



## RESEARCH

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### THE TRANSGRESSIVE DISCOURSE OF ROWLAND BROWN'S CINEMA (1931–1933): A BRIEF CAREER IN PRE-CODE HOLLYWOOD

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#### ABSTRACT:

This article consists of an analysis of the film work and career of director Rowland Brown, one of the first (if not *the* first) director-screenwriters in Hollywood. Brown pursued his career during Hollywood's pre-Code era, but only directed three idiosyncratic films, all of which were linked to the gangster genre: *Quick Millions* (1931), *Hell's Highway* (1932) and *Blood Money* (1933). There are many factors which explain why he was ousted from Hollywood and not allowed to direct again, one of which is the highly transgressive and critical nature of the discourse found in his cinema. Despite the uniqueness and originality of his film work, today he is an all but forgotten figure, only acknowledged by a prestigious group of film historians. His cinema has yet to be studied in depth. The ultimate purpose of this article is to contribute towards redressing this omission in the History of Film.

**KEY WORDS:** Rowland Brown–Classical Hollywood cinema–Pre-Code period (1930–1934)–*Quick Millions* (1931)–*Hell's Highway* (1932)–*Blood Money* (1933)–gangster genre

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# EL DISCURSO TRANSGRESOR DEL CINE DE ROWLAND BROWN (1931-1933): UNA BREVE CARRERA EN EL HOLLYWOOD PRE-CODE

## RESUMEN:

El presente artículo consiste en el análisis de la obra y trayectoria fílmica del cineasta Rowland Brown, uno de los primeros (si no el primero) directores-guionistas de Hollywood. Brown desarrolló su carrera en el periodo Pre-Code y tan solo realizó tres idiosincráticas películas vinculadas con el género *gangster*: *Quick Millions* (1931), *Hell's Highway* (1932) y *Blood Money* (1933). Numerosas razones contribuyeron a que fuera expulsado de Hollywood y no se le permitiera volver a dirigir, entre ellas el discurso enormemente transgresor y crítico de su cine. A pesar de la singularidad y originalidad de su corpus fílmico, en la actualidad es una figura olvidada, tan solo reconocido por un prestigioso grupo de historiadores cinematográficos. Su cine todavía no ha sido estudiado en profundidad. Este artículo tiene como fin último contribuir a suplir esa laguna de la Historia del Cine.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Rowland Brown – cine clásico de Hollywood – periodo Pre-Code (1930-1934) – *Quick Millions* (1931) – *Hell's Highway* (1932) – *Blood Money* (1933) – género *gangster*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Rowland Brown—playwright, director, screenwriter and author of original stories for the cinema—is a cult figure of classical Hollywood cinema. In the words of Don Miller (1971, p. 43), he was an authentic *auteur maudit*. The main reason behind this was that he only directed three groundbreaking, audacious films—*Quick Millions* (1931), *Hell's Highway* (1932) and *Blood Money* (1933)—all of which belonged to the pre-Code era<sup>2</sup> and were associated with the gangster genre. He did not direct again; suddenly, he almost completely disappeared from the world of cinema.

More importantly, he not only directed these films, but also wrote them. He was the co-author of the original stories of two of them, *Quick Millions* and *Blood Money*, and he was the co-screenwriter of all three, which was something totally unheard of during the era. In fact, he first began as a screenwriter and playwright before making the leap to directing. Thus, he was one of the first (if not *the* first) who took

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<sup>2</sup> Pre-Code refers to American films made between 1930 and 1934, during which time films enjoyed exceptional freedom due to the absence of genuine self-censorship combined with the newfound power of the spoken word. In fact, although self-censorship in the cinema had existed since 1922, with the creation of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), Hollywood did not firmly commit to the process until July 1934, with the establishment of the PCA (Production Code Administration), which rigorously applied the Motion Picture Production Code (1930). The MPPDA and the Code were commonly known as the Hays Office and the Hays Code respectively, after Will Hays, who led the MPPDA from 1922 to 1945.

on the dual roles of director and co-screenwriter, long before other more famous people more widely credited for having taken that step, such as Preston Sturges, John Huston, Billy Wilder, and Joseph L. Mankiewicz. Consequently, his films, both unconventional and striking, represent his own personal expression.

Despite the remarkable quality of his films, their value as critical works far removed from the usual product generated by Hollywood, his pioneering work as writer-director, and the (by no means insignificant) distinction of having been twice nominated for an Oscar by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS)—the first time for his original story for *The Doorway to Hell* (Archie Mayo, 1930), and the second for the original story for *Angels with Dirty Faces* (Michael Curtiz, 1938)—Rowland Brown is an all but forgotten figure. His acknowledgement is limited to a small and prestigious group of historians, such as Paul Rotha and Richard Griffith (1964), Lewis Jacobs (1972), John Baxter (1973), Richard Koszarski (1980), Bertrand Tavernier and Jean-Pierre Coursodon (1997), and Martin Scorsese and Michael Henry Wilson (2001), who have included him in larger works, such as manuals on the History of Cinema or dictionaries of directors. In terms of studies featuring and an in-depth analysis of his work, they are practically non-existent. Not a single book or dissertation has been published that is devoted exclusively to his work. There are only two texts of any note that mention him: an article of a rather biographical nature in *Focus on Film* (Miller, 1971), and a chapter in a volume on five directors (Tibbets, 1985), which expands on the same article. Finally, I also believe it is relevant to mention an article by Gerald Peary (1976) that was published in *The Velvet Light Trap*, because, although it refers exclusively to *The Doorway to Hell*, it focuses strongly on Brown's work as a writer.

