EDGAR G. ULMER

Detour on Poverty Row

Edited By Gary D. Rhodes

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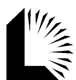

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To Tony Williams, my colleague, friend, and fellow supporter of the First Amendment. He has had a very positive and profound influence on this anthology, for which I thank him greatly.

—Gary D. Rhodes

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Introduction

Gary D. Rhodes

I first read about Edgar G. Ulmer as a child many years ago in the books of the late William K. Everson. Ulmer's name stuck in my mind, as did the first film of his that I viewed: *The Black Cat* (1934). It gripped me, as did *Detour* (1945) and *The Man From Planet X* (1951) when I screened them some time thereafter. To be sure, one of the reasons I later befriended actor Robert Clarke was due to his performance in *The Man From Planet X*.

Directing Clarke for my own film, *Lugosi: Hollywood's Dracula*, I marvelled at his tales of Ulmer, whom he believed was something of a genius, but also a troubled, very difficult person. Later, while spending time with Lucille Lund, an actress who had starred in *The Black Cat*, I heard even more stark tales of Ulmer's challenging personality. Indeed, Ulmer's own biography remains in a position more precarious than that of a talented, but difficult director. After all, some of his claims about his early career are hard to substantiate; his own version of history collides at times with the archival record.

As a result, scrutinizing Ulmer's American films is a much easier task than squinting at his somewhat questionable German career. His work in the United States fits neatly into the narrative of the exile in Hollywood, the story of filmmakers travelling from abroad to participate in the U.S. cinema. Ernst Lubitsch, F. W. Murnau, Paul Leni—so many European directors appeared in Hollywood during the 1920s and 1930s. Problems occurred when such a director's unique approach conflicted with a classical Hollywood style founded on conformity. But Ulmer's case is still unique; unlike, say, a Fritz Lang, Ulmer was a virtual unknown in 1934 when he directed *The Black Cat*, his first Hollywood studio film.

To be sure, he created a bold feature film as his introduction to the American public, who responded to it without major applause or major disappointment. It simply did not register as an important film.

Given that Ulmer became blacklisted at "Big Five" and "Little Three" as a result of his relationship and later marriage with Shirley Castle (who had been married to a relative of Universal Studios chief Carl Laemmle), he also falls into another category of Hollywood directors: those who once worked for, but then fell out of favor at the major studios, spending the remainder of their careers making B-movies. It was a group that famously included William Beaudine, director of important films like *Sparrows* (1926) with Mary Pickford before being relegated to decades of making poverty-row movies like *Bela Lugosi Meets a Brooklyn Gorilla* (1952). It was a group that included Phil Rosen, who directed Barbara LaMarr in the silent era before drifting into the world of low-budget filmmaking. The story was relatively common, of course; similar fates befell Christy Cabanne, Frank Strayer, Elmer Clifton, Sam Newfield, Jean Yarbrough, and others.

The resulting Ulmer canon, consisting largely of B-movies, is curious enough as to make him a fascinating, but still problematic, inclusion in a discussion of auteurs. On the one hand, it is difficult to see much consistency of style emerge in films like *Thunder Over Texas* (1934), *Tomorrow We Live* (1942), or *St. Benny the Dip* (1951). Indeed, movies like *From Nine to Nine* (1935) hardly seem the work of a competent director, let alone an auteur. Other Ulmer films are noticeably hampered by their low budgets, such as the not-so-special effects that mar *Isle of Forgotten Sins* (1943). His cinematic style was at times dictated as much by budget as by artistic design.

Given the erratic quality of his films, it is possible to view Ulmer's work in the plural. A varied range of genre affiliation also seems to divide his efforts. For example, he was the Ulmer of exploitation, as in *Damaged Lives* (1933) and *Girls in Chains* (1943). He was the Ulmer of industrial films, as in *Goodbye Mr. Germ* (1940) and *Another to Conquer* (1941). And he was the Ulmer of ethnic films, such as *Green Fields* (1937) and *Moon Over Harlem* (1939).

