

**The File on Robert Siodmak in Hollywood:
1941-1951**

by
J. Greco

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INTRODUCTION PRONOUNCED SEE-ODD-MACK

Making a film is a matter of cooperation. If you look at the final credits, which nobody reads except for insiders, then you are surprised to see how many colleagues you had who took care of all the details. Everyone says, 'I made the film' and doesn't realize that in the case of a success all branches of film making contributed to it. The director, of course, has everything under control.

—Robert Siodmak, November 1971

A book on Robert Siodmak needs an introduction. Although he worked ten years in Hollywood, 1941 to 1951, and made 23 movies, many of them widely popular thrillers and crime melodramas, which critics today regard as classics of film noir, his name never became etched into the collective consciousness. Not like Alfred Hitchcock's name, the director with whom he was inevitably compared as a potential rival.

By 1946, following the success of The Killers, the film that brought Siodmak name recognition and his only Oscar nomination, he was touted by "Hollywood oracles," reported Time magazine, as "'the new master of suspense.'" To his credit, it seems, he created more suspenseful, psychologically disposed films noirs than any director who worked in that style, twelve in all. And yet, it is an identification that proved professionally fatal. As the noir cycle had run its course by the 50s, so had Siodmak's career in America.

"A sensible and reliable director," as Siodmak liked to call himself, he was also a good company man who could adapt and compromise, frequently with success. But after all, when Siodmak came to America in 1939, he was already well versed in studio politics, having directed six features for impresario/producer Erich Pommer at UFA (Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft), the prodigious German film company, and nine features in France between 1934 and 1939 (where he was well on his way to becoming a successor to Rene Clair until the Nazis came and was forced to flee). Siodmak turned out several B-films and programmers for Paramount, Republic, and 20th-Century Fox before his seven-year contract with Universal studios in 1943. It secured him and his wife Bertha a good life in Hollywood: by 1946 he was earning about

\$6,000 a week. By then he had also earned a reputation for professionalism within the industry. In fact, it is believed his services as house director were often used to salvage troublesome productions at Universal (*Swell Guy* is one that I know of). Although valued as a skilled technician, Siodmak was never sold to the public as a name director. The studio did not have to, really. His films were successful on their own and, consequently, better known than he. They were, Pauline Kael observed, “often mistakenly attributed to other directors or to highly publicized producers.”

Ironically, even though Siodmak’s best work is in the 40s, it is because he had so ensconced himself within the studio system that his Hollywood career and contributions to our popular culture have been largely neglected over the years (not coincidentally, Siodmak—“the original self-imposed exile,” he once said—bowed out of American cinema early in 1952 as the studio system was ending). The prevailing consensus on Siodmak is that he “was never more than an assignment director,” as film historian David Thomson puts it (526). He also wonders if Siodmak “was ever what we might think of as an artist, an author, someone taking sole responsibility” (“Cottage” 21).

Siodmak’s own contribution as an artist at work in the studio era is a necessary consideration, since a film made then was not simply the product of any one individual, as Siodmak himself acknowledges in the epigraph. It was, Thomas Schatz explains in his book *The Genius of the System*, “a melding of institutional forces,” that is “the studio’s production operation and management structure, its resources and talent pool, its narrative traditions and market strategy” (6). That Siodmak is situated as such within a period *sui generis* in the history of film raises one unavoidable question: To what degree may we assume Siodmak responsible for the films he made?

Over the years, Siodmak’s reputation has borne the kind of comments, like David Thomson’s, which critics level broadside at contract directors. It may be that they are a call to arms for us to come to the director’s defense. Anyway, we must acknowledge the value of such comments, since pinning down responsibility for a studio film, at least in Siodmak’s case, is not an easy task. It is, however, much easier to assume, as Thomson does, that Siodmak was only a mere “assignment director” (others have assumed the same of George Cukor and Michael Curtiz). When he says this, we

sense the words leave a bad taste in his mouth, as if the studio contract were an injunction against creative expression and control. Perhaps for some directors it was, but certainly not always for Siodmak, as research has uncovered.

Then there are those critics who loosely accord Siodmak responsibility by applying a yardstick approach to the films of his Hollywood period. For all that, they end up finding what Andre Bazin disapprovingly calls “standards of reference.” Charles Higham recognizes Siodmak’s “observation of people under the stress of evil impulses...his deep knowledge of morbid psychology” (19); Colin McArthur sees his use of “obsessive loves and hatreds [that] pass into psychosis” (103); Jack E. Nolan likes the way he combines “ingredients that create psychological horror” (218); Andrew Sarris thinks his Hollywood films are “more Germanic than his German ones...as it should be” (138); and Foster Hirsch notes his films for their “physical and psychological compression,” their “edgy atmosphere,” and “flamboyant use of Germanic lighting and of Expressionistic transformations of physical reality” (117-18). It is my aim here to determine the extent to which these standards of reference—really generic observations that could apply to any number of films noirs—may be attributed to Siodmak.

