

**Albert Isaac Bezzerides:
Translating Ethnicity from Fiction to Film**

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Albert Isaac (Isook) Bezzerides' contribution to the making of the classic film noir *Kiss Me Deadly* has been variously assessed and universally praised, originally by the French (Chabrol, Truffaut) and consequently by Anglo-American film critics (Silver, Naremore, and Lang, among others). However, little thought has been given to the issue of Bezzerides' development from fiction writer to screenwriter nor to the representation of ethnic issues in his fiction and film; in fact, his fictional work has remained, with one recent exception, unrepresented in discussions of American literature and culture of the 30s and 40s.¹ On the other hand, his self-fashioning early in his career as an Armenian-American writer, and then as a writer who would write novels and scripts for Greece and Greek-Americans has received little or no attention.

This paper focuses on the translation of ethnic themes from fiction to film in Bezzerides' work. I argue that certain aspects of ethnicity that appear in his work were reinforced by his contact with Hollywood, while the studios redefined his ethnicity for him. I claim that Hollywood transformed particular ethnic aspects of his work in developing two of his novels as films. At the same time, I suggest that Hollywood forced him to make decisions that prioritized elements of the Greek ethnicity he was least familiar with; as a result, a stereotypical and often distorted representation of Greeks in America marks his scripts. To be fair to Bezzerides, this

is due partly to the studios' idea how to represent ethnics in film, especially in a time of war (WW II and the Cold War), when the need to emphasize national unity and political consensus is most pressing. Nevertheless, Bezzerides' accurate depiction of life in the streets and his sympathy for the marginalized and downtrodden ethnic mark his first and last novels as well as the films *Juke Girl* (1942), *Thieves' Highway* (1949), *On Dangerous Ground* (1951), and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955). Such depictions and sympathies in their turn were made possible by the conventions of film noir, a genre with which Bezzerides became most closely associated. Thus, I argue, his connection with Hollywood both constrained and liberated and redirected his creativity; it frustrated his career as a writer of modernistic fiction, but allowed him to contribute successfully to what is considered America's pulp modernism, the movies of the 1940s and 1950s.

Bezzerrides was born in 1908 to an Armenian-Greek (Pontic) family in Samsun, on the Black Sea area of Asia Minor (Ottoman Empire at the time, Turkey now). His father took the family to Fresno, California when his first born was only a few months old. Like the Saroyans with whom Bezzerides became close friends, the Bezzerides family had converted to Presbyterianism and were assisted in their immigration by the missionaries. Bezzerides grew up in a financially precarious environment that was primarily Armenian. By his own account, he grew up speaking Armenian and Turkish, but very little Greek (probably the Pontic variety), attended the University of California, Berkeley and began writing stories inspired and encouraged by William Saroyan's success in the thirties, emulating him and other Armenian American writers.

At the time, he presented himself as Armenian, as attested by the story-plots, but also by his own prolific statements concerning his ethnic background (for example, in the

Introduction to *Long Haul* and his commentary on "Passage to Eternity"). His first novel, *Long Haul* (1938), was an immediate success; the rights to the movie were bought by Warner Brothers, and the book was made into a film which launched Bezzerides' Hollywood career, as well as that of Ida Lupino and Humphrey Bogart. His second novel, *There was a Happy Land* (1942), failed to please the critics and was a financial failure, while his third and last novel, *Thieves Market* (1949), was made into a film based on his own script and directed by Jules Dassin. In the meantime, Bezzerides' association with Warner first, and then Columbia, allowed him to write original scripts and re-write books into film, thus making him an important screenwriter in the 40s and 50s. He also wrote for television and eventually created one of the most successful TV serials with *The Big Valley*. He currently lives with his son in San Fernando Valley in a sprawling old estate once owned by Albert Dekker, the actor who portrayed the evil Dr Soberin in *Kiss Me Deadly*.

A brief sketch of Bezzerides' life, however, cannot capture his evolution first as an ethnic writer, and consequently as a screenwriter who created ethnic characters in his scripts. His evolution is better reflected in his literary work and his scripts. Bezzerides started his career as an Armenian-American writer and to a certain extent as a Pontic, inserting elements of his Armenian ethnicity in his first novel. Yet when Hollywood offered him the opportunity to speak as an ethnic, he opted, with Hollywood's encouragement, for the more legitimate Greek ethnicity.² His work allows a better view of how the contemporary literary establishment as well as the Hollywood movie industry opened up these choices to him, and also encouraged the creative interface between art and ethnicity which is testified in Bezzerides' short stories, his novels (especially *Thieves Market*), and also in his film scripts.

