

## Detour

By J. Hoberman

"The B List: The National Society of Film Critics on the Low-Budget Beauties, Genre-Bending Mavericks, and Cult Classics We Love"

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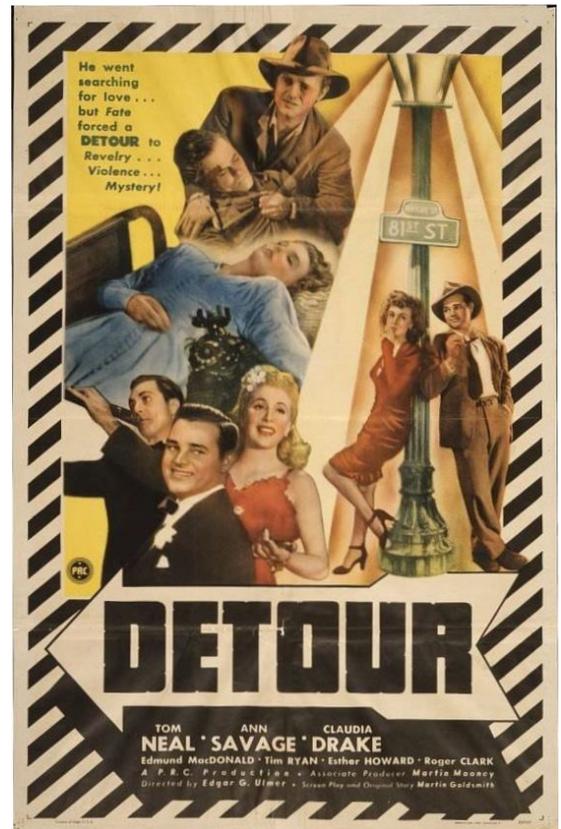
"Yes, Virginia, there is an Edgar G. Ulmer," Andrew Sarris chuckled in "The American Cinema," as though the idea of this unique director — a bargain-basement maestro who epitomized the category Sarris termed "expressive esoterica" — was even more remarkable than the director himself. But Edgar George Ulmer (1900-1972), a filmmaker who set up aesthetic shop in the recesses of Poverty Row, requires no indulgence. The man was a hero.

Reading the extensive interview that Peter Bogdanovich conducted with the ailing Ulmer in 1970, it's natural to wonder whether the filmmaker's bizarre trajectory from "The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari" (1920) through the Universal horror factory and the Ukranian independent cinema to the Hollywood B-movie mill and eternal idiocies of "Beyond the Time Barrier" (1960) was Bogdanovich's invention. Here was a filmmaker whose major commercial success, "Damaged Lives" (1933), was a banned educational film on venereal disease that would up grossing \$1.4 million, and whose greatest artistic achievement, "Detour" (1945), was produced on a rented soundstage in under a week. Could such a vita be real?

Raised in imperial Vienna, where he studied architecture, Ulmer broke into movies as a teenager in post-world War I Berlin and, shuttling for the next decade between Germany and the United States, built sets for F.W. Murnau while directing Westerns for Carl Laemmle. A new sort of avant gardist, Ulmer followed up a classic independent documentary in Berlin with the supremely perverse "The Black Cat," Universal's top-grossing release for 1934. "The Black Cat" was "From Caligari to Hitler" in one lurid package, marooning a naïve pair of American honeymooners in Europe's heart of darkness as unwitting pawns in the death struggle between a hysterical Hungarian psychiatrist (Bela Lugosi) and a proto-Nazi, Satan-worshipping Austrian architect (Boris Karloff) who has built his steel-and-glass deco castle on the site of World War I's bloodiest battlefield.

Wildly expressionistic, bathed in Liszt and Chopin, trafficking in incest, necrophilia, human sacrifice, and sadism, "The Black Cat" somehow transcended the Production Code (not to mention the narrative incoherence resulting from extensive reshooting). The movie also established the Ulmer style — long, somewhat stolidly choreographed takes punctuated by close-ups all shot on the last day of production — which was designed to get the most out of the fewest number of camera setups. This pragmatism was put to the test when, in a career move without Hollywood precedent, Ulmer relocated to New York to make "ethnic" movies on budgets that sometimes failed to break five figures.

Ulmer's inventiveness was legendary — constructing a plywood shtetl in rural New Jersey as the backdrop for both his Ukranian and Yiddish talkies, and shooting "Moon Over Harlem" (1939) entirely with short ends. When he returned to Hollywood during World War II to direct six-day wonders for the B-movie studio PRC (Producers Releasing Corporation), Ulmer demonstrated a formidable capacity for making something from nothing. He created PRC's relatively lavish "Isle of Forgotten Sins" (1943) using leftover South Seas miniatures from John Ford's "The Hurricane" (1937). Even more minimal, "Club Havana" (1945) was shot entirely in the nightclub that might be generically termed The Ulmerocco.



