

Framed: Forging Identities in Film Noir

MARK OSTEEN

"EVERY PAINTING IS A LOVE AFFAIR." So says the cashier and Sunday painter Chris Cross (Edward G. Robinson) in Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street* (1945). Cross is explaining his aesthetic principles to Katherine "Kitty" March (Joan Bennett), who later conspires with her lover, the slimy Johnny Prince (Dan Duryea), to sign Cross's paintings with her name. Yet Cross's words resonate beyond this film; indeed, they could provide the epigraph for a group of early films noir that depict men falling in love with a woman's portrait.¹ Three films in particular—*I Wake Up Screaming* (1941), *Laura* (1944), and *The Dark Corner* (1946)—feature fetishized female images that males use to bolster their own identities or to fashion new ones. These women's portraits become, in effect, mirrors or self-portraits of the men. In these retellings of the Galatea/Pygmalion myth, each man ends up creator and forger of the woman and of himself. The pictorial representations in the films also generate two types of self-reflexivity. First, in employing the typical noir device of the framed narrative or flashback, the films analogically replicate the fashioning of these characters' framed identities within exploitative perspectives. Second, their stories of fabricated female identities invoke Hollywood's own fabrication of female stars in the studio system.

MARK OSTEEN is a professor of English and the Director of Film Studies at Loyola University Maryland. He is the author or editor of six books and dozens of articles on modern literature and film. His current project is titled *The Big Night: Film Noir and American Dreams*.

A second triad of painting films—Lang's *The Woman in the Window* (1944) and *Scarlet Street* and the film on which the latter was based, Jean Renoir's (non-noir) *La Chienne* (1931)—employs painting to explore problems of originality, authorship, and replication. In testing the relation between unconscious desire and waking life, *Woman* explicitly depicts its female portrait as an aspect of the male psyche. Here the lines between representation and viewer become nearly invisible: the portrait is less a painting than a mirror. *Scarlet Street* multiplies the reflections, at once repainting Lang's *Woman* and forging a copy of Renoir's film. The latter two films also stage a debate about cinematic authorship and record the filmmakers' concerns about their position in a culture that devalues art in favor of commerce.

Finally, the little-known 1946 film *Crack-Up* uses an art-forgery plot to complicate further these problems of authenticity, originality, and subjectivity, posing anxious but ultimately unresolved questions about the reliability of memory and pictorial representation. Blurring the lines between originality and forgery, subjectivity and objectivity, and reality and representation, these films imply that all identities are to some degree forged, that human character is too malleable and complex to be framed within a single subject or explained within a single narrative.

Dreamgirls

In *I Wake Up Screaming*, the murder of model Vicky Lynn (Carole Landis) precipitates a search

for her killer. Three witnesses recall, in nine flashbacks, the circumstances leading to her death. Promoter Frankie Christopher (Victor Mature) relates how Vicky was “discovered” while working as a waitress and how she cooperated with the efforts of Christopher, washed-up actor Robin Ray, and columnist Larry Evans to create her as a “face.” The flashback structure suggests that each narrator has imagined a somewhat different Vicky: Ray, for example, testifies that “the very sight of her gave [him] new hope” that he might revive his fading career. Vicky’s image will refresh *his* image. Although Vicky insists to Frankie, “I’m a very attractive girl. You didn’t create that. I’m no Frankenstein, you know,” the film implies that she is just that—a synthetic creature pasted together from fragments of others’ aspirations. Like Charles Foster Kane, she remains a puzzle, a mirror within a mirror—a canvas on which others paint their own desires and values.

Vicky’s sister Jill (Betty Grable) remembers warning her, “One week your face is on the cover of a magazine, and the next it’s in the ashcan.” Vicky dismissed the admonition. “From that moment on,” Jill recalls, “life became just one big dizzy world for her”; before long she even “fancied herself a chanteuse.” Grable’s presence injects a curiously self-reflexive note into this examination of celebrity. Her career followed a path similar to Vicky’s, largely because her mother, Lillian, pushed her toward stardom at an early age and constantly insisted that her daughter “make as many publicity and personal appearances as possible” (Billman 3). Like Vicky, Betty was groomed to be a singer, despite her so-so voice. Lillian’s promotion paid off: after a series of lightweight roles in the ‘1930s, Betty grew wildly famous as the GIs’ favorite pinup during World War II. She became identified with—even subsumed by—an iconic picture of her in a bathing suit, her back to the camera, peeking flirtatiously over her shoulder. Betty Grable *became* a pinup photo.² Her performance in *I Wake Up Screaming*, her second and last dramatic role (Pastos 56), exposes her limitations as an actress: her picture doesn’t fit this frame. Yet her presence obscures the lines

between reality and representation, reminding us of the artificiality of all actors’ personae and inserting a mirror into the film’s pictorial frame.

In a sense, Vicky’s death scarcely matters, so long as her picture lives on. This becomes clear when Jill later recounts how she found Vicky’s body. Christopher bends over the corpse, a circular portrait of Vicky behind him; Jill then moves upstage so that her face is next to Vicky’s portrait. The juxtaposition reveals a real woman next to a two-dimensional one—or Betty Grable’s image next to her cinematic mirror image. Frankie, who had pursued but failed to win Vicky, protests to Jill that he never loved her, that “when a man really loves a woman, he doesn’t want to plaster her face all over the papers and magazines. He wants to keep her to himself. Right in here.” Another man—Inspector Ed Cornell (Laird Cregar)—wants to do both. Throughout the film, he doggedly pursues Frankie, apparently convinced that he is the murderer. Near the end, however, we discover that Cornell has covered his apartment walls with photos of the dead woman, turning it into a creepy Vicky Lynn shrine. Christopher “took her away from me,” he says: Cornell had wooed her, but when she became a minor celebrity, “she started gettin’ too good for me.” In death, he had her all to himself. “I’m a sick man,” he admits, before taking poison. Yet his pathological obsession is merely an enlargement of the other males’ attempts to fashion a Vicky who might enhance their own images or help them forge a new one. Each of them shares some of Cornell’s guilt.

During Cornell’s confession, Vicky’s portrait remains in the frame between the two men: she is both the link and the wedge between them. The composition also provides a link between two brands of framing, connoting that Cornell’s attempted framing of Frankie follows from his fetishistic framing of Vicky. The narrative flashbacks enact a similar process: each narrator puts Vicky together piece by piece, yet the parts never quite cohere, and she remains fragmented, two-dimensional. Through her, however, *I Wake Up Screaming* encourages us to reflect on its own status as constructed artifact,

a series of pictures mirroring the audiences' and production system's forging of idealized identities. Vicky Lynn exists only as a function of others' belief in her, as audience members not only consume the creations of real-world Frankie Christophers but also partake of Ed Cornell's fetishizing impulses.

Made at the same studio, Fox, by the same producer, Darryl F. Zanuck, *Laura* is an elaborate repainting of *I Wake Up Screaming* that similarly calls attention to its own fictional status. In it Detective Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews) and columnist Waldo Lydecker (Clifton Webb) fall in love with competing portraits of aspiring (and murdered) advertising executive Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney). McPherson and Lydecker form two parts of a single male psyche: the investigator and the murderer, the one who will love her and the one has loved her, the macho detective and the ambiguously gay snob.³ To Lydecker, Laura was a prize objet d'art for his collection; to McPherson, her mysterious death makes her intriguingly enigmatic.

