

CHAPTER 4

Dead Fathers and Other Detours: Ulmer's *Noir*

Scott Loren

Released the same year as Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton's seminal *Panorama du film noir américain 1941–1953* (*A Panorama of American Film Noir*), one is tempted to speculate that as a *film noir*, *Murder Is My Beat* (1955) has something of the intentional to it. As a crime-thriller, *Murder* bears all the markings of what had come to characterize the “tough detective” *noir* by the mid-1950s. And although the core *noir* films made by this point were mostly made without directors knowledge that they were contributing to a distinctive genre (*film noir* was defined in retrospect—whether or not it constitutes a genre still continues to be a heated dispute), in 1955 there would have been some talk of it in critic circles. There also certainly would have been widespread recognition of the collection of crime-thriller tough detective films, many based on hardboiled fiction, that had been made up to this point and that share various characteristic elements. I point this out not because I'm particularly interested in whether Ulmer might have been aware of the term *noir* by 1955, but because he would have been aware that he was contributing to a style of film that had come to populate the cinematic landscape of the previous ten years. It is from this perspective that one might consider *Murder* an intentional, Ulmer's only intentional, *noir*. In retrospect, this is interesting as the particular mood of the film doesn't hold up as a *noir* as strongly as *Detour*, a rather early *film noir* whose *noir* status in no way could have been intentional. Although *Murder* is a crime-thriller about illicit sexual relations, deception and murder (all characteristics of *noir*), the mood of despair so essential to *noir* and the utter breakdown of social institutions are lacking. Partially contributing to this is the happy ending, of course,

but there are also some absent technical points making the difference as well: the heavy play of shadows, the long shot, tight framing, all of which supplement the gravity of *Detour's* narrative, are missing here. As a result, the claustrophobic atmosphere of *noir* is lacking somewhat. This is not in any way to suggest that *Murder* doesn't belong to the category of *film noir*. It does.

Rather, what I'd like to point out is that it is more than mere plot conventions and *chiaroscuro* lighting that constitute *film noir*. The narrative content, the mood, the application of certain cinematic techniques, and the kind of social commentary a film makes all contribute to whether or not a film is effective as a *film noir*. Whether or not to classify a film as *noir* often comes down to a question of how many *noir* indices it contains. Of the films I've chosen as representing Ulmer's *films noirs*, four of them are commonly included in critical registries of the *noir* style. They are *Detour*, *Strange Illusion*, *Ruthless*, and *Murder Is My Beat*. I have also included two additional films that contain various key *noir* indices, but nevertheless do not properly belong to the *noir* genre. For our purposes here, we'll consider them accomplices.

The Usual Suspects

Detour (PRC, 1945, 67 min)

Director: Edgar G. Ulmer

Producers: Leon Fromkess, Martin Mooney

Story: Martin Goldsmith

Screenplay: Goldsmith and Ulmer

Cinematography: Benjamin H. Kline

Music: Leo Erdody

Primary Cast: Tom Neal, Ann Savage, Claudia Drake, Edmund MacDonald, Tim Ryan, Esther Howard, Pat Gleason

Noir indices: *Chiaroscuro* lighting techniques, the long shot, tight framing, voiceover, flashback, the *femme fatale*, mood of despair, moral ambivalence, crime and murder. Other characteristics that make *Detour* a definitive work of *film noir* are a mood of oppressiveness, with characters trapped in situations seemingly against their will, the problematization of gendered authority, the inversion of the American dream (of renewal through westward movement), and social atomism.

Strange Illusion (PRC, 1945, 84 min)

Director: Edgar G. Ulmer

Producers: Leon Fromkess

Story: Fritz Rotter

Screenplay: Adele Commandini

Cinematography: Philip Tannura, Benjamin H. Klein (uncredited), Eugen Schüfftan (uncredited)

Music: Leo Erdody

Primary Cast: James Lydon, Warren William, Sally Eilers, Jayne Hazard, Regis Toomey, Charles Arnt, George H. Reed

Noir indices: The main technical *noir* characteristic is the use of *chiaroscuro* lighting, particularly accompanying tenebrous narrative elements. Thematic *noir* elements are murder, crime and deception.

Ruthless (Eagle-Lion, 1948, 104 min)

Director: Edgar G. Ulmer

Producers: Arthur S. Lyons, Joseph Justman

Story: Dayton Stoddart (*Prelude to Night*)

Screenplay: S. K. Lauren, Gordon Kahn, Alvah Bessie (originally uncredited)

Cinematography: Burt Glennon

Music: Werner Jannsen

Primary Cast: Zachary Scott, Louis Hayward, Diana Lynn, Martha Vickers, Sydney Greenstreet, Raymond Burr, Lucile Bremer

Noir indices: Along with its harsh critique of capitalism, moral ambiguity and a certain degree of atomism contribute to the *noir* qualities of this film. Although the protagonist's choices and actions are rather despicable, Ulmer's direction and Scott's acting manage, much to their credit, to sustain an element of likeability in the character of Horace Vendig. This aspect, which is a trademark of the *film noir* anti-hero, only adds to the atmosphere of moral ambiguity and can be found throughout Ulmer's *noir*. *Chiaroscuro* lighting is employed here, as in *Strange Illusion*, as a narrative supplement. The centrality of the flashback narrative technique is the film's prominent *noir* feature.

Murder Is My Beat (Allied Artists, 1955, 77 min)

Director: Edgar G. Ulmer

Producers: Aubrey Wisberg, Ilse Lahn

Story: Aubrey Wisberg, Martin Field

Screenplay: Aubrey Wisberg

Cinematography: Harold E. Wellman

Music: Al Glasser

Primary Cast: Paul Langton, Barbara Payton, Robert Shayne, Selena Royle, Ray Gordon, Tracy Roberts

Noir indices: Murder, voiceover, and the flashback are this crime-thriller's most prominent *noir* features. See below for a discussion of its additional *noir* elements.

Accomplices

Bluebeard (PRC, 1944, 72 min)

Director: Edgar G. Ulmer

Producers: Leon Fromkess, Martin Mooney

Story: Werner H. Furst, Arnold Phillips

Screenplay: Pierre Gendron

Cinematography: Jockey Arthur Feindel, Eugen Schüfftan (uncredited)

Music: Leo Erdody

Primary Cast: John Carradine, Jean Parker, Nils Asther, Ludwig Stössel, George Pembroke, Teale Loring, Sonia Sorel, Emmett Lynn, Patty McCarty, Anne Sterling

Genre: costume drama, crime-thriller, horror

Noir indices: Although it is usually *not* counted among Ulmer's *noirs*, with the exception of *Detour*, *Bluebeard* employs more technical and narrational *noir* elements than any of his core *films noirs*: *chiaroscuro* lighting with very heavy shadow work, city night scenes with lots of fog, tight framing and the canted shot are among the most prominent cinematic techniques. The dream sequence and the flashback are among the narrative techniques Ulmer employs here. Thematically there is murder, of course. There is also the incongruity between male fantasy, sexual difference and feminine *jouissance* that repeatedly and symptomatically makes an appearance in *film noir*. The breakdown of social codes is prominent. Personal moral codes replace official codes of law and authority. Finally, Ulmer and his lead actor once again manage to capture the viewer's sympathy and align it with the morally ambivalent criminal *noir* hero.

The Strange Woman (United Artists, 1946, 100 min)

Director: Edgar G. Ulmer (Douglas Sirk directs the opening sequences with Jenny Hager as a child)

Producers: Hedy Lamarr, Hunt Stromberg, Jack Chertok

Story: Ben Ames Williams

Screenplay: Herb Meadow

Cinematography: Lucien Andriot

Music: Carmen Dragon

Primary Cast: Hedy Lamarr, George Sanders, Louis Hayward, Gene Lockhart, Hillary Brooke, Moroni Olsen, Rhys Williams, June Storey, Alan Napier, Dennis Hoey

Genre: costume drama

Noir indices: The main technical *noir* characteristic is the use of *chiaroscuro* lighting accompanying tenebrous narrative elements in key scenes. As opposed

to the usual analepsis, we have a prolepsis early in the film. Thematic *noir* elements are murder, deception, personal moral codes replacing official codes of law and authority, and, primarily, the *femme fatale* as the embodiment *par excellence* of a threat to masculine authority.

Film Noir and Ulmer's Noir

Popular critical consensus places the classical period of *film noir* between 1941 and 1958, beginning with John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* and ending with Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil*. As Mark T. Conrad points out, some characteristic attributes are "the constant opposition of light and shadow, its oblique camera angles, and its disruptive compositional balance of frames and scenes. . . . But, besides these technical cinematic characteristics, there are a number of themes that characterize *film noir*, such as the inversion of traditional values and the corresponding moral ambivalence (e.g., the protagonist of the story, who traditionally is the good guy, in *noir* films often makes very questionable decisions); the feeling of alienation, paranoia, and cynicism; the presence of crime and violence."¹ The dominant motifs he makes reference to are social criticism (of capitalist ideologies, for example), murder, crime, private eyes, *femmes fatales*, doubles, sexual pathology and psychopaths. Another dominant feature of *film noir* is that the victim and the perpetrator tend to converge in the same character. As such, ambivalent sentiments of sympathy and antipathy can arise conterminously in the viewer. John Belton points out that with Ulmer, "[w]e sympathize even with his villains—with Vendig in *Ruthless* searching his past for a lost love, with Jenny in *The Strange Woman* looking for happiness. . . . In *Bluebeard*, Morell's affection for Lucille briefly purges him of the demon that haunts him. Vera's consumptive coughs and loneliness in *Detour* elicit a sympathetic, human response from Roberts—yet neither character can escape the course of action to which he has committed."² We will want to keep all these things in mind when considering Ulmer's *noir*. As we will find, a consideration of the "stock" *noir* features of his *films noirs* soon leads to a distinguishing set of repeated themes and motifs, some of which take up a position of centrality in certain films (the *femme fatale* in *The Strange Woman*, for example) and some of which are found in healthy doses throughout several works, such as the Oedipal drama. Focusing on a particular thematic aspect for each film should offer some insight into Ulmer's application of the theme throughout his *noir*, and perhaps more generally throughout his work. Of particular interest will be the themes of fate versus agency in *Detour*, capitalism and atomism in *Ruthless*, the *femme fatale* in *The Strange Woman*, Oedipal antagonisms in *Strange Illusion*, and repetition compulsion in *Bluebeard*. Finally, we'll reassess *Detour* through the Freudian concept of

the return of the repressed, taking recourse to David Lynch's *Lost Highway* as, to borrow Greil Marcus's terminology, a "reinhabiting of *Detour*."³ To begin with, though, a synoptic look at *Murder Is My Beat* will immediately establish a cursory thematic code for Ulmer's *noir*.

Detective Ray Patrick—Bad Cop

Detective Ray Patrick (Langton) is a bad cop. When we think of the crime-thriller bad cop, we tend to think of corruption. That's not the case with Ray. He just can't do his job well. He falls in love with his number one suspect, helps her to escape once she's been convicted of murder and sentenced to prison, and can't figure out how to prove her innocence even after all the necessary clues have fallen in his lap (*fallible masculine authority*).⁴ And worse still, he gets caught!

