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***MOON OVER HARLEM: EDGAR G. ULMER,  
THE RACE MOVIES AND THE NEW NEGRO AGENDA***

Acknowledgement: The unusual personality of Edgar G. Ulmer has been brought to my attention by my colleague and friend from Cologne University Bernd Herzogenrath, who has also provided me with the dvd with the footage of this rare film.

**I.**

The following article examines Edgar G. Ulmer's race film *Moon over Harlem*. It discusses this rare film in the context of Ulmer's career but, more importantly, in the context of the phenomenon of race movies, which, in their day, provided their viewers with a much needed alternative to Hollywood's stock representations of African Americans. It also takes into account the actual situation of the Black urban population during the Great Depression and argues that the reform agenda expressed by means of its main heroes coincides with certain ideals of progressivism and the New Deal reforms and that its principal characters embody the ideal of Alain Locke's New Negro.

**II.**

Known as one of the "king of the B's", Edgar G. Ulmer (1904–1972) earned his reputation as a filmmaker who could work with extremely tight budgets and still turn out interesting work with a unique personal style. Like Roger Corman after him, Ulmer could shoot movies under a week and get excellent production values for the miniscule amounts of money spent on them. Ulmer was never universally known or appreciated, yet the personal vision of his films – and the resourcefulness with which he battled the budgetary constraints – have become legendary among filmmakers and film-buffs alike. Throughout his career he made as many as fifty films, his best-known films probably being the horror *The Black Cat*

(1934) with Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi and one of the best film noirs ever made, *Detour* (1945).

Ulmer was born in Olomouc in 1904 to Jewish parents. After the death of his father in World War I he moved with his mother to Vienna where he later studied stage design at the local Academy of Fine Arts. There he got to know the famous Max Reinhardt, who hired him as a stage designer and in 1924 took him on his first trip to America. From that time onward Ulmer kept traveling between the USA and Europe, making inexpensive films for the Universal Studios as well as in Berlin. In the 1920s he collaborated – as assistant art director or set designer – with a select society of filmmakers whose works would make movie history, most notably with Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau, Robert Wiene, Fritz Lang and others.

Ulmer's only race movie *Moon over Harlem* (further on: *MoH*) was made in 1939; in the transitional period between the moment of his exile from Hollywood (he was forced to leave the Universal Studio for personal reasons) and finding a place on the payroll of Poverty Row's studio PRC. At that time Ulmer also made several Yiddish films – *Green Fields*, *The Singing Blacksmith*, *The Light Ahead*, *The American Matchmaker* – and apparently also a Ukrainian film, *Natalka Poltavka*. Scripted by his wife Shirley, *MoH* was shot on 16 mm, in a cigar factory in New Jersey and on location in one of Harlem's night clubs. According to myth the shooting took mere four days (two days in NJ and two days in Harlem) with the whole production costing not more than \$ 8,000.

### III.

*MoH* is a gangster movie with elements of musical and family melodrama. The story opens with a wedding. Minnie, a likeable middle-aged widow, is getting married to a “no good rascal”, Dollar Bill. While the wedding party is still in full swing and the apartment is swarming with guests, Dollar Bill starts to make amorous advances to Sue, Minnie's attractive student daughter. Unlike her mother, Sue is not in the least interested for she knows from the outset that Dollar Bill is not exactly what one would regard as an ideal husband. (His main interest is Minnie's money.) Moreover Sue already has a sweetheart, the local reformer Bob. Bob and Bill's relationship is strained on yet another front. While Bill earns his living in the world of crime, running a local protection racket, Bob tries to encourage the local residents not to let themselves be intimidated by the gangsters. Caught in an argument over Sue, Bob gets nearly killed by Dollar Bill. So as to save Bob from the furious Bill with a gun, Sue swears never to see Bob again.

Events take a dramatic turn at a moment when Dollar Bill gets into financial difficulties. Being a typical gangster figure, he keeps spending lavishly on other (white!) women and does not behave like someone in urgent need of economizing. He decides to solve the problem by running his territory by himself which entails a confrontation with a Chicago boss who claims this part of town as well.

