



INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Slum Plays, Salvation Stories, and Crook Pictures: The Gangster Regeneration Cycle and the Prehistory of the Gangster Genre

Author(s): Nick Heffernan

Source: *Film History*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Summer 2017), pp. 32-65

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/filmhistory.29.2.02>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Indiana University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Film History*

JSTOR

Slum Plays, Salvation Stories, and Crook Pictures: The Gangster Regeneration Cycle and the Prehistory of the Gangster Genre

ABSTRACT: Recent scholarship exhorts film historians to attend to production cycles in order to interrogate established conceptions of genres. This essay identifies and examines a neglected cycle of gangster regeneration films that flourished between 1910 and 1925 and constituted the prehistory of a genre usually identified with the early 1930s. The gangster regeneration cycle drew from the slum plays and salvation stories of stage melodrama a set of narrative formulas and thematic concerns that reflected the influence of Progressive ideology. In its attitude to social reform and gender, it stands in sharp distinction to the canonical gangster cycles that succeeded it.

KEYWORDS: film cycles, gangster genre, Progressivism, sentimentalism, gender politics, Jazz Age

In late 1927 *Variety* gave a name to a phenomenon that film-industry personnel and analysts had long accepted and often partaken in but had not yet explicitly defined. “Types of picture stories seem to run in cycles,” announced a major two-page article beneath an imposing banner headline. “No sooner than a certain kind of story hits the screen and clicks,” the piece continued, “practically every company, big and independent, starts making pictures of the sure-fire box office type patterned along the lines of the original picture which served as a trail blazer.”¹ Of course, it was a truth universally acknowledged that from its earliest days motion-picture production had revolved around commercially driven, opportunistic, short-term trends. Yet rarely had this been so overtly stated, perhaps because such trends were the object of much ambivalence in the industry. What better way to ensure a return on a picture than to model it on a recently successful story? But, equally, what quicker way to bore audiences with repetition or—especially where sensitive subjects such as crime or sex were concerned—invite the interference of censorious reformers alarmed by

the glutting of screens with unsavory material? As the *Motion Picture Herald* observed wearily in 1935, “cycles seem to be something that this business can’t seem to get along with or without.”²

This ambivalence was especially acute with regard to crime stories. Indeed, as early as 1910, industry figures were bemoaning the tendency of crime films to cluster into what would later be called cycles, principally because of the hostile attention such release patterns attracted from guardians of public morality and taste. Giles R. Warren, scenario editor at Carl Laemmle’s Independent Moving Pictures company (IMP), sought to deflect such attention by blaming writers who, he complained, were simply failing to produce any other type of story. “We have spared neither money nor labor in our efforts to obtain good, clean, high-class, definite plots for our pictures,” he assured the readers of *Moving Picture World*. But “we reject so many manuscripts,” he continued, “because . . . hundreds have as their basic feature a murder, a robbery . . . or too plain a reference to the underworld.” Warren’s department must have been exceptional in its choosiness, however, for one scenario writer recalled being relentlessly pursued for crime stories by production companies, particularly between 1910 and 1913 when “the field was great for underworld stuff.” And it was precisely “underworld stuff”—material dealing with criminal gangs and their connections with the shadier reaches of business and politics—that the industry found most problematic among crime subjects. *Moving Picture World*, committed to raising the cultural status of commercial film, regularly inveighed against “too much filming of the underworld and the portrayal of crime just for the sake of thrill or sensation.” These “have been two great reproaches of the industry,” it asserted in late 1912, denouncing what it called a “recent influx” of underworld films as “plainly and frankly immoral. They appeal directly to the ignorant, the morbid and the depraved. They are a stench in the nostrils of the audiences in the ordinary American picture theatre.”³ Despite—or perhaps because of—their apparent popularity with moviegoers, recurrent cycles of underworld films would provoke further complaints from within the industry and without, culminating in April 1931 in a self-imposed, industry-wide suspension of what by then were termed gangster films, initiated as a public-relations strategy by the industry’s trade organization, the Motion Picture Producers and Directors of America (MPPDA).

The motion-picture business might have been conflicted about the merits of film cycles, underworld cycles especially, but recent scholarship has embraced them as a vital and hitherto neglected aspect of film history. Rick Altman argues that they are the DNA of genres, the latter emerging only on the basis of especially resonant or persistent cycles, while for Amanda Klein cycles are more than merely “nascent film genres”; they should be examined precisely

because they “have the potential to disrupt or complicate the discrete categories frequently generated by genre studies.” And with respect to the gangster movie, Grieveson and others maintain that consideration of temporally limited production trends can provide new insights into historically determined attitudes to crime, social environment, race, class, sexuality, and gender, and thus destabilize the “ahistorical” view of the genre prevalent in orthodox film history.⁴ In fact, for two decades now, film historians have been questioning the hitherto established view of the gangster genre as a product of the early sound period, narrowly defined by a trilogy of classic films released in 1931 and 1932—*Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*.⁵ Yet with notable exceptions such as Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet, and Amanda Klein, few scholars have ventured very far into the classic gangster film’s prehistory or hinterland in order to extend our understanding of the broader cultural, social, and industrial contexts out of which it emerged.⁶ Moreover, even when they do venture beyond the established canon, many historians tend to position the underworld films of the silent period merely as precursors of the classic trilogy, viewing them as more or less unrealized anticipations of the thematic concerns, narrative patterns, and iconographic material that are deemed only to attain full development there and thus, it is implied, define the genre.⁷

In what follows, therefore, I wish to put aside the concept of genre and instead of seeking generic precursors among the stories of gangs, gangsters, and the organized criminal underworld that were offered to moviegoers in the period before the classic trilogy, consider this output in terms of cycles. As Steve Neale and Peter Stanfield have argued, studying films in terms of temporally delimited cycles rather than formalistically defined, transhistorical genres takes us closer to how the industry itself understands its market and organizes its production and exhibition practices. It thus gives us greater insight into the dynamics of a “formulaic commercial cinema,” a large part of whose business consists, as Amanda Klein puts it, in “repeat[ing] the same images and plots over and over within a relatively short period of time.” Cycle studies foreground imitation and repetition in popular film, downplaying innovation and novelty, and necessitating what Peter Stanfield calls “a descriptive analysis” of sequences of films that, considered individually as texts, might be overlooked or dismissed as uninteresting and marginal to film history. Yet this kind of close description of runs of nearly identical films can, by tracing how cycles emerge, develop, and decay, illuminate not only important aspects of industry practice but also reveal much about American cinema’s complex and elusive relationship to wider cultural and historical forces. Overwhelmingly defined by what Stanfield calls their “relationship to the topical,” film cycles operate in Klein’s words “as a mold placed over the zeitgeist.” In this respect

they are much more revealing than are genres of “the contours, fissures, and complicated patterns of the contemporary moment.”⁸

From this perspective, scrutiny of the gangster film’s prehistory reveals a number of overlapping and interlinked crime cycles that sought in various ways to illuminate and exploit various aspects of what was commonly referred to as the criminal underworld. These cycles played out as the American film industry made the transition from the nickelodeon to the silent feature and the talkies, registering as they did so significant shifts in public views of criminality and in popular sensibilities and tastes. Beginning in 1910, a series of story formulas borrowed largely from stage melodrama fed into a topical film cycle that addressed public concern about urban gang activity and centered on the criminal’s potential for moral regeneration. Across two distinct phases, the gangster regeneration cycle registered first the hegemony and then the incipient decline of Progressivism as a social movement and broad cultural ethos. In its shifting understandings of the social dimensions of lawlessness, it betrayed the dwindling of popular interest in Progressive discourses of social and criminal reform. In its increasingly sexualized depiction of women, it registered the decay of nineteenth-century notions of true womanhood and feminine moral virtue, signalling the retreat of the female sphere of social influence that, in the final analysis, rested on them. And in its ever more conflicted stance toward sentimentalism as a moral and dramatic principle, it reflected an emerging temper of self-consciously modern, hard-boiled cynicism—a mood to which it would ultimately fall victim. Indeed, the gangster cycles that succeeded it and came so completely to overshadow it in accounts of the genre would do so precisely by virtue of their repudiation of the regeneration formula’s rootedness in the sentimental and melodramatic conventions of the late Victorian stage and the ameliorative social vision of Progressivism.

“THE STORY OF A . . . REGENERATION THAT WILL STRAIN YOUR HEART CHORDS”: THE GANGSTER REGENERATION CYCLE

The anonymous *Variety* journalist who first publicly elaborated the concept of film cycles emphasized their dependence on the exploitation of current issues: “It seems as though the picture producers watch topical events before deciding what they are going to make and all hit on virtually the same idea . . . which may have been in the public eye during the six months in which the picture[s] started.” The crime cycles that emerged as American cinema moved from its early into its transitional period—developing the extended narrative forms, visual grammar, and industrial structures that would underpin classical Hollywood—confirm this thesis.⁹ From 1910 a series of moral panics concerning

urban crime and vice fuelled a Black Hand cycle about the American influence of the so-named Italian extortion racket, a white-slave cycle about organized gangs that trafficked vulnerable girls into prostitution, and a detective cycle addressing the feared inadequacy of America's city police forces to deal with such menaces. But even as they capitalized on sensationalistic press reports and the attendant public alarm, these films offered solutions that reflected the cultural and political dominance of the ethos of Progressivism.¹⁰

The Black Hand films, for instance, typically portrayed that criminal organization as a symptom of the failure—or refusal—of Italian peasant immigrants to assimilate into the structures of modern American life. Though Black Hand films can be traced back to 1906, the cycle was sparked by the publicity surrounding the April 1909 murder in Palermo of heroic New York policeman Lieutenant Joseph Petrosino whose campaign against the Mafia family led him from Manhattan's Italian neighborhoods to its birthplace in Sicily. As Giorgio Bertellini has shown, films such as *Black Hand* (1909), *The Detectives of the Italian Bureau* (1909), *Foiling the Camorra* (1911), and *The Life and Death of Lieutenant Petrosino* (1912) portrayed the detective (or his fictional surrogates) as a paragon of assimilated Americanism, a dedicated professional, and a bourgeois family man devoted to eradicating this vestige of the old country's backwardness that brought shame on his community and hindered its advancement in the new world. Later entries in the cycle such as *The Padrone's Plot* (1913), *The Padrone's Ward* (1914), and *Purple Shadows* (1916) emphasized the moral distinction between assimilated and unassimilated Italian immigrants. The gangsters are atavistic, illiterate, peasant throwbacks, resistant to the institutions and ideals of modern American life, while their victims are either successfully integrated Italian businesspeople and professionals or nobly aspirational immigrant workers eager to embrace the American dream.¹¹