After Frank Dean (Gordon) is found dead in his apartment, lying facedown with his head in the fireplace and burned beyond recognition (*murder*), Patrick follows the first lead to a woman named Eden Lane (Payton), who works in a nearby nightclub (*sexual promiscuity vis-à-vis fallible masculine authority*). Various clues take Patrick up to a mountain cabin where, after trudging four miles on foot through deep snow, he finally finds Lane, who admits she'd hit Dean over the head with a figurine, but is shocked to hear that he is dead (*potential femme fatale*). Nevertheless, she's ready to accept the blame for the murder, and submissively accompanies Patrick back to Los Angeles, where she is prosecuted (*fate*). On the trainride to prison, Lane claims that she sees Dean waiting at the platform in Lindaville and begs Patrick to believe in her innocence. Having begun to doubt her guilt, and perhaps having already fallen in love, Patrick decides he and Lane must escape (*private morality or code of law outside institutional authority*). In what is probably the most ungracious train jump in film history, Patrick pushes Lane from the train, explaining afterward that he's giving them one week to find Dean (*problem to solve/dilemma*). In Lindaville, they live as *faux* husband and wife in a hotel while Patrick begins his investigation of Dean (*false families*) (*complicated sexual/romantic relations*). Mostly by chance, Patrick puts together a small collection of clues: a figurine resembling the one used in the murder; the factory where they are produced; the sudden and conspicuous appearance of Lane's roommate, Patsy Flint (Roberts), who also seems to have business in Lindaville; and five thousand dollars that she is hiding in a suitcase in her hotel, where she is later found dead. What could it all mean? Patrick has no idea. Fearing he will fail them, Lane returns to Los Angeles to turn herself in. In the meantime, Patrick's boss, Bert Rawley (Shayne), has tracked him down (*the Law*). He's mad as hell and determined to bring Patrick in. How could he be so stupid? How could a good cop like Patrick fall "for the oldest pitch a dame could

make"? Convinced of Eden's innocence (even though she's gone missing at this point!), Patrick persuades Bert to give him just twenty-four hours and to help him, which is a good thing, because it's only with Bert's help that the clues can be pieced together (*despair/helplessness*). With the suspicion that Dean might actually be Mr. Abbott, the owner of the factory where the figurines are made, they arrange for a witness from Los Angeles to come to Lindaville to have a look at him. On a train again, the film's denouement rapidly takes place: Abbott is positively identified as Dean and admits to having killed the man in the apartment, Abbott's driver, who was trying to bribe Abbott for having an affair (*père jouissant*). Patsy Flint, in on the bribe as well, raises the stakes when she learns that murder is involved (*femme fatale compromising masculine authority and jouissance*). Fearing for her family's good name, Mrs. Abbott kills Patsy Flint, but then throws herself from the train when she's found out. Bert and Patrick return to Los Angeles, Patrick and Lane are acquitted and the film ends with the three of them rushing off to the marriage license bureau (*moral ending*).

As one might surmise, the key themes I've parenthetically indicated above in italics, which are often found together both in Ulmer's *noir* and more generally throughout the genre, are interdependent, providing a structure in which social and gender-based antagonisms, as they are related to authority, can be staged. The element of fallible masculine authority, represented here by Patrick's incompetence, is essential to *film noir's* depiction of masculinity in crisis (often ascribed to historical conditions, primarily the two world wars and the Great Depression). Patrick's gendered fallibility finds its more extreme counterpart in *Detour's* Al Roberts, who is not only helpless when confronted by female desire, but feels that he is the victim in every single circumstance determining his existence. What one often finds in stagings of masculine crises and what is clearly staged here might also be formulated as a crisis of agency, not surprising given the historical conditions of the time; the (male dominated) social, political, and economic structures that were folding in on themselves seemed to leave no room for the individual to make a difference, despite his level of engagement, potentially leading to the kind of fatalist logic that permeates the narrative of *Detour*. Characterizing any crisis in masculinity, then, is not only the fallibility of institutions of authority (the State), but also authority at the individual level. Where Detective Patrick's authority only leads him deeper and deeper into trouble, into a position of confusion as his agency diminishes, Al Roberts has no authority whatsoever and the only mode of recourse open to him is that of murder, the greatest breach of institutionalized authority.

When considering *film noir's* portrayal of masculinity or masculine authority in crisis, it only makes sense that among the key motifs, we find depictions of the law as an unstable and unreliable social structure that is regularly transgressed, murder as the last resort for those without agency, the *femme fatale*

representing an always already excessive and autonomous drive lashing out in the face of fallible masculine authority, totemic *pères jouissants* who are beyond the law and enjoy at the cost of whoever happens to be useful to them, and other fallible masculine figures, such as Roberts, whose lack of agency prevents them from affecting any kind of meaningful action whatsoever. From a psychoanalytical perspective, the antagonisms subtending the crisis in masculinity staged in *film noir* are primarily those of the Oedipal drama. In fact, one might claim that *film noir* constitutes a continual restaging of failure in Oedipal structures of authority. Though this is precisely where *Murder Is My Beat* makes a paradigmatic departure, which is also not to say that Oedipal antagonisms are not at work in *Murder*. As Stefan Grisseman has suggested, "Oedipal conflicts are a focal point of Ulmer's work."⁵ Rather, the Oedipal trajectory in *Murder* is not a failure; it arrives at its "proper" destination. Consider Barbara Creed's comment on patriarchal ideology and the Oedipal trajectory in film: "the (male) hero was confronted with a crisis in which he had to assert himself over another man (often a father figure) in order to achieve social recognition and win the woman."⁶ This is essentially the plot structure of *Murder*. Eden Lane is framed as *the* object of the masculine gaze and desire, portrayed here as literally being forbidden by the Law until Ray can emasculate or expose as fallible the *père jouissant*, Mr. Abbott, and win the Law over to his side. The culmination of the narrative trajectory is that Ray Patrick can marry Eden Lane with the consent of the Law; i.e., they don't have to play a pretend game of husband and wife as they did in Lindaville. Thus, the "resolution" of the Oedipal drama constitutes a happy ending somewhat uncharacteristic of the *noir* genre. As I suggested earlier, it is precisely in this capacity that *Murder*, which has many typical *noir* indices, becomes atypical as a *noir* film. We see something similar at work in *Strange Illusion*. Loosely based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Strange Illusion* is Ulmer's purest adaptation of the Oedipal drama. Here again, though, it appears that the drama may be resolved in the end. On the other hand, the dream sequence ending the film with a resolution of the Oedipal drama might not be a resolution at all, but rather itself a strange illusion. In *Detour*, Ulmer's quintessential *film noir*, we'll find no such resolutions.

***Detour*: Fatalism, Defeatism, Masochism**

"Fate, or some mysterious force, can put the finger on you or me for no good reason at all." (Al Roberts, *Detour*)

Detour presents a scathing portrait of social isolation and despair. The narrative drive appears to follow Elisabeth Cowie's assertion concerning fate and false ac-

cusation in *film noir*: "Fate, the arbitrary and accidental event that brings diverse dangers and the risk of death, together with a hero falsely accused are used as narrative motivation."⁷ When his fiancée (Drake) leaves him in search of fame and fortune in Hollywood, nightclub piano player Al Roberts (Neal) soon decides he's got nothing to lose in going himself, and calls Sue to say he's coming to join her. Thus begins Al's fateful and murderous journey west. Thumbing it, as he's not only down on his luck but also his money, Roberts gets a lift from attempted rapist, bookie and dealer in shady wares Charles Haskell Jr. (MacDonald), who dies shortly into the ride presumably from medical complications (signaled by the medication he regularly takes). Fearing the police will arrest him for murder, Roberts hides Haskell's body in a ditch on the side of the road. Concluding that the most reasonable thing to do in such a situation is swap identities, he steals Haskell's clothes, wallet and car, hoping the authorities will assume the body on the side of the road is his own. This is Robert's first unlucky encounter with "fate." The next is a day later when Roberts stops at a filling station to get some water for the car. "There was a woman," as his voiceover informs us, to whom he offers a ride. At this point, Roberts couldn't possibly have known that the woman getting into the car with him is the same woman responsible for the scars on Haskell's hand (presumably, Haskell tried to rape her), and who will blackmail Roberts in a scheme to make money by having him continue to pose as Haskell—that is, until he strangles her with a telephone cord.

In Al's voiceover he would have the viewer believe that he is a helpless victim of fate, first with Haskell's stopping to give him a ride as a bad stroke of luck, then with Haskell's death occurring as a mystery of fate, with Vera's appearance as yet another mystery of fate, and finally with Vera's death as occurring independently of Al's agency: he is the "passive agent" of her death. The embedded implications of the narrative, though, both implicit in Al's voiceover and in the course of events, are not quite so clear on the point of fate. Astute interpretations have been quick to point out that fate has little to do with the poor choices Al continually makes. For example, it is not fate that determines he should hide Haskell's body on the side of the road and steal his identity along with his belongings. And it certainly wasn't fate that made him offer Vera a ride—a particularly incongruous choice as a potential suspect for murder and a car thief! In response to John Belton's statement that Ulmer's characters are "powerless prisoners of an irrational series of experiences which they can neither understand nor control . . . repeatedly surrender[ing] themselves to their intuitive but irrational impulses . . . as passive *reactors* to what happens to them,"⁸ Erik Ulman suggests that "[o]ne should not dismiss Ulmer's characters as puppets but recognize the difficulty of distinguishing fate from imperfectly conscious motivation. What in his characters is will, and what destiny? Is the active character more or less at the mercy of controlling forces than the passive? The

'irrational experiences' of which Belton writes arise often both from external pressure and internal susceptibility, and the two forces more often reinforce than impede one another."⁹ Ulman is entirely right in his implication of a certain inextricability between fate and "imperfectly conscious motivation," and in his claim that external pressures and internal susceptibility reinforce one another. One must ask, though, what the "controlling forces" to which Ulmer's characters are at the mercy of, in fact are. If we attribute these controlling forces to unconscious motivation that the conscious character passively accepts, as opposed to attributing them to some external mystery of fate, then what we arrive at is a masochistic form of defeatism that is already implicit in Belton's observation on characters surrendering to irrational impulses and perhaps elsewhere in his commentary on *Detour*. In volume 3 of *The Hollywood Professionals*, Belton suggests that "Roberts's hard-boiled cynicism and subjective perception of the action create a weird sympathy between himself and the nightmarish world around him that binds him to its logic, not his own. He becomes its prisoner, caught up helplessly in its flow like a man in a dream."¹⁰ Again, there is a gesture toward the ambiguous relationship between the external "nightmarish world" and Al's internal repressed desires that marks the film's entire narrative. Belton's metaphor of a man in a dream is particularly useful if we consider that there is no "external world" exerting pressure in dreams. Rather, everything is internal, pure phantasmatic introjection (in the sense of "internal" projection). Thus, the logic of the nightmarish world around Al, to which he is bound, is nothing but an extension of his own unconscious desire, a masochistic defeatism whose traces are evident throughout his narrative.