A great deal of this historiographical neglect is due to the inaccessibility of his films. *Quick Millions*, *Hell's Highway* and *Blood Money* have been very difficult to see for decades, have never been marketed on VHS, and have only been broadcast on television in the United States a handful of times. Of the three (at the time of writing this text), *Hell's Highway* is the only one of his films to have been released on DVD, and that occurred very recently. Curiously, it was first released on DVD in Spain (by Vértice, in March 2014), and subsequently (in October 2015) it was released in North America as part of the pack *TCM Archives. Forbidden Hollywood Collection, Vol. 9*, Warner Archive Collection. *Quick Millions* and *Blood Money* continue to be commercially unavailable.

What is more, regarding Rowland Brown himself, everything related to him is shrouded in darkness and mystery. The fact is, very little is known about him and there has been much speculation as to why his career was so abruptly cut short. Most authors tend to highlight a single event, which, although it remains unsubstantiated, forms part of the legend behind the director. He is said to have punched an important Hollywood executive, which brought his career to a sudden end (Rotha & Griffith, 1964, pp. 354-355; Miller, 1971, p. 43; Baxter, 1973, pp. 99, 182; Tibbets, 1985, p. 180; Tavernier & Coursodon, 1997, p. 378; Scorsese & Wilson, 2001, pp. 140-141; Maddin, 2007b, p. 8). This alleged confrontation took place in 1936 and, whether it is true or apocryphal, as of 1937, the fact is that Brown

was barely able to return to work. He only occasionally managed to sell his original stories to the studios, alongside two late and isolated collaborations as a co-writer and head of additional dialogues for *Johnny Apollo* (Henry Hathaway, 1940), and *The Nevadan* (Gordon Douglas, 1950) respectively.

Brown was an eccentric character that Hollywood committed itself to oust. His films are no less eccentric than their creator. Justifiably, he has been compared to such directors as Erich von Stroheim (Rotha & Griffith, 1964, p. 355) and Samuel Fuller (Tavernier & Coursodon, 1997, p. 378), with whom he is seen to share remarkable similarities, both historical and aesthetic.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

This research aims to study his work and film career with the ultimate purpose of examining and revealing the idiosyncrasy, originality and transgressive discourse of his cinema. In order to do so, it specifically aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To contextualise his film work and provide a complete panoramic view of it, along with Brown's various creative facets.
2. To analyse his productions.
3. To define the essential features of his filmic corpus.
4. To correct the mistakes that are presented in the bibliographical sources regarding the facts of his career in the industry, and the films mistakenly included in his filmography.
5. To contribute, therefore, towards establishing a filmography for Brown that is free of mistakes and closer to his real filmography than those produced to date.
6. To examine the many causes that contributed to the end of his career and motivated his expulsion from the Hollywood studio system.

## 3. HYPOTHESIS AND METHODOLOGY

To achieve these objectives, I have analysed the three films where Rowland Brown worked as director and screenwriter in detail, based on theme, plot, narrative and visual factors, as well as looking at the critical and commercial reception of his film work. Of his remaining works as a writer—fifteen in all—due to their lack of availability I have examined only twelve: *The Doorway to Hell*, *State's Attorney* (George Archainbaud, 1932), *What Price Hollywood?* (George Cukor, 1932), *The Robin Hood of El Dorado* (William A. Wellman, 1936), *The Devil Is a Sissy* (W. S. Van Dyke, 1936), *Boy of the Streets* (William Nigh, 1937), *Angels with Dirty Faces*, *The Lady's from Kentucky* (Alexander Hall, 1939), *Johnny Apollo*, *Nocturne* (Edwin L. Marin, 1946), *The Nevadan* and *Kansas City Confidential* (Phil Karlson, 1952)<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> I have not been able to see the following films: *Points West* (Arthur Rosson, 1929), *Leave it to Blanche* (Harold Young, 1934, U.K.) and *Widow's Might* (Cyril Gardner, 1935, U.K.).

Since previous bibliographic texts have been both brief and limited, in order to contextualise his career and understand his strained relations with the Hollywood system I have carried out extensive research of news and newspaper articles from the era, especially focusing my attention on the following trade papers: *Film Daily*, *Hollywood Filmograph*, *International Photographer*, *Modern Screen*, *Motion Picture Almanac*, *Motion Picture*, *Motion Picture Daily*, *Motion Picture Herald*, *National Board of Review Magazine*, *New York Times*, *Photoplay*, *Screenland*, *Silver Screen*, *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Variety*.

Through this methodology, which consists of a combination of filmic analysis, research on historical documents of the era, and bibliographic sources, I have established that Rowland Brown's cinema was characterised by its great individuality, manifested chiefly by means of a strong thematic cohesion focused on criminality in the urban underworld. In turn, I will demonstrate that there is no single reason that explains the end of his career as a filmmaker, but as many as six explanations can be inferred.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

Rowland Brown was born in Akron, Ohio, on November 6 1900, and died in Balboa, California, on 6 May 1963, but almost everything else known about him is uncertain. His professional profile in *Motion Picture Almanac 1931* ("Writers", 1931, p. 226) and *Motion Picture Almanac 1932* ("Writers", 1932, p. 192) reads as follows:

Came to Hollywood in 1928 and became a laborer on the Fox lot; next property boy and then gag man. Provided ideas for several scenario writers; then became a writer himself; wrote "Doorway to Hell" for Warner Bros., collaborated con Courtney [sic] Terrett on "Skyline" for Fox and in 1931 signed contract with Fox and wrote "Quick Millions".

However, several of these pieces of information are wrong. The most significant error, due to it being replicated in later texts (Tavernier & Coursodon, 1997, p. 379), is the mention of his participation in *Skyline* (Sam Taylor, 1931), a confusion that arises from the fact that it was one of the working titles of *Quick Millions* ("Rowland Brown's First", 1931, p. 22). Therefore, *Skyline* must be completely removed from Brown's filmography. Furthermore, the profile omits that his work as an expert in gags took place at Universal, where he was part of the team that wrote the comedies for the star Reginald Denny. He obtained his first screenwriting credit at that studio, in 1929, for Hoot Gibson's western *Points West*.

