

The Kray Twins of East London

Image Making, Celebrity Gangsters, and Their *Legend*

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Abstract: This paper examines the legend of the Kray twins, who were criminals, gangsters, and celebrities in the London of the 1950s, and whose popularity has been marked by a growing number of filmic representations, such as the 2015 blockbuster, Legend. I focus on interdisciplinary questions of how role models and their media representation, including photographs, biographies, memoirs by gang members, and film adaptations have created and maintained the image of gangsters, more specifically, of the two East London criminals, Reggie and Ronnie Kray, since the 1950s. I start with an overview of aspects of organised crime and mafias, providing a few examples of famous gangsters who were the role models of the Kray twins, from the American Al Capone and Frank Sinatra to the English gangster Billy Hill. As a case study, I examine the image-making methods and achievements of the Krays in the post-war era until they died in prison (Ronnie in 1995 and Reggie in 2000) and their strange ever-growing fame even 20 years after their death (Campbell, Underworld 8–12). Finally, I demonstrate how the systematically built and promoted Kray brand and legend paved the way for the success of the 2015 film, Legend, which still resonates with the myths surrounding the Krays.

Organised crime is usually associated with the provision of illegal goods and services. However, when the term, “organised crime,” first came into use in the mid-1800s in colonial India, it referred primarily to gangs of highway robbers (Lampe 3). Likewise, in the US Prohibition Era in the 1920s, the first consistent use of the term was linked to theft and robbery (with the coordination of interlocking tasks), much

more than to illegal gambling or the illegal sale of alcohol (Hobbs 57).¹ Organised crime is generally associated with gangsters like Al Capone, who was respected because of his wealth and power accumulated from crime. Criminals like him are often connected with crime as a lifestyle, and less with crime as a profession (Hobbs 58).² In the terms of Lampe, “the underworld is an idealised criminal subculture with its own rules and slang, separated from mainstream society with many possible links to the upperworld” (4). According to scholars such as McIntosh, the underworld is closely linked to urbanisation and to the lower-class quarters of large cities; it materialises in the bars and clubs where criminals socialise and receive advice or recognition and find accomplices for their plots (24). A criminal is not automatically part of the underworld; one needs to be accepted as “capable” and “reliable” first. As Pyrooz and others put it, the underworld, in general, has no formal structure, just an informal status hierarchy (86). Hobbs emphasises that organised crime remains elusive: criminals tend to be way, or at least one step, ahead of the police and prosecutors (58).

There are also much more cohesive and formalised amalgamations of criminals: clannish criminal fraternities, like the Sicilian Mafia or the North American “La Cosa Nostra” with their own rituals, symbols, and ideologies constituting criminal elites (Lampe 4).³ According to Lampe, being accepted into their ranks carries an enormous boost in prestige and power, but even so, criminals are not free to commit any crime: they need permission from the ruling criminal group (5). Certain crimes are not tolerated as they go against the moral convictions of the leaders or may attract unwanted police attention.⁴

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- 1 Cf. the seminal study by Frederick M. Thrasher, *The Gang: The 1313 Chicago Gangs*. I would like to thank Zsolt Györi for calling my attention to the book and to further relevant literature.
 - 2 Densley quotes Schelling (1970) who even differentiates “crime that is organised” and “organised crime.” The former refers to crime that involves cooperation, functional role division, planning, and specialisation. The latter refers to monopolistic control exerted by one criminal group over “the production and distribution of a given commodity or service” (518).
 - 3 According to Densley, the mafia as industry of private protection thus represents the quintessential organised crime (518).
 - 4 Zsolt Györi has called my attention to substantive scholarship in cultural criminology, which relies on perspectives that emerged out of the British/Birmingham School of cultural studies and the British “new criminology” of the 1970s (Ferrell 396). This approach explores “both historical and contemporary texts” while also “investigating local and national newspaper coverage of crime and crime control”; “filmic depictions of criminals, criminal violence, and criminal justice”; “television portrayals of crime and criminals”; “images of crime in popular music”; “comic books,

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McIntosh argues that some criminals achieve more respect than others because of their personality, skills, or wealth, because of their notoriety in the media, or because of their connections to even more influential persons in the underworld or upperworld (3). Lower-status criminals tend to orbit around higher-status criminals for support and protection and to increase their own standing. A recurring theme in the debate on organised crime is how powerful criminal organisations and individual criminals are. Journalists and the media are quick to award the “most powerful” title, but still, as Bair points out, Al Capone stands out among all the glorified and mystified gangsters (2).