The white-slave cycle showed a similar commitment to Progressive principles. The films promoted the assimilation of immigrants and working-class Americans to bourgeois norms and celebrated the agency of professionals and reformers in cleansing America's civic and political institutions and bringing order to its chaotic and vice-ridden urban centers. Prompted by lurid newspaper exposés, alongside dozens of municipal vice-commission reports and the findings of New York's Bureau of Social Hygiene, films such as *Traffic in Souls* (1913) exploited public fears that, as the picture claimed, "50,000 Girls Disappear[ed] Yearly" due to the depredations of organized prostitution rings. While salaciously depicting the horrors of vice (a code word for prostitution, drug abuse, and miscegenation), these films typically suggested that the remedy was to ensure that vulnerable girls were properly socialized and the urban underworld subjected to the reforming expertise of doctors, welfare workers,



Fig. 1: Gang violence makes headlines in the *New York Times*, June 9, 1912, fuelling the gangster film cycle.

journalists, policemen, and politicians immune from corruption and graft. Titles like *Trapped in the Great Metropolis* (1914), *The Lure* (1914), and *The Call of the Dance* (1915) cautioned against the dangerous appeal of urban pleasures and freedoms not only to immigrant and working-class girls who might lack the stabilizing influence of bourgeois family structures, but also to the modern middle-class girl overly keen to assert her sexuality or independence. Stressing the importance of traditional notions of female purity as a buttress against the power and attractions of the underworld, the white-slave films illustrated the extent to which Progressivist understandings of crime rested on Victorian assumptions about gender.¹²

Such assumptions loomed large in a crime cycle that has received far less attention than the Black Hand or white-slave cycles, despite being considerably more populous. What I call the gangster regeneration cycle was prompted by rising public fears about gang violence in New York's slum districts and its links with business and politics. Concern escalated from the summer of 1910 when open gang warfare caused the city's police commissioner to announce a "crusade against gangs" and the *New York Times* to complain that "the exploits of young gangsters have long taken up an undue amount of space in the daily papers." When two senior judges admitted that "the underworld [was] organized" and received "strong financial backing" from legitimate sources, the

police department formed a “secret squad” of undercover detectives to infiltrate gangs. But in the summer of 1912, gang hostilities spilled out of the slums and across the city in a spree that lasted three days and claimed several lives, including that of an innocent child bystander (fig. 1). In the aftermath it was revealed that the head of the police department’s “strong arm squad” was financially entangled with the gangs and had personally sparked the violence by ordering the execution of a recalcitrant underworld associate.¹³

The gangster regeneration cycle capitalized on these events while also exploiting a vogue on the legitimate stage for slum plays and salvation stories sparked by the success of *Salvation Nell*, the sensation of Broadway’s 1908–1909 season. Early entries in the cycle such as *The Better Way* (1911), *The Gang Fighter* (1912), and *Fire and Straw* (June 1912) shamelessly borrowed *Salvation Nell*’s setting, plot structure, and themes, while adding spectacular and violent action sequences impracticable on the stage, turning them into a story formula that would recur in dozens of pictures well into the 1920s.¹⁴ Lee Grieveson shows how the themes and story lines of some of the few of these films that have survived, such as *Alias Jimmy Valentine* (1915) and *The Regeneration* (1915), were informed by the reform tracts, memoirs, civic reports, and academic studies that constituted Progressive criminology at the time. But contemporary entertainment industry discourse indicates how decisively this material was mediated by theatrical forms and conventions as it made its way onto the screen. *Jimmy Valentine*, for instance, had roots in an O. Henry story and was framed by an address to camera by a noted reform criminologist. But advertisements and reviews stressed its fidelity to Paul Armstrong’s “world famous” 1910 stage play, highlighting this as a selling point for exhibitors, just as they did with the 1920 remake. Similarly, *The Regeneration* drew ultimately on a well-known 1903 reform memoir, Owen Kildare’s *My Mamie Rose*. But Raoul Walsh’s scenario was, as *Variety* reported, modelled entirely on the very different 1908 stage adaptation: “the film version . . . follows the play in a great measure,” it pointed out, “for it gives an opportunity for dramatic punches that were not present in the original.”¹⁵

Invariably set in the streets, tenements, dives, and mission houses of New York’s Lower East Side, the films of the gangster regeneration cycle typically revolve around the struggles of a good woman—usually a Salvation Army girl or mission-house worker—to reform a gangster in whom she has developed a more than purely moral interest. Some variations of the formula feature female gang members who are rescued from the underworld by the intercession of respectable men, often unusually forgiving and reform-minded victims of the girls’ crimes as in *The Reformation of Mary* (1912) or undercover detectives as in *Just a Woman* (1912). A consistent element is the love-triangle plot in which

a protagonist is pulled between two potential romantic partners, each representing opposing moral poles. But the cycle's overwhelming characteristic is a commitment to the moral and social reformation of the criminal, reflecting in equal measure Progressive ideas about the role played by environment in determining criminal behavior and gender attitudes that were absorbed from the conventions of the period's stage melodrama.

This is illustrated by the publicity for Defender's one-reel crime film, *Great Marshall Jewel Case* (1910). "Crime cannot be imbedded so deep into the nature or the heart," it proclaimed, "that kindness and a helping hand cannot eradicate it." Reviewers concurred. This was the tale of "a girl brought up far from pure things and pure existence, and taught the fine arts of the underworld." But "kindness revolutionizes her entire creed, and makes of [her] a self-respecting and respected woman," and the film becomes "the story of a . . . regeneration that will strain your heart chords."¹⁶ Nurture rather than nature explained criminality; love, charity, and mercy—feminine virtues traditionally rooted in women's domestic roles but now also publicly administered through early social-work institutions such as the mission house—were its remedies. Indeed, the films were remarkably consistent in refusing to advocate more aggressive policing or harsher sentencing as an answer to the problems they depicted. And while male gangsters were customarily redeemed by a woman's intervention, female criminals were invariably regenerated simply by being guided back to the imperatives of their own sex, as if there were a categorical incompatibility between womanhood and defiance of the law. Even the fallen women of the underworld who compete with the "pretty little mission worker[s]," the "sweet, sympathetic little Salvation Army wom[e]n," and the "pretty slum worker[s]"¹⁷ for the attentions of charismatic gang leaders in *The Better Way*, *Fire and Straw*, *Salvation Sal* (1913), *Night Shadows of New York* (1913), and *The Rat* (1914) ultimately reform, typically entering the mission house or convent by the story's end. Meanwhile, those unable to escape the underworld's clutches often sacrifice themselves so that their beloved might, as in *Just a Woman*, *The Gangsters and the Girl* (1914), *An Inside Tip* (1915), and *The Purple Night* (1915).

The gangster regeneration cycle rested on a commitment to the power of sentiment as both a moral principle and a criterion of successful entertainment. Producers and reviewers alike emphasized the regeneration story's ability to strain viewers' heart chords while offering new kinds of punch in action scenes of an immediacy and scale the stage could not provide. "The picture's story shows a gangster reform through love," noted a reviewer approvingly of *The Transformation of Mike* (1912), while Essanay advertised *The Forbidden Way* (1913)—in which a gang leader reforms after falling for the respectable daughter of a man he robs—as "a thrilling drama of the underworld" whose "masterly



Fig. 2: *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912): Local hoodlum Snapper Kid (Elmer Booth), ill at ease in the domestic sphere, chivalrously pledges to protect the Little Lady (Lillian Gish) and her husband (Walter Miller) from the disorder of the slums.

presentation of scenes from the criminal haunts of a great city play [*sic*] upon the heartstrings of human emotion with an eloquence of appeal that rends the very soul.” Lubin’s tagline for *The Gangster* (a.k.a. *The Gangster’s Sacrifice*, 1913)—in which a gang leader forces an innocent Salvation Army girl to marry him and bear him a child, only later to surrender his life in their protection—was “The brute gangster at last finds he has a heart.” Promoting it as “a powerful underworld picture” about “the love of a gangster for a mission worker and a comparison of that passion with the pure devotion of a good man,” the company stressed the film’s sentimental appeal as a “singularly gripping human interest narrative.” A similar emphasis on sentiment characterized the discourse surrounding *The Supreme Moment* (1913). “A humane impulse surged superior to the meaner emotions in his darkened soul,” gushed *Moving Picture World* of the scene in which protagonist Gangster Griggs is redeemed by sacrificing his life to save the innocent daughter of a bitter underworld rival. *Variety* also celebrated the gangster regeneration story’s sentimental impact, hailing the film adaptation of *Salvation Nell* (1915) as “a wonderful specimen of modern film direction and photography . . . constructed around a story with powerful heart interest.”¹⁸

Even those gangsters who were not entirely regenerated by the story's close were often presented sympathetically as creatures of sentiment not unresponsive to the wholesome influence of women. In *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), gang leader Snapper Kid assumes the role of chivalric custodian to the vulnerable Little Lady after her mother dies and her husband's work takes him away. He guards her against sexual predators at the gangsters' ball and relinquishes his own interest in her on witnessing the depth of her devotion to her returning husband. Ultimately, the benign hoodlum returns the husband's stolen pay packet and pledges to watch over the couple in return for their declining to report him to the police (fig. 2). In *The Samaritan of Coogan's Tenement* (1912), gangster Red McGuire repays the kind widow who nurses him back to health after a vicious gang battle by supporting her while her son is in prison and using his influence to extract the boy from the underworld on his release. Red's gratitude for the mother love he lacked as a poor orphan cannot bring about his renunciation of the gangster life, but it motivates his provision of the guidance and money that allow the widow and her son eventually to escape the city's slums and begin life anew. And in *The Rat* a gentle mission worker comforts a wounded gang leader, receiving a grateful pledge of protection in return. When the girl is kidnapped by a rival gang the Rat is as good as his word, belying his underworld nickname by rallying his forces to rescue her and return her to her family.

