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A World Destroyed by Gold

Shared Allegories of Capital in Wagner's *Ring* and Ulmer's *Isle of Forgotten Sins*

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Lord, smile on those who smile,
Hosannah!
Grant them the wealth to live in style.
Hosannah!
Pardon their crimes against the masses.
Hosannah! Hosannah! Hosannah! Hosannah! Hosannah! Hosannah!
May God bless Rockefeller,
May God bless Henry Ford
May God bless J. P. Morgan, too,
And his great treasure hoard.
God bless Big Oil and Coal and Steel,
Send them their just reward.
May God bless sex appeal,
When wealthy men get bored,
God keep their faith and profits high,
And though the poor may starve and die,
Make sure no Earthly court will try the rich
Who rule the Earth the way you rule the sky.
Almighty Lord!

—Bertolt Brecht, *Happy End: A Melodrama with Songs*, 1929, translated
by Michael Feingold, 2006

THE BIRTH OF CINEMA OUT OF MUSIC

Before he acquiesced to the fact that only music can communicate what fails words and tableaux, Richard Wagner sought to mount *Gesamtkunstwerk*—

dramatic pageants where music, text, and special effects synthesize to create a total work of art, greater than the sum of its elements. With the advent of motion-picture photography just before the turn of the nineteenth century, the movement-image became the sibling to music, inasmuch as both now possessed music's previously unique possibility of expressing the inexpressible.

Western cinema, and especially synchronized "sound" cinema, makes making "total works of art" almost accidental, as the medium inherently lends itself to cathartic, overpowering, all-encompassing spectacle whose root can be found in Wagner's operatic revolutions of the nineteenth century.

Radical new theater techniques had been in the Norse air since Georg Büchner left his observationist plays unfinished in the 1830s and they, perhaps because of their unfinished nature, elicited a startling, strange, new dramaturgy that moved narrative along at an unstable emotional pace. Though still underrecognized in its great significance, Frank Wedekind's most indelible contribution to post-Wagner world drama was fusing Büchner's disjointed (unfinished) hyperrealism with his own distinct form of burlesque, at a time when Scandinavian drama, especially Henrik Ibsen, ruled the stage with a revolutionary, "modern" approach to the representation of European psychology. For the first time on the Western stage, unsolvable ambiguity ignited both structure and content, melding the effect into one inseparable element of performance.

From Wedekind's experimental performance works, infused with Büchner, Bertolt Brecht synthesized much of his style, so much so that we can, on an elemental level, understand Brecht's theater as the flower of Wedekindian grotesque and Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Because of its privileged place at the intersection of German cinema between the wars, Brecht's theatrical influence was inseparable from feature-length cinema, especially once the sound era ostensibly relegated the movement-image to an imitation of theater. Brecht's theater speaks most pointedly today as the European exclamation of the first half of the twentieth century. As he himself tells us, "art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it."

But indirectly, a sort of declawed Brecht permeates. His effects of alienation, seduction, and propaganda are used to trigger or merely to facilitate any old narrative today. Everything is Brechtian in our post-postmodern era. His use of the lurid, of the enticing-and-yet-forbidden, to fuel theater is the dramatic technique on which Western sound cinema (and its advertising) is based. Ultimately, when method is inseparable from narrative, the medium is the message.

With the premiere of *Happy End* in 1929, Brecht summarized this polyformatic genre that we see in his theater and in Western sound cinema's imitation of theater as "melodrama with song." Brechtian "melodramas with song" are

the defining genre of the twentieth century because they provide a format in which entertainment and allegory can coexist in an easily digestible, and perhaps commercial, form.

To a large extent—and this is made all the more convincing an observation because of the existence of exceptions, like the work of Chaplin and Dreyer—Western sound cinema has consisted of individuals creating less ambiguous representations of the personality possibilities they understand to be relevant to the items they wish to juxtapose against them. Ergo, all cinema is allegory, just as all media is propaganda, and all theater is manipulation of illusion and disillusionment.

Germany from 1919 to 1933 was a creative golden age. In that era, German theater, silent cinema, and music fused European aesthetics into technique, and for over a decade produced the most indelible images and sounds of the twentieth century. Weimar Germany is now a time of legends—Reinhardt, Brecht, Wiene, Murnau, Lang, Pabst, Weill, Schoenberg . . . It was in this fertile milieu that Edgar George Ulmer came of age. Ulmer would go on to excel at cinematic “melodramas with song.”