Al's defeatist view on life and his desire to be dominated take expression through his absolute lack of autonomy, his seeming lack of agency and his conviction that he will never "make it to the top," but will rather remain at the "bottom," to use the discourse of sexual domination and compliance. When Sue tells him, "[y]ou're going to make Carnegie Hall yet, Al," Al's telling response is, "[y]eah, as a janitor. I'll make my début in the basement." Thus, when Al meets up with Vera, she is able to fulfill his fantasies of powerlessness and being dominated.

Ann Savage (born Bernice Lyon), who starred in three other films with Tom Neal prior to *Detour* and purportedly spent a mere three days on the set, delivers a brilliant performance as one of Hollywood's most memorable *femmes fatales*. Although so many *films noirs* portray an imbalance in masculine identity vis-à-vis female identity, (and vis-à-vis institutionalized authority) as one of a few thematic pillars, primarily through the role of the *femme fatale*, *Detour* is extraordinary in its brutal portrayal of the reversal of gendered authority. As Andrew Britton has suggested, "Vera needs to establish that the inequality of the sexes has been *reversed*, not eliminated, and her every word and action is designed

to convince Al that she can do exactly what she likes with him ('I'm not through with you by a long shot!') and to rub his nose in the humiliating fact of his complete subordination to her."¹¹ The configuration of the white (almost) middle-class male as self-made pariah, skeptical of social institutions and whose own authority is deeply destabilized in contrast to the *femme fatale's* feminine *jouissance*, has come to be recognized as the hallmark of a crisis in masculine authority *film noir* symptomatically depicts of post-war and post-depression America.¹² Ulmer stages this gender-troubled structure as a vicious play of domination between Al and Vera. In fact, a good deal of their interaction appears very much like a role-playing game. The first verbal exchange in the car establishes the "play" at work in the roles they will assume: Al asks, "How far you goin'?" to which Vera replies, "How far you goin'?" When Al asks, "What's your name?" Vera's response is, "You can call me Vera if you like." Vera's speech signals the element of fantasy at work between her and Al. If she is going to function as an active screen for his masochistic desire, she's ready to go as far as he is. Plus, with "you can call me Vera if you like," she signals a certain malleability regarding his fantasy and already begins to fulfill it by responding to his inquiry with a statement about what he is or isn't permitted to do.

Frank Krutnik suggests that "male masochism can be seen as manifesting a desire to escape from the regimentation of masculine (cultural) identity effected through the Oedipus complex. The masochist seeks to overthrow the authority of paternal law and the determinacy of castration," and that "the strongly marked persecutory fantasy of *Detour*, and the hysterical determination of its narrative, suggest that behind Roberts's ostensible wish to regain Sue, and thus to accede to his rightful place as husband/father, is another, more perverse wish to fail in his trajectory, to remain outside masculine identification."¹³ Al chooses to remain an object of Vera's feminine *jouissance*, subject to her logic of drive. Even the fact that he "accidentally" kills her doesn't complicate an interpretation of Vera as the means through which Al masochistically escapes masculine identification (as husband/father). By killing her, he informs us, he can never go back to California; that is, he can never go back to Sue. Moreover, his imminent arrest functionally transports him from one configuration of oppression (with Vera) to another (with the Law). It's also worth noting that this inevitable encounter with the Law does not place Al within the regime of masculine authority as a proper subject (of castration), but rather as an outlaw in the sense Krutnik describes above—an outlaw of the Oedipal drama.

It has been suggested that Ulmer's ending, which seems more disjointed than much of the rest of the film, was implemented to please production codes of the 1940s. A cop car pulls up to take Al away because crimes such as he has committed cannot go unpunished. On the other hand, even if this is true, the ending is not out of accord with the logic in the rest of Ulmer's work. As Tag Gallagher has

suggested, “in Ulmer’s morality tales, debts are always paid.” Al is, after all, a murderer. Where the integrity of the ending is most poignant though, is in its continuity with Al’s defeatist attitude and his desire for failure and punishment. This is the red thread of logic to be found throughout the narrative. Belton makes the accurate assessment that “Ulmer’s world . . . is an irrational one, governed more by crazy nightmare than by any coldly mechanical sense of fate.”¹⁴ I would simply qualify this by pointing out that there is a logic to the irrationality. Ulmer’s “crazy nightmares” are not mere chaotic or surreal depictions of anxiety and dread, but rather framings of unconscious impulses and psychological/psychotic rupture, and as such logically irrational. As Elizabeth Cowie comments regarding the *noir* genre, “[c]haracters are given psychological motivation, and this is often in some way perverse or acknowledged as psychotic.”¹⁵ We will return to the point of psychotic rupture in *Detour* later. In order to discuss such ruptures, it is first necessary to identify the unconscious impulses, the drives and desires at work in Ulmer’s character depictions and his narratives.

In *Detour*, we find that Al Roberts is not only a masochist; he’s also an opportunist, one of several in Ulmer’s *noir*. He sees an opportunity to quit his miserable surroundings in joining Sue out west. He furnishes himself with a new wardrobe, a car, and more than seven hundred dollars by robbing a dead man. And we can only assume that in offering Vera a ride, Al’s supposition is that he can turn the situation to his sexual advantage. Recall Haskell’s suggestive observation shortly beforehand: “What kind of dames thumb rides, Sunday school teachers?” Admittedly, Al is a failed opportunist who has nothing to begin with, and if we consider freedom an asset, ends up with even less. Greil Marcus writes of Al sitting next to Haskell, “[t]here’s nothing in his face but sweat, stubble, shame, and anger. All the shared gestures of the Great Depression are present in the way Tom Neal sits in the car . . . a man who has nothing tries to maintain some dignity and distance in the face of a man who acts like he has everything.”¹⁶ This brings us to another element that plays a prominent role in Ulmer’s *films noirs*: social and economic mobility. Such mobility is always potentially gained at someone else’s expense. In addition to Al, consider the other characters hoping to gain by someone else’s loss in *Detour*. Haskell’s and Vera’s main objectives are to obtain financial gain through some form of cheating someone else, a condition that recalls various other characters considered here: Horace Vendig in *Ruthless*, Brett Curtis and Professor Muhlbach (or even Paul Cartwright if we consider his oedipal desire to replace his father) in *Strange Illusion*; Jenny Hager in *The Strange Woman*; Patsy Flint in *Murder Is My Beat*, and Lamarte in *Blue-beard*. The various attempts at mobility are mostly through illegitimate or, at the very least, unethical means. Characters are either haunted, on the one hand, by their desire to attain that which is not rightfully theirs, or, on the other hand, by the knowledge of this desire—that is, by greed (Vendig in *Ruthless*, Jenny in *The*

Strange Woman) and by a guilty conscience (Al in *Detour*, Ephraim Poster in *The Strange Woman*). The open road in *Detour* becomes a symbol for both of these. In it, we detect the desire to get somewhere, and at the same time to escape something, conditions most clearly at stake in both *The Strange Woman* and *Ruthless*, where Ulmer's commentary on capitalist opportunism and its social consequences comes to the fore.

***Ruthless*: Capitalism, Atomism, and the Family Romance**

In *Ruthless*, Horace Vendig (Scott) is indeed a ruthless opportunist. Though when the film opens, it appears as if he might be taking a philanthropic turn. He has decided to establish a "Foundation of Peace," an organization dedicated to intercultural tolerance and peace, for which he donates his estate of three thousand acres and an endowment of twenty-five million dollars. To celebrate its inception, he holds a large ceremony, inviting all of the people he has previously known, many of whom he has also injured. As he greets his guests, a series of flashbacks present Vendig's personal history and rise to power. When his childhood and lifelong friend Vic (Hayward) arrives with a woman who conspicuously resembles their mutual first love, Martha Burnside (Lynn), Vendig is paralyzed and hypnotically dreams of old relationships and former conquests.

As an adolescent, Vendig saves young Martha from drowning during a boating trip, for which Martha's family is very grateful. So much so, that when Vendig runs away from home because of an abusive and unloving mother and an absent father he is forbidden to see, the Burnside family takes him in, raises him, pays for his education, and finally gives their consent for him to marry Martha. Though when Horace sees the opportunity to become involved with a wealthier and more powerful family, he breaks off his engagement with Martha. Leaving, he tells her, "I'm going far, Martha, and fast, and alone." Vendig's rise to power is enabled through a series of relations to women through whom he can gain access to wealthy men. After Martha, he gets engaged to Susan Duane (Vickers), whose uncle secures Vendig a job on Wall Street and whose aunt puts him in touch with financial backers. Going after still bigger fish, he leaves Susan for Christa Mansfield (Bremer), whose husband tyrannically rules over a power and communications monopoly. Once he's convinced her to leave her husband, he marries her and acquires "48 percent of Delta bonds and shares." Along with his previous holdings in the company, this makes him the primary shareholder. Each time Vendig trades in his social loyalties for more profitable ones, he tears through the unity of families and friendships, leaving a trail of social ruin in his

wake. With this portrayal of an utterly unscrupulous man who will do anything to increase his wealth, *Ruthless* offers a harsh critique of capitalist ideology.

Ulmer claimed that, with this film, he was interested in “the complete evilness and ruthlessness about money,” and that he “wanted to do a morality play.”¹⁷ With Vendig, what we get is a portraiture of unchecked capitalist ambition as a kind of sickness. When Vendig is leaving Martha for a career in New York, he proposes, “And now you hate me,” to which she responds, “When you can’t help yourself? No, I can’t hate you for that any more than if you’d told me you were terribly ill. Perhaps you are.” Viewed as a character in morality play, Vendig is quite functional as an allegorical figure: “He was not a man, he was a way of life.” Like the one of the deadly sins in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* (Faust is another morality play that makes an appearance in the films discussed here), Vendig represents “greed” and “the ruthlessness of ambition.”¹⁸ The film’s commentary on greed and social neglect is encapsulated in a short exchange between Vic, his date Mallory Flagg (again Lynn), and some guests at the opening reception. When Mallory ponders, “it must mean a great deal to him, this house; I wonder why he wants to give it away,” a guest standing behind them claims that the endowment is for peace, but for a specific kind of peace: “[I]t wasn’t peace in the world I was thinking of. I was thinking of the peace within, within Woodruff Vendig’s soul.” Another guest claims that it’s not at all for peace, but for tax purposes, asking a third guest who joins them, “[W]hich would you rather save, Vendig’s soul or taxes?” to which he replies “[T]axes, every time.” As good capitalist businessmen, these associates of Vendig’s are quick to point out that the endowment has nothing to do with altruism. The “peace” at stake is Vendig’s own peace of mind, which would also be supplemented by a massive tax deduction, and the comment about saving taxes as opposed to souls stresses the point of miserly egoism being favored over altruistic humanism. The price of capitalist ideology is, then, social unity. This is evident in Ulmer’s portrayal of families, or the lack of them.

Paul Cantor points out that there are “no families in *Detour*—in Ulmer’s vision, America is a land of atomistic individuals. The truck driver looking for companionship who approaches Roberts at the beginning of the film stands for all Americans: ‘I ain’t got nobody at all.’ In the eyes of a European socialist [Ulmer, presumably], this is the ultimate result of American capitalism—it destroys community, and it isolates the individual.”¹⁹ (155). Though this is entirely accurate for *Detour*, in *Ruthless* there is also an other America: the America of the Burnside family, which takes Vendig in as a young man, raises him and pays for his education, and of Vic Lambdin, who remains loyal to Vendig long after everyone else has lost faith in him. This “other America,” though, is constructed mainly in contrast to Vendig’s character. Notably, Vendig has an abusive mother who forbids him from seeing his father, the gambler. As he says to Mrs. Burn-

side, "I haven't got a home." This brings us to another prominent point regarding individual desire, social antagonisms, and the family in Ulmer's film: that of the family romance.

