

## Perennial Detour: The Cinema of Edgar G. Ulmer and the Experience of Exile

by Noah Isenberg

*Abstract: This article offers an examination of the unusual career of Austrian-born filmmaker Edgar G. Ulmer. Several examples from the director's eclectic oeuvre are used to support the idea that exile is a vital strain in Ulmer's aesthetic and cultural sensibility.*

"Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience."<sup>1</sup> So begins Edward Said's "Reflections on Exile," a series of impassioned meditations on both the idea and the reality of exile. According to Said, despite the enduring sense of estrangement and loss felt by those who are exiled, the term itself has often been viewed—or even romanticized—as a common condition of modern life, a legacy that has shaped contemporary culture. Exile is thus a concept to be understood both literally and metaphorically; it possesses formal criteria, say, as in the case of Georg Lukács's definition of "transcendental homelessness," and political criteria, as in the case of nationalism and other ideologies that determine those who belong and those who do not. Although Said differentiates between the use of such disparate designations as exile, refugee, expatriate, and émigré, one statement applies particularly well to the predicament of Austrian-born émigré filmmaker Edgar G. Ulmer. "For an exile," writes Said, "habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally."<sup>2</sup>

Said adopts a musical term, "contrapuntal," to evoke the "plurality of vision" and "awareness of a simultaneous dimension" that the exile ostensibly experiences and that, when read within a cinematic framework, might be thought of as a kind of flashback or montage. Exile is perhaps not the most fitting term to describe Ulmer, given his early history. He left his native Austria in 1924 for New York, where he helped Max Reinhardt's theater company stage *The Miracle at the Century Theatre*, then shuttled back and forth during much of the late 1920s. He returned to America for good in the early 1930s. Given his Jewish background, Ulmer could not go back to Austria after Hitler's stunning ascent to power—surely not after the *Anschluss*, the Nazi annexation of Austria, in 1938. Yet unlike his

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contemporaries Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Robert Siodmak, and Fred Zinnemann, the last three of whom Ulmer collaborated with on his Berlin directorial debut, *Menschen am Sonntag* (*People on Sunday*, codirected with Siodmak in 1929), Ulmer chose to leave Austria before being forced to flee.<sup>3</sup> Although Ulmer may not be considered a "true" exile according to Said's typology, he maintained a similar state of in-betweenness, between old world and new, Europe and America, high culture and mass culture, throughout his career.

**An Exile in the Making: Ulmer's Early Life.** As an initial flashback of sorts, we might examine briefly the early biography of the filmmaker.<sup>4</sup> Ulmer came of age in war-torn Austria. After his birth, on September 17, 1904, in the Austro-Hungarian (today Czech) town of Olmütz—at his family's country house, where the Ulmers often spent summers—he and his family returned to Vienna. There Edgar was raised in the bourgeois comforts of his parents, Siegfried, a wine merchant, and Henrietta (*née* Edels), an unsuccessful opera singer. Edgar was the eldest of four children, two boys (Edgar and Max) and two girls (Carola and Elvira). Brought up as a secular Jew, he attended a local Jesuit school. (Ulmer once claimed not to have known he was Jewish until he went to high school.)<sup>5</sup> Like so many patriotic Jews, even those with socialist leanings, Ulmer's father served in Emperor Franz Josef's army during World War I; his father died of kidney failure while in uniform in 1916.

With the help of a Jewish aid organization, Edgar and his sister Carola were sent to live with a foster family in Sweden, where they remained until the end of the war.<sup>6</sup> Edgar then returned to Vienna, moving in with the Schildkraut family, whose father-and-son acting duo, Rudolf and Joseph, introduced Ulmer to theater and cinema. After a brief, incomplete, and altogether undocumented course of study in architecture at Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts, Ulmer worked as a set builder for the Max Reinhardt Theater and, according to his own account, also for the renowned Burgtheater.<sup>7</sup> Around this same period, in the early 1920s, Ulmer began to assist, mainly in set design, on several German pictures and theatrical productions.<sup>8</sup>

Ulmer's early film career was undoubtedly auspicious, although it has been somewhat embellished by grandiose and largely specious claims made by the director himself—or, perhaps more accurately, by the émigré director, who no longer intended to return home and continually reinvented himself in America.<sup>9</sup> Ulmer insisted, for example, that he worked on the sets of Paul Wegener's *Golem* (1920) and on Robert Wiene's *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920)—even though he would have been just fifteen years old—as well as on several early pictures by Fritz Lang and F. W. Murnau.<sup>10</sup> Because of a lack of sufficient documentation, unverifiable records, and assignments that did not always bear the stamp of credit, these early years remain shrouded in mystery.<sup>11</sup> What is clear is that Ulmer's extended film career took him on a series of detours from Vienna to Berlin and from Berlin to Hollywood, where in the mid- to late 1920s he worked as an art director at Universal while assisting Murnau (credited this time) with his American studio production of *Sunrise* (1927), back to Berlin, on to Hollywood and New York, and back to Hollywood and Europe once again.<sup>12</sup>

Regarded as “one of the minor glories of cinema” (Andrew Sarris), “a legendary underground figure” (Peter Bogdanovich), and the “King of the Bs” (Bill Krohn), Ulmer enjoyed a directorial career that spanned some thirty-five years.<sup>13</sup> His sprawling and eclectic filmography includes daring and original horror films; two-bit westerns; educational shorts; a startling variety of ethnic pictures from the late 1930s, including a Ukrainian operetta, an all-black musical drama, and four acclaimed Yiddish films; numerous respected, and now preserved, B-pictures—from science fiction to love stories—shot mainly during the 1940s and 1950s; and, finally, the film noir classic *Detour* (1945).

Elaborating on Dana Polan’s study of American cinema, *Power and Paranoia*, George Lipsitz has suggested that “the image of a detour appeared prominently in 1940s films as an appropriate metaphor for individuals whose lives and hopes had been interrupted (or shattered) by the war.”<sup>14</sup> This same image may serve as a revealing lens through which to refract the diverse films that Ulmer made during his lifetime—a lifetime that was interrupted, or at least displaced, by two world wars and several transcontinental migrations. In the following analysis, I would like to follow three junctures along Ulmer’s cinematic trajectory, paying attention to what Said has called the “contrapuntal” elements of the exile’s vision. We shall in turn explore those films Ulmer made within the Hollywood studio system as well as those he made on a paltry independent budget, on so-called Poverty Row, where the director was infamous. As Peter Bogdanovich has maintained, “Nobody had ever made good pictures faster and for less money than Edgar Ulmer.”<sup>15</sup>

**Camping in Hollywood.** Reviewing Ulmer’s checkered career, an unnamed critic for the *New Yorker* recently commented: “[He] built a filmography like nobody else’s. His only mainstream classic was the 1934 horror film *The Black Cat*, and even that is gloriously *outré*. . . . [His] movies come off as oddly sophisticated Saturday-matinee stuff; their campiness derives not from incompetence but from intelligence pushed to budgetary limits.”<sup>16</sup> *The Black Cat* offers a fascinating glimpse into the world of an émigré filmmaker negotiating American financial and aesthetic constraints. With Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff in leading roles—the first of seven pictures in which they would star opposite each other—the film represents the rich interplay between European art cinema and Hollywood camp, between the undigested horrors of war and their psychosexual counterparts, between reflections of exile and those of home.

The film opens with images of transit: a European railway station, packages and luggage, train officials and passengers. Aboard the Orient Express is a newlywed, patently American couple, the mystery-thriller writer Peter Alison (David Manners) and his young bride, Joan (Jacqueline Wells), bound for a luxury resort in the Carpathian mountains (the site of Murnau’s *Nosferatu* (1922)). The honeymooners, shown affectionately in their cheery, brightly lit compartment, soon face an intruder, Dr. Vitus Werdegast (Lugosi), who in fact does become a guest, as his name—in German, literally “I shall be a guest”—suggests; his jarring screen presence quickly disrupts the matrimonial bliss of the Alisons. Werdegast is enraptured by the sight of Joan, who Ulmer captures in several revealing point-of-view

shots—a foreboding sign of what is to come. (Lugosi had recently starred in Tod Browning's *Dracula* [1931], so his role in *The Black Cat* was very much colored by that memorable performance.)