While Brown was still working at Universal, he wrote a story that he sold to Warner Bros. This story led directly to fame and laid the foundations for his whole career. It was *A Handful of Clouds*, which became *The Doorway to Hell*, one of the most emblematic gangster films of the early 1930s. Brown's personal stamp on the completed film, and the role he played in its making, was enormous, as will be demonstrated. According to Gerald Peary (1976, pp. 2-3), who claims that *A Handful of Clouds* was not an original story but a play, he was also the author of the first

script and of at least another later version, before the script was modified (and purged of its political content) by George Rosener, who was given sole credit as screenwriter. This explains the strong connection of the film with the filmmaker's entire later filmic corpus. In fact, the film, though directed by Archie Mayo, is a draft of *Quick Millions*, in terms of the conception of the main character, story situations, plot elements, and even the same lines of dialogue.

*The Doorway to Hell*, inspired by the life of Al Capone, tells (as does *Quick Millions*) of the rise and fall of a gangster, Louie Ricarno (Lew Ayres). He is not the typical gangster; he has social, literary and historical aspirations (he spends five hours a day writing the story of his life) and he is obsessed with the organisation of his business, with the intention of giving his illegal beer racket a respectable façade. All of this, and especially the view of organised crime as a business, was to be repeated in *Quick Millions*. At the beginning of the film, Ricarno brings together the other gang leaders of the Chicago underworld (an evocation of the real Conference of Atlantic City celebrated in 1929, where Capone met with the leading racketeers of the country) and presents his objectives: "We're in a big business. The only thing wrong with it is that it needs organising and it needs a boss. I'm taking over both jobs." In *Quick Millions*, Bugs Raymond (Spencer Tracy<sup>4</sup>) tells a racketeer partner: "Just a question of big business. You know, organisation..." The same phrases and concepts show up again and again in both films, and they were even to appear again in a later work by Brown for which he was not credited—*The Robin Hood of El Dorado*. In this film, Joaquin Murrieta (Warner Baxter), upon joining a band of Mexican desperados, says, "Who is the leader here? Oh, you got no leader, eh? This is the trouble. We have to have a leader... I am the leader."

The equivalencies, similarities and parallels between *The Doorway to Hell* and *Quick Millions*, in particular, and the rest of Brown's film work, in general, are numerous. Both Ricarno as Bugs come from the underworld and first started work as newspaper boys on the streets, which accounts for their subsequent life of crime. Brown would specifically address the issue of juvenile delinquency in impoverished neighbourhoods in three subsequent original stories, which resulted in *The Devil Is a Sissy Boy of the Streets* and *Angels with Dirty Faces*.

Moreover, Rowland Brown's authentic and idiosyncratic world is manifested in the dialogue featured in these two films, through a continual emphasis on the luxury funerals of gangsters, a theme that both also include at their conclusion. At the end of *The Doorway to Hell*, Ricarno is cornered in a motel while his enemies wait outside to riddle him with bullets. He fixes his tie, puts a cigar in his mouth, looks at his portrait of Napoleon<sup>5</sup> and leaves the room. Following this, the final page of his memoirs is displayed on the screen as the noise of a machine gun firing is heard. The spectator is spared from witnessing the murder, which occurs off-screen, instead

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<sup>4</sup> It was his second film, after *Up the River* (John Ford, 1930).

<sup>5</sup> Another interesting aspect of Brown's story is Ricarno's assimilation of Napoleon, of whom he considers himself a modern equal, which highlights the megalomania of his personality. Brown's inspiration came from a statement by Capone himself, who referred to Napoleon as "the world's greatest racketeer" (Peary, 1976, p. 1).

a text appearing on-screen reads: "The little boy walked through it with his head up and a smile on his lips. They gave him a funeral—a swell funeral that stopped traffic." The narrative approach to the end of *Quick Millions* is the same. Accompanied by several other of his gang members, Bugs heads to church in a limousine to abduct the society girl to whom he has taken a fancy, who is about to marry another man. "Take your elbow outta my ribs," he tells the gangster sitting next to him. "That's not my elbow," comes the reply. One of the gangsters draws the curtain of the limousine, gunshots are heard and there is a cut to an image of the church. Again, the audience do not see the killing, but as the limousine passes by the church, Bugs's hat is thrown from the car and rolls along the floor. "Don't those society people have big weddings!", says the driver. "Yeah, but us hoodlums have the swell funerals", replies his accomplice.

Ricarno has a younger brother, whom he protects and pays for his education at a military academy ("War is a grand racket!" is another phrase that he utters over and over again). The film includes a brutal scene where the youngster, as he tries to escape from a group of gangsters who intend to kidnap him, is knocked down and killed by a truck. This is a narrative element that Brown would include again in the original story of *Boy of the Streets*<sup>6</sup>, where it is presented in the exactly the same way.

Finally, the expression "A Handful of Clouds", the title of the original story (or play) by Brown, is explained in *The Doorway to Hell*, and a very similar variation of the expression crops up in *Blood Money*. In the first film, Ricarno's right-hand man, Mileaway, played by newcomer James Cagney<sup>7</sup>, says to another gangster: "If you don't watch your step, you're gonna find a way to treat yourself to a handful of clouds." "What do you mean a handful of clouds?" the gangster asks. "I mean the kind that comes out of the end of a 38 automatic." In *Blood Money* it is the leading character, Bill Bailey (George Bancroft), who says to a taxi driver, "You listen, friend, how would you like to make bubbles?". "What do you mean?", asks the driver. "You open that trap of yours and tell those flat feet, I'll have one of my boyhood pals put you in a little bag and drop you in the river. Then you'll make bubbles."