To this end, production histories of films are helpful. They take into account outside forces—cultural, social, economic (e.g. shooting abroad in the late 40s to cut production costs in Hollywood)—that may determine a director’s stylistic preferences. Unfortunately, most histories are partly non-specific as regards Siodmak’s own contributions to individual productions. Yet, a careful analysis of production records does reveal clues to his creative intentions. It is also necessary, since studio files on Siodmak are incomplete, to supplement archival evidence with Siodmak’s own accounts, as well as those of colleagues and actors. In addition to production case study, analysis of films will help us to discover Siodmak’s art, specifically through his use of mise-en-scene, that is to say through camera placement and movement, sound, decor, lighting, composition, direction of actors, and editing, since these are the distinct signs of a film maker’s control. To quote Sartre, “One isn’t a writer for having chosen to say certain things, but for having chosen to say them in a certain way.” This may also be said of a director. Of course, there were studio con-

straints on a director's choices, like production control, established production routines, and production codes (including outside determinants), which limit assigning sole authorship to a single individual. Still, because Siodmak worked consistently in one style, it is somewhat easier to organize his oeuvre into a unified whole.

The chapters that follow try to clarify some of the mysteries and misconceptions about Siodmak's Hollywood period. Chapter One, "Getting Your Own Way in Hollywood," looks at the production operations at Universal Studios where Siodmak mostly worked. I situate the studio historically before and during Siodmak's tenure there to show the sort of influence management brought to bear on a director's work (those "constraints" I spoke of). Of particular importance in this regard are the film-making practices of two independent producers, Dore Schary and Hal. B. Wallis, for whom Siodmak worked on loan out. There is less known of Mark Hellinger's contribution to The Killers, except that which an analysis of the film and its production history may provide, so I have saved him for Chapter Two. Nunnally Johnson is a different case: an in-house independent at Universal, like Hellinger, he was an absentee producer on The Dark Mirror and gave Siodmak no interference. The film's star Olivia de Havilland did, however, and this I shall touch upon here, as the film itself is immaterial (although entertaining, it is uncharacteristic of his best work). Also in regard to those pressures within the industry, another important consideration is the restrictions the Production Code Administration (PCA) imposed on several of Siodmak's Universal productions. In this instance, a finished film opposes (drastically as in the making of Uncle Harry) the one that might have been, further complicating the course of film history. These are some of the obstacles to creativity Siodmak encountered. But he overcame them with a reputation for being cooperative within the studio system, for using "cunning," as he once said, to get his own way.

Siodmak began as an untried director by Hollywood's standards and slowly established himself as a leading player within the industry. Yet, how much clout did he finally have? I am not sure we can ever know for certain, but through an understanding of the studio apparatus, as far as history may provide an answer, we can better sense Siodmak's own artistic control in choosing and developing projects. So it is the films themselves that remain, in the

end, the most immediate and accessible path to finding our way back to the artist and the man.

Chapter Two, “I Never Promise Them a Good Picture...Only a Better One Then They Expected,” therefore, examines the Siodmak *oeuvre*, with careful attention to those films I find stylistically and thematically homogeneous and representative of what we may term “the quintessential Siodmak.” Films that fall out of this ranking, such as the early B-films and programmers, and his first features at Universal, *Cobra Woman*, *The Son of Dracula*, and *Phantom Lady*, provide for my purpose here only anecdotal service. (Those later films in which Siodmak was either vaguely interested: *The Whistle at Eaton Falls*, or completely undermined: *Deported* and *The Great Sinner*, are held over for Chapter Three.) The oddity *Time Out of Mind*—the one documented case of a film Siodmak had complete control over, as promising as that may sound—offers us little else than an exercise in fancy camera work, as the director’s remote handling of the material implies. Although the Grand Guignol of *The Spiral Staircase* is not typical of his work, the film’s production history will help us see how Siodmak worked artistically in partnership with an independent and opinionated producer, Dore Schary. It is also noteworthy in Siodmak’s *oeuvre* for his characteristic use of *mise-en-scene* to convey a sense of dread within domestic spaces, the only truth Siodmak managed to rescue from the contrivance of its script.

Chapter Three, “Hollywood? A Sort of Anarchy,” looks at the studio system in its early decline. By the close of the decade, The Golden Years had already begun to dim slowly, as had Siodmak’s career in the US. The Hollywood studio system, after all, with its superior technology and crews, had been for him the apogee of artistic expression and creativity. Fittingly, then, the chapter ends the book with the film most indicative of the “new Hollywood” of take-charge stars, extravagant budgets, and studio divestment, to which Siodmak was unable to adjust. The film is *The Crimson Pirate*, and although it was both a critical and commercial success, it was a problematic production unlike any other Siodmak had experienced. By now soured on Hollywood’s new direction, he left for Europe, where, he believed, the director was still an artist. The sad consequence of that is, although he tried, he never regained the kind of career Hollywood had afforded him.

Finally, I include an Afterword, “The File on Robert Siodmak,” which maps out the research strategies I used to trace the production histories of films. Documentation presents the best case of a director’s artistic control. And yet, despite the availability of resources to scholars, the sad fact is that, for many of Siodmak’s films, studio files are incomplete and some production records, even lost. What I present here is a kind of descriptive reckoning of methods, resources, and data which have brought me to this assessment of Siodmak’s contributions to 40s cinema.

Siodmak’s is a career of paradoxes. Critics agree he is a formidable talent, and yet, in the same breath, brand him a skilled technician or, again to use Thomson’s words, “deft, yet anonymous,” which is like T.S. Eliot’s left-handed praise of Ezra Pound, “the better craftsman.” Most agree, too, that his films have not received thoughtful consideration, yet that none ranks with the masterpieces of 40s cinema (Coursodon 276). Some of Siodmak’s films actually rank among those of directors who, Lawrence Alloway says, “do not dominate their work with the same authority or with the same degree of interest” as directors like Hitchcock and Ford (35). Alloway does not name Siodmak, yet his comment seems to warrant it. Even Siodmak’s brother, Curt, who perhaps knew him best (but was, it should be noted, often hostile and negative about others, including his brother), believes Robert “was a genius,” but that he “pissed it away...” (Server 219).