RECALLED TO LIFE

Western cinema has excelled at melodramas with songs—if, indeed, it is not almost totally comprised of them. Classics as diverse as *L'Atalante* (1934), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *Casablanca* (1942), *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), *The Searchers* (1956), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), *Aguirre Wrath of God* (1972), *Jaws* (1975), *Stand By Me* (1986), *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989), and *The Rock* (1995) all fit into what we can consider the “melodrama with song” genre.

Ulmer made melodramas with songs in nearly every genre, often in dip-tychs—*Thunder Over Texas* (1934) / *The Naked Dawn* (1955), *Detour* (1945) / *Murder Is My Beat* (1955), *The Wife of Monte Christo* (1946) / *Pirates of Capri* (1949)—which afford Ulmer a first and last word on genre archetypes. Like Shakespeare or the Greeks before him, Ulmer frequently assembled preexisting narratives into a new, inherently more complex whole. Ulmer's reworking of *Hamlet* as *Strange Illusion* (1945), and his reworking of Wagner's four-part music drama *Der Ring Des Nibelungen* in *Isle of Forgotten Sins* (1943), are potent reimaginings of world classics, almost postmodern in the way their simplification for the screen illustrates core truths of the source that more straightforward productions often miss. Ulmer's deconstructions, usually heavily related to his budgets, are dramaturgical inventions unthinkable in any other circumstances than their own. It is this unique essentialism that

propels intermittently moldy melodrama forward with a contrastingly sophisticated psychological expression of the profound uneasiness at the illusion of representation that any performance phenomenon offers.

Ulmer's cinema is remarkable because of its synthesis of Weimar-era theatrics at a time when the cinema afforded a massive world audience, and the European political upheavals of the 1930s created a direct migration from the film capitals of Europe, and especially Germany, to Hollywoodland, U.S.A. Ulmer's "golden hour" was his time at the Producers Releasing Corporation (PRC), where he directed some of his most evocative and distinct work, including *Bluebeard* (1944), *Detour*, and *Club Havana* (1945).

Ulmer's first major PRC movie was *Isle of Forgotten Sins*, first released in 1943 and later reissued as *Monsoon*. In it, Ulmer and composer-conductor Leo Erdody shape a dreamy South Seas adventure yarn into a meditation on philosophical themes developed in Wagner's *Ring* operas, expressing these dramatic concerns with liberal quotations of Wagnerian leitmotifs woven into the movie's almost constant underscoring. An understanding of Wagner, and the significance of each quoted *Ring* leitmotif, adds an immense layer of illumination and unexpected metaphorical depth to *Isle of Forgotten Sins*.



Figure 8.1. Film poster for *Isle of Forgotten Sins*. Courtesy of Arianné Ulmer Cipes.

CGI CAN NEVER TOP THIS!

Just as the first part of Wagner's *Ring, Das Rheingold*, begins with an unmodulated 136-bar prelude based on the chord of E-flat major (meant to represent the Rhine), *Isle of Forgotten Sins* begins with the sound of the sea. In Ulmer's work, the water sounds are followed by the swelling of an unseen orchestra and a camera pan over driftwood, on which the main titles appear. Erdody's overture fills the soundtrack, resembling an orchestra warming up before a concert. All sorts of musical phrases and percussive crescendos fly out of Erdody's pit, until this cacophony is overwhelmed by an unseen choir harmonizing, giving voice to powerful forces of nature that will eventually and apocalyptically deluge the human squabbling at the heart of *Isle of Forgotten Sins'* melodrama.

To illustrate the importance of the score's construction and its multiple authorship to the viewer, Erdody's credit reads "Music by ERDODY [. . .]," the ellipses denoting that Erdody's contribution is the final redaction of music, and that his score will draw on other composers.

Isle of Forgotten Sins opens with a subjective, nearly point-of-view tracking shot that winds down a corridor of bedrooms in a vaguely Asian setting. It is clear that we are in a brothel and that a still-unseen madam is waking her "girls" to ready themselves for fresh sailors. The musical underscoring is a noodling oriental theme that Erdody and Ulmer use to connote the exoticness, and also the toil of the prostitutes.

