

THE THIRD ANNUAL DR. SAUL AND DOROTHY KIT FILM NOIR FESTIVAL

FILM NOIR & THE JEWISH EXPERIENCE: FROM WWII TO THE BLACKLIST

March 23-27, 2022

FESTIVAL INTRODUCTION

It is often said that film noir emerged from the *Caligari*-like shadows of German Expressionism. A wave of émigré filmmakers, fleeing Hitler's Europe, arrived in America and shaped a new cinematic style in the process. What gets left out in this history, though, is the reason those filmmakers left in the first place: They were Jewish. This year's iteration of the Dr. Saul and Dorothy Kit Film Noir Festival highlights the contributions of these filmmakers, along with their American-born Jewish peers, in shaping film noir during a tragic and tumultuous period of Jewish history.

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There can be no question that Jewish directors – whether émigrés like Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, Edgar G. Ulmer, Billy Wilder, and Fred Zinnemann, or second-generation immigrants like Sam Fuller, Joseph H. Lewis, and Anthony Mann – helmed a disproportionate number of noir's flagship entries. The role of Jews in noir looms larger still when one factors in actors like Kirk Douglas and John Garfield, writers like Herman Mankiewicz and Abraham Polonsky, composers like Bernard Herrmann and Erich Wolfgang Korngold, cinematographers like Stanley Cortez and John Alton, and producers like Mark Hellinger and Dore Schary.

The trickier issue, though, is how to interpret these films from the perspective of their makers' specific ethno-religious background. How and why does Jewishness matter as a piece in the film noir puzzle, especially since only a handful of noirs – like *The Stranger* (1946) and *Crossfire* (1947) – make explicit reference to Jewishness? Certainly the bleak worldview for which noir is known could hardly have found greater resonance than among Jewish artists working in the shadow of the pogroms of Eastern Europe and the genocide of WWII. Nor could the theme of the outsider, so central to noir, have been more appropriate to a generation of Jewish filmmakers who experienced exile from Germany only to confront persecution in the

postwar anti-communist fervor of the US. But there is also the issue of aesthetic sensibility, too, in particular the fascinating confluence between émigré aesthetes who had participated in the modernist ferment of Weimar-era Germany and American-born Jews who, in many cases, came to Hollywood from the working-class tenements of New York City. Film noir's unique fusion of modernist style and urban realism was overdetermined by the experiences of early-twentieth-century Jewish life.

It is also important to place these filmmakers' careers in the context of Hollywood's broader responses to the antisemitic ideologies that burgeoned in Europe and at home. The topic of Hollywood's relation to Nazi Germany in the runup to WWII has been subject to much controversy in recent years, in great part thanks to Ben Urwand's sensationalist *The Collaboration* (2013), which unfairly lambasts the Jewish moguls for actively "collaborating" with Germany and not doing more to make films that exposed Nazi ideology. The truth of Hollywood's supposed complicity, however, lies rather in the moral gray area of industry economics: the studios could not risk being excluded from the European market and were hamstrung by the provision of their own Production Code that "the feelings of any nation are entitled to consideration and respectful treatment."

The moguls were also constitutionally averse to displays of Jewish partisanship that could strengthen antisemitic feeling against the industry. Perhaps this is one reason why, even after the war, noir's engagement with Jewish experience tended to operate more at the level of submerged themes and allegory. This wariness also explains why the studio heads were so toothless in the face of the antisemitism that bubbled under the House Un-American Activities Committee's (HUAC) purge of Communist-suspected film industry workers in the postwar era. Antisemitic congressman John E. Rankin kickstarted HUAC's postwar witch hunt, and no less than six of the original Hollywood Ten were Jews. (As screenwriter Samuel

Ornitz asked in a written statement to the HUAC leadership: "Is it mere coincidence that you chose to subpoena and characterize as 'unfriendly' the men who produced, wrote, and directed or acted in [films] which attacked antisemitism or treated Jews and Negroes sympathetically?") Unnerved by the scaremongering implication that Hollywood was a haven of Jewish Bolsheviks, the industry's leaders quickly complied with demands for a blacklist and, in the process, permanently derailed the careers of many of the filmmakers highlighted in this festival.