In "The Neurotic's Family Romance," Freud hypothesizes that, "[f]or the small child, the parents are the only authority and source of belief. To become like the parent of the same sex and to become big like the parents is the most intense and momentous wish of these childhood years. With increasing intellect, though, the child inevitably comes to understand the categories to which its parents belong. It comes into contact with other parents, compares them with his or her own, and thus comes to doubt the incomparability and uniqueness he or she has attributed to them."²⁰ In *Ruthless*, we find a hint of the first of these conditions at work, and an explicit staging of the second. When young Horace (Bobby Anderson) goes to visit his father, although this is prohibited, it's clear that the child reveres his father ("I just came to see you"). We also shouldn't forget the extent to which he takes his father's advice to heart: "Let me tell you something son. Opportunity knocks on every man's door once. . . . Go after it. Grab it, with both hands. Don't let nothin' stand in your way." Regarding contact with other parents, it quickly becomes clear that Horace prefers Martha's to his own. In fact, it's telling that the staging of Horace's mother as a loveless tyrant who would prefer to abandon him, running off with some strange man, is portrayed through a flashback sequence (a trope or form of daydream) in which she is depicted vis-à-vis Mrs. Burnside, the perfect mother, caring, able, faithful, and of higher social standing than his own.

As Freud suggests, in reaction to feelings of disappointment, a child might find other parents preferable to its own: "All too often, there are situations in which the child is neglected, or has the feeling of being neglected, in which it misses the fullness of its parents' love."²¹ Further, intense feelings of sexual rivalry also play an important role in such developments. This is precisely what is staged when Horace returns home from seeing his father, only to find his mother kissing a man who claims: "It's our last chance, Kate. Horace must not be allowed to stand in our way." To paraphrase Freud in relation to this element of the family romance, he claims that out of resentment, the child might imagine it is adopted, or a stepchild; that is, it imagines its real parents are elsewhere. Fantasy and dreamwork, particularly daydreams that continue well beyond puberty, function as wish fulfillment for two specific goals in this context: erotic ones, and ones of ambition. Such fantasies are usually about getting rid of the parents it currently has and exchanging them for ones with a higher social standing. Bearing these psycho-social and sexual antagonisms in mind, one might claim that *Ruthless* is precisely about the frustrated desires at work in Freud's *Familienroman*, with Vendig's compulsion to perpetually trade in one family for another of higher standing as rooted in the frustrations of his childhood home. Such a

reading supplements the anti-capitalist critique at work in *Ruthless*, as both (capitalism and the *Familienroman*) subscribe to a pre-Oedipal logic of drive—a logic typically represented in *film noir* through the *femme fatale*.

Hedy Lamarr: *Femme Fatale*

Predating *Ruthless*, with *The Strange Woman* Ulmer mounts another anti-capitalist campaign, once again taking the family romance as the narrative's point of departure. Here, Oedipal antagonisms and a pre-Oedipal logic of drive take center stage with Hedy Lamarr as a ravishing, ruthless and unrelenting *femme fatale*.

At the insistence of longtime friend Lamarr, Ulmer was loaned out to United Artists to direct this big-budget costume drama. The year is 1824. In the harbor town of Bangor, Maine, young Jenny Hager (Jo Ann Marlowe, uncredited) is playing by the river with a group of boys. She pushes Ephraim Poster (Christopher Severn, uncredited), who can't swim, into the river, but when she sees Judge Saladine (Napier) approaching in his wagon, she jumps in after Ephraim, pretending to rescue him and placing blame on the other boys. After the exchange with Judge Saladine, Jenny and her father (Hoey), the drunkard, go back to the river and discuss her future. As Tim Hager laments his lack of any monetary means, Jenny claims, "just as soon as I grow up, we'll have everything we want, because I'm going to be beautiful." In the original script (and the original direction by Ulmer, which was substituted by a retake from Douglas Sirk due to the replacement of Arianne Ulmer, who purportedly wasn't nasty enough as young Jenny), young Jenny explains to her father that he needn't miss mother, who ran off with a sailor. She says, "I'm gonna take good care of you. I'll grow up and be everything she used to be," and then solicits him for a kiss "the way you used to kiss mommy."²² These opening scenes portray precisely what is at stake in the character of Jenny Hager: she is cruel, deceptive, manipulatively uses her sexuality at the expense of the people around her (weak men in particular), and, being everything her mother used to be, she wrecks families. The incestuous implications of the conversation with her father also foreshadow the Oedipal structures that come into play when she is grown.

In a prolepsis, we now see Jenny Hager standing by the river, fully-grown, attractive, and self-possessed. She rushes off to meet her friend who works at a local tavern, suggesting, "let's go down and meet the packet." When her friend is reluctant, saying that the sailors will come into town in any case, Jenny replies, "Oh, but the best ones get picked off down at the dock." She also points out that she's not interested in having the "the youngest and best looking man on the river," but rather "the richest." Like Horace Vendig, Jenny has a very Straussian notion of kinship, particularly where monetary gain is concerned. At this point,

the viewer sees that Jenny is not only beautiful and self-possessed, she's also determined and knows precisely what she wants. She goes down to the docks and directly to the richest man on the river: Ephraim Poster's father, Isaiah (Lockhart), who is a wealthy merchant, and who she'll end up both marrying and burying. Jenny's interest in going to the docks to meet the sailors, though, is not restricted to finding a husband. She's also in search of some fun and trouble—that is, she's in search of pleasure.

By flirting with (and implicitly sleeping with) the first mate from one of Poster's ships, Jenny sets in motion a play of antagonisms between men that vie for power over her. First, Isaiah Poster attempts to bring Jenny under control by gesturing toward her flagrantly sexual behavior with sailors to her father. When the first mate drops her off at home singing "Oh, once I loved a pretty girl that I called Jenny," a sexually charged exchange takes place between Jenny and her father. Not only does she visibly enjoy the whipping he gives her, the verbal exchange directly preceding it implies repetition, that this is an act which takes place again and again, and that it's something Jenny usually takes pleasure in ("This is one beating you'll not like"). Jenny is thus placed within an economy of sexual exchange in which domination, submission and the infliction of pain play a central role. Although Jenny appears to get sexual satisfaction by assuming or identifying with the role of the victim (later, when her barmaid friend is chased through the streets, physically assaulted and threatened by a group of drunken sailors, before helping her Jenny takes a moment to savor the situation, closing her eyes and listening to the screams with an orgasmic expression in her face and manner), we should differentiate between the kind of masochism we see in *Detour* and Jenny's pleasure in manipulative, sexualized exchanges of power. She appears not to be compulsively tied to one side or the other (like Al the masochist or Vendig the sadist), but to be the master of all situations, whether in the role of the masochist or the sadist. Indeed, as a master of orchestration, we soon see how the play of antagonisms Jenny sets in motion down at the dock quickly turns to her advantage.

The struggle we witness between Jenny and her father turns out to be too strenuous for the old man, and he dies of a heart attack. Jenny runs directly to Poster's house and, instead of telling Isaiah that her father is lying dead on the porch, she begs for help, claiming that her father is after her and he's going to kill her. When, in a wanton manner, Jenny shows him the marks from the whipping (again with visible joy!), Poster is determined to have her. He goes to the reverend under the guise of seeking safe long-term shelter for Jenny, and, at the reverend's suggestion, ends up marrying her the same night. This, however, is only the beginning of Jenny's well-orchestrated and perfectly executed manipulation of masculine desire. Later, when Ephraim Poster (Hayward) returns home from his studies at Jenny's bidding, she seduces him into killing his father, promising that they

can finally be together once Isaiah is out of the picture. After Ephraim kills his father in a boating accident, Jenny turns him out, publicly placing the blame on him for his father's death. Like Jenny's alcoholic father, guilt-ridden Ephraim, now a social outcast, turns to liquor, eventually hanging himself. In the meantime, Jenny is busy seducing her next conquest, John Evered (Sanders), the fiancé of Jenny's friend Meg Saladine (Brooke). Although Jenny is successful in stealing John from Meg, it is here that the inevitable elements of morality and retribution in Ulmer's work come into play. Jenny actually falls in love with John, who desperately wants a family, though after they are married she learns that she is infertile. A guilty conscience increasingly takes hold of her, and she admits to having persuaded Ephraim to kill his father. Finally, in a fit of jealousy she drives a horse driven carriage off the side of a hill, killing herself.

With Jenny's local rise to power, we again witness a character that follows the basic model of Freud's *Familienroman*: like Horace Vendig, she trades in one family for another in an attempt to improve her social standing and satisfy an economy of sexual desire. Contemplating Jenny as a *noir* figure, we're interested in the way her manipulation of a matrix of social structures, particularly of masculine desire and authority, resembles the *femme fatale*. First and foremost, I would reiterate the claim that Jenny embodies a logic of drive. She has no distance to objects of desire. Rather, she will break every social contract and convention—from infidelity and murder to incest—in order to possess that which she cannot have. This is what Joan Copjec has called the “fetishization of private *jouissance*,” or “the choice of private enjoyment over community.”²³

From a Lacanian perspective, drive is that which is curtailed by the symbolic father's castrative “No!”—a forbiddance that sets desire in motion by creating distance between the subject and an imaginary object of desire. This imaginary object and the distance to it are structured as a constitutive lack. Lacan calls this process, this structure, “triangulation.” By dividing the individual from an imaginary object, *objet petit a*, the castrative agent functions as a third term that enables normal social interaction. Put concisely, proper social subjectivity functions on a logic of desire. In a logic of desire, desire is “fulfilled” in the very condition that it can never reach the object of desire—that is, in the condition that it is based on lack and, as such, perpetually reconstitutes itself (it is fulfilled in the very condition that it can never be fulfilled). Such a model takes into account and functions with respect to the symbolic Law. A logic of drive, on the other hand, can never be fulfilled because it actually expects to arrive at attainment, to “possess” the object of desire (which is in any case constituted by a lack). Misinterpreting the non-object, *objet petit a*, as a *thing to be had*, or something to be consumed if we are to place it in the logic of consumer-capitalism, the individual in question repudiates symbolic Law and remains at a level of pathological engagement with respect to a social economy. Such a logic of drive is represented

in Jenny through her disregard for Law in any capacity—she kills, lies, steels, betrays, is incestuous, etc.—and in her wish to accumulate more and more (money, status, etc.) through her transgressions. The socio-pathological element of such a logic also becomes clear in that, for Jenny, all social relations are simply a means of attaining closer proximity to her objects of desire. As such, there's not only no respect for Law, there's no respect for the social subjects around her who are determined by the Law and by a logic of desire.

