

Edgar G. Ulmer

The Man Off-screen

A Film by Michael Palm



Credits

Austria / USA 2004

With

James Lydon
Peter Marshall
Ann Savage
John Saxon
William Schallert
Arianné Ulmer Cipes
Peter Bogdanovich
Roger Corman
Joe Dante
John Landis
Wim Wenders
Christian Cargnelli
Stefan Grissemann
Alexander Horwath
Noah Isenberg
Greg Mank
Michael Omasta
Tom Weaver

Directed by

MICHAEL PALM

Camera

JOERG BURGER

Sound

GEORG MISCH

Film editors

MICHAEL PALM
MAREK KRALOVSKY

Production manager US

DAGMAR HOVESTADT

Production office

ANGELA LEUCHT

Production assistant

KERSTIN GEBELEIN

Sound editor

JOHANNES KONECNY

Dubbing mixer

RAINER PUSCHNER - gosh!_audio

Producers

GEORG MISCH
RALPH WIESER
ARIANNÉ ULMER CIPES

Produced by

MISCHIEF FILMS
EDGAR G. ULMER PRESERVATION CORP.

Co-produced by

WESTDEUTSCHER RUNDFUNK

Commissioning editors

REINHARD WULF
ROLAND JOHANNES

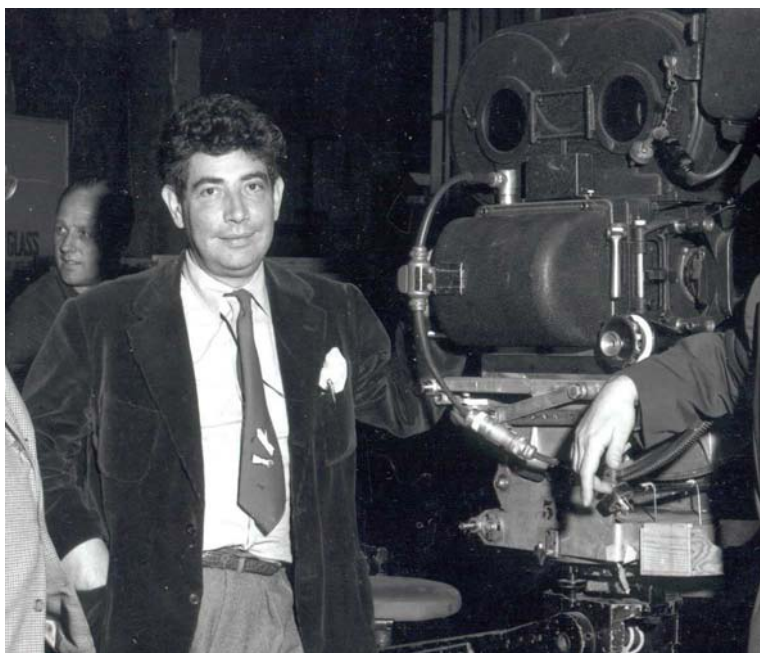
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Synopsis

Edgar G. Ulmer emigrated from Austria and worked on the fringes of Hollywood, where he was named “King of the B's”; forgotten and rediscovered, he became a legendary cult figure to film aficionados and “new wave” filmmakers. Edgar G. Ulmer – The Man Off-screen is the first movie about the director. Pieced together like a detective story, it is a dazzling picture of Ulmer's mysterious and moving life and work, a journey through the strange world of B-movies.

In order to tell a coherent story you have to invent some things and you certainly create illusion. Arianné Ulmer Cipes



The Film



A picture of Ulmer is like a cryptic police sketch, as Stefan Grisseemann writes in his Ulmer biography “Mann im Schatten” (Man on the Sidelines). Separating legends from fact is difficult, but quite a fascinating challenge in making a film portrait. The elements of the ghostly, transitory, and illusionary constitute the thematic and formal leitmotifs of the film.

What part of Ulmer lives on? Where does Ulmer still haunt film history like a ghost? What links cinema illusions with (necessary) illusions about one's own life?

Ulmer's character casts many shadows: he has left plenty of tracks, is himself, however, elusive; his past zigzags through time, is full of gaps and contradictions. Nevertheless (or perhaps for this very reason?) his influence on others was enormous, the traces he left behind were striking. Edgar G. Ulmer is a symptom we have yet to interpret and understand fully. He stands for many things: for the prototype of the independent, effective laborer, for rebelling against the mainstream Hollywood system, for the identity crises of modern times, for exile and minorities, for geographical and spiritual nomadism, for tragic failure, for a specter that vacillates between art and trash in film history, for the fact that necessity can spawn inventiveness and illusions can be more real than reality.