There are many ties that link that moment in American history to our own recent past: both marked by a reactionary political effort to undo the achievements of a previous progressive administration; both driven by nativism's twin engines of racism and antisemitism in the face of global refugee crises. When Edward Dmytryk and Adrian Scott – the Jewish director and Catholic producer of *Crossfire*, respectively – were facing jail time as two of the original Hollywood Ten, they attempted to reclaim the meaning of "Americanism" from the mouths of their persecutors: "*Crossfire*, a picture which opposes the degrading practice of antisemitism, [...] will stand as testament of our Americanism long after [our accusers] are dead." One hopes that, in the long run, the *Crossfire* filmmakers will be proven right.

Rob King, Professor, Film and Media Studies, Columbia University
Programmer, Kit Noir Film Festival

TICKETING INFO

Tickets: \$12 General Admission / \$10 Seniors (65 and older) / \$8 Students

Packages: \$40 for four films / \$75 for all films

Columbia University students, faculty, and staff will have access to free rush tickets. CUID required. For more information, contact filmnoir@columbia.edu.

All screenings take place in the The Katharina Otto-Bernstein Screening Room, Lenfest Center for the Arts. Lectures take place at The Katharina Otto-Bernstein Screening Room or The Lantern, Lenfest Center for the Arts.

All standalone lectures are free and will be livestreamed and available on the School of the Arts' YouTube channel.

Wednesday, March 23, 7:30pm

"VIOLENCE AND VISIONARY PESSIMISM: THE JEWISH CONTRIBUTION TO FILM NOIR"

Keynote Lecture by **Ann Douglas**, Columbia University

Welcome by **Carol Becker**, Dean of Columbia University School of the Arts

Introductory remarks by **Gordon Kit** (CC '76)

This talk will explore the historical circumstances in which Jewish artists – some émigrés from Hitler's Europe like Edgar Ulmer, Robert Siodmak, and Billy Wilder, others Americans of European immigrant descent like Phil Karlson, John Berry, and Ben Hecht – decisively stamped classic Hollywood noir with their own thematic preoccupations and visual techniques. Using clips from noirs on (and a few off) the 2022 program, this talk will consider these films' sometimes submerged, sometimes explicit allusions to Hitler's programs of euthanasia (*The Spiral Staircase*) and genocide (*The Stranger*, *Ace in the Hole*) as well as the German POW camps (*Act of Violence*), German and American antisemitism (*Address Unknown*, *Crossfire*), the Fascist mindset, and the atomic age inaugurated by Hiroshima (*Gilda*, *Notorious*).

With the end of WWII and the death of F.D.R., paranoia acquired a U.S. passport and spawned the anti-communist crusade (*The Sweet Smell of Success*) and the blacklist (*He Ran All the Way*), most of whose victims were Jews. Special attention will be paid to the figure of the pariah or displaced person (*Detour*, *The Stranger on the Third Floor*, *The Big Heat*) and classic noir's extreme reliance on extras and bit players who represent the detritus of an un-throttled capitalist society (*Scandal Sheet*, *Ruthless*); both tropes owe much to a longstanding but newly acute Jewish concern with the wronged and obliterated. This talk contends that noir's trademark combination of "visionary pessimism" (Raymond Durgnat) and bravura dark wit is irrevocably linked to its Jewish artists and the horrors and inextinguishable hopes of the time in which they lived.

Thursday, March 24, 7:30pm

EDGAR G. ULMER DOUBLE BILL: DETOUR + RUTHLESS

DETOUR

1945 / 68 mins / b/w

Dir. Edgar G. Ulmer / Sc. Martin Goldsmith / Cine. Benjamin H. Kline

Cast: Claudia Drake, Tom Neal, Ann Savage

4K DCP courtesy of Janus Films

Introduced by **Noah Isenberg**, University of Texas at Austin

European émigrés directed six of the 11 films at this year’s Kit Noir Festival. Four of those directors – Billy Wilder, Robert Siodmak, Fred Zinnemann, and *Detour’s* Edgar G. Ulmer – even collaborated on a single film, the 1930 German drama *People on Sunday*. The four filmmakers, all Jewish, would leave Europe within a few years to work in America, escaping the rise of fascism.

Wilder and Siodmak went on to make films for the major studios, while Ulmer remained a purveyor of B-movies. The same year *Double Indemnity* earned seven Oscar nominations, Ulmer shot *Detour* on a small budget in under two weeks with no big-name talent. Both films, it’d turn out, would become essential entries in the noir canon: one as prestige cinema, the other as scrappy B-film. As Noah Isenberg has argued, one can draw a clear parallel between the down-on-his-luck protagonist of *Detour* and Ulmer himself. Both men, after all, are underappreciated artists who amble into California without much purpose. The story of a reluctant couple-on-the-run, *Detour* rises above B-movie anonymity thanks in part to its low-budget ingenuity and Ann Savage’s radical performance. Savage was a B-movie regular who appeared in 11 films in 1943 alone. Her bug-eyed, unvarnished hostility overwhelms *Detour* and distances her from the typically glamorous femme fatales of the era.

