HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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You and Me 1938

Fritz Lang (1890-1976)

Contents

Overview
Story
Themes
Characters
Character Analysis (Helen Roberts)

OVERVIEW

You and Me is an unusual Fritz Lang film—it is not only a light comedy, but also a semi-musical. As his third work in the USA, it is the last film of his "social trilogy". Previously, *Fury* (1936) and *You Only Live Once* (1937) had tackled social problems and injustice—focusing respectively on lynch mobs and the "three-strikes" law. While *You and Me* is lighthearted in comparison, it also addresses social issues such as the hardships endured by former convicts and the arbitrariness of parole laws. More strikingly, it is a sardonic look at consumer society.

Story. The screenplay of *You and Me* was written by Virginia van Upp, the producer of the film noir classic *Gilda* (van Upp was one of the first female executive producers in Hollywood). It was based on a short story by Norman Krasna, who also wrote the treatment for *Fury*. The story revolves around former convicts who work at a department store. Sylvia Sidney stars for the third time in a Lang film, as a parolee in love with co-worker and ex-con played by George Raft. What brings them together in the first place is the store owner's hiring practice—which he explains as an experiment in altruism. As the couple struggle against parole restrictions, the viewer is led to muse whether their love will prevail—and their boss' belief in second chances affirmed.

Setting. *You and Me*'s tight-knit crew of criminals recalls Lang's *M*—notably the scene in which a crack team of hoodlums break into the commercial building. The modern department store has been a favorite setting of comedy films such as Charlie Chaplin's 1916 short *The Floorwalker* and *Modern Times* (1936), 1927 silent film *It* (Badger and von Sternberg), Marx Brothers' *The Big Store* (1941), and *Holiday Affair* starring Robert Mitchum (1956, Don Hartman).

Design. Cinematographer Charles Lang Jr. would be nominated for an Oscar Award 18 times in his career—he would work with Lang again fifteen years later for the acclaimed *The Big Heat* (1953). Art Director Hans Dreier—*Beau Geste* (1939), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950)—had worked with Josef von Sternberg on a number of films. One scene in *You and Me*—the torch song set at a waterfront tavern—nodes to von Sternberg's style, particularly his *The Docks of New York*[1] (1928).

Music. *You and Me* bears comparison to René Clair's 1931 film *À Nous la Liberté,* which is noted for its satirical tone and playful use of music. The three musical numbers were composed by Kurt Weill (with the contributions of Sam Coslow, Boris Morros and Phil Boutelje). Lang had evidently envisioned the film to have more songs.[2] *You and Me* opens with a witty take on consumerism with the "Song of the Cash Register". Musical numbers come up two more times—the torch song with its nautical set up and inmates' "Knocking Song". As viewers today, we can only imagine how the film would change

if Lang was able to include more such numbers in *You and Me*. Contemporary critics evidently didn't feel that more music could have elevated the film—on the contrary, the songs were deemed superfluous.[3]

Influence of Bertolt Brecht. *You and Me* has an affinity with another work of its composer, the Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill play *The Threepenny Opera* (1928)—which was adapted into film by G.W. Pabst in 1931. In an interview, Lang said he wanted *You and Me* to be a Brechtian "Lehrstuck—a play that teaches something".[4] Lang and Brecht would have an opportunity to work together five years later for *Hangmen Also Die!* (1943)—which would be their only collaboration. Tom Gunning observes that *You and Me* is a more "Brechtian film" compared to *Hangmen Also Die!* and marks "the highest point of Brecht's influence on Lang".[5] For a comprehensive understanding of his filmmaking, this relatively less known and atypical Fritz Lang film provides a unique vantage point. As interesting and thought-provoking as it is, *You and Me* leaves the viewer to ponder what it could have been—had Lang the opportunity to fully realize his vision.

Setting Sail for New Genres. *You and Me* premiered towards the end of a decade marked by the Great Depression. The previous year had seen the Hindenburg Disaster, the Japanese invasion of major Chinese cities, and the bombing of Guernica by the Fascist forces during the Spanish Civil War. The Second World War was just around the corner and 1938 "proved a crossroads"[6] with Nazi Germany's annexation of Austria and Kristallnacht pogrom against the Jews. For his next projects, Lang would turn to the Western genre for *The Return of Frank James* (1940) and *Western Union (*1941). These would be followed by his direct response to the international crisis with his anti-Nazi films *Man Hunt* (1941), *Hangmen Also Die!* (1943), and *Ministry of Fear* (1944).