The first intervention on the part of the intruder, an attempt to protect Joan from his falling suitcase, elicits a wry response: "After all, better to be frightened than to be crushed." We then learn that Werdegast left a wife of similar beauty when he went off to fight in the Great War eighteen years earlier; that in the intervening years he has been interned as a prisoner of war; and that now, as he triumphantly states, "After fifteen years, I have returned." Not a far cry from his role in *Dracula*, Lugosi's Werdegast suggestively evokes the return of the undead.

As the twisted plot unravels—following, in rapid succession, a severe rain-storm, an abbreviated journey by bus, an accident, the death of the bus driver, and the injury of Joan—the three passengers, who continue their extended travels together, end up in another prison of sorts, the home of engineer Hjalmar Poelzig (Karloff), built directly over the mass graves at Fort Marmaros, a wartime battleground ("the greatest graveyard in the world"). With its clean modernist lines and stylish mystique ("very much out of my Bauhaus period," as Ulmer would later refer to it<sup>17</sup>), Poelzig's house, perched on the hillside, stands in marked contrast to the primal, forested landscape below. There is, we are told, "still death in the air." The house becomes a new battleground, the space in which the two European "monsters" vie for power and control over their American prey. (Joan, left temporarily unconscious from her injury, becomes the prime object of desire.)

As is soon made clear, Werdegast has a debt to settle with Poelzig, a former army commander, who abandoned his troops, Werdegast among them, resulting in countless deaths and prolonged prison terms. "You sold Marmaros to the Russians," declares Werdegast in one of the early confrontations. "You scurried away in the night and left us to die." Not only did Poelzig betray Werdegast in the trenches, but Poelzig also stole Werdegast's wife and eventually killed her, preserving her corpse behind glass, and married Werdegast's young daughter, Karen (Lucille Lund).

With its heavy emphasis on the recurrent motif of the black cat and on Werdegast's crippling phobia ("an intense and all-consuming horror of cats," as Poelzig calls it), the film moves along a narrative axis of rivalry and revenge. Time and again, Poelzig and Werdegast face off, as the helpless Alisons remain captive. At night, while the Americans are asleep, Poelzig and Werdegast descend to a basement vault, into an old military bunker, where Poelzig has Werdegast's wife, among others, embalmed in a glass shrine. There, Werdegast confronts Poelzig, only to be rendered powerless by the presence of a black cat. The following day, they wager Joan's life, in which they both take extraordinary interest, over a game of chess; and, finally, during an interrupted midnight pagan Black Mass ceremony led by Poelzig, in what is undoubtedly the film's most gruesome scene, Werdegast hangs his rival on his own embalming rack while attempting to skin him alive "slowly—bit by bit."

Because the film was shown in the U.S. in the mid-1930s and was produced by a leading Hollywood studio, the especially frightening scenes had to be tempered

by more lighthearted, if also cornier, moments. As Otto Friedrich has observed, "Absurdity—campy absurdity—was probably the only way Hollywood could deal with horror, because that was the only way it had ever known. Hollywood horror films, no matter how gory or pseudo-gory they were to become, never approached real horror."<sup>18</sup> In the case of *The Black Cat*, the occasionally stilted dialogue adds to the campy effect, as in the chess scene, when the Alisons attempt to place a call only to discover that the line has been cut: "Did you hear that, Vitus," asks Poelzig impishly, "the phone is dead. *Even* the phone is dead." Finally, in keeping with the American tradition of happy endings, the Alisons escape and the fortress explodes with the two European "monsters" inside.

According to Susan Sontag, "The essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration." Sontag also highlights camp's "relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms."<sup>19</sup> We get a clear idea of how Ulmer incorporates such a camp sensibility in one of the most clever sequences in the film, one involving remarkable camerawork and a sharp eye for symbolic detail. Leading up to this juncture is the first significant clash between Werdegast and Poelzig, climaxing in Werdegast's incriminating assault on Poelzig for his wartime betrayal and in Werdegast demanding to see Karen. The unexpected presence of Peter Alison breaks the tension and, in a temporary role reversal, Peter becomes the intruder on intimate terrain, as Werdegast was in the lovers' train compartment.

The "atmosphere of death" pervading Poelzig's masterwork of architecture contrasts with the phony collegiality of the ritual drink in which the three men—"one of Austria's greatest architects" (Poelzig), "one of Hungary's greatest psychiatrists" (Werdegast), and "one of America's greatest writers of unimportant books" (Alison)—indulge. During Werdegast's toast to Peter—to his charming wife and to love—the shadow of a black cat introduces the sinister leitmotif that will set the tenor (together with the ominous tones of Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*) for the remainder of the film; the portentous shadow is enough to cause Werdegast to hurl a knife at the unsuspecting feline.

The tension, initially offset by Peter's presence, increases, however, when Joan arrives. A kind of return of the repressed—or, perhaps, the undead—she stands in for the off-screen murder of the cat. In her lustful drug-induced lilt (she is given a narcotic after Werdegast tends to her wound, which is prominently exposed on her neck), Joan commands the attention, the deep-focus gaze, of her male spectators. She asks Werdegast, almost teasingly, in a moment of uncharacteristic assertiveness, "You are frightened, Doctor?" Finally, during a climactic kiss between Joan and Peter (after announcing that Joan should return to bed, where, we are led to believe, a lovely woman such as herself belongs), Ulmer amplifies the sexual frustration by focusing on Poelzig's hand as it grips a nude female statuette, blurring the background embrace (Fig. 1).

The sequence demonstrates, on several levels, the vital strain of camp at work in Ulmer's movie. The two monsters, embodiments of the supernatural living dead, are extravagant not only in their style of acting, gesture, costume, and intonation but also in their contribution to the *mise-en-scène*. Together with their American



Figure 1. Poelzig (Boris Karloff) fights off sexual tension as his hand grips a nude statuette in Edgar G. Ulmer's *The Black Cat* (Universal Pictures, 1934).

counterparts, Poelzig and Werdegast convey an air of "seriousness that fails," as Sontag puts it; thus, the scene has, in Sontag's words, "the proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve."<sup>20</sup> The climax of the scene is achieved visually: the blurring of high and low art, European and mass culture, war trauma and unbridled sexual passion. Ulmer achieves this visual climax through the use of a kind of raw sensationalism, and the film—or the marketing of it—made no pretensions about it. It was billed as "The Daddy of 'em all! The monster of *Frankenstein* plus the monster of *Dracula*, plus the 'monstrousness' of Edgar Allan Poe—all combined by the master makers of screen mysteries to give you the absolute apex in super-shivery" (Fig. 2).

Indeed, *The Black Cat* earned its renown by delivering on the promise of its marketers. As the authors of *Universal Horrors* note, "Boldly thumbing its nose at convention, the film is a veritable catalogue of human corruption. Sadism, shades of incest, revenge, murder, torture, voyeurism, Satan worship. . . . *The Black Cat* provided the kind of sensationalism audiences craved."<sup>21</sup> Yet given the film's controversial themes, Ulmer ran up against various obstacles, some of which he was able to surmount and others that had to be relegated to the floor of the editing room.<sup>22</sup> What remains is the poignant psychosexual dimension, much of it played out in a vexed homoerotic feud. As Harry M. Benshoff has argued, Karloff and Lugosi represent "a monstrously queer sado-masochistic male couple" whose "homosexual



Figure 2. Original poster art for *The Black Cat*, featuring Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi (Universal Pictures, 1934).

desire is displaced onto sado-masochistic behavior.<sup>23</sup> In its bearing on camp, queer sexuality, as portrayed on the screen, subverts social mores; or as Sontag would have it, "It neutralizes moral indignation, sponsors playfulness."<sup>24</sup> To put it another way, the relationship between Poelzig and Werdegast is an instance of the émigré director engaging the cultural fears and fantasies of his new country yet captivating his audience by drawing on aesthetic conventions of the old. As Ulmer presumably witnessed during his training in Vienna and in Weimar Germany, the recurrent play on a kind of homoerotic camp—enacted quite notably in such classic horror films as *Caligari* and *Nosferatu*—was nothing exceptional for the genre. However, his first major movie completed in his adopted homeland has, to take Said's lead, a "contrapuntal" dimension to it in that the legacy of the past comes into conversation with, or is filtered through, the present.