Martin Goldsmith’s original novel contained many references to Judaism and Jewish culture, all of which he cut for the script (Alexander Roth, for example, became Al Roberts). As Isenberg surmises, perhaps 1945, one year after the war’s end, was “not an

especially hospitable moment for an ethnic allegory about Jews in America.”

RUTHLESS

1948 / 104 mins / b/w

Dir. Edgar G. Ulmer / Sc. Alvah Bessie, S.K. Lauren, Gordon Kahn / Cine. Bert Glennon

Cast: Zachary Scott, Martha Vickers, Sydney Greenstreet

35mm print courtesy of UCLA

Introduced by **Noah Isenberg**, University of Texas at Austin

Based on Dayton Stoddart’s popular novel *Prelude to Night* (1945) and starring big-studio actors Sidney Greenstreet and Zachary Scott (both on loan from Warner Bros.), *Ruthless* has come to be known as Ulmer’s “*Citizen Kane* in miniature.” It is also a standout example of what critic Thom Anderson describes as film gris, a politically-minded subset of film noir often distinguished by contributions from soon-to-be-blacklisted filmmakers.

Like Welles’ 1941 masterpiece, *Ruthless* tells a story of a wealthy tycoon’s financial rise and moral decay through a series of flashbacks. As Ulmer later put it, the film was intended as “a very bad indictment against 100 percent Americanism,” depicting “the complete evilness and ruthlessness about money.” A mainstream New Dealer, Ulmer was rarely this outspoken. In this case, though, the film’s critical edge was unquestionably sharpened by the script contributions of two future members of the Hollywood Ten, both Jewish: the Columbia-educated Alvah Bessie (uncredited) and Hungarian-born Gordon Kahn.

Despite its anti-capitalist themes, the film represents an obvious step up in production values from the bargain-basement *Detour*. PRC (Producers Releasing Corporation, euphemistically known as “Poverty Row Cinema”) had, by this point, been taken over and absorbed into Eagle-Lion, which released *Ruthless* among a slew of ambitious noirs in 1947-1948 (*T-Men*, *Canon City*, and *He Walked by Night*, among others).

Friday, March 25, 7pm

DOUBLE BILL: CROSSFIRE + ACE IN THE HOLE

CROSSFIRE

1947 / 86 mins / b/w

Dir. Edward Dmytryk / Sc. John Paxton / Cine. J. Roy Hunt

Cast: Gloria Grahame, Robert Mitchum, Robert Ryan

35mm print courtesy of Warner Bros.

Introduced by **Rob King**, Columbia University

One of two 1947 films to deal explicitly with antisemitism – the other being the Best Picture-winning *Gentleman's Agreement* – *Crossfire* is an adaptation of future director Richard Brooks' 1945 novel *The Brick Foxhole*. It significantly reworks Brooks' novel, however, whose plot originally centered not on an antisemitic hate-killing, but a homophobic one.

In one sense, this change was inevitable, since the strictures of the Production Code Administration considered homosexuality a “sex perversion” that could not be explicitly represented on the screen. (The PCA's head, Joseph Breen, deemed Brooks' novel “thoroughly and completely unacceptable.”) But *Crossfire's* filmmakers – who included some of Hollywood's most leftist talent – likely did not need the PCA's restrictions: RKO's new head, Dore Schary, and social-minded producer Adrian Scott already intended to change Brooks' novel to address the rising tide of antisemitic bigotry in America following the war. The result is a mordant, and still timely, depiction of a postwar America united only in hate. “We just don't know what to fight,” one character reflects early in the film. “You can feel the tension in the air. A whole lot of fight and hate that doesn't know where to go.”

Crossfire was the third and last noir collaboration between Adrian Scott and director Edward Dmytryk (following *Murder, My Sweet* and *Cornered*), who both would be blacklisted just a few months after the film's release.

ACE IN THE HOLE

1951 / 111 mins / b/w

Dir. Billy Wilder / Sc. Walter Newman, Lesser Samuels, Billy Wilder / Cine. Charles Lang

Cast: Richard Benedict, Kirk Douglas, Jan Sterling

DCP courtesy of Swank

Introduced by **Ron Gregg**, Columbia University

“If the concentration camps and the gas chambers were all imaginary, then please tell me — where is my mother?”

