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Marked Woman (1937), and the dialectics of Art Deco in the classical gangster genre

ABSTRACT

1. *In this article, I analyse the function of Art Deco designs in the 1930s gangster*
2. *genre and, in particular, Warner Brothers' Marked Woman (Bacon, 1937). Like*
3. *many gangster films of the period, it associates high-style Art Deco with excess*
4. *and the criminal underworld. My findings, however, reveal a tension between*
5. *the film's moralist stance and its visual excess. Compelling visual signifiers of*
6. *leisure, style and social mobility, the modern designs are free to circumvent the*
7. *film's critical message and reinforce American capitalist ideologies. My analyses*
8. *underscore Art Deco as an emblematic style of commercial modernity. Marked*
9. *Woman and other gangster films not only reflect the latest trends in design, but*
10. *also negotiate a constellation of values, ideologies and desires at a time of social*
11. *and economic volatility.*

12.
13.
14. In addition to reflecting contemporary tastes, Hollywood's ubiquitous
15. Art Deco settings of the 1920s and 1930s visually project and reinforce
16. the idea of modernity. The streamlined bodies, clothes and sets cele-
17. brate not only new ideals of good taste, but also modern practices. When
18. one thinks of Hollywood's love affair with Art Deco, high-style movies
19. come to mind, especially those made by the two most lavish studios in

KEYWORDS

Art Deco
gangster
excess
mise-en-scène
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Warner Bros.
Depression

Hollywood at the time, MGM and Paramount. Here I consider a different construction of modern space and fashion – one considerably less idealizing in reflection of societal cynicism towards both modernism and decadent lifestyles. I analyse Warner Brothers' *Marked Woman* (Bacon, 1937) in the context of three overlapping, sometimes countervailing cultural currents: Art Deco fashions and designs, the Great Depression and the classical gangster genre.

From the same studio that popularized earlier prototypes of the gangster genre, *Marked Woman* is unlike the romantic comedies and society melodramas popular during Hollywood's Art Deco era. As in most movies from the period, the fashionable spaces in *Marked Woman* sustain both pleasures and plenty, but they are also cynically tainted by gangsterism and decadence. As in other Warner productions, its use of Art Deco settings articulates, in particular response to the Great Depression, society's ambivalence towards modernity and the excesses of opulence. Rather than wealth and sophistication, this story deals mainly with dark city streets, overcrowded, bland Victorian apartment buildings and a circle of lower-class working women struggling to make ends meet. Many of the film's settings epitomize the studio's distinct house style: in this powerful portrait of underworld corruption and one woman's defiance against an oppressive system, the drab settings complement the narrative's austere, moralist tone. Indeed, Charles Eckert describes *Marked Woman* as aesthetically spare and 'vintage Warner's *cinéma brut*' ([1974] 1991: 212).

In part because the plain, minimalist settings dominate the film, the occasional lively and luxurious Art Deco settings stand out even more. Alternating between nondescript interiors and luxurious locales, between a subdued shooting style and effervescent eruptions of cinematic excess, *Marked Woman* wrestles with itself and its own marketing. The treatment of the modern spaces – and, indeed, of modernity – is of split minds, on the one hand linking them with decadence, vice and violence, while on the other exploiting their hedonistic, consumerist possibilities. Reflective of the times and the American movie industry, powerful currents of populism and social justice, consumerism and high fashion converge in this unique amalgam of 1930s Hollywood. Rich, powerful gangsters may be brought to justice by the very working-class women they exploit, but *Marked Woman* also participates in, and indeed endorses, the commercial contexts of spectacle, the star system, modish fashions and a consumer economy.

For many moviegoers who were struggling to realize the American Dream, the Hollywood gangster became a sympathetic figure. His desire for wealth, power and fun – none of which seems feasible when toiling for meagre pay in a factory – makes the movie mobster almost as much a victim of capitalist ideologies (and shortcomings) as he is a vicious criminal. He may be murderous and immoral, but he is also iconic and well suited to the spectacle of the big screen: the gangster knows (or learns in the course of the film) how to look good, enjoy himself, get rich and spend money. The designs and fashions make this eminently clear, indexing his social mobility and wealth. In this sense, the modern high-style settings have a life of their own. Uncontained by the narrative or its moral, they work visually against generic conventions that typically encourage the censure of modernity's excesses. Their effect on audiences and even characters within the film is connotative: rather than make us think, they often make us feel.

THEORIZING EXCESS, COMMODIFICATION AND ENTERTAINMENT

Borrowing from Roland Barthes and Russian Formalism, Kristin Thompson theorizes the narrative's inability to manage what she terms 'cinematic excess'. Thompson writes, 'Outside any such [narrative] structures lie those aspects of the work which are not contained by its unifying forces – the "excess"' ([1986] 1999: 487). She challenges purely formalistic approaches to understanding cinema, reminding us that the film experience entails more than merely following the narrative's chain of cause and effect. For the critic, Thompson points out, this means having to account for those qualities in cinema that are often overlooked because they may not seem to affect the narrative or to fit into a 'tight analysis' ([1986] 1999: 489). In *Marked Woman* and other classic Warner Bros. gangster dramas, the playful scenes of modern glamour and style in otherwise austere, 'proletarian' productions about urban underworlds exemplify 'cinematic excess'.

The dichotomy between the moral (narrative) and spectacle (excess) in *Marked Woman* is also evident extra-cinematically, in Hollywood studio publicity and industry censorship practices. The studio's marketing of *Marked Woman*, for instance, emphasized modern fashions, cosmetics and consumption, thus decontextualizing the star from the film's narrative and therefore its social critique. Similarly, in the case of several fallen-woman films from the same period, publicity stills advertise glamour and thereby isolate the star from the story. Here the image works against the interests of censorship, which sought to tame the excesses of modernity (Jacobs 1991: 63–64). Lea Jacobs writes,

Censorship [...] confronted powerful countervailing forces. The morally didactic tone approved by industry censors, and more generally, the overall tone of nineteenth-century genre conventions, were consistently at odds with what I have described as a preoccupation with class rise, defined in terms of opportunities for consumption and celebrated through display.