A. I. Bezzerides, the fiction writer, came of age in the

1930s and 1940s when the children of immigrants insisted on the literary representation of the ethnic and, in fact, carved a literary space for themselves and for the ethnic character in American literature. Bezzerides belongs to the same generation of writers as Pietro di Donato, Joe Fante, Nelson Algren, Nathaniel West, Henry Roth, and William Saroyan among others. All of them were contemporaries with the better known writers of the Depression era, Richard Wright, William Faulkner,³ John Dos Passos, John Steinbeck, James T. Farrell, Clifford Odets, Dashiell Hammett, James Cain, Horace McCoy, Cornel Woolrich, Edward Anderson, William Lindsay Gresham and others. They represented America's modernist literary tradition which included both a high modernism exemplified by John Dos Passos, Henry Roth, William Faulkner and a pulp modernism seen in the work of James Cain and William Woolrich.⁴ They all contextualized the narrative strategies and aesthetic choices of an earlier American generation and a European tradition: they focused on life in the streets, sometimes including class struggles. Thus the fiction of all these writers, including Bezzerides, turned to the economically disadvantaged, and the disenfranchised racial and ethnic segments of American society.

The ethnic characters depicted in such fiction could relate the authors' own ethnic background as is the case with James Farrell, Pietro di Donato, Henry Roth, Joe Fante, William Saroyan, or life in the ethnic urban ghetto, as, for example, in the writings of Nelson Algren. The latter, however, focused on the Polish rather than Jewish ethnic. Bezzerides remained devoted to his Armenian heritage at first, but later, under the circumstances I have pointed out, promoted his Greek identity. As many of these writers were influenced in their work by the new politically radical ideologies of the 20s and 30s, they typically represented the ethnic or racial character as the underprivileged who could not find his/her place in

a marginalizing capitalist society. Bezzerides' protagonists belong to the working class and in the course of the narratives they develop an awareness of their social condition and a sense of solidarity with other laboring Americans; however, Bezzerides would complicate and question such camaraderie and would find solutions in the ambiguously open-endedness of his fictional and cinematic work.

Bezzerrides' career as a writer was initiated by a series of short stories. From 1935 to 1939, he wrote and published at least five short stories that, with one exception, focus on characters of Armenian background and on Armenian life. At the same time, he worked on his first novel *Long Haul*, which he eventually published in 1938. Thematically, the novel and the stories interrelate in oblique ways. In the former the author allows the hero, Nick Benay, to wander from one interminable and mostly unsuccessful haul to the next; the author would depict such ventures as reflections of the futility and socio-economic and existential frustration of the underprivileged in a capitalist economy.

Similarly in the short stories Bezzerides focuses on emerging socio-political awareness of anonymous, young narrators. The passing of time brings about the loss of the older generation as well as the alienation of the young from their parents and grandparents. In addition, the stories reveal the frustration of the hopes that brought the immigrants to the U.S.A. and provided a meaning for their lives; the narrators observe their farming, disenfranchised and disempowered Armenian families trapped by the exploitative mechanisms of a society which promised them political freedom as well as economic solvency.

These pessimistic politics are testified in his first published short story "Passage to Eternity" (February 1935). The narrator describes the last days of his Armenian grandmother, Diroohi, and the innocent prank he played at her expense which alienated him from her. Diroohi represents the pre-

American past whose relevance and meaning to his life is indecipherable and remains forever mysterious and non-recoverable after her death. In "Dreamers" (1939), the narrator is mystified by the ways of the former subjects of Ottoman Turkey when he visits a friend of his father's. Once again the past remains beyond his understanding, as an unsolvable riddle, and his alienation from his parents and their ethnic traditions is underscored. "Yonni's Wife" (January 1938) is a vignette in which the narrator describes the rhetorical function of story telling. It is his only Pontic short story, tender and ironic at the same time; it foregrounds the narrator's inability to situate himself meaningfully vis-à-vis the traditions of his immigrant family.

"The Vines" (June 1935) openly questions whether the move from a pre-industrial to a capitalist economy has served the immigrant well. In the figure of the toiling father whose labors bring the family no financial improvement, the author situates the immigrant in a market economy the immigrant cannot understand. "The White Mule" (March 1936), on the other hand, describes satirically how a beast of burden rebels against the work ethic of the narrator's immigrant father; yet the reason of its rebellion escapes the immigrant father although it makes sense to the narrator and his grandmother. The father possesses the traditional wisdom of the old country that is not obscured by the promise of America, while the narrator/son possesses the double cultural vision that eludes the father.

