The 2022 Edition of the Kit Noir Film Festival

I relax into the chair and look around me. It's Sunday evening at the annual Kit Noir Film Festival and the movie — the third that day — is about to begin. A hushed and happy anticipation fills the auditorium, the confident expectation of enjoyment to come. The house is full — no surprise, considering it's the climax of the festival, Alexander MacKendrick's 1957 masterpiece *Sweet Smell of Success*. The theme of this year's festival is emblazoned on the program in my hands. **"Film Noir and the Jewish Experience: From WWII to the Blacklist"**. The theme, and the accompanying eleven films, were picked by the Festival's inspired donor, Gordon Kit, CU class of '76, and programmers Rob King of Columbia's Film and Media Studies department, and Ann Douglas of the English and Comparative Literature department. The lights begin to dim; Elmer Bernstein's stirring, pulsing chords begin to soar.

This is the third (in-person) edition of the Kit Noir film festival. It's the fourth if you include 2021's truncated online version, but just being in the audience you can see why the organizers would hesitate to claim 2021 as a true expression of the Kit Noir experience. It is an experience that depends on the cinema — and not just the big screen. Think about it: what could be more fundamentally *noirish* than the cinema itself? The descending darkness; the strange mix of solitude and sociality, intimacy and anonymity; the feeling that there is a (vaguely defined, but palpable) outside world beyond this huddled group of strangers; the exhilaration that accompanies this voluntary exile. Combined with the fact that, as an institution, the movie theater is either, depending on which doom-monger you consult, dead or dying (and has been, incidentally, for the last hundred years), it's high time the cinema was recognized as a noir space in its own right — alongside the automobile, the gas station, and the roadside diner — on the crumbling cliff-edge of American society. I don't know about you, but it's certainly where I want to be sitting.

Two of the films screened at this year's festival had scenes with cinemas. One, true, is more rudimentary than your typical modern-day theater: Robert Siodmak's *The Spiral Staircase* (1946), set in turn-of-the-century New England, opens with an audience watching a silent film, to live piano accompaniment, in a room that's cramped and spare. The second cine-cameo comes midway through Edward Dmytryk's *Crossfire* (1947), when Robert Mitchum's character leaves a young soldier, suspected of murder, in the balcony of an all-night movie. "Watch the picture, then," Mitchum's character says as he departs, "and don't move". Sitting there in silence, I realized the line could have been directed straight at the audience in the Lenfest screening room; so, meeting it almost as a challenge, I imagined an appropriate riposte: "Move where?" — I pictured the young soldier shooting back: "Where *else* can I go?".

The question ripples through all eleven of the selected films: all possess that feeling of fidgety, soul-wringing claustrophobia — the sensation that there's nowhere left to turn, that (to quote *Double Indemnity*) you have reached the "end of the line". But it's not surprising — the filmmakers had experience in this area: the question — *where else can I go?* — would have been a question they'd been forced to answer before. Robert Siodmak (*The Spiral Staircase*), Billy Wilder (*Ace in the Hole*) and Fred Zinnemann (*Act of Violence*) were Jewish émigrés who made it out of Hitler's Europe just in time. Many of their family members and friends who stayed behind were murdered in the camps. And neither did America prove an entirely safe haven: the postwar spirit of anti-Communism allowed those in power to give free rein to latent anti-Semitism. Of the 'Hollywood Ten' — the group who refused to testify before HUAC, essentially terminating their careers — six were Jewish.

Edgar G. Ulmer's *Detour* (1945), opening the festival, embodies this postwar state of cramped dead-endedness. While it could be claimed as a road movie, the tone of *Detour* — its almost dogged smallness, its permanent state of frustration and frenzy — comes from staying inside too long. Al Roberts, the hitch-hiking hero of the film, isn't detouring out of an excess of time; he's panicking because of how little time he has. How little time and how little money: "Money. You know what that is … It's the stuff that has caused more trouble in the world than anything else we ever invented." The film was handling subjects on the filmmakers' minds: *Detour* was made on a famously minuscule budget, and it's undoubtable that this lack, which forced Ulmer and his collaborators to create by cutting corners, contributed to the film's deliriously strained timbre. Noah Isenberg, who wrote *Edgar G. Ulmer: A Filmmaker at the Margins* (2014), listed some of these cost-saving techniques in his introduction to the screening: backdrops were employed extensively, 'fog' was used to cover non-existent sets, multiple takes were rare so continuity errors were common (look out for the safety pins on Ann Savage's sweater and, later, the shuddering eyelids of a supposed-to-be-corpse). In light of this peculiar tone, *Detour* has been interpreted as an allegory of Jewishness: the nameless, homeless, directionless man wandering on the sides of American roads — despite the fact that any explicit markers of Jewishness were expurgated from the film. Al Roberts, as Noah Isenberg put it, was "stripped of any ethnic identity" to facilitate the film's winding progress through Hollywood production codes: indeed, in Martin Goldsmith's source novel of the same name, Al Roberts was born Aaron Rothenberg.