The gangster regeneration films thus contained considerable scope for female agency. Their female characters reformed desperate men, overcame their own dire circumstances, and brought love and order to the slums largely by force of feminine nature. Even the most passive of these women, *Musketeers'* Little Lady, fashions a microcosm of domestic harmony in the tenements powerful enough to compel Snapper Kid to want to defend it from the violent, masculine world outside. Such agency, though, was tightly constrained by the sentimentalism and Victorian gender assumptions that dominated the era's stage melodrama—the key model for a motion-picture industry that now aspired to the dramatic complexity and cultural respectability of the legitimate theater. Adopting what Peter Brooks identifies as melodrama's "high emotionalism" and reliance on "moral polarization and schematization," the cycle presented a world of stark binary oppositions: good versus evil, religion versus godlessness, the family home and the mission house versus the street and the dive, even the countryside versus the city—a central theme in *The Samaritan of Coogan's Tenement*, *The Gangsters of New York* (1914), and *Are They Born or Made?* (1915)—were all imagined in terms of a fundamental tension between the compassion of women and the brutishness of men.¹⁹

These binary gender politics were determined as much by Progressivism as by the conventions of stage melodrama. The cycle's mission workers



Fig. 3: *The Regeneration* (1915): Gangster Owen Conway (Rockliffe Fellowes) is reformed by settlement-house worker Marie Deering (Anna Q. Nilsson).

and interventionist wives were surrogates for the middle-class female activists then engaged in extending women's traditional roles as domestic organizers and moral instructors into the public sphere, simultaneously reaffirming and challenging gender stereotypes as they did so. Meanwhile, the films' gangsters and underworld women represented two of the reformers' major client groups, personifying the kinds of urban disorder and vice Progressives sought to ameliorate. By privileging female agency envisioned largely in terms of the sentimental and domestic virtues, the gangster regeneration cycle channelled the "maternalist vision" and "politicized domesticity" of Progressive reform and balanced women's empowerment with sexual conservatism.²⁰ Progressivism's feminized Christian morality was embedded in the salvation story's religious themes and mission-house settings; in many films it became sufficiently overt to shape their symbolism and visual language. For example, in *Fire and Straw*—promoted as "a Salvation story, suggesting the good work of the Mission House, or Salvation Army"—a mission worker who is also a minister's daughter reforms the gangster with whom she has fallen in love by disguising herself as an angel and hiding in the safe he plans to rob. So guilt-stricken is he by the vision that "the desperado commences a new life, to make himself worthy of a lovely wife." In *The Face of*

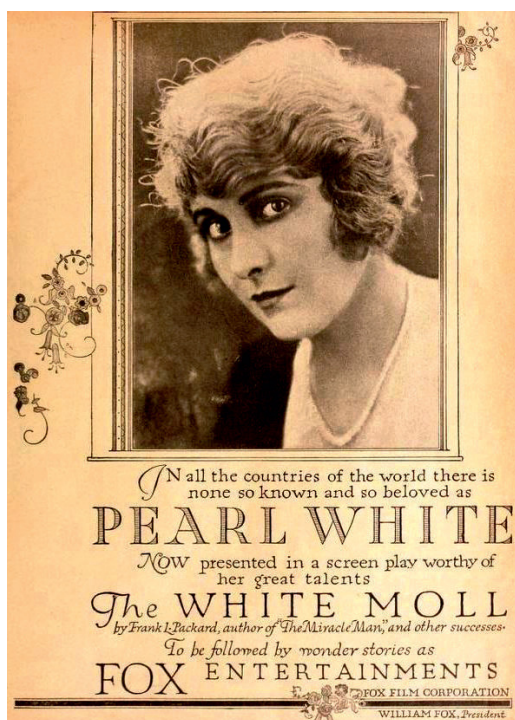


Fig. 4: *The White Moll* (1920): Publicity emphasizes the “beloved” female star of this religious-themed salvation story.

the Madonna (1915), a girl gangster is regenerated when, cradling an infant, she poses for a religious mural being painted by a dissipated artist who is himself redeemed by the experience. At the climax of *The Regeneration*, an ex-gangster is deterred from revenging himself on the killer of the devout mission worker who reformed him by the appearance of the dead girl’s spirit, reminding him that vengeance is the prerogative of the Lord (fig. 3). In a coda at her graveside, the gangster reflects, “She lies here, this girl o’ mine, but her soul, the noblest and purest thing I ever knew, lives on in me.” And in *The White Moll* (1920), a symbolic prologue depicts “the descent of the Christ from the cross for the relief of suffering humanity,” while later in the film special photographic effects animate a church effigy of Christ which, caught by a bullet in a gang shoot-out, writhes in pain, inspiring the female title character’s regeneration. Attired in immaculate white, the erstwhile moll “enters the underworld as an angel of mercy,” returning stolen goods and reforming the members of her former gang whose leader she ultimately marries (fig. 4).²¹

Some films did register the existence of autonomous female sexuality as well as the modernization of gender roles as more women entered the labor market or experimented with new forms of independence and self-realization

beyond the domestic sphere. In *Fire and Straw*, for example, a chaste mission girl falls for “a man of the most desperate type, [because] he is handsome, and [she] wishes that God had given her such a man.” Likewise, Carol, the well-bred artist heroine of *The Purple Night*, is beguiled by “the manly proportions of one of the gangsters” who attempts to rob her. Driven by “a nature that craves excitement and adventure,” she ditches her upper-class fiancé and begs the gangster to model for her, eagerly becoming his moll and partner in crime. In *The Making of Crooks* (1915), Hazel, the spunky daughter of a prominent political boss, defies her father by frequenting cabarets and falling for Italian gangster Tony who “fascinates the girl.”²² And the protagonist of *The Transformation of Mary* even disguises herself as a boy to get a job in the bank she plans to rob. Yet all four women ultimately conform to established notions of female purity and morality: *Fire and Straw*’s Mary resorts to impersonating an angel to bring her handsome gangster to Jesus; Carol selflessly takes a gangster’s bullet to protect the respectable man for whom she has finally renounced the underworld; Hazel’s transgressions are punished when she is accidentally killed by the reckless Tony, already deeply regretting having surrendered her honor to him; and the thieving Mary is transformed by the compassion and understanding of the bank manager’s daughter who helps her renounce crime and “seek refuge in a convent.” The films therefore acknowledged and even visualized female desire only to contain its more transgressive dimensions. In this respect they were consistent with what Janet Staiger describes as early American cinema’s “regulation” of female sexuality principally through narratives that enacted the redemption of “bad women” and their conversion to socially acceptable roles.²³

The centrality to the gangster regeneration cycle of sentiment and melodrama was felt to be entirely compatible with its claims to hard-hitting topicality and realism.²⁴ Reviewers consistently praised what they saw as the authenticity of the films’ depictions of the underworld and its habitués. “The atmosphere of the picture is realistic,” wrote one of *The Gang Fighter*, seeing parallels with the work of the Ashcan artists: “It has the more modern realism found in the school of strong, young illustrators who draw pictures of . . . our congested cities and whose work has ‘a punch,’” he judged. The film’s realism was reinforced by the selection of especially convincing actors to portray the gangsters—“a ‘bunch of mugs’ hardly to be found outside a real gang and a tough one at that”—and by the fact that its salvation-story plotline “never degenerates into sentimentality or mawkishness.” Similarly, *Salvation Nell* was praised as “a realistic picture of the depressing sordidness of slum life.” This tale of a hardened gangster who is regenerated by accidentally overhearing his estranged wife—who has sought refuge in the Salvation Army—praying for his soul conveyed its “powerful moral,” reviewers concurred, “without any apparent intent at melodramatics.”²⁵

The commitment to realism caused some producers to hire real gangsters to appear in films or provide stories for them. Notorious hoodlums Kid Brood and Harlem Tom Evans, recently implicated in the New York gang violence of summer 1912 that lent the film cycle such topical impetus, featured in *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*, remembered by cameraman Billy Bitzer as “one of [Biograph’s] first ‘realistic’ films.” This was “an underworld story which will remind many who see it of some recent happenings in New York City,” noted one reviewer, while the company, notwithstanding the film’s sentimental story line, promoted it as a current-events documentary. “Much is printed . . . in the newspapers of the workings of the gangsters,” Biograph’s synopsis announced, “but the public gains but a vague idea of the actual facts. Hence this picture production . . . is simply intended to show vividly the doings of the gangster type people.” Meanwhile, a penitent (not to mention opportunistic) Jack Rose, the underworld figure at the center of the police corruption scandal that emerged from the same 1912 gang incidents, dramatized the power of environment in creating criminals in an autobiographical scenario for *Are They Born or Made?* Reviewers admired the “good measure of truth” in the film’s “slum types, its political types and its gangsters,” accepting that its claims to realism were entirely compatible with the obligatory romance-regeneration plot: “it has no melodramatic pretensions,” they judged; “all that it shows of underworld life is convincing.”²⁶

The balance of sentiment and realism sought by the producers and praised by the reviewers of gangster films reflected Progressive notions of human motivation and the function of art. “Heart interest” moved the viewer to feel that even the worst criminal could be regenerated by a dose of compassion and the transformation of his or her conditions of life; graphic realism allowed for the honest depiction and proper understanding of those conditions, prerequisites for any effort to reform them. In search of dramatic truth, the director of *Alias Jimmy Valentine* took his cast to Sing Sing prison to rehearse and shoot scenes. Robert Warwick, in the part of the gang leader who is regenerated by the love of a prominent reform politician’s daughter, “spent several days hobnobbing with the inmates in order to get the proper ‘atmosphere,’” *Moving Picture World* reported. The film featured a prologue in which Sing Sing’s reforming warden, Thomas Mott Osborne, attested to its authenticity (fig. 5), and when it was shown to an audience of 1,700 prisoners there, it “was followed with the deepest interest and elicited repeated applause.” Yet for all this striving after realism, the production company’s publicity stressed the story’s “heart interest” while reviewers singled out for highest praise “the breadth of its appeal to the human affections,” assuring readers that “there is good human stuff, and we can sympathize with it.”²⁷

The Gangsters of New York was hailed as an especially significant achievement on the basis of a similarly successful combination of realism and sentiment.