(1991: 63)

Jacobs might as well be writing about the gangster genre, in which the pockets of modern glamour are meaningful at the level of marketing and consumer practices, meant to compete for the viewers' attentions and desires. As C. S. Tashiro attests, 'such magnifications are frequently based on visual fascination *apart from* narrative. As the filmmakers pause to linger over an object, to revel in its surfaces, they put a temporary roadblock in the narrative's forward journey' (1998: 21, original emphasis). Most gangsters may be punished in the end, but meantime their decadent lifestyles, on visual display throughout the film, leave powerful impressions.

Marked Woman may sparingly employ 'excessive', non-representational cinematic techniques, but when it does these fashionable spectacles portray gangster-run debauchery and lively performance, opulence and leisure and practices of consumption. In this way, they become inextricably linked with pleasure, in spite of the clear association the film makes between decadence and crime. Abstracted from the film's story (and even its dominant stylistic tendencies), the modern designs operate on an alternate level of meaning, floating free from the film's generic moral centre. The modern spaces and fashions thus enliven Marx's theoretical conception of commodities, which, once on display in the marketplace, become governed by 'arbitrary' forces.

Karl Marx wrote of commodities as mysterious and mystical entities. While they may appear trivial, Marx asserts in *Das Kapital/Capital* that commodities are instead 'queer [things], abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' ([1906] 1967: 81). A commodity, he writes, comes into being through processes of labour, after humans and machines have manipulated products to form a desired and/or useful item. Once it shimmers in the window display or magazine ad, and then enters the buyer's hands, the product is divorced from referents of production and labour. It thereby becomes increasingly autonomous, free to signify, function and gain value without respect to its utility or labour value. In this sense, it may become a projection of consumer wants.

Analogously, movie designs are capable of circumventing the production's value system and operating independently of narrative constraints. In spite of the film-makers' obvious, obligatory intention to condemn the brutality of gangsters, the modern spaces in *Marked Woman* produce animated atmospheres of abundance and excess. In their capacity as spectacle and commodity – entertaining audiences and fetishizing nightlife glamour – they contradict the narrative's ideological project vis-à-vis modernity. Like commodities on display, these settings may thereby become integrated, as both sources of pleasure and projections of desire, into the imaginative experiences of viewers.

Richard Dyer's model of the utopic value of mass entertainment is also germane to my analysis of *Marked Woman* and, more generally, the gangster genre. In addition to accounting for the dialectical nature of genre productions, Dyer borrows from Ernst Bloch in positing how cinema's non-representational features collaborate to give viewers a sense of what utopia might feel and look like. Dyer cites the musical as an example, with its built-in polarities between musical number and narrative storyline. The dance routines may provide audiences with an opportunity to confront and manage societal anxieties, at least on the level of fantasy.

With its episodic flashes of modern design, upscale revelry and consumption, *Marked Woman* exhibits a binary pattern similar in structure to the Hollywood musical's movement between narrative and number. These utopic counterspaces feature largely non-representational cinematic techniques, which not only depict but also create a sense of buoyancy. Much as in musicals of the period, these sequences manage *Marked Woman's* oppositions, replacing scarcity with abundance, low class with classless, solemnity with merriment, old-fashioned with modern. In the process, they conflate pleasure, if only briefly, with modern glamour, consumption and high-style designs.

Such 'collisions' – deeply rooted in a free-market capitalist society's difficulty in coming to terms with economic recession and its exposure of class inequities – pervade the gangster genre and many crime films. Although the gangster films of the early talkie period typically burlesque the Horatio Alger myth, they concurrently glorify getting rich, spending money and having fun in the big city. In wrestling with the idea of modernity in visual terms, the film's art direction manages the dichotomies particular not only to its genre but also to American society in the throes of the Great Depression. That style is intertwined with the gangster's dreams of a better life suggests simultaneously the allure of and backlash against haute couture and its connotations of status. The modern spaces become designated as sources of pleasure and abundance, thus insulated from the picture's more dominant working-class aesthetic and tone. As in most gangster films, style functions both thematically and iconically to traverse timely issues of class, social mobility, status and image.

STYLE AND STATUS IN THE CLASSICAL GANGSTER GENRE

Film historians point to D. W. Griffith's *The Musketeers of Pig Alley* (1912), a one-reeler made for Biograph, and Raoul Walsh's *Regeneration* (1915), the first-known gangster feature, as the origins of the genre. The latter, in particular, influenced future gangster films with its development of a new screen type, the criminal anti-hero in whom base and likable features coexist (McCarty 1993: 5). Walsh realized that the most interesting characters are complex and paradoxical. In his essay, 'The Gangster as Tragic Hero', Robert Warshow addresses the gangster anti-hero in similar terms, stressing his ambivalent quality: 'The real city [...] produces only criminals; the imaginary city produces the gangster: he is what we want to be and are afraid we might become' (1974: 131).

In the years leading up to the production of *Marked Woman*, the gangster genre came of age. As the Roaring Twenties segued into the 1930s and the Great Depression, Hollywood cashed in on the popularity of gangsters as newsworthy icons. With the dawning of the 1930s, American society was coming to terms with two extremes that had helped define the century thus far: on the one hand, the powerful influences of White-Protestant Reformism and, on the other, the remnants of the ethnically and racially diverse Jazz Age. Even before the Production Code arrived in 1934, Hollywood negotiated this divide carefully. While cautious not to offend religious and temperance lobbies, it was also eager to attract audiences through sexual intrigues, decadence and violence. Speakeasies, street fights, Prohibition, platinum blondes, gambling and Tommy guns were just a few of the ingredients that fuelled the gangster genre's success. The concurrent emergence of talkies (bringing to life machine-gun fire, tough street talk and ethnic accents), J. Edgar Hoover's G-men and a brutal economic depression all helped make the genre increasingly popular and relevant to audiences in 1930s America. Above all, however, the gangster protagonist stole the show with his style, charismatic personality, relentless drive to succeed against all odds and poignant, necessary death.