– Billy Wilder

Six years prior to the release of this desert-noir classic, Billy Wilder co-directed a brutal documentary short on the realities of the concentration camps. *Death Mills* was the work of a Jewish, Austrian-born filmmaker who had fled Europe during the 1930s. Wilder lost several of his family members to the Holocaust, including his mother. A deeply antagonistic film, *Death Mills* accosted the German people for their indifference to the Jewish genocide. As Wilder told it, 500 people attended the film's preview screening, but only about 75 lasted the full 22 minutes.

A different genocide – that of Indigenous Americans – hangs over *Ace in the Hole*. Wilder's most confrontational fiction film, *Ace in the Hole* merits “an honorary expansion of the term film noir,” to quote critic Molly Haskell. Following the Germans' refusal to engage with *Death Mills*, Wilder crafted a narrative feature to smuggle his blunt-force critique of a society in denial. The film is an assault on “Mr. and Mrs. America,” the term protagonist Chuck Tatum (the late Kirk Douglas) uses to describe the rubes who show up to gawk at an Indian cave dwelling. Douglas, a Jewish performer, is believed to have had a crucial role in helping to break the Hollywood blacklist. His Tatum is manifest destiny incarnate: A cocky, culturally insensitive intruder who will do anything to grow his personal empire. A noir in spirit if not aesthetics, *Ace in the Hole* reveals Wilder's outsider perspective of America as a land defined by crass consumerism and racist, genocidal origins.

Saturday, March 26

WORLD WAR II AND THE HOLOCAUST

1 PM THE SPIRAL STAIRCASE

1946 / 83 mins / b/w

Dir. Robert Siodmak / Sc. Mel Dinelli / Cine. Nicholas Musuraca

Cast: Ethel Barrymore, George Brent, Dorothy McGuire

35mm print courtesy of UCLA

Introduced by **Ann Douglas**, Columbia University

A period noir about a serial killer who practices eugenics by preying upon disabled women, Robert Siodmak's *The Spiral Staircase* has been read as an anti-Nazi allegory. If so, however, the film's allegory slyly implicates America in the self-same ideologies by making a number of references to arch-eugenicist Theodore Roosevelt.

Siodmak's stake in these themes was tragically personal: He had left his home country of Germany after his 1933 film *Brennendes Geheimnis* (*The Burning Secret*) was specifically targeted by Josef Goebbels. His younger brother Curt also made his way to America, where he established himself as a successful screenwriter and sci-fi novelist. Another brother, Roland, failed to find passage out of Europe and committed suicide.

For *The Spiral Staircase*, Siodmak was loaned from his home studio of Universal to RKO, where he found himself working with a network of new collaborators who informed the film's unusual generic hybridity. *The Spiral Staircase* is part Gothic woman's picture (it was initially put into development by woman's film specialist and former RKO production head David O. Selznick) and part expressionist horror (cinematographer Nicholas Musuraca had lensed a number of Val Lewton's B horror films at RKO). The film has also been cited as a precursor to the slasher film, thanks to the innovative point-of-view camerawork, which anticipates John Carpenter's *Halloween* by over 30 years. As *Variety* opined: "Fascinating use is made of the camera to make it nearly as potent a force as the action itself in creating [an] eerie background."

3:30PM ACT OF VIOLENCE

1949 / 82 mins / b/w

Dir. Fred Zinnemann / Sc. Robert L. Richards / Cine. Robert Surtees

Cast: Van Heflin, Janet Leigh, Robert Ryan

Digital copy courtesy of Swank

With virtual lecture by **Vincent Brook**, UCLA

Jewish émigré director Fred Zinnemann made four films in the 1940s that touched on WWII. Before he'd go on to direct his blacklist allegory classic *High Noon*, Zinnemann helmed lower-budget genre fare haunted by the Holocaust: *Eyes in the Night* (1942), *The Seventh Cross* (1944), *The Search* (1948), and *Act of Violence* (1949). Zinnemann's parents died in the Holocaust, and he was one of the first Hollywood directors to film in postwar Germany and the first to portray a concentration camp. For *The Search*, he interviewed Holocaust survivors and even cast a survivor in a key role.