Ulmer initially shot *The Black Cat*, which he wrote with American screenwriter Peter Ruric, in fifteen days and for a budget of just over \$91,000. Because some of the more racy scenes had to be cut or reshot, a few days of retakes were required as well as an extra \$6,500.<sup>25</sup> As it happened, the head of Universal, Carl Laemmle, Sr., had been vacationing in Europe during the shoot and thus Ulmer, who was a close friend of Laemmle's son, was more inclined to take liberties with the project. As Ulmer remarked, "Junior gave me free rein to write a horror

picture in the style we had started in Europe with *Caligari*.”<sup>26</sup> Ulmer had hoped to give the film a German expressionist accent, drawing on a visual lexicon from that illustrious chapter of film history. “Interestingly,” notes Michael Henry Wilson, “Ulmer tapped into his Expressionist heritage after he came back to America, notably in the quasi-experimental *Black Cat*, a symphony of horror that plumbed uncharted territories of metaphysical perversity.”<sup>27</sup>

Ulmer’s playful adaptation of early German cinematic style manifests itself in *The Black Cat* in a variety of ways. Having trained on the sets of Murnau—and, according to his own account, those of Wegener, Wiene, Lang, and others—Ulmer was clearly aware of the techniques of his forerunners. His dramatic use of light and shadow throughout *The Black Cat* evokes a hallmark touch of German expressionism, while other narrative strategies appear to be holdovers from the silent era. For example, when Poelzig lies down in bed, he reads the *Rites of Lucifer* (like *The Book of Vampires* in *Nosferatu*).<sup>28</sup>

Some of Ulmer’s references to Weimar cinema resemble more of an inside joke among German and Austrian émigrés than a genuine homage: using a name like Poelzig, and an architect at that, it is impossible to miss the allusion to Hans Poelzig, the set designer for Wegener’s *Golem* and among the great architects of his time. As for Poelzig’s sadistic personality, Paul Mandell has argued that he was based on Fritz Lang; Poelzig was thought to represent the alleged sadism of a notoriously tyrannical director.<sup>29</sup> The sets, Ulmer suggested to Bogdanovich, were inspired by conversations with Gustav Meyrink, the Prague novelist who wrote his own rendition of *The Golem*, on which Wegener’s 1920 film was based, and had allegedly considered writing a play set in a French military fortress from World War I.<sup>30</sup>

Soon after he completed *The Black Cat*, Ulmer embarked on a project that he would never bring to fruition. A fragmented, elliptical novel titled *Beyond the Boundary* and dated “Hollywood, 1935,” it tells the story of a Viennese wartime adolescent named George (Ulmer’s middle name). George is left fatherless by the war, entrusted to a governess who excites his burgeoning sexual appetite, and in due course learns to negotiate the streets of the big city, including the bread lines and the brothels. The trauma of losing a father—Ulmer dedicates the novel “to one of the many thousand soldiers, who died in the First World War; In memoriam of Siegfried Ulmer, my father”—and the ensuing sexual awakening at the hands of a prostitute foreground a crisis that seems to have plagued Ulmer for many years, namely, the acute sense of abandonment and unavoidable breach. Throughout his career, Ulmer was intensely preoccupied with subjects on the margins of society, who were dealt bad hands by fate or by adverse social conditions, who fight to overcome the various catastrophes they face, and who attempt to move beyond the memories of their traumatic pasts.

**An Ethnic Intermezzo.** Although *The Black Cat* was by all counts a box-office success, ending the year as Universal’s top-grossing picture of 1934, Ulmer’s days as a Hollywood studio director were numbered. While working on the film, he met his wife to be, Shirley Castle (*née* Kassler), a script supervisor and screenwriter who at

the time was still married to Carl Laemmle's dear nephew Max Alexander. Their liaison immediately branded Ulmer *persona non grata* in Laemmle's powerful domain, a stronghold that reached far into other studio dynasties. In the words of Bill Krohn, Ulmer was "blackballed not for politics, but for love."<sup>31</sup> Considered in this light, his status marks a different kind of "exile"; it was not so much the double consciousness about which Said speaks, or a state of exile determined by national concerns, but rather a banishment from the world in which Ulmer once saw great potential to flourish. To be sure, Ulmer had initially hoped to direct another horror film, *Bluebeard*, at Universal, but he would not complete that project until a decade later, during the war, when he was with the Producers Releasing Corporation (PRC).

Soon after finishing work on a Z-budget western, *Thunder over Texas* (1934), written by Shirley Castle, Ulmer left Hollywood for New York. Along the way, he did a series of one-reel musical shorts and directed a thriller, *From Nine to Nine* (1936), a Canadian quota quickie shot in Montreal in eight days, before finally embarking on a six-year stint directing films aimed at a minority audience. During what I call Ulmer's "ethnic intermezzo," the filmmaker took on a variety of unconventional and seemingly ill-matched projects. The first of these was a Ukrainian operetta, *Natalka Poltavka* (*The Girl from Poltava*, 1936–37), codirected with Vasile Avramenko and largely financed, with a budget of less than \$20,000, by a Ukrainian window-washers union. The film, which garnered favorable reviews in the Ukrainian and American press, featured a large cast of amateur Ukrainian and Russian actors.<sup>32</sup> As George Lipsitz has noted about Ulmer's engagement with his Ukrainian audience, "He believed that cinema as a medium had a responsibility to educate and communicate, that it belonged as much to people striving to define their ethnic identity as it did to investors seeking profits from whatever product Hollywood could convince the public to buy."<sup>33</sup> In 1938, Ulmer made another Ukrainian film, a musical drama aptly titled *Cossacks in Exile*, about the desire and difficulty of returning to one's homeland.

In the process of preparing a suitable set for *The Girl from Poltava*, Ulmer created a replica of a Ukrainian village on a farm near Flemington, New Jersey. He used the same set for the first of his four Yiddish films, *Grine Felder* (*Green Fields*, 1937), which he codirected with veteran Yiddish stage actor Jacob Ben-Ami. As a self-identified secular Jew, Ulmer did not know Yiddish. Yet, accompanied by a friend, the actor Rudolf Schildkraut, he had visited the Yiddish-speaking Jewish Art Theater on New York's Lower East Side during his first trip to the United States in the 1920s. In his interview with Bogdanovich, Ulmer explains how impressed he was by the "tremendous actors—Muni Weisenfreund [Paul Muni], Jacob Adler [Stella Adler's father], Maurice Schwartz—it was something which didn't exist elsewhere in all of New York. The plays they did, translated into Yiddish, were unbelievable. It was a second Broadway down there."<sup>34</sup>

Several commentators, most notably Neal Gabler, have suggested that European-born Jewish directors and producers in Hollywood frequently proved their strong allegiance to American culture by making films that were stripped of any traces of Jewishness, that were even more American than those made by their

native-born gentile counterparts.<sup>35</sup> Deviating markedly from this trend, an assimilated German-speaking Jew operating outside the normal constraints of Hollywood, Ulmer undertook his most overtly Jewish projects while in America—in New York and New Jersey, to be sure, but in the U.S. nonetheless. As the renowned Austrian novelist Joseph Roth wrote in 1937, “Émigré German Jews are like a new tribe: Having forgotten how to be Jews, they are learning it all over again. They are unable to forget that they are German, and they can’t lose their Germanness. They are like snails with two shells on their backs.”<sup>36</sup> In a profound example of the émigré director negotiating more than one world at once—here the German, the American, and the Yiddish speaking of Eastern Jewry—Ulmer wore at least “two shells” and experienced at least two kinds of exile while making his mark on Yiddish cinema.