Fig. 5: *Alias Jimmy Valentine* (1915): The appearance of Thomas Mott Osborne, progressive warden of Sing Sing prison, attests to the film's authenticity and reform-oriented purpose.

Motion Picture News proclaimed it “one of the most thorough expositions of the much-discussed and little known region of Gangland in New York City yet presented on the screen.” *Moving Picture World* agreed. In this “realistic” and “artistic representation of the truth,” it declared, “there is projected on the screen a manifest desire to portray facts in place of offering a conventional presentation of humanity.” “The gangster,” the review continued, “is shown to be primitive in all his methods, a savage injected into the midst of progressive civilization.” However, its realism notwithstanding, the film’s “highest merit” lay in its sentimental story line in which a gangland couple overcome poverty, withstand police harassment, and battle against a wrongful death sentence, for here it proposed “the solution to the problems it presents.” Showing that only “a total change . . . will enable the criminal to reorganize himself on a better plane,” the film’s regeneration narrative was interpreted as “plainly indicat[ing] that present punitive methods . . . are short sighted, if not mistaken, because they fail to show progress.”²⁸ By presenting the facts while straining viewers’ heart chords, then, the gangster picture could effectively promote the kind of reforming moral and political vision that underpinned Progressive approaches to criminology and social policy.

Gangster regeneration films were sufficiently numerous by 1915 for *Moving Picture World* to introduce the category “underworld drama”—the term most commonly used in promotion and reviews to describe them—into its calendar of releases pages, making this one of the few story types to be awarded its own label in the period’s trade press. This should remind us that it is somewhat misleading to regard isolated examples such as *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*, *Regeneration*, and *Alias Jimmy Valentine* as unique and uncommonly prescient precursors of the classic gangster film. Their celebrated status derives largely from the fact that they are among the very few films of the cycle to survive on celluloid and that they are associated with prominent directors—D. W. Griffith and Raoul Walsh especially—later canonized as founding auteurs of American cinema. Understood in context, however, they are proficient but unexceptional instances of a specific cinematic vogue. The thematic, plot, and iconographic elements that have caused them to be singled out as prototypes of the gangster genre were present in dozens of other films that preceded and surrounded them. And just as significant as these formal characteristics was that they all exploited the topicality of gangsters in the news, borrowed freely from the theatrical salvation story and slum play, and embodied in their attitudes toward crime, gender, and social environment the assumptions of the dominant Progressive ethos.

“NEITHER REALISM NOR FIDELITY TO FACT”: THE CYCLE’S SECOND PHASE

The gangster regeneration cycle’s first phase appears to have wound down by 1916. As the volume of gangster reports in the newspapers declined, the taste in crime stories on both stage and screen turned toward less socially realistic fare. Conventional detective mysteries and tales of audacious master thieves—often placed in exotic society or international settings and popularly described as crook pictures—predominated. By the time a second phase of the cycle began with the release of *A Romance of the Underworld* (1918), production companies and the trade papers were as likely to apply the label crook play or crook picture to the films as employ the previously common underworld drama terminology.²⁹ Amanda Klein notes that film cycles typically retain financial viability for only five to ten years before disappearing or undergoing significant updating. This second phase of the gangster regeneration cycle, however, represents more of a revival than a revisioning. *Romance* harked directly back to the prewar theatrical slum play, being an adaptation of a hit 1910 Broadway production by Paul Armstrong, author of *Alias Jimmy Valentine*. The trade press attributed its commercial success not to any innovation or great topicality but to the high profile of its source play, the celebrity of its recently deceased author, and the fact that his widow, Catherine Calvert, reproduced her acclaimed stage role as the film’s



Fig. 6: *A Romance of the Underworld* (1918): Publicity emphasizes the female star, sacrificial femininity, and the film's connection to Paul Armstrong's stage drama.

heroine (fig. 6).³⁰ Yet while the films of this phase were as dependent on the slum-play and salvation-story formulas as those of the first, and as committed to the theme of moral regeneration, they were marked by a more noticeable degree of melodramatic sensationalism and wish fulfilment in their plotting, settings, and resolutions.

Romance, one of an “epidemic of crook plays” commented on by *Wid’s Daily* in September 1918, established the trend.³¹ The fate of its central character, an impoverished and innocent convent girl drawn into New York’s opium-ravaged underworld, hinges on the dramatic courtroom testimony of a drug-addicted gangster. Managing to exonerate her of a murder charge and in the same breath expire on the witness stand, Dopey Benny frees Mary to live happily and luxuriously ever after with the wealthy lawyer and social reformer who, while smashing the gangs and cleansing the city, has taken an interest in her case. The film’s producer promoted it as a sober contribution to criminal reform, arranging special showings for the inmates and officers of Sing Sing prison and securing a favorable review in the high-minded journal of the Mutual Welfare League, warden Thomas Mott Osborne’s progressivist prison reform organization. But *Moving Picture World* saw baser, more exploitative motives at

work. “For those who have never gone slumming in New York,” it noted, “here we get it pictured true to life—the real stuff—at a safe distance.”³²

It had long been a tradition for upper- and middle-class tourists to seek a transgressive frisson by visiting the dubious resorts of New York’s tenderloin while in the city. Now the increasingly sensationalist gangster picture made slumming available on celluloid. Indeed, the plot of *Hell’s End* (1918) revolves around it, offering a cocktail of underworld and upper-world ingredients similar to that found in *Romance*. During a slumming expedition with her society chums, the daughter of a self-made millionaire who has risen from the Lower East Side’s tenements to a mansion on Park Avenue is drawn into the underworld when she encounters an old childhood friend, now a notorious gang leader. Falling in love, the couple struggles to overcome the social gulf between them. Jack eventually repudiates his gang and marries the heiress but remains faithful to both his roots and the ethos of Progressive reform by establishing with Mary a mission house in his old neighborhood. *Moving Picture World* caught the gangster picture’s new flavor of high romance and escapism in the taglines it suggested that exhibitors might use to promote the film: “Love Makes Paupers of Millionaires and Heaps Riches on the Poor. Great Land of Opportunity Levels All Creeds and Prejudice. Clever Story of Adventure and Romance Filmed in Realistic Settings.”³³

Hell’s End’s fairy-tale marriage of hoodlum and heiress was typical of the fantasies of upward mobility that characterized the gangster regeneration cycle’s second phase. Moral reformation was now invariably tied to long-range class mobility and the acquisition of wealth and status.³⁴ In *Courage for Two* (1919), a Hell’s Kitchen gangster hides from vengeful underworld rivals by swapping identities with a sympathetic millionaire. The pampered rich boy discovers a new manliness in the guise of a temporary hoodlum, while the gangster takes permanently to upper-class life, quitting crime, acquiring a society wife, and forsaking the slums for a Fifth-Avenue love nest. In *Crook of Dreams* (1919), a gangster’s girl is adopted by the wealthy widow she robs, acquiring manners and sophistication in the process. When it is revealed that the girl is actually the widow’s long-lost daughter, she is able to marry her patroness’s rich and socially elevated lawyer. In *The Miracle Man* (1919), a gang of crooks from New York’s Chinatown is regenerated by the beneficence of a millionaire whose \$50,000 gift sets up a pair of hitherto lawless lovers for a new life of respectability and comfort. The film became the second-highest-grossing release of 1919, indicating the public’s taste for such improbable tales.³⁵ And in *Tiger True* (1921), an aristocratic nabob out on a slumming spree plucks a girl gangster from an underworld dive, regenerates her, and whisks her away as his bride to his opulent tropical retreat.

As their narratives became more escapist, so the films' claims to realism increasingly masked ulterior purposes. *Variety* noted that the vice-den setting of *The Finger of Justice* (1918) "furnishes an opportunity for flashing close[-]ups of numerous pretty girls"; "the vampire mistress of the Boss," it reported, "indulges her fancy in bizarre evening gowns and negligées." Appreciating the female flesh on view in *Environment* (1922), the same paper inquired, "What more could any exhibitor ask for than to have a plot like this dished up to him with sets that include a Chicago dance cabaret?"³⁶ Graphic depiction of the underworld was now offered more in the spirit of voyeurism and titillation than socially responsible documentation, and the cycle's commitment to Progressive reform and its attendant ethos of female empowerment dwindled. The regeneration of gangsters and underworld molls was increasingly effected by startling plot contrivances and the magical intervention of powerful, upper-class men, rather than by the agency of energetic, courageous, and essentially virtuous women. In *Crook of Dreams, Fighting Destiny* (1919), and *The Silver Lining* (1921), the catalyst for moral reform is a sudden revelation of mistaken identity; in *The Penalty* (1920) it is a fanciful brain operation; while in *The Frontier of the Stars* (1921), *The Shock* (1923), and *That Royle Girl* (1925), it emanates unaccountably from nature in the guise of a fire, an earthquake, and a cyclone, respectively. In *The White Moll*, as we have seen, it is literally an act of God. Meanwhile, female characters were more likely to be erotically active but also sexually objectified, as in *The Finger Points* and *Environment*, and portrayed as morally ambiguous, precariously poised between the old certainties of nineteenth-century true womanhood and the destabilizing new forces of postwar modernity—economic independence, sexual expressiveness, and consumerism.