The Hollywood gangster – from Tom Powers to Don Corleone – has always been stylish. His criminal motivations stem from a relentless drive for power and money, and he makes his success known for all to see. His loud suits, flashy girlfriends and luxury automobiles signal to the world that he has made it, usually in spite of his modest beginnings, lack of formal education and thick ethnic accent. The screen gangster's successes, however, always come with a price, particularly in productions of the early 1930s, when Prohibition and the mob's reign were still in effect.

The design systems in these movies outline the gangster's evolution: from working-class street hoodlum to stylish, successful icon. They are just one indication that representations of the gangster in popular culture reflect conflicting attitudes towards class, ethnicity, criminality and the American Dream. For a society struggling to reconcile the contradictions of joblessness in the Land of Opportunity, the movie gangster articulates both the desperations and longings of many Americans during the Great Depression.

To avoid making heroes of gangsters, the studios sought to show that crime never pays. Several went so far as to insert moralist prologues that reminded viewers not to sympathize with the villains and that loudly proclaimed the need to solve a social problem. Most pictures of the genre end with the hoodlum's demoralizing death, and along the way viewers see a good deal of his cruelty. In spite of all this, the gangster emerges as sympathetic during difficult economic times: his dreams of wealth and a

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1. In another Warner Bros. gangster film, *Little Caesar*, which followed the success of *The Public Enemy*, Rico (Edward G. Robinson) and Joe (Douglas Fairbanks, Jr.) discuss several advantages of becoming gangsters in the city: 'Yep, there's money in the big town. And the women! [...] The clothes I could wear!'

better life than that of his hard-working, first-generation immigrant parents resonated with Depression audiences (Eckert [1974] 1991: 218). In addition to the screen gangster's dynamic personality, the genre's construction of modern style and space is instrumental in glamorizing a lifestyle that, though criminal, is rooted in the American Dream.

In *The Public Enemy* (Wellman, 1931), the charismatic gangster combines guts, street smarts, style and personality. He is more dynamic than any of the principled but boring 'straights' around him. (Warner Bros. virtually cornered the market on this sort of character with a string of popular pre-Code gangster films, all making use of a house style that epitomizes the Great Depression.) The film follows the life and times of Tom (James Cagney), as he rises from a tough street kid to mobster. In his ascent to power, Tom's advancing style and status help glamorize a modern, adventurous lifestyle in the city. That the studio felt obligated to aver – in a foreword following the opening credits – that the film's authors intended to 'honestly depict' organized crime rather than 'glorify the hoodlum or criminal' suggests that its concerns were not unfounded. Indeed, it is difficult to root against Tom, whose criminality is deeply intertwined with his dreams of making it in the big city.

The film opens in 1909. The opening empty frames of factory yards and a sparse street with children playing invoke Depression America. The film eventually settles on two boys, Tom and his friend Matt Doyle (Donald Cook), who spend most of their time on the street, toying with Edwardian gentlemen in their path and committing petty crimes for the local boss, Putty Nose. By 1917, with the onset of World War I, Tom and Matt are delivery drivers for a local brewery. In the family's modest home, Ma Powers tries to keep her boys from fighting. Overflowing with personality and chutzpah, Tom makes his older brother Michael – who speaks in moralizing platitudes and rarely smiles – seem by comparison tedious and preachy.

As Tom and Matt enter the bootlegging business in the 1920s and become successful gangsters, their styles (and the settings in which they operate) change dramatically. After getting paid for their first bootlegging job, they at once drive to an upscale men's dress store. Properly outfitted in sleek suits, complete with vests and hats, they purchase a fancy automobile and drive it that evening to a popular nightclub with dancing, live swing jazz, plenty of booze and stylish women (see Figure 1).¹

Figure 1: Matt (left) and Tom (centre), decked out in their new suits, arrive at a speakeasy, where high style, jazz, women and liquor abound.

1. Soon Tom and Matt are literally living the high life, taking residence in
 2. Art Deco penthouse suites. While his brother toils at a low-paying, honest
 3. job, making 'two bits a week', Tom earns enough to enjoy the city's extrava-
 4. gant offerings. Dressed better (in other words, with more modern flair) than
 5. anyone else – including the wealthier industrialists that do business with the
 6. mob² – and with money to spend, the young gangsters acquire status and
 7. reinvent their image. Able to gain entry into stylish locales filled with modern
 8. designs and activities, they show off their wealth, dance, drink and attract
 9. women. In a general sense, such a film permits viewers to play out fantasies of
 10. rebellion and criminal success. Classical gangster films from Warner Bros. also
 11. provided a safe place for Depression audiences to sympathize with working-
 12. class, ethnic mobsters and revel in their exciting lifestyles.

13. Back at Tom's childhood home, Michael Powers continues to disapprove of
 14. his brother's business and the 'blood' money it generates.³ A telling exchange
 15. between Tom, brother Michael and Ma Powers reveals the allure of the gang-
 16. ster son's new lifestyle, especially in the light of difficult times. Ma admits that
 17. Michael is 'working himself to an early grave'. Tom offers her money, which
 18. she declines, knowing Michael would not be pleased if she were to accept
 19. it. The older brother enters the room and says to Tom, 'We don't want your
 20. money. I'm taking care of Ma'.