STORY

First Musical Number: "Song of the Cash Register". A fleeting series of images roll to the tune of the "Song of the Cash Register". The refrain "You can't get something for nothing" is accompanied by a cash register popping up in between shots of delicious looking food, sparkling jewelry and fancy cars. Leisure, beauty, education—concepts too have an exchange value. More images—of books, art, guns, machines, bricks—come up. There is a price for everything and "only a chump thinks he can" get things for free.

The Morris Store. With the end of the musical number, the camera aptly turns to the shoppers of a modern department store. Helen Roberts, one of the sales representatives, catches a woman shoplifting a satin garment. She lets her leave the store after taking back the blouse. Helen's compassion has to do with her past—she is one of fifty ex-convicts employed by Jerome Morris, who believes that parolees deserve a second chance in life. Another Morris employee is Helen's boyfriend Joe Dennis—previously a hardened criminal who has recently successfully completed his parole. Joe is the boss' leading examplar demonstrating that a successful transition to a crime-free life is possible.

Joe and Helen. Helen has kept her three years in prison a secret and she has yet to complete her parole. Until then, she has to comply with several social restrictions, most notably she is forbidden to get married. This has strained her relationship with Joe—who is apparently confused about their future as a couple. Her ambivalence leads Joe to quit his job at the store and leave the city. Before he boards the evening bus to head out to the West Coast, the two go dancing.

Second Musical Number: "The Right Guy for Me". At the dancehall, Joe and Helen listen to the torch singer's song about a timeless love story that takes place at a sailor's inn—packed with "wretches and vagabonds". The lyrics tell about a woman's regret and loneliness after letting the mysterious "good for nothing" go away.

Marriage. After leaving the dancehall, the couple solemnly walks to the bus depot and Joe gets on his coach. Evidently touched by the torch song, Helen abruptly tells Joe that if he were to propose, she would accept. Joe is ecstatic and the two take the subway to an all-night marriage bureau. Subsequently, he moves in with Helen—she lodges with Mrs. Levine and her husband. The newlyweds live happily in modest circumstances. Joe is surprised by his wife's request to keep their marriage a secret, but plays along.

Short-lived Bliss. Helen soon finds it increasingly difficult to conceal her past from Joe, who gets jealous and suspicious. In the meantime, a former cohort of Joe named Mickey tries to recruit him for a robbery—but gets rejected. Mickey keeps hanging around the store and manages to enlist several clerks (all ex-cons) for his scheme.

Gang Reunites. On Christmas Eve, his friend and co-worker Gimpy persuades Joe to stop by a get-together of ex-prison mates. Mickey is delighted to see Joe and the group reminisces nostalgically about the old times. It amuses them that they happen to miss life behind the bars. The guys reenact their method of communication in between the cells—coded messaging by way of finger tapping, metal clicking and knocking.

Third Musical Number: "Knocking Song". Topic turns to a memorable incident that took place during their incarceration—the time a reputable crook was brought in. The Big Shot, as they called him, was not content to stay locked-up for five years. A flashback shows the inmates chanting the refrain "Stick with the Mob" with excitement, urging their fellow prison mate not to try to escape by himself. Their cries are in vain and he ends up paying for his heedlessness—the Big Shot is machine-gunned (off-screen) in the courtyard before reaching his getaway vehicle.

Joe learns about Helen's Secret. The recollection makes everyone sad and they turn quiet—that's when Mickey once again invites Joe to join them for a new heist. When he is told that the plan is to rob Morris' store, Joe staunchly objects. The others mock and reproach him for bending to the will of Helen. Someone blurts out that she used to be a "jailbird" and a brawl ensues. Joe leaves the joint infuriated that his wife has lied to him about her past.

Knight Moves. Unbeknownst to his cohorts, Mickey hires an attorney for himself—as a precaution in case things go sour. However, the attorney right away informs a high-level mobster about Mickey's plans. The mobster referred to as the Big Shot—second use of this nickname in the film—has his henchmen intimidate Mickey to give up going ahead with the break-in. Meanwhile, Gimpy tip-offs Helen about the goings-on and urges her to prevent Joe's participation in the crime. Helen is alarmed and has a talk with Jerome Morris.

The Botched Heist. Mickey doesn't care much about the threats and pushes forward with the robbery. A team of eight (all Morris employees) enter the building and prepare to load the merchandise to trucks. They are in for a surprise, as Morris greets them inside—accompanied by several armed guards and Helen. After a forceful rebuke, he commands them to show up at work tomorrow—but first, they have to carefully listen to what Helen has to tell them.