Marge Williams (Gale Sondergaard) is revealed to be the madam of the brothel, called the Isle of Forgotten Sins, which officially operates as a legit nightclub with live music, food, and drink. Marge reminds the women that they are under heavy scrutiny by a magistrate who is seeking any provocation to close the place. Marge tells them to clean up the floor show ("All rough stuff is taboo"), and a gong announces the opening of the establishment for the night.

Marge has a special relationship with the new prostitute, Diane (Rita Quigley). In a private moment, Marge tells Diane that it's not easy when your "modesty has taken a beating" and reminds her that "giving patrons an eye-ful is a stepping stone on [your] way home." Already, Ulmer has presented us with a world where love has been affected by capital, if not conjoined to it, and where capital and the pursuit of capital force individuals to do things that they would otherwise be uncomfortable with. In almost every one of his motion pictures, Ulmer treats money, as Al Roberts says so pointedly in *Detour*, as "paper crawling with germs." This is a direct correlation to *Der Ring*, where omnipotent power can only be achieved by theft, the violation of nature, and the forswearing of love.

In the tradition of other great Ulmer-film heroine portrayals like those of Janet Smith, Vera, and Jenny Hager, Sondergaard's approach to playing Marge is ambiguous. In her aside with Diane, we must ask the following: is Marge just trying to protect her investment in the woman? is she seducing her? or does Diane represent a daughter or a younger version of Marge herself? Ulmer often sets up these character dualities, as they serve to transform the under-written into the fertiley suggestive by the nearly total ambiguity of performance. In montage theory, this technique is named the Kuleshov effect.

The action of *Isle of Forgotten Sins* moves aboard a docked ship belonging to Jack Burke (Frank Fenton). Below deck, Burke has tied up shipmate Clancy (John Carradine). Stealing his money, Burke makes for the Isle of Forgotten Sins. Arriving there, he takes Marge to her office, tells her that her lover Clancy is dead, and proposes that they run off together. As Marge is weighing her options, Clancy bounds in, mad as hell, and he and Burke fight.

Burke and Clancy's sparring is gleeful and joyous; they attack each other with a verve and flirtation that physically illustrates the complex and often contradictory bonds they share. Almost immediately, the men break the table lamp and the room plunges into near darkness. Here, Ulmer undercranks the camera and the drama gains momentum by being captured in a jittery fast motion. Clancy and Burke's fisticuffs spill into the nightclub centrum, and in a matter of moments they have nearly destroyed the place. The patrons are greatly amused that the club is living up to its wild reputation. After Clancy has beaten Burke unconscious, a plantation owner named Carruthers (Sidney Toler) injects himself into the fray and leads the club in celebrating the new champ, buying all a round of drinks.

Money makes Burke and Clancy fast friends again. Clancy has recognized Carruthers, through his distinctive "banshee laugh," as a missing sea captain named Krogan. Six months earlier, Krogan had been captain of the *Tropic Star*, which sank under mysterious circumstances, taking its cargo of three million dollars in gold to a watery grave. Clancy surmises that Krogan sank the ship on purpose and reckons that Krogan must have the gold on his island, or that the treasure is still with the sunken ship. The appearance of Krogan's first mate, now using the name Johnny Pacific (Rick Vallin), confirms to Clancy that Carruthers is Krogan. Clancy tells Burke that there will be "so much money for both of us" that they will have "no reason to double cross each other." Clancy and Burke shake hands on joining forces and pledge to fight "back-to-back," not between themselves.

Chaos again erupts at the Isle of Forgotten Sins as a man falls from the balcony onto the main dance floor and dies, having been shot by Olga (Betty Amann), one of the dancers. The visiting magistrate places everyone in the

club under “technical arrest,” leading to riotous panic breaking out as patrons and club employees alike scramble to escape the law.

Burke, Clancy, Marge, and some of Marge’s women flee in Burke’s ship with the club’s cash. They set their course for Moran Island, where Caruthers/Krogan has his plantation. Burke and Clancy plot to use the women as a distraction for Krogan and Pacific while they snoop around to figure out what has become of the *Tropic Star*’s gold. For their part, Clancy promises Marge and the other women a share despite Burke’s objections. Diane wants nothing to do with gold, and her forfeited share is claimed at gunpoint by Olga, who has also fled to the island.