21. 'On two bits a week!?' the young gangster retorts. Michael responds,
 22. 'I don't go to nightclubs and she don't drink champagne'. At this point, the
 23. normally quiet, servile mother chimes in, with a tinge of melancholia, 'Well,
 24. how do you know? I used to dance when I was a girl'. Even this hard-working,
 25. honest woman is growing weary – as presumably many Americans were – of
 26. living a life short on pleasure and abundance. The quiet admission betrays her
 27. envy of Tom's financial success and new status. All surface indications suggest
 28. that Tom is realizing the American Dream.

29. By the film's end, Tom appears quite sympathetic. When he is shot in
 30. the street gutter, he whispers for only the audience to hear, 'Maybe I ain't so
 31. tough after all'. In this self-deprecating moment, the film has lowered Tom's
 32. guard and made him human. Shortly thereafter, his body is dropped off at the
 33. Powers' residence and then discovered by Michael. The haunting shot of the
 34. gangster's 'mummied' corpse falling through the open doorway, combined
 35. with a cut to his gleeful mother preparing Tom's bed in anticipation of his
 36. return from the hospital, positions audiences to sympathize with the gangster
 37. and his efforts to make his ma proud.⁴

38. As the decade continued, gangster dramas remained a staple product
 39. of Hollywood studios. *Bullets or Ballots* (Keighley, 1936), starring Edward G.
 40. Robinson, Joan Blondell and Humphrey Bogart, tells the story of Johnny Blake
 41. (Robinson), a detective who works undercover for an underworld racketeer. In
 42. vintage Warner Bros. style, it begins with a 'March of Time'-like sequence that
 43. provides viewers with important narration and establishes the film's tone. In
 44. a reflection of 1930s proletarian politics, a trio of genteel WASP bankers funds
 45. the citywide crime circuit. Once Blake enters the underworld, the settings
 46. change dramatically, shifting from plain, low-budget apartments and city
 47. offices to fancy Art Deco-designed hotels and high-class nightclubs, replete
 48. with gambling, streamlined décor, abstract art hanging on the walls, jazz and
 49. cocktails. Blake (and the viewers) temporarily escapes the doldrums of an
 50. upper-world milieu of ordinary salaries, workweeks and dowdy furnishings.

51. *Angels with Dirty Faces* (Curtiz, 1938), like many Warner Bros. gangster
 52. films, follows a historical timeline that begins in the Progressive Era and ends

2. In one scene, for instance, we see a brewery owner with a British accent and outmoded Edwardian dress.
3. In stark contrast to his younger brother, Michael has chosen the straight life, in service of the system. In pointed critique of this system, he has nothing to show for playing by its rules: in addition to working a gruelling, low-paying factory job, he returns from Europe a shell-shocked veteran of World War I.
4. As proof that they have made it, movie gangsters have often wanted to impress their mothers. The classic example is James Cagney's Cody Jarrett in *White Heat* (Walsh, 1949), who yells from the top of a blazing oil tank, 'Made it Ma! Top of the world!' before he dies in a fiery explosion.

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5. The Production Code forbade the studio to call the women prostitutes.

in the twilight of the Jazz Age. Employing modern settings, like those in *Marked Woman*, to portray the gangster's meteoric rise in wealth and status, it cuts from tenement flats and working-class neighbourhoods to ritzy Art Deco speakeasies and penthouse suites. The film features the 'Dead End' kids playing - a group of grubby street urchins who idolize a legendary gangster, Rocky Sullivan (James Cagney), originally from the same neighbourhood. They long to be like him and look like him, in spite of the local priest's efforts to reform the boys. When they make extra cash protecting the mobster's money stash, they all buy flashy suits and spiffy hats that resemble Rocky's attire. Rocky impresses women as well with promises of wealth, glamour and social mobility. To a cynical Laury (Ann Sheridan), just after he has reclaimed his stash and is poised to re-enter the underworld, he says, 'You've been reading stuff about crime don't pay. Don't be a sucker. That's for yaps and small-timers and shoe-strings, not for people like us. You belong in the big-shot class. Both of us do [...]'. In the next scene, we see the pair playing roulette in an Art Deco speakeasy. Rocky wears a tuxedo and Laury has replaced her ordinary dress with a sparkling white evening gown. A swing band is in full cry, couples are dancing and drinking, and even the normally jaded Laury is enjoying herself.

Like most screen mobsters, Rocky Sullivan dies a ceremonial, public death. He is electrocuted as he pleads for his life. In *The Public Enemy*, *Scarface* (Hawks and Rosson, 1932) and *Little Caesar* (LeRoy, 1931), the gangster is humiliated in death: one is mummified and delivered to his mother's house, another is gunned down in his own apartment, and the last is shot and left to die in a ditch behind a billboard. The message rings clear in the end: crime does not pay. And yet throughout most of these movies, it does appear to pay handsomely, in the form of bright, modern spaces, lively fun in the big city, stylish clothing and celebrity status. As important, the vogueish designs and fashions contribute to the gangster genre's interrogation of the American Dream. In this way, these films negotiate, both thematically and visually, a series of polarities that define 1930s America: rich versus poor, big city versus small town, modern (Art Deco) versus old-fashioned (Victorian), proletarian (or jobless) versus self-made entrepreneur, WASP versus ethnic and Reformism (Prohibition) versus Jazz Age leisure culture (speakeasy).

WARNER BROTHERS' *MARKED WOMAN*

Unlike most classical gangster films, *Marked Woman* does not focus on the gangster or his rise to success. Nor does it portray the gangster as a sympathetic martyr trying to succeed during trying times. Yet the genre's systematic use of modern styles informs our understanding of the role of design in this film. Even as *Marked Woman* positions audiences to scorn the gangster, who in this case bears little resemblance to charismatic archetypes such as Tom Powers or Rocky Sullivan, the settings function independently of the film's formal and moral agendas. In their capacity as visual, fetishistic spectacle, the designs reinforce popular perceptions - circulated through advertising, illustration, fan magazines and Hollywood - of how pleasure, abundance, affluence and modernity ought to look and even 'feel'.