Themes of survivor's guilt pervade *Act of Violence*. The film depicts an idealistic nation plagued by postwar trauma. Zinnemann contrasts the creation of a prototypically American suburb with a pair of former POWs for whom the war never really ended. He also wrestles with the guilt of informing at a time when the House Un-American Activities Committee sought to find informers to target subversive (often Jewish) writers and performers. *Act of Violence* transcends the plot mechanics of noir, as such, to reflect the obsessions of a Jewish filmmaker after the war. As Vincent Brook argues in *Driven to Darkness*, "Film noir, although certainly no cure-all for the Jewish émigré complex, offered a unique creative outlet for addressing some of the conflicts and alleviating some of the pain."

Midway through *Act of Violence*, a character consoles the film's despondent lead: "So you're unhappy? Relax. No law says you got to be happy." The sentiment, cynical and pithy, distills noir pessimism down to its essence.

7PM NOTORIOUS

Double Bill with *The Stranger*

1946 / 101 mins / b/w

Dir. Alfred Hitchcock / Sc. Ben Hecht / Cine. Ted Tetzlaff

Cast: Cary Grant, Ingrid Bergman, Claude Rains

35mm print courtesy of UCLA

Introduced by **Soheil Rezayazdi**, Columbia University

When Jean-Luc Godard claimed a certain *Notorious* filmmaker “invented 80 percent of what is used in Hollywood movies today,” he was referring not to the film’s director, but to its screenwriter, Ben Hecht. Hecht worked on as many as 200 films during his Hollywood tenure, from Josef von Sternberg’s proto-noir *Underworld* (1927) to the James Bond spoof *Casino Royale* (1967). He was also an aggressive advocate for the Jewish people during WWII. In the same year as *Notorious*’ release, his Zionist play *A Flag Is Born* debuted on Broadway, and in 1944 he organized *We Will Never Die*, a massive dramatic work dedicated to the Jews murdered in the Holocaust.

Hecht’s passions as an anti-fascist and a consummate entertainer found their ideal union in *Notorious*, the story of a Nazi hiding in Buenos Aires. Like Adolf Eichmann and other real-life Nazis, the mild-mannered villain of *Notorious* fled to South America to avoid punishment postwar. The film’s politics play in deep-background to Hitchcock’s more overt interests: a twisted love triangle, slow-burn suspense setpieces, and an overbearing mother figure. The result is perhaps Hitchcock’s most elegant film, one in which every camera move, every object (the key, the teacup, the wine bottle) becomes imbued with meaning. Hitchcock remained far from indifferent, however, to antisemitism in the 1940s. One year prior to filming *Notorious*, he served as an advisor on *German Concentration Camps Factual Survey*, a long-abandoned documentary that debuted at last in 2014. With *Notorious*, Hitchcock and Hecht found an ideal marriage between their distinct creative impulses.

9PM THE STRANGER

Double Bill with *Notorious*

Dir. Orson Welles / Sc. Anthony Veiller, Decla Dunning, John Huston, Orson Welles / Cine. Russell Metty

Cast: Edward G. Robinson, Orson Welles, Loretta Young

35mm print courtesy of Park Circus

Introduced by **Rob King**, Columbia University

With *The Stranger*, Orson Welles returned to directing for the first time in four years, following the twin debacles of *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) and his never completed Latin American documentary *It’s All True*. His wings well and truly clipped, Welles was hired by International Pictures producer Sam Spiegel on condition that he defer to the studio on all creative decisions. What’s more, Welles’ assigned editor, Ernest Nims, was given authority to cut any material he considered unnecessary to the plot, eventually scrapping over 30 pages from the shooting script.

Perhaps for these reasons, *The Stranger* has been one of Welles’ most overlooked films, its reputation tainted as a “mere” studio picture. Still, for all his assertion that “there is nothing of me in that picture,” *The Stranger* shares with other of Welles’ films the relationship between an unknowable, domineering man (here a Nazi war criminal, played by Welles) and an inquiring detective figure (the Jewish actor Edward G. Robinson’s UN War Crimes investigator). *The Stranger* is also testimony to the anti-Nazi activism in which Welles, Robinson, and screenwriter John Huston had all participated in the years leading up to and during the war. Notably, the film was the first commercial feature to include actual footage of Nazi concentration camps, taken from the Billy Wilder-supervised U.S. War Department documentary, *Death Mills*. “Everytime you can get the public to look at any footage of a concentration camp, under any excuse at all, it’s a step forward,” Welles later explained. “People just don’t want to know that those things ever happened.”

