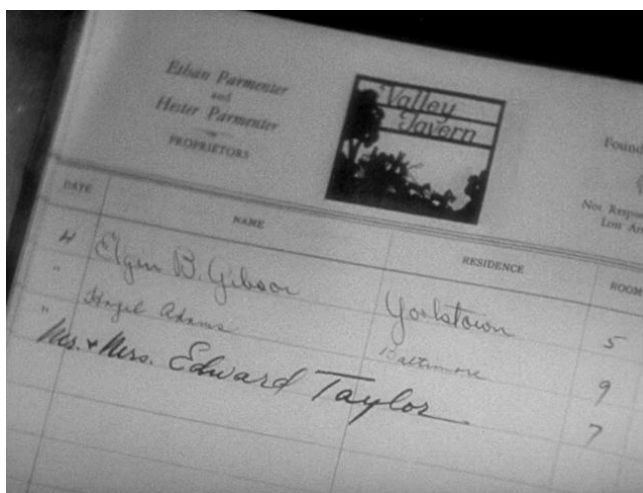
Compressed in one way, the sequence is also extended in another. There was no need to introduce the Parmenters as an interruption of the foreplay between Eddie and Joan. The honeymoon conversation could simply have been completed before we were taken to witness events in the parlour. But this tidier continuity would have sacrificed the menace projected over Joan and Eddie's love scene and it would have weakened the contrasts not only between the two couples but also between the two warring modes of romance and grotesque comedy.

Going back and forth between the Taylors and the Parmenters constructs a parallel that foregrounds contrast but conceals a comparison. Against Joan's enraptured prospect of lifelong devotion, Ethan and Hester present a bitter portrait of what may become of marriages. Locked together, clearly, till death do them part the pair are able to make contact only in warfare that vents Hester's contempt and affirms Ethan's servility. This first scene of the world's persecution of Joan and Eddie did not demand a husband and wife as the antagonists. The field was free for the film to characterise the Valley Tavern's management. By opting for a couple embittered by a stale marriage *You Only Live Once* makes the intimacy of Eddie and Joan the more precious but also the less secure.

The shot where Eddie carries Joan up the outside staircase is interrupted by an image of two frogs apparently staring up at them from the surface of the pond below. Where the frogs have become the Taylors' emblem of ecstatic fidelity, this pair pose a resemblance rather to Ethan and Hester. Their beady stare has much more in common with a glare of accusation than with the tender lovers' glances. The insert coincides with a turn in the music, from romance to menace, that supports this alternative response.

At the start of the honeymoon sequence, before we discovered Joan and Eddie taking the night air, Lang presented three more of the signpost images that summarise vital developments. He dissolved from a scene at the prison gates to the hotel sign for the Valley Tavern, through the open pages of the hotel register signed for 'Mr and Mrs Edward Taylor', to a marriage license fondly displayed in a frame of foliage and roses. (No doubt the censors wanted everything clear and legitimate.) These images fill in for another large ellipsis but they do much more than the routine work of exposition.

The hanging sign is backlit – by clouded moonlight, it's implied. It appears as a silhouette that stresses the two-dimensional aspect of its pressed-metal emblem. The sign is held within a hard iron frame whose rigid lines are decorated by glistening dew and a leafy surround. Beside and below the words 'Valley Tavern' – displayed in ornamented lettering – is represented a jolly scene of olde-tyme travel, a stagecoach drawn by a team of horses. At the left, the outline of a tree certifies the setting as away from town. A top-hatted driver and footman complete a nostalgically



Dickensian scene – one suitable for, if not derived from, a greetings card. Since the sign is as much as we see of the hotel's exterior, the scene that follows is played in an uncertain, abstracted, space. All we can know is that the place is not a bit like the one that the name and the sign evoke.

The image from the sign is repeated at the top of the hotel register in the next shot. The Valley Tavern has been self-consciously branded as a retreat from such realities of the contemporary world as motor transport – or convicts and penal systems, or gutter journalism. What the sign does for a guest house has a lot in common with what Joan has done to the marriage license by adorning a civil document as a shrine to true love. The pretty fantasies are brought together in Eddie's first remark: 'What a nest for a



honeymoon' he says dreamily.