The action switches to Krogan, Johnny, and their concubine Luana (Veda Ann Borg) on Moran Island. As they watch Burke, Clancy, and Marge arrive on Burke’s boat, we hear the first Wagner leitmotiv quoted on the soundtrack, as shown in figure 8.2. It’s Hunding’s theme from Act I of *Die Walküre*, the second of Wagner’s four *Ring* operas. In *Walküre*, Sieglinde has been separated from her twin brother Siegmund and forced into a marriage with Hunding, a warrior from an uncivilized tribe. Act I begins with Siegmund finding Sieglinde in Hunding’s hut, where she lives as an abused sex slave. Wounded and fleeing pursuers, Siegmund asks who she is and where he is. Sieglinde replies, “Dies Haus und dies Weib sind Hundings Eigen,” roughly, “This house and this woman are Hunding’s possessions”; and, with that line, Hunding’s leitmotiv sounds on a muted horn. In *Isle of Forgotten Sins*, the horn call represents the pending battle between Clancy-Burke and Krogan-Pacific, just as in *Walküre* it anticipates the Hunding-versus-Siegmund battle at the climax of the second act. In *Der Ring*, the horn’s balefulness painfully evokes Sieglinde’s imprisoning marriage to Hunding, and in *Isle of Forgotten Sins* it evokes the way the women are treated as objects by men.

In one of the most lyrical moments of *Isle of Forgotten Sins*, Marge and the other women go on a moonlit swim with Krogan and Pacific. The soundtrack merges music, the sound of water, and the chatting of the characters into an intriguing ambient soundscape; where the story is being told visually, the soundtrack is a muddled reflection of the emotions displayed and sug-



Figure 8.2.

gested on the screen. Ulmer's pioneering use of the limitations of his sound, where we get the gist rather than word-for-word audibility, anticipates Robert Altman's deservedly famous layered stereo soundscapes, and illustrates yet again Ulmer's miraculous skill at using the meagerness of his budget to his artistic advantage.

As Krogan forces himself on one of the women in the water, *Isle of Forgotten Sins* cuts to Clancy and Burke searching the plantation house. Clancy finds a map of where the *Tropic Star* went down, and he and Burke surmise that the gold is still at the bottom of the sea, ripe for looting.

Forty-two minutes into *Isle of Forgotten Sins*, the twenty-four-minute centerpiece deep-sea diving sequence commences. Clancy commands the ship and air bellows, while Burke goes down, an air line and microphone his umbilical cord to the surface. Burke is represented underwater by Ulmer photographing a puppet in a tank. The *Rheingold* E-flat-major Prelude chord emerges, as if from the depths of the brine, on the soundtrack.

In *Rheingold*, the head god, Wotan, in acquiescence to the nagging of his wife Fricka, has hired giants, Fafner and brother Fasolt, to build a home. With it, Fricka hopes for a hearth that will keep her adulterous husband from further infidelities. However, fearing the destruction of the gods, Wotan has turned Fricka's dream house into a fortress and agreed (earnestly or not—it is never clear) to trade Fricka's sister Freia, goddess of youth, to Fafner and Fasolt as payment for the castle (named Valhalla). Not only is Fricka outraged at this selling of her sister, but the race of gods clamors for Freia's return because they age rapidly when not revitalized by her magic apples. Wotan turns to crafty half-god, and sometimes adversary, Loge to help free Freia from his contract with the giants. Loge recounts how the Nibelung gnome Alberich has recently gained a gold hoard by stealing the magic *Rheingold*—which can only be taken from nature by the renunciation of love—and forging it into a magic ring granting omnipotence. Loge suggests that Alberich's booty, gained via the ring's magic, might prove a worthy substitute payment. Enticed, the giants agree to accept the treasure in lieu of Freia. Amorally but legally, Wotan and Loge then trick and trap Alberich, who under threat of death relinquishes the ring and the hoard to the gods, but not before he curses the ring, and all who come into contact with it, with envy, unslakable lust, and death. These events, in the concluding part of *Der Ring, Götterdämmerung*, result in the immolation of the gods and the rebirth of the natural world through a catastrophic flood.

In *Isle of Forgotten Sins*, we have a simplification of the *Rheingold* argument, where Ulmer reduces Wagner's panoptic *Ring* universe to a relatively elemental story of one pair of crime partners using a second to help them steal some gold—the equivalent of the *Rheingold* subplot wherein Wotan

and Loge (re)steal the gold from Alberich, who first stole it from the Rhine. Just as Wotan is unwilling to renounce love but desires unlimited power and therefore needs Alberich to steal the gold, Krogan-Pacific need Clancy-Burke to obtain the treasure for them from the bottom of the ocean.