In 1920, Capone’s mentor, Torrio, having recognised the opportunities of the manufacture and sale of alcohol created by Prohibition, enlisted Al Capone to be his right-hand man. They assumed control over legitimate breweries that supplied the black market with “beer” while officially only producing “near beer”; this led to the so-called “beer war,” in which Capone assumed a key role commanding whole troops of gunmen (Lampe 6). However, their “prestige” and, thus, their power was also enhanced by media representation. Unlike earlier underworld figures, Capone courted the press and, according to his biographer, Laurence Bergreen, his dominant position had even been a media fabrication (McIntosh 4).⁵ When examining the Kray twins in London, we see many similarities.

There have been records of gangs in Great Britain since the eighteenth century (Berry-Dee 14).⁶ In post-war London, the exploits of notorious families like the Krays or the Richardsons were considered local urban issues, rather than coordinated national threats.⁷ According to Hobbs, gangs often fought for hegemony

crime, and juvenile delinquency”; “crime depictions in cyberspace”; “and the broader presence of crime and crime control imagery throughout popular culture texts” (400).

- 5 Referring to Joel Best, Ferrell argues that “cultural criminologists attempt to elaborate on the ‘symbolic’ in ‘symbolic interaction’ by highlighting the popular prevalence of mediated crime imagery, the interpersonal negotiation of style within criminal and deviant subcultures, and the emergence of larger symbolic universes within which crime takes on political meaning. These understandings of crime and crime control as social and political constructions, and this endeavour to unravel the mediated processes through which these constructions occur, also build on more recent constructionist perspectives in sociology” (398).
- 6 The Metropolitan Police Commissioner in his Annual Report of 1964, commenting on the 30% increase in robberies or assaults with intent to rob, explicitly stated that London had always been the scene of robberies from the days of highwaymen and footpads (Hall 5).
- 7 The gangster “is the man of the city; with the city’s language and knowledge, with its queer and dishonest skills and its terrible daring, carrying his life in his hands like a placard, a club” (Warshow 228).

in certain territories and illicit markets, engaging in violent and bloody street wars (60). Sergi, in turn, argues that, in the 1950s, the Kray brothers grew accustomed to a fictional Italian/American mafioso model and based their own power self-consciously on the charisma of leaders, conducting their business through emotion rather than calculation (177).

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The story of the Krays is similar to Al Capone's, but less well-known. In the words of McCaffrey, they were "sharp-suited underworld icons, merciless murderers, robbers and racketeers" ("Kray"). Born in 1933, Ronnie and Reggie Kray ruled London's East End for almost two decades in the 1950s and 1960s, running their "Firm" (Gray). At the same time, they also lived the life of pop culture celebrities, spending their days with famous politicians and artists. Kim Peat, the twins' cousin, who grew up next door to them on Vallance Road, East London, and celebrated family milestones with them, reveals how much she loved their mother, Violet, but could not stand the father, Charlie, for being violent to her until Ronnie, aged 16, threatened him (McCaffrey).⁸

According to their biographer, John Pearson, the Krays began their criminal careers in 1952, at the age of 18, when both were called to do National Service in the British Army (42). They reported for duty but attempted to leave, and when a corporal tried to stop them, they beat him and went home, before they were arrested and returned to the army (Person 43). Several months later, they repeated their escape and were sent to prison in Canterbury (Gray). After being released, the Krays bought a pool hall and started running protection rackets in the East End (Garner-Purkis).⁹ According to Pearson, they intimidated businesses into paying protection money, and if someone refused, he was threatened with violence and murder. The Krays were often assisted by corrupt police officers who turned a blind eye in exchange for cash, and by 1954, they had taken over the Regal billiard hall in the East End (48).

8 Sociological studies have shown marked correlations between poverty and delinquency. As for broken homes, the studies of Slawson in New York, and of Shaw and McKay in Chicago, have shown that the broken home in itself cannot be considered a very significant factor in explaining delinquency. It has been asserted that motion pictures are a major cause of delinquency (Thrasher, "The Comics and Delinquency" 198).

