

The 1920s in the United States: An Account of the Filmic Representation

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Dpto. Filología Inglesa y Alemana
Grado en Estudios Ingleses
Convocatoria Septiembre 2015
Curso 2014-15

ABSTRACT

The 1920s was a period of changes in American society. The Industrial Revolution, World War I, National Prohibition, the economic consequences derived from all those factors and a general spread of crime due to Prohibition are some of the most important themes treated in the vast majority of books related with this period. A further characteristic of the 1920s is the development of the film industry, which began in those years to adopt a much more complex expansion in Hollywood. The aim of this final year dissertation is precisely to use movies in order to show some aspects of American society during the 1920s. Through the movies I have chosen to analyse – *The Roaring Twenties*, *King of the Roaring Twenties: The Story of Arnold Rothstein*, *Once upon a Time in America* and *The Cotton Club* – I will explore several issues of paramount relevance in those years, such as the changing role of women, masculine identities, the emergent figure of the gangster, the end of WWI and the Prohibition Law. This is also the time when new terms were coined in relation to all these elements, for example, bootlegging, speakeasies or flappers. I will analyze the films in chronological order, and I hope this will help me to trace the line of evolution from one film to another and how each of them deals with the issues in question.

In order to engage with this topic in a more critical way I will broach it from two points of view: 1. the social and political – in this respect, I have used the notions developed by Kathleen Drowne and Patrick Huber in *The 1920's American Popular Culture Through History* (2004). And 2. the filmic, where I have drawn on the ideas articulated by Barry Langford and Paul Watson in their respective studies.

Key words: Film Industry, Gangsters, the 1920s, Prohibition,

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1. Introduction

The period known as the “Roaring Twenties” in the United States was characterized by a number of significant social and political changes. The First World War launched the country towards a period of unprecedented economic prosperity and turned it into an important cultural influence in the Western world. However, some historians argue that those changes were forged already in the 19th century, more specifically after the Civil War, from which two crucial factors emerged: the shaping of a new political ethos free of slavery (at least officially) and the Industrial Revolution. This revolution would later be the seed of the United States’ economic power after the First World War, with its immense development of technology and technical devices that supposedly improved the daily lives of people and made them think happiness could be achieved by everyone, as far as the prices of items were low enough to be accessed by a high number of the population. The automobile industry is a case in point, where Henry Ford and his model T implied a revolution in the field but also in society, as this model could be bought by a large sector of the population owing to its cheap price.

The technological turn, so to speak, affected American society mostly at the level of the economy during the 1920s, with relatively no unemployment and a general sense of affluence that had no historical precedent. Alongside this economic prosperity a number of social changes emerged, most importantly a new role for women, who began to think in terms of liberation and economic independence. The Jazz Age was the time when women cut their long hair and released their bodies from the tight corsets and complicated outfits that prevented, literally and metaphorically, their free movements.

All in all, this period of American history seems to me a crucial time not only for the United States but in Western culture in general, as far as we can see that the leading role of the country began to take shape in those years. Besides, historians coincide that this was the time when American culture achieved for the first time a sense of unique identity, with the emergence of the movie industry, and its relationship with literature. It is well known the role of important authors, such as Francis Scott Fitzgerald or William Faulkner, as script writers for Hollywood. Precisely, I will focus on the film production of that time because of two reasons: on the one hand, because films offer a contrast to the literary works that we have studied throughout the years of the English Studies degree; and, on the other hand, because films constitute another cultural manifestation that reveal quite significantly many of the features of American culture. Throughout these four years in the degree, less attention has been paid to the

films than to the literary or historical works, so I thought I could devote my dissertation to this other aspect of American studies. My main objective will be, then, to analyze a number of films in order to get a deeper insight into American society of the 1920s . The examples I have chosen for my study are: *The Roaring Twenties*, *Once Upon a Time in America*, *King of The Roaring Twenties* and *The Cotton Club*.

I will use the study published in 2004 by Kathleen Drowne and Patrick Huber titled *The 1920's American Popular Culture Through History* as my theoretical framework for the exploration of the main issues present in these movies, since it develops significant perspectives of American popular culture which are helpful for the approach I will employ. Simultaneously, I will also draw on some notions developed by Barry Langford and Paul Watson on the issue of film genre and the gangster genre itself, for a better understanding of the visual material. In this respect, then, my methodology exhibits a combination of the two approaches: the cultural and the filmic.

More specifically, I will devote chapter two to an historical overview of American society during the 1920s, following Drowne and Huber's study. This chapter will focus more specifically on four important themes: 1. The way in which everyday life in the country developed from the cultural point of view with an emphasis on music; 2. The newly achieved importance of alcohol in American life; 3. The role of women and 4. Politics and Race Relations.

In chapter three I will engage with the analysis of the above-mentioned films in light of the theoretical considerations that I have made in the previous chapter. In order to make my analysis more accurate I will also use some notions drawn from the above-mentioned titles on film studies.

Finally, I will devote a chapter to the main conclusions extracted from the overall exploration of both the features of American society in the 1920s and the filmic representation in the movies I have chosen for analysis.

2. The 1920s: A Historical Overview.

In the attempt to approach the 1920s it is important to bear in mind that it was a complex and very significant period in the United States. At a middle point between the end of the First World War and the 1930s Depression, this period brought a number of very important changes into American society and politics. For the purpose of giving a context to the analysis of the films, I will proceed to comment on some of those aspects.

2.1 Economy and National Prohibition.

After the end of WWI, mass production and people's consumerism lowered and unemployment grew. However, by 1922 things had changed, mainly owing to the automobile and radio factories. The so-called "Buy now, pay later" plans drove a lot of American people to buy things (mostly technical devices such as vacuum cleaners, washing machines, etc.) that they were not able to buy before. For instance, new radios or the popular Model-T Ford. It must be said that there were many areas which took advantage of such plans. Unfortunately, this situation did not apply to the whole of American population: lower class workers such as miners or farmers did not get access to this kind of plans, therefore they did not notice this new boom.¹
(5)

A crucial event during those years was the national prohibition, whereby alcohol was prohibited in January 16, 1920. It is really important to establish that it was not just a law against alcohol drinking: it was also against the creation, selling or transporting (either to the US or from the US) of "intoxicating liquors." As Drowne and Huber indicate: "according to the Volstead Act passed in 1919, an intoxicating liquor was the one containing a minimum of one-half of 1 percent of alcohol." (13) Therefore, it is easy to imagine the strictness of the law. One question that came to my mind after reading such definition was: What happened if someone broke the law? Obviously, people got penalized because of that. As an example, if someone broke the law once, they were imposed a fine up to \$1,000 and above 6 months in jail. A second infringement of the law could suppose a fine up to \$10,000 and almost 5 years in jail. In addition, any vehicle seized by the police during any anti-alcohol operation immediately passed into the government's hands, either for their own use or for sale. The American government created the Prohibition Bureau which consisted of an additional police force with just one

¹Since I have drawn on Drowne's and Huber's study in the recollection of information for this chapter, from now on I will indicate between brackets only the page number of this work.