Ulmer struck it big with *Green Fields*, an affecting portrayal of shtetl life captured with unusual grace and beauty. In spite of its New Jersey set, one critic argues, “The film seemed to possess an almost verité authenticity.”<sup>37</sup> Much the same could be said of Ulmer’s threadbare depiction of Berlin in *People on Sunday*, produced almost ten years earlier in Germany, and of his all-black musical drama, *Moon over Harlem*, made a mere two years later in New York. Both films are indebted to a rich tradition of cinematic realism, which Ulmer employs in his Yiddish debut. Unique to *Green Fields*, however, is the emphasis on the natural landscape and the connection between the common people and their idyllic surroundings. Perhaps owing to the fame of the Peretz Hirshbein play on which the film was based, and perhaps also to the name recognition of its principal actors (Helen Beverly and Michael Goldstein), both of whom had enjoyed distinguished careers in the Yiddish Art Theater, *Green Fields* opened to packed movie houses. Writing in the pages of the Yiddish-language *Literarische Bleter*, Nakhman Mayzel hailed the picture as an “outstanding artistic and financial success, unparalleled in the history of Yiddish film in America.”<sup>38</sup>

What Ulmer does for the simple romance of a semiutopian pastoral ethnic enclave in *Green Fields*, he subverts radically in *Fishke der Krumer* (*Fishke the Lame*, or, in the more fanciful English title under which it was released, *The Light Ahead*, 1939), by far the most complex of his Yiddish-language movies. Based primarily on the 1869 novel by S. Y. Abramovitsh—the so-called grandfather of modern Yiddish literature who was known mostly by his pen name and fictional persona, Mendele Moykher Sforim, or Mendele the Book Peddler—Ulmer’s film recasts Abramovitsh’s sharp critique of the shtetl.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the film contains none of the nostalgia so often evoked in new world versions of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. According to J. Hoberman’s account, Ulmer’s film “offers the only negative view of the shtetl to be found in an American movie.”<sup>40</sup> With the help of prize-winning scriptwriter Chaver-Paver (*née* Gershon Einbinder) and that of Ulmer’s script supervisor wife, Shirley, Ulmer drew his material from Abramovitsh’s literary repertoire and transformed it into a tale of intense social alienation at the hands of religious superstition, communal corruption, and archaic shtetl practices. As Myron Meisel has emphatically stated, “Far more than any other film director, Ulmer

represents the primacy of the visual over the narrative, the ineffable ability of the camera to transcend the most trivial foolishness and make images that defy the lame literary content of the dramatic material.<sup>41</sup>

Unlike *Green Fields*, in which the world of the shtetl radiates harmony and warmth, the town of Glubsk (literally "fools' town") in *The Light Ahead* conjures a corrupt backwater village. Alternating highly stylized sets with naturally lit pastoral background shots, Ulmer plays out the tension between stifling interior spaces and the open road—something he would go on to explore at much greater length in *Detour*. Ulmer shot the film on the same location in Newton, New Jersey, where he had filmed *Yankl der Shmid* (*The Singing Blacksmith*, 1938) and *Cossacks in Exile* on the property of a Catholic monastery that was flanked, he claims, by a nudist colony on one side and the proto-Nazi Camp Siegfried on the other.<sup>42</sup>

*The Light Ahead* opens with a convivial sequence drenched in daylight featuring two traveling small-time Jewish merchants riding behind horse-drawn carriages. During these initial scenes, the audience is introduced not only to the central character of Mendele (Isadore Cashier), an all-knowing raconteur and *folksmentsh*, but also to Fishke the Lame (David Opatoshu), who is en route to Odessa. After displaying his powers of persuasion, by reminding Fishke of the love he has left behind in Glubsk, Mendele takes his friend—and the audience—home.

The main story line of the film then takes shape around the lives, and the love, of two community outcasts: Fishke and his soon-to-be fiancée, the blind orphan Hodel (Helen Beverly). Their dreams of leaving Glubsk for the big-city life in Odessa are met with derision by most inhabitants of the shtetl except for Mendele, who ultimately helps the couple abandon their wretched existence. The urban-rural dialectic—which Ulmer explored persistently throughout his career, from his initial work as set designer on Murnau's *Sunrise* and his debut in *People on Sunday* through his last films in the 1960s—between Odessa as the modern metropolis and Glubsk as a town helplessly stuck in the dark ages fuels Fishke and Hodel's quest. By using a sympathetic lens and frequently shooting in soft, muted light, Ulmer renders the town pariahs, in particular, the telegenic Beverly, almost heroic (Fig. 3).

In the remarkable sequence in which Hodel is first introduced, we observe both the modernist set design and the primitive world that literally encloses the young woman. As Hoberman has commented (in an aptly titled chapter, "Phantom Europe"), "With its crazy angles and skewed lampposts, Glubsk suggests the confluence of Marc Chagall and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*."<sup>43</sup> Such images recall the mode in which the shtetl was imagined by such artists as Chagall and the way German expressionist cinema captured, at least in part, a similar aesthetic. Indeed, the film contains shades of noir—flourishes of chiaroscuro—while Ulmer also seems to draw on a kind of "Chasidic gothic," a mode of representation invoked in the dark atmosphere of Michal Waszynski's cinematic rendition of S. Ansky's *Der Dybbuk* (1937).<sup>44</sup> In theme, Ansky's *Dybbuk*, which originally bore the title "Between Two Worlds," lies in close proximity to *The Light Ahead*; both films deal with the intrusion of reason and social justice into a milieu that is otherwise determined by the logic, or illogic, of mysticism and folk tradition. As John Belton has astutely observed,

Figure 3. Fishke (David Opatoshu) and Hodel (Helen Beverly) as the glorified bride and groom in Edgar Ulmer's *The Light Ahead* (Collective Films, 1939).



"Ulmer's world, somewhat akin to Murnau's in its sensitivity to and assertion of abstract mystical forces that haunt its inhabitants, is an irrational one, governed more by crazy nightmare than by any coldly mechanical sense of fate."<sup>45</sup>

During one particular sequence, Hodel sits somberly plucking feathers, unaware of her physical surroundings, though able to sense what is taking place (Ulmer frames Hodel in near-angelic lighting). Hodel's confidant, Gittel (Anna Guskin), soon arrives and makes her presence known. The conversation that ensues, very much a part of the core narrative, conveys the dilemma the ostracized couple faces. "What can we expect in Glubsk?" asks Hodel. "We'll never be able to marry." She explains her fear that she and Fishke will remain dejected and, in turn, announces to Gittel: "In a big city, there's more opportunity." (This great hope for a better—and more anonymous—life in the metropolis receives further consideration in Ulmer's characterization of Al Roberts's plight in *Detour*.)