One of Wagner's greatest dramatic reforms was his attention to soundscape. His music, and music in general he would argue, is meant to invoke the drama as well as the movement within the created space—the descent and return to Nibelheim in *Rheingold* or “Siegfried's Rhine Journey” in *Götterdämmerung* are but the two of the most prominent examples of this “cinematic” technique in *Der Ring*. Wagner's dramatic innovations were not confined to the music and text of his shows; rather, with the construction of the Bayreuth Festival House, he moved performing art closer to installation and away from presentation by seeking a total effect. With that in mind, the Bayreuth orchestra pit is covered, so that the audience's vision is directed to the stage, and the sonorities of the instrumentation blend seamlessly with the actors' voices. Thus, the audience is immersed in the created world and therefore must navigate its own role in the drama and allegory at hand. The contemporary parallel to the effect of Wagner's covered orchestra pit and a movie's nondiegetic scoring, once we see the interchangeability of the disciplines of music drama, opera, and movies, is what we name the “cinematic.”

At first, Burke's excursion under the sea in *Isle of Forgotten Sins* brings no sign of the treasure. He remarks to Clancy that there is “nothing but sand” at the bottom of the sea. On the soundtrack, the Rhinemaidens' lament for their stolen *Rheingold* punctuates Clancy's frustration. In *Rheingold*, the gold is stolen from its rightful place in nature, and through the power of the renunciation of love by Alberich directly, and Wotan indirectly, it takes on a supernatural importance that brings about the destruction of the world order. In *Isle of Forgotten Sins*, Ulmer/Erdody use this allusion to underscore how money taints love, and greed leads to destruction.

Clancy stirs the frustrated Burke on, telling him not to be discouraged because the gold's “got to be somewhere.” Burke urges Clancy to “check the map.” Dramatically parallel, the motif of Erda's warning of the gold's destructive force from *Rheingold* follows his line (figure 8.3). Clancy finds the wrecked *Tropic Star* and Ulmer/Erdody harness the exuberant music that accompanies the revelation of the treasure in scene 1 of *Rheingold* (figure 8.4).

For the next few minutes, quotations from *Rheingold*'s prelude, the Rhinemaidens' lament, and Erda's warning repeat on the soundtrack. Clancy ascends from the depths; his relief at being safely back on the surface is expressed by a repetition of the joyous “*Rheingold* Revelation” leitmotiv. All is not calm on the surface, however—as the *Rheingold* prelude sounds below, a tremendous monsoon (represented by naturalistic sound effects and the double exposure



Figure 8.3.

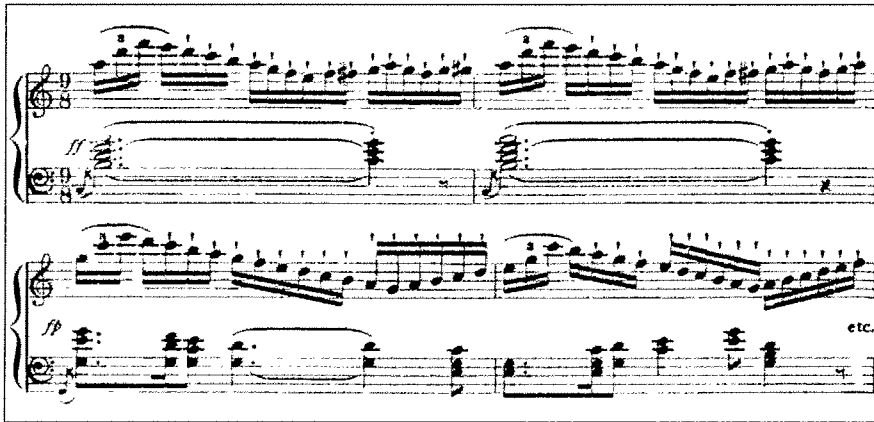


Figure 8.4.

of stock footage) builds in the sky above. Just as Wagner often incorporates diegetic sounds (e.g., anvils, steerhorns, fluepipes) into his total musical theater, Ulmer incorporates natural sounds to compound and contrast with Erdody's nearly overweening underscoring. The tension of this music-sound effects dichotomy mounts until it is expressed by the unseen chorus that sings a lively jig, recapitulating the narrative of the adventure for gold before us. In *Der Ring*, Wagner often has secondary characters reiterate major themes, using them to provide new details or explain situations differently from how we have previously understood them. Ulmer's/Erdody's vocal chorus provides this effect, but in a modern way—"modern" insofar as Erdody's choral song has an *alienation effect* from the drama at hand. Erdody's song asks the audience to consider the "why" of the adventure. Enamored of Greek drama, Wagner wanted the orchestra to replace the chorus. In *Isle of Forgotten Sins*, Ulmer uses Erdody's score as his Wagnerian Greek chorus. When lyrics are added to Erdody's music, the effect becomes Brechtian because, rather than drawing us further into the illusion, it questions the illusion, forcing the exploration of metaphor.