Marked Woman is loosely based on New York crime boss Lucky Luciano's alleged prostitution racket, for which he had been convicted and jailed only the year before the film's release. The film follows a group of hostesses and escort women⁵ whose formerly French-inspired dinner club is taken over by

Johnny Vanning (Eduardo Cianelli as Luciano) and turned into a modern nightclub (with a back-room gambling hall). None of the women is thrilled about the new management, but Mary Dwight (Bette Davis⁶) is the only one tough enough to challenge Vanning from the start. After the gangsters kill a number of people, including Mary's own sister Betty, the women agree to help the prosecuting attorney, David Graham (Humphrey Bogart), in his efforts to convict the gangland boss. Audiences of the time knew that Bogart was playing Thomas E. Dewey, who had been appointed special prosecutor of New York County in 1935 and famously put behind bars several of Manhattan's biggest gangsters, including Luciano.

Originally Michael Curtiz was slated to direct the film, and indeed he started it, but Lloyd Bacon, an efficient director known for making timely films within budget, finished the job. The seasoned veteran Max Parker, who had begun designing films in the teens, was the art director. Previous to *Marked Woman*, Parker had designed several important gangster films, including *The Public Enemy*. Warner Brothers' premier gowns specialist, Orry-Kelly, contributed his stylish touch. This duo teamed up for many Warner productions that required the sleek, new look in settings and fashions. Their influence on the film and its *mise-en-scène* is immediately apparent: in the first scene, as Vanning takes a tour of his latest acquisition, he orders a complete makeover in Art Deco 'moderne'.

Like many of the studio's crime films from this period, including *The Public Enemy* and *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (LeRoy, 1932), this one challenges the American mythology of social mobility. It is an unusually resolute film that climaxes in a memorable conclusion. Mary Dwight's decision to walk away from the district attorney's offer of assistance and possible romance defies Hollywood's penchant for tacked-on endings that bring romantic closure and smooth over class divisions. When Mary accompanies her female co-workers into the ominous night fog outside the city courthouse, the film acknowledges her struggles and loyalties as a working-class woman. At the same time, bearing the markings of both its culture and industry, this film remains a product of the glamorous star system, Hollywood marketing strategies and the epoch's conflation of modern designs with contemporary ideals of leisure and consumption. It is this dialectic, between the film's moral and the visual excess, that crystallizes the dichotomies of 1930s America.

The opening credits, in a series of five illustrated stills, introduces the film's critique of Art Deco designs but does so ambivalently. The credits are centred in each frame as an upbeat, jazzy swing score and curvilinear 'rainbow' strips in alternating shades of white and cream provide the background. Adding to the Deco touch is a wipe edit between each still that briefly divides the frame into quarters. Most emblematic of the style, however, are the illustrated women appearing in the margins of the credits. On one level, these depictions reinforce the film's construction of these women as victims of modernity and their occupation: they have dour expressions and a cigarette or cocktail within easy reach.

On yet another level, however, these Deco vignettes invite associations of luxury and leisure passed down through generations of nude portraiture and, more contemporaneously, reflected in moderne art/commodity. Rather than gloomy or grim, for instance, a few facial expressions come off as jaded or indifferent – as if to imitate conventions of relaxed decadence. Several of the figures also resemble the mass-produced Art Deco statuettes that helped make ashtrays, clocks, lamps and other household accessories fashionable at

6. This was Davis' first film since losing her court case against Warner Bros. Hoping to win back her loyalty to the studio, Warner Bros. gave her top billing in this 'A' production. Abem Finkel and Robert Rossen wrote the script with Davis in mind for the lead.

Figure 2: The woman's pose here invokes the nude genre of portraiture, and, in concert with the Deco designs and upbeat jazz score, may imply casual leisure.

the time. In wispy, stylish gowns, their figures elongated, they may be seen to casually luxuriate and pose like models (see Figures 2 and 3). Much like the film to follow, as well as studio marketing strategies, the credits reveal a semi-otic struggle between narrative and design, content and commodity that is at the heart of my analysis.

Immediately following the credits, the first scene confirms the importance of modern designs in this film. Vanning struts into the 'Club Intime', a French-inspired nightclub he has just purchased. Before introducing himself to the hostesses who will now work under him, he surveys the interior décor and calls for a makeover that will not only update the place, but also Americanize

Figure 3: Much like the studio's press book for *Marked Woman*, the film's title frame does a 'makeover' of Bette Davis' Mary Dwight, from proletarian heroine to swanky, sultry supermodel.

1. it. He wants the classical French chandeliers replaced with modern indirect
 2. lighting; the plush carpets pulled up and replaced with shiny tiles; and the
 3. name on the marquee changed to 'Club Intimate' and set in bold neon Art
 4. Deco lettering. In an overhead shot, the camera is perched slightly above and
 5. to the side of the classical French chandelier. He eyes it sceptically and says in
 6. a thick accent, 'None of the classy spots use that kind of stuff anymore. I want
 7. the kind that sticks up at the ceiling'.