What is so interesting about the *femme fatale* is not simply that she is an outlaw *per se*, but that the challenge to the Law she represents challenges the Law as a structure of masculine desire, which she counters with her feminine *jouissance*. As we see in the character of Jenny, her *jouissance* tears through masculine authority with a sexual voracity and the promise of sexual plentitude, destabilizing in its over-proximity: "It wasn't by knowing how to set a table that Cleopatra got along." *The Strange Woman* depicts a reversal of the kind of authority we see in *Bluebeard*, for example, where monetary deals and the negotiation of authority among men take place at the expense of young women's lives or, as Elisabeth Bronfen has so poignantly illustrated elsewhere, over the dead bodies of young women.²⁴ Jenny inverts such structures of masculine authority, amassing wealth and power for herself at the expense of the men who "love" her—or, more precisely, who wish to possess her. This play of antagonisms is essential, as one of the main subtexts of the film is the breakdown in the negotiation of power between men, trading women as an item that represents the magnitude of their authority. This is especially reflected in the scene in which Isaiah Poster negotiates for possession of Jenny with the town reverend and the deacon, two other men of powerful social influence. However, as Jenny points out to her father, she made Isaiah Poster want her, and eventually she will dispose of both him and his son, keeping the Poster fortune and social influence to herself. As such, Poster's negotiation over Jenny's body simply turns out to be another tactical move in her well-orchestrated manipulation of social desires and exchanges. In bringing this structure—of the negotiation of authority between men over the body of a young woman, who subsequently implodes these dealings—to the foreground, Jenny represents the most critical social component of the *femme fatale*.

The overabundance of sexual plentitude Jenny employs to destabilize masculine authority is also supplemented by philanthropic engagement that wins her favor; or, to put it another way, her sexual prowess is accompanied by social prowess. As soon as she has risen to a higher social status by marrying Isaiah Poster, she realizes she must also have public opinion on her side if she is to become influential and attain what she wants. In church, when the general public begins to stare and whisper in disapproval of her, particularly of her new status, she responds by donating a large sum of money to the church, which in turn obligates other families of influence to do the same. With this act, she at once places

herself above public reproach. Regarding such philanthropy and its social effects, she later tells Ephraim, "That's the way to hold your place in the town." But it's not only public opinion Jenny is able to manipulate. For example, Isaiah Poster would prefer to be rid of his son, as Ephraim poses a threat to his father's possession of Jenny, but just when Ephraim is ready to capitulate to his father's wishes and leave town, Jenny enters the room and proposes, "I think your father needs you here, Ephraim." Complicating the exchange already taking place, she asks, "You want him to stay, don't you, Isaiah? Can't you be honest with your own son?" The truth is, of course, that he doesn't want his son to stay, but Jenny puts him in a position where he can say nothing other than that he does. This brings us to another point regarding Jenny's sexual plentitude and the manipulation of authority: her relation to Ephraim.

From a theoretical perspective, one might claim that in killing the father (and let's not forget that she kills two of them), Jenny provides for a possible elision of the symbolic father's castrative "No!" Whether one wishes to support such a claim or not, there's no getting around the fact that Jenny stages herself as an attainable object of Oedipal desire. As soon as she has moved into the Poster house, the first thing she does is write to Ephraim, telling him that, by marrying his father, she is "giving you a nice young mother . . . I shall demand obedience, *and love*, and if you refuse, my dear son, I shall punish you by not kissing you goodnight."²⁵ Earlier, I suggested that one might find in *film noir* a continual restaging of failure in Oedipal structures of authority. With Jenny's seduction of Ephraim Poster and her persuading him to kill his father so that the two of them might be together, *The Strange Woman* provides a rather literal framing of the Oedipal drama, where pre-Oedipal fantasies of wholeness (of an attainable *objet petit a*) dominate while masculine structures of authority collapse. Although Oedipal antagonisms are at play in much of Ulmer's work, of the films considered here, *Strange Illusion* presents the most focused staging of the Oedipal drama.

Strange Illusion: The Oedipal Drama

"In some cases, filial devotion to a mother goes beyond the border of normality." (Dr. Muhlbach, *Strange Illusion*)

Something's rotten in the town of Waynefield! Drawing on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Strange Illusion* revolves around a core of Oedipal antagonisms. In addition to the Oedipal drama itself, we'll find various references to *Hamlet*, such as a message from beyond the grave, here in the form of the posthumous arrival of Judge Cartwright's warning letter to his son. There's also the condition of patri-

archal authority dominating from beyond the grave, as well as a play between potential and faked insanity that the protagonist uses to his advantage.²⁶ As a staging of the Oedipal drama, Ulmer notes in an interview with Peter Bogdanovich, "I was fascinated at the time with psychoanalysis, and this story was about a father-son relationship."²⁷ Not only is psychoanalysis foregrounded in the Oedipal antagonisms that play out in the narrative, Ulmer also includes two psychoanalysts in the cast of characters. Though the main character is, of course, the son.

Young Paul Cartwright (Lydon) is troubled by strange dreams about a doppelganger illegitimately replacing his deceased father and winning the favor of his sister Dorothy (Hazard) and mother Virginia (Eilers) without their realizing that he's an impostor. Upon his early return home from college, Paul finds that his dreams have become a reality. Not only has smooth-talking and eager to please Brett Curtis (William) charmed his way into the Cartwright household, he also uncannily resembles the deceased Honorable Judge Cartwright. Following a series of phantasmatic, uncanny externalizations, in which elements from his dreams find their way into his daily life, Paul becomes increasingly suspicious of Curtis, but at the same time arouses concern for his own mental health with his feverish dreamlike flashbacks. Like Hamlet, Paul turns the illusion of sickness to his own advantage. When Curtis's accomplice, the psychiatrist Professor Muhlbach (Arnt), suggests that Paul come and stay at his institution for a few days, Paul agrees, hoping he can find out more about Muhlbach and Curtis while there. That's precisely what he does: at Restview Manor, Paul discovers evidence linking Muhlbach and Curtis to his father's mysterious death two years earlier. Muhlbach, the mastermind behind the scheme to have Curtis marry Virginia Cartwright and steal the family fortune, is in it for the money. Curtis, we soon find out, is actually Claude Barrington, an illusive criminal and murder suspect Judge Cartwright was investigating when he died. Barrington's motive is revenge. As tensions rise and evidence against Muhlbach and Barrington is substantiated, the narrative tempo speeds toward a final struggle for life and death between Barrington and young Cartwright.

As with *Detour*, the automobile plays a significant role in the narrative. It is the means by which Judge Cartwright dies and one of the early indications pointing toward Curtis's deception: although Curtis claims he can't drive a car, Paul sees him drive off from Muhlbach's institution. The moral ambiguity found in *Detour*, however, which is also typical of *film noir*, is less ambiguous in *Strange Illusion*. From an extra-diegetic point of view, the good are clearly good, and the bad are clearly bad. Curtis, for example, is a thoroughly disturbing character. Not only is he a murderer, driven by an insidious desire for revenge and at the same time able to assume the demeanor of a caring suitor and benevolent paternal figure, with his indiscriminate predilection for underage girls, Ulmer stages him as a totemic *père jouissant* who takes pleasure where he pleases and disregards any

law but his own. He is, of course, not the only *père jouissant* we encounter in Ulmer's *noir*. Charles Haskell, Mr. Abbott, and Jenny Poster as *mère jouissant* are all lawless figures who sate their drive to *jouissance* at the expense those around them. In the case of Curtis, however, the totemic capacity of this *père jouissant* is more pronounced. Like Freud's mythic *Urvater*, Curtis hoards all of the women and poses a violent threat to the other males, at the same time posing a threat to the propagation of the family/tribe. In order for the family/tribe to survive and expand, and in order to set a transgression of precedence that establishes Law, the totemic *père jouissant* must be done away with.

As an all-enjoying and corrupt father, Curtis holds the position of Claudius in *Hamlet*, with Paul Cartwright in the role of the prince. It's worth noting that mother Cartwright's nickname is "princess," an insinuation leading again to the Oedipal drama. Frank Krutnik points out that "[w]hat is at stake . . . in the Oedipal model is the male's succession to a tradition of cultural supremacy. In order to achieve 'correct manhood,' the male subject is forced to identify with the Law of the Father and at the same time to accept his own subjugation to that law. The dissolution of the Oedipus complex through the castration complex involves a form of Symbolic pact (where the subject becomes 'contracted' to the symbolic ordering of patriarchal culture)."²⁸ Notably, this is precisely where *film noir* stages its crisis in masculinity: in the refusal of its male subjects (the tough detective, the criminal outlaw, the social recluse) to engage the symbolic pact of patriarchal culture. If we look closely, we'll find that resistance to Oedipal structures of authority is present in all of Ulmer's *noirs*. The metaphors at work when Haskell tells the story of his flight from home after playing with his father's forbidden "Franco-Prussian sabers" are clear enough. But there's also a general condition of resisting symbolic authority through lawlessness and through the rebuking of society and social norms. As Juliet Flower MacCannell points out: "*Film noir* portrays a conflicted modern subject, torn between its symbolic character (desire) and its unconscious lawlessness (drive to *jouissance*)."²⁹ Though as we saw in *Murder Is My Beat*, the protagonists of Ulmer's *noirs* don't always match the codes of *noir* masculinity in crisis, where the symbolic patriarchal pact is rebuked.

As in *Hamlet*, what we witness in *Strange Illusion* is not Paul Cartwright's outright refusal to identify with phallic authority. In fact, he is so bound to his identification with paternal Law, it is only logical that any repressed desire for transgression must find an outlet *elsewhere*. That is precisely where Brett comes in. Like Claudius to Hamlet, Brett gives body to Paul's forbidden desire to kill his father and be able to keep the enjoyment of "princess," his mother, all to himself. Freud suggests that Hamlet's "own dark feelings of guilt paralyze his hand" from taking any action against Claudius precisely because he identifies with Claudius's desire to be rid of the king and possess Gertrude.³⁰ Although Paul isn't staged as being "paralyzed" in quite the way young Hamlet is, the desires and

identifications at work appear to be the same. This becomes most evident in the opening and closing sequences, which are both phantasmatic dreamscapes.

Frank Krutnik claims that the dream sequence in *film noir*, “laden with such expressionistic techniques as tilted camera set-ups, heavy *chiaroscuro* lighting and exaggerated-perspective sets . . . serves as a correlative to the hero’s psychological destabilization.”³¹ Specifically in regard to *Strange Illusion* John Belton states that the dream sequences “make explicit the film’s concern for the psychological purgation of its central character.”³² What should we make, then, of the fact that Ulmer stages the narrative denouement itself as a dream? In an effective gesture toward the potential phantasmatic quality of Paul’s perspective on and engagement in the family fiction, *Strange Illusion* completes the narrative circle by ending as it began, with a dream sequence—only this time the Oedipal tensions are resolved, and Paul finds himself in a pre-Oedipal fantasy in which he has eliminated the “bad” competition for his mother’s affections. What is in question here is finding a proper representative of Paul’s desire, which Brett Curtis was not.