Siodmak was ten years in Hollywood as a director who liked to be considered sensible and reliable, who never lost his German accent, yet eventually came to believe the myth of his own American birth—in Memphis, Tennessee no less (it was really Dresden in 1900: the myth was necessary to get a visa in Paris). He began his career with a whimsical little film, Menschen am Sonntag, he made with Billy Wilder, Edgar G. Ulmer, and Fred Zinnemann in 1929, the last important German silent. He fled from Hitler’s Germany after Goebbels attacked him in the press, and then from Europe, sought a studio contract, bought Boris Karloff’s Beverly Hills home. He returned to Europe in 1952 and settled in Ascona, Switzerland, an artist’s community on the shore of Lake Maggiore. He continued to make films in West Germany, France, Great Britain, Spain, and Rumania. He died in 1973, seven weeks after his wife’s death.

Today Siodmak is remembered as the director who launched the careers of Ava Gardner and Burt Lancaster. Anyone who knew him knows he loved making movies, especially on sound stages, and hated shooting on city streets. He liked only his commercial successes, and the film he made with friend Charles Laughton. And on the set he often wore a blue blazer which had on the back his Polish name spelled phonetically: SEE-ODD-MACK. Now, it is time to open the file on Robert Siodmak, to give this master of suspense and film noir the considerate attention that for too long he has not received.

CHAPTER ONE

GETTING YOUR OWN WAY IN HOLLYWOOD

I want to report that this morning we waited 35 minutes for Jon Hall before he was ready to shoot. We broke at 12:10 for lunch, and here at 1:30 Miss Montez is not back yet. I lose every day, with airplanes and my actors, at least one and a half hours of shooting time. I am merely stating this fact as I don't want to be held responsible.

—Robert Siodmak, in a 1943 Universal memorandum

Robert Siodmak arrived in Hollywood in 1939, having abandoned an established, successful film-making career in Europe. “I left Germany one day before Hitler came to power,” he wrote in a 1963 article. “One day before war broke out, I sailed from Europe to the USA.” But a studio contract did not come until 1943, after two years of consignment—“compromises” as he called those early B-films and programmers.

The first compromises began in 1941 when Siodmak was hired by Paramount Pictures. This came about, as Donald Marshman recounts in a 1947 Life magazine interview, with some helpful urging by Preston Sturges, the then Wunderkind of Paramount. Sturges enthusiastically recommended him to studio manager Henry Ginsberg, even though he had only moments before met Siodmak: “Sturges was amused by the gnomelike man with the German accent who confronted him. He listened to Siodmak’s rapturous descriptions of movies that he, Sturges, had never heard of” (107). At Paramount, Siodmak made three films for executive producer Sol C. Siegel (they would reunite in 1948 on the classic Cry of the City): West Point Widow (1941), Fly-By-Night (1942), and My Heart Belongs to Daddy (1942), all innocuously entertaining movies the studio turned out quickly as second-feature B-films and programmers—Siodmak called them “Paramount shit.”

He preferred to forget them. Others certainly have. Yet it is interesting to note today some of the artists involved in them, all of whom graduated to A-features, like Siodmak. And like Siodmak, some were Germans with stellar careers abroad: Hans Kraly, Hans Dreier, Theodor Sparkuhl, Martin Kosleck, Albert Basserman; others were Hollywood-bred: F. Hugh Herbert, John Seitz, Daniel Fapp. Herbert, a screenwriter with a certain flair for domes-

tic high jinks, worked on all three films, but is better known for adapting to the screen in 1953 his own play The Moon is Blue, and for his screenplay Sitting Pretty (1948), the first of the Mr. Belvedere series (as a matter of fact, Cecil Kellaway's refined factotum in My Heart Belongs to Daddy is a sketchy precursor of the character Clifton Webb came to personify in that series). Herbert co-wrote West Point Widow with Hans Kraly who had been Ernst Lubitsch's collaborator on many of the director's German and American silent films. And Theodor Sparkuhl, Lubitsch's cinematographer in Germany, photographed it. Art director Hans Dreier, with whom Siodmak would work again in Thelma Jordon, also designed sets for Widow and for Daddy (he was art director on Lubitsch's films too and won an Oscar for Sunset Boulevard in 1950). Actors from Max Reinhardt's Berlin theater, Martin Kosleck and Albert Basserman, co-starred in Fly-By-Night, for which cinematographer John Seitz, who would later photograph many of Billy Wilder's and Preston Sturges's films, created a slick noir look. And Daniel Fapp's expert photography (it earned him an Oscar in 1961 for West Side Story) gave My Heart Belongs to Daddy its attractive finish.