Like *I Wake Up Screaming*, *Laura* opens on the day after the subject's murder and then presents a flashback account—in this case, Lydecker's—of the narrator's relationship with the victim. The framed narration again functions analogically: just as the act of narration seeks to pin Laura to Lydecker's vision of her, so the story recounts his attempt to mold her into his desired form. We see them meet when Laura ingenuously asks him to endorse a pen for an ad campaign. After Lydecker snidely rejects her, she chides him for his callousness and fraudulence; he replies that he does it only for money, but he is lying: he is really an obsessive romantic. Later he apologizes and signs his picture with the pen, in a single gesture endorsing both the pen and the new Laura he has begun to fashion. "Her career began with my endorsement of the pen," he relates. "I secured other endorsements for her." But he endorses *his* portrait, not hers; Lydecker's Laura is a forgery, a picture made in *his* image, designed to enhance his prestige and help him project a heterosexual identity. And though he fancies himself Laura's Pygmalion, she created

him as much as he created her: for her sake, he tells McPherson, "I tried to become the kindest, gentlest, most sympathetic man on earth." As their similar apartments further suggest, the two are alter egos, mirror images, each the other's artist and subject.

During his investigation, McPherson rifles through Laura's drawers, sniffs her perfume, and stands before her dresser mirror while staring at the large portrait that looms over the room. Critics have argued that the portrait seems to fetishize and entrap Laura.⁴ Yet throughout this sequence, it remains almost constantly in view, often at the center of each shot, attesting to the power her image exerts over McPherson—and the viewer. As McPherson searches and ponders, variations on David Raksin's *Laura* theme play on the soundtrack, the changing arrangements reflecting the detective's shifting moods: initially unfocused and agitated, it gains clarity when he sits beneath the portrait, and a piano restates the melody against a string background; as he dozes, a muted trumpet voices his isolation and longing.⁵ What follows changes the tune and interrupts McPherson's mooning: the living Laura opens the door and stands framed within it. Perhaps, as Richard Ness points out, the variations on the theme reflect "her refusal to be contained," just as her sudden reappearance proves her capacity to escape the "fixed image created by her portrait" (60).

Just before her reappearance, Preminger dollies in to McPherson's face, holds, and then dollies back out, following the conventional method of introducing a dream sequence (Kalinak 165). It is as if the rest of the story—in which Laura and McPherson fall in love, and the killer is exposed—were a dream. Or perhaps the *first* half, depicting Laura's "death," is merely Lydecker's, or McPherson's, fantasy.⁶ Either way, as McPherson declares, "somebody was murdered in this room." Certainly: Diane Redfern, a model who resembled Laura, was the actual victim. Diane may have been a lesser, or forged, Laura, yet the film implies that they are virtually indistinguishable.⁷ In a sense, then, several Lauras *have* been killed: Lydecker's



Photo 1: In *Laura* (1944), Detective Mark McPherson (Dana Andrews) dreams of Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney), whose portrait hangs over her mantel. Photo credit: The Kobal Collection.

picture of her as his Galatea is erased, along with McPherson's mystified icon. And though Lydecker is the one who shot Diane (mistaking her for Laura), Laura understands that by having acquiesced to Lydecker's manipulation, she is nearly as "guilty as he is. Not for anything I did, but for what I didn't do." In a sense, it seems, Laura killed herself.

Nor is her resurrection complete, for although she announces to Lydecker, "No man is ever going to hurt me again," her attitude and actions are ambiguous or inconsistent. As Li-ahna Babener observes, Laura remains "caught in a series of contradictions: claiming to want freedom from overbearing men, but clinging to" them anyway (92). The film depicts her plight in the climactic sequence, as the camera focuses on her brushing her hair before a large mirror: the two Lauras—living woman and dead icon—remain inseparable yet never truly merge. But Lydecker cannot allow a new Laura to be born and, having failed to frame both Carpenter and Laura for Diane's murder, tries to kill Laura again. As a radio recording of his voice rhapsodizes that "[l]ove is stronger than life. It reaches beyond the dark shadow of death," the incarnate Lydecker enters the apartment bent on murder. He has become his own double, his

identity a deck of lies. As the recording intones Ernest Dowson's "Vita Summa Brevis"—"They are not long, the days of wine and roses / Out of a misty dream / Our path emerges for awhile, then closes / Within a dream"—the bodily Lydecker is killed. His dream is over.

Is Laura's? Does she escape her frame? It's possible to read the film as silencing her and thereby replicating the male characters' reifications. Babener argues that Vera Caspary's Laura narrates the fourth section of the novel and thus "assumes authority over her life—she constitutes herself as a subject" (85).⁸ It is also true that Caspary's Laura is more devoted to her work and generally a stronger, though no less complex, character than the movie's ethereal presence. But Laura doesn't get the last word, even in the novel: McPherson ties up the loose ends and concludes by quoting Lydecker. Nor does the film endorse Lydecker's version of the story: his narration ends a third of the way through. Hence, Laura escapes Lydecker's narrative frame—his attempt to control and silence her—just as she defeats his attempt to frame her for murder and thus silence her again.

Nevertheless, as Sheri Chinen Biesen reminds us, "Laura's character is . . . manufactured not only by the men in the narrative

but also by the male production executives involved in making the film” (160). Just as each male character believes his Laura to be the true one, so did the filmmakers who altered Caspary’s novel to fit their vision. They too are Lydeckers—tricksters who let us believe Laura is dead and imply that part of the film is only a dream. Their *Laura* is as much a forgery—a falsely endorsed picture—as Lydecker’s or McPherson’s Lauras. These reinventions of Laura were eerily recapitulated in the life of actress Gene Tierney, an emotionally fragile woman who had just given birth to a multiply disabled daughter but who was pressured by the studio to accept the part of Laura. Tierney became identified with the role; indeed, her performance as “the movie’s key prop” overshadowed her later career just as Laura’s portrait overshadows her living self (Tierney 113). In Tierney’s autobiography (titled *Self-Portrait*), she admits, “My problems began when I had to be myself” (114). *Laura*’s plot thus foreshadows how Tierney was elevated and then effaced in favor of an unchanging, two-dimensional icon. Alas, Tierney’s afterlife—which included several hospitalizations, a suicide attempt, and electroconvulsive treatments—was even more troubled than Laura’s.

Lydecker’s resurrection was more prompt, though no happier: he was reborn (again played by Clifton Webb) less than two years later as art collector Hardy Cathcart in Henry Hathaway’s *The Dark Corner*.⁹ This reiteration is perhaps fitting, for *The Dark Corner*’s plot is all about self-reinvention. It tracks private investigator and ex-convict Bradford Galt (Mark Stevens) through his attempts to foil Cathcart’s plan to frame him for the murder of Galt’s ex-partner Tony Jardine, who once framed Galt for manslaughter and is now having an affair with Cathcart’s wife, Mari. Cathcart fetishizes Mari to the point of purchasing an expensive painting only because it resembles her. Thus, although this film does not include a frame narrative, it nevertheless dramatizes framing in a number of ways. First, Cathcart’s attempts to dominate his wife are shown by the way he tries to frame her as a painting he can possess—the extension of

his imprisoning her within his luxurious marital prison. Second, he tries to frame Galt for a murder that he himself commits. Third, the film employs numerous internal frames—boxes created by doors, windows, and the like—to embody Galt’s and Mari’s entrapment in Cathcart’s machinations. The film’s visual tropes thus illustrate its themes of identity and possession.

Early in the film, for example, Galt is reflected in a mirror, the two images of himself sandwiching his loyal secretary, Kathleen (Lucille Ball), who is helping him fashion a new self-portrait as an honest man. A little later, he is visited by Cathcart’s agent, a mysterious man in a white suit (William Bendix); after Galt roughs him up, the two are shown in a balanced, split-frame composition, with Galt to the right in silhouette and White Suit to the left: framer and framed as doubles. Later, when White Suit kills Jardine with a poker and places it in the unconscious Galt’s hand, these visual frames are enacted on the level of plot.