9 For postwar London society, see "Swinging London, Dangling Economy 1945–1975" (Porter 344ff.).

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By 1957, they had their own club, the Double R, and their own gang called “the Firm,” consisting of “London heavies, Scottish hard men, and bent businessmen” (Pearson 77). Then they moved westwards, taking over a gambling club, Ermeralda’s Barn, which soon made them rich. Pearson describes it as a high-class nightclub, frequented by government officials and celebrities, that gave the Krays broader opportunities and covered for their criminal activities (78). Soon they became friendly with famous people like Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, and Diana Dors (Pearson 65). Their celebrity status distinguished the Krays from other gangsters and helped obscure what was going on under the surface at Esmeralda’s Barn (Gray). As emphasised in several later representations—including the 1990 feature film, *The Krays*, directed by Peter Medak—they adored their mother and tried to meet all her wishes. Among others, they took her to meet her favourite actress, Judy Garland, in one of their nightclubs (Flanagan).

Power and control play a major role in gangsters’ lives, including that of the Kray brothers. Anyone who did not have their permission could get into trouble in East London, even celebrities or their mother’s favourites. According to a new documentary, *Secrets of the Krays* (2021), their mother’s favourite actress, Barbara Windsor, was once threatened to be killed while shooting scenes in the East End for her 1963 film, *Sparrows Can’t Sing*. The assistant director of the film, Peter Medak, remembered that the Krays had shown up in black limousines on the first day of filming and threatened the cast. However, after the producers agreed to their control and struck a deal, the gangsters befriended the cast and even proved generous, giving them all free drinks (McCarthy).

Authenticity in heritage films is a highly debated issue, with historians and film scholars often taking different stands. In this paper, I am not concerned with the historical accuracy of the Kray films but still wish to cite a few examples that are relevant for my examination of how the Krays were transformed from East London gangsters into celebrities. Unlike in *Legend*, Reggie Kray in real life had dated Frances Shea for eight years before she married him in 1965, aged 22, and according to their biography, Frances often had tea and watched TV with their mother, Violet, and her local friends (Pearson 138). At her wedding, where David Bailey took the wedding photos, Francis’s mother walked in dressed entirely in black as if she had gone to a funeral, in protest against the marriage. The rebellious act is described in their biography and is also shown in *Legend* (Pearson 139), where it is highlighted on purpose to create an atmosphere of scandals surrounding the Krays and thereby

enhance their celebrity status. The filmic portrayal of Ronnie's scandalous sexuality has also shifted with time: while he is depicted as a covert homosexual in *The Krays* (1990), in *Legend* (2015), he is represented as openly gay among his close family at a time when homosexuality was illegal in the UK (Pearson 136).¹⁰

Kim claims that the Krays' role model in England was a "dashing gangster" called Billy Hill, who modelled himself on Humphrey Bogart, and in the 1950s exercised control over Soho (McCaffrey). Hill was linked to smuggling, protection rackets, and extreme violence in London between the 1920s and the 1960s, and his gang managed cash robberies and defrauded London's high society of millions at card tables (Berry-Dee 61). During the Second World War, Billy Hill, who was later to become mentor to the Kray twins, specialised in food and petrol in the black market, supplied forged documents for deserting servicemen, and was involved in West End protection rackets with fellow gangster Jack Spot (Campbell, *Underworld* 61).

THE KRAY TWINS: CELEBRITIES AND SHOW BUSINESS

According to Pearson, throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Krays were carving out their reputation to make money and win attention (140). David Bailey, a successful celebrity photographer at *Vogue*, took a portrait of the twins in 1965, when they were not yet notorious gangsters and celebrities, just former boxers who ran nightclubs and collected protection money (Campbell, *Underworld* 67). Campbell argues that the portrait was to serve as "gangland's Mona Lisa," which was central to their image and their brand, as they aspired to be as famous as Al Capone and were gratified when the picture appeared alongside the Beatles and the Rolling Stones in Bailey's *Box of Pin-Ups*, Bailey's documentation of 1960s celebrity culture (*Underworld* 159).