Clancy takes his turn diving, and Burke commands the ship in the face of worsening weather as Krogan-Pacific poise themselves to ambush the team. Unable to dive for the gold themselves, it is revealed that Krogan-Pacific have lured Clancy-Burke into doing the hard work for them. With its interwoven chords representing hard labor and mighty strength, the giants' leitmotiv from *Rheingold* is shown in figure 8.5, making explicit the affinity between Wotan-Loge using Fafner-Fasolt, and Krogan-Pacific using Clancy-Burke.

As Krogan orders his native minions to attack Clancy-Burke and take the gold, the Rhinemaidens' motif again fills the soundtrack; yet this time it is their reintroduction music from their final, more somber, appearance in *Der Ring*, at the top of Act III of *Götterdämmerung*. The familiar but transformed music of the Rhinemaidens' third *Ring* appearance underscores both the futility of humankind's quest for gold and the destruction that the gold wreaks, causing people to forswear love for tangible assists and therefore betray their souls. In *Isle of Forgotten Sins* the gold has distracted all of Ulmer's characters, save the sage native king of Moran Island, from the danger of the impending monsoon, just as in *Der Ring* the gold distracts nearly everyone from the impending *Götterdämmerung*.

The giants' leitmotiv appears again to accompanying Clancy-Burke's raising of the chest of gold from the sunken *Tropic Star*. Ulmer's/Erdody's Wagner quotes then shift to the music of the "Gods' Entrance to Valhalla" from the end of *Rheingold*. While outwardly celebratory, the music carries with it the knowledge that the creation of Valhalla has sealed the gods' fate, and that they have already begun to destroy themselves.

Clancy fakes having the bends so that Burke will bring him to the surface before the gold. As with Fafner and Fasolt, distrust and envy are core tenets of the men's relationship. Eventually in *Rheingold*, Fafner kills Fasolt for the treasure, and in *Isle of Forgotten Sins*, the suspicion of a double cross is never far from either Burke's or Clancy's mind. The fear that one man will desert the other to feed his self-interest permeates the diving sequence, and this is the same net of fear that most of *Der Ring*'s characters find themselves trapped in because of gold. Erdody works the giants' leitmotiv and the "Gods' Entrance to Valhalla" music into a feverish cycle, until the moment when the trunk of gold is tugged to the surface and the "Revelation of the Rheingold" quotation again sounds.

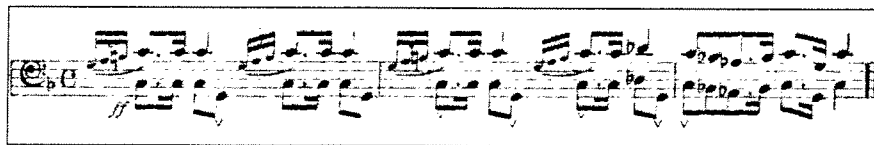


Figure 8.5.

As Burke helps Clancy on board, the giants' leitmotiv repeats yet another time. As Clancy "recovers" from faking the bends, the Valhalla music, that is, the music of false victory, further echoes in Erdody's underscoring.

Clancy and Burke take the chest of gold to a dark room. They open the chest, and the gold finally lies before them after their intense subterfuge and labors. Ulmer chooses to have the gold remain dark (and, without a close-up, loveless) in the chest. In a rare moment, Erdody's score is silent, the Greek "chorus" of *Isle of Forgotten Sins* muted while ghostly winds rage outside to accompany the scene. Burke pays his crew their share of the gold, and he and Clancy are left alone to haggle over the rest. Burke proposes a 2-to-1 split. Clancy objects, but Burke tells him that since he has furnished the diving equipment, boat, and crew, he deserves a larger share. Burke reminds Clancy that the knowledge of the gold was his. Clancy is unimpressed, as to him, the idea of something is not the same as the means to do it. In *Rheingold* this is directly analogous to Fafner telling Fasolt that he has more right to the gold because Fasolt wanted Freia more than he desires the Nibelung hoard and the Ring, which Wotan has substituted as payment. As they dispute the distribution of the gold, Clancy and Burke fight more violently than ever before, trashing the room and knocking over a lamp, which begins a fire as the monsoon approaches outside.