Cathcart’s attempted framing of his wife emerges early in the film when he tells her, “I never want you to grow up. You should be ageless, like a madonna, who lives, breathes, smiles, and belongs to me.” Mari understandably feels stifled, lamenting to Jardine that Cathcart “gives me everything a man can give a woman. It still isn’t enough. . . . I just keep sitting, listening to his paintings crack with age.” As she delivers these lines, the soundtrack plays the Warren/Gordon standard “The More I See You,” whose lyrics could be Cathcart’s credo: “The more I see you / The more I want you . . . / My arms won’t free you / And my heart won’t try.” To possess her more fully, Cathcart has purchased a painting he has long and ardently coveted, a portrait of a woman gazing seductively at the viewer. Its resemblance to Mari “isn’t pure accident,” he admits. “It was as if I’d always known her. And wanted her.”¹⁰ The more he sees her. . . .

As for Galt, he understands after he wakes up beside Jardine’s body that “[he] could be framed easier than Whistler’s mother.” To escape this frame, he visits Cathcart’s gallery and pretends to buy a Donatello sculpture.¹¹



Photo 2: In *The Dark Corner* (1946), art collector Hardy Cathcart (Clifton Webb) desires to possess his wife Mari (Cathy Downs) in a painting. Photo credit: The Kobal Collection.

As Cathcart emerges from the shadows holding a gun, Galt tells him he's really interested in a piece of modern art "finished the night before last" but now "stiff as a statue. . . . A Tony Jardine." Cathcart: "Nonsense. I never handle anything as worthless as a Jardine. . . . It was found in your apartment." Galt: "This Jardine really belongs to you. You paid to have it done. . . . Somebody had to pay this muscle artist to brush him off." As the dialogue indicates, Cathcart cannot distinguish between human beings and objects: if his murders are a form of collecting, so his collecting is a form of murder. The sequence ends with Galt standing on one side of a door frame, Cathcart on the other; between them, at the far end of the room, hangs Cathcart's beloved portrait. All the frames break when Mari (offscreen) shoots her husband, leaving Galt free to remake himself as a law-abiding citizen.

These three films all portray forged identities, not only of the women whom the males mold into objects but also of the males themselves, who use these female images to fabricate or reinforce their identities as lover, worthy husband, or intellectual. Yet the males do not merely define themselves against femininity; they also try to incorporate it. They recreate themselves, in other words, *as women*,

in order to *become men*. The films' power struggles and gender crossings may signify what many film historians have detected in film noir's *femmes fatales* who, it is argued, represent anxieties about wartime and post-war gender roles.¹² This idea contains a good deal of truth. However, these characters—both framers and framed, victims and killers—also embody broader and deeper questions for an America emerging from the traumas of depression and war: Is the American dream of self-reinvention, of adopting a new role in life's second act, still viable? And does such reinvention ever occur without violence, exploitation, or commodification?

The films indeed suggest that identities are *always* in flux, always a matter of performance. To do so, these portrait noirs invoke the conditions of their own making, not only reminding viewers that their characters are actors staging their own fabrication, but even referring to and remaking earlier versions of the same story. Thus, *I Wake Up Screaming*, itself an adaptation of Steve Fisher's hard-boiled Hollywood-insider novel, is transformed (by the same producer) into *Laura*, one character of which is then revived (with alterations) for the same studio's *The Dark Corner*. No longer mere pictures, these movies begin to resemble an infinite regress of

mirrors within mirrors. The next group of films brings us even closer to that condition.

Mirror Images

"Some dreams require solitude. . . . At times the illusion of love may outlast the image of a dingy room, but awaken we must." These are the words of Maurice Legrand (Michel Simon), the protagonist of Renoir's *La Chienne*, yet they also describe Professor Wanley of *The Woman in the Window* and Chris Cross of *Scarlet Street*. The films in this triad reflect each other in a myriad of ways. As Oliver Harris observes, because Fritz Lang's two films employ the same lead actors (Robinson, Bennett, Duryea) and present similar stories, they induce "a kind of vertigo of déjà vu, cross-reference and pure confusion" (7). The effect is heightened by Lang's tendency to create a "sealed-off environment," where, in Foster Hirsch's description, there seems to be "no world outside the frame" (6). When we add to the mix *La Chienne*, not a film noir, of course, but an earlier adaptation of *Scarlet Street*'s source material (both were based on a play by Georges de la Fouchardiere), the trio becomes a hall of mirrors filled with reverberating themes and visual echoes, all illustrating

plots that also involve frames, doubles, mirrors, and portraits. In all three, "the project of desire discovers itself to be within a frame, in a potentially infinite *mise en abîme*"—one that even swallows the viewer (Gunning 287). Together they constitute a triangular dream text revealing their directors' reflections on the art of filmmaking and the nature of authorship.

Early in *The Woman in the Window*, psychology professor Richard Wanley (Edward G. Robinson) laments the "stodginess" that has engulfed him and his friends. With his wife and children out of town, he has a chance to break out but instead spends the evening reading the *Song of Solomon*. When, a bit later, he gazes through a shop window at a woman's portrait (his friends had earlier called her their "dream girl"), his cage begins to crack. We regard the portrait from Wanley's point of view; in the reverse shot a faint reflection of the portrait appears to emerge from his shoulder. Lang cuts back to the painting, now juxtaposed with an actual woman's face, before returning to Wanley and the reflection. Another shot of the painting follows, and then the camera pans left to rest on a smiling Alice Reed, the portrait's model. As the scene continues, the portrait remains between Wanley and Alice in every two-shot: he can't see around the portrait to



Photo 3: In *The Woman in the Window* (1944), Professor Wanley (Edward G. Robinson) falls in love with a portrait of Alice (Joan Bennett). Photo credit: The Kobal Collection.

the actual woman. Wanley's painting is not a love affair; rather, his love affair is a painting.

As the multiple images of Alice suggest, she plays several roles in what follows—siren, victim, accomplice. When she invites Wanley into her mirror-filled apartment, he follows her through the looking glass into Lewis Carroll terrain, where he plays a topsy-turvy chess game in which his every move is wrong and where authorities hound him until he is finally cornered. Yet in the wonderland of his unconscious, Wanley also becomes a dashing hero, a man who would yield to temptation instead of just reading about it—a man who would even kill if necessary. That's what he does when Alice's lover, Claude Mazard, breaks in on them and attacks Wanley, provoking the professor to stab him repeatedly with the scissors Alice provides. As they clean up, the two are repeatedly framed by mirrors to represent the redoubling of identities in the aftermath. Alice is both a portrait come to life and a mirror of Wanley's desire. Mazard too embodies Wanley's impulses: as Gunning notes, "killing Mazard [is], in a sense, killing himself" (302). Later, Mazard's former bodyguard, a man named Heidt (Dan Duryea), blackmails Wanley and Alice until they try to poison him with Wanley's medication. They fail but inadvertently set up Heidt to be killed and identified as Mazard's killer. In short, not only does Wanley frame Heidt; in an important sense Wanley *is* Heidt.

Wanley also frames himself. Throughout the investigation he makes incriminating "mistakes" when discussing the case with his friend, District Attorney Lalor: he knows the killing occurred at night, knows the body was dumped over barbed wire, almost leads the police directly to the scene, and even dares to show Lalor the arm he scratched on the fence. Certainly Wanley wants to be caught, but these inculpatory acts are not merely a guilty conscience at work: to be recognized as the killer would validate him as an adventurous man and prove his masculine power and appeal. But ironically, instead he must efface his identity by burning his coat and hiding his monogrammed pen.