But despite all of the limitations he faced, Ulmer achieved staggering results in a number of films that *do* reveal consistency of cinematic style and theme, thus making the term "auteur" possible to apply. His work within *film noir* is a key example, whether directing *Detour* (1945), *Murder Is My Beat* (1955), or even infusing *noir* aesthetics in his science-fiction film *The Man From Planet X* (1951). Similar remarks could be made of his work in the horror genre, given the repetitive, fascinating, and challenging range of taboos and obsessions he explored so adroitly in films like *The Black Cat* (1934) and *Bluebeard* (1944).

Journeying through Ulmer's canon thus means reaching the rich and wonderful destinations of his important, "auterist" works, while remaining mindful that some of his films are mirages in our path—mirages due largely to budget-

ary circumstances beyond his control, of course. In the end, perhaps Ulmer should be viewed against the model of authorship suggested in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (1985), meaning a form of authorship bounded by economic, technological, and ideological material determinants. Ulmer's ideological approach (mitigated as it was by the aims of writer, producers, and others with whom he worked) was in some cases undermined and other cases assisted by his economic and technological limitations. These factors mean that some of his films suffer by comparison to higher-budget output from the major studios, while others seem to stand out favourably because of their modest production values. The erratic becomes perhaps a liberating asset, then, as much as it remains a limiting deficit.

The present collection of chapters proposes to examine key elements of Ulmer's canon, whether though macro or micro forms of analysis. For example, part I investigates issues of "Texts and Contexts" important to Ulmer's American film career. Yannis Tzioumakis inaugurates the anthology with an overview of Ulmer's work in low-budget cinema, concentrating on his connection to the film company Producers Releasing Corporation (PRC). Christopher Justice follows with a discussion of Ulmer's films within the framework of the sexploitation genre. In her chapter "At the Border," Claudia Pummer concludes part I as she traverses into Ulmer's ethnic films by engaging with *The Singing Blacksmith* (1938) and *Cossacks in Exile* (1939).

Part II interrogates "Ulmer and *Film Noir*," a crossroads between a filmmaker who fits problematically into the category of auteur and a category of film that fits problematically into conventional notions of genre. Scott Loren's monumental "Dead Fathers and Other Detours" analyzes the *noir* indices of six different Ulmer films, Hugh S. Manon's chapter "See Spot" offers a revelatory examination of Ulmer's parametric work in *noir*, and Stephen Broomer's "Even the Pictures Lie" scrutinizes the unreliable narrator in the Ulmer *noirs*.

The section continues with ever more specific analyses, such as Marlisa Santos's study of Ulmer's "Homicidal *Noirs*," in which she focuses on three particular films: *Strange Illusion* (1945), *The Strange Woman* (1946), and *Bluebeard* (1944). Then Phillip Sipiora's insightful study "All Wrong Turns" drives towards an even more precise location by engaging with *Detour* (1945), the *noir* film for which Ulmer is best known. Reynold Humphries completes the journey with his own "Masculinity and Masochism in *Detour*," which moves the discussion to a different, but equally fertile destination. Taken as a whole, part II can thus be seen as a kind of conversation regarding Ulmer's work within *film noir*, including an implicit debate about which of his films fit into that category.

Part III continues the single-film model approach by presenting an array of chapters on individual works that operate either outside of *noir* (such as *Carnegie*

Hall of 1947) or exist at the intersection of *noir* and other genre classifications (such as *The Man From Planet X*). Steffen Hantke's "Puppets and Paintings" opens this section with an examination of authorship and artistry in *Bluebeard*, followed by Tony Williams's insightful analysis of *Ruthless* (1956) as a "radical psychobiography." Tony Tracy offers a valuable investigation of the oft-overlooked *Carnegie Hall*, Graeme Harper provides a deft critique of *The Man From Planet X*, Robert Singer addresses the intertextual lineage of *The Daughter of Dr. Jekyll* (1957), and David J. Hogan revisits *The Amazing Transparent Man* (1960). The section, which broaches Ulmer's work in a variety of contexts, genres, and eras, concludes with Kevin Heffernan's revealing look at *L'Atlantide* (1961) and its debt to Fritz Lang.

Part IV is a case study of a single Ulmer film, offering a trio of very different chapters on *The Black Cat*. Alongside *Detour*, the film certainly ranks among Ulmer's most famous and most important works. *The Black Cat* is a truly cavernous film with themes, subtexts, and taboos existing beneath the surface of what remains an amazingly complex, but also amazingly brief sixty-minute film. Alison Peirse begins the case study by situating *The Black Cat* within the classic horror film of the 1930s, as well as providing insight into its unique Bauhaus-inspired design. Dion Tubrett's "The Devil's Contract" examines the film's theme of self-destruction by analyzing its key characters. My own chapter concludes the case study with an historical investigation of *The Black Cat*'s reception in 1934.