These stories, thematically similar to the ethnic fiction of the 30s, emphasize the threat to traditionalism posed by the present; the past has sustained the immigrant in the old country but fails to do so in the U.S.A. In other words, the memory of the pre-industrial reality of the old country cannot help the immigrant adjust to the industrial situation of America; the rules of the precapitalist economy to which he is accustomed do not hold in the capitalist economy of the new country, and

this has disastrous effects on the immigrant's life. In addition, there is a breach of understanding between the immigrant and the new generation, since the latter is represented as more politically and socially savvy than their parents, and more likely to view capitalist America realistically.

Bezzerides' first and second novels, *Long Haul* (1938) and *There Was a Happy Land* (1942) are works with little ethnic content. Both are set in California. The first describes the life of truck drivers in the produce network, while the second presents the life of migrant workers. Instead of focusing on the toiling immigrant or the ethnic laborer, the author foregrounds the American worker who openly sets himself against the ethnics he encounters. Moreover, in the dust jacket of the second novel the author openly renounces any connection with proletarian literature and class struggle. This is a dramatic shift from the political themes of the short stories, and it is possible that it indicates Bezzerides' attempt to connect with mainstream American writing. Thus, in the first novel he bypasses ethnicity altogether and underscores class; in the second he appeals to an older American tradition of life beyond the constraints of society but also beyond the concerns with the class struggle which characterized *Long Haul*.

Of particular interest is *Long Haul*, a novel that marks Bezzerides' transition from ethnic themes to mainstream concerns. The story follows the life and eventual destruction of two brothers, Nick and Paul Benay, whose ethnic origins remain undefined. Nick and Paul are truck drivers who struggle to survive the fierce competition of the California produce market and fail to do so; Paul is wounded in an accident which ruins their truck as well, and he remains incapacitated and unemployed. Nick, on the other hand, dies senselessly in a car accident while being pursued by the police after a bloody brawl with the produce boss who tries to underpay him.

The novel presents two types of women; Isabel, Paul's wife, exemplifies the type who argues for a domestic politics that involves a steady income and social conformity, Nick's girlfriend, Cassie Hartley, on the other hand, exemplifies another type; she is more independent, and condones Nick's ambition to succeed on his own, to realize the promise of the American dream of financial success. Yet given the structure of economic relations in California such a venture is doomed; Nick himself understands this, and experiences moments of extreme frustration and despair. In an attempt to replicate such economic structures he cheats a fellow truck driver only to experience extreme guilt for his action. *Long Haul* points out that only the circle of fellow truck drivers and fellow workers can function as a meaningful social milieu for him, and indeed Nick finds comfort and understanding only among them.

Nick is an intelligent observer of socio-economic power relations, yet he never manages to interpret the socio-political situation that disenfranchises and marginalizes him. On the contrary, moving among the downtrodden, his fellow travelers in a sense, Nick "ethnicizes" his resentment for other people's modest successes. The Japanese and the Chinese truck drivers who become successful, the Armenians who succeed where he and his family have failed, and the Mexican who elopes with the white girl are encounters which elicit his negative commentary. He does not recognize that all these are examples of precarious social and economic advancement; indeed, such resentments delineate Nick's ethnic politics which are a world apart from his presumed working class ideals. In the end, *Long Haul* narrativizes the incompatibility between ethnicity and class in the struggle for social and political justice and equality. Such incompatibility derives from the failure of the worker to assess the ethnic origins of America's new immigrants as a source of empowerment rather than antagonism.

Long Haul was filmed by Raoul Walsh under the title *They Drive by Night* (1940). The screenplay was not written by Bezzerides, who claimed that the producers were collaborating with his literary agent to cheat him out of his profits. The producers completely changed the plot but also renamed the main characters from Nick and Paul Benay to Nick and Paul Fabrini, played by George Raft and Humphrey Bogart. Thus, Bezzerides' characters became working class *ethnics* who in the course of the film and despite the scheming femme fatale succeed financially and get established as labor bosses, democratically elected by their co-workers. Such a choice by the studio as well as the presence of a minor Greek character in the film (George Rondolos) seems to have influenced Bezzerides' decision to explore more freely relations of class and ethnicity in his film scripts and eventually in his last novel.