In a response whose double edge Eddie cannot ignore, Joan says that she had three years to seek out such a nest. The idealisation evident in the hotel sign is what has drawn the lovers to this place, but it is also what will get them expelled from it since Ethan and Hester prove determined not to allow unacceptable realities to upset the vision. Under the pressure of Lang's mise-en-scène, Ethan's self-righteous vow that 'no jail-bird's going to spend the night in Valley Tavern' gains new meaning. The casting-out of Joan and Eddie becomes a measure in defence of the glamorised image that first brought them there.

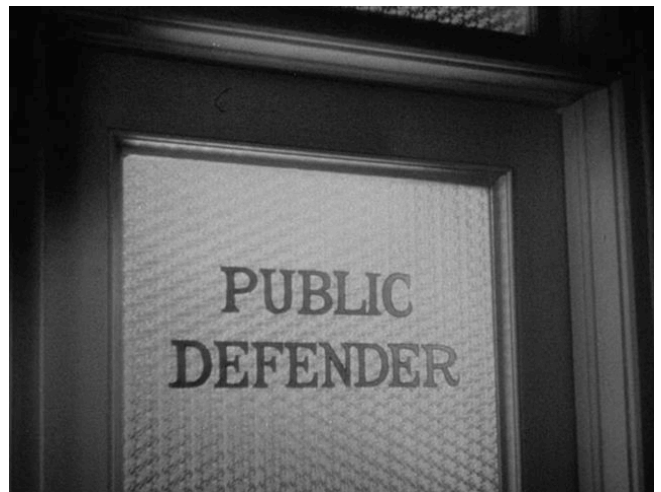
The diagrammatic shots that begin the honeymoon scene echo those at the start of the film. Here too we have a sequence of three static images; they take us from an establishing shot of a Hall of Justice building, through to an angle from a corridor onto the closed door of the Public Defender's office, and on through to a close view onto a desktop on which are arranged two piles of apples modelled as matching pyramids. The journey from outside to inside is moderated by no human agency. Lang refuses the convention whereby a succession of this kind could be measured and bridged by having the shots trace the progress of a messenger, or newspaper boy, or mailman. The disembodied sense of the images is the stronger on account of the absence of sound from the first of them; out in the city street we hear no trace of traffic on highway or sidewalk, no shriek or murmur of urban life. One door of the Hall of Justice stands a little ajar, and that is the sole immediate trace of human activity. The image is completely void of people and motion.

These abstractions mean that the film begins by displaying its control over the sequence of information. It is as much the movie's choice to bring in a voice-over the 'Public Defender' sign, before we can identify its source, as it is to present a daylight street image in complete silence. A mailman's progress could have made the succession of images appear to be determined by action in the movie's world. With no human process traced by his shots and without movement to bridge his cuts, Lang composes and deploys the opening images in a design that we can only observe and work to follow. The first pair begins a sequence which should culminate in penetration of the office space, specially since number two has ('My dear lady ...') the start of a speech that we can expect to hear continued – but surely also to see spoken. Then the apple piles are completely removed from anything we might have anticipated within. Their impact of surprise can bolster awareness of our submission to choices imposed upon us both negatively (no general view of the office, no introduction of the man who speaks or of anyone listening) and positively (displaying the unprepared and bizarre image of the desktop).

The uncertain continuity of the exposition plays oddly against a clear, indeed emphatic, continuity of visual design. The three images carry a single basic shape. In each of them the camera displays a symmetrical structure whose lines could easily be matched to the screen's rectangular format. However the viewpoint is repeatedly angled so that the lines of the composition, the horizontals in particular, are tilted within the frame. The symmetry of the objects is marked in an image that displays them asymmetrically. The repetition of the linear structure is stressed by a variation that places the tilt from right to left, left to right, right to left. This zig-zag-zig gives emphasis to a visual metaphor of tilted scales. Prepared in shot one by the lamp-globes set on either side of the main entrance, the design climaxes in the two apple

piles where the left one seems to outweigh the one on the right.