In *Outside the Law* (1920), for instance, Silky Molly Madden declares war on the cops for framing her crime-boss father (fig. 7). With gangster boyfriend Dapper Bill Ballard, she becomes a defiant thief and underworld siren before a chance encounter with an innocent toddler awakens her maternal and wifely instincts, prompting her regeneration. In *Voices of the City* (1922), an ill-judged slumming expedition causes respectable Georgia Rodman to become suspected of murder and emotionally entangled with a gang leader whom she suspects has killed her fiancé. Ultimately, Georgia is exonerated and preserved from either sleeping with or murdering the gangster by the timely intervention of his jealous ex-girlfriend; however, for much of the picture, while in hiding from the authorities, she frequents the underworld as the veiled, fugitive, and mysteriously alluring Night Rose (the film's original title)—embodiment of the ambiguity of the new femininity. Similarly ambiguous heroines appear in *Love Madness* (1920), in which an ostensibly good wife seduces a gang leader to save her husband before being in turn rescued by the police; *Environment*, in which

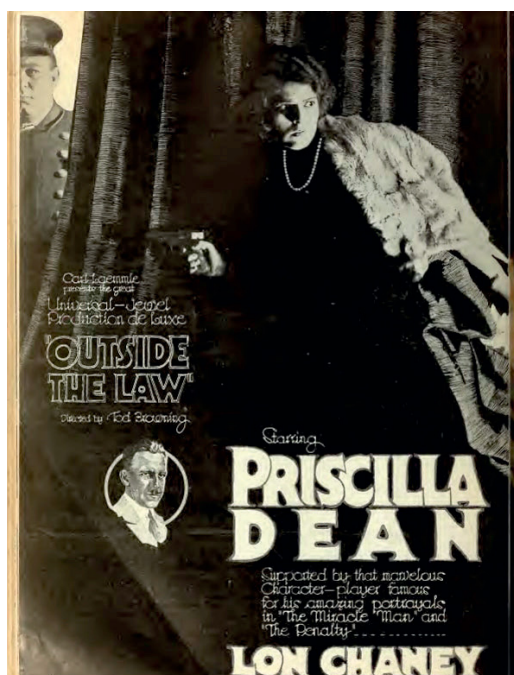


Fig. 7: *Outside the Law* (1920): Priscilla Dean as Silky Molly Madden, an example of the morally ambiguous heroine of the regeneration cycle's second phase.

a headstrong nightclub dancer bounces between a crime boss and a good man before sticking with the latter; *The Exciters* (1923), in which a rebellious heiress marries a sexy gangster, discovering to her initial disappointment that he's an undercover policeman; and *The Woman with Four Faces* (1923), in which a female crook assumes different identities to commit a string of daring crimes, only to be revealed as the puppet and romantic plaything of an ambitious district attorney and his plan to convict her gang. The latter film's title and story line encapsulate the displacement of female agency within the cycle by a more modern concern with the spectacle of an ambiguous femininity—an ambiguity always resolved by denouements in which the women revert to traditional notions of female propriety and submit to male control. Indeed, the DA hero of *Four Faces* closes the film by announcing that rather than pardoning (as he had promised) the girl gangster who has helped him bust the crime ring, he is instead giving her a life sentence—as his wife! According to Lary May, the heroines of postwar movies “could not go too far” in their repudiation of Victorian sexual and gender norms, while women's newfound individualism and sexual expressiveness paradoxically undermined the authority they had acquired in the Progressive era as moral guardians and social reformers. Lamenting the dissipation of moral seriousness and “reforming energy” among young women

of the 1920s, prominent female Progressives such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Jane Addams blamed “the astounding emphasis upon sex” and a distracting “new confidence in self-expression.”³⁷

By the mid-1920s the underworld of gangster films was no longer modelled on the slums, tenements, and dives of New York’s Lower East Side but on the more glamorous, Prohibition-era demimonde of Broadway with its speak-easies, nightclubs, and cabarets. Similarly, the slum-play and salvation-story plot formulas were superseded by racier narratives that absorbed the modernity, exoticism, and frivolity of the crook picture. Indeed, from the late 1910s, the trade press made no systematic distinction between the underworld drama and the crook picture, increasingly employing the latter term to designate any story set among thieves or gangsters. And when producers persisted with the prewar formulas, they were derided. *Variety* judged *A Romance of the Underworld* “a conventional, old-fashioned melodrama of the east side of New York,” observing that “five years ago this would have been a big novelty for the screen.” The religious uplift theme was also wearing thin. *Hitting the Trail* (1918)—according to its publicity “a story of the King of the Slums, an East Side Gangster who took the Straight Path” thanks to a pious mission girl—was dismissed as “a crook play . . . with a lot of Billy Sunday stuff thrown in.” Reviewers likewise sniffed at *The White Moll*’s “attempt at spiritual uplift,” judging it “good underworld stuff” marred by the fact that “the religious quality striven for doesn’t register with force or conviction.” One of the last films to employ these conventions, *The Lawful Cheater* (1925), in which Clara Bow plays a “slum angel” who infiltrates a gang of tenement toughs in order to regenerate them, received particularly harsh treatment. “Clara’s version of a rag-picking heroine is neither realism nor fidelity to fact,” sniped *Variety*.

In contrast, films such as *The Exciters*, which “deal[t] with the fast-moving flapper . . . who is out in search of thrills”; *That Royle Girl*, which “attempt[ed] one more explanation of the jazz-mad youngsters of this age”; and *Those Who Dance* (1924), “a compelling topical melodrama, moving through a maze of bootleggers, hijackers, police pursuit, gats and jazz,” were increasingly the norm (fig. 8).³⁸ Their repackaging of the regeneration story in Jazz-Age trappings with a morally ambiguous and distinctly modern heroine at its heart was a formula exploited by the Film Booking Offices of America (FBO) in a sequence of seven films starring Evelyn Brent released between November 1924 and June 1926. In each, Brent plays a bold and beautiful female crook, usually attached to or even leading a gang, who is regenerated by falling for and submitting to a male authority figure whom she has hitherto defied. *Midnight Molly* (1925) catered to the vogue for female moral ambiguity by featuring Brent in the dual role of a daring crook and a respectable politician’s wife (fig. 9), a trick repeated by Norma

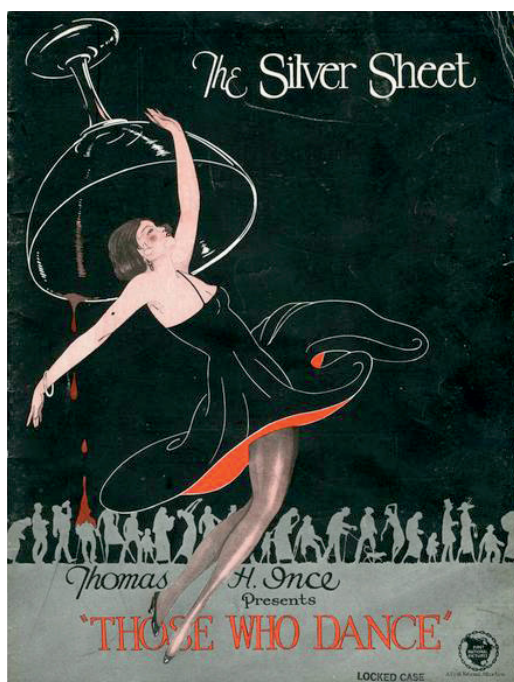


Fig. 8: *Those Who Dance* (1924): In the gangster regeneration cycle's second phase, Broadway glamour and Jazz-Age iconography displace the slum settings of New York's Lower East Side.

Shearer who impersonated both a slum delinquent and a society deb in *Lady of the Night* (1925). Indeed, *Variety* judged *Forbidden Cargo* (1925) an “ultra-modern story” for its presentation of Brent as a sexually assertive female gang leader who commands her own bootleg-liquor and rum-running operation. The films were controversial despite consistently imposing patriarchal discipline on their wayward heroines. *Smooth as Satin* (1925) was banned in Britain and Australia for breaching censorship guidelines on sex and crime, causing FBO to announce that it would terminate the series and find other roles for Brent. Meanwhile, the films provoked the General Federation of Women's Clubs to issue a blanket condemnation of such “crook pictures,” which, it announced, were “infinitely more dangerous to youth than those movies portraying so-called ‘sex interests.’”³⁹

So successful were Brent's “crook story vehicles” that *Film Daily* saw them driving the market for crime films. “Crook pictures seem to be in demand,” it alerted writers and agents in late 1925, “so if you have one up your sleeve dig it out.” This applied especially to “female crook stories” as “the Evelyn Brent success in such productions has evidently started something.”⁴⁰ However, as the gangster regeneration films abandoned the reform ethos of a waning Progressivism in favor of increasingly fanciful and entertainment-oriented stories, reviewers began to disparage them. The films were accused of lacking



Fig. 9: *Midnight Molly* (1925): Evelyn Brent becomes the crook play's leading embodiment of Jazz-Age female moral ambiguity.

realism and their sentimentality and melodramatics, no longer attached to a broader moral and social vision, appeared merely trite. *Variety* dismissed *Courage for Two* as an “old fashioned ‘ten-twenty-thirty’ melodrama” built around “a series of melodramatic situations of the old penny dreadful type.” *Wid’s Daily* complained that the same film was “obviously written for entertainment purposes without any effort to interpret life as it is,” and judged the similarly themed *Fighting Destiny* “a frankly melodramatic story, devised only for passing entertainment.” *Variety* observed that the “amazing sentimental success” of *The Miracle Man* was “to the critical mind . . . palpably contrived,” and declared that *Tiger True* “reeks with melodrama . . . its underworld ‘stuff’ has been done to death.” *Wid’s Daily* found the same film “too fantastical to be enjoyable” and regularly complained of being “fed up on crook subjects.” “For a time you are led to believe something original will turn up,” it noted of *The Greater Profit* (1921), but “like other girl crooks the heroine wants to reform when she falls in love” and “the ending is what you expect it to be.” *Variety* observed skeptically that *Voices of the City* “aims at swift interweaving of complications rather than realism and has the complexion of a dime novel,” while the *New York World* dismissed the blockbusting *Big Brother* (1923), in which a gangster is regenerated by adopting an orphaned slum waif, as a “sentimental and made-to-order melodrama.” *Photoplay* deemed *A Romance of the Underworld* guilty of “mere gross melodramaticism” and *Mighty Lak a Rose* (1923), the story of a blind, orphaned violin prodigy who reforms an entire gang of tenement hoodlums, “cloying in

its sweetness.” *Variety* was even harsher on the latter film: “an artificial, theatrical affair,” it sneered, “spread thickly with heavy sentimental jam that will please the very unsophisticated.” *Film Daily* adopted a similar tone toward *The Lawful Cheater*, declaring this “wild melo of underworld life” “foolish” and “too far-fetched for critical audiences.” Even those films that sought to update the regeneration formula by foregrounding female moral ambiguity and Jazz-Age settings were viewed skeptically, the same paper noting that *Midnight Molly* succeeded largely because Evelyn Brent’s glamour served to “cover up some absurdities of logic and common sense.”⁴¹