The films played well, but Siodmak was unhappy as a B-unit director. According to Curt Siodmak, he would often tell the assistant director to do shots. "I don't argue," Siodmak described his comportment on the set of Widow, "because I don't care." So Paramount fired him. Out of necessity, he went to the B-factory at 20th Century-Fox to make something of Ladislas Fodor's and Gina Kaus's rather limp sex comedy of errors, The Night Before the Divorce (1942). It starred Lynn Bari, "Claudette Colbert with muscles," as she was sometimes called, sparkling and enthusiastic despite faint support from co-stars Nils Asther and Joseph Allen Jr. But at Republic, he brought off something of note in the studio's low-budget "Deluxes" production Someone to Remember (1943), finding inspiration in Mabel Paige's maternal pathos as a lonely widow who imagines a college student is her wayward grandson. The role became the hallmark of the character actress's career. And for Siodmak, working within a fixed shooting schedule of 21 days and with a budget of \$300,000 to \$500,000 (Gomery 183-84), the film was another chance to prove his mettle. The challenge was not to get typecast as a B-picture director, as had other Europeans, like John Brahm and Edgar G. Ulmer. "When

this happens to you," explained Douglas Sirk, "no matter how good you are, you can just get stuck" (Halliday 137).

Nevertheless, Siódmak's ennui with material he considered substandard angered producers and he once again failed to secure a studio contract. Unable to find work, Curt Siódmak got him a directing job at Universal. Curt had been writing scripts in Hollywood since his arrival in 1938 and had already contributed to Universal's horror tradition with The Invisible Man Returns (1940), The Wolf Man (1941), and Frankenstein Meets the Wolf Man (1943). The job was to direct, yet another programmer, The Son of Dracula (1943), based on Curt's original story. "On the third day of shooting," Siódmak said in a 1959 interview, "they [Universal Studios] offered me a contract, with options, for seven years. I took it and our association was very happy." The film began Siódmak's seven-year stint at Universal, but it, too, was another compromise, as was his second feature—his first A-film—the Maria Montez/Jon Hall vehicle Cobra Woman (1944).

He managed as best he could with the studio's reliable formulas of horror and Technicolor exotica. Of the Dracula film, the third in a trilogy beginning with Dracula (1931) and Dracula's Daughter (1936), Siódmak thought "it wasn't good," but that "some scenes had a certain quality"; it is, however, as The Dracula Book correctly cites, "the slickest and most entertaining of the trilogy" (134). And of Cobra Woman, which featured Montez in a dual role, improbable as that seems, Siódmak simply regarded it as "silly but fun." Yet, the inter-department memorandum he sent to production manager Martin Murphy (quoted above) shows that it was critical, too. This time careful not to forfeit another studio contract, he did not want the star behavior of Hall and Montez to stall his getting out of the low end of the industry. His own behavior, on the other hand, was to avoid whatever did not interest him by handing the film over to 2nd-unit director Ray Taylor who shot, in addition to the process footage, many location and studio scenes.

The scripts for Son of Dracula and Cobra Woman were not to Siódmak's liking, but both were first-rate productions true to formulas that would assure profit for the studio, and for Siódmak, \$150 a week (a year later directing The Suspect, he would earn \$27,425.00 for seven weeks, and three years later with The Killers, as much as \$43,072.00, plus a \$25,000 bonus, also for seven

weeks). Then two months after Cobra Woman closed production on June 6, 1943, the breakthrough came with his next film, Phantom Lady, for staff producer Joan Harrison, Universal's first female executive and Hitchcock's former screenwriter. His first all-out noir, it inevitably began Siodmak's career-long identification with the popular style. In fact, Phantom Lady set the standard.

At Universal, noir-photographed thrillers and crime melodramas—"the only wartime product that did not lapse into utter predictability" (354), writes Thomas Schatz—became the studio's in-house style. They were also dependable and profitable: in 1946, The Dark Mirror and The Killers were box-office hits for Universal.

Siodmak mordantly explained, in his own 1959 Films and Filming article, how he got caught up in the noir cycle: "I was under contract to Universal-International, and as is usual in the film city, if you are successful at making a certain type of picture then you are given more of them to make. You have to be one of the boys!" (10). Considering the studio's interest in spinning off lucrative formula films, the financial successes of both Phantom Lady, which brought newcomer Ella Raines to the cover of Life magazine, and Christmas Holiday, an A-class production with a grown-up Deanna Durbin, more than secured film noir, Universal's other reliable formula, as a mainstay for Siodmak while under contract there. All of his films for Universal after Phantom Lady were noirs, except for Time Out of Mind, a lavish period melodrama which he produced at the urging of Cliff Work, vice-president in charge of production.

Unquestionably, it is his films noirs which distinguish him among his peers, none of whom worked with the same degree of artistic and thematic consistency in that style to establish a nearly metonymic identification with it as he did. Ironically, it is often argued that, because Siodmak specialized in this kind of film making, he "not only failed to enhance his reputation," as David Shipman contends among others, "but virtually ruined it" (Story 699). Of course this opinion is in large part a reaction against Siodmak's also having been a contract director, which to contemporary theorists is shorthand for non-auteur. But as we shall see, Siodmak's Universal contract provided him an extraordinary resource for bringing his unique visual expression to American cinema and

enabled him to do this in collaboration with some of the most talented artists and technicians ever collected under one roof.

Universal at that time was a major/minor studio, like Columbia and United Artists: major because it could produce and distribute films with the same efficiency as the five major studios—MGM, Warners, 20th Century-Fox, Paramount, and RKO. But also minor because, unlike the majors, it did not have its own theater chains and was, therefore, unable to take full advantage of the first-run movie market: “the palaces and deluxe downtown theaters in major urban centers, where most of the box-office revenues were generated” (Schatz 11).