*The Doorway to Hell* was so successful that in December 1930 Brown got a contract as a screenwriter at Fox (Wilk, 1930, p. 3). Director-writers did not exist at that time, but in January 1931 he managed to convince the chief of production of the studio, Winfield Sheehan, to allow him to perform this dual role ("Rowland Brown's First", 1931, p. 22).

*Quick Millions* was presented as a *Rowland Brown Production*, a symbol of prestige that suggested the considerable authority of the director behind the whole project, which would not be flourished again by any of his other films. This emblem was more than justified, as Brown not only wrote and directed the film, but also

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<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the similarities between the story of *Boy of the Streets* and that of *Johnny Apollo* (a film that was not based on an original story by Brown) are extraordinary, especially in their endings.

<sup>7</sup> This first appearance undoubtedly influenced his being chosen for the leading role in *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931), which made him a big star.

contributed to the continuity and editing, for which the studio rewarded him a \$1,000 bonus (Char, 1931, p. 18). James Shelley Hamilton (1931, p. 11) wrote about the film in the *National Board of Review Magazine*:

*Quick Millions* is also the work of a newcomer, as promising a talent as has appeared in many a day. His name is Rowland Brown, and this is his first picture. It would be a good picture made by anybody—it is exceptionally remarkable made by a young man before unheard of.

However, he added: "It will probably not be a great box-office success: it is maybe too aloof and ironic and intellectual, without any of the quality known as 'punch' to command mob attention." The author was absolutely right. Cynicism, irony and political criticism dominate the film, and there is no character that the audience can relate to in any way, least of all the main character, Bugs; a man as cold as ice, an impenetrable subject that does not care about anything except power, prestige and success, both socially and economically. One only has to observe the description he gives of himself: "I'm just a guy with a one-ton brain who's too nervous to steal and too lazy to work." Whereas Ricarno had a human side—he was married (I have already mentioned that he was an unusual gangster), took care of his younger brother and had full confidence in Mileaway—this facet has completely disappeared in the character of Bugs. He neither has friends nor loves anybody. He is interested in a society girl, but there is no indication that he is in love with her. His interest in obtaining her lies in the prestige that he thinks she can give him, along with the appearance of legality for his business that he longs for. When she leaves him to marry another man, it is only his pride that is hurt.

The film recounts Bugs's journey from simple truck driver to racketeer and, finally, to becoming a businessman who does not hesitate to extort anyone who crosses his path. Just like Ricarno, when he decides to leave the underworld, his former partners do not allow him to, and finish him off. There is no love story, a distinctive feature that all three films directed by Brown share.

In all of Brown's films, *Quick Millions* is that which best establishes the connections between organised crime and power—political, economic and judicial—an ideological content that it is fundamental to his film work and which appears again in *State's Attorney*, *Hell's Highway*, *Blood Money* and *Johnny Apollo*. Brown's message is axiomatic: the criminal underworld is supported by the honourable pillars of society, judges and capitalists, all of them corrupt, no one is free from guilt. This is an unmistakably modern and up-to-date view of society. It is understandable why the film did not please the audiences of the time.

In his study of the director, Miller (1971, p 43) remarks: "Brown had few if any social or political axes...". This is a statement that I completely disagree with. In fact, according to Peary (1976, p. 3), Brown had already written "Gangsters are really the invention of capitalists" in one of the early scripts for *The Doorway to Hell*, a line of dialogue that was later removed. In *Quick Millions*, where he had complete control, the same idea runs through the film, but it is especially emphasised towards the end,



when the district attorney attacks the supposedly respectable businessmen who have supported organised crime. For Brown, human beings are corrupt per se and, consequently, so is society, since it is controlled by economic interests; there are no class differences in this regard. From the first to the last, rich and poor alike, all are rotten. At the same time, this is an extremely nihilistic and pessimistic view of society, which is also presented in the film through an abundance of cynicism and irony.

"All of Brown's work, it has a sophistication—artistic, visual, sexual, moral" wrote Martin Scorsese (2015). Indeed, it is so. Although Brown was a writer, not a stylish director, he did not neglect the visual aspect in any of his films. In *Quick Millions* there is a notable scene in which Bugs's buddy, Jimmy (George Raft<sup>8</sup>), kills a journalist without his consent. The composition of the scene, a low camera angle shot from under the table, reveals artistic as well as narrative purposes; the audience are only permitted to see the feet of both men and hear the gunshots. Again, the director prevents us from witnessing the murder. Furthermore, Brown foreshadows Bugs's demise visually: while he is talking to a policeman in his apartment, his image appears reflected in a mirror, framed between the downward-tapering lines of a truncated triangle, heralding his imminent fall.

In general, *Quick Millions* received excellent reviews and was hailed as a different kind of gangster film (Crouch, 1931, p. 36; "The Shadow Stage", 1931, p. 56; "Quick Millions", 1931c, p. 85). Interestingly, its conciseness, its dramatic construction through short, often rapid, scenes (at other times the tempo slows down) and its elliptical montage—all qualities that would be highly valued by later historians (Jacobs, 1972, p. 277; Tavernier & Coursodon, 1997, p. 378)—were the very features that critics objected to at the time (Char, 1931, p. 18; "Quick Millions", 1931a, p. 10; "The Shadow Stage", 1931, p. 56). *Silver Screen* stated that the film had been shot exactly like a newsreel ("Quick Millions", 1931b, p. 45). Nevertheless, it was a flop at the box-office.