FROM THE GANGSTER REGENERATION CYCLE TO THE UNDERWORLD MELODRAMA CYCLE

Reviewers’ disdain for the “very unsophisticated” filmgoers who in *Variety*’s view lapped up such sentimental melodramas was the obverse of a growing solicitousness for the sensibilities of “critical audiences” whom *Film Daily* was sure would scoff at them. It betrayed a growing view within the trade press that gangster regeneration films were pitched at the masses rather than the classes—the latter term standing for the more educated, bourgeois audience the industry increasingly courted. At the height of the cycle’s first phase, *Moving Picture World* could confidently assert of *Alias Jimmy Valentine* that “the spectator who wants ‘high brow’ stuff and the one who wants ‘low brow’ stuff can generally get together on . . . this picture.” The belief that such films appealed across social and educational distinctions was consistent with the industry’s homogenizing conception of its audience. As Eileen Bowser notes, 1915 marked the culmination of its commitment to the idea that the movies drew “people of all classes . . . in[to] the process of being welded together.” Yet at the beginning of the cycle’s second phase, *Wid’s Daily* observed that *Romance of the Underworld* “has been titled and exploited to appeal to the element who are attracted by the underworld type of play,” cautioning, “certainly it isn’t for the theatre that is catering to a high class sort of patronage.” Similarly, *Variety* advised exhibitors that *Love Madness* would “prove absorbingly interesting to the proletariat and hence can be set down as a good buy for the average picture house,” while *Wid’s* deemed *Voices of the City* an “underworld crook story that will appeal to sensationalists [and] the cheaper tastes.” Henceforth, the gangster regeneration story would fall victim to what Richard Maltby describes as the industry’s tendency in the 1920s to begin to classify audiences into differentiated “taste publics.” The trade press’s bias toward the more sophisticated, affluent customer and its growing disdain for the lower end of the market is encapsulated in *Variety*’s characterization of the appeal of *Courage for Two*: “Doubtless it will please some, but those it will please will be of a peculiar mentality.”⁴²



Fig. 10: *Little Annie Rooney* (1925): Mary Pickford as the eponymous urchin of the newspaper cartoon strip. The slum setting is now a stage for comforting nostalgia.

The trade press's growing impatience with the films also reflected a broader cultural decline in tolerance for earnestness, sentimentality, and what were perceived as old-fashioned melodramatics, despite producers' efforts to modernize their tone, settings, and characterizations.⁴³ During its first phase, the gangster regeneration cycle's ability to strain heart chords while presenting the facts of underworld life was perceived as its great strength. During its second phase, the cycle was felt merely to strain credulity, sugarcoat the facts, and attract the wrong type of patron. The Clara Bow vehicles, *Grit* (1924), *The Lawful Cheater*, and *Free to Love* (1925), were among the cycle's final entries and the last to deploy the salvation-story formula and the Lower East Side slum setting. Each featured the future It Girl as a tomboyish tenement urchin who regenerates herself and the gangsters around her before, in the two later films, being adopted by a sympathetic millionaire. Each was teased by reviewers for its sentimentality and inauthenticity. This did not discourage Mary Pickford, however, from borrowing the formula for *Little Annie Rooney* (1925) in which she played an East Side orphan who faces down the neighborhood gangs and regenerates her delinquent brother by donating her blood for the timely transfusion that saves his life (fig. 10). Though universally identified as "hokum," the film was a great success and critics indulged its preposterous sentimentality,

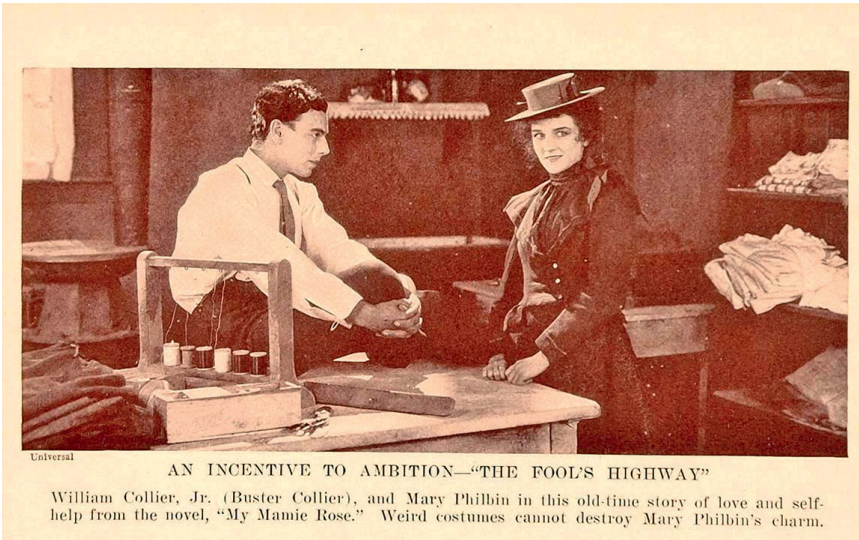


Fig. 11: *Fools' Highway* (1924): *Moving Picture World* remarks on the nostalgic tone of this "old-time story" set in the Lower East Side of the 1890s.

judging that its origins in the newspaper comic strip of the same title absolved it of any obligation to realism.⁴⁴

Annie Rooney's outright disavowal of realism was of a piece with its shameless nostalgia. Casting the now thirty-two-year-old Pickford as a twelve-year-old "smudgy-faced gamin of the streets," as *Variety* put it, was calculated to evoke the sentimentality of a bygone era and rekindle the star's heady early fame as a prepubescent cutie-pie. *Fools' Highway* (1924) likewise demonstrated that the gangster regeneration film had mutated into a vehicle for comforting nostalgia (fig. 11). This remake of Fox's gritty and soberly reform-minded 1915 slum story *The Regeneration* was retooled as a comedy-drama shot on an elaborate set that recreated through rose-tinted glasses the Bowery of the 1890s. Reviewers relished the film's "atmosphere of bygone days," the actors' "old fashioned attire . . . that might have stepped out of ancient tin types," and especially the trouble taken to reconstruct "the old miniature steam engines at one time used by the elevated trains." The original film had ended in tragedy, the reformed gangster losing the girl who regenerated him to a rival hoodlum's bullet. This version, however, climaxed with a happy marriage and the redeemed roughneck's proud induction into the police force. Even the film's premiere was a themed nostalgia event. The Atlantic Garden Theatre—site in the 1890s of the Bowery's legendary Atlantic Gardens drinking and music venue—was transformed into a period beer hall for the occasion, replete with costumed ushers and chorus girls, and

the evening culminated with a hearty sing-along of “the old East Side songs.”⁴⁵ Such films confirmed that the gangster regeneration cycle had jettisoned all but a purely conventional reference to the social conditions, political concerns, and moral vision that had fostered its emergence in the early 1910s. Rooted in the Progressive era, it had lost its purchase on the increasingly individualistic, skeptical, and permissive temper of the times.

But in 1927 a fresh wave of gangster-related news stories, this time emanating from Chicago, sparked a new cycle of topical crime films that would more successfully embody the cultural radicalism of the Jazz Age, as well as its ideological conservatism.⁴⁶ In due course, *Underworld* (1927)—a “metropolitan melodrama reminiscent of newspaper accounts of Chicago’s gang warfare,” as a dubious *Educational Screen* announced—would be recognized as the initiator of a new cycle of what the trade press would dub underworld melodramas. But for all the claims of novelty made on its behalf by reviewers and studio publicists, *Underworld* retained some telling traces of the earlier cycle. Not least among these was the presence of Evelyn Brent who had been lured from FBO to star in the film, making her, as *Film Daily* noted, “holder of the record for playing heroines in crook melodramas.” However, in contrast with her FBO roles, Brent was confined to what reviewers described as a “mostly decorative” function as the swashbuckling gangster Bull Weed’s glamorous but pliant moll, Feathers. Moreover, Brent’s status was diminished during production and promotion of the film, while that of her male costars Clive Brook and George Bancroft was elevated, which further illuminated the turn taken in the gender politics of the new cycle.⁴⁷

The social and moral agency of women that had been central to the gangster regeneration films was in *Underworld* decisively reconceived and, ultimately, marginalized. Feathers’s fate depends entirely on the two powerful men in her life, between whom she is torn. Yet the concern with female moral ambiguity and the spectacle of an eroticized femininity that had emerged during the regeneration cycle’s second phase became increasingly prominent. Feathers’s passive agonizing about whether to remain Bull Weed’s transgressive moll or become his decent friend Rolls Royce’s respectable wife is *Underworld*’s key moral dilemma, and Brent wrestles with it in a range of gowns so exotically revealing that they occasioned particular comment from reviewers (fig. 12). Furthermore, the new cycle would have no place for the gangster’s regeneration and rehabilitation. *Underworld* demonstrated that the best he could hope for was to die a redemptive, sacrificial death, clearing the way for the good couple to quit the underworld and live the classless, upwardly mobile life promised by the ABC Investment Co.’s “The City Is Yours” advertisement that flashes throughout the film. Though usually interpreted as a reference to gangster Bull



Fig. 12: *Underworld* (1927): Evelyn Brent as Feathers McCoy establishes the spectacle of an eroticized femininity as central to the underworld melodrama cycle.

Weed's hubris, ironically foreshadowing his demise, this motif applies equally to the aspirational good couple around which the underworld melodrama cycle would henceforth revolve. It encapsulates the gangster film's ideological turn away from the social-reforming vision of Progressivism to a free-market politics of individualism and sexual and consumer gratification. The success of *Underworld*, which won the first ever Oscar for best original story in 1928, and the later impact and notoriety of the classic trilogy might have obscured the gangster regeneration cycle in popular memory and film history. Indeed, neglect of the cycle has made it tempting to read underworld melodramas, with their staging of the spectacle of female desire, as unusually and positively oriented—for crime films, at any rate—around and toward women.⁴⁸ But they can be so understood only in comparison to the unambiguously masculine, classic gangster cycle that later eclipsed them. Considered in relation to the preceding gangster regeneration cycle, underworld melodramas appear rather to embody the displacement of women's agency by their sexualization and objectification. Thus, regardless of its merits as art, politics, or entertainment, without an understanding of the gangster regeneration cycle's scope and cultural significance, we get a less than

complete grasp of these subsequent films and of the genre that has been too narrowly defined by a small handful of the most celebrated of them.

