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Empty Spaces and Backward Glances: Edgar Ulmer's *Detour* and the Exilic Experience

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by Jessica Davis

In many ways, the American road should be the perfect place for an émigré in exile to affirm a sense of identity and celebrate America as their new utopian home. As Andrew Cross suggests in his article "Driving the American Landscape," the long-distance journey across the American road provides direct access to American culture for those Europeans wishing to experience it on its "home turf" (249). Similarly, the road film, espousing values of freedom and self-fulfillment, also offers this point of access to American culture. The road film's intimate link to American culture also makes it the perfect genre to undermine the myth of the road and expose the difficulties of living in exile. Exiled director Edgar Ulmer's noir road film, *Detour* (1945) does just this. While it participates in the classic American journey west, *Detour* directly subverts the optimistic traditions of the American road film, creating a perfect metaphor for the exile experience and a sharp critique of the American myth of the road.

The Road, the West, and Exile

As film scholar Timothy Corrigan describes, the road narrative is a distinctly post-war phenomenon (143). With Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, the seminal America road text, still twelve years into the future, *Detour*'s release in 1945 sits at the infancy days of the American road genre. While one might think *Detour*'s early release date precludes it from subverting the norms of a genre that had yet to be developed, the mythology of the American road begins long before the advent of the post-war road text. The roots of the American road myth lie in the history and mythology of the American frontier. As Jean Welsh states in her essay on the landmark road film, *Thelma and Louise*, "[the desert road] is iconic of both the road movie and the western and encourages particular generic expectations. It connotes not just the wide open spaces of the American West, but the freedom and self-determination coded into the myth of 'the West' and popularized by Hollywood" (215). Welsh's comments are key because they connect the road genre with the established and culturally fundamentally American Myth of the West.

While one could view *Detour* as simply a critique of the American road genre, when considered in conjunction with writings about exile, particularly those of Edward Said and Hannah Arendt, *Detour* becomes a much clearer reflection of the exilic experience. In particular, two themes arise in the works of Said and Arendt that relate directly to *Detour*: one, that exile is a purgatorial experience of existing in the in-between, and two, exile is a condition that destabilizes identity. As will be discussed

below, these important characteristics of exile are inherent in *Detour*'s structure, characters, and depiction of the American landscape, and are essential to interpreting the film as an exile text.

But before delving deeper into an examination of *Detour*, it is important to discuss how Said and Arendt describe the exilic condition and identity because their thoughts provide a suitable framework for looking at *Detour*. Referring specifically to exile as a state of "in-betweenness" (to borrow Noah Isenberg's phrasing) Said describes exile as a "perilous territory of not belonging" (Isenberg 4; Said 140). Here, Said's description of exile characterizes the exilic experience as a space where one can neither go back to their original community, nor move forward and belong to the new community. The exile is essentially trapped in a cultural limbo, disconnected from both returning to the old and joining the new.

Consequently, this state of non-belonging causes a crisis of identity. As Arendt writes (albeit specifically about the Jewish exile population) the exile may full-heartedly embrace the cultural and national identity of their new home, but ultimately the new culture sees through this adopted identity and rejects it as inauthentic (260). In short, without a definite community to identify with, the exile's identity is equally as homeless, lost in the journey from old to new.

Moving West, But Looking East

Detour's plot structure perfectly creates the sense of purgatorial existence Said discusses. Specifically, by overlaying a road film with a film noir flashback structure, *Detour* completely nullifies the forward moving structure of its road film elements, creating a frustrating, hopeless, and stagnating sense of "in-betweenness." Typically in road films, forward, linear movement and a quest for freedom and discovery characterize the plot structure (Corrigan and White 318). While it may be less obvious, *Detour* does possess these qualities typical of the road genre.

Detour's protagonist Roberts, for example, initially possesses the desire for both literal and figurative forward mobility. Despite his obvious cynicism, Roberts wants to see Sue, his girlfriend, succeed in Hollywood, and he himself wants to leave behind the struggles of being a no-name pianist in a small club. Like those Europeans forced into exile during the war, Roberts wants to use his westward mobility as a way to create a new life for himself and loved-ones.