In this context it is worth taking note of Matthew Bernstein's report that 'the most interesting element of *Mary Burns, Fugitive* is [director] William K Howard's deployment of the iconography of justice. Under the film's titles is etched the familiar woman blindfolded and holding up scales' (1994: 121). Lang would almost certainly have seen the earlier film and it may well have prompted him to open *You Only Live Once* on an inversion of its imagery. In any case the graphic allusion to a tilted scale seems strategic. In the first shot Lang is able at the same time to display the pretensions of civic architecture, by foregrounding the mass



of a neo-classical column, and to embed in the composition an ironic motif that casts doubt on all that boasting.

This opening sequence has received little discussion, despite Lang's known stress on the crucial importance of the way a film starts. The rest of this essay will focus on the first minutes of *You Only Live Once* and present an understanding of their determinedly eccentric process.

The surface drama is presented by the run of the monologue that began in voice-over. A heavily accented voice is heard protesting injustice and claiming the law's protection:

My dear lady, each day for the last couple of months, this policeman he's walk right past my fruit-stand, then he's turned around and... pffffph... he's taken the apple and... hmph! And when I tell him to leave my apple alone he's telling me go chase himself! So, I think to myself I will have him put in a jail for stealing an apple. But... ahhh-sttt!... this idea is no good, you know, because all the policemen have a union. And one cop is not going to arrest other one... Now, Miss, I have come here for to have your boss sue this cop for stealing my apple...

The dissolve through to the office interior is completed on the words 'This policeman ...' and straightaway a hand enters right of frame in close-up, with two fingers extended to strut the space between the apple piles. The mystery of the transition is clarified as we witness a complex act of representation. The narrator is working his fingers to mimic the walk of a beat-pounding cop. Thereby he transforms the desk-top into an image of a city sidewalk, which in turn

makes sense of the apple pyramids as marking out the space of his fruit-stand. The movement of the fingers is synchronised with the separate enunciation of each word – 'right ... past ... my ... fruit-stand'. The teller is insisting, then, on the deliberate accuracy of his enactment, an insistence maintained when – on 'he's turned around' – the hand performs a balletic twistabout with one finger bent at the knuckle-knee.

... he's turned around ... AND



On this the hand abruptly reverts to its off-stage function as the real hand, here and now, of the complainant. The index finger points across to the right to assert its call on the attention of the off-screen listener. Then another change. The hand remains a hand but, as it swoops to grab the apple from the top of the left pyramid, it ceases to be *this* hand and becomes the represented hand of the thieving policeman. This gesture transforms the apple also: no longer an emblem of the fruit-stand's presence it becomes a real, edible, apple – yet not *this* apple but one of the several lost before now to the cop's delinquency.



Here the camera pulls back to reveal, first, the speaker as he continues his performance by rubbing the apple vigorously on his forearm, taking it to his mouth and making as if to munch it. We see a pale, middle-aged, balding man with a moustache. He wears work clothes and carries a pencil behind his ear; the urgency of his grievance, to him, is marked by his evidently having snatched this time away from his stall to seek remedy. At the same time, through his gestures,



he has transformed his whole body to represent the cop in the act of biting the fruit: his hand is the cop's hand, his mouth is the cop's mouth. All this is confined to the mime, of course, since in his words the stallholder is speaking on his own behalf and maintaining the cop as a 'he', an other.

The camera's movement continues, drawing back to frame in mid-shot the speaker on the left and, seated behind the office desk, his listener – a smiling young woman who divides her time between hearing the complaint and attending to the papers in front of her. (She is not yet 'Joan'.) The funny foreigner extends the range of his graphic gestures as the protest goes on. For instance, on 'I think to myself' he points to his head to show where the thinking occurred; on 'put in a jail' his hand plunges down to the desktop to locate the jail, imaging it as a dungeon and celebrating the power and finality of the desired retribution; and when speaking of the coppers' union he makes a spreading and squeezing motion with both hands to picture the scale, tightness and ferocity of the hostile syndicate.