This parallels the name change in John Berry's *He Ran All the Way* (1946) where the protagonist — played by the Jewish actor John Garfield — was given the anglicized name of Nick Robey. Even in the production process, identities were being censored from the films. Films which are, ironically, about suffocation; about men struggling to breathe, as "fate" — as

it's called in *Detour* — elbows them into nothingness. It's all the more tragic when you recall that, less than a year after his turn as Nick Robey, John Garfield had died of a heart attack — almost certainly induced by the strain after he refused to name names to HUAC. He was 39.

It's practically the first thing you learn if you study the genre: noirs are never, ever straight. Detours and spiral staircases abound in a world where progression is often little more than rear-projection: the mere illusion of change. Noir characters are more than ensnared; they're stunted, suspended "on account of darkness" (as J.J. says in *Sweet Smell of Success*). In *Detour*, Al Roberts has the aspirations, as well as the potential, to make it big; in *He Ran All the Way*, Nick Robey and his partner fantasize about what they'll do with the stolen cash: "Florida in the winter, mountains in the summer". Nor is it just the men who want more than their lot: Ann Savage in *Detour* craves the money in Haskell's will — "No sweating, scheming, wondering where your next meal's coming from!" — while, opposite Garfield, Shelley Winters' character is more patiently searching for a way out of the working class. When Garfield first encounters her, she's using her Sunday afternoon to teach herself how to swim; when she brings him back to the family apartment, her parents are noticeably, painfully, keen for her to spend time alone with this stranger. Noir films are well-known for their temporal shiftiness — people checking over their shoulders as they flinch at the thought of what's to come — but there is a second dimension in noir, just as important: the spatial divide between the sewer below and, far above, the cloud-tipped high-rise of 'making it'.

"Look at the calendar, Mr. Boot," cries Kirk Douglas's Chuck Tatum in *Ace in the Hole* (1951) — "It's the 20th century, the second half of it! You don't expect the kid to stand still. He wants to get going. Going!" Mr Boot, the editor of the Albuquerque Sun-Bulletin, sporting a tired suit — belt *and* suspenders — pauses, stares. "*Going where*?". In a society that's steadily bleeding out, you can still see, in many film noirs, the assumption that a dollar bill is the ideal stopgap. Even when you're on the up, there is the irritating sensation, gnawing through all noir, that the need to move is just another expression of stasis; that, furthermore, 'making it' means endorsing all things broken. It is striking that Chuck Tatum, in the second half of *Ace in the Hole*, proudly wears the sheriff's badge, the tin star — is it a coincidence, one wonders, that it looks like a Star of David? The doubleness of the emblem, signifying both ostracized and ostracizer, suggests the perpetual complicatedness of really belonging — of being welcomed back to New York's skyscrapers, of being, in short, assimilated: which is what 'making it' truly means for Chuck. And yet by the end of *Ace in the Hole*, it isn't the 'Boot' who's sprawled on the floor.

The politics of 'making it' are further considered in the second Edgar G. Ulmer film that was screened: R*uthless* (1948). Made two years after and on a greater (although still relatively small) budget, there is a starched, over-exposed elegance to *Ruthless*; Ulmer gives us a multi-millionaire Horace Vendig who is, at least at first, finished and polished to a T. It's the same deceptive, near-hypnotic elegance that's seen in Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946) which, as Soheil Rezayazdi noted in his introduction to the film, has a peculiar obsession with possessions, the curated and well-composed. Over the course of both films, however, the filmmakers peel away this bland gloss, exposing the thoroughly poisoned core of a poised world. It is, ultimately, as much a matter of what people *seem* as what they see. Elegant surfaces, after all, can easily hide a "putrefaction of the soul," as Orson Welles put it; can all too easily decorate "pure garbage".

This is the message of Welles's *The Stranger*, also released in 1946, which played immediately after *Notorious*. Like Claude Rains in Hitchcock's film, Welles plays a Nazi who managed to miss Nuremberg. While Rains' Nazi, however, has put up his tent on the coast of Brazil, Welles's Franz Kindler has assimilated, apparently seamlessly, into a small suburban town in New England, the home of America's brightest — and whitest. For there is a central difference between *Notorious* and *The Stranger*: Welles, more interested than Hitchcock in sounding social quagmires, is more intent on incriminating the 'good guys' of the Second World War. Hitchcock was always suspicious of authorities — note the blunt cruelty of the American operatives who blackmail Ingrid Bergman into submission — but Welles sharpens this skepticism into an implicit attack on postwar American hypocrisy. The source text makes this more explicit: the town's inhabitants are explicitly xenophobic, quietly fostering the same fascist spirit seen over the Atlantic. Welles was frustrated when the less-than-patriotic notes were removed from the script. But hints of the original diatribe do remain: the fact that a small American town appears so willing to welcome, even unknowingly, the man "who conceived the theory of genocide, mass depopulation of conquered countries"; the fact that the residents are so reluctant to acknowledge the horrors of the Third Reich. There is a reason Welles chose to include footage from concentration camps — a first in an American feature. He did it to force the audience to confront the past, to force them to face the truth.