However, *Detour* also uses retrospective narration to create, as Paul Schrader calls it in his article "Notes on Film Noir," "temps perdu" (104). Translated as "lost time," temps perdu creates a sense of "an irretrievable past, a predetermined fate, and an all-enveloping hopelessness" within the narrative (104). In *Detour*, Roberts's retrospective, noir-style narration concedes from the very beginning of the film that his

and Sue's hopes ultimately remain unfulfilled and his westward journey is completely in vain, creating Schrader's sense of temps perdu. For example, Roberts's initial section of narration immediately alerts the audience that Roberts's journey fails to go as planned. "Did you ever want to forget anything? Did you ever want to cut away a piece of your memory or blot it out?" Roberts asks the audience, signaling that no matter how his story begins, it is fated to end unhappily.

The conflict between the two generic structures creates the sense of limbo within the narrative. Whenever *Detour*'s conventional road film characteristics attempt forward momentum and positive development, Roberts's cynical and retrograde noir narration holds it back, leaving Roberts lost somewhere in the middle. For instance, just before Roberts begins his journey across the country he speaks to Sue on the phone with uninhibited optimism. During the conversation, he reassures her that her singing career will succeed, expresses his intense desire to see her again, and even plans for them to get married as soon as he makes it to Los Angeles. In addition to the conversation, Roberts ends the scene with a rare smile. All of these elements yearn for forward movement and should set up Roberts's journey as a fulfilling one that ends successfully, but less than two minutes later in the film Roberts's narration exhorts the dangers of hitchhiking and then muses, "If only I had known what I was getting into that day in Arizona." This scene completely nullifies any hope the previous scene created, leaving Roberts without a definite destination and no home to return to. In essence, Roberts exists in Said's exilic-like state of "in-betweenness." For every mile he moves forward, the audience knows it ultimately leads nowhere. For every small promise of happiness the prospective destination holds, the audience knows it will never be fulfilled. As Roberts tells his story he is stalled at a roadside diner, frozen by the overwhelming prospect of where to go next, but limited by where his past precludes him from going. He is trapped between two places, unable to connect with either.

Identity in the Empty Landscape and "Non-space of Modernity"

Fittingly, *Detour*'s landscape is as grim as the film itself. As Paul Cantor describes, "It is, in fact, extraordinary how empty the American landscape is in *Detour*—miles and miles of bleak and inhospitable terrain. All Roberts encounters on his journey west are gas stations, motels, roadside cafes, and, finally… a drive in restaurant" (155). Here, Cantor captures the bareness and monotony of *Detour*'s spaces perfectly. But this emptiness goes beyond the mere aesthetic qualities of the landscape and roadside establishments; it is at the heart of the very spaces themselves. And because this emptiness is total, when Roberts gives everything to the road, including his complete identity, the landscape gives nothing in return. For as Roberts travels through the barren desert, stopping at the cafés and motels along the

way, he finds neither meaning nor hope, only reminders of everything he has lost in the act of travel.

This negative depiction of the American landscape is directly at odds with American road mythology and the conventional road film. As discussed previously, the American desert road, through its associations with the Myth of the West, traditionally signifies freedom and self-determination. In essence, the desert is a space to strike out on one's own and conquer whatever problems arise or already exist. In this view, the desert landscape and roadside spaces are enriching spaces, holding all the potential of discovery, development of the self, and fulfillment.

But, as *Detour* suggests, the desert and its roadside spaces are not necessarily the nurturing and meaningful spaces American mythology claims they are. As philosopher Jean Baudrillard writes of the desert, "The inhumanity of our ulterior, asocial, superficial world immediately finds its aesthetic form here, its ecstatic form. For the desert is simply that: an ecstatic critique of culture, an ecstatic form of disappearance" (5). Here Baudrillard claims the desert is the truest reflection of American culture, not because it represents a great American space where enlightenment and freedom are found, but because American culture, like the desert, is ultimately empty.

Similarly, the commercial spaces scattered along the desert road hold no value either. These roadside cafés, motels, and gas stations, as Christopher Pinney describes in his article "Automonster," "[refuse] poetic adhesion, [its] surfaces hostile to the tropical complexity of metaphor" (231). In other words, these roadside establishments form a space, or "non-space of modernity" as Pinney labels it, that holds no meaning: its homogeneity and blandness lacks even the smallest foothold for metaphor or significance to latch on to. When looking at Baudrillard and Pinney in conjunction with one another, they depict an incredibly bleak image of American spaces of travel. Unlike these spaces in traditional road films, Baudrillard's and Pinney's landscape and spaces offer the traveller no means of forming an identity by the processes of moving through the landscape.