objective: law enforcement against those who didn't obey the prohibition. However, and due to scarcity of means and funding, this force remained in the shadows. (13)

A further crucial aspect related to prohibition were the so-called "speakeasies," that is to say, illicit bars in which alcohol was sold. Around 1927, just in New York City, there were almost 30,000 speakeasies. Some of them were located in elegant and modern areas of the city, but the vast majority were in secret rooms behind ordinary business or even in basements. Other terms closely related with the prohibition were: "moonshiners," basically a term to refer to those who created their own alcohol beverages, "rumrunners," which made reference to alcohol smugglers, and "bootleggers" or alcohol distributors. (13) All of them appeared in the context of a new phenomenon connected with the National Prohibition: a new mafia. Responsible for the selling and transport of alcohol, this mafia made the prices increase and even new mixtures appeared as the result of this rising. Cocktails became famous, due to the mix of alcohol with fruit juices, so the unpleasant taste of this alcohol was suppressed. As in the case of the above-mentioned technical devices, lower class people, mainly farmers and unskilled laborers, did not have sufficient incomes to buy the alcohol sold by bootleggers, so they started to create their own beverages. Beer was the main one, but in extreme cases, people adulterated alcohol with aftershave lotion and alcohol-based household products. As a result, tens of thousands of people died. (14)

Alcohol also affected society in a wide variety of forms, and not only at a personal level. Along with cocktails, new terms like Jackass Brandy, Cherry Dynamite or Happy Sally emerged. Many songs were inspired by those terms, for example: "What'll We Do on a Saturday Night" (When the Town Goes Dry) or "If I Meet the Guy Who Made This Country Dry." (15) Songs became quite controversial, and some lyrics even urged people to think about their situation, for example "If I Meet the Guy Who Made This Country Dry," which contains the following statement: "What will you do when they won't let you smoke?" Likewise, motion pictures became influenced by several aspects related to prohibition. Hollywood movies parodied the Dry law, showing huge parties in which illicit beverages or cocktails figured as positive things and entertainment for people. The appearance of censorship, however, put an end to this. (15)

National prohibition made crimes more frequent. Bootlegging offered famous gangsters, among them George Remus in Cincinnati, Al "Scarface" Capone in Chicago, and Salvatore "Lucky" Luciano in New York City, the possibility of obtaining a new life of luxury. It was said that F. Scott Fitzgerald got inspired by George Remus in order to create his famous character of Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*, in which a new social class was described: the so

called “new rich.” Bootlegging made them rich to the point that, for example, “in 1928 Al Capone made an estimated \$105,000,000 — reportedly the highest income in the United States —” (15-17). Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that there was a massive clash of interests in connection to the National Prohibition.

If, as said above, there was a special police force to ensure that people abide by the rules and norms, how then it was possible that some of these people got rich? On many occasions, mob bosses got arrested and paid for their crimes thorough jail time, but there was an element that appeared: corruption. Those mob bosses often paid police, judges, and even federal agents, in order to get some sort of protection from interference and prosecution. As Drowne and Hubert Said: “those gangsters lived to a great extent beyond the reach of the law.” (17) In other words, there was no rule for them.

Finally, after many years of organized crime, murders, and illicit activities, the law came to its end on December 5, 1933, “when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law the Twenty-First Amendment to the Constitution, repealing the Eighteenth Amendment (the only constitutional amendment ever repealed).” (17) The reconomic crisis that followed the 1929 crash made Roosevelt repeal the law. From now on, alcohol could be sold without any risk, many gangsters disappeared, speakeasies closed, and bootleggers were no longer needed.

2.2 Politics and Race Relations

Another important aspect that took place right after the end of WWI was the Red Scare or, in other words, the big fear that people had about the spread of communism in the US, taking as an example what had happened with the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. It is also worth mentioning that within this period of unemployment and recession, many labor strikes took place across the nation. This somehow evolved to the point of bombings, such as the one on Wall Street in September 1920, in which 38 people were killed (7).

On the other hand, the situation of Afro-Americans was characterized by two main aspects: 1. The huge movement of black population from the South to the North, to cities like Chicago or Detroit. Throughout the 1920s the figures registered up to 700,000. And 2. The Jim Crow laws that were still in operation, whereby segregation and racism became dominant traits in the relationship between black people and white society. The massive movement of people from the South was mainly due to the better conditions that the northern part of the United States offered: higher salaries, better working conditions, and therefore better environments for the families. Nevertheless, things were not as easy as they thought because white people began

to feel that their jobs and salaries were in danger and this perception led to the increase of racism and hatred against blacks. The material consequences of this were a number of race riots that took place in several cities, being the so-called “Red Summer” of 1919 possibly the most famous one. These race riots were started by white people’s attacks against black population, and in many cases the latter fought back, to the extent that 400 people were killed. This social turmoil was in some way due to the demobilization of veterans of World War I, both black and white, and competition for jobs among ethnic whites and blacks, as said above. The political aspect of these conflicts was revealed in the association made by many people between black movements and bolshevism, and this obviously contributed to the spread of the above-mentioned anti-communist feelings (9). Furthermore, when black people arrived to the north, they found out that the best jobs and incomes were not real, and only slightly better conditions were accessible to them. (9)

2.3 The role of women

It is clear that the Jazz Age was a period of changes, and among them, the situation of women changed considerably. On the one hand, women decided to modify their physical image in order to make it fit more with modern urban life: a new hairdo in which the hair was cut, clothing became more comfortable, etc. Many of them broke with traditions and social customs deeply ingrained in American society, and “they could flirt, ‘pet’ and play the field much more than their mothers and grandmothers had.” (17) In other words, they achieved an unprecedented perception of freedom. Access to university education, entrance into the job market, political advance reflected mainly in the right to vote – through the Nineteenth Amendment to the Constitution in 1920 –, and a more open attitude in general terms from society towards women’s rights and abilities, were obtained throughout the 1920s. However, this doesn’t mean that the idea of becoming wives and mothers disappeared completely. As Drowne and Huber observe: “the youthful, flamboyant flapper existed only temporarily, until social pressure placed her squarely in the familiar roles of wife, mother and homemaker.” (17) It was true that a new generation of women appeared, but it did not last, due to the enormous pressure received from social and religious traditions. Raising a family was still one of the most important aspects of a woman’s life. However, some achievements changed forever the prospects of American women. One of them was birth control, and the ensuing liberty that this brought to them. Another one was the passing of more liberal laws that made divorce easier and accessible to women. As a matter of fact, by 1928 the percentage of divorce rate was around 16,6%, more

than the double in the previous years. And yet the truth was that the vast majority of women followed the old traditions and the inherited sex roles: “the husbands were the principal breadwinners, while the wives had primary responsibility for cooking, cleaning and taking care of the children.” (18) These lines sum up quite well the status of men as authoritarian figures and the status of women as housewives.