Gordon Kit, Professor King and Professor Douglas selected films that tackled the consequences of antisemitism in Europe and also closer to home — consider Edward Dmytryk's *Crossfire* (1947), which opens with a killing, what we come to discover is an antisemitic hate crime committed by an American GI. The film was one of two films in 1947 about antisemitism: the other was Best Picture winner *Gentleman's Agreement*, directed by Elia Kazan. Where *Gentleman's Agreement* maintains an upper-class sheen throughout (the locus of antisemitism, for the film, is a country club), *Crossfire* ties its caustic social criticism to a

through-and-through noirishness. Other films may have reached the "the end of the line," *Crossfire* crossed that terminus a long time ago: it exists in a world gone adrift. The film is so woozily oneiric that, if you didn't know where it was set, you'd think it took place in some noir zone of its own creation — until, that is, you see though the window of the detective's office, almost complacently, the dome of the Capitol, nearly shimmering in the early morning light. The sight of something so recognizable, so democratically concrete, is jarring after sixty minutes of a film that sometimes approaches quasi-Lynchian surrealism — you almost have to mentally reappraise the entire film, in a fashion not dissimilar to the experience of watching *Planet of the Apes* (1968) or *Logan's Run* (1976). It prompts similar reactions: *that* world is *this* one? *Theirs* is *ours*? The dividing lines are destabilized in the eerie postwar quiet. So, in *Crossfire*, queerness is Jewishness (and is Blackness); the future is the present (and the present is the past); Germany and America have more in common than you'd imagine.

There's a moment in *The Spiral Staircase*: we're in the killer's POV — he is approaching a woman — she turns, and, relieved, says to the man who is about to kill her: "Oh, it's you!". To us, it might sound typical of the slasher genre or the murder mystery but there's something so fundamentally noirish in the phrase. "Oh, it's you!" — it's the fatal misinterpretation of another person, only realized at the moment of death. Three of the film's shown at the festival — *Ace in the Hole*, *Scandal Sheet*, *Sweet Smell of Success* — center on journalists, and this shouldn't be too surprising: 'newspaper noir' distills noir's essential fascination with identifying, revealing, classifying. This noir anagnorisis, repurposed from Greek tragedy, can be seen as another way of registering current questions in America and the West. While noir registers an uneasiness about the future, the recognition scene represents a broader cultural re-evaluation of America's past and potential culpability. This is literally portrayed in Fred Zinnemann's *Act of Violence* where it becomes clear that the central WWII vet, who has undoubtedly 'made it,' has been hiding a hideous past. This process of reassessment is also seen in *The Spiral Staircase*, which shows a young mute woman, in turn of the century New England, hunted by a serial killer who has already murdered three other disabled women. As Professor Douglas said in her introduction, Siodmak, whose family had personally skimmed the bloody edge of Nazi Germany, was almost certainly conscious of the story's connotations of eugenics and Social Darwinism. It's also likely that he knew exactly what situating the film in a New England manor would mean: these theories didn't just have the Nazis' thumbprint. Just as Ann Savage tells Al Roberts in *Detour* to not talk about the dead Charlie Haskell because "Remember — I knew him better than you did!" so noir films could be said to know society better than most: the American body politic, both killer and corpse, rotting from the inside because of the things it had done in the past.

After eleven films in four days, a well-worn harmony has united the audience — the regulars connected with a comfortable, knowing sense of shared experience. It's, above all, a shared experience of *noirvana* — the inarticulate, recalcitrant joyousness which comes from watching film noir. It's a feeling I knew well as I strolled out of the Lenfest Center each night. I feel it again tonight: after the final scenes of *Sweet Smell of Success* — after the audience had really tumbled, all in conversation, out of the theater — it seemed as if the pure effervescence of noirvana was loosening and diffusing into the open air. The area seemed changed, as if my perspective on things was refined, even realigned, after hours of such intense watching. Wide-eyed, I turn my head and look around. The buildings opposite, so structured and architectural; the sleek black hands of a decorative but useless clock hovering on a beige slab opposite, proprietorially keeping watch over the vicinity; the wind-swept barrenness bizarrely culminating, on both sides, in vast tectonic beams — the highway on one side, the elevated subway on the other — which give the place a near-subterranean tone, as if it were temporarily exposed. On the first night of the festival it was pouring with rain: it was strange — everything felt roused, as if, though on the edge of breaking down, the city felt only more broken in, more inhabited. My mind had then returned to the just-watched *Detour*: the heavy downpour when Mr Haskell dies and Al Roberts looks hopeless. Now, on this dry Sunday night I think of the final shot of *Sweet Smell of Success*: the solitary individual pitted against the stark concreteness of New York in early morning; the dawn edging its way over the skyline. I look around — the other audience members have started to move away — I walk into the darkness beside them.

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