Sunday, March 27

THE BLACKLIST AND THE MEDIA

1 PM

HE RAN ALL THE WAY

1951 / 78 mins / b/w

Dir. John Berry / Sc. Hugo Butler, Dalton Trumbo / Cine. James Wong Howe

Cast: Wallace Ford, John Garfield, Shelley Winters

35mm print courtesy of Park Circus

Introduced by **Stuart Weinstock**, Adjunct Lecturer and Film Series Coordinator, Institute for Israel and Jewish Studies, Columbia University

"[This movie is] about doom," director John Berry explained late in his life. "That's not coincidental." A film about a desperate man in search of somebody to trust, *He Ran All the Way* is the product of a remarkable coalition of leftist filmmakers who would themselves become victims of the treacherous witch-hunts of the postwar era.

Berry (born Jak Szold) was named by fellow director Edward Dmytryk to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1951 and relocated to France; writer Hugo Butler dodged a HUAC subpoena the same year and moved to Mexico; Dalton Trumbo was one of the original Hollywood Ten, here writing under the front of novelist Guy Endore, who was ironically soon to be blacklisted himself; Selena Royle, who plays Shelley Winters' mother, was subsequently named in *Red Channels* and saw her acting career evaporate; and Norman Lloyd (born Norman Perlmutter), who appears as Garfield's accomplice in the payroll heist, was similarly sidelined for much of the 1950s.

This concentration of soon-to-be blacklistees was only possible because *He Ran All the Way* was an independent film, produced by leftist star John Garfield's own Roberts Pictures (cofounded with Bob Roberts). Yet, of the talent he brought together for *He Ran All the Way*, few fell quite as far as Garfield himself (born Jacob Garfinkle), who, after refusing to name names before HUAC, was barred from future employment in Hollywood and died of a heart attack a year later. *He Ran All the Way* was his last film.

3:30PM

"KILL THE HOLLYWOOD JEWS: THE PREWAR ORIGINS OF FILM NOIR"

Lecture by **Steven J. Ross**, University of Southern California

For many Hollywood studio heads, producers, and writers, the postwar sense of dread, of criminality unpunished, and of corrupt or indifferent cops that came to characterize the postwar film noir genre was borne out of prewar experiences with Nazis, fascists, and government authorities in 1930s-1940s Los Angeles. Indeed, no film noir crime drama rivaled the real-life threats faced by Hollywood Jews in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

When Nazi death plots and plans to blow up nearby military installations were ignored by local and federal authorities, Hollywood Jews responded by secretly funding a spy ring that operated from August 1933 until the end of WWII.

It was a good thing they did, for their spies uncovered a series of death plots aimed at attracting international attention to the Nazi cause and sparking a wave of deadly pogroms throughout America. Their most nefarious plot involved blowing up the homes of 24 of Hollywood's most famous figures: 22 industry Jews (including Samuel Goldwyn, Louis B. Mayer, Paul Muni, Eddie Cantor, B.P. Schulberg) and two Christian movie stars known to be too friendly to Jews, Charlie Chaplin and James Cagney, who spoke fluent Yiddish.

In this lecture, Steven J. Ross will argue that the dark cynicism and sense of corruption that characterized film noir came in part from the additional discovery that Nazi and fascist plotters were aided by members of the LAPD and the LA County Sheriff's Department.

5:30PM SCANDAL SHEET

1952 / 82 mins / b/w

Dir. Phil Karlson / Sc. Eugene Ling, James Poe, Ted Sherdeman / Cine. Burnett Guffey

Cast: Broderick Crawford, John Derek, Donna Reed

35mm print courtesy of Sony Pictures

Introduced by **Matthew Rivera** '18 CC, Kit Noir Festival trailer and logo co-creator

Based on the novel *The Dark Page* (1944) by former reporter and soon-to-be auteur Sam Fuller, *Scandal Sheet* is the second of three “newspaper noirs” screened in this retrospective (the others being *Ace in the Hole* and *Sweet Smell of Success*).

The Jewish influence on the development of American journalism has been significant enough to inspire bigoted and conspiratorial claims of Jewish domination, now as then; but the reality is that Jewish Americans have been far more prominent as editors, reporters, and pundits than as actual owners. Sam Fuller’s own path – first selling newspapers in Manhattan at the age of 12, then copyboy for the *New York Evening Journal*, eventually assigned to the crime beat at the *New York Evening Graphic* in 1928 – was in this sense more typical than that of someone like Adolph Ochs, who purchased the *New York Times* in 1896.