Back at home Bill tries to break the stubborn resistance of his step-daughter. Being a strong and formidable man, he locks the fragile beauty into a tight embrace exactly at the moment when her mother comes in. Upon discovery of the couple Minnie blames her daughter and asks Sue to leave. The saddened heroine finds refuge with her friends, embarks on a career of a successful night club singer, and resumes her romantic liaison with Bob. Meanwhile Dollar Bill is visited by two henchmen of the Chicago man who had “inherited the territory” and while the gentlemen settle their accounts Minnie is caught in the crossfire and mortally wounded. After a long funeral wake, when Minnie’s friends perform a heart-breaking spiritual number, the narrative winds up rather rapidly. Dollar Bill – not exactly dying with grief – is killed at the moment when he is presenting his future wife to his cronies. This scene is followed by an abrupt cut to Bob and Sue being notified about Bill’s death. Immediately they approach the window and look out into the attractive Harlem night. “You really like Harlem, don’t you”, says Sue. “Yes, There is so much to be done here, the place is screaming for leadership!” says there reformer. Then the credits start rolling.

#### IV.

Today’s occasional viewer may object to varied and at times imperfect acting style of Ulmer’s all black amateur cast. Yet, despite such apparent deficiencies, *MoH*, just as many other race movies, had considerably higher relevance to the everyday experience of its African American target audience than the traditional Hollywood film offering. A brief look at the large studios’ production of the late 1930 will supply ample evidence. The critic Donald Bogle describes typical African American screen representation at that time as the age of the servant. Indeed, the roles typically played by Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Louise Beavers and, most notably, by Hattie McDaniel seem to be a case in point. To make matters even worse, perhaps the most popular Black representations of the day were the supposedly comic coon characters embodied by Stepin Fetchit.

Several years before the production of *MoH* Hollywood discovered the business potential of films with all black casts that played in Black theaters throughout the South and on the African American circuits in the northern cities. Although films such as *Hallelujah* (1929) avoided the malevolent stereotyping of the earlier times (as in D.W. Griffith’s 1915 classic *Birth of a Nation*, for instance) and represented a major opportunity for many talented Black actors, they still relied on another set of stock images: African American experience as predominantly rural, the characters speaking in dialects, frequently dancing and bursting into a song. Three years prior to *MoH* a major all black cast film appeared that came to be hailed as a new milestone in African American screen representation, *The Green Pastures*. While the film was – for the most part – favorably received by the reviewers as well as by the numerous audiences, its appeal was by no means unproblematic. As Donald Bogle pointed out, the basic problem rested in the

film's main narrative premise. The magic transformation of the Old Testament figures "into contemporary Louisiana Negroes – in attire, in vernacular, and in customs" (Bogle 1994: 67) "rested on a cruel assumption that nothing could be more ludicrous than [...] the incongruity of angels with dirty faces" (Bogle 1994: 68).

In the ensuing years the Hollywood studios looked for the themes of their major features in the Old South. However, as old habits die hard, all the black characters in the 1938 antebellum romance/melodrama *Jezebel* represented a return to time-tested "stereotypes that legitimated the slave system and serves as devalued or comic counterpoints to white roles" (Guerrero 1993: 24). The wave of the "good old plantation revisited cycle" lasted through 1939. Lupack reminds us of the feature *Way Down South* (1939) where once again, significantly for the 1930s, "the relationship of a black servant to a white child [was] explored" (Lupack 2002: 201). In the same year the plantation genre reached its apogee with the ultimate national epic, *Gone With the Wind*. Its technical achievements, brilliant colors and star-spangled cast combined to create a seductive image of the Old South whose sweet nostalgia helped viewers – for a brief time – forget the hardships of their everyday Great Depression existence.

Given this context, race movies, despite their technical and professional shortcomings, represented a much appreciated alternative. Since the 1920s the creators of race movies reacted to a limited range of African American screen representations dominated by the prevailing stereotypes by creating Black personages of stature, such as physicians, lawyers and scientists, along with persons of achievement in sports, arts or agriculture. While some movies supplied their viewers with the much needed action heroes – such as brave gunslingers in Black westerns or African American flying aces – others carried a message meant to inspire their African American viewers to reach higher, into the middle class respectability.