Despite the customs and cultural discourses on women’s lives, their minds started to change when they were required to work outside the home in the positions that men had left in order to fight in the First World War. For the first time, they were able to occupy jobs that until then had been taken only by men (mining industry, railroad, etc.). This period was really brief since when the war ended and American soldiers came back home, they claimed their jobs back and women were confined to the home again or doing jobs that men rarely applied for such as teaching, nursing, social work, secretaries, domestic services, etc. (18-19) As commented above, some women decided to enter university but only a few of them ended up becoming doctors, scientists, lawyers, etc. (19) However, the situation of women was bound to change if one bears in mind that the proposal of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the constitution in 1923 had established the following statement: “Men and woman shall have equal rights throughout the United States and every place subject to its jurisdiction.” (19) This statement guaranteed more freedom and equality in theoretical terms, but the social reality was still far away from this.

2.4 Music

The importance achieved by music was one of the major themes within the 1920s. As Drowne and Hubert point out: “the 1920s marked a watershed era in the development of American Popular Music.” (191) There were many factors that contributed to this, for example, the widespread of phonographs, radios, Broadway musicals, and music in motion pictures. New styles like jazz, blues or hillbilly music appeared. It is important to mention Jazz as the most famous one of them. (191) During the 1920s the biggest group of music producers had a company called “Tin Pan Alley,” and their studies were located in New York City (it is worth mentioning that they were the strongest company until the 1950s). Numerous ways of making music available to the people appeared. One of the first ones was by selling sheet music, usually sold at a price between 5 and 10 cents. Later on, this was substituted by phonographs and radios. Radios allowed the broadcasting of shows, mixed with popular music, and what was even more

innovative, the broadcasting of live music. Companies were created to take advantage of these advances. The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) was founded in 1926 and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) in 1927, and with such companies popular music spread throughout the whole nation. Radio programs were created, and the big companies took advantage of this by adding their names to those shows, for example “The Palmolive Hour,” “The Goodrich Silvertown Orchestra” or “The Voice of Firestone.” It is quite clear that advertising strategies were very important for those companies. The life of American people started to change, for instance, with the broadcasting of such shows, American families tended to meet all together at nights, in order to spend some hours of entertainment and listening to them. (195)

The other two ways of spreading music were Broadway shows and Hollywood movies. Broadway was possibly the most important place for the broadcasting of live music. Each season opened with at least 50 musicals. In relation to Hollywood, “Tin Pan Alley” incorporated music in the background of movies since the very beginning. They even created songs for specific movies. In 1929 motion pictures attracted the astonishing number of 100,000,000 moviegoers per week, so little by little, music was expanding. (196)

The 1920s are sometimes referred to as the “Jazz Age” owing precisely to the importance of this style of music. The first recording of a piece of Jazz took place in 1917, and by the beginning of the 1920s it had already become one of the most important musical styles. It is important to bear in mind that “Jazz emerged in the mid-1890s among African-American and creole musicians in New Orleans.” (200) The great popularity that Jazz acquired made Afro-American musicians have more possibilities of recording and broadcasting their compositions. Many historians believe that the first recording of Jazz music belongs to a group of five white musicians from New Orleans, The Original Dixieland Jazz Band. However, we have to notice that Afro-Americans were not allowed to do so before 1923. From 1923 onwards, things changed, and the real Jazz appeared, with such famous recordings as the one by Louis Armstrong and “His Hot Five” (and “His Hot Seven”), or Fletcher Henderson and His Orchestra. (199-200)

Hot Jazz was a variation that appeared through the 1920s. The Afro-American bands were pioneers in this style, more dynamic and emotionally charged than the ordinary jazz. It reached its climax between 1925 and 1929, and its main characteristics were individual solos and swinging rhythms. As Drowne and Hubert argue: “King’s Oliver Creole Band, ranked as one of the most important Hot Jazz Bands on the 1920’s.” (201) Directed by cornetist Joe “King” Oliver, this band also promoted beginners in that period and by the end of the 1920s,

dozens of them moved from Kansas, Chicago and other cities such as New York (the new mecca for recording music). Additionally, there was a close relationship between Jazz music and the speakeasies during the Prohibition above mentioned: numerous night clubs and cabarets attracting the attention of young people and tourists, by offering them places for drinking illicit beverages and dancing with such music styles. (201-202)

The greatest figure of this kind of music was the above mentioned Louis Armstrong, “cornetist and trumpeter whose inventive solos and technical brilliance marked the pinnacle of hot jazz” (203). Among his most famous songs, we have “Hebbie Jeebies”(1926), “Potato Head Blues” (1927) or “West End Blues” (1928). Even though the jazz’s greatest figures were Afro-Americans, there were many white musicians as well. Most of them tried to imitate the Afro-American style, and succeeded. Among them, we have “The Original Memphis Five,” “The Wolverines,” “Red Nichols and His Five Pennies,” etc. (203) In contrast to hot jazz, another branch called Sweet Jazz appeared, which was played mainly by white musicians and had slower tempos. It ended up becoming remarkably appealing to the middle-class. One the major figures was Paul Whiteman. (204)

Despite the popularity of Jazz music, many people thought that it was a sort of threat against the nation’s morals and young people’s behavior. For example, Henry Ford was one of the figures that strongly criticized Jazz music, as Drowne and Hubert point out:

Automobile tycoon Henry Ford likewise condemned jazz music and the modern dances such as the Charleston that often accompanied it. Jazz he believed, was nothing more that “monkey talk, jungle squeals, grunts and squeaks and gasps suggestive of cave love” and his newspaper, the *Dearborn Independent*, regularly published attacks on what he called “moron music.” (204)

These words serve to show what those critics mentioned. On the one hand, Jazz music served as a way-out from reality, a scape from the hard conditions of the age. On the other hand, it was responsible for the new changes that did not fit well within the most traditional part of society.

Another type of music that gained popularity during this age was Blues music. Its first great popularizer was W.C. Handy, also known as the Father of the Blues for songs like “Memphis Blues” (1912) or “St. Louis Blues.” (1914) (205) In 1920, Mammie Smith and her band “The Jazz Hounds” recorded “Crazy Blues” and it achieved such a record on sales that it got 75,000 copies sold just in one month. The white managers on great recording companies saw the potential that Afro-American music had, and decided to let them record this kind of

music, even though at the beginning Afro-American musicians were not allowed to record any Blues songs. (206)

3. Analysis of the films: Methodolgy Remarks

As Paul Watson points out in his study on film genres theory: “At a general level, work on genre seeks to understand film as a *specific form of commodity* and at a more refined level attempts to disentangle *different instances of that commodity*.” (112) He goes on to explain that several approaches have been used to address “Hollywood’s generic structures.” (112) Specifically, he talks about three “key lines of theoretical development” (112):

[...] the taxonomic view of genre which attempts to map the boundaries between generic classes; second, the view of genre as an economic strategy for organizing film production schedules; and third, the view of genre as a function of cognition, as a contract between producers and consumers which renders films intelligible on some level. (112)

The third approach seems to me the most convenient to apply to my analysis of the films, since they all belong to the gangster film genre, which exhibits a number of conventions that are crucial for understanding the gangster film precisely as a contract or agreement whereby the filmmakers already know what the audience expects from them, so that they construct the films following the gangster film criteria (conventions). Among them, we find:

- Urban settings.
- The use of dark colors, mostly grey and black.
- Formal outfits like suits and ties in the case of men, and elegant dresses in the case of women.
- Most commonly used props: guns, cigarettes, drugs and money.
- The American Dream theme, developed from a number of different points of view and with dissimilar resolutions.
- A narrative tone mostly achieved through music.
- Although women play an important role, most of the times the hero and the main focus of the film is precisely the gangster.