The sequence ends with the lighting of a streetlamp, a striking allusion to the battle between enlightenment and religious dogma that the film addresses in its subsequent treatment of a cholera epidemic; the town suffers terribly, yet the residents obstinately refuse to employ modern sanitation, let alone modern medicine. In a moment of superstitious ritual, enacted during a climactic scene near the end of the film, the community elders call for a midnight wedding at the town graveyard—not a far cry from the midnight mass in *The Black Cat*—at which Fishke and Hodel, as the "cholera bride and groom," serve as the means of ridding the shtetl of the disease killing its inhabitants. With Mendele's help, the town pariahs break free from the dark ceremony and make their way to the bright road toward the big city. Ulmer's film was greeted by hearty praise in the popular press. The *New York Times*, for example, called it "remarkably honest and forthright."<sup>46</sup>

In the years surrounding *The Light Ahead*, Ulmer directed several short documentaries commissioned by the National Tuberculosis and Health Association. These films were aimed at protecting the health and promoting the rights of African Americans (*Let My People Live*, 1938–39); Mexican Americans (*Cloud in the Sky*, 1939); and Native Americans (*Another to Conquer*, 1941). Around the same time, Ulmer also shot *Moon over Harlem*, his musical drama set in “black Manhattan,” which treats the African American community’s confrontation with mobsters and the ensuing struggle for harmony and prosperity. His handling of characters, regardless of setting and social milieu, tended to reveal the complexity and ambivalence of identity, the internal strife individuals face, and the external battles against corrupting and exploitative forces. These dynamics shaped Ulmer’s ethnic films of the late 1930s and early 1940s, an intensely personal phase, as Krohn suggests, that enabled Ulmer “to explore his own condition of exile and his mixed feelings about being an inheritor of an alien tradition.”<sup>47</sup> These dynamics also informed quite a few of his B-pictures from the mid-1940s and 1950s—many of which are similarly concerned with figures on the fringes of society.

**Allegories of Exile.** In an article in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, French critic Charles Tesson speculates that the journey Al Roberts (Tom Neal) takes in *Detour* reflects a journey Ulmer made from New York to Hollywood a few years earlier. Near the beginning of the film, in a New York nightclub called the Break O’Dawn,

the pianist [Roberts] plays something classical, which after a while turns into a Jazz melody and thus brings something to expression that has to do with Ulmer, something that led him on his path from Europe to Hollywood. Al, the pianist at a low-level establishment, may wish to dream of Carnegie Hall just as a PRC director might dream of MGM.<sup>48</sup>

During his four years at PRC, from 1942 to 1946, Ulmer directed eleven pictures, most of them, like *Detour*, shot in under a week and with little budget to speak of. It is not fully clear whether Ulmer wanted to break into the big studios (as he once put it, “I did not want to be ground up in the Hollywood hash machine”<sup>49</sup>), although he does express some hope of landing a studio contract (in this case, at Paramount, a cinematic Carnegie Hall of sorts) in his unpublished, private correspondence from 1941, just before he began his cycle at PRC.<sup>50</sup> As for the significance of attaining musical recognition as addressed in *Detour*, Ulmer himself would go on to direct his independent tribute to musical virtuosity, *Carnegie Hall* (1947), a few years later.

Tesson picks up on this passion for music—indeed Ulmer’s first passion, even more than cinema, and a passion that was never entirely fulfilled—and notes the extraordinary role that it plays in the film. In Al’s journey back in time, the abrupt shift into flashback comes to him via music. The memories that he so ardently tries to keep bottled up surge over him as he hears the tunes of his past. More broadly speaking, as Austrian film scholar Alexander Horwath has suggested, music figures as a means of highlighting the “allegories of a typical emigrant situation.”<sup>51</sup> That is to say, it amplifies the tension—or, in Said’s terms, the “contrapuntal” valence—transported from the old world to the new, from Brahms to boogie-woogie.<sup>52</sup>

*Detour* begins in the present tense. Somewhere on the open highway, a hitchhiker, Al, steps out of a car and enters a roadside diner. Noticeably distraught, he drinks a cup of coffee and does his best to ward off the unsolicited interventions of others around him. When an insufferably garrulous trucker finally turns away from Al, places a nickel in the jukebox, and plays "I Can't Believe That You're in Love with Me," Al can no longer contain himself: he shouts at the trucker to turn off the music, only to realize that he has no right to do so. ("It's a free country," the trucker retorts, "and I can play whatever I want to.") After the confrontation, the camera tracks forward into a tight close-up of Al, darkened around all but his eyes, for the flashback narrated by Al's voice-over. Al's edgy voice pervades the scene:

That tune, that tune! Why was it always that rotten tune, following me around, beating in my head, never letting up?!

Did you ever want to forget anything? Did you ever want to cut away a piece of your memory or blot it out? You can't, you know, no matter how hard you try. You can change the scenery, but sooner or later you'll get a whiff of perfume, or somebody will say a certain phrase, or maybe hum something. Then you're licked again!

The camera then tilts and tracks in on Al's oversized coffee mug (an effect Ulmer seems to have pulled from his Weimar-era bag of tricks) and from there to the intense spinning of the jukebox, set in dreamlike motion, which sends us back to the Break O'Dawn.

Al's voice-over articulates his heavy nostalgia for a lost past when his girlfriend Sue Harvey (Claudia Drake) used to sing the song, *their* song ("Those were the days!"). Al's sweet memory of the event, when Sue serenaded him, caressed his shoulder, and looked longingly into his eyes, is as rosy as only a memory can be. For the duration of the film, this memory represents a kind of paradise lost for Al, who finds himself sliding down a slippery slope toward ruin. Ulmer trumps up the memory as a means of making the portrayal of Al's decline all the more tragic. It is a telling example of what Paul Schrader calls

the most overriding noir theme: there is a passion for the past and present, but a fear of the future. The noir hero dreads to look ahead but instead tries to survive day by day, and if unsuccessful at that, he returns to the past. Thus film noir's techniques emphasize loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, insecurity; then submerge these self-doubts in mannerism and style.<sup>53</sup>

Al Roberts alternately invites and resists looking back at his past; it is a well of solace and, after new memories accumulate, of haunting frustration. The future, in turn, is at best a fantasy and at worst a horrific nightmare. While hitchhiking from New York to Los Angeles, in pursuit of Sue, who has gone on to realize her dreams (but in fact is now a "hash-slinger" at a cafeteria), Al looks into the rear-view mirror—a rear-view reflection that, by way of suggestive lighting on the part of Ulmer's cinematographer, Benjamin Kline, enables Al wistfully to project his desires forward. He envisages Sue singing in a surreal jazz club, her larger-than-life image against the backdrop of shadowy figures of musicians (Fig. 4).<sup>54</sup>



Figure 4. Sue (Claudia Drake) performs in a fantasy Hollywood nightclub, as reflected in a rear-view mirror, in Edgar Ulmer's *Detour* (Producers Releasing Corp., 1945).

Later, after Al suddenly becomes an accomplice in the death of Charles Haskell (Edmund MacDonald), the driver who picks him up—and, in an effort to maintain his innocence, takes on Haskell's identity himself—Al hopes immediately to “blot out” his memory. As he tries to sleep off his traumatic encounter with Haskell in a roadside motel, he finds himself tormented by images of the dreadful experience. When he later picks up a hitchhiker called Vera (Ann Savage), his disguise fails him as she awakens from a deceptively brief nap and demands to know where Al has hidden Haskell's body (as the sordid narrative would have it, she had been traveling with Haskell before he picked up Al, and she is the source of the vicious scars that Al notices earlier on Haskell's hand).

Al's fierce desire to repress his memories, and his old identity with them, eventually manifests itself in another “accidental” death; he unwittingly strangles Vera with a telephone cord, pulling it underneath a locked door, after Vera threatens to reveal his identity to the Hollywood police. (Al's desire to get away from the rural landscape to the city mirrors, in several respects, the quest of Fishke and Hodel in *The Light Ahead*; as Al states in his voice-over, “In a small town I might be noticed, but in a city I should be safe enough.”<sup>55</sup>)

In spite of its inherently suspicious take on Hollywood in the 1940s—with its doom-and-gloom story line and brutal imagery—Ulmer's film received favorable reviews in the local trade papers. The *Hollywood Reporter* pronounced it "an excellent picture" and "the best film PRC has ever produced," asserting further that the overall "achievement is unmistakably attributable to Ulmer."<sup>56</sup> Although less effusive in its praise (calling the film "adequate as second half of a double bill"), *Variety* was quick to point out that "director Edgar Ulmer manages to keep the show smartly paced," while a review in *Film Daily* highlighted the "suspense and vividness" that Ulmer was able to achieve with the picture. Finally, the *Los Angeles Times* called *Detour* "one of the most poignant and disturbing stories to reach the screen in any year. . . . Direction is tops, with no opportunity overlooked."<sup>57</sup> Given his tentative status in Hollywood, Ulmer could not have expected more attention; nor could he have expected the trade and popular press to lavish more accolades on his picture.