The second half of the 1930s saw the rise of the race gangster film. Inspired by the success of white gangster film such as Howard Hawks' *Scarface* (1932), these features filled a niche in the black cinema-going market, which was being gradually dominated by the Hollywood musicals and Old South Stories. Typically set in Harlem, they presented African American experience as predominantly modern and urban, in tune with the demographic developments of the Great Migration. Moreover, they addressed issues that bore somewhat more relevance to their everyday lives. Films such as Oscar Micheaux's *Underworld* (1936) Harry L. Fraser and George Randol's *Dark Manhattan* (1937) and Edgar Ulmer's *MoH* are the genre's best-known examples. The use of the location is important here for in the wake of the Great Migration Harlem gained a strong symbolic charge: it came to be regarded as the generally acknowledged capital of the American Blacks and functioned as "the embodiment of an idea, a sign, a motif, and a trope, all of which combined to create a fictive image of a city space through which the possibilities of an African American urban metropolis could exist in the public imagination" (Massood 2003: 60).

## V.

With remarkable economy Ulmer's establishing shots present Harlem as a complex and sophisticated urban space bustling with life. Significantly for the chosen genre – as well as for Harlem's larger cultural reputation as great center of entertainment – the streets are shot at night. Thus one can admire the well-lighted boulevards and strings of subway train lights shooting through space across the elevated portions of the tracks. Signs of inevitable local icons abound: a sign of 125<sup>th</sup> Street, the Apollo, the Savoy ballroom, the famous Bauman's night club.

However, Ulmer goes beyond a skilled reiteration of such courant clichés. Against the odds of amateur acting he does smuggle in a sense of authenticity, particularly the economic hardships of Harlem life. To be able to pay the rent in her spacious, well-furnished apartment and support Sue at her studies, Minnie works as a maid in one of the fancy night clubs. Moreover – as if to add another element of traditional uplift to the narrative – Minnie tries to convince her daughter that clubs like this are not the right place for a young innocent student. Further down at the bottom of the social scale we witness Bob agitating among a group of local residents to resist the gangsters. But the status of these characters as residents is made uncertain by a significant detail: we do not see them in their stores, nor in their apartments. Bob addresses them in the street as they are shivering with cold, warming their hands around a fire. Ulmer's Harlem thus encompasses a whole range of Black characters: in addition to the obligatory gangsters, the musical band and the showgirls, we find there the homeless, the struggling working- and lower-middle class (Minnie; "the Jamaican", a small businessman whose wife at one point gets brutalized by the gangsters) and the reformist middle-class (Sue, Bob and Bob's ladies' audience).

At the moral center of the narrative we find Bob. He is educated, eloquent, prosperous, and has the necessary courage to resist the racketeers. As a member of the middle-class he sets an example for the community. He is a progressive New Deal reformer as well as the embodiment of DuBois' talented tenth, the African American intellectual and moral avant-garde that according to DuBois should lead the American Blacks not only toward prosperity and a higher social standing but also – even more importantly – toward full political equality. Thinking in those larger terms one has to act within one's community – exactly as Bob does in the film. Bob is yet another representation of Alain Locke's New Negro, someone who does not beg for acknowledgement from the outside but is aware of one's own intrinsic quality, worth and achievement. "The place is screaming for leadership!" exclaims Bob twice and it is obvious that he is the one for he is frequently positioned in the center of the frame, with all other characters on the side or around him, listening. He agitates in the streets as well as in the parlors and while the destitute street crowd remains skeptical, the prosperous young ladies are willing to take some serious risks. So much hope is vested in the respectable African American middle class!

Yet the record of his achievement is mixed because the ending of this narrative of uplift is not exactly upbeat. Did we witness any significant success of Bob? Has his endeavor borne any significant fruit? How is Bob going to deal with the new boss of the territory who so easily eliminated the dangerous Dollar Bill? Like every so often in commercial cinema, the film's positive solutions are solely confined to the individual level: the adversary being dead, the main hero can marry the beautiful girl he desires. The future of the larger context, however, remains uncertain. Yet still, looking out the window at the lively night streets, the viewers must have shared Bob's faith in the potential of Harlem as a place where the boldest African American aspirations may reach their fruition.