In connection with this last convention, it is important to bear in mind that gangster films exhibit a “preoccupation with how masculine identities are constructed and portrayed.” (Langford 53) And it just turns out that the films I am going to study can be analyzed following Barry Langford’s notion about “the relationship between the gangster as an exemplary figure

and the social context out of which he emerges and to which he answers.” (53) Hence, I will base my examination on the ways in which the four movies under consideration approach the construction of the, in many cases, infamous gangster masculine identity, on the one hand, and the approach they exhibit towards the above-mentioned conventions, on the other hand. The following pages will be devoted to the analysis of the films bearing in mind the above-mentioned methodology remarks.²

a) *The Roaring Twenties*

The Roaring Twenties was directed by Raoul Walsh in 1939, produced by Hal B. Wallis and distributed by Warner Bros. It is classified as one of the greatest gangster movies from the late 1930s. The story behind its title is quite long, but it begins with the figure of Mark Hellinger, a man who started working as a columnist writer for many newspapers, but as time went by, he got involved in some financial problems. His solution was entering the world of Hollywood where he had to write stories for some movies. His first great job came with a 50 page story called: *The World Moves on*, later re-named as *The Roaring Twenties*. Even though the script's authorship belongs to Jerry Wald, Richard Macaulay and Robert Rossen, the story behind this film is based on Hellinger's story. He said that this was the first story made by himself, and it was based on his own experiences. Just in the first minutes of the film, the audience can read a text about this work:

It may come to pass that, at some distant date, we will be confronted with another period similar to the one depicted in this photoplay. If that happens, I pray that the events, as dramatized here, will be remembered. In this film, the characters are composites of people I knew, and the situations are those that actually occurred. Bitter or sweet, most memories become precious as the years move on. This film is a memory - and I am grateful for it. (1:16)

According to Susan Speidel, the story and plot orders are the same: the film follows a chronological order that starts near the end of World War I (1918) and ends by 1933 after the removal of the Prohibition Law. In between we have some running times, where ellipsis take place, as for example, right after the end of WWI the movie shows how time passes and the main character finally comes back home by the end of 1919 (9:14-9:23).

This movie tells the story of Eddie Bartlett, a man who has to leave his job in a garage in order to go to the war. When he comes back home to New York, he has to face a different

²From now on, I will refer to episodes and scenes in the movies alluding to the exact time in which they appear onscreen.

society. His job has been occupied by another man, and he is unable to get it back again. Thanks to his friend George Hally, he finds a job as a taxi driver. Accidentally he is involved in the delivery of alcohol and gets arrested by police, being sentenced to 60 days in jail and a fine of \$100. When he comes out of jail, thanks to his new friend Panama Smith, he finds himself within the world of bootlegging. Time passes and he decides to build his own organization of bootlegging, at the same time that he meets again Jean Sherman, his love from the time of war. Time goes by, and he ends up losing the girl he loves and also the money he made throughout the years in the stock market crash of 1929. Near the end of the movie, he finds himself driving a cab again. Due to a coincidence with his beloved girl, he ends up in a gun battle against one of his old friends in order to save Sherman's husband from death.

As I observed in chapter 2, some famous writers based their novels on real gangsters of this period, as for example F. Scott Fitzgerald and his novel *The Great Gatsby*. In this case, even though the original story is based on Hellinger's experiences, the character of Eddie Bartlett is based on the figure of Larry Fay, one rumrunner that operated in New York City in the 1920s. With the profits he made, he was able to buy a taxi cab company, the same that happens in the movie with Eddie Bartlett. Furthermore, they both started with a partner. In the case of Fay, he teamed up with Owney Madden³ and in the case of Eddie Bartlett, he worked with his friend George Hally. Fay and Bartlett share two circumstances that make them equally relevant: They make a big fortune within the world of bootlegging but they later lose everything.

As explained at the beginning of this chapter, one of the major themes reflected in this kind of movies is the American Dream. However, this movie comes to show what, for want of a better name, I have called the "corrupted" version of the American Dream. It is a common assumption of American people that if you work hard, you will improve and succeed in life. In this movie, the characters try to achieve this end by means of bootlegging, which is not precisely considered a honest activity. Hence, the accumulation of easy money through easy jobs is the main purpose of Eddie Bartlett, George Hally and Nick Brown. Thus, they have corrupted the ethical principle of honesty which the Puritans brought to the new world and that later was transformed into the so-called American dream. In contrast, Jean Sherman and Lloyd Hart are characters who really believe in decent and law-abiding activities in order to achieve the same end. Thus, we have here two different versions of the American Dream, and two different endings: a positive one for Jean and Lloyd who achieved what the American Dream proposes and a tragic one for the gangsters.

³This figure is going to be very important in the section devoted to *The Cotton Club*.

Music plays an important role in gangster films. As a matter of fact, it is very important to achieve the narrative tone, as outlined at the beginning of the his chapter. In this movie, there are a lot of examples not only of music but of dance as well. So, which was the best starting point for a movie that was about the 1920s? The answer is music. In the first minute of the film, music sounds while some credits are shown. It is important to highlight that from the very beginning this element is present. Every time the narrator participates – using a voice-over – in order to give some extra information about the situation, there is music in the background. For example, from 20:40 to 21:13 the narrator tells the audience that the Prohibition Law has just started and according to his words: “the word speakeasy began to appear in our language.” As I commented before, music, dance and speakeasies were elements connected between them. In minute 26:00, the first speakeasy appears: what seemed to be an ordinary paint shop, was actually an illicit bar. After this first appearance, we have some others, and in all of them music enhances the situation: in 42:15 when Eddy’s beloved girl makes an audition in order to become a singer, or in 46:11 when she is accepted and performs her first show. As well in 1:02:50 again she is performing a show, in 1:21:40 after he realized that he was betrayed by one his fellows and in 1:33:51 when we see Eddy onscreen constantly drunk because of the loss of his beloved girl.

Regarding the new role of women, it becomes explicit when at the beginning of the movie the narrator comments on the short skirts that women started to wear: “there is an alarming news that women’s skirts are becoming shorter. Already there are 6 inches above the ankle.” (8:45) It is important to bear in mind that those changes were not accepted by everybody, actually the most conservative section of American society was afraid of them. As a matter of fact, when the narrator utters those words – always using a voiceover – a judge appears onscreen astonished by those shorter skirts. Besides, the new style in women’s haircut was another important issue during the 1920s that is also reflected in the film. As a matter of fact, the narrator mentions the phrase “bobbed hair is introduced” (8:51) and the character of Jean Sherman (Eddy’s love) is worth commenting in the light of the above-mentioned considerations. During his time fighting in the war, she used to send him letters and when the war ended and he came back they met for the first time. However, he found out that she was a very young girl (actually a minor) and this fact made him go away. Here, the term flapper, as defined by Drowne and Huber above, should be applied to the character of Jean: “they could flirt, ‘pet’ and play the field much more than their mothers and grandmothers had.” (17) And even more, she is depicted as a young woman who dares to send letters to a soldier much older than her. Moreover, she sings and performs shows in speakeasies, what makes her an example

of the young flapper, who even rejects marriage with Eddy but who does not reject the benefits that came while being by his side. At the end, when she really falls in love with Lloyd Heart, she decides to leave that way of living and accepts the traditional one: marrying and having children.