A crucial change in Universal’s production operations occurred in 1936 when then studio president, Charles Rogers, former producer of programmers at RKO and Paramount, introduced a supervisory system, called the producer-unit. The shift from the old central-producer system to the supervisory one facilitated feature production, using a single producer on one or two films at a time. In the early years of Carl and Junior Laemmle’s proprietorship, a single individual—Carl Senior from 1906 to 1929 and Carl Junior up to 1936—produced as many as fifty films a year, overseeing every detail of production. Under this system, Universal did profit from John Stahl’s melodramas, Imitation of Life (1934) and Magnificent Obsession (1935) for instance, which were distinguished, yet too costly to create momentum for first-run, feature-film production. The practice of turning out films without executive supervision better suited serial productions, like those of Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon, which were a consistent source of revenue. But Rogers wanted to make features that would compete for the first-run market along with those of the majors.

So he hired producer Joe Pasternak to supervise a series of Deanna Durbin musicals that would fit that bill. The films did, making a star of the Canadian teen-ager. Under Henry Koster’s direction, Three Smart Girls (1937), its sequel Three Smart Girls Grow Up (1939), and 100 Men and a Girl (1937) were as prestigious and profitable as Show Boat and My Man Godfrey had been in 1936. But just as the latter were costly, lavish productions, so were the Durbin films. While the series did rescue Universal from bankruptcy—a much heralded fact—they were too expensively and infrequently made, and really had little effect on the studio’s

annual gross, which was in 1937, Thomas Schatz reminds us, “over \$1 million in the red” (242).

Thomas Schatz describes this period of Universal’s production history as “a combination of discipline and disorganization” (250). A film there began with an assigned cast, crew, and starting date, and then proceeded “with only a sort of vague conception of both the production and the finished project.” He goes on to write, “scripting and production design came together during shooting in a collaborative effort.”

The ensemble approach to a film’s production relaxed the central-producer’s grip on everything from script to wardrobe and permitted a single individual, usually the director, more artistic control to make a film an expression of his own personal vision. In spite of this hope, a hierarchical system persisted: a director still ran the risk of losing his film to a domineering producer.

Nevertheless, the likelihood of a director’s having more artistic control was greater after 1940 as a result of the Consent Decree that curtailed block-booking. Block-booking was the brainstorm of Adolph Zukor, president of Paramount, who, in 1919, wanted to guarantee the distribution of films without marketable stars, because the exorbitant salaries they demanded had made productions cost-prohibitive. So to enforce distribution, he required theater owners to accept a complete block of films—as much as 104—or none at all. Soon this became a standard practice among all distributors to remain viable within the industry (Izod 47). In 1940, the US Justice Department, that had begun anti-trust litigation against the studios oligopoly in 1938 (the Supreme Court ordered the studios’ divorcement and divestiture in 1948), was successful in convincing the five major studios to sign the Consent Decree (the three minors: Universal, Columbia, United Artists, did not sign). Block-booking curtailed, it was now possible for theater owners to choose films based on quality of product not just number (Kerr 50). As John Izod points out, “The demand for quality put a premium on talent so that stars, directors, producers and even some principal technicians could bargain for greater recognition—either in cash or in artistic independence” (126).

The Consent Decree made the first-run market more accessible to the minor studios. It was not soon enough, however, for Universal. President Charles Rogers had failed to sustain access to that market and, after the financial losses of 1937 disrupted man-

agement at Universal, he was summarily replaced by Nathan J. Blumberg. He, too, wanted the studio to have its share of the first-run market, but not at the expense of the once reliable serials and programmers.

Under Blumberg's leadership and the expert guidance of production manager Cliff Work (1938-1945), Universal scored financially, if not critically, with its Sherlock Holmes series starring Basil Rathbone, with Technicolor and Maria Montez, and with its B-quality Abbott and Costello escapades. In the years Siodmak started working at Universal, the studio was by far the most productive in operation, responsible for 20 percent of major company releases in 1944 alone, while production at other studios declined. Universal turned out an average of one feature per week during the war years, a steady flow of pictures with bankable stars, such as Deanna Durbin, W. C. Fields, Marlene Dietrich, and Charles Boyer.

Blumberg and Work were now able to tackle the first-run market with A-class projects, like Rene Clair's The Flame of New Orleans, Alfred Hitchcock's Shadow of a Doubt, and Siodmak's Christmas Holiday and The Suspect. In order to hold on to the first-run market—Universal had its best box-office during the World War II years—Blumberg hired the production team of Leo Spitz and William Goetz (1946-1950), who together adapted as a mode of production the package-unit system, a more profitable arrangement, whereby independents selectively produced films for which the studio provided its production and marketing operations, and distribution network.

The first of these in-house independents was Walter Wanger, who in this capacity produced features that ranged from the smart, Scarlet Street (1945), to the the silly, Salome: Where She Danced (1945). His production Canyon Passage (1945) was to be directed by Siodmak, but Jacques Tourneur, an even unlikelier choice for a western, took on the assignment instead. In addition to Wanger's Diana Productions, some others include the Fairbanks Company, Kanin Productions, and Rampart Productions. Two of the better known in-house independents for whom Siodmak worked are Mark Hellinger (The Killers) and Nunnally Johnson The Dark Mirror.

In 1946, when Universal merged with International Pictures, the studio began a new production policy that temporarily altered

its course in the final years of Siodmak's tenure there. In an unsuccessful attempt to compete side-by-side with the majors (Universal closed briefly in 1949), Blumberg chose "to discard its earlier successes—Abbott and Costello, Deanna Durbin, B-films, Westerns and serials—and to substitute a big-budget production schedule just at the time the industry ran into difficulties" (Izod 120).