These chapters and the overall anthology would not have been possible, of course, without the hard work and resolve of all of the contributing writers, each of whom I would thank for their kindness and their insight. Moreover, a number of other persons have assisted on this volume as well. As a result, I also extend much appreciation to Mark Bould, Kevin Brownlow, the late Robert Clarke, Kristin Dewey, Jack Dowler, the late William K. Everson, Michael Lee, the late Lucille Lund, Gregory William Mank, Marina McDonnell, Desmond O'Rawe, Tom Weaver, and Devin Williams. Last but not least are Tony Williams and Reynold Humphries. Both of them have contributed chapters, but must be thanked additionally for their enthusiasm and support, without which this volume would not have been possible.

Considering the breadth and complexity and importance of Ulmer's films, it becomes immediately apparent that no one book or anthology could ever be objectively dubbed "definitive." Nor could any one person ever reasonably hope to exhaust all that remains to be mined from Ulmer's canon. That process should be viewed as an ongoing enterprise that must involve many different scholars working from many different perspectives. To be sure, Ulmer fought for his opportunity to speak in the public sphere through his films, worried though he was that he might become underappreciated or forgotten. Herein are the voices of

nineteen scholars who have worked with vigor to share their research and enthusiasm for Ulmer. Our voices are thus a necessary contribution into the public sphere, into what must be an open and ongoing conversation for many years to come. In that way, we can achieve both Ulmer's goal of continued recognition, as well as our own goal of academic freedom and integrity. *Litera Scripta Manet*.

Gary D. Rhodes
Belfast, Northern Ireland
December 2007

Part I

TEXTS AND CONTEXTS

CHAPTER 1

Edgar G. Ulmer: The Low-End Independent Filmmaker *Par Excellence*

Yannis Tzioumakis

Edgar G. Ulmer was a filmmaker with an extremely unconventional career in American cinema. Unlike other émigré filmmakers associated with Vienna (Erich von Stroheim, Josef von Sternberg, Billy Wilder, Otto Preminger, and Fritz Lang) who established a career under Hollywood's limelight and in association with the big studios that have controlled the business of cinema since the 1920s, Ulmer is still relatively unknown to the wide cinema-going public. Having made only one film for a major Hollywood studio, *The Black Cat* (1934), and that for Universal, one of the so-called Little Three studios, Ulmer made almost all of his subsequent films for smaller outfits, production and distribution companies that are firmly associated with the "low-end" spectre of commercial American independent cinema. This means that Ulmer's films were made under industrial and economic conditions that were far removed from the studio mode of filmmaking under which Hollywood movies were produced between the late 1910s and the late 1940s, the years of what film historians have called "the studio era." Instead, Ulmer's films were produced under a mode where making a film within the constraints of a very low budget and a very tight schedule were often the only conditions posited by the people who controlled the purse strings of thinly capitalised independent film companies and irrespective of the ways in which the film "looked" and "sounded." As a result, Ulmer's films often broke away from the classical aesthetic, the dominant aesthetic regime of Hollywood cinema during the studio period.

This chapter will examine a particular period in Ulmer's filmmaking career, the years between 1942 and 1946. During this period Ulmer made eleven films

for Producers Releasing Corporation (PRC), a low-end independent company whose product "was considered cheap even by Poverty Row standards."[1] Despite the adverse circumstances, however, Ulmer made some of his most famous films during those five years, including *Bluebeard* (1944), *Strange Illusion* (1945), and *Detour* (1946), the last widely considered to be "a classic *film noir*," "one of the most famous B-films of all times" and Ulmer's "unquestioned masterpiece."[2] More than any other filmmaker associated with low-end independent cinema, Ulmer demonstrated that visually arresting, quality filmmaking was indeed possible in an area of American cinema that is often dismissed as "a cinematic no man's land,"[3] while his name became synonymous with the ability to transcend the considerable limitations associated with filmmaking outside the studio system.