Here, as in many of Ulmer's films, the search for one truth remains futile. Instead the film focuses on the investigations themselves: the sleuth's approach makes the coexistence of various staged truths possible. One can only do Ulmer filmic justice by presenting and making transparent the manner of “truth production,” by being willing to fictionalize and spin tales of one's own. Thus it becomes apparent that “truth” is always guided by interests, just as Ulmer constantly appended his own biography with dubious facts in order to achieve respect, worth, or simply existential security.

Director Michael Palm reconstructs the convoluted labyrinthine paths in Ulmer's biography and filmography, investigates gaps, contradictions, falsehoods, and confusions, and in the way he stages his film he conveys a feeling for the constant restlessness, the constant illusions in Ulmer's life.

Most of the interviews with the protagonists are in moving cars – in the streets of Hollywood and Berlin – or as rear projection shots. The film's protagonists do not





just have the function of supplying information, but are incorporated in consciously staged scenes, so that what resonates throughout the film is the question as to how their comments relate to reality and truth.

Ulmer himself serves as an “unreliable” off-narrator, often leading us astray or causing us to doubt the things we hear and see. Montage is used to simulate between individual protagonists dialogue that never actually took place, suggesting the fabrication and filmic construction of history and reality without robbing the figures of their relevance, without making due with simple truths. In this sense Edgar G. Ulmer – The Man Off-screen is also playfully loyal to the illusion machine, to the productive illusion of the film – to the strange illusion of cinema. But it is also an analysis of the utterly capitalist world of illusion, Hollywood, a figment that actually “only exists in one's head” (John Landis) – “a gigantic, blurry rear projection” (Joe Dante) – that both attracted and repulsed Ulmer his whole life.

Film excerpts assume the formal role of the documentary, archive material is given narrative functions. Thus the protagonist of Ulmer's Detour serves repeatedly as an allegorical Ulmer double, as his alter ego; and the main character from Ulmer's Beyond The Time Barrier, who stands in the wasteland outside the futuristic city, shares the same fascinated expression that Ulmer might wear as he stands before the gates of the glamor world of Hollywood.

The film's staging, visual style, and montage convey to the viewer the B-movie's “attitude of life,” its fast, forceful narrative pace, its roughness and simplicity, its extreme density and directness, but without imitating its style, Ulmer's style. Thus Edgar G. Ulmer – The Man Off-screen isn't just a fascinating mythical tale of a truly influential Hollywood maverick, but it also explores the issue of what fascinates us about the barrenness, efficiency, and flexibility of B-movies.



Arianné Ulmer Cipes: He would re-invent himself with each new situation.

Peter Marshall: We all exaggerate, we all color stories!

John Saxon: He was bragging!

Peter Marshall: That's the way we are. We are creative people...

John Saxon: It happened with such frequency.

Peter Marshall: I believed in his stories, absolutely. Why would he lie?

John Saxon: Recognition! And hope for even an illusion of about what he might have been able to achieve.

Peter Marshall: I think within the man there was a great film. At least he was King of the B's!

John Saxon: There is a lot of kings of the B's. There is a lot of kings in that beehive.

Peter Marshall: Hey listen, be a C player, a B player or an A player... when you are king of C, B or A, that's not bad! Some of the most talented people I know are not successful and some of the most untalented people I know are very successful.

Arianné Ulmer Cipes: He wished to be all over the place, part of everything that was going on at that time. He didn't know how to pace himself, he wanted to be everything at all times.

(Dialogue excerpted from Edgar G. Ulmer – The Man Off-screen)