What best exemplifies this emptiness in *Detour* is its rear projection landscapes. These landscapes epitomize both Baudrillard and Pinney's description of the American roadside landscape. As Roberts travels through the desert, it is difficult for the viewer to distinguish one landscape projection from the next; they are monotonous, inconspicuous, and offer none of the sublime beauty often seen from the landscape in other road films, such as *Easy Rider* (1969) or *Thelma and Louise* (1991). While it is true the repetitive and bland nature of the rear projections is most likely a direct result of *Detour*'s poverty row budget, they are not any less appropriate than the landscapes of *Easy Rider* or *Thelma and Louise*. If anything, these landscape projections are completely apt. Not once in the film does the background appear

glaringly incorrect or unsuitable. As empty and homogenous as they may be, these rear projections represent the actual American landscape.

But *Detour*'s empty landscape and "non-space of modernity" push this a step further than mere emptiness. Not only are these monotonous, purgatorial spaces empty of meaning; they are vampiric and corrupting spaces that ultimately mean death for Haskell, Vera, and Roberts's identities. For example, Vera, an experienced hitchhiker whom Roberts picks up and eventually murders accidentally, possesses no stable identity by the time she meets Roberts. After Roberts first picks Vera up and asks her about herself, her answers are vague and suggest no constant home, destination, or identity. When Roberts asks how far she is going, she simply returns the question eventually responding that Los Angeles is "good enough." Similarly, when he asks her name, she vaguely responds, "You can call me Vera if you like," leaving the audience to ponder whether this is her real name or a protective pseudonym. Again, when Roberts ask where Vera is from, she shortly responds, "Oh, back there." While this scene overtly establishes Vera as lacking a secure identity, *Detour* goes on to more subtly align her with the death of identity. As she takes a brief nap in the car, Roberts observes, "She lay sprawled out with her head resting against the car door— like Haskell." Not only does this brief comment align Vera with Haskell, the grifter who loses his identity to Roberts after mysteriously dying, but it also aligns her with Haskell's literal death, suggesting her own identity is already, at least somewhat, dead.

Haskell's loss of identity on the road is particularly compelling since he provides the closest attachment to literal exile in the film. As Haskell tells Roberts while showing him an impressive scar on his arm, he willingly exiled himself from his family after a violent incident involving an antique saber. Roberts learns later in the film that after Haskell's departure from his family, Haskell lived as nothing more than a transient bookie and small time conman. While Haskell's conman career already suggests an unstable identity, it is his literal death on the road that ultimately causes the figurative death of his identity. After Haskell inexplicably dies while Roberts is driving, Roberts hides Haskell's body and steals his clothes, his car, his wallet—his complete identity—in an attempt to cover up Haskell's death. In short, the act of constantly travelling through these empty, unhealthy spaces in a purgatorial state of exile causes the complete death of not just Haskell's identity, but of Haskell himself.

Finally, Roberts also loses his identity to the road. But unlike Haskell or Vera, he seems distinctly aware of what he is losing. As Roberts himself notes after trading identities with the dead Haskell, "I left nothing in the car to give me away as Roberts. If they found a dead man in the gully now, it would be me." Here, Roberts acknowledges that he must sacrifice his own identity to the desert and road—spaces that demand everything, but provides nothing—if he wishes to remain mobile. By the time Roberts reaches the dingy roadside café from wherein he narrates the film, he is an empty shell. When a fellow customer jovially inquires where he is going and what

direction he is travelling from, Roberts's answers are as vague and as hostile as Vera's were to Roberts's own questions.

And the café itself, as a part of Pinney's "non-space," continues to drain Roberts of what little sense of self and sanity he has left. As he sits sipping his coffee, the jukebox begins to play "I Can't Believe You're In Love With Me," the song he and Sue used to perform together at the club in New York. In essence, the café fails to offer Roberts any sense of hope or identity; it only reminds him of what he has lost—everything. Now, he is no longer Roberts, and he is no longer Haskell: he is simply a husk that is as empty as the spaces he travelled through. Like Arendt's exile, the act of travel disconnects Roberts's identity from both his original home and his destination, leaving him permanently damaged and homeless.

An Empty End to Empty Dreams

As a metaphor for exile, *Detour* offers little comfort: its spaces barren, its characters irreparably damaged, and its structure always looking in the rearview mirror. Perhaps, as a B-film shot by an exiled director on Hollywood's poverty row, *Detour* offers the B-American dream—a dream where the westward road, instead of offering fulfillment on route to a new and better self and home, exists as a draining and empty space that forever refuses genuine meaning.

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