Distraught over his failure and certain of his guilt, Wanley poisons himself. As he sits in his chair at home, slowly losing consciousness, Lang dollies in and holds on Wanley's face (meanwhile, his breakaway robe is removed, and the "wild" home set is replaced by the club set) and then pulls back as a club employee wakes him.¹³ We now understand that the whole experience was Wanley's dream. The gimmick is hokey, as Lang himself recognized; yet its thematic and psychological plausibility largely redeems it, as Wanley and the others are retrospectively transformed. For example, we now realize that the portrait's appearance as Wanley's appendage had already told us it was a projection of his psyche. Like Heidt, Mazard, and the rest, Alice is Wanley's self-portrait. He is their author—and they are his.

Yet in this film, the frame is invisible—if it exists at all. The absence of cuts in the awakening scene, that is, implies that no line exists between the dream and waking worlds.¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek thus argues that the ending means not that it was all a dream and Wanley is a normal man, but that "in our unconscious, in the real of our desire, we are all murderers." He continues, "[W]e do not have a quiet, kind, decent bourgeois professor dreaming for a moment that he is a murderer; what we have is . . . a murderer dreaming . . . that he is just a decent bourgeois professor" (16–17). But this formulation is too dualistic: Wanley is *simultaneously* a bourgeois professor and a murderer. Just as Alice is both inside and outside of the portrait, so Wanley exists in two realms at once. We may feel cheated by the ending. But if so, Lang has caught us doing what Wanley does—conflating the real and the imaginary. As Harris puts it, "like him, we too have passed through the window: in our unconscious, we are all naive spectators" (8–9). The ending, then, invokes both the power of cinematic authorship—as if Lang were announcing, "I can change this all into a dream, for a movie is just a dream anyway"—and its limitations: "this is *merely* a fantasy that ends when you exit the theater." Wanley's face thus becomes a portrait of ourselves watching it—an image of how film pulls us through the

looking glass, inviting us to dream new selves as a professor or murderer or model or prosecutor, or all of them at once.

La Chienne likewise evokes its own artificiality and elides it. It begins with puppets disagreeing about the story to come, until the last puppet declares that it's "neither comedy nor drama," but a realistic story depicting "plain people like you and me." The film's cluttered *mise en scène*, constant ambient sounds, and cramped living spaces lend it a meticulous verisimilitude. On the other hand, a curtain comes up at the beginning and down at the end, drawing our attention to the story's theatricality, and its plot contrivances and emphasis on the constructed nature of truth insinuate that we should be skeptical about all representations. Renoir thus both pulls us into this world and holds it at a distance, warning us to neither believe in fantasy nor trap ourselves in Legrand's brand of cynicism.

Shackled to his shrewish wife Adele, who calls him "the laughingstock of the neighborhood," Legrand has good reason to be cynical. The compositions show his entrapment: as she chides him about his painting hobby, he stands to the left of the frame facing her; between them looms a large oval portrait of her first husband, Alexis Godard, a hero killed in World War I—"a real man. A regular lady killer," according to Adele. Legrand will never equal this smug, uniformed icon. Yet he does try to enlarge his male identity after he meets Lulu (Janie Marèse), a prostitute he believes he has saved from a beating by her pimp, Dede (Georges Flamant). A month later, Legrand has set her up in an apartment and led her to believe he is a wealthy, successful artist.

Soon we watch Legrand paint a self-portrait. As we observe, three Legrands become visible—his reflection in the mirror, his image in the unfinished painting, and his body, shown from the rear. Split between his identity as a cashier (we've already seen him working in his cage) and his new self as Lulu's sugar daddy, he is now painting a picture of himself as a painter. Yet he remains surrounded by frames, including the one revealed as the camera pulls

back to disclose a window through which we can see a neighbor.¹⁵ Legrand doesn't notice the neighbor; he prefers his narcissistic obsession. More importantly, perhaps, this camera movement invites us to recognize that the entire scene has been created by another painter named Renoir.

This self-reflexive layer unfolds further after Dede's friend instructs him about capitalizing on Legrand's work: "[T]he only thing that counts in art is the signature. And since you can't use a famous signature, you'll only get chicken feed." The two then come up with "Clara Wood" as the pseudonym with which Lulu will sign Legrand's paintings. Voila: they have made a painter. But Lulu must endorse this picture, as she does soon after, when we see her signing over a check to Dede: her signature now ensures both aesthetic and economic value. This moment reminds us that the essence of forgery lies not in the act of copying but in the act of signing (otherwise the thousands of "art prints" for sale online would be subject to criminal prosecution). It also raises broader questions about the nature and limits of authorship and identity. As K. K. Ruthven observes, every signature is to some extent a self-forgery, in that no two signatures are exactly identical (156). Further, a signature may always be close to a forgery because to sign a document is to endorse the notion of a consistent, essentially unchanging self (Thwaites 6)—a notion that all these films (and indeed much modernist and postmodernist art) undermine.

But are the paintings really forgeries, given that Legrand consents to the scheme? And are they his creations, or hers, or even Dede's? After all, Dede invented Clara. After seeing Legrand's paintings, a dealer boasts, "We can make painters, you know." In a sense, then, he also "makes" the paintings. Director Renoir thus insinuates that art works are collaborative products of painters and the entrepreneurs who turn the artifacts into commodities. This matrix encompasses filmmaking as well. Who is a film's author? The director? Or is it the screenwriter, actors, production company, or all of them at once? In effect, the film offers

a critique of auteur theory *avant la lettre*. But when Dede induces Lulu to romance a wealthy man who wants her to paint his portrait, Renoir unveils the darker side of collaboration: by permitting others to write over his name, an artist becomes a prostitute.

As both a forger and a forgery, Legrand shares this distinction with M. Godard, who suddenly reappears with a false name and no money. Through a farcical stratagem, Legrand reunites Godard with Adele, leaving himself free to marry Lulu. But when he goes to break the news to Lulu, he catches her in bed with Dede. As Legrand opens the door, Renoir cuts to outside the bedroom window. The camera pans right, then holds Legrand within the window frame, and the next two shots frame him within the door. The meaning is clear: Legrand is trapped within the picture he helped to paint. Thus, when he confronts Lulu the next day as she lies in bed cutting the pages of a novel, she replies, “Take a look in the mirror.” He berates and beseeches her; she laughs at him. Then he takes up Lulu’s knife, and Renoir takes up his, cutting to a shot outside the apartment, where a crowd gathers around some musicians. But we don’t need to see the murder to understand that Legrand has at last matched Godard: he has become a regular lady killer.

Dede, who imagines himself as one, now drives up in his flashy convertible, goes upstairs, and returns, all in full view of the crowd. He is quickly charged with the murder. Who is guilty? Like that of the paintings, the murder’s authorship is shared. Renoir even identifies Lulu’s two lovers through a brilliant camera movement in the police station. We see Dede, his back to the wall, lamenting his fate; then the camera tracks right to reveal Legrand in the same position on the other side of the wall: they are two faces of the same portrait. But Legrand lets the police and jury view only one side and permits Dede to be framed for the murder he committed. Ironically, he has at last come into his own as a painter—one capable of forging convincing representations of himself as a dupe and of another man as a murderer.