An Education. Helen acerbically explains that their scheme was foolish and proceeds to demonstrate her point using the chalk board. She juts down the expenses and meticulously calculates the profit—which turns out to be a lot less than what the would-be robbers expected to receive. Everyone is persuaded—just then Joe gets nasty about her past and Helen leaves store in tears. Subsequently, the gang silently disperses, leaving Joe alone to ponder his attitude. Meanwhile, the ringleader Mickey—who was waiting outside—is hustled and abducted by the Big Shot's enforcers.

A New Beginning. Tamed and repentant, the intruders of the previous evening duly show up at their workstations in the morning. With shock—and sighs of relief—they read in the newspaper that Mickey was found slain. After thinking things over, Joe decides to fix things with Helen but finds out that she has left home. He turns to his department store pals to help him find her and they comb the city. Finally, Gimpy finds Helen at the hospital as she is about to give birth to her baby. Joe and Helen happily unite, the guys cheer for them.

THEMES

Consumer Society and Desire. The shop window is a recurrent sight in Lang's films (e.g. *M, Fury, The Woman in the Window*). The hot item on display at the department store in *You and Me* is the "Hour of Ecstasy" perfume that Joe buys to gift Helen. The film opens with similarly alluring images of objects and activities—associated with desire as much as need. We are reminded that everything comes with price tags attached. There are no shortcuts and frustration is pervasive—the woman who tries to steal a blouse says she really wanted to own a satin garment. While Lang might have wanted to create a didactic film, the result is also a bitter mockery of "carceral nature"[7] of consumerism.

Modern Marketing. The market is filled with items appealing to the desires of consumers—a trend that coincides with the rise of modern marketing and advertising. The boss of the department store may have altruistic motivations, but Jerome Morris is also quick to spot creative marketing opportunities. He is inspired by a former safe-cracker's chatter about a can opener and instructs the store's window designer to use a safe to display "newfangled kitchen gadgets".

Social Problems. Tom Gunning points out that *You and Me*'s publicity material referred to the marriage ban for parolees as an issue that affected 50000 young women.[8] Besides the severe social restrictions for people on parole, former convicts have difficulty finding employment and—as Helen demonstrates at the end—"little crooks" end up being exploited by "big shots" that are "politicians". Another problem is prejudice against former convicts—and Helen herself is a target of it, as exemplified by Joe's scolding.

Poverty. Another important problem that is hinted at is poverty. Despite the humor and music, *You and Me* is hardly an optimistic film. Characters live in modest circumstances and apparently stare down the possibility of becoming homeless—Helen's landlady kicks out a tenant for failing to pay his rent on time and jokes that "he always hollered for quiet, so I gave him quiet with nature in Central Park".

Solidarity. Although Lang himself does not seem to view it as such, *You and Me* is arguably one of his left-leaning films. The explicit message of the film may be that crime does not pay—but it also emphasizes that individuals need to organize. "Knocking Song" demonstrates this as the gangster who tries to escape from the prison by himself is shot right away. Similarly, one of the consequences of the botched robbery of the Morris Store is that the ringleader Mickey—who was preparing to betray his cohorts—is murdered by rival gangsters. Although this happens off-screen, it is a grim reminder of the violent end that awaits those who fail to "stick together".

CHARACTERS

Joe Dennis. Joe is an ex-con who works as a sales representative at the Morris Department Store.

Helen Roberts. Helen is also an ex-con working at Morris. As a parolee, her social life is restricted and she is forbidden to get married.

Jerome Morris. The owner of the department store runs his workplace guided by his belief that former convicts deserve a second chance.

Mickey Bairn. Mickey is an ambitious gangster and a former a prison mate of Joe. He is the driving force of the plan to rob Morris' department store.

Gimpy. A funny and well-intentioned friend of Joe, who is part of the gang that attempts to rob the boss.

Mr and Mrs Levine. The landlords of Helen are very fond of her. The couple frequently use German words and they are portrayed sympathetically. The actor playing Mr. Levine (Egon Brecher, born in Austria-Hungary) would play another émigré in Lang's *Man Hunt* (1939). The shop owner in that film also gives away his ethnic background by his use of German.