Following its release, Brown's relations with Fox became tense. Although he was announced as the director of numerous productions, none of them came to fruition. For *While Paris Sleeps*<sup>9</sup>, large posters were printed which featured his name ("1931

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<sup>8</sup> *Quick Millions* was George Raft's first film. Brown himself discovered Raft at the Brown Derby restaurant in Hollywood, when he was yet to make a film and was still working as a professional dancer. According to Raft (Manners, 1932, p. 85), who recounted what happened in several interviews, two weeks after completing filming he got a call to play an almost identical character in *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932), which catapulted him to stardom. Undoubtedly, Brown's facet as a discoverer of new talents is another of his outstanding features. In *Blood Money* he enabled another star of the theatre to make her debut, Judith Anderson. She had previously undergone numerous screen tests, but had finally been rejected by Hollywood due to her lack of beauty ("Inside Stuff-Pictures", 1933, p. 52). Following her role in Brown's film, Anderson did not return to cinema until almost a decade later, when she performed her memorable portrayal of Mrs. Danvers in *Rebecca* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1940). It was not in Hollywood, but on Broadway, that Brown also discovered Lauren Bacall—then called Betty—who was offered her first stage role in his play *Johnny 2 x 4* (1942), written and produced by Brown himself, and directed by Anthony Brown (Bacall, 2005, pp. 55-58).

<sup>9</sup> *While Paris Sleeps* (Allan Dwan, 1932).

Fox 1932", 1931, p. 28). I believe that the wide dissemination of these images is the reason why the AFI Catalog of Feature Films (2016)<sup>10</sup> erroneously mentions him as one of the screenwriters of the film. In May, *Variety* reported that the reason behind his many unsuccessful projects was because Fox had relegated him to the writers' department as a disciplinary measure ("Roland [*sic*] Brown's", 1931, p. 3). He tore up his contract and signed with Universal on 2 July ("Laemmle Signs", 1931, p. 8).

The exact same thing happened to him in this studio; a huge number of projects were under consideration, but in the end he did not direct any of them. In December, Universal loaned him to RKO as director of John Barrymore's *State's Attorney*, whose script was being written by his friend Gene Fowler (Meehan, 1931, p. 39). Brown's reputation as a violent and problematic filmmaker began to emerge at this point. In early February 1932, on the first day of shooting, he left the set and abandoned the production ("Hollywood", 1932, p. 6). According to the AFI Catalog, he did so because the studio refused to hire the cameraman Lee Games. So, contrary to the assertions by some authors (Miller, 1971, p. 47; Tibbets, 1985, p. 167), he never got to shoot any of this film. In March, *Variety* furthered his notoriety as a troublesome director by reporting that his contract had just been cancelled by Universal: "Since directing 'Quick Millions' for Fox, Brown has torn up contracts with Fox, Radio [*sic*], and Universal... and hasn't directed a picture" ("Rowland Brown", 1932a, p. 6). What is surprising is that, following the *State's Attorney* incident, he signed a contract with RKO as director-screenwriter in early April ("Rowland Brown", 1932b, p. 2). Equally surprising is that RKO decided to give him credit as co-writer of *State's Attorney* and, then, the same studio included him as part of the team of writers for *What Price Hollywood?* one of their most important productions.

*State's Attorney* contains abundant similarities with his previous work. It deals with a criminal lawyer who works to defend members of the world of organised crime. The link between politics and power appears once again, since it is the gangsters who elevate him to the position of district attorney. When he decides to abandon his life of crime and carry out his duties honestly, the gangsters do not permit him to do so, just as happened to Ricarno and Bugs. At the end of the film, the character confesses to a life of juvenile delinquency and tells of his confinement in a reformatory, which anticipates *The Devil Is a Sissy*, *Boy of the Streets* and *Angels with Dirty Faces*. Even though *What Price Hollywood?* was a film where Brown worked under assignment and a production on which many screenwriters collaborated, Brown's unmistakable stamp is revealed by the presence of a lesbian at the start of the film, at the Brown Derby, a feature that foreshadows *Blood Money*. Moreover, besides *What Price Hollywood?* several of Brown's other films relate to the world of cinema or even contain direct references to it, as can be found in *Quick Millions*, *Hell's Highway*, *Blood Money* and *Nocturne*.

In late April 1932, RKO announced that Rowland Brown would direct *Hell's Highway* ("Dad Says", 1932, p. 6). The film describes the brutality and the inhumane treatment of inmates in the prison camps of the South, where convicts were still

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<sup>10</sup> Hereafter the AFI Catalog.

subjected to forced labour in chain gangs. The issue of injustice in prisons, especially in Southern prison camps, was a hot potato in 1931–32, mainly because of the true story of ex-convict Robert E. Burns, who, after twice escaping from a Georgia prison, had just recounted his story in a book: *I Am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang!* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1932). His story caused a major scandal, owing to the inhumane conditions of the Southern prison camps, since they were the only place in the country where forced labour continued to be implemented. Publications like *Harper's Magazine*, *The New Republic* and *The Nation* launched a campaign to condemn the practice, calling for a reform of the penal system (Davis, 2010, p. 410). Warner Bros. was getting ready to film Burns's story, and *Hell's Highway* was produced at top speed by David O'Selznick in order for it to beat the other film to the box-office.

The production of the film was complicated. Brown began shooting around 20 June, and ended it in the record time of under one month. However, on 18 July, after he had already left the studio (he had moved to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer), RKO decided to go back and reshoot parts of the film, fearing a possible lawsuit for plagiarism by Warner ("Revamp", 1932, p. 34; AFI Catalog). To differentiate it from Burns's case, the studio wanted to make cuts to the film, as well as include extra scenes from the most recent events concerning a tragedy that had occurred in a Southern prison camp ("Revamp", 1932, p. 34). On June 3, 1932 Arthur Maillefert, a young man of 19 or 22 years of age, had died in the Sunbeam Prison Camp in Jacksonville, Florida, inside a "sweat box", strangled by a chain around his neck and with his feet locked in clamps, and the case was receiving wide press coverage ("Revamp", 1932, p. 34; Meehan, 1932, p. 16; Chic, 1932, p. 21; Blaisdell, 1932, p. 33). John Cromwell filmed the retakes ("Revamp", 1932, p. 34; Wilk, 1932, p. 7; AFI Catalog).