Published in 1942, the same year the movie *Juke Girl* was filmed, *There Was a Happy Land* is, nevertheless, thematically very different from it. Obviously influenced by the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, this novel presents a satirical view of migrant workers who live off the labor of farmers. The novel satirizes mildly the farmers' gullibility but does not cast the main characters, the migrant workers, as lazy and malicious. On the contrary, it presents them as free spirits who infuse the farming community's life with a new sense of joy and love for life.

On the other hand, *Juke Girl* is the story of two drifters, ex-farmers Steve and Danny, played by Ronald Reagan and Richard Whorf, who arrive in Florida looking for employment in the tomato fields. Steve eventually sides with the migrant workers and farmers while Danny with the packers who exploit them. Lola (Anne Sheridan) is the juke girl of the title who helps Steve vindicate the rights of the farmers and migrant workers. It is important that this film casts George Tobias as Greek farmer Nick Garcos, who speaks out and

on behalf of the other growers and who elicits the anger and ultimately the vengeance of the packers.

The film is far more political than *The Grapes of Wrath*, filmed a few years earlier, since it deals head on with the problem of vertical monopolies, provides an analysis, and offers solutions (Kiersch 90). Furthermore, the romantic plot it contains, the love affair between Lola and Steve, forms an integral part of the film's political engagement rather than diverting attention from it. The workers, Steve, Lola, and Danny, eventually join forces with Nick and prevail over the monopolies. In this film, ethnicity does not clash with class interests; nevertheless, it is telling that the end of the movie finds Nick Garcos dead, killed accidentally by Madden the packer. The movie depicts Garcos as an immigrant who speaks ungrammatical English who is ineffectual in dealing with industrial America and who is not attuned to the younger generation, especially Steve and Lola. For example, in one scene, in which Garcos speaks publicly to defend his choices, he fails miserably and has to be saved by Lola's intervention. In fact, the ethnic is depicted as unable to control his circumstances unless the younger generation helps him out. It is significant that this younger generation consists of socially and politically committed activists who are not necessarily directly descended from Nick Garcos the ethnic, but who share and realize his ideals for political justice. Ultimately, the movie suggests that ethnicity is, or ought to be, subsumed to the pursuit of class interests; it is indicative that, although ethnic markers circulate in the movie, ethnicity does not matter for the next generation when Nick Garcos passes away. In this sense, this theme of *Juke Girl* foreshadows the main theme in Bezzerides' last novel, *Thieves' Market* (1949) and Bezzerides' movie script based on it, *Thieves' Highway*.

Thieves' Market was Bezzerides' last published novel. The same year it became a critical but not a financially successful

movie, *Thieves' Highway* (1949), directed by Jules Dassin. In fact, it was Dassin's last movie in the U.S.A. before he departed for Europe under pressure from the House Committee on UnAmerican Activities (HUAC). This novel returns us to a number of pre-war and pre-Hollywood themes, but unlike *Long Haul* it ends ambiguously with the main character Nick Garcos determined to defend his rights in a social milieu where the chances to win are slim. *Thieves' Market* is the story of a young Greek American who has lost his father (Yanko Garcos) and is antagonized by his mother (Parthena), who pressures him to remain a slave to a meaningless but steady job while he himself craves a different future. Nick takes his father's life insurance money that Parthena has been hiding from him and becomes a truck driver after he joins forces with an older and savvier man, Ed. He eventually ends up in San Francisco where the local produce merchants and especially Italian-American Mike Figlia rob him of his earnings while they tempt him with a prostitute, Tex. The novel ends with Nick setting out to claim what belongs to him.

The novel begins as the story of a son who tries to vindicate his father's dreams and ambitions in America. Nick Garcos means to succeed where Yanko Garcos has failed. In a way, this is a novel of how the immigrants' children learn from their parents' experiences and are determined to advance socially in the United States. On the other hand, this social mobility is meant to be seen as a move away from ethnicity; their emerging awareness of class-consciousness helps them reject the victim mentality of their parents and become aware of the social forces that keep the ethnic on the lower rung of the economic scale.

At first, *Thieves' Market* foregrounds the character's ethnic identity; Nick is Greek, and like a good Greek son lives with his mother Parthena, but he is also about to marry Anglo-American Polly and compromise his and his father's

ambitions for a different future. The petty bourgeois future Polly offers him poses a threat for Nick since it delineates an alternative personal development of social conformity; such a future will stop his rising awareness of social injustice and his eventual rebellion against it. His marriage to Polly symbolizes the character's social and political compromise; his conformity would make him a slave to a system that has disempowered and finally destroyed her father as well as his. Nick's awareness of another type of marital union underscores the danger of what both Polly and his mother demand of him. The unconventionality of an Armenian couple, Haig and Ahna, who take risks, scorn social proprieties, and support each other in an emotionally, sexually, and financially successful life in America contrasts sharply with the conformity and social victimization which characterizes his parents' and Polly's parents' marriages. Thus Nick's connection with Tex, the prostitute, reinforces his resistance against an ethos that has victimized his father and threatens to victimize him as well (Rabinowitz 124). The novel might have an ambiguous ending, but what stands out is Nick's determination to fight against the forces that keep him down.