Edgar G. Ulmer

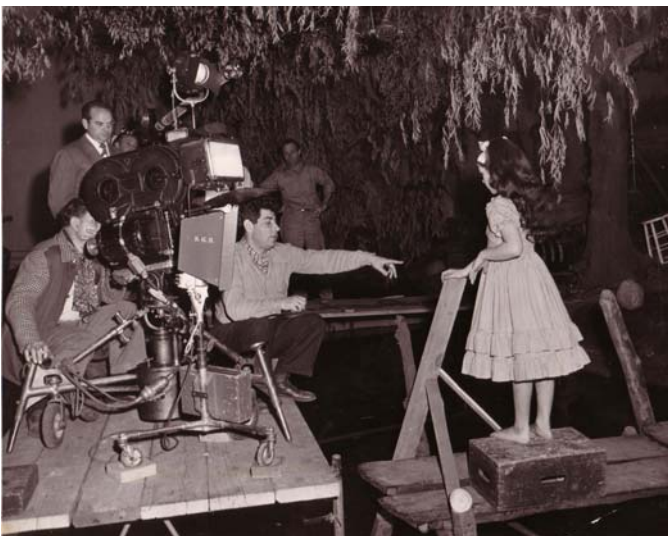
NOTES ON EDGAR G. ULMER: DETOURS, IMPROVISATION

Edgar G. Ulmer (1904–1972) emigrated from Austria in the late twenties and became the King of B-movies in Hollywood with the minor masterpieces “The Black Cat” (1934), “Grine Felder” (1937), “Bluebeard” (1944), “Detour” (1945), “Strange Illusion” (1945), “Ruthless” (1948) or “The Naked Dawn” (1955), to name just a few, which have long since become classics of their genre.

Ulmer was forgotten, rediscovered, and finally ended up a cult figure. All his life he straddled the line between art, solid craftsmanship, and trash, “an Odysseus of cinema, who wasn't destined to return home, but who, on his long voyage through various genres and film cultures, spanned the entire spectrum: cool modernity alongside lascivious speculation, cheap trash beside classic virtuosity.” (Bert Rebhandl) Ulmer was and still is the nonconformist, non-classifiable filmmaker par excellence.

The prayer helped. They didn't forget me, they've as good as hired me at Paramount. As producer-director – my God! We're back home and on our way.

Letter from Edgar G. Ulmer to his wife Shirley, July 1, 1941



His hopes of making it into the ranks of the big Hollywood directors during his lifetime wouldn't come true. Hollywood, that Ulmer laconically called “home,” remained for him for the most part just an object of yearning: for financial security, for artistic recognition. On the other hand he insisted on artistic independence and for this he was willing to work on the fringes of the dream factory, almost always on an extremely low budget, at a breakneck pace. One might say that in every way Ulmer's life and work took place on the fringes, off-screen.

There was nothing smooth about the life of Edgar Ulmer, the son of Jewish parents born in Olomouc

(today in the Czech Republic). Ulmer suffered the classic fate of an emigrant: in 1920 he worked with Max Reinhardt at the Theater an der Josefstadt in Vienna. Soon thereafter, he left Vienna with Reinhardt and didn't come back until the mid-50s, returned with mixed feelings and the fear of coming back to a city in ruins, the city of his youth *that was probably full of murderers*. (Ulmer in a letter).

In 1921 he first started working in movies with the director Friedrich W. Murnau in Berlin, from 1924 on, he worked as a set decorator on several film productions in the USA (among others in Murnau's *Sunrise*), in 1928 he returned to Berlin, where he made the semi-documentary masterpiece *People on Sunday* with Robert Siodmak and Billy Wilder. In 1929 he finally immigrated to the USA for good.

I did not want to be ground up in the Hollywood hash machine.

Edgar Ulmer to Peter Bogdanovich



The only film Ulmer makes for a big Hollywood studio is the horror film *The Black Cat* (1934, with Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi), a classic of the genre. Shortly thereafter, he moves to New York, where he begins making ethnic movies in 1937: Yiddish movies, a feature film in New York's black community, various works with Mexicans and Navajo Indians. In addition, his educational and industry films keep him above water. But all that is soon to change.

THE KING OF THE B's

In 1942 Ulmer is hired as a contract director at PRC, one of the small poverty row studios. PRC produces B-movies, i.e. movies meant to be shown as the first movie before the big, major-league, Hollywood A-production in a double feature. There is virtually no prestige involved, they're always extremely low-budget productions, and the shooting schedules are very tight. But these constrictions brought out the best in Ulmer and forged his highly individual style. He made some of his best works at PRC, among them films like *Club Havana* and *Strange Illusion* as well as *Detour*, probably Ulmer's most important work.



Ulmer leaves PRC after a falling out and works from 1946 on a free and independent basis, forever in search of projects, always financially strapped. Ulmer leads the life of a nomad, makes films in the USA and in Europe, travels with his family from one location to the next. This is how he makes the films *The Strange Woman*, *Ruthless*, *The Man From Planet X*, *The Naked Venus*, *Beyond The Time Barrier*, *L'Atlantide*, *The Cavern*, among others.

I really am looking for absolution for all the things I had to do for money's sake.

Edgar G. Ulmer to Peter Bogdanovich, two years prior to his death

Having come from the haute-bourgeoisie, he tries to enhance his usually trivial subject matter – often pulp fiction – by adding cultural meaning. He is forced to make compromises. But in the process he develops his typical Ulmer style: rough and minimalist, sometimes garish and overambitious, but always original with a concentrated atmosphere, and frequently in contrast with the smooth style of the big Hollywood studios.