During this transitional period at Universal, Siodmak agreed to direct and produce Time Out of Mind (1947), a big-budget production at \$1,647,500 that was short-lived at the box office (see Chapter Two). Ironically, in April of 1947, the studio had better box-office receipts from the Abbott and Costello sequel, Buck Privates Come Home, which grossed \$31,986 in its first week, far ahead of Time Out of Mind, which only grossed \$16,526. (Beginning in 1948, Universal successfully returned to its former market strategy with Abbott and Costello genre parodies, and then through the 50s with rural programmers like Ma and Pa Kettle and "Francis the talking mule.") Siodmak consented to do Time Out of Mind with the understanding that the studio would not interfere with future projects and would agree to a pay increase (\$70,000 compared to \$45,000 for The Dark Mirror). Despite the understanding, he made only two more noirs for Universal: Criss Cross and Deported (the latter filmed on location in Sienna, Italy), and was often farmed out to work at other studios: Fox, MGM, Paramount, Columbia, and Warners. Siodmak said Universal peddled him to different studios to compensate for the higher salary he was now being paid; but as a consequence of that, he no longer had time to carefully prepare his work (Dumont 237). By now disillusioned with Hollywood, Siodmak worked almost exclusively outside the studio, making his last American film—until 1967—The Crimson Pirate, in Ischia, Italy.

In 1970, Siodmak reflected on his years in Hollywood in a letter to German film historian Gunter Knorr (the epigraph on page one is quoted from there) and touched upon the problem he often confronted in the business of movie-making:

In Hollywood [the director] used to have the right to first show a film in his version, but then the producers took his work out of his hands and recut it.... [M]any good films have been undermined this way, because the director's signature was no longer recognizable.... I am in favour of collaboration

with my colleagues, but have always fought [here in the handwritten manuscript he crossed out: “sometimes with success”] with the producers who, in the end, always believe that they know better.

Confrontations with producers are legend in Hollywood, and Siodmak certainly had his share, won and lost. Unfortunately, he is short on specifics: in a postscript he explained that he wanted to keep his recollections “general,” that he did not want to talk about himself, “but only about collaboration in film making and several difficulties the creative human being always fights against.” The stipulation was in regard to writing his memoirs, which were partly published in Germany under the title, Zwischen Berlin und Hollywood: Erinnerungen eines grossen Filmregisseurs (Between Berlin and Hollywood: A Veteran Director’s Memoirs).

Too often Siodmak was as reluctant to talk about himself as he was to talk about others with whom he worked. This is especially disappointing, since most of his collaborators were independent producers with strong, often unenlarged opinions on the film-making process, men like Mark Hellinger, Dore Schary (The Spiral Staircase), and Hal B. Wallis (The File on Thelma Jordon).

From his own account, we know what Schary thought of the director’s role in this process. The director, he wrote, is “the field commander on the set,” even though there is a limit to his control and authority. The producer is still the “‘head man’” (Heyday 195). A producer’s pictures, he believed, express a “‘point of view’ which becomes his style” (Case 12). Nevertheless, he allows his director the leeway to translate “in screen terms” everything present in the script “by suggestion or implication” (70). In other words, Schary did not expect the director, as contributing artist, to follow the strict letter of the script. Those additions the director brought to a script always came about in pre-production readings and rehearsals, something which Schary began to experiment with when he arrived at RKO. In a story-conference forum, the director did not have free-wheeling control over a project: as Schary admits, there simply wasn’t the time nor the money to allow a director to reinvent a script (194). An important side note to this is that Siodmak was not part of the pre-production meetings on Staircase. Before the film went into production at RKO in August of 1945, Siodmak was already on loan out to RKO, working on Deadline at Dawn, which was, like Phantom Lady, a Cornell Woolrich adapta-

tion. He was involved in pre-production meetings on that film, but left at Schary's request after Fritz Lang had declined to direct *Staircase* (on Deadline Siodmak was replaced by Harold Clurman).

The production record from *The Spiral Staircase* shows that Siodmak kept close to the shooting script, as Schary expected, yet still managed to include his own personal touches during production and especially in the editing room. In a 1969 Films in Review interview, Siodmak said that he edited this film as he pleased: “there was a strike on in Hollywood [beginning in April of 1945] when I was cutting *Staircase* so they let me alone” (229). As we shall see in Chapter Two, editing becomes an important site of artistic control in Siodmak’s Hollywood period.

Briefly put, the editing process is a kind of give and take between director and editor. Sometimes the director plans the editing before production begins (Hitchcock, for one, is known to have worked this way). But usually editing takes shape during production as director and editor assemble the daily rushes (footage shot the previous day) into a rough cut: a general continuity of all the shots, including a sound track. Once production ends, both director and editor refine this rough cut into a fine cut with optical and special effects and sound mixing. It is during this latter process that the director does the final shaping and polishing of his vision. Only when editing his own film, Orson Welles once told Andre Bazin, “the director has the power of a true artist.” On this point, we have at least Siodmak’s word for it, as he once wrote: “I always insist on editing my own pictures....To me the final shape of a picture can only be got in the editing room under the direct supervision of the director” (“Hoodlums” 35). Siodmak was self-trained in the art of montage: at twenty-six, he was hired by producer Seymour Nebenzal (his cousin) to assemble original silent movies from the film stock of old ones. The challenge was to cut together otherwise unrelated shots and still maintain a coherent sense of dramatic, temporal, and spatial continuity. Siodmak worked at this for two years before he persuaded Nebenzal to finance his first feature, the silent *chef d'oeuvre*, Menschen am Sonntag. (Later in 1934, at the request of Nebenzal, who wanted to economize on the Buster Keaton film, Le Roi des Champs-Elysees, which Max Nosseck and Robert Wyler directed, Siodmak

spliced in footage from Fritz Lang's Dr. Mabuse: subjective shots from inside an automobile.)