In the film, prisoners build a road—the road referred to in the title of the film—that is ironically called "Liberty Road". Abused by sadistic guards, they are whipped at the slightest sign of fatigue and, in the event of any disobedience, are confined inside the aforementioned box. This is a narrow compartment—similar to a coffin and certainly portending to one—made of metal, to absorb the heat, which is deliberately exposed to the sun, where the prisoners remain chained by the neck and shackled at the feet until death. The primary desire of the main character, Duke Ellis (Richard Dix), is to escape, but he changes his attitude when his little brother Johnny (Tom Brown) is brought to the camp as a prisoner. From this time onwards, all of Duke's efforts are focused on preventing Johnny from being put inside the "sweat box" and on enabling him to get out of the camp alive. At the end of the film, the convicts riot and kill the cruel head warden of the penitentiary and his overseer. The authorities recruit the local folk to capture them, and the respectable citizens revel in shooting them as if they were hunting animals. Johnny is injured, and Duke, even though he knows he will face the death penalty if he returns, carries him to the camp so he can receive medical attention.

However, Brown's film did not end this way. The reviews of the time inform us that it finished with the brutal death of Duke, shot down and killed by a guard's machine gun (McCarthy, 1932, p. 35; Chic, 1932, p. 21; "Hell's Highway", 1932b, p. 6;

Blaisdell, 1932, p. 33). This was followed by an ironic scene of several citizens admiring the wonderful views of "Liberty Road" ("Hell's Highway", 1932c, p. 68). The film was so poorly received at its preview that RKO ordered further cuts and a new ending to reduce its violent content. In addition, there were many other cuts to please the Hays Office, which sought to place the responsibility of the prisoners' mistreatment on the actions of a private contractor in order to shift the blame away from the system (Black, 1998, pp. 149-150). The added footage is easily recognised, especially at the beginning of the film, where it is very confusing, and at the end—which is clearly imposed by the censors—where the governor visits the camp and arrests the contractor for murder, as the person responsible for installing the "sweat box". According to *Hollywood Filmograph*, Brown was so upset with the results that he asked his name to be withdrawn from the film ("Hell's Highway", 1932a, p. 7).

Nevertheless, despite the cuts and the scenes filmed after he had left, it retains the flavour of Brown's best work and is full of memorable moments. For example, the convicts wear a uniform with a big bull's-eye on the back, making them a perfect target to shoot at if they were to try to escape. The sadistic camp director mistreats the prisoners during the day, but he spends his nights playing the violin, this contrast is a touch that directly reveals Brown's hand in the production. The filmmaker's desire to provoke is also manifested by the presence of a homosexual prisoner. The manhunt of the prisoners contains scenes of great impact; the person who shoots Johnny is a young man of the same age, who then flees in shame and horror. The citizens who participate in the hunting stop a deaf-mute prisoner, who is unable to hear them and is shot in the back. At other times the narrative acquires a strong artistic tendency, relating certain events by means of drawings that have been made by black prisoners in their barracks, which appear on-screen accompanied by their songs.

Released nearly two months before *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1932), *Hell's Highway* was the first film that condemned the forced labour and cruelty taking place in the Southern prison camps. However, shortly after its release it was eclipsed by Warner's production. There are a variety of reasons that can explain why this happened, just as there are many differences between the two films. For example, when compared to LeRoy's film, *Hell's Highway* is incredibly cold. Whereas Burns is innocent, Duke is an unrepentant bank robber, which makes it difficult for the audience to empathise and identify with his character. Both men are veterans of the First World War, but *Hell's Highway* does not emphasise this heroic aspect of its leading character—with the exception of a single shot, whose function is merely to provide this information. Moreover, unlike *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, Brown's film lacks a leading female character or love interest, only one young woman appears in a brief scene of the film. Its status as a B movie is another significant contrast. Finally, it was another big flop at the box-office. Film critics repeated endlessly that it was too brutal, could not be described as entertainment and was unsuitable for children (McCarthy, 1932, p. 35; Meehan, 1932, p. 16; Hall, 1932, p. 18; Chic, 1932, p. 21; "Hell's Highway", 1932d, p. 58; "The Modern", 1932, p. 10; "Reviews", 1932, p. 48).

During his time at MGM studios, Brown never got to direct a single film. The rest of 1932 and the greater part of 1933 went the same way for him, resulting in many failed projects at almost all of the Hollywood studios: with the producer Howard Hughes, at Columbia Pictures, again at MGM, RKO, United Artists, Paramount, Warner Bros., etc. His luck changed when, in early June 1933, Darryl F. Zanuck acquired the rights to his story *Blood Money* ("Darryl Zanuck", 1933, p. 3) for his newly created production company 20th Century Pictures, whose films were released through United Artists. In July it was announced that Brown would also direct the film ("Dad Says", 1933, p. 4). It was presented as being *Written and Directed by Rowland Brown*<sup>11</sup>.

*Blood Money* was his final creation and is considered by many to be his greatest achievement (Miller, 1971, p. 43; Baxter, 1973, p. 97; Tibbets, 1985, p. 163). Scorsese (2010), even ranks it in third place of his all-time favourite gangster films. Certainly, Brown surpassed himself and all his previous work with *Blood Money*, which is the most subversive, daring and striking of all his works, and it provides us with another of the key reasons why he was never allowed to direct in Hollywood again.