The movie version of the novel, *Thieves' Highway*, based on Bezzerides' screenplay, emphasizes these themes and casts them in a film noir format. The ethnic aspect is far more pronounced, as is the class camaraderie that helps Nick (Richard Conte), win in the end. Greek, Italian and Russian are heard in the movie, while the multiethnic character of the marketplace is emphasized, as well as the antagonisms among the different ethnicities. Still the antagonisms are resolved in a final gesture of class solidarity against capital; the truck drivers help Nick reclaim his money from Mike Figlia, the produce wholesaler. The ending of the movie is unambiguous as concerns Nick's loyalties: he rejects Polly, as in the novel, but in the film he runs away with the

prostitute who in the film version is an Italian and is called Rica (Valentina Cortese). Thus, the ending emphasizes, in film noir manner, that the working stiff and the mobile femme fatale resist successfully the decay of modern life depicted in the drive for embourgeoisement at the expense of political consciousness among the immigrants' children. Furthermore, it embraces ethnicity and class as interconnected elements through which one can read the working class experience (Peddie 120).

The movie is characterized by a documentary style of filming developed in the 1930s mostly by leftist writers and screenwriters. Such a documentary quality serves Bezzerides well in his next screenplay for Nicholas Ray's movie *On Dangerous Ground* (1951), another film noir. Bernard Eisenschitz, referring to Bezzerides in his biography of Nicholas Ray, calls him "a real writer," emphasizing Bezzerides' drive for authentic representation of life in the streets (147). He mentions how the screenwriter traveled in police cars in order to reproduce authentic dialogues for the movie. The darkness and pessimism that informs the first part of the movie, the city part, is partly attributed to Bezzerides' ability to reproduce through dialogue an urban milieu, but also the ambiguity of human motives, especially the motives of those who presumably stand for the law. In this sense, and considering the two previous screenplays, Bezzerides and Ray advocate a politics of representation and difference that supports their view according to which narrative and film constitute a social critique. The writer himself makes a cameo appearance as an ethnic con man, Gatos, who tries to tempt the main character, the policeman, Jim (Robert Ryan).

The screenplay for *Sirocco* (1951), a movie that tried but failed to replicate *Casablanca's* success, marks Bezzerides' compromise with Hollywood ideas and rules of production. It is of interest to the present analysis only to the extent that

Zero Mostel plays an Armenian, Bezzerides only direct acknowledgment in film of his most salient ethnicity, while Nick Dennis depicts a boisterous Syrian. The latter, who was a Greek immigrant from Thessaly, would recreate the same type in Bezzerides' most famous movie *Kiss Me Deadly*. At the same time, interest in the declining community of Tarpon Springs motivated Hollywood to produce a movie that would depict the exotic aspects of being Greek-American. The ethnic content of this movie was meant to be non-threatening for mainstream American society that was experiencing a period of widespread social conformity during the early years of the Cold War and during HUAC's height of power.

Indeed, the screenplay Bezzerides wrote, *Beneath the Twelve-Mile Reef* (1953), and the movie Robert Webb directed, emphasize just that: the passing of the immigrant generation and the assimilation of their children in American society. The movie is a modern day Romeo and Juliet story with an ethnic twist. Two sponge diving communities compete for the same sea beds while they have defined clearly their areas of jurisdiction. However, when the sponges decrease in their area, the Greeks trespass into Anglo-American territory, and a feud ensues which is eventually concluded with the union of the Greek man (Robert Wagner) with the American woman (Terry Moore). The movie presents the colorful customs of the Greeks, such as diving for the cross on Epiphany Day (Jan 6), their boisterous singing and dancing, the mourning of the dead, the patriarchal structure of the Greek family with the implication that it is far more traditional than the American counterpart, and the traditional role played by Greek women.