Siódmak may well have had the authority to shape a film in the editing room. After all, a producer like Schary was not about to relinquish a script to a director "who might then decide to junk it" (194). Schary was happy with Mel Dinelli's Staircase script—he thought it was as well written as a mystery novel—and was satisfied that it, and the film Siódmak made of it, would be a true reflection of his own personal style, whatever he believed that was. Known around Hollywood as something of a prude, Schary often monitored good taste in his productions, that Spencer Tracy once said: "Since Schary took over, nobody gets laid at MGM."

The producer's personal style is unmistakable, however, in Wallis's postwar melodramas which, as critic Lawrence Alloway observes, reveal Wallis, not the director, as "the dominant and shaping influence" (26). In the years between 1945 and 1950, Hal B. Wallis Productions (releasing through Paramount Pictures) specialized, "very consciously," as Wallis put it, on a series of melodramas "with strong characters and situations, films that proved to be extremely popular" (Starmaker 118). In these films, like The Strange Love of Martha Ivers (1946), Desert Fury (1947), I Walk Alone (1947), Dark City (1950), and of course Siódmak's The File on Thelma Jordon (1950), Wallis and his collaborators "made no attempt to glamorize, excuse, or deify villains. We explained them," he wrote, "that was all. The dark side of life was portrayed frankly and without compromise" (118). Wallis saw a need for such films because, as he believed, "movie-going audiences had matured during the war and no longer required false and sentimental portraits of human nature." Yet it was not only his ability to psychologically gauge an audience and meet its needs that proved him successful, but also his "autonomy" as an independent producer. He reflected on his role in this capacity for a 1970 Museum of Modern Art retrospective of his career:

"...being an independent means that I have a free hand to select the material I want to make; to engage the writer, the director, the cast, and supervise the final editing and dubbing of the picture....Without this autonomy, the contribution of a producer must necessarily be limited." (Mancia 3)

No doubt it is this autonomy which Alloway had recognized as "the dominant and shaping influence" of Wallis's "postwar cy-

cle of dark films” (26), Thelma Jordon among them. Although Wallis was autonomous, he did allow his directors their individual approach to filming a finished script, but was strictly opposed to their altering it completely: “I am not in accord with constant changing and rewriting after your pattern is set” (3). Despite that, Siodmak did in fact change and rewrite parts of the shooting script while Thelma Jordon was in production, scrambling the pattern to fix his own, with special emphasis on a character-driven narrative.

Since a producer’s influence has a strong bearing on the projects he develops, I wonder how much of The Killers reflects the pulp and Broadway swagger of Hellinger’s style. James Agee in his review thought a good part of it did, especially the “jazzed-up realism.” Even studio executives then talked about “the Hellinger touch” as they had once the “Lubitsch touch” (Bishop 318). Siodmak discusses, if only briefly, his working relationship with Hellinger, whom he called “reasonable.” He said in the 1947 Life interview that Hellinger did not object to his preference for cutting with the camera, an economical practice of shooting only enough footage to finish a scene already envisioned by the director, but a dangerous one for the producer who likes the assurance of extra footage during the editing process to impose his own choices on the final cut. It was during production, however, that Hellinger interfered. Siodmak did get a chance to re-do The Killers his way three years later. In the now classic noir Criss Cross, this time without Hellinger at the helm, he was better able to express motivation through the hero’s sexual enslavement.

There was no chance for Nunnally Johnson to interfere on The Dark Mirror in 1946, because he was away in Georgia for all eight weeks of production (Johnson also wrote the screenplay: its cliched worst anticipates his 1957 psycho-docu-drama, The Three Faces of Eve). However, Siodmak did encounter some objections from the star, Olivia de Havilland (maybe that’s why he shut down production for three days?). What she objected to was Siodmak’s approach to filming the story, which he saw as a rather straightforward psychological thriller (it was that and a conscientious effort on the part of the newly formed Universal-International to make a box-office winner, which it was). But deHavilland—experimenting with method acting at the time—saw the film as a serious character study of paranoid-schizophrenia. She plays twins, identical but for signet pins (however, the bad one is always

surly and smokes too much). According to Nora Johnson, the producer's daughter, de Havilland was "striving for a paranoid mentality," and would not do the movie unless everyone involved in the project met with a psychiatrist (154). She and Siodmak argued endlessly throughout the production: he wanted a stronger difference between the sisters to show, as Herve Dumont explains, "that good and evil have the same face" (190); she, however, insisted on playing them with only slight variation. As a result, the good one is too nice and the bad one only a little less so. Siodmak just could not get her to shake loose her sugary image and act evil with conviction. "'That horrible character Terry,' de Havilland confessed, 'continues to haunt me'" (Parish 309).