The demands on the actor here are extraordinary and it is disgraceful that he is not named in the closing credits. (He is Henry Taylor; some filmographies name the character 'Kozderonas'.) Reading his performance in the light of the film's first emphasis on the claims of official Justice we could understand it to be offering an initial statement, in comic vein, of the themes of fair play in conflict with the institutions of the law, individual humanity versus the system. This might be considered as the meaning of the scene if what we are seeking is an abstraction that we can draw from the scene's particularity. We might be tempted then to regard the scene as significant mainly for what it illustrates rather than for what it shows. What it shows is, first of all, the excess of signification displayed in the profuse and exaggerated readability of the complainant's gestures. Everything he does pictures something else, something not actually present and visible. The relations of sound to image

constructed by Lang's framings make the spoken words the narration to a sequence of visual drama; the voice functions as a commentary that controls the meanings of the images within Lang's image and imposes a particular sense on configurations that would otherwise be baffling.

Our understanding of the scene should include, then, its work as an explication of the act of storytelling in words and pictures, where the two combine to construct mental images that stand in no fixed relationship to the material content of what we see and what we hear. (Note how gesture fills in for gaps in the spoken account on the acts of polishing and chomping the apple.) The episode demonstrates some of the powers of the audio-visual storyteller both on screen and behind the camera. Most strongly, perhaps, it should impress on us how ready we are to let vividness of representation stand in for verisimilitude in the telling, and the showing, of a tale.

So far my account has ignored the figure of the secretary that the film's audience would have recognised as the star as soon as she appeared on screen. But this is in accord with the priorities that Lang establishes. Sylvia Sidney is not awarded a star entrance. The camera merely discovers her as it draws back, and she is given no activity likely to compete for our attention with the colourful performance of the man standing over her. Nevertheless by the end of this episode we shall have derived, without apparent effort, a strong impression of her character. The scene is as demanding for Sylvia Sidney as for Henry Taylor. While she remains sitting at the desk and mainly silent, her activity requires a multitude of small gestures so that she can display appropriate attention to the complainant, listening to his tale with an amusement that is kindly rather than contemptuous or dismissive, while nonetheless dealing with a range of competing obligations. She makes notes, assembles a clutch of papers and files them, takes a message on the phone, meanwhile receiving a packet from a mailman, signing for it





and finding a coin to give him a tip; finally she responds to a voice on the intercom by excusing herself to answer her boss's call.

Giving Joan so many things to deal with, and having her do so with a continuous – even excessive – cheerfulness, establishes her as competent and a bit hyperactive. The discreet nameplate on her desk contributes to our sense of a young woman in command of a secure job with middle-class status. That puts her at a height against which her fall will come to be measured. The scene has been constructed with great skill to suggest that we are seeing something like Joan's customary working environment; it would have been all too easy to distract us from the characterisation by making us wonder why the office is having such an unusually busy day. All this is an alternative to starting with the key narrative information: that today is Joan's wedding day and that she will be leaving to marry a convicted robber.

The exposition is decidedly offbeat. We start with a setting, necessarily, but we start also with a figure who will not appear again and whose business, expansively introduced, will have no impact on the course of events. The complainant explains himself, tells his story. We learn about Joan only from apparently incidental actions and reactions within what looks like a daily routine. It is only at the end of this section, as the camera moves away with Joan, that Lang's treatment acknowledges her as the centre of attention.

*You Only Live Once* presents the story of a couple and does so (with one remarkable deviation) chronologically. The concern for narrative compression is shown in the scenario by the move that gave Eddie's lover a job to tie her in to the justice system. Further weighty choices are entailed by the decision to begin at this point in the story and to begin with Joan. We have yet to be told about the couple's meeting, courtship and current situation. Eddie remains to be introduced and his character is in need of exposition.

The film could delay our view of Eddie until Joan is reunited with him. Instead it opts to introduce Eddie separately, in action connected with his discharge from prison. This choice is one that balances the two characters by giving each of them a life and a context that is independent of their partnership. The balance is the more pronounced in that each of them has a surround of supporters and commentators, most prominently Joan's sister Bonnie (Jean Dixon) and her boss, Stephen Whitney (Barton MacLane)

and Eddie's prison chaplain Father Dolan (William Gargan). This structure allows Whitney and Dolan to be positioned in complementary roles, as differently prejudiced observers of the couple. The risk the picture runs is of halting the momentum achieved in the exposition of Joan's story while it catches up the essential details both about Eddie and about the couple's shared past. Apart from their significance in relation to themes of prejudice and fatality, Ethan and Hester also serve to maintain dramatic urgency in the honeymoon episode, allowing the lovers' conversation to serve as the conduit for the (quite sparse) back story of their relationship.