Independent Filmmaking in the Studio Era

Commercial independent filmmaking in the studio era assumed three formats. Firstly, there was top-rank independent film production that took place within the studio system. During the 1930s, this type of filmmaking was associated with a small number of elite producers such as Samuel Goldwyn, Howard Hughes, David O. Selznick, Walter Wanger, and a few others, and was typified by prestige pictures aimed at the mainstream, white, middle-class audience that patronised the first- and second-run theatres owned by or affiliated with the major studios. Top-rank independent producers normally distributed through United Artists, the only member of the eight key companies during the studio era that was not a producer and, consequently, relied on outside product. However, from the late 1930s onwards other major studios opened their gates to top-rank independent production, making this type of filmmaking an integral part of Hollywood cinema. Apart from the change in volume, the main difference between independent production in the 1930s and in the 1940s was that during the latter period the studios became active players in fostering this type of filmmaking. One by one Warner, Universal, Columbia, and especially RKO gradually opened their gates to independent producers and established an environment that actively encouraged the formation of independent companies that would distribute their product through studio resources.

Secondly, there was the independent production (and distribution) that took place outside the studio system but still within the same geographical region—the U.S. West Coast. This was exemplified by a large number of films associated with the so-called Poverty Row studios (Mascot, Monogram, Republic, Chesterfield, Grand National, Producers Distributing Corporation [and its successor, Producers Releasing Corporation], etc.). Unlike their top-rank counter-

parts, these low-end independent producers specialised in cheap action films—primarily westerns—as well as other genre films and serials. With the studio-owned and affiliated theatres normally closed to them, these small companies serviced primarily the large number of independent, subsequent-run theatres that were located in small towns and rural areas. With few exceptions, low-end independents did not own distribution networks and, therefore, distributed their films through states' rights exchanges. This was a system of film distribution that entailed "the sale of rental rights to distributors who cover specifically delimited territories (or states)," usually for a flat fee as opposed to a set percentage rate of the box office receipts that the major studio distributors charged theatres for their films.[4]

The third type of commercial independent filmmaking was associated with the "ethnic" film. The term "ethnic" here does not only refer to films aimed at American audiences of specific ethnicities; rather, it is used as an umbrella term under which one could group several defining audience characteristics such as race, religion, and nationality.[5] Ethnic films were produced and distributed outside the studios (and often outside California) and dealt with representations of issues ignored by mainstream studio films. For instance, black-owned companies such as the Lincoln Motion Picture Company and Million Dollar Productions were not affiliated in any way with the major studios. Like the Poverty Row firms, these production companies distributed their films through the states' rights exchanges and, significantly, catered for another distinct segment of the audience, ethnic audiences, which, besides patronising subsequent run theatres, also attended several hundred specialised theatres during the 1920s and 1930s.[6] Furthermore, both Poverty Row and ethnic films were characterised by shoestring budgets and, therefore, a "cheap" look compared to the infinitely glossier, refined look of top-rank independent films. The key difference between ethnic and Poverty Row independent filmmaking was that the production of ethnic films never reached the level of the mass production of Poverty Row studios. Rather it was defined mostly by individual entrepreneurs like Oscar Micheaux, which means that the films were produced intermittently and not as part of a speedy, streamlined production process that characterised filmmaking by the Poverty Row studios.

Edgar G. Ulmer was one of the few filmmakers who worked both in the second and third category of independent filmmaking, making films for PRC (between 1942 and 1946) and for a variety of ethnic audiences (Jewish audiences, Ukranian audiences, and black audiences, in particular), especially between 1935 and 1941 when he made films such as *Grine Fedler* ([*Green Fields*] 1937, in Yiddish); *Natalka Poltavka* (1937, in Yiddish); *Yankel der Schmid* ([*The Singing Blacksmith*] 1938, in Yiddish); *Zaporozhets za Dunayem* ([*Cossacks in Exile*] 1938, in Ukrainian); *Americaner Schadchen* ([*The Marriage Broker*] 1939, in Yiddish);

Di Klyatshe ([*The Light Ahead*] 1939, in Yiddish); and *Moon over Harlem* (1939, for a black audience). Although his "ethnic period" represents another important chapter in his career as an independent filmmaker, this chapter will concentrate exclusively on his work during the years of his association with low-end independence and the filmmaking practices this form of independence entailed. Specifically, it will examine four of the films Ulmer made at PRC—*Tomorrow We Live* (1942), *Monsoon* (1945, also known under the title *The Isle of Forgotten Sins*), *Strange Illusion* (1945), and *Detour* (1946)—and will discuss the stylistic and narrative choices Ulmer made and the ways in which those choices distinguished his films from the rest of the low-end independent product. It will argue that Ulmer's PRC films are distinctive mainly because they are characterised by a visual style that often far exceeds the requirements of his trivial and sometimes incoherent narratives.