Still, in the context in which the film appeared in 1945, and in the context of an émigré director's life, several elements of the film lend themselves to an allegorical reading, to interpreting *Detour* as an oblique commentary on the experience of exile. First, there is the issue of constant displacement, the lack of any kind of permanence. According to Andrew Britton:

None of the central characters in *Detour* has a fixed abode and the marginal figures with a settled existence and a role to play in the maintenance and reproduction of what remains of social life are engaged in occupations—running motels and diners, policing highways, buying and selling cars—which relate in some way to the wandering of others. . . . [The principal characters] are all running away from places to which they do not wish to, or cannot return.<sup>58</sup>

Part of this problem, especially in Al's case, is that each of the characters loses control over his or her itinerary. As Al notes soon after Haskell's death, "Something else stepped in and shunted me off to a different destination than I'd picked for myself." Second, there is the mythical perception of America as an open, though not altogether benign, frontier, a desert (Brecht's choice of metaphor for Hollywood, and the location of Ulmer's other self-avowed "desert exile," the Ghost, in his PRC debut, *Tomorrow We Live* [1942]), a place where one can easily fall prey to greed, materialism, and deception.<sup>59</sup>

For Ulmer, cinema and theater—you might say the arts in general—could be divided into what he calls "the Romantic" or the "art-possessed" on one side and "a group to whom theater and film was a business" on the other.<sup>60</sup> Like Al Roberts, Ulmer chose to think of himself as belonging to the first group, as somebody who remained true to his artistry and who viewed the lure of capital with great suspicion (money, in Al's words, was "a piece of paper crawling with germs. . . . It couldn't buy anything I wanted"). The filmmaker returned to this idea repeatedly in his mature work, from *Ruthless* (1948) through *The Naked Dawn* (1955). Ulmer's move from New York to Hollywood, like Al's, was ill fated.<sup>61</sup> Third, and finally, there is the austerity and sheer minimalism of *Detour*, achieved out of necessity, owing to the severe budget constraints, but surely also a way to conjure a certain (possibly

"exilic") mood; indeed, many of these formal limitations led Ulmer to return to techniques developed during his early career in Vienna and Weimar Germany.<sup>62</sup>

Although the experience of exile may be especially rooted in the topography of *Detour*, or in the rootlessness of that same topography, Ulmer continued to explore similar ideas, themes, and motifs—either indirectly or, in some cases, overtly—in his subsequent work in Hollywood and abroad. Ulmer's PRC weepie, *Her Sister's Secret* (1946), based on a novel by Viennese émigré writer Gina Kaus, filmed by Austrian-born Frank (Franz) Planer, and played by a cast that included the European talent of Felix Bressart and Fritz Feld, deals with a tragically disrupted romance set against the imposing backdrop of World War II. Once again, figures in flight populate the picture, and the big city offers refuge for those without a proper home. Ulmer's characters often face a similar kind of existential turmoil to that of Al Roberts, a "coming apart at the seams," as hard-boiled detective Ray Patrick (Paul Langton) puts it in the late noir film *Murder Is My Beat* (1955). Moreover, Ulmer's last films continue to address cases of complete and utter displacement, as in his no-budget foray into science fiction, *Beyond the Time Barrier* (1960); his garish Technicolor fantasy, *L'Atlantide (Atlantis, City beneath the Desert)*, (1961); and his final film, *Sette contro la Morte (The Cavern)*, (1964), a dramatic tale of human perseverance and survival instincts in which his characters are trapped by the seemingly arbitrary forces of war.

**Conclusion.** Toward the close of his extensive interview with Peter Bogdanovich, Ulmer turns his attention to British-born director John Schlesinger, comparing the stark subjectivity of the latter's *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) to *Detour*. He remarks: "Schlesinger came from Europe and spent a year covering the waterfront; he saw New York; he saw Texas; he saw what people do, which a native [-born] American couldn't see."<sup>63</sup> To borrow Stanley Kauffmann's term in describing Billy Wilder, Ulmer's "bicultural" vision is one that combines the familiar and the unfamiliar, the immediately perceptible with the imperceptible.<sup>64</sup> The exile or émigré director negotiates competing cultures so as to convey what he or she sees, imagines, and experiences. As André Aciman has recently said:

Exiles see two or more places at the same time not just because they're addicted to a lost past. There is a very real, active component to seeing in this particularly retrospective manner: an exile is continuously prospecting for a future home—forever looking at alien land as land that could conceivably become his.<sup>65</sup>

In Ulmer's case, this meant maintaining a strong sense of the past and the present, and out of that conveying his art. Ulmer's daughter, Arianné Ulmer Cipes, who acted in several of his films, has said of her father, "He loved Thomas Mann, Schiller, and Goethe. He was a European intellectual who had based most of his thinking on the great minds of the German language." To which she then critically added: "He was an FDR New Deal liberal. . . . He loved this country, baseball, hot dogs, Jackie Gleason, jazz, Sid Caesar, Jimmy Durante, and barbecues."<sup>66</sup>

It was perhaps this unlikely combination of Goethe and Gleason, of European high and American mass culture, that enabled Ulmer to create the remarkably

eclectic opus of films that marks his legacy today. The “bicultural” or “contrapuntal” dimension of his work is indeed fundamental to understanding the full impact—metaphorical and concrete—of Ulmer’s experience of being an exile and the integral role this played in his choice of subject, style, character, and tone, as well as the final, rather peripheral place his work has occupied in the canon of American and European cinema since his death in October 1972.

## Notes

Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Center for Humanities at Wesleyan University and at the Feuchtwanger Memorial Library at the University of Southern California. I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for *Cinema Journal* as well as these readers, who were kind enough to offer critical comments: John Belton, James Donald, Dana Polan, and Melanie Rehak.

1. Edward Said, “Reflections on Exile,” *Granta* 13 (1984): 159–72, reprinted in Marc Robinson, ed., *Altogether Elsewhere: Writers on Exile* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 137. Subsequent references to Said’s essay are to Robinson’s collection.
2. Said, “Reflections on Exile,” 148.
3. On migration from Berlin (and Vienna) to Hollywood, see Ronny Loewy, ed., *Von Babelsberg nach Hollywood: Film Emigranten aus Nazideutschland (From Babelsberg to Hollywood: Film Émigrés from Nazi Germany)* (Frankfurt: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1987); Jan-Christopher Horak, “German Exile Cinema, 1933–1950,” *Film History* 8, no. 4 (1996): 373–89; and Helmut G. Asper, “*Etwas Besseres als den Tod...*” *Filmexil in Hollywood: Porträts, Filme, Dokumente* (“A Cut above Death...”) *Film Exile in Hollywood: Portraits, Films, Documents* (Marburg: Schüren, 2001).
4. I have relied for biographical information largely on three sources: the documents in the Edgar G. Ulmer Collection at the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California, as well as those kept by Ulmer’s daughter, Arianné Ulmer Cipes, head of the Edgar G. Ulmer Preservation Corp.; the relatively recent German reference-book entry “Edgar G. Ulmer—Regisseur, Autor, Szenenbildner” (“Edgar G. Ulmer—Director, Screenwriter, Set Builder”) in *CineGraph* 33 (July 2000): D1–D8; and the 1970 interview with Peter Bogdanovich, “Edgar G. Ulmer: An Interview,” *Film Culture* 58–60 (1974), reprinted in *Who the Devil Made It: Conversations with Legendary Film Directors* (New York: Ballantine, 1998), 558–604. In addition to the English version of the interview, there is a German translation that includes a vast selection of stills, photographs, a detailed filmography, and a number of important corrections to the original interview, in *Filmhefte* 1 (summer 1975): 4–43. See also J. Hoberman’s brief biographical account in *Bridge of Light: Yiddish Film between Two Worlds* (New York: Museum of Modern Art/Schocken, 1991), 245ff. Since I first wrote this essay, Viennese film critic Stefan Grisseemann has published an excellent biography. Grisseemann, *Mann im Schatten: Der Filmemacher Edgar G. Ulmer (Man in the Shadows: The Filmmaker Edgar G. Ulmer)* (Vienna: Szolnay, 2003). During the revision process, I drew on that work, which I cite, and in general have used it as a means of thinking through Ulmer’s life and career. I thus wish to take due note of my indebtedness to Grisseemann for sharing his research with me.
5. Bogdanovich, “Edgar G. Ulmer,” 577. It is not clear which Viennese school Ulmer attended.