8. 'Indirect lighting', his assistant replies, taking notes. Mary is observing from
 9. the side, and the smirk on her face indicates her feelings towards Vanning and
 10. his enterprise. She speaks for the film when she snaps condescendingly of
 11. the mobster's remodelling plans, 'High class'. These initial scenes, in which
 12. Vanning lays down the law for his employees and serves as designer, intro-
 13. duce the mob boss as the film's unambiguous villain. They also make trans-
 14. parent his strong desire to gain status by means of up-to-date designs. Like
 15. many gangsters before and after him, Vanning is a first- or second-generation
 16. immigrant (with a thick Italian accent) who has realized the American Dream
 17. (albeit illegally) and become a member of the nouveau riche. He aspires not
 18. merely to wealth but to high social standing as well. He surrounds himself
 19. with the latest fashions, regardless of cost, in order to appear 'classy'. His
 20. fancy penthouse apartment is also done in moderne style: clean white walls,
 21. linear geometrical designs and northern European furniture fill the space. By
 22. associating these designs with Vanning and his dubious efforts to win respect-
 23. ability through the maintenance of appearances, the film calls into question
 24. the overt purposes of modern design.

25. Within the opening minutes of the film, as the credits segue to the first
 26. scenes of *Marked Woman*, a pattern emerges: alternating back and forth
 27. between high-fashion revelry and the gloomy domains of the oppressed
 28. working-class women, the settings reflect the film's conflicted nature. The
 29. movement between these constructed spaces reveals the extent to which this
 30. film is a product of not merely Hollywood, but also of Depression America.
 31. In these contexts, desire and despair commingle at a time when easy images
 32. of glamour and wealth confronted hard realities of joblessness, poverty and
 33. inequity.

34. After Vanning gives his stern lecture, the women leave the spacious,
 35. brightly lit club for the city night. The non-diegetic music changes tempo
 36. from the opening track and is instead melancholic and slow, connoting the
 37. women's disadvantaged lives. The music continues as they arrive home
 38. and enter their old, bland Victorian apartment building, filled with 'homey
 39. curtains, department-store art, an air of proletarian domesticity' (Eckert [1974]
 40. 1991: 208). The apartment set is claustrophobic thanks to the flat lighting
 41. and narrow floor plan. The women share rooms and come in and out of the
 42. same doorways. The cramped atmosphere seems to exacerbate the tensions
 43. between several of the women, as they crowd the living room and quarrel
 44. about work.

45. The film cuts from this setting to a new flashing neon sign that reads Club
 46. Intimate (see Figure 4). Whereas the previous one was written in polished
 47. cursive, this sign flashes the new name in a sparse Deco font. A doorman
 48. escorts well-dressed clients into the club as swing jazz emanates from the
 49. dance floor. A group of male customers enters the club, and we see the
 50. new interior as a woman sings onstage with the band behind her. Indirect,
 51. skyscraper lighting fixtures abound, and the walls are largely unadorned, save
 52. the clean, geometrical patterns and, in one section, a backlit translucent panel

Figure 4: The nightclub redone in Art Deco style, as per Vanning's orders.

patterned in diamonds. Unlike the settings of the neighbourhood streets at night, the courtroom and interior of the women's apartment, this Deco space is bright, roomy and contemporary. Whereas in their cramped apartment or on the city streets the women are often downcast and worried about money, in the nightclub or ritzy penthouse parties they appear sophisticated and happy, able to blend in with the wealthy set.

The hostesses wear slinky, shiny metallic dresses. Both sexes appear to be enjoying themselves as they smoke, drink, laugh and dance. After one of Mary's roommates gets onstage to sing a tune about nightlife, her hair clip and dress sparkling under the key spotlight, a montage captures the setting's lively, contemporary atmosphere. The montage begins with a transitional wipe to a raucous jazz band, before dissolving to dancing, singing and various musicians playing their instruments. A champagne cork pops and we next see bubbly being poured in multiple glasses, which then circle (superimposed) within the frame, as the dancing and music continue in the background.

While most of the women are conversing and drinking with male clients, one of Mary's co-workers and housemates sings onstage in front of a jazz swing band. The lyrics reinforce the film's moral message and overall tenor, but they noticeably clash with what we see in the nightclub: modern urban designs and the pleasures they afford. The first three stanzas tell the story:

City people pity people
Who don't know a lot
About the night life,
But they are wrong.
Though they may be witty people,
They don't know that folks

1. Who lead the right life
2. Still get along.
- 3.
4. To a plain old-fashioned couple
5. Let me dedicate my song.
- 6.
7. They're not sophisticated people,
8. And though they're only common folk,
9. You don't know how I envy people
10. Like Mr. and Mrs. Doe.⁷

7. Lyrics by Harry Warren
and Al Dubin.

11. As if to imply the inner longings of these working women, the song valorizes
12. what they lack in their line of work in the big city: small-town American
13. values, marriage and the 'right life'. The song is morally and socially conserv-
14. ative, while remaining populist. It romanticizes the 'common folk' and a
15. simpler time free of modernity's complications.

16. Yet the atmosphere and performance are products of the same urban
17. nightlife scorned in the lyrics. Here, as in the opening credits, the modern
18. spaces collide not so much with the working-class settings, but rather with
19. the film's moral text and content. The visual style (much of it belonging to
20. what Dyer calls the non-representational) and *mise-en-scène* tell a different
21. story than the nostalgic, cautionary one conveyed through the song (and
22. throughout much of the film's text). Instead of arguing that one domain
23. ('textual' versus visual) triumphs over the other, I would suggest in this case
24. that the visual designs are quite persuasive, as they are more immediate, iconic
25. and less transparent in their effect on spectators. In keeping with concomi-
26. tant advertising pioneers, images dominate words. Moreover, they facilitate
27. modern releases and utopian impulses that the old-fashioned, more mundane
28. spaces in this film tend to deny: professional live performances and entertain-
29. ment, revelry, abundance, witty conversations and beauty.