In the epilogue, Legrand reunites Godard,

both of them now homeless derelicts. Though Legrand says he “wouldn’t mind” being dead and admits to being a murderer, he doesn’t seem guilt-ridden: the two jocosely share a smoke and gaze at some paintings through a store window. Legrand briefly spots his self-portrait being loaded into a car but is more interested in twenty francs that have fallen onto the sidewalk. He snatches the cash, and the two depart for a feast. As the opened-up *mise en scène* indicates, in losing his bourgeois identity, Legrand has been liberated from his constricted life and lethal fantasies. It doesn’t matter that he no longer paints; he has found a soul mate. By yielding control, Legrand discovers a new self.

To remake this story, Fritz Lang teamed with Walter Wanger (who had produced *The Woman in the Window*) and Wanger’s wife, Joan Bennett, to form Diana Productions. The notoriously autocratic Lang usually treated collaboration as interference and clashed frequently with his American producers. On this film, however, he was afforded a great deal of freedom. Ironically, Lang used this freedom to direct an allegory about losing it: he told Peter Bogdanovich that Chris Cross’s fate is that of “an artist who cares more for his paintings than for gaining money” (205). Thus, we may read *Scarlet Street*—the story of an artist whose works are appropriated by a prostitute and her pimp—as the self-portrait of a director harnessed to mercenary producers and studio heads who “steal” his pictures and put their names on them.

Patrick McGilligan (321) writes that Lang and screenwriter Dudley Nichols failed to find a print of *La Chienne*, and Lang recalled that they tried to be “absolutely uninfluenced by it” (Bogdanovich 205). But close scrutiny reveals that he imitated or carefully revised *La Chienne* in pivotal scenes. Indeed, with its borrowed plot about lost identity and forged paintings, *Scarlet Street* is itself a kind of forgery or plagiarism, a painted-over Renoir to which Lang signs his own name. Yet despite his debts to the French master, Lang displays a quite different attitude about authorship and forgery.

Protagonist Chris Cross’s unlikely name

introduces an important set of motifs. First, it presages a series of double-crosses: Kitty March betrays him by stealing his words, name, and money; Chris double-crosses Adele and her first husband, Homer Higgins, by forcing them to reunite; Chris crosses Johnny by framing him for the murder of Kitty. These crossings constitute a series of exchanges: Chris for Kitty, Chris for Johnny, Homer for Chris. Perhaps more significantly, the name signifies Chris's erasure. Kitty erases his identity as a cashier and a painter and replaces it with hers; in complying with the forgery scheme, Chris commits self-erasure. In the end, he even crosses out his dream by testifying that he's not a painter at all.

In a sense, however, Chris's erasure scarcely matters, for he is a nonentity from the beginning. In the opening scene, for example, his reward for twenty-five years of service to the firm of J. J. Hogarth is a watch—appropriately for a “14-carat, 17-jewel cashier.” The metaphor—a trope for authentic representation and value—captures Cross's mechanical existence. In this he resembles Professor Wanley: both are bored with their humdrum lives but too timid to escape.¹⁶ When Chris tells his friend that he once dreamed of being a painter, the friend replies, “When we're young, we have dreams that never pan out. But we go on dreaming.” Unlike Legrand, he doesn't mention waking up. Though they are not delivered by Chris, the lines nonetheless pinpoint a primary difference between him and Legrand: whereas Legrand is fettered by his sense of superiority and finds release in being humbled, Cross seeks restoration in fantasy. Thus, when his paintings are later sold for a tidy sum, he enthuses, “It's just like a dream!” Or rather, it's a nightmare, one that begins, as in so many *noirs*, with a single act—his “rescue” of “actress” Kitty March from a beating by her boyfriend, Johnny Prince.

Chris explains to Kitty his aesthetic principles. He doesn't paint what he sees but merely puts “a line around what [he] feel[s].” And what he feels is love: “every painting is a love affair.” Gunning describes Chris's aesthetic as “semi-expressionist” (327)—one similar to that of the American Fritz Lang. Indeed, Chris's

quasi-primitivist paintings are visual allegories that resemble Lang's heavily symbolic films, as exemplified when Chris's body is dissolved over an image of the wilting flower he brings home from the meeting with Kitty.¹⁷ In his painting, however, the wan bloom is large and erect. His imaginary love affair has already begun to restore his potency—at least in his imagination.

In the real world of home, however, he remains emasculated; in one scene he even wears a frilly apron while doing the dishes—an abject image of the castrated male. But if Chris is a fake wife, so is Adele, despite being addicted to a radio show called *The Happy Household Hour*. The scene in which Adele castigates Chris about his paintings also proves that Lang viewed *La Chienne* closely, for the composition and framing of the two versions are nearly identical. Like Renoir, Lang places Adele and her current husband on opposite sides of the frame (he left, she right); between and over them hangs a large oval portrait of the proudly smiling first husband (this time a cop who allegedly died while saving a woman's life), his chest out, his arms akimbo. Homer is to Adele as Kitty is to Chris—an image of the ideal mate. But this portrait is as enhanced as Chris's flower: as we learn later, Homer faked his death and stole money from the drowning woman. In copying this scene, Lang casts himself as Cross, with Renoir the heroic forerunner to be overcome.

Kitty's lover wields his own phallic power by wangling money from her and romancing her—whenever he's not roughing her up. It's Johnny's idea to sell Chris's paintings, and his idea—after they attract the attention of an art dealer named Janeway—to attribute them to Kitty. For these two as for Lulu and Dede, paintings are merely commodities, and an artist is just a prostitute. Lang none-too-subtly depicts Johnny's values in a characteristic lap dissolve: skulking outside Kitty's apartment, he is superimposed over Chris's painting of a snake. But if the dissolve conveys Johnny's potency and sliminess, it also implies that he is a product of Chris's imagination. That is, by endorsing the painting scheme, Chris *creates* Johnny, just as

he later frames him for the murder of Kitty. The snake, like the flower, is Chris's imaginary self-portrait.

Still, if Chris's paintings are forgeries, it is not because they are copies of another painter's work but because they are signed "Katherine March." Hence, whereas Renoir implies that Lulu—the signer—is the forger, Lang assigns the role to Chris: he's the one, after all, who makes a career, in Hillel Schwartz's formulation, by "standing invisible behind names or styles in demand" (315). Indeed, his imaginary love affair embodies art critic Francis Sparshott's explanation that "the primary erotic analogue of artistic forgery is the substitution, in conditions of desperation or poor visibility, of an alternative sex object for the loved one" (254). Chris tries to stand in for Johnny and Homer; like Cornell, Lydecker, Cathcart, and Wanley, he loves not a woman but a portrait of one. Sparshott also contends that original art shows us something about the person who created it; forgery is a lie about the self (252–53). In that regard, Chris, who pretends to be an unmarried, successful painter, is a forger from the moment he meets Kitty. And Kitty—more plagiarist than forger—perpetuates the fraud by parroting Chris's aesthetic principles to Janeway; ironically, this lie ratifies her earlier lie to Chris that she is an actress (Janeway gushes that talking to her is "like talking to two people"). Likewise, Johnny pretends to be the boyfriend of Kitty's roommate, Millie, and Homer pretends to be dead. All of them are self-forgers.

Peter de Bolla observes that "forgery . . . inserts the possibility of multiple personality, or no identity at all, into the paper-thin circulation of trust in a speculative society," thereby destabilizing "self, society and certainty" (73). In short, forgery severs the relation between object and representation, thus releasing the anchor of social relations—the belief that people are who they claim to be, that a signature belongs to the signer. Chris's consent to the forgeries casts him adrift in a world of floating signifiers. For Lang, this is his most damning self-betrayal: a denial of the authorship that confirms and solidifies an artist's identity.