The leading character of the film is once again a man: Bill Bailey, a bail bondsman who has close ties to the criminal underworld. "How many gangster films featured bail bondsmen as their protagonists?", wrote Guy Maddin (2007a, p. 8). In this regard, one could infer that much of the commercial failure of Brown's films was because, besides them being devoid of a love story, they were strictly and fundamentally masculine, and the box-office earnings during the Depression era in North America depended primarily on the influx of female moviegoers at the theatres. Nevertheless, in *Blood Money* he presented two superb portraits of women, Ruby Darling (Judith Anderson), the owner of a nightclub with whom Bill has an intermittent affair (although he does not fall in love with her), and Elaine Talbart (Frances Dee), certainly the most fascinating and enduring character of his filmography. Danny Peary wrote about her in *Cult Movies 2* (1983, p. 31): "Elaine is like no female in film history. [...] She has a crime mania, and is also a kleptomaniac, a nymphomaniac, and a masochistic. She is turned on by anything daring...". Sometimes Elaine seems like an interpretation of Brown himself. Note the description that her father gives of her: "A very fine girl. But she has a little too much...". "Imagination?" Bill proposes. "Imagination. That's it. She has a little bit too much imagination. She has an underworld mania. She's very fond of underworld pictures. Always reading detective stories."

As was the case with *Ricarno* and even more so with *Bugs and Duke*, it is very difficult for the viewer to identify with Bill, because he is a former corrupt policeman who lives by taking advantage of the most disadvantaged people. He receives two visitors at his office that reveal to the audience the nature of his clients, the kind of

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<sup>11</sup> At the beginning I mentioned *Blood Money* as a story co-written by Brown because Zanuck also bought the story *Out on Bail*, by "Speed" Kendall, in order to combine them both ("Speed' Gets", 1933, p. 3).

issues he handles, and how he runs his business. A woman and her sixteen-year-old son, a stocky and sinister lad who is accused of raping of a woman of thirty-eight, are the first to arrive at the place. "Sixteen?", Bill says, laughing. "Well... You haven't got a thing to worry about Sonny, not a thing. By the way, mother, do you own your own home?". The second to arrive is Elaine, who is accused of shoplifting at a department store. Since Bill has all the phones in his office tapped, he quickly finds out that she is the daughter of a wealthy capitalist from Los Angeles and that she steals for the thrill of it. Just like Ricarno and Bugs, Bill has social pretensions and, similarly to Bugs, he very soon becomes fascinated with this young girl who belongs to high society, even more so when she brazenly reveals to him a cigarette lighter that she has removed from his table. Elaine is a compulsive kleptomaniac. "She's different. Unusual," Bill tells Ruby when the latter reprimands him for the fact he is pursuing a high-class girl. What Bill does not know is exactly how different Elaine is.

The thematic links between *Blood Money* and the previous work of the director are very pronounced. Without exception, Ricarno, Bugs and Bill are completely rejected by the women with whom they fall in love or are interested in. Ricarno's wife cheats on him with his best friend; the wealthy girl that Bugs courts can barely tolerate him; and Bill, similarly, is abandoned by Elaine. He introduces her to Ruby's younger brother Drury (Chick Chandler), who is a bank robber (like Duke). Elaine, upon recognising that he is a much more violent and dangerous person than Bill, does not hesitate to betray Bill and replace him with Drury. This very negative view of what can be expected of women—rejection, abandonment and betrayal—expresses a strong misogynist component on the part of Brown that is even present in the only scene in *Hell's Highway* in which women appear. At the prison camp, Duke receives a visit from his mother, who is accompanied by Johnny's girlfriend. Even though this is the first time that Duke has ever met her, he does not hesitate to attack her: "Do you realize that 99 out of 100 men steal for some dame? And keep on stealing for her?". Society women prove to be the ruin of both Bugs and Bill. Because of Elaine, Ruby and Drury believe that Bill has betrayed them and they incite the criminal underworld to turn against him. This brings us to another plot similarity that all three of Brown's films share. The gangsters must not be permitted to join civilised society or abandon their background; moreover, if they do so, the underworld will not tolerate it. A life of crime does not allow for reintegration; it is a one-way street.

Criticism of capitalism is seen throughout the film. While Bill, Ruby and Drury have their own moral codes which they would not dare to break, high-society girl Elaine robs and cheats them. However, this criticism is much more noticeable in an early scene where Brown mocks the system directly. Bill visits the owner of the department store where Elaine was caught shoplifting with the intention of getting him to withdraw his accusation. When this character gets up to shake his hand, Brown cuts to a shot that reveals that he was sat on special cushion for haemorrhoids. Bill sees this and does not hide his amusement as he bursts into laughter.

Brown's eagerness to surprise and shock the spectator never ceases. Another unusual scene takes place at Ruby's club. Beside Bill, at the bar, Brown places a

lesbian dressed in men's clothing, who is wearing a man's hat, tuxedo and monocle. The woman empties her glass in one gulp, the same way as Bill has drunk his, and sneers at him. He offers her a cigar and she replies: "Oh, you big sissy!". Thus, dialogues full of profanity, cruel criticism and irony are another outstanding feature of the film. Furthermore, the way this scene is filmed, in the purest style of Samuel Fuller (Tavernier & Coursodon, 1997, p. 378), is as unusual as its content.

However, the most transgressive element of the film is its ending. Abandoned by everybody, Elaine sees a girl crying on the street. This girl tells her: "I've just had the most horrible experience I've had in my whole life. I went upstairs to answer this ad. A man named Johnson told me he wanted a model... I had to fight my way out of the office... My arm, it's bruised black and blue." In hearing this, Elaine's eyes light up. "He struck me. Look at my jaw," continues the girl. "What d'you say his name was?" asks Elaine, her face full of excitement as she snatches the newspaper from the girl and heads off to meet the stranger, to be battered, beaten and sexually assaulted herself.