Notes

1. "Film Stories in Cycles: Coast Producers Crowding Types," *Variety*, November 9, 1927, 5.
2. Victor M. Shapiro, "The Hollywood Scene," *Motion Picture Herald*, April 27, 1935, 47.
3. Giles R. Warren, letter to the editor, *Moving Picture World*, December 17, 1910, 1424; Epes Winthrop Sargent, "The Photoplaywright," *Moving Picture World*, November 15, 1913, 729; and W. Stephen Bush, "Advertising and Criticising," *Moving Picture World*, November 23, 1912, 750. On *Moving Picture World's* commitment to boosting the cultural status of film, see Richard L. Stromgren, "The Moving Picture World of W. Stephen Bush," *Film History* 2, no. 1 (1988): 13–22; and Jordan Brower and Josh Glick, "The Art and Craft of the Screen: Louis Reeves Harrison and the *Moving Picture World*," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 33, no. 4 (2013): 533–51.
4. Rick Altman, "Reusable Packaging: Generic Products and the Recycling Process," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1–41; Amanda Ann Klein, *American Film Cycles: Reframing Genres, Screening Social Problems, and Defining Subcultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 5, 6; and Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet, and Peter Stanfield, eds., *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 9.
5. See Richard Maltby, "'Grief in the Limelight': Al Capone, Howard Hughes, the Hays Code and the Politics of the Unstable Text," in *Movies and Politics: The Dynamic Relationship*, ed. James Combs (New York: Garland, 1993), 139; and Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 76–82. The orthodox view of the genre was established by, among many others, Colin McArthur, *Underworld USA* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1972); Jack Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster-Crime Film* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977); Carlos Clarens, *Crime Movies* (New York: Norton, 1980); and Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* (New York: Random House, 1981).
6. Lee Grieveson's research extends deepest into the period before the classic trilogy and establishes the connection between key gangster stories of the 1910s and Progressive ideas about social and criminal reform. Meanwhile, Amanda Klein and Esther Sonnet have highlighted the importance of female agency in the gangster films that preceded the classic trilogy, though their focus is confined to the later 1920s. See Lee Grieveson, "Gangsters and Governance in the Silent Era," in Grieveson, Sonnet, and Stanfield, *Mob Culture*, 13–40; Klein, *American Film Cycles*, 25–59; and Esther Sonnet, "Ladies Love Brutes: Reclaiming Female Pleasures in the Lost History of Hollywood Gangster Cycles, 1929–31," in Grieveson, Sonnet, and Stanfield, *Mob Culture*, 93–119. My aim here is to build on this valuable work by providing a more detailed and carefully historicized account of the broader production practices, industry discourses, cyclic patterns, and sheer range of films that surrounded the few key examples discussed by these scholars.
7. For instance, John McCarty's and Marilyn Yaquinto's discussions of notable silent crime films of the 1910s and 1920s ultimately position them as "prototype[s] of what would become . . . the gangster movie" and "powerful example[s] for other filmmakers to exploit in the developing gangster genre," as if they were made with the culmination of the classic trilogy in mind. John McCarty, *Bullets Over Hollywood: The American Gangster Picture from the Silents to The Sopranos* (New York: Da Capo, 2004), 16; and Marilyn Yaquinto, *Fill 'Em Full of Lead: A Look at Gangsters on Film* (New York: Twain, 1998), 14.
8. Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 253–55; Peter Stanfield, *The Cool and the Crazy: Pop Fifties Cinema* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 6, 13; and Klein, *American Film Cycles*, 13, 20.

9. "Film Stories in Cycles," 14. On the transitional era, see Eileen Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Charlie Keil, *Early American Cinema in Transition: Story, Style, and Filmmaking, 1907–1913* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001); and Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp, eds., *American Cinema's Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions and Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
10. American historians have defined the period 1890 to 1920 as the Progressive Era, characterizing Progressivism as a broad-based series of reform initiatives dedicated to what Robert Wiebe calls "the search for order" in an increasingly complex, unequal, conflict-ridden, urban-industrial-capitalist society. Many have emphasized the centrality of the new, educated, professional middle class and of bourgeois assumptions in what Michael McGerr calls "the progressives' bold bid to create the middle-class paradise." Others have highlighted the agency of women in forging what Robyn Muncy calls a "female dominion" of reform through Progressivism. Jackson Lears defines the Progressive Era as "the age of regeneration," so central was that concept to it. See Robert Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877–1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980); Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America, 1870–1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 317; Robyn Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890–1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877–1920* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 329.
11. Giorgio Bertellini, "Black Hands and White Hearts: Southern Italian Immigrants, Crime, and Race in Early American Cinema," in Grieveson, Sonnet, and Stanfield, *Mob Culture*, 207–37; and Bertellini, *Italy in Early American Cinema: Race, Landscape and the Picturesque* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 190–204. About twenty-five Black Hand films were released between 1909 and 1916. Some are discussed by Bertellini and by Larry Langman in *American Film Cycles of the Silent Era* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), 73–80, while others I have identified from accounts in the trade press of the period.
12. Scrutiny of the period's trade press suggests that at least twenty white-slave films were released between 1913 and 1920. Some are discussed by Langman, *American Film Cycles*, 355–62; and Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 41–101. *Traffic in Souls* has been exhaustively analyzed. As well as Stamp, see Janet Staiger, *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 116–46; Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early Twentieth Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 151–91; and Charlie Keil, "'Six Reels of Thrilling Realities': *Traffic in Souls*," in *American Cinema of the 1910s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Ben Singer and Charlie Keil (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 109–14. The cycle was so troublesome from a censorship angle that in 1921 the MPPDA's predecessor body, the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry (NAMPI), placed a prohibition on white-slave stories as part of its drive toward industry self-regulation and the gentrification of movie content. See "Editorial Committee Will Review Pictures for National Association," *Wid's Daily*, May 28, 1921, 1–2. This move foreshadowed the MPPDA's response to gangster films exactly a decade later.
13. "Rival Gangs in Battle," *New York Times*, July 29, 1910, 3; "Crusade Against Gangs," *New York Times*, September 12, 1910, 4; "Two Judges Say That Crime Is Organized in New York," *New York Times*, April 9, 1911, 1; "Dougherty Forms Secret Squad," *New York Times*, June 8, 1911, 2; "Gang Men Use Guns," *Washington Post*, June 6, 1912, 1; "Children Dying of Gang Bullets," *New York Times*, July 23, 1912, 1; and "People Declare War on Protected Crime," *New York Times*, August 15, 1912, 1.
14. The play's impact is detailed in Albert Cohn, "Salvation Nell: An Overlooked Milestone in American Theatre," *Educational Theatre Journal* 9, no. 1 (1957): 11–22. Reviewing it, the *New York Times* declared that "the regeneration of the slums . . . appears to be the task the playwrights have set for themselves this season," while leading drama critics were soon penning articles on the vogue

for slum plays on both the legitimate and the vaudeville stage. *New York Times*, November 18, 1908, 5; Hartley Davis, "The Slum Invades the Theatre," *Everybody's Magazine*, April 1909, 561–62; John Corbin, "The Drama of the Slums," *Saturday Evening Post*, March 20, 1909, 15. See also J. Chris Westgate, *Staging the Slums: Class, Poverty, Ethnicity, and Sexuality in American Theatre, 1890–1916* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); and Andrew L. Erdman, *Blue Vaudeville: Sex, Morals, and the Mass Marketing of Amusement, 1895–1915* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004). Determining the precise outlines of the gangster regeneration cycle is problematic. Barely any of the films survive, few are included in the American Film Institute catalog, and Langman does not mention the cycle in his work. From listings, reviews, and synopses in the trade press of the period, I have been able to identify over fifty films of this type released between 1911 and 1915. There must have been many more, given repeated complaints about their profusion in *Moving Picture World* from 1911 onward; and they must have begun before 1911 since the reviewer of *The Transformation of Mike* (Biograph, February 1912) described it as a "melodrama of the underworld . . . of the usual, outworn kind" (*Moving Picture World*, February 17, 1912, 582). Of the films of this first phase of the cycle, I have viewed *The Transformation of Mike*, *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*, *The Regeneration*, and *Alias Jimmy Valentine*.

15. Grieseson, "Gangsters and Governance," 25–28; reviews of *Alias Jimmy Valentine*, *Moving Picture World*, March 6, 1915, 1459, and *Wid's Daily*, April 11, 1920, 3; advertisement for *Alias Jimmy Valentine*, *Motion Picture News*, May 8, 1920, 4006; review of *The Regeneration*, *Variety*, September 24, 1915, 22. On the adaptation of Kildare's memoir from book to play to film, see Tony Tracy, "The Pauper and the Prince: Transformative Masculinity in Raoul Walsh's *Regeneration*," *Film History* 23, no. 4 (2011): 414–27. Fox rereleased the film in 1919, retitled *Regeneration*, the name by which it is now commonly known.
16. Advertisement for *Great Marshall Jewel Case*, *Moving Picture World*, September 3, 1910, 545; review of *Great Marshall Jewel Case*, *Moving Picture World*, September 3, 1910, 502.
17. Synopsis of *The Gang Fighter*, *Moving Picture World*, January 13, 1912, 134; synopsis of *The Better Way*, *Moving Picture World*, September 23, 1911, 895; review of *The Rat*, *Moving Picture World*, August 1, 1914, 685. Phrases such as these quickly became standard in advertisements, synopses, and reviews to describe the female protagonists of the gangster regeneration cycle.
18. Review of *The Transformation of Mike*, *Moving Picture World*, February 17, 1912, 582; advertisement for *The Forbidden Way*, *Moving Picture World*, July 5, 1913, 111; advertisement for *The Gangster's Sacrifice*, *Moving Picture World*, July 26, 1913, 399; advertisement for *The Gangster*, *Moving Picture World*, August 16, 1913, 808; review of *The Supreme Moment*, *Moving Picture World*, October 30, 1913, 1034; and review of *Salvation Nell*, *Variety*, August 20, 1915, 19.
19. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New York: Columbia, 1984), 11, 12. On the relationship between film and theater in this period, see Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915–1928* (New York: Scribner's, 1990), 181; and Roberta Pearson, "The Menace of the Movies: Cinema's Challenge to the Theater in the Transitional Period," in Keil and Stamp, *American Cinema's Transitional Era*, 315–31.
20. John Whiteclay Chambers, *The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1890–1920* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992), 166; Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 162.
21. Synopsis of *Fire and Straw*, *Moving Picture World*, June 19, 1912, 1234; review of *The White Moll*, *Variety*, July 23, 1920, 33; and review of *The White Moll*, *Wid's Daily*, July 18, 1920, 21.
22. Synopsis of *Fire and Straw*; review of *The Purple Night*, *Variety*, October 1, 1915, 19; synopsis of *The Purple Night*, *Moving Picture World*, September 11, 1915, 1898; and synopsis of *The Making of Crooks*, *Moving Picture World*, January 1, 1916, 126.