6. An article by Tag Gallagher includes a photo of young Edgar with his host family in Uppsala in 1919. Gallagher, "Förtrollad av ett under: Edgar G. Ulmer," *Film Häftet* 108, no. 4 (1999): 30–39. This essay has appeared in English as "All Lost in Wonder" in the Australian online journal *Screening the Past* 12 (2001): www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast.
7. Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 562. There is no record of Ulmer ever having attended the Academy of Fine Arts (although the archive keeps information on only those students who completed a degree), and no definitive documentation links Ulmer to the Burgtheater.
8. It is not until the late 1920s that Ulmer's work in German cinema and theater bears verifiable credit. For instance, he is listed as *Bildassistent*, or production assistant, on Louis Ralph's adventure film, written by Curt Siodmak, *Flucht in die Fremdenlegion* (*Escape to the Foreign Legion*, 1929) and as set builder on Robert Land's *Spiel um den Mann* (*Play Concerning the Man*, 1929). See Gerhard Lamprecht, *Deutsche Stummfilme 1927–1931* (*German Silent Films, 1927–1931*) (Berlin: Deutsche Kinemathek, 1967–1970). Ulmer is also credited, in 1928, with assisting Rochus Gliese on the set design for Max Reinhardt's production of Ferdinand Bruckner's *Die Verbrecher* (*The Criminals*) at Berlin's Deutsches Theater. Heinrich Huesmann, *Welttheater Reinhardt* (Munich: Prestel, 1983).
9. On the process of self-reinvention among exile (or émigré) directors, see Stuart Klawans's discussion of the extraordinary case of Erich von Stroheim. Klawans, "The Politics of Authorship," *Film Follies: The Cinema out of Order* (New York: Cassell, 1999), 41–68. For a discussion in a more general framework, see Thomas Elsaesser, "Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Exile: A Counterfeit Trade? German Filmmakers in Hollywood," in Hamid Naficy, ed., *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 97–123, especially 110–16. On the influx of German and Austrian émigrés (and exiles) to Hollywood, as well as competing developments across the Atlantic, see Lutz Koepnick, *The Dark Mirror: German Cinema between Hitler and Hollywood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
10. Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 561–62. Lang unequivocally disputes the claim that Ulmer had a hand in his pictures: "Herr Ulmer never worked for me. Neither as a film architect and set designer nor in any other capacity" (cited in *Filmhefte*, 36n.7).
11. Given the lingering mysteries surrounding Ulmer's status, Stefan Grisseemann, whose biography, *Mann im Schatten* (*Man in the Shadows*), takes its title from Ulmer's elusive life story, has gone so far as to think of Ulmer as a kind of *Phantombild*, or phantom figure, during these early years. Grisseemann, *Mann im Schatten*, 15–46.
12. Michael Henry Wilson makes a similar point concerning Ulmer's "detours." Wilson, "Edgar G. Ulmer: 'Let There Be Light!'" *Divine Apparizioni: Edgar G. Ulmer, Joseph Losey, Leonid Trauberg* (Milan: Transeuropa, 1999), 249–55. Wilson writes, "His career took as many twists and turns as his most outrageous melodramas: a succession of detours!" (250).
13. Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions, 1929–1968* (New York: Dutton, 1968), 143; Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 558; Bill Krohn, "King of the B's," *Film Comment* 19, no. 4 (July–August 1983): 60–64.
14. George Lipsitz, "The New York Intellectuals: Samuel Fuller and Edgar Ulmer," *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 201. See also Dana Polan, *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative, and the American Cinema, 1940–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

15. Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 558.
16. *New Yorker*, November 16, 1998.
17. Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 576.
18. Otto Friedrich, *City of Nets: A Portrait of Hollywood in the 1940s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 198.
19. Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Farrar, Straus, 1966), 275, 279.
20. *Ibid.*, 283.
21. Michael Brunas, John Brunas, and Tom Weaver, "The Black Cat," *Universal Horrors: The Studio's Classic Films, 1931-1946* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1990), 78. See also Geoffrey O'Brien's brief assessment in "Horror for Pleasure," *New York Review of Books*, April 22, 1993, 66.
22. There were concerns pertaining to specific scenes, which were put forward as requests for cuts: (1) "This scene of the corpse of a young girl suspended in a glass coffin . . . is rather gruesome and open to serious objection"; (2) "In introducing the guests [at the Satanist ceremonies], care should be taken to avoid any suggestion of homosexuality or perversion"; (3) "Throughout this celebration of the Black Mass of Poelzig's rituals, care should be taken to avoid any suggestion of a parody on any church ceremony." Cited in Mark A. Vieira, *Sin in Soft Focus: Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999), 175. See also Joseph Breen's letter of February 26, 1934, addressed to Harry Zehner at Universal, in which Breen spells out in great detail the risks inherent in the blue script created by Ulmer and cowriter Peter Ruric. Edgar G. Ulmer Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California, unnumbered letter.
23. Harry M. Benshoff, *Monsters in the Closet: Homosexuality and the Horror Film* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1997), 61, 63.
24. Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" 290.
25. See the production estimate (March 2, 1934) and the picture costs in *The Black Cat* files (Box 277/8314) of the Cinema-Television Archives, University of Southern California, Los Angeles.
26. Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 575.
27. Wilson, "'Let There Be Light,'" 251.
28. According to Ulmer, "Murnau was the greatest [inspiration]." Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 566. Ulmer remarked elsewhere, "[Murnau] was a great purist who worked under a sort of hypnosis; that is to say, each time it was as if he hypnotized himself afresh." Lotte Eisner, *Murnau* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 87. Paul Mandell suggests that "*The Black Cat* is a grand summation of the decade of cinema that preceded it. Woven into it are the echoes of Murnau, of Robert Wiene, of Wegener and the pioneers of the Bauhaus." Mandell, "Edgar Ulmer and *The Black Cat*," *American Cinematographer* (October 1984): 45. In his critical assessment of Ulmer's career, Hoberman calls *The Black Cat* "'From Caligari to Hitler' in one lurid package." Hoberman, "Low and Behold," *Village Voice*, November 17, 1998.
29. Mandell, "Edgar Ulmer and *The Black Cat*," 36. Ulmer says in his interview with Bogdanovich, "On the set he [Lang] was the incarnation of the Austrian who became a Prussian general—a sadist of the worst order you can imagine." Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 563.
30. Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 576.