This kind of thing was too much even for the pre-Code era. Obviously, Hollywood was not prepared for anything like it. *Blood Money* was received with indifference by the critics and was considered to be absolutely repulsive by the public. It was the biggest flop of Brown's career. In Maryland the censors withheld it for being "immoral, indecent and inhuman" and the issue went to court ("U.A. Goes to Court", 1933, p. 9). In 1934, it became one of the first films to be banned and hidden away from view by the PCA (AFI Catalog).

Subsequently, Brown moved to England, where his story *February 29* was filmed as *Leave it to Blanche* and he co-wrote the screenplay for *Widow's Might*. Then he received an offer from Alexander Korda to direct *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (Harold Young, 1935), but only a few days after the start of shooting he was withdrawn from the production (AFI Catalog).

Travelling back to the United States in 1936, he took part in *The Robin Hood of El Dorado* at MGM. He sold his original story *The Devil Is a Sissy* to the same studio and began to direct the film. However, once again, he was fired and W. S. Van Dyke shot it practically from scratch.

It is at this point that the story of him punching an important Hollywood producer is supposed to have occurred, but historians cannot even agree on who the assaulted man was. Purportedly, this event happened during the filming of *The Devil Is a Sissy* and was the cause of his dismissal. Both Irving Thalberg (Tavernier & Coursodon, 1997, p. 378) and producer of the feature film, Frank Davis, have been mentioned (Scorsese, 2015). However, Baxter (1973, pp. 99, 182) settles upon David O'Selznick as the man attacked, who shortly afterwards assigned Brown the role of reviewing the script for *A Star Is Born* (William A. Wellman, 1937), which was filmed at the end of 1936. Other authors consulted allude to the incident but do not give any name (Rotha & Griffith, 1964, pp. 354-355; Miller, 1971, p. 43; Tibbets, 1985, p. 180; Scorsese & Wilson, 2001, pp. 140-141; Maddin, 2007b, p. 8). In the press of the

time, I have only found a single brief (and in no way explanatory) mention of his dismissal from the MGM film. It comes from *Variety* and reads as follows: "For the fourth time another director is finishing a Rowland Brown picture at Metro. W. S. Van Dyke has replaced Brown on 'The Devil Is a Sissy'..." ("Inside Stuff-Pictures", 1936, p. 6). This secretiveness is highly suspicious at the least. Moreover, the article exaggerates the truth; it was not the fourth time, but only the third that he had left or been fired from a production. It had happened previously with *State's Attorney* and then with *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. He was never able to return to direct again.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of Brown's filmography has shown that his work was idiosyncratic yet completely cohesive, in which the element of criminality was a constant presence. Thus, we can establish that the world of crime forms the backbone of his films, both in his work as writer-director and in his work simply as a writer.

From this point onwards, it is possible to identify many other subthemes, all of which invariably take place in the environment of the underworld of the contemporary city: gangsters, politics, the notion of organised crime as a business, the inability to leave the underworld, that gangsters should not mix with the upper classes, street urchins, juvenile delinquency, impoverished neighbourhoods, etc. In general, his work reveals an extremely pessimistic view of the world and society, not without a large measure of misogyny.

In addition, the three films directed and written by Brown convey the same ideological message, one which comes across as highly "modern" today: a criticism of those in the highest spheres of power in capitalism, as they play an instrumental role in the world of organised crime. In turn, the films are distinguished by their atypical, groundbreaking discourse, and by the presence of corrupt, cynical and unpredictable characters who are the result of their author's particular and eccentric worldview. Cynicism, irony and cruel criticism are another inseparable feature of his films.

On the stylistic level, although one cannot speak of a personal mark or distinctive method of filming in Brown, he often filmed in different ways, but always did so with imagination and invention.

In short, all Rowland Brown's film work is unique and is permeated by his strong personality. His desire, no doubt, was to break the rules, provoke, surprise and shock the audience. He defied convention, went against the tide and paid dearly for his insubordination to the system.

Regarding the end of his career as a filmmaker and his being thrown out of Hollywood, these matters cannot be attributed to a single factor, but a combination of at least six significant reasons:



1. The story of him punching an important Hollywood executive, although it has not been verified, it cannot be ignored either, since it is undeniable that he was barred and, no matter how hard he tried, he was never able to direct again. Not even his Academy Award nomination for best original story for *Angels with Dirty Faces* opened the doors to the studios for him, and he was kept out of Hollywood until 1940.
2. In connection with the previous point, it has to be noted that he had a controversial and explosive personality. Since his early years at Fox, he had earned a very bad reputation as an unreliable and problematic director, who did not think twice about tearing up his contracts and leaving the set at the drop of a hat.
3. He only directed three films in three years, which was a very slow pace of work for the time, and all three were resounding flops at the box-office. Thus, what is extraordinary is not that, being a writer and a screenwriter, he managed to direct, but that after releasing failure after failure he was allowed to try it again. His last film, *Blood Money*, was such a commercial disaster that it meant the end of the line for him as a director.
4. The nuances, the subtle aspects, the cynicism and the audacious and transgressive nature of his films, which make them highly valued and incredibly "modern" works today, were not appreciated at the time. On the contrary, they were seen as strange and even distasteful creations. No producer would risk financing his eccentricities.
5. Moreover, Brown had been pigeonholed. He was associated with gangster films and the Prohibition-era, which ended in 1933, but even before then the subject had ceased to be in vogue. The fact that he could not get his production of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* off the ground—a historical film far removed from his usual interests—strengthened the belief that he was only fit for one kind of genre, which was a thing of the past.
6. The establishment of strict self-censorship in Hollywood in July 1934, with the creation of the PCA, was another decisive factor. His films, which featured homosexuals, lesbians, nymphomaniacs and all kinds of amoral and criminal characters, were among the first to be banned and hidden from view. Neither Brown nor his films had a place in the new Hollywood governed by the extremely right wing, radically conservative Catholic in the form of Joseph I. Breen. From that day on, his cinema was to prove impossible to film.

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