Dayton. Helen's meticulous parole officer.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

HELEN ROBERTS

Character Helen has completed a three-year prison sentence and has been lodging with the Levines for six months. She is portrayed as a responsible person who risks her parole status for her love. Helen has similarities to the characters Sylvia Sidney played in Lang's *Fury* and *You Only Live Once.*

Illustrative moments

"It girl". Clara Bow in *It (1927)* is considered to have epitomized the concept of the **"It girl"**. Helen could be viewed as an example of such a woman, attractive and one who has a striking personality.

Worldly. Helen evidently feels at home educating the would-be robbers about the stupidity of their scheme. Her knowledge about the expenses and expected profits obviously surpasses theirs. During her lecture, she reminds them that in the world of crime, she "used to know bigger people than" them. She is persuasive and her audience is quick to accept her authority.

Independent. Helen is ready to face life as a single mother. "I can take care of a baby by myself, other women have." she tells her landlady. She anticipates working women in Lang's films such as *The Blue Gardenia* (1953) and *While the City Sleeps* (1956).

Discussion questions

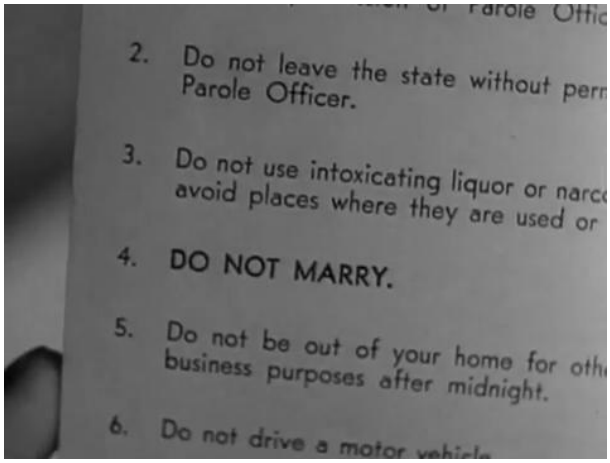
Is Mr. Morris altruistic or pragmatic? Do you find his explanation about his motivation plausible?

When *You and Me* was released, contemporary critics weren't too fond of it and it did not perform well at the box office. The critics were particularly irritated by the musical numbers in this film.[9] Looking at it now, what is the contribution of music to this film?

How would you compare the use of music in *You and Me* with other musicals?—e.g. G.W. Pabst's The Threepenny Opera (1931) and *Chicago* (2002) with its "Cell Block Tango".

("Song of the Cash Register": health, sports, art, education… everything has an exchange value, according to the lyrics. Numerous images accompany the song and the cash register appears multiple times)

("A popular item sold at the department store is the perfume "Hour of Ecstasy". Consumption and desire are strongly related)



(Helen's parole card lists the rules and restrictions; a sensual moment when Helen and Joe touch hands on the escalator, taking care to keep their relationship secret)

(Nautical themed "The Right Guy for Me" recalls Josef von Sternberg's *The Docks of New York*)

("Knocking Song": friends reminisce about their prison days—where they learnt that they need to stick together to survive)

(Flanked by armed guards, Jerome Morris confronts and rebukes his employees. The would-be robbers are told to sit down and listen to what Helen has to say)

(Crime does not pay—because it does not pay well enough—Helen demonstrates)

(Helen's landlady Mrs. Levine and her husband—Jewish[10] German immigrants—are portrayed sympathetically; *You and Me* features little violence, but does not pretend that it does not exist—Ringleader Mickey is murdered by higher-ranking mobsters off-screen)

(In a hilarious scene, Jerome Morris scratches his head, mimicking the sculpture outside; Art Deco style permeates the film; the department store raid recalls a similar scene in Lang's *M*)

(Joe cancels his bus ticket to California and spends the money for their "honeymoon" night, tasting international cuisine at several restaurants. Last stop is Lang's motherland "Austria", where they order a pancake)

[1] Gunning Tom. *The Films of Fritz Lang: Allegories of Vision and Modernity*. London: British Film Institute. 2000, 266
[2] Ibid, 265
[3] Ibid, 262
[4] Bogdanovich, Peter. *Fritz Lang in America*. NY: Praeger. 1967, 38
[5] Gunning, 262
[6] McGilligan, Patrick. *Fritz Lang, the Nature of the Beast.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2013, 256
[7] Gunning, 264
[8] Ibid, 266
[9] Ibid, 262
[10] Grost, Mike G. "Human Desire" http://mikegrost.com/lang.htm#You.
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