Bailey later revealed in his memoirs that, when he was about 13, his father got slashed by a knife, and according to a family secret, it was done by the twins, then aged 19, who got two months in jail as a consequence (206). Bailey did not know this fact when he befriended Reggie Kray through Francis Wyndham, who had been first asked to write the Krays' biography. Bailey was later invited to tea at the twins' mother's house in Bethnal Green, the Krays' headquarters (Bailey 208). In 1965, Reggie Kray asked Bailey to take his wedding pictures with Frances Shea; obviously,

¹⁰ According to their cousin, Kim, the Kray family was very open-minded, and Ronnie's boyfriend, Teddy Smith, used to stay overnight with the family (McCaffrey).

he could not refuse, because “people did not say no to the Krays” (Bailey 211). By 1965, the twins had money and as Ronnie loved glamour and celebrities, they brought over Joe Louis, the former American heavyweight world champion, and they would take him round the clubs and have him sign boxing gloves for people to popularise their celebrity status. Since it helped boost his ego and further enhance his celebrity image, Ronnie enjoyed being in the limelight and in the company of other celebrities like George Raft, the American actor and star of the 1932 film, *Scarface*, who was a director of the Colony Club, a West End casino (Pearson 118).

The cross-fertilisation between crime and show business, like Frank Sinatra’s relationship with the mafia in the US, benefited both sides: it brought prestige for the gangsters and was “cool” for the stars. When in 1950 the Kefauver Committee investigated the growing problem of organised crime in the US, it was televised with more than 30 million viewers, showing growing interest in scandals and celebrities.¹¹ Sinatra narrowly escaped the public “grilling,” as he admitted to having passing acquaintances with Lucky Luciano and Al Capone’s cousins, the Fischetti Brothers, and due to possible mafia ties that stretch back to Sinatra’s grandfather’s youth in Sicily before he emigrated to New York in 1900 (Williams 63–64).

Organised crime often went hand-in-hand with the bar business and celebrities, and even after Prohibition ended in the USA, “the mob” remained “silent partners in many businesses,” “involved in the music industry, controlling most of the jukeboxes nationwide, and therefore dictating what records would be successful” (Williams 65).¹² Under mafia pressure on the head of Columbia Studios, Harry Cohn, Sinatra played the role of Angelo Maggio in the 1953 film, *From Here to Eternity*, for which he won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor (68). In return, when mafia fortunes were invested in making Las Vegas, the gambling capital of the world, Sinatra, who “dressed like a gangster, talked like a gangster, behaved like a gangster, grew up around gangsters and fraternised with gangsters,” was to be a regular performer at the mob-run Sands Hotel and Casino until the late 1960s (68). Sinatra’s “relationship with the mob was clearly beneficial to both sides: Sinatra got fame and fortune and the mob had a tame star who could be used to boost their coffers” (68).

11 See further details in Wilson (728).

12 According to Densley, “gangs start life as purely recreational groups but over time they attain different functions, thus, expanding the menu of goods and services they can offer. The four stages of recreation, crime, enterprise, and governance are not mutually exclusive, but rather each stage builds upon the previous” (524).

Like the relationship of Sinatra with the mafia, the relationship of the Kray twins with the press was also symbiotic. Both sides profited nicely from an affair that began when the front page of *The Sunday Mirror* on 12 July 1964 read, “Peer and a Gangster. Yard Inquiry.” The unnamed peer was Lord Boothby, a Tory politician, who (when homosexuality was still illegal) liked to hang out with Ronnie Kray in private (Campbell, *Underworld* 67). This was followed by another story, which referred to “the picture we dare not print” of Ronnie and Boothby, which still did not name the latter (Pearson 273). Boothby then, according to Pearson, wrote a letter to *The Times*, denying it all, claiming that the whole affair was a lie, and by suing the *Sunday Mirror* for libel, he pocketed £50,000, from which he paid £5,000 to Ronnie to keep quiet (275). Some recently found British MI5 files also contain details of an investigation into the relationship between Ronnie Kray and Lord Boothby, and include an explanatory letter from Boothby to the Home Secretary about why there was a picture of him with Ronnie, who, when visiting him for the business of a Nigerian development company, was innocently only offered a “drink” (Garner-Purkis). From contemporary media and records, it seems that Ronnie Kray used his private life and the scandals surrounding his homosexuality for staying in the media’s attention, which is accurately portrayed in *Legend*: when the American mafia boss offers Ronnie some nice Italian girls, Ronnie openly answers that he prefers boys.