Despite this portrayal of Jean as an active woman, Eddie Bartlett is actually the central figure in the film. Throughout the whole movie, we see how he manages to earn money and gets the “corrupted” American Dream. The best example appears almost at the end of the movie, in 1:36:19 when Jean, after leaving Eddie in order to establish a family with Lloyd Hart, comes back to him looking for help. Eddy, even though he has lost everything, is still represented as a hero, and later on, in the final scene, (1:40:00 onwards) we see how he kills George Hally, emphasizing his heroic nature by managing to save Lloyd’s life and family, even though this meant the loss of Jean.

Another major theme in this movie is alcohol and the consequences of the Prohibition law. Numerous instances appear from the very beginning, when the law was passed (20:50) until the end, when in 1933 the law was abolished (1:21:47). Between 22:04 and 23:17 Eddy is caught selling alcohol and even though he is not related with that selling, he is arrested and charged with a \$100 fine and 60 days in jail. The judge in the film, tells him: “I give you a warning, that another offense would not be treated so lightly,” making reference to how the law was imposed on bootleggers, and also to what I commented before about a second breaking of the law. Some time later, the narrator uses an expression that is worth mentioning: “The Eddy of this story joins the thousands and thousands of other Eddies throughout America” (22:58), thus making reference not only to him, but to all those people who decided to enter this world of delinquency. Eddy has now become a gangster, only motivated by money. Two good definitions of these people are mentioned in the film: On the one hand in minute 29:27 the narrator says: “this new kind of army grows and grows. Always gaining new recruits who cares nothing about tomorrow, just so long as money is easy today.” On the other hand, in minute 33:41, Eddy’s lawyer tells him that he was on the wrong track, and his response was simple: “take what you can while you can get it.”

Crime was also closely related with the Prohibition and the movie reflects it abundantly. Eddy becomes one of the major rumrunners in New York, and therefore, he gets involved in numerous problems with some other rumrunners, as for example in minute 54:10 he and his partners decide to steal some goods from another guy. This evolved into a gun battle and later on it almost caused Eddy’s death: “Bootlegging has moved from individual effort to big business. Corruption, violence and murder [...] A new tool appeared: the Tommy” (57:50),

the narrator's voice-over points out. This is a good example to show the changes in the gangsters' *modus operandi* in order to achieve their objectives: from simple fights to gun battles, being the so-called "Tommy" an allusion to the Thompson submachine gun that appeared in 1920.

Now that I have dealt with the major themes, it is worth commenting on three more aspects: the urban settings, the use of dark colors and outfits. It can be seen through the whole movie an urban New York, with elements typical of the new period (cars, trucks, higher buildings, speakeasies). The use of dark colors is a common element among gangster's films. In this case, as the film was produced in black and white, that emphasis on dark colors can't be so much appreciated. However, it is true that some scenes, as for instance the last one, when Eddy goes to kill George, take place in the night, thus stressing the presence of obscurity. Finally, there is not a gangster movie which does not show men wearing suit and ties, and this movie is no exception. At the same time, women's elegant dresses figure in the characters of Jean Sherman and Panama Smith.

b) *King of the Roaring Twenties: the Story of Arnold Rothstein.*

King of the Roaring Twenties: the Story of Arnold Rothstein, also known as *The Big Bankroll*, is a 1961 film directed by Joseph M. Newman, produced by Samuel Bischoff and David Diamond and distributed by Allied Artists. The original story was written by Leo Katcher, and it was entitled: *The Big Bankroll: The Life and Times of Arnold Rothstein*. As the title indicates, the movie is about Rothstein's life, a mobster of the 1920's quite famous in the Jewish community. Rothstein was also known because of his methods to corrupt professional athletes. Drowne and Hubert point out about the Black Sox scandal:

In September 1920, eight members of the Chicago White Sox baseball club—including star outfielder Joe "Shoeless Joe" Jackson, one the game's greatest hitters — were indicted for conspiring to throw the 1919 World Series against the Cincinnati Reds in exchange for a sizable payoff. (155)

This deeply affected Americans' faith in this game. Rothstein was involved in this scandal, and it has been described in some other films, as for example in *The Godfather II*. The movie deals with the life of Arnold Rothstein, a man who achieves, as Eddy Bartlett in the previous movie, the corrupted American dream, at least during some time, for at the end he finds himself ruined, without money, friends and family. He and his lifelong friend Jonny Burke

had always been involved in the gangsters' world. Time passes, and Arnold becomes a notorious figure, only motivated by money. He meets Carolyn Green, an actress to whom he promises eternal love. Since the very beginning of their marriage, the true personality of Rothstein is shown: they both spend their honeymoon on a racetrack, in which he abandons his beloved wife in order to orchestrate a victory on the racetrack. As time goes by, his relationship with Carolyn and his pal Johnny deteriorates, until the point that she leaves him. His friend ends up dying after being rejected by him and Rothstein finally loses his relationships, his money and influences, dying while playing poker.

In this movie the presence of dark colors is also noticeable. Even though it is a black and white film, we can perceive darkness for instance in some of Arnold's worst moments, which happen during the night. A case in point is when his friend Johnny comes seeking for help and he refuses to help him, in the scene of Johnny's death, or when his wife decides to abandon him, and almost at the end, when he dies betrayed by all his relatives.

The presence of music is also quite noteworthy in this movie. The audience can listen to it in a number of important occasions, for example, in minute 16:55 when Rothstein is trying to get Carolyn's attention and they meet at a restaurant in which music is played, or in 21:17 when he has a second date with her, as well as in 39:31, which shows one of the typical speakeasies of those days, with music and dances.

The character of Carolyn serves to show the new role of women in society. She is first seen on screen as a young actress with a brilliant future. However, Rothstein appears and although she does not have in mind the idea of establishing a relationship, she ends up feeling astonished by the life Rothstein had, and also by the love that he promises to her, making her quit her job: "I'm quitting the show. I've decided to take a new job [...] House wife." (37:34) So, for a time, she is free and determined to live independently, but she yields in the end to the force of tradition. In 38:31 Carolyn's roommate (Madge) tells her about her personal experience, being married with a gambler in the past, in order to make Carolyn re-think her decision:

I was married to a gambler once, and when you are married to a gambler, the only game you play is solitaire. Gambling takes all the energy and passion they have, and you have to be satisfied with what is left. You spent all your time waiting for him to come home. Sometimes he comes home late. Sometimes later and one day he just don't come home.