In the closing sequence, family friend Dr. Martin Vincent (Toomey) joins Virginia and Paul arm in arm, and then escorts Virginia off-screen. Vincent has acted as Paul’s closest ally throughout the film, and represents a “proper” *ersatz* father figure. Tellingly, in response to Paul’s dismay about his mother’s plans to marry Curtis, Dr. Vincent informs Paul, “It hasn’t been easy for me to accept this situation either.” As Dr. Vincent and Virginia move out of the frame, Paul is joined by Lydia (Mary McLeod), the romantic interest he avoids throughout the film. Now, the two of them can be happily united. The subtext here is that Paul has replaced the “inappropriate” father with a candidate he sees fit—that is, with a candidate that can stand in as a replacement for himself. Having done so, he can symbolically take pleasure in his own replacement-object of desire. The ending dream sequence might thus be interpreted as Paul’s attempt to master his desires, or, as Belton put it, to purge his psyche of that which is troubling him. From this perspective, we might liken the dream sequence to Deborah Thomas’s formulation of what is at stake in the *film noir* flashback: “The frequency of flashback structures in the genre is suggestive of the neurotic’s compulsion to repeat, as the *noir* protagonist, too, reworks the past to try to master it through his narration.”³³ A compulsion to repeat the violent negotiation of “proper” versus improper objects of desire, as we’ve seen in *Strange Illusion*, is the psychological component driving the plot of Ulmer’s 1944 production, *Bluebeard*.

Repetition Compulsion in *Bluebeard*

“Warning! Citizens of Paris! A murderer is in your midst!”
(*Bluebeard*)

In *Who the Devil Made It*, Peter Bogdonovich suggests that *Bluebeard* is one of Ulmer's best pictures. Like many of Ulmer's films, *Bluebeard* was shot in a remarkable six days, which is not at all to be guessed at by the quality of the film, the plot complexity, and the acting. A captivating John Carradine plays Gaston Morell, a puppeteer and portrait painter with a rather curious compulsion: Once he has painted the beautiful women he's drawn to, he must kill them—until he meets Lucille (Parker), that is. When Morell claims, "I'm not going to paint this one," we are to understand that in Lucille, he has found a suitable object of desire, a new ideal of feminine perfection that could potentially break his compulsion to kill. When he first meets Lucille, he offers to put on one of his puppet shows in the park for her: Gounod's *Faust*.

Stefan Grisseman notes that Ulmer was driven by the idea of "smuggling" a great European opera in the form of a puppet show, into a "Californian low-budget shocker."³⁴ Merging American low-budget popular (or even sub-) culture with European "high" culture can equally be seen in Ulmer's more widespread employment of the morality play, classical music, and psychoanalytic themes throughout his work. Having done this, Ulmer should be recognized for his pioneering work in blending and blurring the boundaries between "high" and "low" culture, which so much of contemporary critical theory has come to prize and which we've become so accustomed to in contemporary art. Gounod's *Faust* as *mise en abyme* functions as a centerpiece to *Bluebeard*, mirroring the narrative kernel. In the opera, Faust is tempted by Marguerite, whom he falls in love with, and for whom he trades his soul to Mephistopheles, but whom he ultimately corrupts (socially) and is responsible for the death of. Similarly, Morell is tempted by a woman who also turns out to be socially and morally corrupt. As a result of his encounter with her, he figuratively sells his soul in that he is "possessed" by the compulsion to repeatedly kill. Gounod's *Faust* is gestured toward again through one of Morell's portraits. It is a bust of one of his victims, smiling. In the background above the rooftops of Paris, the devil (Mephistopheles) and succubae bear a bound nude woman off through the air. The judgment of "corrupted" women and the collection of their "souls" thus becomes a leitmotif in *Bluebeard*.

After Morell's puppet show, Lucille notes how real the puppets seem, to which Morell responds, "They're all likenesses of people I've known." "Mephistopheles too?" she asks. "Yes," replies Morell, "the evil one too." The implication is that Mephistopheles represents Morell himself, and the other likenesses of people he has known, we are to assume, are of people he has killed. As Morell explains to Lucille, the puppet Marguerite is modeled after a friend who "met a tragic ending." Morell's reincarnation (through portraiture and puppets) and killing of these people stands in as a trope for taking their souls, as Mephistopheles has claim to Faust's. The Faust and the Bluebeard myth converge

on this point: Morell represents Mephistopheles in his “collection of souls” and in his ability to offer something to the people whose souls he collects (portraiture as a form of immortalization). At the same time, he represents Bluebeard in that he metes out a disproportionate or unwarranted retribution to women with, according to him, transgressive behavior.

As Morell becomes increasingly enamored with Lucille, who is a *modiste*, he contracts her to make new costumes for his puppets. Meanwhile, the art dealer Lamarte (Stössel) sells one of Morell’s paintings to the Duke of Carineaux (George Irving, uncredited), who puts it on display. Subsequently, the police inspector recognizes the woman in the painting as Bluebeard’s last victim. Cooperating with the police in an attempt to catch Bluebeard, the Duke commissions another portrait. The model is to be Lucille’s sister, Francine (Loring), who appears to work in some capacity with the police force, and poses as the daughter of a wealthy South American. Morell reluctantly agrees to paint her, but when she recognizes him as Lucille’s friend, he kills her and escapes before the police can catch him. As the only clue, the police find the cravat with which Morell strangles his victims. Having previously mended it for him, Lucille recognizes it as Morell’s. When she goes to his home to confront him, he proclaims his love for her and explains why he doesn’t want to paint her, offering a description of the traumatic event that led to his strange relations to women. In a flashback sequence with a voiceover, Morell nurses a young woman who collapsed in the street one night (Sterling) back to health, painting her as she rests during her sickness. She reminded him, he claims, of *The Maid of Orleans* (Jeanne d’Arc). When it later turns out that she is not the ideal of purity he had imagined her to be, but rather a “lascivious” woman (the suggestion that she is a prostitute is already evident in the *mise-en-scène* when he first brings her home), he is compelled to kill her. He explains that as time went on, “Every girl I painted turned out to be Jeannette . . . I couldn’t stop myself. Every time I painted her, I had to kill her again.” When Lucille threatens to go to the police, Morell attempts to strangle her too, at which point the police break in and a pursuit over the rooftops ensues. Finally, Morell loses his footing and falls into the Seine, meeting the same end as his victims.

John Belton claims that “[t]he sympathetic villain of *Bluebeard* . . . is driven to kill by forces neither he nor the audience can understand.”³⁵ I would qualify this by suggesting that Morell is driven to kill by repressed impulses (which, judging from his explanation to Lucille, he does seem to have some understanding of) that continually break through the mechanism of repression (ego/superego). As such, what we witness is a continual return of the repressed in which, again and again, Morell relives an initial traumatic episode. But what makes Morell’s encounter with Jeannette so traumatic, and why should he repeatedly relive it?

During his flashback recollection of the trauma, he explains that when his portrait of the sick Jeannette was chosen to be exhibited in the Louvre, he “[q]uite naturally . . . wanted to share my happiness with the one who was chiefly responsible for it: Jeannette.” Upon her recovery, though, Jeannette had disappeared. When he finally finds her, he claims, “[s]he wasn’t the same Jeannette. This was the real Jeannette: a low, coarse, loathsome creature” who was “defiling the image I created of her.” This encounter with the “real” Jeannette is staged as an originary trauma both narratively and visually. Belton points out that tilted camera angles and flashbacks signal toward the influence of a “traumatic mental experience that has stunned the action of Ulmer’s characters and made them prisoners of their own nightmares,” which is exactly what is staged in this scene.³⁶

In reminding him of the Maid of Orleans—Jeanne d’Arc—who was martyred and beatified, Morell projects a fantasy of Jeannette entirely opposed to Jeannette the prostitute. When he finds out that she is freer in her sexuality and social behavior than he finds appropriate, he kills her. In this regard, the destabilizing, traumatic threat she poses is to the stability of Morell’s ideal of feminine purity, though implicitly to the regime of masculine Law represented in Morell’s fantasy of control encoding and directing female sexuality. Thus, his compulsion to kill might be interpreted as a compulsion to uphold threatened masculine authority. Notably, the dynamics at work here are the very same as those implicit in the *femme fatale* vis-à-vis the tough detective: one threatens to compromise phallic authority, the other struggles to sustain it. What is at stake, however, in Morell’s fantasy of control is an attempt to negate loss. As he states, by killing Jeannette, “I thought that would stop her defiling the image I created of her. Stop her defiling my work.” As a perfect image of feminine purity, Morell’s projected, phantasmatic Jeannette represents a pre-Oedipal illusion of wholeness, where there is no loss or lack. In *Bluebeard*, the figure of maternal perfection suddenly becomes a “strange woman”—that is, becomes objectified—when she no longer represents pre-Oedipal illusions of wholeness, but rather has an autonomous sexuality she shares with “others.” From such a perspective, one might claim that murder and portraiture function here as tropes for male desire to inscribe and “fix” (implying both holding in place and “repairing”) female sexuality.

Elisabeth Bronfen has suggested in reference to portraiture and other forms of representation of dead women that such representation “affords pleasure in that it stands in for a lost satisfaction which is to be regained in an indirect manner. Yet if representation in one sense serves to negate loss, in another it emerges as the work of mourning.”³⁷ The idea here is that representation negates loss by standing in for the missing object, but at the same time signals toward its own fallaciousness. With this formulation, Bronfen is gesturing toward Freud’s model of repetition compulsion, illustrated by a game he witnesses his grandson play.³⁸

In it, the child throws a wooden reel attached to a string out of sight, making the sound “o-o-o-o” as it disappears. When it reappears by his pulling the string, the child joyfully utters “da.” The “o-o-o-o” is to be interpreted as the German word *fort*, meaning “gone” or “away,” whereas the word *da* means “here” or “present.” With this game, the child symbolically reenacts the disappearance and reappearance of the mother. By repeatedly throwing the object away, it can heighten its pleasure in anticipation of the return of the mother. Through this repetition, the child symptomatically attempts to master the loss of that which was once native to itself in response to the realization that the mother is not “itself,” but rather is its own entity and can come and go at random. By reenacting the mother’s disappearance and reappearance, the child attempts to master the trauma of separation. Likewise, by “re-presenting” dead women, the artist attempts to contain or master loss. We might thus view Morell’s repetition of this originary traumatic episode, in which he learns that Jeannette does not belong exclusively to his fantasy, but rather has an autonomy of her own (notably full of transgressive *jouis-sance!*), as an attempt to counter death (the loss of wholeness) with death (murder and portraiture).

Like the dream sequence in *Strange Illusion*, repetitive, compulsive murder and portraiture might again be likened to Deborah Thomas’s formulation of what is at stake in the *film noir* flashback, which “is suggestive of the neurotic’s compulsion to repeat, as the *noir* protagonist, too, reworks the past to try to master it through his narration,” or “re-presentation.”³⁹ With this in mind, we might recall Ulmer’s use of the flashback in his ultimate *film noir*: *Detour*. Considering that the flashback is the primary narrational technique employed, what might this tell us about a potential attempt at mastery through repetition compulsion in *Detour*? In a consideration of repetition in *film noir*, David Lehman has noted that “[r]epetition, or what Freud called the ‘compulsion to repeat,’ serves as a governing principle in many *noir* and neo-*noir* movies. The present is a repetition of the past—it is possessed by the past or haunted by something ‘out of the past,’ something so tightly repressed that its return produces hysteria.”⁴⁰ I would argue that, more than any other “force” behind the action in *Detour*, what the repetition through flashback attempts to master is precisely “something so tightly repressed that its return produces hysteria.”