Although it worked for scandals and fame to create a hype around the Krays, power-hunger and arrogance finally overwhelmed the twins and brought them down. When George Cornell, a gangster from south London, called Ronnie a homosexual, he went mad and shot him dead in front of shocked witnesses on 9 March 1966 in the Blind Beggar Pub (Pearson 150). Throughout the late 1960s, the Kray twins escalated their crimes from racketeering to murder. In 1966, their first murder was of a member of a rival gang at a Whitechapel pub (Gray). A year later, the twins killed one of their own associates, Jack “the Hat” McVitie: as he had failed to carry out the order to kill their own financial adviser, Reggie stabbed him to death in front of numerous witnesses (Pearson 193). According to Root, by 1968, when the twins were at the height of their fame, Scotland Yard had built up a file on them and their gang, while the Kray twins thought their reputation made them untouchable (220). However, the twins and several of their associates were arrested by a policeman nicknamed “Nipper” Read, who had a distinguished policing and boxing career (Dodd) and whose fallibility was mocked in *Legend* to illustrate the Krays’ popularity

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and upper hand to outshine the police wits. Their arrest was followed by long murder trials for 39 days with the press and public galleries both packed, which enabled them to boost their legend even further before they were sentenced to life in prison (Gray). Although the twins denied everything, the Blind Beggar barmaid gave evidence, and the renegade members of the Firm did the rest (Pearson 263). They were jailed for life and a minimum of thirty years by Justice Melford Stevenson, who told them that society “earned a rest from their activities” (Ezard).

THE KRAY BRAND’S PROMOTION FROM PRISON

Despite being jailed, there was to be little rest from the twins, who continued to promote their image as England’s number one gangsters from prison. Once jailed, according to Pearson, they devoted all their energies to their image as gangland stars; the Krays were always open to visitors from outside (279). According to Campbell, Reggie Kray wrote in 1991 that his eventual aim was to be recognised, first as a gangster, then as a man and eventually as an author, poet, and philosopher (*Underworld* 82). Therefore, publicity was of primary importance for the twins and was promoted all through their lives and beyond to support their narcissistic egos and their brand. Bailey’s 1965 photo of the Krays represents the first stage in the construction of their enduring image (Bailey 207). Stage two came in 1967, when the Krays approached John Pearson (who had just written a well-regarded biography of Ian Fleming) to be their biographer, focusing on their clubs, celebrity status, and charitable works (Pearson 220). Pearson finally published three volumes, which are partly responsible for their enduring fame: *The Profession of Violence* (1972), *The Cult of Violence: The Untold Story of the Krays* (2001), and *Notorious: The Immortal Legend of the Kray Twins* (2010).

As Pearson recalls, Tony and Chris Lambrianou were also in the Kray Firm, and both were jailed for their parts in the McVitie murder. As the papers needed good gangster stories, the Kray connection meant money for anyone who could sell a story about them. Tony published a bestselling memoir, *Inside the Firm* in 1991 (269). Chris Lambrianou became a born-again Christian and also published a book, *Escape from the Kray Madness* (1996). This was negative publicity but still contributed to the Krays’ fame. The same applies to “Nipper” Read, who also wrote two books on the pursuit of the Krays, enhancing the popularity of their legend (Dodd).

Film was another tool used for their image building. According to Bailey, Reggie himself experimented with writing script; he sent Bailey his film noir scripts from prison (mostly including a mother and a vicar with lots of violence and no romance), which reflected his unhappiness and mourning his wife, Frances (216). Reggie also wrote to his cousin Kim every day from prison to show off his artistic talent, sending her poems and recommending her books (McCaffrey).

Pearson highlights that, after Violet Kray's death in 1982, Mareen Flanagan, who used to be Violet's hairdresser, and who knew the twins when they were children, took on the role of prison visitor and go-between with the press (279). Flanagan claims that she also helped the twins in organising charity events in their name, which kept up their celebrity image even in prison. For example, she got footballer George Best to sign a Manchester United shirt, or the former world boxing champion, John H. Stracey, to sign boxing gloves, which would then be auctioned ("Behind the Legend").

In 1979, Ronnie Kray was certified insane with paranoid schizophrenia, and he was transferred to Broadmoor Hospital, where he remained until his death in 1995 (Pearson 277). Flanagan faithfully visited the twins in prison and dealt with Ronnie's luxury demands to show off from inside Broadmoor, a secure hospital rather than a prison. As she recalls, one of her roles was to cash in on the Krays' legend: she had to ring *The Daily Mirror*, as the paper would always pay for a story, which would be passed on to their brother, Charlie, to share it with the twins ("Behind the Legend"). Kim, who also visited the twins in jails, remembers that in Broadmoor, Ronnie's butler served tea from a silver pot, again underlining his celebrity status (McCaffrey).