Despite all these qualities, which are destined to be recognized only generations later, Ulmer's career takes a tragic course. In the late 60s despite several strokes he tries in vain to make his comeback in Hollywood, but most of his projects never pan out. Two years before his death and already gravely ill, he lets the director Peter Bogdanovich interview him. It is a several-hour-long recorded conversation and can be regarded as Ulmer's legacy. Ulmer dies in 1972, impoverished, in a nursing home in California. His gravestone reads: Talent Obliges.

Ulmer's artistic and private life was always full of unexpected turns of events, brief soaring moments, hard setbacks, and missed opportunities, and it probably wouldn't be too far from the truth to see Ulmer's own life as a B-movie: full of detours and the need to improvise – poor but inventive.

LATE FAME, CULT STATUS AND AFTERLIFE

After he is discovered in the early 60s, mainly by cinephilic critics and directors associated with the Nouvelle Vague, Ulmer is celebrated and revered as a cult director, as auteur. His admirers recognize Ulmer's talent of being able to bring out the artistic maximum on a minimal budget, his pessimistic, existentialist heroes and stories, his virtuosity with lighting and camera. But it is too late – Ulmer can no longer profit from this rediscovery.

Edgar Ulmer is certainly the most underrated of all American filmmakers. His movies surprise us with their freshness, directness, and inventiveness.

Francois Truffaut

Appearances

Edgar G. Ulmer, like the mysterious Dr. Mabuse, is only present as a voice. His statements serve as an off-screen narration, as both commentary and counterpoint. The source material is the taped interview that Peter Bogdanovich conducted with him in 1970.

Arianné Ulmer Cipes is Ulmer's second daughter and the most important narrative protagonist in the film. She runs the Edgar Ulmer Preservation Corp. and opens the gates of Ulmer's legacy and the archives of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles to us. She is the most important and personal source of information about Ulmer's life.

Peter Bogdanovich, US film director and a prominent representative of the “New Hollywood Cinema” movement. An Ulmer admirer, he conducted the most extensive interview with him in 1970.

Roger Corman, film producer and director. Most prominent representative of the trash cinema movement of the 50s and 60s, in a certain sense Ulmer's direct successor as far as the low-budget and effectiveness of his productions is concerned.

John Landis and **Joe Dante**, there is a direct stylistic and thematic link connecting these directors to Ulmer and to the B-picture.

Wim Wenders, director, prominent representative of the New German Cinema.

James Lydon, actor, director, and producer; leading role in Ulmer's *Strange Illusion*.

John Saxon and **Peter Marshall**, leading roles in *The Cavern*.

Ann Savage, leading actress in Ulmer's major work *Detour*, talks about Ulmer's method, his short shooting schedules, the myth that shrouds *Detour*.



William Schallert, actor and trash cinema veteran. Played in *The Man From Planet X*, describes Ulmer's dilemma between art and trash, and sings one of Schubert's songs.

Stefan Grisseemann, journalist, Vienna; author of the Ulmer monograph "Mann im Schatten."

Alexander Horwath, director of the Austrian Film Museum; author, Vienna.

Noah Isenberg, film scholar, New York; is working on a comprehensive monograph on Ulmer.

Tom Weaver and **Gregory Mank**, authors, New York; both are declared Ulmer fans.

Michael Omasta and **Christian Cargnelli**, film historians, Vienna.



The Director

MICHAEL PALM

Born in 1965, attended the University of Music and Performing Arts, Vienna, Department of Film and Television (Film Academy), and the University of Vienna, where he studied philosophy and drama. Filmmaker and editor. Composes film music, sound editor, and sound designer, freelance film scholar and author. Countless lectures and publications on theory and aesthetics of film and cinema, lectures on film theory at the University of Music and Performing Arts and at the University of Vienna. Lives and works in Vienna.