This quote sums up the kind of life that Carolyn is going to have from this point onwards, a life of solitude and abandonment. For example, in minute 1:01:12 when they are at home an

the telephone keeps ringing until Rothstein leaves Carolyn alone, or in 1:07:02, when they have a significant dialogue: Rothstein asks her: “What did you do today?” and she replies “Uh, I window-shopped and walked the dog,” then he asks her another question: “and what did you do yesterday?” and she replies again: “Well, I walked the dog and window-shopped, and in the afternoon I went to an audition.” Her days are not as joyful as she thought and in 1:25:19 Carolyn says: “this is the first night you’ve been home since we were married and how do you spend it. Watching the clock, waiting for a man to die in the electric chair,” and Rothstein replies: “I waited a long time for this midnight, and it feels good.” Finally, she decides to leave him, realizing that Madge was right about the life of a gangster’s wife.

This movie also focuses on the personality of the hero, represented by Arnold Rothstein, and his methods for getting the American Dream, if certainly enough it did not last much in his case. However, Carolyn recovers at the end her former self-reliance and proves that it was possible for a woman to reject a kind of life she no longer wanted. In this aspect, the female character is rather significant as far as the new role of women is concerned.

c) *The Cotton Club*

The Cotton Club is a 1984 movie directed by Francis Ford Coppola, produced by Robert Evans and distributed by Orion Pictures. It deals with the story of Dixie Dwyer, a musician who after saving the life of the mobster Dutch Schultz, finds himself within the world of rackets. The nightclub known as Cotton Club appears, and Sandman Williams and his brother (Dixie’s neighbors, both Afro-Americans) get a job at the bar as dancers. It is important to highlight the racist vision of the club: all the performers and musicians who worked at the club were black, however, only white people could be costumers. Time passes and Dixie gets deeper into the world of rumrunners, by playing music here and there, until he has the opportunity of becoming a Hollywood star (playing the role of a gangster). Until that moment he was subjected to Dutch Schultz but from now on, he is no longer going to obey his orders. They are rivals in the affections of Vera Cicero, a young beautiful woman who is in love with Dixie, but prefers to stay by Dutch’s side because of money. While Dixie makes his way as actor, his brother Vincent makes his as gangster, working for the Dutch, until near the end, when he faces him. Then Dixie and Dutch fight because of Vera, arguing until the point in which Dixie is almost killed.

A parallel story is told by the figure of Sandman Williams, who after getting a job as dancer (with his brother) falls in love with another dancer, the young girl Lila Rose (who is trapped in society because of her skin). Dutch’s way of behavior did not fit well among some

other important mobs. When he gets killed, Dixie is finally able to establish a relationship with Vera.

The allusions to some famous people of that decade are quite important in the movie. Among them, and as I mentioned before, Owney Madden, a leading figure in New York City during the 1920s, also known as “The Killer.” The history of the Cotton Club (the bar) is quite well-known. It began with the figure of Jack Johnson (the first African-American world heavyweight boxing champion) who in 1920 rented a building in the heart of Harlem in order to open the so-called Club Deluxe. Time later, in 1923, Madden appears and buys the club, changing the name to “Cotton Club,” and using it to sell his own alcohol. This figure is represented in the film in the character of Irvin Starck (the owner of the club). Another major figure in the movie is Dutch Schultz, an important German Jewish-American mobster in New York City during the 1920s and 1930s. He, as many other rumrunners, made money from bootlegging. By 1935, after disobeying the inner laws among mobsters, he was killed. Two more rumrunners also appear in this movie. One is Charles “Lucky” Luciano who, although he appears only at the end of the movie, is quite important because he was one of Dutch’s fellows in the 1920s and had some problems with him. In the movie, Dutch ends up the same way, having problems with Luciano’s “family.” The other one is Bumpy Rhodes, a crucial figure for black people since he is based on Bumpy Johnson, a Harlem gangster, known for being insolent when dealing with white people.

It is important to mention that this is the first movie, from the four under consideration in this dissertation, produced in color and not in black and white. This is important because now the presence of dark colors and the contrast between them and other colors is enhanced. Significantly, from the very beginning a dark atmosphere is perceived, for example, in 1:48, when the first speakeasy is shown and a dark environment is presented along music and dance. Other examples may be found in 3:14 when the entrance to the Bamville Club is shown, in 13:13 when Dixie and Vincent are in their mother’s house and the dark atmosphere stands out, full of shadows. In 14:57 when Sandman along with his brother get the first audition at The Cotton Club, in 17:39 when Dixie goes to the first party payed by gangsters. At this moment, the presence of typical outfits for men and women stands out and is merged with dark colors: all the suits in the party are black or grey, and even Vera wears a black dress. Along with these two elements, the presence of urban settings is quite obvious, as in 3:04 when the dirty streets of Harlem are shown, and in 14:16 when the outer part of The Cotton Club appears. In general, the suburbs of New York are the scenario for this movie, reflecting in a really remarkable way this aspect of the 1920s.

Obviously, music is one of the major factors in this movie, as well as in the others. Since it is set in a club, it is just logical that a lot of musical shows are going to appear on screen. For example, the first 3 minutes show the performance of a group of dancers. Later on 3:14 a small bar appears, the Bamville Club, in which Dixie is presented as a musician. More frames in which speakeasies appear along with music are shown: for example in 15:51 when one of the guys who works for Dutch requires Dixie to play in a private party, in 28:30 when we are shown the back of the bar, the place where black artists prepared their shows, in 30:00 and 33:57 two shows are offered, and it is worth mentioning that right after the end of one performance, another one started, with no pauses among them, just a constant flowing of music and dance. These are just a few examples among many others.

The role of women is well reflected in this movie as well. The audience is shown the story between two characters who fight for Vera's love. As explained in chapter 2, women's mentality was changing in that decade, traditions were left aside, and a good representation is found in the character of Vera, who seems to have a liberal attitude towards sexuality and love. At some point in the movie (8:43-8:50) she is carried home by Dixie, with whom she has sex. As he gets up to leave, she tells him: "Don't go home, ok? Stay here with me. Just for night, please." Vera is in love with Dixie but remains by Dutch's side because of money. Also in 13:47, Dixie's mother tells Vincent that his girlfriend should wear her clothes in the house (she is walking around the house with no more clothes than her underwear). Traditions and changes are constantly in conflict. In 45:21 William tells Lila: "well, let's get married now instead of having lunch" and Lila replies: "No chance. I got many things I need to do. I wanna make them, I mean really make them. I wanna do Broadway" (45:27-45:36). Another good example appears when Dixie and Vera finally meet in private. They are adults and as such, they kiss and have sex (55:31-57:31). However, she doesn't want to stay by Dixie's side, even though she was in love with him. Putting reason over emotion, she decides what is more convenient for her from the economic point of view. This is very well reflected in the scene just before Dutch is killed, when they meet in the streets and have a little dialogue, in which Dixie tells her: "That party life is over. I wanna ask you one more time: Do you want to come alone?" (1:58:16-1:58:32) and she replies: "Do me the biggest favor you ever did for me [...] just kiss me on my lovely lips and don't say anything. Keep looking over your shoulder, and maybe we'll see each other again. May we'll have a drink, maybe we'll make love. Maybe, Dixie" (1:58:32-1:58:55). Again, her feelings are revealed, she is in love with him, but she is not willing to reject Dutch's influence and money. However, after Dutch's death, Vera and Dixie are finally able to be

together, but Vera has proved that she has made her own rational decisions independently of her feelings.