Anyway, Siodmak had a free hand to do what he wanted, given the material (he considered inferior Johnson's adaptation of Vladimir Pozner's story) and de Havilland's second guessing his direction: "'I had to watch Mr. Siodmak all the time,'" she claimed. He was more interested in exploiting the film's potential for suspense, and even managed to hire—confidentially because he was not yet a union member—his friend, cinematographer Eugene Schuftan, to create some complicated traveling-matte shots. But for all of de Havilland's seriousness and Lew Ayres's virtue (he's the beyond-the-call-of-duty psychiatrist), the film today is not too interesting. Siodmak does, however, infuse Johnson's synthetic plotting with some diverting moments. In one scene, for instance, the bad twin torments her sister with a flashlight in a darkened bedroom (if their sleeping together weren't eerie enough).

I don't know how Siodmak got on with his other producers, including those staff producers at Universal I have not mentioned: Ford Beebe (Son of Dracula), George Wagner (Cobra Woman), Felix Jackson (Christmas Holiday), Islin Auster (The Suspect), Michael Kraike (Criss Cross), Robert Buckner (Deported); and those producers for whom he worked on loan out: at 20th Century-Fox, Sol C. Siegel; at MGM, Gottfried Reinhardt (The Great Sinner); at Columbia, Louis de Rochmont (The Whistle at Eaton Falls)—as he never mentions any of them in recollections that I've seen. He discusses at length, but in personal correspondence only, which explains its uncharacteristic detail, his falling out with Burt Lancaster whose independent company produced The Crimson Pirate.

In December of 1951, the letter Siodmak writes to Warner's executive assistant in charge of production, Steve Trilling, is hotly accusatory, but politic. It offers a rare glimpse of the artist who believed the director "has everything under control" and preferred it that way. And of the man who tried always to stay in control of himself, even to the extent of editing himself out of his own memoirs. His biographer in Switzerland, Herve Dumont, told me that when Siodmak moved to Switzerland, he threw out all of his personal papers. Anything else he may have left behind was either destroyed or stolen after he died alone in his apartment. As Dumont said, "Nobody seemed to care."

Siodmak liked his years in Hollywood and longed to return there in the 60s, "to go back where people [have an] immense knowledge of how to make motion pictures" ("Why?" 13). During his time at Universal, he succeeded to the post of house director, which formerly John Stahl had occupied, and which Douglas Sirk would assume through the 50s, and Hitchcock through the 60s. Under the studio's newly adapted supervisory system of production, Siodmak endured more direct scrutiny by producers than Stahl ever had, even though he was far more pragmatic with schedules and budgets than Stahl was. This is how he explained the technique he used for getting his own way in Hollywood:

...about a week before shooting was due to begin I'd go to the producer and say, "Look, this is a wonderful script, but there is just one little point..." and suggest a small but vital alteration. This would always be accepted, if only to keep the peace, and then of course other things would have to be altered to fit in with it, and gradually the thing would start coming to pieces at the seams. By the time we started shooting everything would be so confused that I began with no set script at all, and could do as I liked, which was the way I wanted it....

(Taylor 181)

Siodmak may just be teasing us here, as he was more inclined to be sardonic than serious. It is his wit friends and colleagues remember best about him. In fact, all of his comments about the business, like this one, seem to be pricked with a kind of disarming playfulness. Still there is this sense underneath that he was determined never to get a reputation for being difficult in Hollywood. Fritz Lang, "the master," as Siodmak called him, had such a reputation. Even historian David Shipman contends that Lang's

reputation was “outstripped by that of Siodmak,” whose studio productions, unlike Lang’s, endured “fewer setbacks” (Story 697). Lang’s films often lagged through extended periods of production and post-production, because he had, Schatz writes, “little appreciation for the power structure and ‘commercial interests’ in Hollywood that demanded a denser and more economical narrative style” (357). Producers trusted Siodmak to keep productions on schedule, within budget, and under ninety minutes. Siodmak himself knew first hand, from the time he was an assistant director in Germany and would slip out to watch Lang at work, how the legendary director’s “unique temperament,” which everyone feared, and his “arrogance” made him unpopular at UFA. Anyway, he was an artist with so much responsibility, Siodmak reasoned, he could ill afford to have friends: “Lang had no equivalent” (Fritz Lang 42).

Siodmak, however, enjoyed friendly relationships with studio management, with producers and crews. According to Herve Dumont, he trained cinematographer Woody Bredell in the noir style of photography while they worked together on Phantom Lady. They collaborated again that same year on Christmas Holiday, and then two years later on The Killers. He enlisted the help of cinematographers Paul Ivano, on Criss Cross, and Eugene Schuftan, on The Dark Mirror, both of whom worked without receiving credit, and chose for his art director on Uncle Harry long-time friend Eugene Lourie, who had come to Hollywood from France where he designed sets for Siodmak and Jean Renoir. And it is rumored Siodmak often came to the aid of troubled productions at Universal. In one instance, I know that, at Mark Hellinger’s behest, he agreed to replace Frank Tuttle on the film Swell Guy while he was still shooting The Killers (uninterested in the subject matter, Siodmak went through the motions on this one, refusing screen credit).

Secure within the studio system by 1947, Siodmak used whatever influence he had earned to help a fellow refugee director, Max Ophuls, who arrived in America in 1941. Ophuls languished in Hollywood for six years, under appreciated by studio heads (Howard Hughes threw him off the set of Vendetta in 1946). He was about to return to Europe until Siodmak warned him not to go home without first making a successful Hollywood film. Siodmak knew very well that a director who succeeds with a studio film has