Detour’s Return of the Repressed

“Did you ever want to cut away a piece of your memory and blot it out?” (Al Roberts, *Detour*)

“I like to remember things my own way.” (Fred Madison, *Lost Highway*)

As a distant remake, there are several plot elements in *Detour* that reemerge in David Lynch's 1997 production *Lost Highway*. The two films open with an extended tracking shot (from a vehicle) of a dividing line running down the middle of a road not clearly headed anywhere and end with the police coming for the protagonists, both of whom are musicians in a nightclub. Both narratives move from complicated relationships the protagonists don't have control over to subsequent ones they have still less control of. The "other" women in each, both of whom display raw sexual voracity, attempt to persuade the protagonist to rob other, more potent men. Each story involves a perverse *père jouissant* who dies at the hands of the "impotent" male. Home in each is always disjointed and claustrophobic, while the road is staged as the location of the non-social, the savage. Finally, both narratives stage masculine agency in crisis. From a psychological perspective, the most prominent narrative feature they share is the employment of repression and a return of the repressed as *the* characteristic that guides the unreliable narrators' telling of their stories, where "the desire to recall is countered by the desire to forget."⁴¹ What we should ask, then, is the following: What indicators are there that something is being withheld, something repressed, something reformulated by a potentially unreliable narrator's unconscious mechanisms of control?

Among sundry other borrowings, there's a scene from *Detour* Lynch quotes in *Lost Highway* as a staging of repression. Auto mechanic Pete Dayton (Balthazar Getty) is lying under a car working when a song comes on the radio that he can't bear the sound of. He crinkles his forehead and squints his eyes. It physically pains him to hear it. Holding his head, out of breath, he gets up and turns it off. Like many of Lynch's films, *Lost Highway* presents the story of a psychic split, "literally" staged through a narrational break in which one character suddenly and miraculously turns into an other, with his own character traits, his own diegetic history—in short, his own story. The song that Pete Dayton can't bear to hear features a prolonged frantic jazz riff on the saxophone that we've heard somewhere before. It's a piece by the character Fred Madison (Bill Pullman), who we see playing it at a club early on in the film. When Pete becomes agitated by the song, the implication is that it threatens the stability of the fantasy being played out through his persona.⁴² That is, it threatens to call Pete Dayton back to his "other" persona, Fred Madison. The framing of a psychic split by having various *dramatis personae* occupy the location of a single actant (in the Proppian sense) is a technique we've become increasingly accustomed to in Lynch's work. He radically stages psychosis as a somatic split, a device that is mirrored in his signaling of psychosis through bodily violence. For example, in the closing scene when Fred Madison is being pursued down a long desert highway by a string of police cars, his head flashes back and forth in frenetic, blurred, abstract motion, indicating his psychic instability. The shots of his mutating head

are interspersed with shots of an exposed organ: namely, the brain. Considering Lynch's tactic in the radio scene can help illustrate what is at stake in the scene, in the entire film, which it quotes.

A frustrated and jumpy Al Roberts is sitting in a diner drinking coffee when another customer plays a song on the jukebox that Al can't bear to hear: "Hey turn that off! Will you turn that thing off," he ejaculates. "That music, it stinks!" We soon find out that it is a song Al also used to play in the club where he worked. We should interpret Al's reaction to this song from out of the past the same way Lynch does: as indicating psychic instability and threatening a return of the repressed. The song signals toward a past that, judging by his reaction, Al is desperately trying to repress. Following the logic of the flashback, the voiceover, or the dream sequence as a mode of revision, I would claim that Al's mode of repression, his "secondary re-vision," is precisely the voiceover narrative he presents upon hearing this song.

Regarding the element of the unreliable narrator in *Detour*, Andrew Britton suggests that "Al's commentary . . . though it is not hypocritical—he plainly believes every word of it—is profoundly self-deceived and systematically unreliable. 'Did you ever want to cut away a piece of your memory and blot it out?' he asks us as the film goes into flashback, implying that the truth of what he is about to say is guaranteed by the pain involved in remembering it. In fact, Al's memory of the past is in itself a means of blotting it out, and his commentary, far from serving as the clue to which leads us infallibly to the meaning of the narrative action, is like a palimpsest beneath which we may glimpse the traces of the history he has felt compelled to rewrite."⁴³

Barbara Creed points out that, "[a]ccording to Freud, large parts of human thought remain unconscious; that is, the subject does not know about the content of certain troubling ideas and often much effort is needed to make them conscious. Undesirable thoughts will be repressed or kept from consciousness by the ego under the command of the superego, or conscience. . . . Repressed thoughts can manifest themselves in dreams, nightmares, slips of the tongue, and forms of artistic activity. These ideas have also influenced film study and some psychoanalytic critics explore the 'unconscious' of the film text—referred to as the 'subtext'—analyzing it for repressed contents, perverse utterances, and evidence of the workings of desire."⁴⁴ Up to now, we've considered the use of the flashback, the voiceover, and the dream sequence as devices that potentially incorporate repression, locations where one might find unconscious desires imbedded, where a "subtext" makes itself most evident. Frank Krutnik poignantly suggests that, with the flashback, "the process of storytelling becomes submerged within a whirlpool of subjective overdetermination, where objective parameters become difficult to distinguish. It occasionally becomes impossible to work out any clear demarcation between, on the one hand, the realm of desire and fantasy

and, on the other hand, the world of actuality.”⁴⁵ Although this is clearly the case with *Detour*, one also finds sufficient indicators of where repression might be taking place. When Vera says to Al, “Get rid of that long puss. Or is your conscience bothering you?” Al has a fit, precisely *not* as if he were really innocent, but as if he were fighting something off, holding something back, perhaps even from himself. Whenever the question of Al’s guilt comes up, he “doth protest too much, methinks,” a point that Vera is quick to indicate: “If you’re innocent, what have you got to be scared of?”

However, the question in *Detour* is not whether one is innocent or not—everyone is guilty. The question is how one bears ones guilt. Vera bears hers like sharpened fangs. She is so free with her *femme fatale* logic of drive that it doesn’t seem to be guilt she bears, but rather a history of transgressive actions for which she must suffer consequences other than guilt. Haskell bears his guilt, or his transgressive past, like a medal, a trophy, like the scar on his arm. In thus approaching *Detour*, the point isn’t to determine whether or not Al “actually” intentionally killed people, but rather, as Creed suggests, to determine what the economy of desire at work in the overall narrative, and particularly Al’s voiceover narrative, indicates. For a consideration of the economy of desire and the implicit unconscious mechanisms at work in *film noir*, Deborah Thomas has proposed a schema regarding the id, ego, and superego that is particularly useful for interpreting Al’s voiceover along with his actions. Thomas states, “the private eye (ego) can be seen as caught between the demands of criminals (id) and the law (superego).”⁴⁶ With *Detour*, Ulmer once again departs from a standard *film noir* formula of having these characteristics incorporated in various characters. Al Roberts contains all of these aspects at once. His revisionary voiceover and flashback function like the private-eye ego explaining or retrofitting his criminal id actions and mediating between them and his superego-Law bad conscience. Consider the scene in the hotel room when he counts the money he has taken from Haskell: “The first thing that I had found out was that I had seven hundred and sixty-eight dollars. This was a lot of jack, but believe me, it was the kind of money I’d rather not have.” As the voiceover imparts this information, Al unfolds the money, looks through it, then puts it back in his pocket. If it’s the kind of money he’d rather not have, why did he take it to begin with, and why does he keep it? Shortly after, when looking through Haskell’s belongings, he begins to justify the situation by rationalizing that perhaps it’s better that Haskell will never make it to see his father, who he was in any case only intending to swindle. Why is Al justifying Haskell’s death to himself? Is this another indication of his of his superego bad conscience? Al is a criminal (id) who at the very least has stolen a man’s identity and belongings; his ego commentary attempts to rationalize the situation, while the whole time his superego bad conscience bears down on him.

Returning to the notion of a psychic split, one might make the claim that the “detour” in *Detour* is a psychological one, constructing a narrative of fate

around drives and desires, and as Britton suggests, veiling the “actual” actions that might have taken place. This is precisely the point Lynch picks up on and brings to the fore. Ulmer and Lynch also use similar mechanisms to indicate psychic instability. In his discussion of *The Black Cat* (Poe’s and Ulmer’s), Stefan Grisseman suggests that we are dealing with characters who choose evil over good, although they are not entirely evil themselves, and that a metaphorical representation for the disturbed psyche of these villain-hero’s can be found in the closed rooms and hermetic spaces we witness.⁴⁷ This holds true for several of Ulmer’s *noirs*. For example, in *Strange Illusion* both the father’s study, with the portrait indicating the psychic dominance of the father over the son, and the room at the hospital that he must break out of reflect the protagonist’s psychological antagonisms. The ultimate implementation of this is, of course, in *Detour* when Al is trapped with Vera in the Hollywood apartment. The incredible feeling of oppression, inescapability, and that something is bound to break in this scene is really a credit to Ulmer’s talent as a director. Few such stagings of closed rooms manage to attain the mood of claustrophobia this one does.

Similarly, in *Lost Highway* Fred Madison’s home functions as the phantasmatic space in which his psychic antagonisms are reflected. Jason Holt points out that the mystery man, who can access the Madison’s house at will, “apparently represents homicidal jealousy, and this, together with the loop [in narrative, which moves from someone informing Fred via his intercom at home that Dick Laurent is dead, to Fred toward the end of the film being the one who speaks these words to himself through the intercom], suggests that Fred’s house is something of a metaphor for his mind.”⁴⁸ The visual characteristics of the house reflect this as well: it is cavernous and one never knows where the occasional doors lead. As noted earlier, Lynch also uses violence to indicate psychic instability. When Fred kills his wife Renee (Patricia Arquette), cutting her into pieces and strewing her body parts around the bedroom, the psychic “rupture” indicated here is doubled through having the violence occur in the home. On the other hand, having the violence occur in the home, which in any case serves as a metaphor for Fred’s mind, leaves open the possibility that such scenes, like the encounter with the mystery man, are “merely” phantasies. Following this logic, the action in *Lost Highway* can be interpreted a couple of different ways. One possibility is that Fred Madison doesn’t realize he’s killing. Another is that what the viewer witnesses is Fred’s repressed fantasies. Leaving such questions open is a strategy Lynch repeats in his films. This might also be assumed for *Detour*. Again, I would suggest that the point isn’t to determine what “really happens,” but rather to determine what the economy of desire is. One way to do this is through a consideration of the uncanny emergence of phantasies, the return of the repressed, that breaks through Al’s “secondary revision.”

In “The Uncanny,” Freud recalls the story of a patient who visits a hydrotherapeutic health resort. He notes that the patient had visited the resort in

the past and was able to recover quite well as a result, but that the man attributed his recovery “not to the healing effect of the water, but rather to the location of his room, which directly neighbored upon the chambers of a very agreeable nurse.”⁴⁹ Consequently, when the patient returned to the resort hoping to stay in the same room, he was very disappointed to hear that another elderly man was occupying it. Upon hearing this, he exclaimed that the old man should die of a stroke. Two weeks later, when the old man does indeed have a stroke, Freud’s patient experienced a guilty feeling of uncanniness. We witness a similar uncanny return of the repressed with respect to Vera’s death.