The mafia that appeared as a consequence of prohibition, and related criminal activities, appear quite often in this movie. For example, in 6:45, Dutch is attacked by some gangsters, and Dixie saves his life. As the movie goes on, many references to the power of rumrunners are shown, for instance in 16:30 when Dixie is offered \$150 just for playing music in a private party, or in 23:54 when Dutch tells Vera: “anything you want, anything. Just ask me” and she replies: “I want to own a nightclub” (24:01). Later on, in minute 1:12:23 it becomes clear the power and influence of gangsters, since Vera had already become the owner of a nightclub.

This movie has also several references to people who achieve the American Dream, but it is important to divide them. On the one hand, we have those who worked hard to achieve their dreams, following the ethically correct (for lack of a better word) American Dream: Dixie, starting his career as a musician, spending several years under the service of a gangster, to a brilliant career as an actor. Also the Williams’ brothers, Clay and Sandman, two Afro-americans who establish their own position in society by means of dancing and working hard to get auditions, and Lila, who also achieves her dreams as a dancer. On the other hand, those who tried to achieve the corrupted American Dream: Dutch, a character who makes all his fortune by means of bootlegging as well as the other gangsters: Owney Madden, Vincent Dwyer, Frenchy Demange, Charles “Lucky” Luciano, Irving Starck, Bumpy Rhodes, etc.

d) Once Upon a Time in America

Once Upon a Time in America is a 1984 film directed by Sergio Leone, produced by Arnon Milchan and distributed by Warner Bros. It was based on Harry Grey’s *The Hoods*, and it is known that he was involved in the world of bootlegging, so much of the content of the book is autobiographical. The script plays an important role as far as there were six people involved in the writing of it: Leonardo Benvenuti, Piero De Benardi, Enrico Medioli, Franco Arcalli, Franco Ferrini and Stuart M. Kaminsky. The story can be interpreted from many points of view, although maybe the most interesting one is that one about Noodles’ dream. The movie begins *in media res* with the appearance of Noodles smoking opium at Chuns Lao’s, a Chinese theater. The movie goes on and the final scene is the same as that of the beginning, thus giving the movie a circular structure. Because of this, an interesting debate might be held about whether the story has actually happened or was just Noodle’s dream about his future life.

Basically, the plot of the movie revolves around a group of young boys who decide to enter the world of crime, beginning with the arrival of Max to the city of New York. From this point onwards, the audience is presented with the life experiences of Noodles, Cockeye, Patsy and Dominic, this one is going to die shot by a gangster. Because of his death, Noodles decides to take a knife and kill Bugsy, the mobster that killed Dominic, subsequently killing also the policeman that came to stop him. He goes to jail and spends there the whole period corresponding to his youth. By the time he is released from jail, his friends have already become prominent figures within the world of crime, with a good number of assaults, murders, robberies, etc. Years pass and disagreements appear between Max (who wants to change their way of acting) and Noodles (who only believes in money). They both leave the city and go to Florida. There is where Max reveals Noodles his biggest dream: a hold-up at the Federal Reserve. Noodles, following the advice of Carol (Max's girlfriend) decides to betray his friend in order to save his life: a robbery at the Federal Reserve would be a suicide due to the great amount of police and guns that are going to be there. Time later, Max has become an important politician in New York City. However, after a party, in which he talks with Noodles, he commits suicide. In the movie there are some allusions to other famous gangster's movies. Among them, *The Roaring Twenties*. As a matter of fact, the relationship between Bartlett and Sherman (in *The Roaring Twenties*) parallels that between Noodles and Deborah.

It seems clear that one of the major themes in this movie is that of crime, and related issues such as bootlegging, the world of rackets, rumrunners, gangsters and the enormous power and influence they all had at that time in American society. As explained at the beginning of this chapter, the gangster genre presents a number of conventions and some of them appear conspicuously in this movie: the urban settings, the use of guns, and the presence of formal outfits. Through the whole movie, we as spectators watch an urban New York City. The timeline does not follow a chronological order, but rather a fragmented pattern with plenty of flashbacks and flash-forwards. However, the setting seems to stay invariable despite the passing of time, there are just tiny details that establish the changes from one period to another, and one of them is the evolution of automobiles. Guns and weapons are crucial elements in the movie as well, since they appear from the very beginning, varying from knives to automatic rifles. Now in relation to the outfits, a change may be perceived in the style of wearing suits and dresses. During their youth, Max, Cockeye, Patsy, Noodles and Dominic wear clothes of low quality. As time goes on and they start earning money, their appearance changes, and they are able to buy better suits. The same happens with Deborah and Patsy.

The episodes related with crime are so many that it becomes difficult to choose examples. However, I think the following ones will be sufficiently illustrative: in 03:59 a group of gangsters attack Eve (Noodle's girlfriend) and in 04:12 they kill her; in 04:44 one of Noodle's friends is tortured in order to get some information about his location; in 10:19 a very simple but symbolic representation of the times appear when a big cake with the inscription "Prohibition" is shown during a party; in 16:32 Noodles kills the gangster that had previously kill his girlfriend and in 38:38, after having a talk with Moe (Fat's Moe Restaurant's owner) Noodles mentions a suitcase that should have contained \$1,000,000.

Within the gangster world depicted in the movie, the issue of money obtained from crime is very relevant and there are many references to it. For example, in 43:48 all the members of the group carry out their first job as gangsters and in 45:00 they have to decide between earning a \$1 for the job or robbing a drunk man. Also in 1:53:26 they rob a jewelry shop and hand the diamonds in to Frankie, although they later kill him and his fellows, getting back both the diamonds and the money they were going to obtain for the job. After another flash-forward, in 2:04:53 the issue of money becomes evident when a journalist asks someone about "Particularly in view of the rumor about rigged contracts, bribery... the international mafia, especially those dealing the illegal use of the Transport Union pension funds." From 2:13:00 to 2:19:05 Noodles and his pals go into a hospital in order to blackmail a policeman who was obsessed with having a boy and they managed to change the number of all the babies in the maternity ward, so that he had to accept the extortion. All in all, and despite the benefits obtained from all these illegal actions, the business associated with the gangster world was bound to end sooner or later, owing to social and political reasons. This idea is contained in the following statement uttered by Mr. Sharkey (a politician) in 2:51:14:

Times change. Prohibition ain'tgonna last much longer. Take it from me. A lot of you guys will be out of work. You ever think of setting yourselves up in business? All those trucks they're using to haul liquor, soon be selling them for nothing. I'm talking about hundreds of vehicles controlled by a national organization...

Here, Sharkey is giving the main characters a possible way-out by telling them that the Prohibition is not going to last forever; they need to start thinking about some other possibilities for their future, otherwise, they will lose their jobs. As a matter of fact, the movie shows in 3:03:47 the celebration of the end of the Prohibition Law. Obviously enough, the major theme in this movie is crime. The examples I have referred to inform us about different criminal, illegal, violent and immoral actions in which the group of five characters which comprise the

core of the plot engage. From a childhood marked by misery they evolve to a time in which they are able to buy anything they want. This shift from utter poverty to wealth was possible only because a number of factors coincided in the 1920s whereby the Prohibition Law, paradoxically, made feasible the illicit enrichment of criminals like the ones depicted in the movie.