The finale of *Isle of Forgotten Sins* echoes the finale of *Der Ring*, in which Wotan's disowned daughter Brunnhilde ignites a fire that (supernaturally) rages out of control. After the immolation brings about the dusk of the gods, the Rhine waters rise, flooding everything in their embryonic fluids. In Wagner's world, the corrupt social order has fallen and is ready to be rebirthed out of nature. Whether this rebirth will be a perpetuation of the cycle or a new, better phase of humanity is the ambiguous question that Wagner's music meditates on in the final minutes of *Götterdämmerung*.

Krogan-Pacific board Burke's boat and interrupt Burke and Clancy's fight. They confine Burke-Clancy to a closet, which Pacific nails shut. Krogan-Pacific abscond with the gold and blow up Burke's ship, but Burke and Clancy escape at the very last minute as the monsoon hits Moran Island full blast.

Marge and the other women wait for the men to return to the plantation house. Olga reveals that she betrayed Burke and Clancy's looting plans to Johnny Pacific. As she and Marge are about to fight, Krogan and Pacific return with the gold and the news that Clancy and Burke are dead. Olga pulls a gun, demanding the gold; but when she goes to fire, her gat is empty. Krogan laughs at Olga, telling her that he neutered her gun, remembering her bad habit of shooting people, and knocks her to the ground with his hands.

Suddenly, Krogan turns a gun on everyone, including his partner Pacific, and claims the entire treasure hoard for himself. "As long as we're having a

showdown," he says, "we might as well make it a good one." Pacific objects, saying that Krogan didn't know about the gold being on board the *Tropic Star* until he informed him. Krogan calls Pacific a "weak sister" who "didn't have innards enough to steal it" alone. With this final turn of events, Ulmer makes the parallels between the Krogan-Pacific and Clancy-Burke relationships explicitly clear. The couples are doubles for each other—there are no heroes where gold is concerned.

Pacific fires his pistol at Krogan. Krogan shoots back; and after exchanging six shots each, both men slump to the ground dead. At that very minute, Burke and Clancy waltz in, the former noting the "nice shooting" of his slain adversaries. Luana takes a gun off the floor and points it at Burke and Clancy. Burke removes the gun from her as if she were a child, and tells her that Clancy "can't give you the gold, but I can." Luana falls into Burke's embrace. As when Alberich lovelessly woos Grimhild with gold to mate and sire an heir, the women in *Isle of Forgotten Sins* all have their price for companionship.

At the very moment that Luana trades love for gold, the eye of the monsoon wrecks the plantation house and washes Burke, Clancy, and the women out to sea in an apocalyptic frenzy. In ragged, open waters, Clancy holds Marge and Diane to a piece of driftwood. Exhausted, Marge tells Clancy that she cannot hang on much longer. Clancy holds her, and himself, against the raft as Marge tries to sacrifice herself to the stormy sea. The monsoon rages harder, and we fade out on Clancy clutching Diane and Marge to the raft, as it appears that they may be, or are being, overcome by the waves.

For the coda of *Isle of Forgotten Sins*, we fade in on a peaceful skyline after the monsoon has passed. We find Marge minding the till at the Bird Cage Café. Erdody's oriental theme from the beginning of *Isle of Forgotten Sins* perfumes the soundtrack after a long absence. Marge stands by the cash register, a picture of an embracing Burke and Diane at its side. Clancy appears, looking disoriented. He pours himself a drink, and asks Marge for money for another scheme which he promises to fill her in on later. Marge gives Clancy the money, thrilled that her man needs her and always comes back to her, yet worried at what worse fate could result from Clancy's shenanigans. Clancy runs out, and Marge slams the register shut wearily. She is left looking after her man as we fade out on Sondergaard's wry smile.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

The most remarkable aspect of Ulmer's PRC films is their subjective use of the unconscious as a cinematic location, the tone of which places the entire context in a dream state. For Ulmer, it's the logical alchemy of the

silent expressionist-philosopher awoken by the vulgar clamor of sync sound. The epilogue to *Isle of Forgotten Sins* in the Bird Cage Café easily plays as Marge's satirically bourgeois death dream, projected as she loses her struggle with the monsoon. Because everyone is alive and accounted for in the Café coda, it is a "happy ending" sure to please censors and studio brass alike. However, when examined, this happy end is anything but, as Marge finds herself trapped in the existential living hell of perpetually almost having what she most desires.