To be sure, dramatic depictions of gangster life represent time-tested stereotypes. Yet such scenes did belong to the everyday experience of the Harlem residents of the 1920s and 1930s. For instance the game of numbers – a kind of illegal lottery run by local gangs – was played by members of all strata of the local society and the related corruption extended way beyond Harlem's limits into the municipal authorities of New York City dominated by Tammany Hall. In the film, one of the two white skins we see is the fat neck of a mob boss giving orders to Dollar Bill. This situation – just as Bill's fated confrontation with the important Chicago mafia man – corresponds to the actual historic situation of the takeover of the Black numbers bankers by Dutch Schultz's Mob syndicate ten years earlier:

More than removing law enforcement as an obstacle in criminal enterprises, Schultz mobilized police officers, bail bondsmen, lawyers, and court officials as active participants in his criminal enterprises and as appendages in his war for the numbers rackets in Harlem. The gang war that broke out in Harlem was short-lived. Harlem's numbers operators were not prepared for an extended turf war, or the ruthlessness and violence inflicted by the mob. Many of them were badly beaten and some were even murdered by the mob's musclemen. It has been estimated that more than 40 murders and six kidnappings came on the heels of this turf war. Harlem's black numbers runners began to disappear off the streets and its policy bankers began to mysteriously retire. By late 1928, only a little more than 20 policy banks remained out of 40. (Bell)

The character of Dollar Bill may have been inspired by the historic personage of someone like Bumpy Johnson, who, however, unlike Bill, was wise enough to give up on his independent career, join Schultz's organization and thus save his life. According to the Internet Movie Database, the Production Code Administration refused to issue an approval certificate for the film on grounds that the murderers escaped punishment. But even this aspect, I would argue, turns Ulmer's film into a more plausible statement about the actual historical reality. In the context of the violent 20s and 30s, when excesses of organized crime reigned supreme, it was not uncommon for "the gunmen to kill and go free to kill again".

In a true B movie fashion the plot has numerous inconsistencies and the logic of some of the characters' actions is not exactly bullet-proof: why did not the henchmen kill Dollar Bill right away? Is it plausible that a mother would drive out her nearly perfect daughter, believing the word of her moody uncouth husband? While the logic of the character's actions may appear deficient, the requirements of the film narrative are served well: both scenes prepare ground for important musical numbers, Sue's night club performance and, above all, the collective choir performance during the funeral wake. In this sense *MoH* is rather typical of the white productions of the early sound era, among whose main attraction was "Black music, singing and dance" (Rhines 1996: 31). Indeed, the sequences shot on location in a Harlem night club where Ulmer used their regular band and chorus girls must have pleased many potential cultural tourists and, perhaps even more typically, persons of moderate means whose Great Depression income would not support an actual visit of the place.

It has been pointed out that Ulmer spiced his B-movies with unusual additions of European high culture (Herzogenrath 2006). The musical score of his horror films – such as *The Black Cat* (1934) or the *Bluebeard* (1944), for instance – are dominated by compositions by a select company of Europe's best known composers, ranging from Bach or Beethoven on the one hand to Musorgski or Gounod, on the other. (In this Ulmer anticipates the superb use of classical music in film by someone like Stanley Kubrick.) In *MoH*, however, Ulmer remains, musically speaking, in the United States, devoting extensive screen time to Donald Heywood's original score. (Donald Heywood was an important Harlem composer who not only had collaborated with Oscar Micheaux on the very first race talkie *The Exile* (1931), but also, after the making of *MoH*, went on to write film music for other features set in Harlem, *Murder on Lenox Avenue* (1941), *Sunday Sinners* (1940).)

The film also offered a rare screen appearance of Sidney Bachet, who enters the film briefly during the wedding party as a hired musician. It is only when someone asks him to play the blues that the party reaches full swing. No wonder, for Bachet belonged to the cream of the cream among the great jazz virtuosos of the day, and his reputation in jazz history remains on par with celebrities such as Charlie Parker or John Coltrane.

## VI.

By way of conclusion one can stress once again that Edgar Ulmer managed, for the most part, to stay clear of the various pitfalls of race movies. While offering role models to his viewers, he avoided the false idealizations other similar films frequently suffered from. It is particularly thanks to the presence of the characters of Bob, Minnie and Sue that he added a much needed dimension to the more sensational – and frequently exploited – notions of Harlem as a place of music and entertainment on the one hand and organized crime on the other. In contrast



to the traditional escapist vehicles produced by the major studios, Ulmer's marginal film succeeded in conveying a sense of authenticity as well as suggesting – if only in shorthand – the extent with which the Great Depression misery hit the American minorities. While being very modest in its production aspects, and imperfect in terms of acting, the film featured most African American characters as human beings with dignity.

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