30. Later that night, after most of the women and their clients have departed
31. the Club Intimate, one of the men is left with his party's tab. After using a
32. bad check, he tries to escape town, on Mary's advice, but Vanning's strong
33. men murder him before he can. A wild evening on the town leads to exces-
34. sive debauchery, a pricey bar and gambling tab, and, in the end, death. The
35. excesses of fast urban living exact their toll on these out-of-town characters
36. and thereby taint the glamorous routines within the club. Yet the set designs
37. and consumerist practices operating within the club provide a gay ambience
38. that seems as removed from the rest of the film as the club's dazzling interior
39. is from the dark city streets.

40. Another pocket of modern pleasure occurs midway through *Marked*
41. *Woman*. As in the nightclub scene, the residence becomes animated due to
42. the 'liberating' powers of fashion and consumption. The up-tempo music
43. once again confirms the shift in tone. The women are recovering from the
44. previous evening, having just awakened, when Louie (Allen Jenkins), their
45. local dress salesman, stops by to sell them the latest fashions on credit.
46. When he enters the scene, the once pervasive gloom instantly disappears.
47. Louie functions as comic relief. In response, the normally jaded women
48. become animated, girlish and gleeful in his presence. They 'ooh' and 'aah'
49. over the modish gowns and dresses. They imagine aloud how they will look
50. in these clothes. They playfully fight over certain pieces of clothing. Even the
51. cynical, guarded Mary prances around the salesman, grabbing at clothes that
52. suit her tastes. For a brief moment, she sheds her toughness and becomes

Figure 5: The usually sombre mood of the women's flat becomes briefly animated as Mary (Davis), smiling, clamours to see what fashions Louie has brought for them.

the stereotypical 'shop-crazed' girl (see Figure 5). Although the women owe him for previous purchases, they convince the amiable salesman to give them more credit. The women go into further debt by purchasing the clothes on credit, but cosmetic beauty and the latest fashions prevail. The arrival of Mary's sister Betty interrupts the happy atmosphere, as the women scramble to keep the younger sibling from finding out that Mary is a nightclub 'hostess'. As if suddenly awakened from a dream, the film quickly resumes its formal course.

In a private party scene later in the film, the wealthy ambience is again festive and modern. Couples dance, laugh, smoke and drink as jazz music plays. The clean Art Deco interior of the penthouse, with views of the city below, makes the rooms spacious and ideal for pleasure. The high-key lighting accentuates the smooth sheen of the all-white interior décor, harmonizing with the women's sleek, shiny dresses and the gentlemen's shingled, oiled hair.

Even in this party sequence, however, the film associates modernity with decadence, corruption and crime. Owned by the mob boss and thus acquired with 'blood' money, this extravagant penthouse setting is eventually the scene of an 'accidental' murder upon which the prosecution bases its case against Vanning. Hoping to enjoy herself at the party and make a little money, Betty, Mary's younger sister, does not realize that the sugar daddy she's entertaining expects sex in return for the money he lavishes on her. Furious with the young woman for refusing to comply with a client's wishes, Vanning pushes Betty (to her death) down the steps of his penthouse's outdoor veranda. Although the Deco interior is visually insulated from the film's squalor and cynicism – and, technically, even the murder itself – the association is clear. It reflects the public's more natural aversions to crime bosses and excessive displays of wealth in the middle of the Depression, revealing a backlash against high-style design and art direction.

That both party sequences (fuelled by black jazz, Mafia money and booze) lead to murder undoubtedly pleased the temperance unions as well as the Hays Office. *Marked Woman* makes a patent connection between high-style excess and moral depravity, punishing those who indulge in both. Symptomatic of the period's conservatism, which blamed the Depression on an overly decadent Jazz Age, and which was further nourished by leftover Reformism, Hollywood did not always idealize modern spaces and practices. Industry and civic censors were complaining about glamour and its promotion of decadence, hedonism and looser lifestyles made to seem heroic and fun – and Hollywood responded. Popular productions, such as *Wonder of Women* (Brown, 1929), *The Divorcee* (Leonard, 1930) and *Grand Hotel* (Goulding, 1932), simultaneously glamorize and stigmatize Art Deco domains. In *Wonder of Women*, 'Lewis Stone shares a tranquil house by the sea with his brunette wife Peggy Wood when not visiting the jazzy digs of blonde Leila Hyams [...]. The association between Deco and decadence is clear' (Mandelbaum and Myers 1985: 13). Although it is a lively and luxurious point of crossing, Berlin's Grand Hotel, designed in plush Art Deco, is also home to murder, prostitution and disjointed lifestyles. The streamlined, circular lobby becomes a visual metaphor (reinforced by the constantly spinning revolving doors and frenetic switchboard activity) for instability in the modern age.

Moreover, by the time of *Marked Woman*'s release, Hollywood's ubiquitous use of moderne and Art Deco styles during the previous decade was well known and beginning to wane. Perhaps its decline could not come soon enough for Warner Bros., known for its gritty movies set in Depression America. In the case of *Marked Woman*, the overt associations between Art Deco fashions and the violent, tyrannical mob boss visually articulate the studio's politics. The production thereby not only critiques high fashion, but also Hollywood's tendency to glamorize modern design as a symbol of high-class elegance. Vanning may have the money to wear expensive suits and install the latest designs in his home and business, but he lacks the personality to match: anything but gay and sophisticated, he is murderous, coarse and gauche. Regardless of the studio's position on the politics of design and class, however, viewers still see glamorous fashions and people having fun in them.

