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Criss-Crossings of Robert Siodmak: The Time and Space of Cinematic Exile

This paper examines three phases in the career of exiled German-Jewish director Robert Siodmak: his late Weimar, Hollywood, and postwar German work. It argues that the exilic experience is reflected in a shift of temporal and spatial configurations in Siodmak’s American film noirs and in his German films after his remigration to Europe after the war. This shift is visible in the differing treatment of modes of transport or spatial mobility and in alternative approaches to narrative progression.

As he assessed the damaged condition of the exiled intellectual, Theodor Adorno described the “annulled” past life of the involuntary émigré as memory driven out into the harsh glare of a false present tense. First at the border of the country to which the exile flees and then repeatedly at bureaucratic thresholds, lived life is forcibly transformed into the artificial and reified “background” of identification documents. The exile is forced into mobility, effecting the exposure and extermination of “anything that lives on merely as thought and recollection”: “To complete its violation, life is dragged along on the triumphal automobile of the united statisticians and even the past is no longer safe from the present, whose remembrance of it consigns it a second time to oblivion”.1 It is perhaps significant that the means of reification, of sending authentic recollections into a void, is here pictured as the quintessentially American vehicle.

Shortly after this passage, Adorno reflected on the experience of seeing through the windows of the automobile onto the country of exile, describing travel through this vast country as an unsettling procedure in which the landscape itself appears yet again to threaten the life of the exile with cancellation: “[The American landscape] is uncomforted and comfortless. And it is perceived in a corresponding way. For what the hurrying eye has seen merely from the car it cannot retain, and the vanishing landscape leaves no more traces behind than it bears upon itself”2. The open space of the road is not experienced as liberation from a confining civilization or as an expanse of possibility awaiting exploitation, but as a black hole of perception, identity, and affect. While attempting to visually grasp and contain the vanishing empty spaces, the anxious traveler reveals a fear of disappearing, uncomfortably and unheroically.

2 Ibid. P. 48.
This suggests that the vision of those unwilling emigrants exiled to America in particular might be marked by an agoraphobia that is at odds with the usual mythology of Western spaces. The more general experience of a past annulled by obligatory presentness also makes the exile want to rescue the multiple temporalities of memory, rather than following exterior ephemera and risking oblivion. And, indeed, such anxieties mark the vision of some German directors who were exiled to Hollywood after 1933, particularly in the film noir genre in which they excelled – a genre characterized by phobic spaces and discontinuous temporal structures. The exiles’ films also evidence, as I would like to propose, a certain resistance to travel. Although similar observations might be made about the work of Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Edgar G. Ulmer, or Fred Zinneman, this essay will concentrate on Robert Siodmak, whose post-exile work evidences an altered relationship to spatial and temporal mobility.

Traitorous Traveling or Forced Mobility

Robert Siodmak may not seem the most obvious choice for examining the exilic style of film workers who fled the Third Reich. To many film critics and historians, Siodmak has generally appeared less damaged than many other German exiles, even among those fortunate few who managed to escape to Hollywood and continue their careers. Born in Dresden to a Polish-Jewish father who had obtained an American passport before marrying in Germany, Robert Siodmak was able, thanks to this background, to escape to the United States from France in 1939. He was consequently spared a few of the humiliations and existential crises of those refugees who were continually refused entry into the United States, and subsequently became one of the mostly highly paid directors in Hollywood and is particularly noted for his cycle of classic 1940s film noirs. Despite his exceptional success there, he decided to depart from the American cinema after the war. His film career consisted thus of four major phases, the first in Berlin in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the second in Paris from 1933–1939, the third in Hollywood from 1940–1951, ending in a return voyage to European cinema in the 1950s through the late 1960s.

More than his international ties, it was Siodmak’s adaptability and talent for assimilating new languages that allowed his directorial career to survive the repeated ruptures of exile. Since fame had not followed him from Berlin to Paris or from Paris to Hollywood despite his remarkable accomplishments in each of these locations, every new station of his exile required a completely

3 Siodmak made nine mostly well-received film noirs in Hollywood: Phantom Lady (1944), Christmas Holiday (1944), The Suspect (1944), The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry (1945), The Spiral Staircase (1945), The Dark Mirror (1946), The Killers (1946), Cry of the City (1948), Criss Cross (1949).