Low-End Independence and the Case of PRC

The history of American cinema is full of examples of independent production and distribution companies operating in the margins of the American film industry. Always very thinly capitalised, low-end independent companies were mostly short-lived enterprises that were driven out of business after a small number of films. The cost of distribution, the inability to secure exhibition that would guarantee high returns, the absence of a steady flow of capital to invest in their films, the decisively outdated equipment they tended to use, the technically flawed films they produced, and especially the competition from the big studios: all of these combined to make the cinema business in the low-end independent sector an extremely precarious endeavour. Yet, despite the adverse circumstances, large numbers of entrepreneurs have defied all the above obstacles and worked on the periphery of Hollywood cinema since the early twentieth century, when Edison's Motion Picture Patents Company attempted to monopolise the film business and standardise film output. In many ways these low-end independents ensured that American cinema would remain a competitive business while their films often broke the rules of filmmaking as those were put into place each time a specific type of film company dominated American cinema.

If there was ever a "golden age" for low-end independents, it was in the twenty-year period that was marked by the introduction of sound in American cinema in the late 1920s and the beginning of the end of the studio era in the late 1940s. The coming of sound "cleared" the field and led various companies to seek corporate consolidation as the vast majority of low-end independents could not secure the funds to upgrade their technology. In this respect the low-end sector started being characterised by a smaller number of (slightly) better

capitalised companies that could survive in the marketplace for a more sustained period of time compared to the silent era. Ironically, it was not until the economic crash of 1929 and the beginning of the Great Depression that these companies had found their *raison d'etre*. The new economic reality forced the film industry to introduce new schemes in order to attract poverty-stricken audiences to the theatres and to ensure the smooth operation of the film business. One of these schemes was the introduction of the double feature presentation during 1930, which upped demand for films. With the eight major studios able to produce only a specific number of films per year and working at full capacity, exhibitors looked to low-end independents for additional product and, as a result, in the years between 1929 and 1934, the number of independents rose from fifty-one to ninety-two.[7]

During the 1930s the key low-end independents were Monogram Pictures, Republic Pictures Corporation, and Grand National Pictures, while a large number of lesser known companies such as Majestic Pictures, Victory Pictures, Allied Pictures, Supreme Pictures, Tower Pictures, Invincible Pictures, and Empire Films continued to make films, recording minuscule (in comparison to studios like Paramount and Warner Brothers) but steady profits. Their films, however, continued to be deeply flawed technically and could never be confused with the glossy productions of the major studios. With budgets rarely exceeding the $100,000 mark and for many films being as low as $16,000–17,000,[8] low-end independents established a filmmaking practice that was considerably different from the one associated with the established studios. That practice obeyed some incontestable rules, while quality and aesthetic ratification were certainly not on the agenda of these companies. These rules included:

(1) Completing the film within inflexible shooting schedules, which often did not exceed a working week (six days) and which could entail up to eighty camera set-ups per working day;
(2) Bringing the film in on a minuscule budget that often did not allow for more than one take per shot, regardless of the take's quality. For companies whose profit was usually a few thousand dollars per film, going over budget (or over schedule) might have made the difference between profit and loss;
(3) Developing stories from inside the company (as purchasing rights to pre-sold properties would drive production costs up); on rare occasions when rights were cheap and/or were in the public domain Poverty Row studios would proceed in such purchases;
(4) Producing a very large number of outdoors pictures (especially westerns) as they required minimal studio work, which meant that they could be produced on extremely low budgets.[9]

In the final analysis, John Tuska argues, "[t]here were two very distinct ways of approaching a motion picture, one where all questions and problems and all energies answered first and last to the budget, the other where the final product itself, the motion picture, took precedence."[10] Poverty Row studios in the 1930s approached filmmaking only in the first way.