While these counterspaces may have an unintended life of their own, intentionally these episodes serve Hollywood's star system and its penchant for glamour and vanguard fashions. In the case of this production, gowns specialist Orry-Kelly and art director Max Parker could put their talents to good use, while the studio's publicity/marketing machine was able to do product tie-ups in promotion of the film's fashions. This is especially evident in Warner Brothers' press book for *Marked Woman*, which reveals the impetus behind the studio's linkage of modern fashions with sophistication and consumption. A good portion of the press book deals with glamour and beauty maintenance, designed for placement in movie theatre lobbies, fan magazines, newspaper spreads and retail store windows and ads. 'Hair beauty is achieved by vigorous brushing – Bette Davis, star of "Marked Woman" tells secret of lovely hair', reads one title. Another article, '60 new styles shown in film', details Orry-Kelly's dress designs, the same ones we see sparkling in the club and for sale in the women's apartment. In big, bold font, '3 nation-wide tie-ups', headlines a section on the studio's suggestions for exhibitors and retail stores on how best to market and advertise the fashions worn by Davis and others in the movie. Pictures of the star brushing her hair, applying make-up,

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Figure 6: Bette Davis models several dresses from the film, displaying how a woman might stay fashionable and elegant all day.

modelling 'How to become a screen star' and styling the latest fashions from the film visualize the text's proclamations (see Figures 6–8).

The irony and incongruity are on full display. The publicity stills of Davis gleefully modelling Orry-Kelly's dresses baldly deny that Davis plays an exploited prostitute wearing these same fashions in order to please her murderous boss and to bait male customers. The marketing of Bette Davis is eerily divorced from the powerful role she plays in *Marked Woman*. In addition to the film's critique of modern excess, the studio's packaging of the film conflicts with the picture's long-touted feminism. Whereas the movie keeps its focus on the heroic will of the women – thus avoiding generic conventions that shift attention to the male protagonist's heroics and/or the refuge of heterosexual romance – the marketing epitomizes patriarchal capitalism: women commodified and on display, doing everything needed to maintain their appearance and to convince other women to do the same through consumption.

The publicity for *Marked Woman*, as incongruous as it may seem, mirrors the conflicted use of fashion and design in the film. Both the marketing and the sequences I analyse are not unusual in and of themselves – they are, in fact, commonplace in Classical Hollywood – yet what interests me is the extent to which these modern designs wrestle discursively with the film's value system.

Figure 7: In this tie-up template, even a minor prop (a compact mirror) has a role to play in marketing the film, local business and the need for women to maintain their beauty through consumption.

Figure 8: Bette Davis plays a defiant, courageous, working-class prostitute in *Marked Woman*, but in the same film's marketing she 'knows the importance of proper make-up'.

Even in its assault on the excesses of modernity, the film cannot help projecting their glamorous allure in largely visual, iconic terms.

The Art Deco fashions in *Marked Woman* and its pre-release marketing transcend mere reflection of contemporary tastes. They operate within a high capitalist context that has long subsumed the industry and its productions. In the midst of corruption, murder and privation, these pockets of pleasure entertain even as they visually and aurally glorify modern ideals of consumption, leisure and design. Hollywood's well-known fondness for entertainment and spectacle, coupled with its increasing reliance on commercialism during this time – evidenced in the growth of studio marketing and publicity divisions, which negotiated tie-ups with department stores and collaborated with costumers, art directors, print publishers and exhibitors towards this end – assured a unique practice of film-making that produced in varying measures art, entertainment, commercialism and consumption.

CONCLUSION

Reconciling two critical 'operatives' – material determinism and utopianism – in mass culture has long been one of cultural studies' primary aims. That we perceive a binary opposition between the two should not lead us to write them off as incompatible. To do so would deny the commercial contexts of 'high art', for instance, not to mention its excess or capacity to entertain. Dialectical criticism reminds us of the inevitability of contradiction in art and production,

but also that what may initially appear as incongruity or paradox stands to be a dialogical negotiation of cultural practices and ideologies. Liberated to reconcile that which appears antinomial or separate, we may appreciate a symbiotic relationship among entertainment, art and ideology. Such a reckoning particularly illuminates Hollywood film-making practices as they are shaped by economic, artistic and other cultural imperatives.

As the 1930s drew to a close, with the gangster genre in decline and giving way to film noir, the styles and their ideological function were changing. In Walsh's *The Roaring Twenties* (1939), the upscale Art Deco settings are tainted less by their association with the corrupted gangster than by their inability to glamorize pleasure. They are no longer utopic spaces insulated from the immoral, violent criminal underworld. Early in the film, Eddie Bartlett (James Cagney) returns from World War I a decorated war veteran and patriotic idealist who wants to make a life for himself as an auto mechanic in his old neighbourhood. He and his old friend Danny enjoy their modest apartment and seem genuinely happy without the wealth and power they soon attain. Unable to get work, however, Eddie is eventually corrupted by desperation. With little choice, it seems, he turns to a life of crime. His decline coincides with his ascent to successful, stylized gangster. Rather than attract the opposite sex, his style and money do not win the one woman he loves. In a pointed class commentary, his sudden wealth does not disguise his working-class roots and accent, both of which repel the educated middle-class woman he courts. Rather than facilitate late-night revelry, and thus detach from the narrative's condemnation of a sordid underworld, Eddie's Art Deco nightclub is the setting of violent retribution and romantic rejection.

Several years later, as America was fighting in World War II and on the eve of an economic boom, the gangster genre shifted course. With the release of *High Sierra* (Walsh, 1941), for instance, it replaced discourses of style and status (all within an urban context) with a pastoral ideal that negotiated oppositions of city and country. Less historical and more psychological in scope, the film focuses on the gangster's decline, rather than his 'class rise'. Thereafter, as the Jazz Age and Great Depression receded in relevance and historical memory, the genre typically relied less on modern styles to manage the dichotomies particular to this period.

During the gangster genre's heyday, however, just as American capitalist ideologies were on trial, Art Deco designs were coding modernity as fashionable, fun and consumable, in tension with the narrative's (and the industry's) moral messages. In this way, the vogue spaces and spectacles in *Marked Woman* and other concomitant gangster films may become abstracted from the domains of narrative and necessity and, in turn, like other commodities in the marketplace, become meaningful at the level of desire.

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