When the topic of Vera’s potential tuberculosis comes up, she says to Al, “Wouldn’t it be a break for you if I did kick off,” to which the superego “innocent” Al replies, “I don’t want to see anybody die.” Whether this really answers Vera’s question is debatable. He certainly does not say no, that it wouldn’t be a break for him, and he also doesn’t particularly specify Vera in his statement about not wanting to *see* anybody die (interestingly, although he potentially kills two people, he doesn’t see anybody die). It’s a general statement that allows Al to skirt the question. Reinforcing the implication of Al’s wish for Vera to die, shortly afterward his voiceover informs the viewer, “If this was a fiction, I would fall in love with her, marry her and make a respectable woman of her, or else she’d make some supreme class A sacrifice for me and die.” What Al makes perfectly clear in his response to her question and in the voiceover preceding Vera’s death is his wish for her to die. Thus, when Vera does die, or rather when Al kills her, he is shocked to experience the external realization of his fantasy: the camera pans around the room moving in and out of focus on objects belonging to Vera and Al informs the viewer, “I was like a guy suffering from shock.”

If we consider the narrative through the point of view of Al’s phantasmatic desires, we find ample justification for Al’s guilty conscience. Moreover, Al complies with the viewer’s suspicions in this regard: “The world’s full of skeptics, I know, I’m one myself. In the Haskell business how many of you would believe he fell out of the car? And now after killing Vera without really meaning to do it, how many of you would believe it wasn’t premeditated?” It is precisely the knowledge of Al’s wish that she die that implicates him in the crime, particularly when viewed as a fantasy. From the point of view of fantasy, he’s in any case guilty—a condition Al repeatedly gestures toward through partial admissions of guilt: “You’re gonna tell me you don’t believe my story about Haskell dying. . . . Who would believe he fell out of the car. Why if Haskell came to, which he couldn’t, even he would swear I conked him over the head for his dough.” Better still, consider the following line for evidence of repression and a confused admission of guilt: “I didn’t like to think about it, but by that time I’d done what the police would say I’d done, even if I didn’t.” With this, Al explicitly signals the potential secondary revision at work in his voiceover *and* complicity in the events that unfold.

In his commentary on Al's narration, Andre Britton astutely suggests an interpretation through the Freudian concept of secondary revision: "Freud argues that our recollection of the past is governed by a mechanism of unconscious censorship, such that memories of events which we find too distressing to acknowledge are either repressed completely or reworked by fantasy so as to eliminate their potentially traumatic elements."⁵⁰ Such an interpretation of Al's narrative not only brings cohesion to the otherwise defuse circumstances "fate" has set up for him, it also recognizes the always already present element of fantasy at work in any process of recollection. Bearing this in mind, the transition to a consideration of Al's narrative as a phantasmatic projection becomes a logical one. Geoff Mayer makes the same deduction when stating, "Ulmer's most significant contribution to *Detour* was to conceive the film in terms of an internalized nightmare as experienced by the main protagonist, Al Roberts. In effect, the film takes place in Robert's [*sic*] head."⁵¹ Regarding *Detour's* cinematic *noir* elements, he suggests that Ulmer's "use of shadow, fog, and street signs, combine to heighten the sense that the film is one prolonged surreal nightmare."⁵² The idea of "one prolonged surreal nightmare" is another element that binds *Detour* and *Lost Highway* so intimately.

Greil Marcus makes the claim that "*Lost Highway* is not a rewrite or a remake of *Detour* . . . *Lost Highway* is a reinhabiting of *Detour*; Lynch's movie emerges from Ulmer's, inside out."⁵³ I would take the second half of this claim somewhat literally. What we get with Lynch is not a character in a diner recounting his past, which, we can only assume, is greatly diluted by his own fantasies and desires as he does so; with *Lost Highway*, we get the raw internal fantasy, not the external phantasmatic projection. The difference is not a great one, but rather one of degree. The implicit abstraction and convolution taking place in Al's voiceover is explicitly staged as advanced psychosis with Fred Madison in *Lost Highway*. Nevertheless, both narratives are structured around a psychic split. Marcus's "inside out" should basically be understood in terms of a change in perspective, not content. Al's secondary revision is presented as a story he tells, whereas we view Fred's revision from the inside, so to speak, with no social ego mediation. Where the content does differ somewhat is in the question of agency within the fantasy. Al attempts to gain control through revision under the aegis of superego demands to conform to the Law. According to his flashback voiceover monologue, he's "not guilty." Fred, on the other hand, is depicted as submerging himself more thoroughly in a different fantasy of control: he is not helpless, and not "not guilty." Rather, his fantasy is one of agency, of control and potency. Both are phantasmatic "revisionary" projections, but with slightly different elements of desires at play.

The radical staging of a narrative as a surreal phantasmatic revisionary projection is something Lynch has become famous for. However, it's not something

one expects of a 1940s *film noir*. Ulmer's subtle portrayal of a psychic split, an unreliable narrator, and of phantasmatic secondary revision is pioneering. As Mayer suggests, *Detour* "is, both thematically and aesthetically a groundbreaking film noir."⁵⁴ However, praise for the vatic, innovative quality of Ulmer's work must extend beyond *Detour*. Stefan Grisseemann points out that "at times he creates subtexts completely free of texts; something that wasn't very common for American cinema."⁵⁵ For example, in *The Strange Woman* there is a scene where, after a fight, Jenny attempts to quell John by telling him that they will be happy together in the future, that it will be just the two of them together. Quite unexpectedly, John bursts out, "No, there won't! There'll be three of us! There'll always be Ephraim!" and then storms out of the house. Jenny runs after him and when the front door closes, she looks upstairs only to see a bedroom door slam shut, signaling Ephraim's presence in the house. As the narrative doesn't allow for the possibility of Ephraim actually being in the house, the scene is altogether surreal. As opposed to providing an unambiguous linear and logical narrative, Ulmer seems to be more interested in what can be garnered from a narrative's implicit subtext. Along with his overt implementations of various other psychoanalytic concepts, it is such departures from convention in favor of foregrounding the "unconscious" of a film that make Ulmer's *noir* so extraordinary.

Notes

1. Marc T. Conrad, ed., introduction to *The Philosophy of Film Noir* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 1–2.
2. John Belton, *Hollywood Professionals Volume Three: Howard Hawks, Frank Borzage, Edgar G. Ulmer* (London/New York: The Tantivy Press, 1974), 171.
3. Greil Marcus, *The Shape of Things to Come: Prophecy and the American Voice* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), 130.
4. The parenthetical italicized phrases indicate themes repeated in Ulmer's *noir*.
5. Stefan Grisseemann, *Mann im Schatten: Der Filmemacher Edgar G. Ulmer* (Wien: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2003), 208. This and all subsequent translations mine.
6. Barbara Creed, "Film and Psychoanalysis," in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, ed. John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 79.
7. Elizabeth Cowie, "Film Noir and Women," in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. Joan Copjec (London/New York: Verso, 1993), 126.
8. John Belton, *Cinema Stylists* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1983), 141.
9. Erik Ulman, "Edgar G. Ulmer," in *Sense of Cinema's* "Great Directors," (2007), <http://www.sensesofcinema.com/contents/directors/03/ulmer.html>.
10. Belton, *Hollywood Professionals*, 164–65.
11. Andrew Britton, "Detour," in *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, ed. Ian Cameron (London: Studio Vista, 1992), 179.

12. For a discourse on *film noir* and a crisis in masculinity, see Frank Krutnik's *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*.
13. Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London: Routledge, 1991), 85 and 127 resp.
14. Belton, *Hollywood Professionals*, 151–52.
15. Cowie, 126.
16. Marcus, 133.
17. Peter Bogdanovich, *Who the Devil Made It? Conversations with Robert Aldrich, George Cukor, Allan Dwan, Howard Hawks, Alfred Hitchcock, Chuck Jones, Fritz Lang, Joseph H. Lewis, Sidney Lumet, Leo McCarey, Otto Preminger, Don Siegel, Joseph von Sternberg, Frank Tashlin, Edgar G. Ulmer, Raoul Walsh* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 600.
18. Grisseman, 250.
19. Paul A. Cantor, "Film Noir and the Frankfurt School: America as Wasteland in Edgar Ulmer's *Detour*," in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conrad (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 155.
20. Sigmund Freud, "Der Familienroman Der Neurotiker," in *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), VII, 228. This and all subsequent translations mine.
21. *Ibid.*, 228.
22. According to David Kalat's audio commentary on the 2005 DVD re-release of *The Strange Woman* in the box set *Edgar G. Ulmer: Archive* (Allday Entertainment).
23. Copjec, "The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal: Private Space in *Film Noir*," in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London/New York: Verso, 1993) 183.
24. See Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*.
25. The italics are not my stress: "and love" is stressed in Lamarr's voiceover.
26. The original script was also inspired by Fritz Rotter's play *Letters from Lucerne*, which Ulmer convinced Fromkess to buy, but sold it back in the end as the final script resembled it so little once Ulmer was ready to shoot.
27. Bogdanovich, 569.
28. Krutnik, 80.
29. Juliet Flower MacCannell, "Between the Two Fears," in *Lacan and Contemporary Film*, ed. Todd McGowan and Sheila Kunkle (New York: Other Press, 2004), 47.
30. Freud, "Selbstdarstellung," GW, XIV, 90.
31. Krutnik, 48–49.
32. Belton, *Hollywood Professionals*, 161–62.
33. Deborah Thomas, "Psychoanalysis and Film Noir," in *The Movie Book of Film Noir*, ed. Ian Cameron (London: Studio Vista, 1992), 72.
34. Grisseman, 198.
35. Belton, *Hollywood Professionals*, 158.
36. *Ibid.*, 160.
37. Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 30.
38. From "Beyond the Pleasure Principle."
39. Thomas, 72.

40. David Lehman, "Shades Among [*sic*] Shadows: The Murder Mystery, Film Noir, and Poetry," *Jacket*, no. 21 (February 2003), <http://jacketmagazine.com/21/lehm-shad.html>.

41. *Lost Highway* does this visually, as opposed to through monologue, but the effect is the same. Deborah Thomas quoting Peter Gay, 72.

42. The term "phantasy" conjoins the concepts of phantasm and fantasy. With the use of "phantasy" as opposed to "fantasy," the implication is that projection or externalization is involved.

43. Britton, 174.

44. Creed, 78.

45. Krutnik, 47.

46. Thomas, 73.

47. Grisseman paraphrased, 83.

48. Jason Holt, "A Darker Shade: Realism in Neo-Noir," in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. Ian Conrad (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 34.

49. Freud, "Das Unheimliche," GW, XII, 252.

50. Britton, 177.

51. Geoff Mayer and Brian McDonnell, *Encyclopedia of Film Noir* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2007), 167.

52. *Ibid.*, 168.

53. Marcus, 130.

54. Mayer and McDonnell, 169.

55. Grisseman, 252.