When their older brother, Charlie, was released from prison in 1975, he was also expected to manage the Kray brand. According to Campbell, "[t]he brothers set up a company called Krayleigh Enterprises, which merchandised their name with everything from T-shirts—'Kray Twins on Tour'—to cigarette lighters" ("The selling of the Krays"). Pearson claims that the sale of their name to small security firms, who would pay a few thousand pounds to be able to tell clients that they had the Krays' backing, was equally lucrative. The Krays' business cards still described them as "personal aides to the Hollywood stars," and to prove this, they even provided bodyguards from prison for Sinatra when he visited Britain in 1985 (280).

Everything, including marriage, was meant to keep the Kray twins in the lime-light and to bring in more money. In 1997, 30 years after the suicide of Reggie's first wife, Frances Shea, Reggie, at the age of 64, married 38-year-old Roberta Jones

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in Maidstone prison for publicity. It was meant to benefit them all. Roberta was also aware that, by marrying a Kray, she entered the media spotlight. The name opened the publishing house doors for her eleven crime novels with titles such as *Bad Girl* and *No Mercy*: they appeared with the word “Kray” featuring on the cover (Pearson 284).

Pearson highlights that, despite being openly homosexual, Ronnie Kray also married twice in prison to stay in the focus of media attention. Besides seeking popularity and fame, Ronnie also liked to spend a lot, thus the Krays needed to capitalise on their name. They decided to sell media rights to Ronnie’s two weddings (Pearson 280). When in 1985 he married Elaine Mildener, *The Sun* paid £10,000 for access to the wedding in the Broadmoor chapel. When Ronnie divorced her, he married Kate Howard in 1989 for publicity and its income (Pearson 281).

THE KRAYS TWINS’ LEGACY AND LEGEND

The Krays were buried next to each other. Back in 1982, Violet Kray was also buried in the Kray corner of Chingford Mount Cemetery, for which occasion her twins were let out of prison (Pearson 279). As always, they took the chance to mourn and to enhance their fame at the same time. There were horses with black plumes, as the hearse drove from Violet’s flat in Shoreditch with 60,000 people lining the streets, and celebrities like Barbara Windsor and Diana Dors were pressed to attend (Moreton). Their own graves were also meant to seek people’s attention, including the ornate headstone erected in 1967 to mark the passing of Frances Shea. On the headstone, an angel looks down on the grave at a little white model of a Scottie dog in sorrow (Moreton). Next to Violet and Frances, the faces of Ronald and Reginald Kray appear on glistening black marble, as they were shot in the famous Bailey photograph with the inscription on their grave: “Grant them eternal peace, O Lord” (Pearson 321).

The twins thought glamour was a cover for grim reality, and they managed to create an exceptional image for themselves. Most criminals become famous when they get caught and go to jail, but the Krays achieved fame while still active. Pearson argues that Reggie would have been a very successful businessman on his own, but Ronnie was darker: he was very much into the gangster image and wanted to live the gangster lifestyle in a way that he thought Al Capone did (318). According to Campbell, the Krays were tough but had manners; they were good to their mother, “loved their dogs,” and became twin symbols of the so-called Spirit of the Blitz: people

of the East End running their own lives, working together, keeping their own code without interference from officialdom in any form (*Underworld* 73).

Hollywood created iconic genres, for example, gangster movies about the mafia (Leggott 53); however, the British film industry worked differently with the social realist versus the heritage cinema tradition as its main divide. Still, the Krays have inspired several gangster dramas both in literature and film. Besides a number of recent documentaries including *The Krays: The Prison Years*, *The Krays: Kill Order*, the 2021 new documentary series, *Secrets of The Krays*, has exposed further intricate details. Two stylish American gangster biopics, *The Rise of the Krays* (2015) and *The Fall of the Krays* (2016), also appeared recently, but interestingly, the first British feature film on the Krays was made by Peter Medak, a Hungarian-born film director in 1990. Since then, there have been two American feature films on the era, *Legend* (Brian Helgoland, 2015) on the Krays and *Once Upon a Time in London* (2019) on Billy Hill ending with the brief introduction of the new era of the Krays.