Chris's plight epitomizes the dilemma of the forger—the only artist whose success depends on *not* being recognized. His paintings, that is, acquire value *because* they are signed by a young, good-looking woman rather than by a meek nobody. Ironically, only by effacing his identity as a painter does Chris actually become one: his lie allows him to assume what he thinks of as his "true" identity. But Chris's identity is very much in question, as evinced by his "masterpiece"—a painting of Kitty titled *Self-Portrait*. As Chris reads about Kitty's solo exhibition in the newspaper, this painting dissolves over a medium shot of Chris in his cashier's cage, sitting beneath his name. For a moment "Cross" is written across Kitty's face, the "o" covering her mouth. Earlier, Chris had told her, "It's just like we're married, only I take *your* name"; now she takes his. Who is crossing out whom? By painting Kitty, Chris paints his own self-portrait not just as a painter and forger and lover but also *as a woman*. As in *Laura*, the creation of a forged identity is linked with gender transgression. Gunning speculates that Chris's identification with a woman "could be seen as a revolt against the hypocritical ideal male identity embodied in the portrait of Homer Higgins" and that his "cross-gendered identity" enables him to trick Homer (331–32). Seen from another angle, however, this gender crossing sends him to a limbo between an unformed feminine identity and an inchoate adventurous, passionate male self. Though no longer himself, he can't be Kitty. Chris can't cross.

Flushed with his victory over Adele, he rushes to tell Kitty he is free to marry her. But as Chris stands outside her window, he witnesses her embracing Johnny (to a recording of "Melancholy Baby" that repeatedly sticks on the line "in love"). Here Lang revises Renoir's rendering, in which Legrand is the focal point of the internal frame. We see Lang's lovers from Chris's point of view, boxed in by the window to resemble a painting. This portrait of the Freudian primal scene shocks Chris, whose subsequent effort to claim Kitty is even more pathetic than Legrand's. Laughing derisively, she berates him as "old and ugly." As she begins her diatribe,

she turns away from the camera, so that we see her face only in the mirror's reflection. It is as if her head has been severed from her body, just as her real intentions have long been separated from her ostensible ones. Kitty is two people again—only one of whom Chris kills by stabbing her four times with an ice pick, finally enacting the piercing lust that he had kept caged.

With remarkably bad timing, Johnny drives up in a light convertible similar to Dede's. In contrast to Renoir's busy street, however, only one person sees him—but one person is enough to verify Johnny's presence and get him indicted for the murder. In the swift trial scene montage, testimony establishes that (1) Kitty was an artist, (2) Chris is not an artist but a forger and thief, and (3) Johnny is a low-down son of a bitch and pathological liar. In framing Johnny, Chris must frame himself, for his life depends on disavowing his identity as a painter. The newspaper headline sums it up: "Famous Painter Slain." Chris's painter self dies along with the lover and the cashier. The shell, however, endures a death-in-life, superbly rendered in a chilling, expressionist sequence in which Chris enters his dark hotel room, whistling "Melancholy Baby," and then is driven by the taunting voices of Kitty and Johnny to (unsuccessfully) hang himself. As a reporter told Cross after the trial, "Nobody gets away with murder" because we all carry a little courtroom "right in here. Judge, jury and executioner."¹⁸ Like Joe Wilson in Lang's *Fury*, or the child-murderer Hans Beckert in *M*, Cross is tormented by ghosts. Worse: Johnny still possesses Kitty, and Chris is denied even the relief of suicide. There is no escape from his self-made frame.

Lang's epilogue contrasts starkly with Renoir's. It's Christmas time, but Chris's present is a lonely afterlife. Now homeless and doddering, he watches incredulously as Katherine March's *Self-Portrait*—his self-portrait—is sold for \$10,000 and loaded into a truck. "Well, there goes her masterpiece," remarks the dealer, as "Melancholy Baby" plays on the soundtrack. "Why do you grieve? / Try to believe," the lyrics recommend, but there is no silver lining

here. Whereas Renoir was at pains to define his characters—and partly redeem them—by placing them within a lively social context, Cross's plight, as Kaplan notes, is an "individual tragedy" (37). Cross reenacts Wanley's strangulating self-enclosure, as Renoir's vision of radical freedom is transformed into "powerlessness. . . . Not once but twice" (Welsch 61). Far from being liberated, Cross merely moves from one prison to another. As he gazes at Kitty's picture, we are drawn back to the opening of *Woman in the Window*: the same actor stares at a portrait of the same actress through what could be the same window on the same street. We watch ourselves watching him watch. We have stepped through the looking glass, but which side we are on is no longer clear.

Though *La Chienne* depicts Legrand as a dupe, he is at least freed from the prison of self and permitted to exercise his creativity in living rather than in painting. *Scarlet Street*, in contrast, dramatizes a world of obsessive reiteration and implacable fate where Chris's best instincts—his capacity for love, his artistic passion, his integrity and credulity—are ruthlessly exploited and utterly obliterated. For Lang, any artist who allows his work to be overwritten by others loses his soul. In remaking *La Chienne*, however, he avoids Chris's fate because in repainting Renoir's masterpiece, he signs it not as Chris Cross but as Katherine March—the one who fashions a self-portrait by appropriating the work of another.

A Little Fractured

"All of a sudden I don't know myself," admits George Steele (Pat O'Brien), the disoriented art critic of *Crack-Up*, who has become the target of a forgery ring. Steele's confusion isn't his alone. *Crack-Up* also dramatizes its makers' ambivalence—or confusion—about their own aesthetic aims: although the film purports to champion a realist, near-documentary aesthetic of "truth"—the kind found in representational art—it also presents forged works as authentic ones. And although the film diagnoses cracks in American ideals, it leaves them unhealed:

like the portrait *noirs*, *Crack-Up* does not resolve the questions it raises about originality and identity.

The film opens with a bang, as Steele shatters the window of a museum and knocks over a large sculpture before being subdued by a guard. Upon coming to, he cannot remember how he got here and admits to being, like the male sculpture he toppled, “a little fractured.” He then launches into an account of his day for the onlookers, which include the curator and a Dr. Lowell (Ray Collins). Steele’s flashback—his framed narrative—is, we eventually discover, also the narrative of a frame designed by forgers seeking to discredit him. They know he’s smart: during the war he was Captain Steele, famous for finding “all those forgeries” in the Nazis’ collections.¹⁹

Steele had proved himself a menace earlier in the day by delivering a lecture mocking modernism and advocating the use of X-rays to detect forgeries. First unveiling Jean-Francois Millet’s 1858 painting *Angelus*—which depicts two peasants praying over a basket of potatoes—he declares that it is not the judgment of “phony” critics and collectors that make it valuable, but the fact that “people like you over the centuries appreciate it. Because Millet was successful at communicating what he felt was a beautiful moment.”²⁰ Steele’s populist aesthetic principles are based on a commonsense notion of “truth”—emotional honesty and representational verisimilitude. Modernist art, in contrast, is associated with European radicalism and disdained as “nonsense.”²¹ This contrast is dramatized when he scornfully displays a surrealist painting (a pastiche of Salvador Dali) at which the audience laughs derisively—all except one man with a foreign accent, who charges that Steele lacks “sensitivity to abstract emotional values.” The foreigner is jeered and thrown out. Yet the introduction of Dali opens a crack into a fascinating corner of art history. Steele earlier noted that even the old masters sometimes painted over images they had originally placed in a work. Though he doesn’t mention it, that is what happened with *Angelus*. Dali, a great admirer of Millet’s painting, long

insisted that it was really a portrait of grief, that the couple were originally praying over a child’s coffin.²² An X-ray of the canvas confirmed his suspicions: Millet painted the basket of potatoes over a shape resembling a child’s coffin (“Jean-Francois Millet”). As the film proceeds, such erasures are repeated in Steele’s lapses of memory, just as forgery comes to represent the blanking out and rewriting of history itself.