Filmography (selection)

as director:

- 2001 *Sea Concrete Human – Malfunctions #1* (concept, direction, sound design)
- 2003 *Sim Movie* (concept, direction, sound design) – trailer for the DIAGONALE 03
- 2004 *Edgar G. Ulmer – The Man Off-screen* (director, editor)
- 2005 *Debasement – Malfunctions #2* (concept, direction, sound design)

as editor, composer, sound designer:

Ceija Stojka (1999, editor; D: Karin Berger), *Zero Crossing* (2000, editor; D: Johannes Holzhausen), *Auf allen Meeren* (2001, editor, sound designer; D: Johannes Holzhausen), *I Am From Nowhere* (2002, editor; D: Georg Misch), *Calling Hedy Lamarr* (2003, editor; D: Georg Misch), *Volver la vista / Der umgekehrte Blick* (2004, music, sound design; D: Fridolin Schönwiese), *Lancia Thema* (2005, sound design; D: Joseph Dabernig)

Press Comments

“Michael Palm’s portrait is dazzling and witty just like its protagonist - affectionate, respectful, full of humour and sincerity. It is brilliant in its dramaturgy, in its associations and counterpoints, in its mixture of means. A firework of ideas and combinations. A masterful editing job (Palm, Marek Kralovsky). A playfully combined puzzle of wonderful lightness and highly precise conception. And a sincere credo for Ulmer and for what he represented – the B-movie. One can get so much from this film, from the rich, exciting material, from this terrific declaration of love to this man and his ‘minor’ film category. This film leaves behind a deep impression.” [Renate Stinn, epd medien Nr. 70, September 8, 2004](#)

“A documentary well worth seeing not only because it conjures up a half forgotten star, but also because Palm and his colleagues have found a convincing and entertaining form to present their research.” [Verena Lueken, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, September 4, 2004](#)

The film attempts to describe the working conditions, atmosphere, magic of Ulmer's films – and of B-pictures in general. In a puzzle of memories – of Ulmer and his family, film historians and directors. We see them sitting in the backseats of cars, driving through L.A. or Berlin, strolling through the cemetery in Hollywood, sitting in the cars of the Giant Ferris Wheel at the Prater – as restless and homeless as their admired Ulmer. [Fritz Göttler, Süddeutsche Zeitung, September 4/5, 2004](#)

September 17 would have been the 100th birthday of the Austrian Hollywood emigrant and ‘King of the B’s’ Edgar Ulmer. On this occasion, Michael Palm’s excellent documentary delights with the help of film excerpts, interviews with experts, younger admirers and colleagues (including Joe Dante and Wim Wenders), developing a clever montage of this exceptional director, who privately liked to create his own legends. Recommendation! [Christoph Huber, Die Presse, September 4, 2004](#)

“He is always placing something personal, something new into his work – even though he never had enough money.” That is how Martin Scorsese describes the work of Edgar G. Ulmer whose film noir ‘Detour’ (1945) is one of his favourite films. And not without reason as this exciting documentary shows.” [Neue Osnabrücker Zeitung, September 4, 2004](#)

Edgar G. Ulmer Filmography

The Border Sheriff (US 1926)
Menschen am Sonntag (D 1930)
Damaged Lives (CAN/US 1933)
Mr. Broadway (US 1933)
The Black Cat (US 1934)
Thunder Over Texas (US 1934)
From Nine to Nine (CAN/US 1935)
Natalka Poltavka (US 1937)
Green Fields (US 1937)
Vida bohemia, La (US 1937)
The Singing Blacksmith (US 1938)
Cossacks in Exile (US 1939)
The Light Ahead (US 1939)
Moon Over Harlem (US 1939)
Let My People Live (US 1939)
Americaner Shadchen (US 1940)
Goodbye, Mr. Germ (US 1940)
Cloud in the Sky (US 1940)
Another to Conquer (US 1941)
Prisoner of Japan (US 1942)
Tomorrow We Live (US 1942)
My Son, the Hero (US 1943)
Girls in Chains (US 1943)
Isle of Forgotten Sins (US 1943)
Jive Junction (US 1943)
Bluebeard (US 1944)
Strange Illusion (US 1945)
Club Havana (US 1945)
Detour (US 1945)
The Wife of Monte Cristo (US 1946)
Her Sister's Secret (US 1946)
The Strange Woman (US 1946)
Carnegie Hall (US 1947)
Ruthless (US 1948)
I Pirati di Capri (I/US 1949)
The Man From Planet X (US 1951)
St. Benny the Dip (US 1951)
Babes in Bagdad (E/GB/US 1952)
L' Amante di Paride (I/F 1954)
Murder Is My Beat (US 1955)
The Naked Dawn (US 1955)
Daughter of Dr. Jekyll (US 1957)
The Naked Venus (US 1958)
The Perjurer (BRD 1959)
Annibale (I/US 1960)
Beyond the Time Barrier (US 1960)
The Amazing Transparent Man (US 1960)
Atlantide, L' (F/I 1961)
Sette contro la morte (I/BRD/US 1964)

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