23. Synopsis of *The Transformation of Mary*, *Moving Picture World*, April 27, 1912, 364; and Staiger, *Bad Women*, 117.
24. As Christine Gledhill and Janet Staiger have demonstrated, a combination of melodrama and realism was the chief characteristic of American theater in the first two decades of the twentieth century and formed the aesthetic and ideological basis for a cinema that increasingly drew on theatrical forms and conventions even as it sought to capture theater's largely middle-class audience. See Staiger, *Bad Women*, xiv, 4, 82–85; and Christine Gledhill, "Between Melodrama and Realism: Anthony Asquith's *Underground* and King Vidor's *The Crowd*," in *Classical Hollywood Narrative: The Paradigm Wars*, ed. Jane Gaines (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 129–68.
25. Review of *The Gang Fighter*, *Moving Picture World*, January 13, 1912, 204–5; reviews of *Salvation Nell*, *Moving Picture World*, October 30, 1915, 763, and *Variety*, August 20, 1915, 19.
26. Eugene Rosow, *Born to Lose: The Gangster Film in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 67–68, 72; review of *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*, *Moving Picture World*, November 2, 1912, 451; synopsis of *The Musketeers of Pig Alley*, *Moving Picture World*, October 26, 1912, 384; review of *Are They Born or Made?*, *Moving Picture World*, January 2, 1916, 83.
27. "‘Jimmy Valentine’ Shown at Sing Sing," *Moving Picture World*, February 27, 1915, 1310; World Film advertisement, *Moving Picture World*, February 20, 1915, 1103; review of *Alias Jimmy Valentine*, *Moving Picture World*, March 6, 1915, 1459.
28. "The Gangsters' Opens Mutual House," *Motion Picture News*, March 14, 1914, 68; review of *The Gangsters of New York*, *Moving Picture World*, February 21, 1914, 932.
29. I can identify no underworld films based on the slum-play or salvation-story formula released between *The Purple Night* in September 1915 and *A Romance of the Underworld* in June 1918. The number of gangster-related news stories by year in the *New York Times* coincides with this pattern, rising from twelve in 1910 to a high for the decade of 150 in 1914, and falling thereafter to a low of thirteen in 1918. Numbers climbed steeply from 1919, reaching 224 in 1927 where the scope of this paper ends. The trade press's terminological conflation of the gangster film with the conventional crime thriller makes determining the outlines of this second phase of the cycle especially difficult. However, I have identified over forty films of the gangster regeneration type released between 1918 and 1925, by which point it had been eclipsed by more modern treatments of underworld themes. The overwhelming majority of these films are no longer extant, but I have been able to view *Outside the Law*, *The Penalty*, *The Shock*, *Lady of the Night*, and *Little Annie Rooney*.
30. Klein, *American Film Cycles*, 4; "Sherry Optimistic as to Kenyon and Keeney Pictures," *Moving Picture World*, July 6, 1918, 93; and review of *A Romance of the Underworld*, *Variety*, April 5, 1918, 42.
31. Review of *Boston Blackie's Little Pal*, *Wid's Daily*, September 4, 1918, 4.
32. "Keeney's Picture Shown at Sing Sing," *Moving Picture World*, May 4, 1918, 713; and Marion Howard's column "Spokes from the Hub," *Moving Picture World*, July 27, 1918, 563.
33. Review of *Hell's End*, *Moving Picture World*, July 20, 1918, 458. On slumming, see Chad Heap, *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in American Nightlife, 1885–1940* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).
34. Virtually all the forty-two underworld stories of this second phase that I have been able to identify feature some degree of upward social mobility, with thirty revolving around the most improbable instances of long-range class rise. This compares with only two of the fifty-one films of the first phase studied.
35. *International Motion Picture Almanac, 1937–38* (New York: Quigley Publishing Co., 1938), 942.

36. Review of *The Finger of Justice*, *Variety*, March 5, 1918, 48; review of *Environment*, *Variety*, March 3, 1922, 33. *The Finger of Justice* was temporarily banned as immoral by New York's Bureau of Licenses.
37. Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 212; Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1935), 323; and Jane Addams, *The Second Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 188, 196. May argues that the introduction of moral ambiguity in the portrayal of heroes and heroines was central to the movies' rejection of Victorianism and Progressivism in this period.
38. Review of *A Romance of the Underworld*, *Variety*, May 5, 1918, 42; advertisement for *Hitting the Trail*, *Moving Picture World*, December 14, 1918, 1254; review of *Hitting the Trail*, *Variety*, November 22, 1918, 45; review of *The White Moll*, *Wid's Daily*, July 18, 1920, 21; review of *Free to Love*, *Variety*, January 6, 1926, 9; review of *The Lawful Cheater*, *Variety*, December 23, 1925, 19; review of *The Exciters*, *Variety*, June 7, 1923, 24; review of *That Royle Girl*, *Variety*, January 13, 1926, 40; and review of *Those Who Dance*, *Photoplay*, August 1924, 48.
39. Review of *Forbidden Cargo*, *Variety*, May 13, 1925, 29; "In Fewer Crook Pictures," *Film Daily*, January 19, 1926, 2; and "Assails Crook Pictures," *Film Daily*, June 1, 1926, 6. The other films in FBO's Evelyn Brent series are *Silk Stocking Sal*, *Midnight Molly*, *Alias Mary Flynn*, *Three Wise Crooks*, and *The Jade Cup*.
40. Review of *The Jade Cup*, *Film Daily*, July 11, 1926, 10; "Crook Pictures," *Film Daily*, November 1, 1925, 4.
41. Reviews of *Courage for Two*, *Variety*, February 7, 1919, 59, and *Wid's Daily*, December 4, 1919, 3; review of *Fighting Destiny*, *Wid's Daily*, March 30, 1919, 3; review of *The Miracle Man*, *Variety*, August 29, 1919, 66; review of *Tiger True*, *Variety*, February 4, 1921, 43; review of *Tiger True*, *Wid's Daily*, January 23, 1921, 15; review of *The Greater Profit*, *Wid's Daily*, June 26, 1921, 16; review of *Voices of the City*, *Variety*, August 11, 1922, 32; *New York World* quoted in *Film Daily*, December 27, 1923, 4; review of *A Romance of the Underworld*, *Photoplay*, October 1918, 105; reviews of *Mighty Lak a Rose*, *Photoplay*, April 1923, 92, and *Variety*, March 22, 1923, 28; reviews of *The Lawful Cheater* and *Midnight Molly*, *Film Daily*, December 20, 1925, 5, and March 15, 1925, 13.
42. Review of *Alias Jimmy Valentine*, *Moving Picture World*, March 6, 1915, 1459; Bowser, *The Transformation of Cinema*, 8, 136; review of *Romance of the Underworld*, *Wid's Daily*, July 21, 1918, 12; review of *Love Madness*, *Variety*, September 24, 1920, 44; review of *Voices of the City*, *Wid's Daily*, August 20, 1922, 9; Richard Maltby, "Sticks, Hicks and Flaps: Classical Hollywood's Generic Conception of Its Audiences," in *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movies*, ed. Richard Maltby and Melvin Stokes (London: BFI, 1999), 26; and review of *Courage for Two*, *Variety*, February 17, 1919, 59.
43. Lea Jacobs, *The Decline of Sentiment: American Film in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
44. Review of *Grit*, *Variety*, March 5, 1924, 13, 37; *Film Daily* and *Variety* reviews of *The Lawful Cheater*; review of *Free to Love*, *Variety*, January 6, 1926, 9; reviews of *Little Annie Rooney*, *Variety*, October 21, 1925, 34, and *New York Times*, October 19, 1925, 26.
45. Reviews of *Fool's Highway*, *Film Daily*, March 9, 1924, 6; *Motion Picture News*, March 15, 1924, 1208; and *Variety*, April 2, 1924, 23; and "Premiere of 'Fool's Highway,'" *Film Daily*, March 2, 1924, 2.
46. Jonathan Eig identifies 1927 as the year in which Chicago's gang violence became a matter of national and international media interest. Eig, *Get Capone: The Secret Plot That Captured America's Most Wanted Gangster* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 104.
47. "Theatrical Films Reviews for October," *Educational Screen*, October 1927, 384; and "On Paramount Lot," *Film Daily*, April 26, 1927, 4. Brent was the first lead player attached to *Underworld* and was

announced as its star; nevertheless, Paramount promoted Brook and Bancroft above her in the billing. When previews revealed that the finished picture rested on Bancroft's dynamic performance, the studio built its promotional campaign around him, giving him an improved contract that guaranteed him star billing in future films. See "Bancroft in 'Underworld,'" *Film Daily*, January 16, 1927, 8; "Studio Briefs," *Motion Picture News*, April 8, 1927, 1259; and *Film Daily*, August 16, 1927, 1.

48. As do Sonnet, "Ladies Love Brutes," and Klein, *American Film Cycles*, 49.

Nick Heffernan is lecturer in film and American studies at the University of Nottingham, UK. He is the author of *Capital, Class and Technology in Contemporary American Culture: Projecting Post-Fordism* (2000) and the coeditor of *Culture, Environment and Eco-Politics* (2011). He is currently working on a study of film cycles and crime genres.