Steele reminds his audience—in what seems a veiled critique of commercial filmmaking—that although a forgery can be as old as an original, “a good technician with nothing to say is a very dangerous man.” Art critic Mark Sagoff offers a more sophisticated version of this argument. A painting, he writes, advances “a theory concerning the way we see things or the way they can be seen. . . . In this way a representational painting is an experiment.” A forgery, however, lacks “cognitive importance: it merely repeats the solution to a problem which has already been solved” (146). But why is that dangerous? The answer lies in Leonard Meyer’s contention that forgeries undermine “our most fundamental beliefs about the nature of human existence: beliefs about causation and time, creation and freedom” (92). Similarly mistaken beliefs about time and causation also lurk behind the fracturing of Steele’s identity. In a sense, then, Steele is himself a forgery, a man whose past has been painted over by skillful, dangerous technicians.

Steele remembers being called away from dinner with his friend Terry (Claire Trevor) by a message that his mother was ill. On the way to visit her, he becomes convinced his train is about to collide with another one. As the second train approaches, we Steele and his reflection in the window: visually, he is “a little fractured.” A series of quick cuts shows Steele from outside the window in full-face and in profile, both images tightly boxed within the window so that he resembles nothing so much as a portrait—of overpowering terror. He pulls the brake cord, stops the train, and collapses. But his mother was not ill, he has no train ticket, and no train wreck occurred yesterday. Perhaps, hypothesizes Lowell, his traumatic

war experiences have affected his cognition. For a moment Steele's fissured psyche becomes a synecdoche for all veterans and civilians unable to process war-induced traumas.²³ He can neither fully remember nor completely forget them. His visual fracturing also links him to the cubist shapes and terror-ravaged faces portrayed in European modernism. Hence, his false memories indicate a rupture in his own realist aesthetic, based as it is on a congruence between representation and shared reality. Can we trust what we see or recall, especially if others do not share our perceptions? "All of a sudden," he confesses to Terry, "I don't know myself. In twenty-four hours everything has become unfamiliar."

When Steele reenacts his train trip, looking for a clue, director Irving Reis repeats his visual fracturing, again resorting to expressionism. As the second train approaches, Steele's face is again confined within the window frame as the train whistle grows louder; his eyes widen, and he appears to panic. This time the train passes without incident, but then the entire frame surrounding his face goes black, and he recedes rapidly into an abyss and disappears. The shot reverses itself, and his face grows to refill the frame. Like Laura and Professor Wanley, Steele has died and been reborn or has fallen back through the looking glass. The reenactment of his flashback helps him recognize that he is "in somebody's way": in replaying the frame tale, then, he discovers that he is being framed in someone else's narrative of crime.

Steele learns that a Gainsborough painting, allegedly lost at sea, and the museum's Durer—*The Adoration of the Kings* [Magi], which he had displayed during his lecture—are both forgeries. Locating the Durer on a ship's hold just as a fire starts, he rolls up the painting and flees with it.²⁴ After gaining access to an X-ray machine with the help of Terry and a museum employee, he examines the painting. He explains that Durer painted over an unfinished figure in the upper left of the original *The Adoration*; Steele compares its X-ray to one of an eighteenth-century forgery that has no such figure. He then examines the X-ray of a second forgery,

the "Scola copy," which is different yet. Placing that X-ray next to that of the museum's *Adoration*, he realizes that the museum has been exhibiting the Scola forgery.²⁵ As these X-rays fill the frame, the film too becomes an X-ray and thus presents cinema as the sole reliable vehicle for discovering truth. But of course the film's paintings and images are forgeries—in fact, forgeries of forgeries, given that there never was a "Scola copy." Once again the film authorizes realist representation on one level while undermining it on another.

With the forgeries destroyed, Steele explains, the forgers will possess the original Durer and Gainsborough paintings. Thinking the originals destroyed, other dealers and collectors will stop searching for them. But this plot twist seems dubious: if art dealers believe the originals destroyed, the originals would be perceived as forgeries—and hence be unsellable! This seeming incoherence, however, does imply a set of intriguing complications. First, in such a case, the authenticity of a painting would matter less than its mere uniqueness. Further, the case suggests that a forgery *always* matters as much as its original because the former validates the latter. That is, because only valuable paintings are forged, the existence of forgeries amounts to a backhanded way of recognizing an original's value, even as the forgeries seek to appropriate that value. A forgery thus enhances the value of the original by certifying it as worthy of protection. As Hillel Schwartz argues, "an object uncopied is under perpetual siege, valued less for itself than for the struggle to prevent its being copied. . . . It is only within an exuberant world of copies that we arrive at our experience of uniqueness" (212). A unique painting is unique—and valuable—only insofar as it faces the possibility of being forged. Thus, if an original's existence ensures a forgery's value, the reverse is also true: a forgery ratifies the value of the original.

But just as Steele makes his discovery, he is captured and turned over to the forgery ring, whose leader turns out to be Dr. Lowell. To determine what Steele knows, Lowell injects him with sodium pentothal, a drug perfected during

the war. “Odd, isn’t it,” he asks, “that truth should be a byproduct of war,” which is infamous for spawning lies and myths. This drug has “placed honesty on a scientific basis” and generated a “direct method of communicating with a man’s true self.” The ironies multiply: a forger promises to uncover Steele’s “true self” and integrate his fractured psyche with a truth serum in order to cover up *his own falsehoods*. Where does the truth lie?

Lowell explains his motives: “Did you ever want to possess something that was unobtainable, that you can’t buy?” He is defending great art from “dolts who can’t differentiate between trash and these masterpieces.” The truth is out: these forgers are elitists, the kind who, as Steele had earlier defined them, want to turn art into a “private tea party.” Lowell’s words echo those of Waldo Lydecker and Hardy Cathcart: here is another collector who prefers art works to people and treats humans as objects. According to Lowell, however, forgers are not criminals but protectors of the canon; his copies are designed to preserve the beauty and value of the originals. Far from criminals, forgers are the true art lovers.

The original paintings are hidden right in the house, but Lowell will no longer enjoy them, for he is shot by Traybin (Herbert Marshall), a Scotland Yard inspector who then pulls the previously unseen Gainsborough from its hiding place. It is *The Painter’s Daughters* (1758), a dual portrait of Mary and Margaret Gainsborough as children. But not exactly: the painting he retrieves depicts only one daughter. In fact, this “original” is a copy of a copy—a replica of a nineteenth-century imitation of the Gainsborough portrait—that portrays only Mary Gainsborough.²⁶ Once again, even as it condemns forgery, the film commits it: like Lowell and his gang, the filmmakers have created copies in order to defend originality. Like the creators of *Laura* and *The Woman in the Window*, these cinematic tricksters invite us into a realistically rendered world only to remind us that it is a fabrication.

To further complicate matters, at the end Steele believes he has taken another journey, that “everybody’s nuts around this place” but

himself. He remains suspended between his failure to remember what has happened to him and his inability to leave behind his war injury. In this regard, *Crack-Up* repeats the other portrait noirs’ challenge to the American ideal of self-reinvention. If Steele, a war hero and famous exponent of truth, cannot start over, then is it possible for anyone in postwar America to do so? And from what fragments will we build our new self-portrait? Neither the shards of demolished European high culture nor embattled pictorial realism seem quite up to the task. The split portrait thus comes to represent America’s fissured psyche as well as the film’s—and indeed, film noir’s—divided aesthetic. All are a little fractured.