Poster shows scenes starring Tom Neal, Ann Savage, and Claudia Drake. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Collection

Never lacking for adaptive strategies, Ulmer used the saga of a concert-hall cleaning woman as the premise for "Carnegie Hall" (1947), otherwise a succession of musical performances shot on location. (That this movie was produced by Boris Morros, the only Russian spy ever to have a Hollywood career, adds another improbable footnote to Ulmer's career.) "The Amazing Transparent Man" and "Beyond the Time Barrier," the impressively crazy movies that Ulmer made for American-International Pictures in 1960, were shot simultaneously in Dallas, using a "futuristic" art exhibit at the Texas State Fairgrounds for post-apocalyptic locations. Ulmer might have been the model for Ed Wood, but unlike Wood (or the even more experimental Oscar Micheaux), his ultra-pragmatic craft is anything but desultory. Ulmerian *mise-en-scène* is synonymous with problem solving — and vice versa.

Having served his apprenticeship at UFA (Universum-Film AG), the world's largest movie studio and the citadel of German expressionism, Ulmer imbued his PRC productions with a surplus of craft. Far from artless, the filmmaker was, if anything, too arty. He cluttered his foregrounds with shrewdly placed bric-a-brac, contrived to dapple the most barren set with shadows, varied angles, and forced perspectives, and created "atmosphere with a vengeance" — no director ever made more adroit use of smoke pots and fog machines. Moreover, Ulmer had *kultur*. "Green Fields" (1937) adapts a Yiddish stage classic; "Strange Illusion" (1945) transposes Hamlet to contemporary Southern California; "Ruthless" (1948), written under a pseudonym by blacklisted Alvah Bessie, remakes "Citizen Kane" for the equivalent of Orson Welles's dinner allowance.

With the decline of the studio system, Ulmer switched to cheap sci-fi. Watching "The Man from Planet X" (1951), one need only squint a little (and screen out the corny dialogue) to see this juvenile quickie as a UFA fantasia filled with expressionist tropes — the spaceship that blinks like a jack-o'-lantern, the alien with the face of a Pacific Indian mask, the lonely castle on the blasted moor. As a filmmaker, Ulmer is actually quite rigorous in proposing his threadbare productions and ridiculous scenarios as a sign system. Not for nothing did the critic Myron Meisel, who used to bestow an annual Ulmer award, call his pioneering Ulmer paean "The Primacy of the Visual."

Indeed, given the music with which Ulmer characteristically drenched his movies, one wonders if he didn't conceive of them as silent. The simpleminded but forceful reform-school drama "Girls in Chains" (1943) — which, thanks largely to its title (typically conceived before the

script was written), was among PRC's biggest hits — ends with a wordless chase over the rooftops worthy of French director Louis Feuillade. "Beyond the Time Barrier," which, among other things, envisions a civilization of mutant deaf-mutes, suggest an impoverished remake of the 1924 Soviet constructivist space opera "Aelita."

The musical puppet show that provides the centerpiece for the often brilliant "Bluebeard" (1944) is almost a metaphor for Ulmer's method. There is finally no disjunction between style and content. In some mysterious way, the artist's stylistic conviction dignifies even the most atrocious script as authentic *kindermärchen* while raising absurdity to a form of primordial make-believe.

Shot on a thirty-thousand-dollar budget that included the rights to Martin Goldsmith's pulp novel, "Detour" was cheap even by B-movie standards. But the master of *arte povera* stylistics turned all the production's liabilities — back-projected locations, limited actors, six sets, abrupt ending — into formal tropes.

"Detour" is quintessential Ulmer and, with its flashback structure and over-determined plot, quintessential noir — an example of un-American fatalism in an echt American world, populated by slangy, tough characters telling one another things like, "You're being a good, that's how people wind up behind the eight-ball."

In hitchhiking across America, the movie's luckless anti-hero (Tom Neal) transverses the two noir modes — moving, via rear-screen projection, from a shadowing New York City to the harshly lit "realism" of the Southwest desert and his fateful rendezvous with a female black-mailer (the aptly named, indelible Ann Savage). This femme fatale is not so much evil as insane; the antihero isn't just innocent but also stupid and unbelievably depressed. Tipped ten dollars for his piano playing, he glumly refers to the bill as "a piece of paper crawling with germs." Earlier, he has told his movie-struck girlfriend that "people go out [to Hollywood] and start polishing cuspidors"; later he'll tell us that "no matter who you do, no matter where you turn, fate sticks out its foot to trip you." Of course, this might be considered questionable in view of his own succession of blunders.

A stringently minimal exercise as paranoid as it is elemental, "Detour" is informed by a kind of lumpen James M. Cain existentialism and propelled by an overheated voiceover narration that, frequently at odds with Ulmer's stolidly mobile camera, does less to explain the story than to discredit the very notion of any rational understanding. "This nightmare of being a dead man would soon be

over.” “Detour” isn’t just a masterpiece; it’s a veritable moon rock, a jagged chunk o the American psyche. (Indeed, Neal — whose movie career fell apart in the early ‘50s after a well-publicized fistfight with Franchot Tone over tawdry starlet Barbara Payton — wound up serving six years in prison for shooting his third wife, Gale, in 1965.)

Although never reviewed by the “New York Times,” this visually exciting movies should be a required study for all prospective independent filmmakers. Ulmer has an inexhaustible sense of how to use fog, shadows, and outsize props to construct a dynamic frame. He never tires of giving being to nothingness. Who this guy trying to impress? “Detour”’s surplus of effect is not unlike dis-

covering a Rembrandt drawing wrapped around a wad of bubble gum.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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