Lang films the action in Joan's office so that it has the feeling of a single long take with one interruption. With the camera at mid-shot framing both Joan and her visitor, he makes a cutaway to the office door – seen from something like Joan's viewpoint – as the mailman enters with a packet.



It could be argued that this is a strictly practical device, allowing a discreet change of set-up so that the shot that comes after can appear to be continuous with the shot that came before. However that would not account for the design that implies the single take and thereby creates what would not otherwise be felt – the sense of an interruption.

This moment should be considered in relation to the staging of Joan's departure from the office. As she goes to



speak to her boss in the inner office, carrying her notepad and the recently received packet, the camera tracks across to the right with her. In its movement it passes behind another seated figure in the lower foreground, a stenographer, ending with her framed in the bottom left corner of the screen. She would be all but unnoticeable if Joan did not stop at Whitney's door and surprise us by turning to speak to her. The image gives her no identity beyond that of a dark-haired female typist and the recipient of Joan's instructions. She says nothing and we do not see her face. Joan's action alerts us to the presence of a figure that the camera appears to have regarded as perfectly negligible. (She will no longer be there when the camera returns to the office with Joan.)

The strategic oddity here is the momentary, punctuating, emphasis on a presence that has so far been systematically ignored – one might say erased. Ordinary procedure is for the establishing shot in any setting, however achieved, to give us a complete inventory of the significant, especially the human, components. Yet not only has the camera treated Joan and her visitor as if they were the sole presences in the office, but the sound-track has omitted to report any off-screen activity – for instance at the typewriter.

Coming at this point of punctuation, before the move into a new space, the small surprise can have the effect of alerting us to the completeness of the film's control over the sequence of information. (We might not think of this as *Lang's* control, but we should.) By flaunting an eccentricity the device advertises the director's command over the mediation of everything the film will recount. It warns us not to suppose that we shall always – or can ever – receive a complete and uninflected report of events in the movie's

world. Right at the start it demonstrates – with a tiny, no account instance – that control over the camera's selectivity gives the film artist the power to deceive us and the power to choose whether and when to give us the whole picture. This sets up some of the terms for the film's presentation of the bank-robbery sequence. Is Eddie Taylor involved or not? Since vital issues will turn on the number of people in on the crime, we ought to be concerned whether we have received a complete or a deceptive account of the occupancy of the getaway van.

Given its work of concealing and revealing the stenographer's presence, the film's insistence on detailing the arrival of the mailman should be seen as a complementary demonstration. It is asserting its freedom to follow its own course whether that involves defying or adhering to, or feinting to follow, normal procedures. I had this in mind when I spoke of the abolition of human presence from the opening images. Agree that a mailman is typically a figure who can humanise the continuity of such a sequence. Then we see Lang developing an oddly convoluted gag, and a germane point, by making a big issue out of the mailman's entry now. He has, in formal terms, put together the same kind of jack-in-the-box by withholding and flourishing the mailman as he is in the process of constructing with the hidden stenographer.

In the first ninety seconds of his movie, the director brought together three distinct strands of exposition: a concealed character sketch of his leading woman, a first statement of the film's social themes, and a complex articulation of problems in the authorship and perception of movie fiction. We have seen similar concentration at work in the



treatment of the honeymoon scenes, and a similar blend between overt, recognisably generic, features and embedded structures. There is a malicious humour in the way that these embedded structures develop a secret movie in tension, if not at odds, with the genre piece that *You Only Live Once* so powerfully delivers. The humour is all the more strange as it serves purposes beyond those of comic relief within a tale of injustice and the defeat of hope, yet it may be less surprising if we recall how many laughs Lang managed to find in *M* (1931), the story of a psychopathic killer of children. If Lang's style can often seem glacial that may be in large part because its humour is not of the more familiar kind that invites us into complicity and warmth.

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[\*Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism\*](#), 3