If we briefly contrast the 1990 British film, *The Krays*, with the 2015 American one, *Legend*, we can see several differences in their representation, but most importantly, *Legend* proves the growing popularity of the Kray brand in the twenty-first century and indicates that the twins have kept enhancing their celebrity status even after their deaths with their afore-mentioned intentional brand-building methods. This popularity is, in the main, informed by a growing sense of nostalgia, as not only the large number of recent literary, intercultural, and transcultural studies testify, especially the ones inspired by Svetlana Boym's concepts of nostalgia,¹³ but there also seems to be a nostalgia for nostalgia in recent years in the film industry as well; mostly in the heritage genre, in many films and TV series set in the interwar or postwar era, e.g. *The King's Speech* (Tom Hooper, 2010), *Made in Dagenham* (Nigel Cole, 2010), or *The Crown* (2016–2023)—just to mention a few.

While the opening and closing bird-eye view frames of *The Krays* show Violet Kray's 1982 funeral, setting her in the focus, *Legend* focuses much more on the celebrity and glamour aspect of the Kray story and on London itself, a spectacular twenty-first-century projection. *Legend's* plot is also more dramatic, and it is narrated by a woman, Reggie Kray's first wife, Frances. It highlights the glamorous

13 See e.g. Hargitai's "Restorative and Reflective Nostalgia in *Doctor Faustus*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*" (2019), where she cites Boym, who describes "nostalgic desires" as trying "to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology" (34), which can be identified in both the lives of the Kray twins and the film adaptations about them as well.

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aspects of the life of the Kray twins more as celebrity figures than as gangsters, with Ronnie's homosexuality and his high life among homosexual politicians. In contrast, the 1990 film highlights the societal aspects of the Kray family, putting more emphasis on the role of their mother, rather than the brand itself.

Maureen Flanagan claimed she did not like the 1990 film, as the Spandau Ballet boys, despite doing their best, were not menacing enough; moreover, she resented that in the film, unlike in reality, Violet Kray was swearing. The twins in prison were also furious about their mother's defamation (Flanagan). But in *Legend*, according to Flanagan, Tom Hardy as Reggie got everything right: "the walk, the beautiful hands, the way he holds the cigarettes and that frown which was always quizzical as if he was just about to ask someone a question," while, on the other hand, playing Ronnie "he was menacing and he got the stare absolutely right" ("Behind the Legend"). Nevertheless, Violet Kray is missing from the 2015 film, despite having been the most important person in the twins' lives—partly because of the narrative structure which, through the recollections of Frances Shea, places in the film's centre glamour, Ronnie's homosexuality, and madness. In the 1990 version, in contrast, Violet represented the Kray family and their East End roots.

The Krays wanted to make sure by any means that everyone knew who they were. When they were sentenced to life in prison, at age 35, their brand was already a success. Due to their popularity, we might wonder if they could be considered modern Robin Hoods. However, unlike Robin Hood, they never gave back what they stole to the poor. Instead, they spent it on high life, clothes, drinks, holidays, and publicity, with only a few exceptions, such as a generous donation after the Aberfan disaster of 21 October 1966 (Lewis). Pearson claimed the twins were generous donors as it generated a lot of sympathy and support for them, so they were successful both as criminals and celebrities creating and keeping up their image, their brand, and legend (281).

Ronnie died in Broadmoor in 1995, and according to Kim, the streets were lined at his funeral, and kids climbed lamp posts to get a better look (McCaffrey). Reggie outlived Ronnie by five years and was released from Wayland prison because of his cancer eight weeks before he died in 2000, but according to Pearson, the crowds were much smaller for Reggie's funeral, as their generation was dying off (14). However, their fame, brand, and celebrity status still survive. There is still a weekly tour of the Blind Beggar Pub in Whitechapel, where Ronnie murdered George Cornell in 1966. As Campbell points out, the pub has done well out of the Krays; one can

take a selfie in the place where Cornell was shot, and they sell DVDs on the Krays and a booklet, *Krays Walk (Underworld 82)*. Around the corner from the Krays' old home, on Bethnal Green Road, there is Pellicci's Cafe, which used to make the twins' breakfast, and which still attracts Kray "pilgrims."

The Kray twins are long dead, but their legend continues to survive and even shows signs of growth, proving the long-lasting impact of their brand. Their systematic image making was so successful, and their celebrity status so well founded, that their legend is still alive 22 years after their death; thus, the 2015 American film, *Legend*, could easily build and cash in on this sentiment, on audiences' longing for glamour, for celebrities, and on feelings of growing nostalgia.

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