A Dostoyevskian thriller in which a big-city editor kills his ex-wife and is unable to stop his crack reporter from pursuing the case, Fuller’s novel was initially picked for film adaptation by none other than Howard Hawks, who ended up abandoning the project and releasing the rights to Columbia Pictures. Hawks’ change of heart was fortuitous: The film was assigned to director Phil Karlson, for whom it was the first in a series of noirish crime films – also including *99 River Street* (1953), *The Phenix City Story* (1957), and *The Brothers Rico* (1958) – that made his reputation.

8PM SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS

1957 / 96 mins / b/w

Dir. Alexander Mackendrick / Sc. Ernest Lehman, Clifford Odets / Cine. James Wong Howe

Cast: Tony Curtis, Susan Harrison, Burt Lancaster

35mm print courtesy of Park Circus

Introduced by **Jason Stevens**, independent scholar

“I love this dirty town.” That sentiment, uttered by J.J. Hunsecker as he watches a drunkard get ejected from a Manhattan bar, captures in one neat phrase the giddy immorality that fuels *Sweet Smell of Success*. The film is one of the great depictions of New York as a den of depravity. As shot by James Wong Howe and penned by Clifford Odets, the city intoxicates – with its neon lights, its jazz clubs, its booze, and its fast-talking hucksters – only to leave you broke, broken, or both. The film belongs within a cinematic tradition that continues to this day (see: the charismatic NYC hustlers of 2019’s *Uncut Gems*).

The film’s aggressively unlikable leads and cynical newspaper narrative recall another film from this year’s program, *Ace in the Hole*. Like Wilder’s indictment of American culture, the film bristled audiences upon release; one viewer remarked after a preview screening: “Don’t change a thing; just burn all the prints.” Both films depict a media ecosystem defined by exploitation. There’s no room for “good” people in *Sweet Smell*, only useful people. The noir ethos pervades the film, even with nary a gangster, gun, or femme fatale in sight.

Lehman and Odets, both Jewish, based Hunsecker in part on Walter Winchell, an influential Jewish columnist known for his ruthless personal attacks. Both writers have a history of telling Jewish stories: Odets with his breakout play *Waiting for Lefty*, Lehman with his (disastrous) screen adaptation of the novel *Portnoy’s Complaint*. Factor in a career-best performance from Bernard Schwartz, a.k.a. Tony Curtis, and you’ll see how *Sweet Smell of Success* brought together a range of Jewish artists to tell one of the quintessential tales of dog-eat-dog America.

SUGGESTED READING

Vincent Brook, *Driven to Darkness: Jewish Émigré Directors and the Rise of Film Noir* (Rutgers University Press, 2009)

Thomas Doherty, *Show Trial: Hollywood, HUAC, and the Birth of the Blacklist* (Columbia University Press, 2018)

Kirk Douglas, *The Ragman's Son: An Autobiography* (Simon & Schuster, 1988)

Noah Isenberg, "Perennial Detour: The Cinema of Edgar G. Ulmer and the Experience of Exile," *Cinema Journal* 43.2 (Winter 2004): 3-25

Noah Isenberg, *Edgar G. Ulmer: A Filmmaker at the Margins* (University of California Press, 2014)

Steven J. Ross, *Hollywood Left and Right: How Movie Stars Shaped American Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2011)

Steven J. Ross, *Hitler in Los Angeles: How Jews Foiled Nazi Plots against Hollywood and America* (Bloomsbury, 2017)

Nick Smedley, *A Divided World: Hollywood Cinema and Émigré Directors in the Era of Roosevelt and Hitler* (Intellect, 2011)

ABOUT THE SPEAKERS

Vincent Brook is a retired lecturer in media studies from UCLA. He has a PhD in film and television from UCLA, has written dozens of journal and anthology articles, and has authored or edited ten books, most dealing with Jewish media issues. Among these are *Something Ain't Kosher Here: The Rise of the "Jewish" Sitcom*, *You Should See Yourself: Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Culture*, *Driven to Darkness: Jewish Émigré Directors and the Rise of Film Noir*, and *From Shtetl to Stardom: Jews and Hollywood*. His most recent book, *All About Eva: A Holocaust-Related Memoir, with a Hollywood Twist* (2021), deals with his German Jewish parents' experiences in Nazi Germany and as refugees in Los Angeles in the late 1930s and 1940s.