Women also play a crucial role in the movie. There are two main female characters who represent two opposed social attitudes: the young flapper and the conservative girl, that is to say, Peggy and Deborah, respectively. In 40:26 Deborah gets naked after dancing. She knew that Noodles was watching her and wanted to surprise him. It is worth mentioning that she was in love with him, but she decided not to stay by his side, because she knew that staying with him would suppose a failure for her professional career (as explained later on in minute 2:28:51). In 51:06 Peggy strips to Noodles. She is used to this kind of freedom, in 56:03 when Dominic buys a dessert for Peggy and he says: “Yeah. For the two-penny one she only gives you a hand job. I can do that myself.” Here we see that Peggy is depicted as a woman who does not care about traditions or moral rules, she only cares about what she wants and what she wants most is money. That seems to be her main motivation in life, but at the same time she appears as an autonomous person unconcerned about the typical moral norms regarding feminine behavior. As a matter of fact, in 1:00:42 she is caught having sex with a policeman in exchange of money. In 1:15:45 after seeing that Noodles and Max get hurt in a fight, Deborah closes the door of her house to Noodles. Again, Deborah knows that no future is possible if she decides to stay by his side. When they reach maturity, we can observe that they both have still the same idea in mind: on the one hand, in 1:43:30 Peggy tells Noodles that she works in a club: “Hey, you watch it, now. And my prices, they’ve gone up. I work in a high-class joint now.” On the other hand, in 1:44:35 we see Deborah, who is determined to achieve her goals. She also tries to convince Noodles of quitting his lifestyle. Actually, she tells Noodles in 2:28:51: “Noodles, you’re the only person that I have ever... that I ever cared about. But you’d lock me up and you’d throw away the key, wouldn’t you?” These words make clear that she wants to control her own life and Noodles is the kind of man who would not let her be autonomous so there is no place in her life for a man like Noodles. Even though they never started a relationship, the future that they both could have had is shown in 2:46:55, after Max has already begun a relationship with Carol, the girl that Noodles raped in the Diamonds’ robbery. At this point, Max and Noodles have a discussion about women, and in the middle of it, Max bumps out Carol, saying that she meant nothing to him. This is the possible future that Deborah could have found if she had decided to stay with Noodles.

This film contrasts with the previous ones mainly because it doesn't rely so much in music, even though the person in charge of composing the soundtrack for the film was the well-known Ennio Morricone, an Italian composer who has worked for more than 500 movies.

As in the previous ones, some conventions of the gangster film genre can be easily seen in this movie. First of all, the corrupted American Dream, by means of bootlegging in the four main characters. Even Deborah, who was a hard working woman, fell in the trap of corruption, and it can be seen at end of the movie, when she tells Noodles the truth about her life, always linked to Max in order to achieve her goals.

Noodles and Max, the two main characters in the movie, represent the assertive and aggressive masculine identity. From the very beginning they appear surrounded by women and it is clear that the emphasis is placed on them, despite the importance of female characters.

Although the film is also in full color, dark colors are present in the moments when things were not going as they were supposed to, as for instance at the beginning when Eve is murdered, or in 1:26:43 when Noodles sees the graves of his friends. As well in 1:59:59 when Jimmy O'Donnell is being tortured, in 2:28:10 when Deborah is raped by Noodles... In general terms, dark colors appear when the director wishes to stress the fact that life has bad moments, even though the life of the characters is presented with brilliance once they have moved on to a higher place in society.

This movie is perhaps the most complete one of all as far as the representation of the 1920s is concerned. Its length allows us to see how that decade was. We perceive a change not only in Noodles, but in his friends as well. Young people were enjoying a new life, a life that their parents or grandparents did not even dream about. Crime opened many doors to people like them, gave them money and power. Life in general changed, and through the whole movie we are able to see it. My first thought when approaching a work like this one, was to offer a clear representation about the 1920's life and society, and I think through this movie that desire is fulfilled.

4. Conclusion

The 1920s was a period that deeply changed the life of American people. It is at this precise moment, after the end of WWI and with the passing of the Prohibition Law, that the necessary conditions for the appearance of new mafias emerged. It is clear that without all these conditions, this period would not have been the same. If alcohol would not have been prohibited, bootleggers would not have appeared. In other words, we are facing a period of American history quite controversial and important, for it disclosed the, sometimes, not acknowledged double morality of American society. Through my research, I have realized that things were not as obvious as they looked. Books can teach and inform us about the hard conditions of that age and the main elements that characterized American life in those years. However, books cannot give us any visual representation of that age. That's why films are a remarkable supplement to history or literature books if one wishes to analyse this period. I have learnt many things about this period, some of them have been commented in this work, but many others, due to length limitations, have not been included. For example, we can't forget the importance of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, or the relevance of sports and the wide variety of scandals that took place, immigration issues and laws that established a limit of immigrants to the US, the newly achieved importance of building, especially skyscrapers, the role of literature and the great amount of novels written in that period, advertising, fashion, food and drinks, etc. However, limits exist, and it may be that this work is the door for a future project in which a deeper vision of this period may be obtained.

As mentioned above, the films were analyzed following a chronological order that allows us to see the different approaches adopted by the directors, as well as the logical differences derived from the very time of production of the films. The two first films are in black and white, so the contrast with the black colors was not as evident as in the next ones. *The Cotton Club* and *Once Upon a Time in America* present several scenes in which the contrasts are quite clear, showing in many occasions a clash between the joyful moments of this age (represented through music and dance) and those hard moments not so enjoyable (represented partly by the dark atmosphere created by means of playing with light, shadows and scenery).

Urban settings are present in a similar way in the four movies. The main action usually takes place inside a speakeasy, a club or in the streets. There is not much difference in this respect. Streets are full of dirt, crowded by people trying to establish their business, etc.

Speakeasies are filled with people drinking alcohol, dancing and looking for fun (also looking for troubles, as we could see in the case of gangsters).

As far as the characterization is concerned, I could verify that the focus is always on the male characters, portrayed as people coming from the lower classes of society trying to achieve the American Dream. In this case, as I mentioned before, a “corrupted” American Dream, because they try to get things not by means of hard-work but through illegal actions which gave them easy money. Women of course played an important role in that age, and also in the movies, but the “hero” is more prevalent, if certainly enough female characters play a crucial role in helping to enhance the heroic nature of the male characters. In other words, the masculine identities are shaped and developed very much thanks to the contrast offered by female characters.

Finally, all the movies show common props such as guns, alcohol, cigarettes, music, outfits, etc. All these elements are present, so that we can confirm Paul Watson’s view about genre “as a function of cognition, as a contract between producers and consumers which renders films intelligible on some level” (112). In other words, the audience and the filmmakers already know what to expect from and how to do a gangster film, respectively, and the four movies I have examined constitute perfect examples of that contract.

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