Detour possesses a similar dream ending. In the final shot, it is uncertain whether Al is narrating his capture by the authorities, or projecting a fantasy of capture that will absolve him of the constant fear of detention that torments him more truly than any physical incarceration ever could. In *Detour*, the law (represented by a squad car) finally catches up with Al by the side of a highway. The ridiculousness of the cops' putting him in the car; pulling away; and then having to stop to reclose the door, only to drive away again, is a detail—a final (?) detour—so preposterously mundane that it reiterates the complete stench of failure and almost-success that Ulmer assembles around Roberts with the skill of a slapstick comedian.

In these dreamy happy ends, Ulmer's synthesis of technique and material is at its most unquestionably successful. Moving the narrative into metaphor by harnessing the concept of "dream," Ulmer exposes his artifice, and this exposure better illustrates the narrative just presented than the actual first-person experience of spectatorship. Ever the psychoanalytic director, Ulmer moves praxis to this subconscious climax, which forces the immediate review of the action in the viewer's conscious, making the true experience of watching an Ulmer movie one of remembrance—most resplendently cathartic when experienced in personal retrospect. As a unique result, the memory of an Ulmer movie is often stronger than the experience of watching one, as Ulmer's cinema becomes dream.

In his famous February 1970 interview with Peter Bogdanovich, printed in *Who the Devil Made It—Conversations with Legendary Film Directors*, Ulmer remarks, "I really am looking for absolution for all the things I had to do for money's sake." It is easy to understand the frustration of a man more talented than his means, who was so crafty at making so much out of so little that his skill confined most of his cinematic expressions to B-programmers and genre exercises. In *Isle of Forgotten Sins*, both Krogan-Pacific and Burke-Clancy struggle with ideas versus means, and this film is but one example of Ulmer illustrating capital's destructive influence on creativity. From *The Black Cat* (1934) to *Ruthless* (1948) to *The Amazing Transparent Man* (1960) to *The Cavern* (1964), wealth is the constant antagonist to love and can only be achieved by love's renunciation. This Wagnerian struggle in

Ulmer festers until it tears an Ulmer movie apart in a “Liebestod”-like climax, always—sometimes insanely—celebrating the unconscious’s true dominion over the soul.

As a result of Ulmer’s unique dramaturgy, where catharsis is welded to memory, Erdody’s musical underscoring abstracts his collaborations with Ulmer closer to ballet or opera than traditional sync cinema. As in opera, time in Ulmer becomes an emotional reality rather than a naturalistic one—the *mise-en-scène* lasts the duration of the created emotional phenomenon, rather than representing the actual time of interactions. Once created in the actor’s deliberate performance, this emotional time is charted in the sculpting of spaces by Ulmer’s camera, which induces an intentional vertigo in the spectator—which, in turn, places much of Ulmer’s cinema in the dream state, demanding interpretation for full understanding. Tracking shots, such as the magistrate’s entrance into the Isle of Forgotten Sins, reveal as much as they obscure, often doubling over the same studio space, oddly claiming it for multiple purposes within the same frame. Camera pullbacks remove spectators from the volatility of the characters’ interpersonal interactions, presenting them as cosmic targets unaware of how at the mercy of their environment (often referred to as “fate”) they are. Push-ins, as when Marge is waiting for the men to return with the gold, remove us from a larger panorama and focus the spectator on specific character obsessions, so empathetically illustrated as to threaten to overwhelm the thrust of genre/plot at any time. When Ulmer arrives at his climaxes, these obsessions overwhelm presentation and reveal themselves to be what the movie has really been about.

Finally, each Ulmer movie is a struggle between capital and love, bisected by vertical lines of light and divided into a primal binary between darkness and light. Because Ulmer rarely had the means to lavishly illustrate his scripts, the shadow plays he devises to represent that which he cannot conjure create a far richer presentation than all the gold in the world could buy. As Godard tells us, “Art attracts us only by what it reveals of our most secret self.”

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