31. Krohn, "King of the Bs," 61. Ulmer would later work with blacklisted scriptwriter Alvah Bessie on *Ruthless* (1948) and with Julian Zimet (a.k.a. Julian Halevy) on *The Naked Dawn* (1955).
32. See Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 246–47.
33. Lipsitz, "The New York Intellectuals," 198.
34. Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 578.
35. Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York: Crown, 1988). See also Friedrich, *City of Nets*, and Anthony Heilbut, *Exiled in Paradise: German Refugee Artists and Intellectuals in America from the 1930s to the Present* (1983; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), especially the chapter on émigré filmmakers in Hollywood, "A Club for Discontented Europeans" (229–60).
36. Joseph Roth, *The Wandering Jews*, trans. Michael Hofmann (New York: Norton, 2001), 124.
37. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 252.
38. Quoted in Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 251. *Green Fields* was reportedly screened in more than seventy New York cinemas, reaching an audience of close to a million. According to Ulmer, it received the "Best Foreign Film Award" in Paris in 1938. Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 579.
39. As Dan Miron notes of Abramovitsh's writings,
 

He subjected the shtetl to a scathing exposé and presented its traditional culture as deeply flawed; and yet he also managed, as an artist, not to remain at a distance from the object of his aesthetic exploration and to allow the shtetl to speak for itself, to use its own authentic voice, to project its own inherent priorities, values and fantasies. Miron, "Introduction," in Miron and Ken Frieden, eds., *Tales of Mendele the Book Peddler* (New York: Schocken, 1996), viii.
40. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 302.
41. Myron Meisel, "Edgar G. Ulmer: The Primacy of the Visual," (1972), in Todd McCarthy and Charles Flynn, eds., *Kings of the Bs: Working within the Hollywood System* (New York: Dutton, 1975), 148.
42. Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 586.
43. Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 303. Brett Wood argues that "*The Light Ahead* is a vastly significant film in the Ulmer oeuvre, perhaps more indebted to German expressionism than any of his other works, with shadows carefully sculpted and sets conspicuously contorted to create the intimate, ominous dreamworld." Wood, "Edgar G. Ulmer: Visions from the Second Kingdom," *Video Watchdog* 41 (1997): 27. See also Winfried Günther, "Misrach un marew: Zu den jiddischen Filmen Edgar G. Ulmers und Joseph Greens," ("On the Yiddish Films of Edgar G. Ulmer and Joseph Green"), in Ronny Loewy, ed., *Das jiddische Kino (Yiddish Cinema)* (Frankfurt: Deutsches Filmmuseum, 1982), 53–80; and Silvia Paskin, ed., *When Joseph Met Molly: A Reader on Yiddish Film* (Nottingham, U.K.: Five Leaves, 1999).
44. See S. Ansky, *The Dybbuk and Other Writings*, ed. David G. Roskies (New York: Schocken, 1992). See also the illuminating introduction by Roskies, xi–xxxvi.
45. John Belton, *Howard Hawks, Frank Borzage, Edgar G. Ulmer* (New York: Barnes, 1974), 151–52. Belton goes on to state, without immediate reference to *The Light Ahead*, "The archetypal Ulmerian situation consists of one or more characters helplessly trapped in a hostile, unfamiliar setting" (153).

46. Quoted in Hoberman, *Bridge of Light*, 305.
47. Krohn, "King of the Bs," 64.
48. Charles Tesson, "Detour de Edgar G. Ulmer," *Cahiers du Cinéma* 436 (October 1990): 50-54, quoted in Peter Nau, "Das Geheimnis der Form in den Filmen Edgar G. Ulmers" ("The Secret of Form in the Films of Edgar G. Ulmer"), in Christian Cargnelli and Michael Omasta, eds., *Aufbruch ins Ungewisse (Departure to the Unknown)* (Vienna: Wespennest, 1993), 131.
49. Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 592. On Ulmer's career at PRC, see Steve Jenkins, "Edgar G. Ulmer and PRC: A Detour down Poverty Row," *Monthly Film Bulletin* 582 (July 1982): 152; see also Grisseemann's extensive chapter, "Trivial Pursuit," in *Mann im Schatten*, 159-244. On the intricacies of the Hollywood studio system at the time, see Thomas Schatz, *Boom and Bust: American Cinema in the 1940s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 174-91.
50. In the summer of 1941, writing from the Plaza Hotel in Hollywood, Ulmer tells his wife, Shirley, of the news—or what he, mistakenly, thinks will soon be news—of a pending deal ("as good as signed") at Paramount. Excerpts of these letters are reprinted in Grisseemann, *Mann im Schatten*, 156-57.
51. Alexander Horwath, "Das Shining: *Strange Illusion* von Edgar G. Ulmer (1945)," in Christian Cargnelli and Michael Omasta, ed., *Schatten.Exil: Europäische Emigranten im Film noir (Shadow Exile: European Émigrés in Film Noir)* (Vienna: PVS, 1997), 299.
52. On the further symbolic potential of Al's journey, read through a musical lens, see the article by musicologist Erik Ulman, "Edgar G. Ulmer," in the Australian online journal *Senses of Cinema* (January-February 2003): [www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/03/ulmer.html](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/03/ulmer.html).
53. Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," *Film Comment* 8, no. 1 (spring 1972), reprinted in John Belton, ed., *Movies and Mass Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 160.
54. In her reading of the film, Tania Modleski sees the rear-view mirror projection as an indicator of the "regressive nature of [Al's] journey." As she goes on to state, "*Detour* is remarkable for the clarity with which it demonstrates the truth that in Hollywood cinema women are often nothing but mirror-projections of male fears and male fantasies." Modleski, "Film Theory's Detour," *Screen* 23, no. 5 (December 1982): 78.
55. See Jonathan F. Bell, "Shadows in the Hinterland: Rural Noir," in Mark Lamster, ed., *Architecture and Film* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2000), 224.
56. Jim Henaghen, review of *Detour*, *Hollywood Reporter*, April 29, 1945.
57. Review of *Detour*, *Variety Daily*, October 29, 1945; review of *Detour*, *Film Daily*, March 1, 1946; anon., "Detour Tears Emotions," *Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 1945.
58. Andrew Britton, "Detour," in Ian Cameron, ed., *The Book of Film Noir* (New York: Continuum, 1993), 182. Grisseemann observes, along similar lines, that the chief locations in *Detour* "are way stations, places of passage . . . without any sense of home, without living quarters or private spaces." Grisseemann, *Mann im Schatten*, 222.
59. See also Dana Polan's insightful discussion of how *Detour* dismantles the myths of Hollywood and of California in general. Polan, "California through the Lens of Hollywood," in Stephanie Barron et al., eds., *Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000), 128-50.
60. Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 566.
61. As Myron Meisel has suggested, "Somehow Ulmer would never find fresh air in Hollywood, where his films assumed the somber, pervasive futility that distinguished most of his serious work." Meisel, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 148. In "The Director's Responsibility," an

unclassified article dating from the early 1950s, Ulmer asserts, "To the visitor from Mars (with permission by Orson Welles) this fascinating place between the desert and the Pacific Ocean, which a world affectionately calls Hollywood, may seem, indeed, at the present time a sad and confused place." Edgar G. Ulmer Collection, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California. See also the brief profile by Peter Bart, "How to Be a Loner in Hollywood," *New York Times*, March 13, 1966.

62. In James Naremore's summation, "The flimsy sets reinforce the theme of social and cultural impoverishment, and the actors seem to belong to the same marginal world as the characters they play." Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir and Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 149. Naremore draws a formal connection between Ulmer and Hitchcock, noting their shared training in the German film industry, and then observes the ties between Ulmer and Murnau, citing *Detour's* mode of "production in its studio-based expressionism, its careful attention to camera movement and offscreen space, and its intensely subjective narration" (147-48).
63. Bogdanovich, "Edgar G. Ulmer," 602.
64. See Stanley Kauffmann, "The Call of the Wilder," *New Republic*, July 1, 1996, 38-41.
65. André Aciman, "Foreword: Permanent Transients," in Aciman, ed., *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss* (New York: New Press, 1999), 13.
66. Quoted in Gallagher, "All Lost in Wonder."

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