Despite the quality problems—Republic Pictures was widely known by industry practitioners as "Repulsive Pictures"[11] while Monogram's films were characterised by "shoddy sets, dim lighting restricted mostly to simple key spots, nonexistent camerawork (static setups, with simple 'master and two close-ups coverage') and extremely poor sound recording"[12]—low-end independents managed to sustain their position in the market with companies like Republic releasing more than sixty films a year, on a par with the release schedules of studios like Columbia and Universal.[13]

The end of the Depression did not mark the end of those good conditions for the low-end independents. A number of factors that included (a) the continuation of the double bill in the 1940s, (b) the impact of the consent decree of 1940 which forced the big studios to phase out their own version of B film production thus allowing the low end independents complete control of the B market, and (c) the effects of World War II, which created a much stronger economy in the U.S and increased theatre attendances, made the 1940s an even more auspicious time for the established low-end independents like Monogram and Republic.[14] This is when Producers Releasing Corporation entered the market in order to exploit these attractive economic conditions.

In 1939, Ben Judell, an exchange owner who had recently ventured into production, set up Producers Distributing Corporation (PDC) as a distribution company. The company came together as a cooperative of franchise holders with the main objective of producing and distributing ultra-low budget films, mainly westerns.[15] Immediately they announced three series of eight westerns per series and soon after a programme of sixty features for a total investment of $1 million.[16] A few months later, however, Judell found himself in financial trouble, and the company did not seem to have the resources to deliver enough films to sustain its distribution network. In the face of bankruptcy and only a year after its formation, the company was taken over by its creditors, one of whom was Sigmund Neufeld Productions, and was renamed Producers Releasing Corporation. Under Neufeld, PRC managed to stabilise operations and become a steady supplier of cheap products to subsequent-run theatres. In its time span (1939–1948) PRC released 179 features while never spending more than $100,000 on a film.[17]

PRC's panache for producing cheap product at an extraordinarily fast rate became notorious. According to Wheeler Dixon, the company adopted a number of extreme practices to keep costs down, some of which had not been seen before in commercial film production. Such practices included:

(1) The use of stock footage with new dialogue scenes to create "new" films. This was particularly the case in westerns where shots of shooting guns and chase sequences were recycled in western after western allowing PRC to make westerns in as quickly as two and a half days and often for a budget below the $10,000 mark;
(2) The retitling and re-release of the same film to exploit new marketing angles. When Alan Ladd became a star, PRC changed the title of a film where Ladd had appeared in a small part in order to exploit his newly-acquired fame;
(3) "The PRC hour," a technique developed by Edgar G. Ulmer in which the filmmaker would shoot all the close-ups of a particular film together by placing his hand in front of the camera lens to separate the individual takes.[18]

With the above practices betraying a production environment where every decision was answerable to budget and schedule limitations, it was no surprise that the company developed a bad reputation, inviting critics to suggest that its films represented "the nadir of independent film operations."[19] However, it was PRC's strict adherence to the above rules of low-end independent production that allowed creative filmmakers a substantial degree of control over their films, something unimaginable for most of their counterparts who worked within the studio system. As quality was never an issue on the list of the company's priorities, filmmakers were allowed to experiment—should they wish to—with stylistic and narrative choices, especially when experimentation was in response to the logistics of shooting a script under seemingly impossible schedule limitations, as well as to make sometimes distinct films that transcended their lowly Poverty Row origins. According to Dixon, "[At PRC] no one really cared what was 'in the can' as long as you had at least fifty-four minutes of programming."[20] And more than any other filmmaker at PRC (and arguably across the low-end independent sector), Edgar G. Ulmer was the one director who capitalised most on the opportunities provided by this mode of filmmaking.

Ulmer at PRC

Although there are sources claiming that Ulmer ended up a low-end independent filmmaker because he was blacklisted by the big Hollywood studios following his marriage to a contracted employee at Universal against the will of the studio owners,[21] critics now agree that Ulmer chose to become independent as he found working within the constraints of the studio system problematic.[22] Despite enjoying considerable creative control at Universal during the making of *The Black Cat*,[23] Ulmer left the studio when he was asked to direct a Shirley

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