Though purporting to expose the differences between originality and forgery, *Crack-Up* instead reveals a symbiotic relationship between them. Further, its depiction of Steele’s divided psyche exposes an unresolved ambivalence both about the war (which Americans wanted both to remember and to forget) and about representation and modern art: though ostensibly condemning European modernism, the film incorporates it. More broadly, all these films seek to validate a commonsense notion of identity—that one must find his or her true self and defend it from others’ efforts to exploit or appropriate it—while dramatizing the near-impossibility of such an enterprise. Even so, these art noirs imply that self-reformation remains feasible by exhibiting the power of pictures to forge identities, frame expectations, and unsettle conventional ideas about gender, selfhood, and memory. In these films, for better or worse, there is no cohesive subject; there are only self-portraits that we paint and repaint, identities that we reinvent again and again.

NOTES

1. Kent Minturn remarks on these painting noirs, arguing that they display a “Romantic notion of the artist as a tortured genius” (282). In addition to the films I discuss, one could cite sculptor Jack Marlow in *Phantom Lady* (1944) and Bogart’s mad artist Geoffrey Carroll in *The Two Mrs. Carralls* (1947), who obsessively paints his wives as the Angel of Death and then poisons them to revive his moribund muse.

2. For a discussion of how Grable and other “pinup girls” were defined by their body measurements, see Renov 184.

3. Leonard Leff points out the homoerotic tinge in the McPherson/Lydecker relationship. For example, when they dine at Waldo and Laura’s favorite restaurant, the two men seem to be on a date (7). It is also difficult to miss the innuendos in the opening sequence, when McPherson confronts Lydecker as the latter luxuriates in the bathtub. This subtext is also present in the novel, which hints that Lydecker’s wooing of Laura is but a set of “gestures” designed to make him appear heterosexual (Casparly, *Laura* 158).

4. Kathryn Kalinak observes that the picture frame “serves to contain the power of her threatening sexuality” (168). Liahna Babener similarly argues that the portrait is “quarantined inside the pictorial space” and usually “sandwiched between men” (94–95) to signify Laura’s domination by males.

5. Royal Brown comments that the theme represents Laura’s absence (90); yet it also betokens her continued presence, at least in McPherson’s thoughts and senses, as each restatement reinforces “the feeling that he is trying to get it [or her] out of his mind” (Ness 62).

6. Nicholas Spencer asserts that the “prior murder narrative was a dream” (137); later in the film McPherson urges Laura to “forget the whole thing like a bad dream.” The lyrics Johnny Mercer added to the musical theme make this possibility explicit: “but she’s only a dream.”

7. In Casparly’s novel, Diane was having an affair with Laura’s fiancé, Shelby Carpenter. The novel’s Diane Redfern was also born with the name Jennie Swobodo (Casparly, *Laura* 95); hence, this fleshing out of Diane’s background adds heft to the doubling motif.

8. Babener concludes that the filmmakers “defeminized” the novel by erasing Laura’s voice in order to advance a “misogynist agenda” (86). Casparly herself praised the film but disliked the way it transformed Laura into a “Hollywood version of a cute career girl” (*Secrets* 209). In Jay Dratler’s original script, according to Biesen (161) and Kalinak (162–63), Laura was given voiceover narration, which Zanuck urged Preminger to remove. According to Preminger, however, Laura’s voiceover was added later, at Zanuck’s request, and then deleted (Bogdanovich 619). For Preminger’s recollections about the production, see Bogdanovich 614–21.

9. *The Dark Corner* was also produced by Zanuck at Twentieth Century Fox and co-scripted by Jay Dratler, who shared the screenwriting credit for *Laura*.

10. Though allegedly by Raphael, the portrait looks nothing like Raphael’s females, instead resembling a touched-up twentieth-century photograph. As Richard Dyer notes, the painting also provides a “grim undertow” to Cathcart’s earlier quip that “the enjoyment of

art is the only remaining ecstasy that is neither immoral nor illegal” (Dyer 124).

11. The sculpture most closely resembles Donatello’s *Fountain Figure of a Winged Angel* (ca. 1440), though that sculpture is bronze, rather than marble like the film’s piece, and much smaller as well. See http://www.metmuseum.org/TOAH/hd/dona/ho_1983.356.htm.

12. For versions of this argument, see Renov 174–91, Belton 240, and Hanson 1–17.

13. These are virtually identical to the camera movements Preminger uses when McPherson dozes in Laura’s apartment.

14. In Nunnally Johnson’s original script (adapted from a novel by J. H. Wallis), Wanley commits suicide. But Lang and producer William Goetz insisted on the dream twist. See McGilligan 310 for more on how the scene was created.

15. As E. Ann Kaplan comments, Legrand is placed within internal frames throughout the film to expose how he is “bounded by, trapped in, bourgeois culture” (43).

16. Near the beginning of *Woman*, Lang dissolves a clock over Wanley’s body to express the same idea.

17. Chris’s works were actually painted by John Decker: see McGilligan 322.

18. This moral, and the fact that Cross ends in a living hell, permitted *Scarlet Street* to pass muster with Joseph Breen, administrator of the Production Code. It did not, however, prevent it from being banned in several cities. For an account of this controversy, see Bernstein.

19. Minturn (306) notes that the film alludes to the notorious case of Han van Meegeren, who forged a number of works in the manner of Dutch masters (especially Vermeer) that were sold to the Nazis for large sums. For a fuller account of the van Meegeren forgeries, see Arnau 242–65.

20. Steele’s quasi-expressionist aesthetic ignores the likelihood that the Socialist Millet was probably trying to portray the poverty and spiritual desperation of the peasants among whom he was raised.

21. Diane Waldman notes that many postwar American films affirmed an “illusionist” aesthetic and viewed modern art with “hostility and suspicion.” Among modernism’s offenses were elitism, ugliness, incomprehensibility, and political subversiveness (53, 54).

22. Not only did Dali write a long analysis of the painting, but he created several variations on it, incorporating its two figures into his 1932 painting *Angelus*, into his *El Angelus arquitectónico de Millet* (1933)—where the praying peasants become two white stones—and into his *Reminiscencia arqueológica del angelus de Millet* (1935). These multiple versions bear out Schwartz’s description of the history of art as “the history of copy rites, of transformations that take place during acts of copying” (248). For images,

see *3D-Dali*, especially <http://www.3d-dali.com/Tour/angelus.htm> and <http://www.3d-dali.com/Tour/reminescence.htm>.

23. Cognitively disabled veterans also appear in films noir such as *Somewhere in the Night* (1946), *The Crooked Way* (1949), *High Wall* (1947), and *The Blue Dahlia* (1946). These characters not only represent veterans' difficulties in readjustment but also capture the alienation and amnesia that seemed to pervade postwar American society. By attributing Steele's amnesia to war trauma, the film gestures toward this same idea.

24. Rolling up the real Durer work would be impossible because it was painted on wood.

25. Although the "Scola copy" is an invention of the filmmakers, Durer forgeries have long been commonplace. Indeed, in the sixteenth century, according to Arnau, there were more Durer forgeries in circulation than genuine Durer works (119–20). For an analysis and reproduction of *Adoration of the Magi*, see *Web Gallery of Art*, "Durer, Albrecht."

26. This copy was bequeathed to the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the original is in London's Victoria and Albert Museum. Sometime after 1831, the original of this painting was cut vertically, but the parts were reunited before John Forster bequeathed it to the Victoria and Albert. See *Metropolitan Museum*, "European Paintings," for further details.

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