Ann Douglas received her BA and PhD at Harvard. After teaching at Harvard and Princeton, she came to Columbia in 1975. She is the author of two books: *The Feminization of American Culture* (Knopf, 1977) and *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (FSG, 1995). She has also written for the *New York Times*, *Time*, *Slate*, *Vogue*, and *Vanity Fair*. She belongs to the New York Historical Society and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She has taught courses on film noir in the English Department since 1995.

Noah Isenberg is the George Christian Centennial Professor and Chair of the Department of Radio-Television-Film at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author, most recently, of *We'll Always Have 'Casablanca': The Life, Legend, and Afterlife of Hollywood's Most Beloved Movie* (W.W. Norton, 2017), which was a *Los Angeles Times* bestseller. Among his other books are: *Edgar G. Ulmer: A Filmmaker at the Margins* (California, 2014), which was selected by *Huffington Post* as a Best Film Book of 2014 and, as editor, *Weimar Cinema: An Essential Guide to Classic Films of the Era* (Columbia, 2009), which was named a Choice Outstanding Academic Title. His current projects include a book on Billy Wilder's *Some Like It Hot* for Norton and a short interpretive biography of Wilder for Yale University

Press. The anthology, *Billy Wilder on Assignment*, which he edited and introduced, is now out from Princeton University Press.

Steven J. Ross is Dean's Professor of History at the University of Southern California and Director of the Casden Institute for the Study of the Jewish Role in American Life. His most recent book, *Hitler in Los Angeles: How Jews Foiled Nazi Plots Against Hollywood and America* was named a Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in History for 2018 and has been on the *Los Angeles Times* Bestseller List for 23 weeks. It has also been made into a documentary for French television, *Leon Lewis, the Man Who Defeated the Nazis in Hollywood* (English title).

His previous book *Hollywood Left and Right: How Movie Stars Shaped American Politics*, received the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Film Scholars Award and a Pulitzer Prize nomination. *Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America*, won the Theater Library Association Book Award for 1999, as well as a nomination for the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award.

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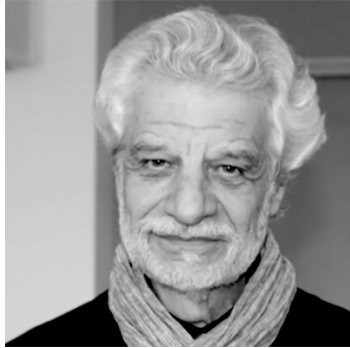
ABOUT DR. SAUL AND DOROTHY KIT



Born and raised in the early 1920s in the New York Metropolitan area, Dr. Saul Kit (Passaic, New Jersey) and Dorothy Anken Kit (Jackson Heights, Queens) were lovers of literature, theater, and film. Dorothy, an interior decorator, wrote poetry and plays in her leisure time and had a strong artistic bent, which included creating needlepoint designs based on famous works of art as well as her own original patterns, many of which were commissioned by her friends. A GI Bill undergraduate at the University of California, Berkeley, Saul went on to receive his PhD in Biochemistry from Berkeley, the location of the birth of their oldest child Sally (Syracuse, Class of 1971). Saul carried out his post-doctoral studies at the University of Chicago, where his first son, Malon (Columbia School of Engineering, Class of 1973), was born. Suffering from the bitter cold winters of Chicago, Saul subsequently moved the family to the warmest place he could find a job, Houston, Texas, where his second son, Gordon (Columbia College, Class of 1976) was born. Saul's extraordinary 35-year scientific career included important discoveries in cancer, virology, and vaccine research. He was Chief of the section of Nucleoprotein Metabolism in the Department of Biochemistry at M.D. Anderson Hospital, and later Professor and Head of the Division of Biochemical Virology at Baylor College of Medicine, both in Houston. Saul was a recipient of numerous research grants from various government and private organizations, including the National Institutes of Health,

National Science Foundation, and The American Cancer Society. In recognition of over 25 years of service, he received a Research Career Award from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. In 1987, Saul, along with his son Malon, were honored with the Distinguished Inventor of the Year Award for developing the world's first genetically engineered vaccine to be licensed by the US government. Saul and Malon were granted numerous United States and international patents for their pioneering vaccine inventions, aided by their patent attorney son/brother, Gordon. Gordon's generous gift to Columbia funds the Film Noir Festival in honor of his parents.

This year's iteration of the Kit Noir Festival is dedicated to the memory of Thomas Elsaesser (1943-2019).



Influential film historian, School of the Arts visiting professor, and a speaker at the first-ever Kit Noir Festival in 2018, Elsaesser had a profound impact on the field of film studies. We miss him tremendously.



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