The immigrants speak a stilted and broken English, whereas their children are fluent in the language of the mainstream. In other words, the Greeks of Tarpon Springs are represented as "people with culture," as exotics, whereas their next-door neighbors the "Anglo Saxons" are "a people without

culture": they represent the mainstream American society.⁵ All the same, according to the movie, community boundaries between "exotics" and the mainstream are flexible, and neither the immigrants nor the Anglo-Americans resist the eventual union of their young. In fact, the only objection comes from Terry Moore's fiancé Arnold (Peter Graves). The dilemma is whether the young woman will choose the exciting and exotic Greek or the sneaky and bland Anglo-American. In the end, nothing can threaten the cultural and national consensus that the movie celebrates. The darkness and ambiguity of the film noir scripts Bezzerides had produced in the past dissolve in this film version of an illustrated *National Geographic* article. But the "noir" Bezzerides will make his comeback in what is admittedly one of the last such film and one of the most celebrated film of the 1950s.

During this period, Bezzerides' scripts fluctuate between the commercially acceptable and the more innovative. In the same year that he wrote his Greek-American movie, Bezzerides wrote the script for a visually experimental film *The Track of the Cat* (1953), directed by William Wellman and starring Robert Mitchum. Then he went on to script another run of the mill espionage drama hampered by its now silly Red Scare thematics. *A Bullet for Joey* (1955) is a genuine Cold War propaganda movie directed by Lewis Allen and starring Edward Robinson, George Raft, and Peter Van Eyck. His next project was in a sense also a product of the Cold War period, but instead of catering to the tastes of state propaganda and to a similarly minded public, it offered a critique of modern American society and concluded not with a happy ending, not with an ambiguous one but with an ending that ended it all.

Kiss Me Deadly (1955), directed by Robert Aldrich, is considered one of the most celebrated films of the 50s and a prototypical film noir. Considering the reputation of the movie, it comes as a surprise that the film was based on a

novel by Mickey Spillane. Spillane's sensationalistic work was very popular at the time and it epitomized many of the period's racist, xenophobic, misogynistic attitudes. It is to Bezzerides' credit, and to a certain extent to Robert Aldrich's, that the final screenplay undermines all these attitudes and ultimately poses a critique of the Cold War period. Bezzerides completely rewrote the story, maintaining only some basic elements and changing the novel's mundane plot device of a search for a package of drugs into the search for the "great whatsit" that eventually marks the end of the world as we know it.

Two aspects of the film stand out: the milieu in which Mike Hammer, the protagonist, moves, and the ethnic characters with whom he associates or becomes acquainted. For Bezzerides the production of this script meant both his return to earlier themes and a departure from them. In *Long Haul* and *Thieves' Market* the world of the working stiff and the mobile femme fatale is largely an ethnic world of laboring individuals, of have nots. The world of money is only hinted at but rarely seen. Bezzerides predicates an essential humanity for the world of the have nots in his fiction and films which is articulated often elegiacally when the underprivileged combine forces against vertical monopolies. In *Kiss Me Deadly* the screenwriter paints primarily the world of money and to a lesser extent the world of the have nots. But now the two worlds cross paths and the results of such crossing are very significant for the development of the plot and the depiction of the main characters.

The film places Mike Hammer in Los Angeles, a significant departure from the book, in which the action takes place in New York. This is the world of Hollywood, but it is also prototypical Bezzerides territory. Furthermore, this is a world of fast cars, spotlessly clean apartments with answering machines and ultra-modern furniture. It is the world of Mike Hammer, a world without "culture" or ethnic markers.

Bezzerrides and Aldrich paint this world as a modernistic wasteland in which Hammer moves calculatingly and unemotionally.

Despite the way in which this wasteland reflects on Hammer's behavior, critics have noticed that there is a divided attitude in how the screenwriter and the director treat their hero. Hammer is portrayed as an ultra masculine, unemotional "monster," but he, nevertheless, connects with certain people. Given Spillane's vulgarity and openly pornographic plots, one might guess that Hammer connects with women since they can cater to his sexual fantasies. Thus it comes as a surprise, first, that the film's Hammer discourages sexual contact with women and, second, that he is humanized by his contact with the film's ethnic characters. The opening sequence offers the information that he likes jazz; in fact, he is listening to Nat Cole's "I'd Rather Sing the Blues Tonight." Later in the film we see him as he frequents the club where Madi Comfort sings the blues and who, along with the black bartender Art Loggins, comforts Hammer over the death of his friend Nick. James Naremore correctly claims that this scene gives the protagonist an aura of "cool" and he characterizes Hammer as a "White Negro" (240), after the term Norman Mailer coined. Furthermore, his encounter with the old Italian mover outside Christina's apartment turns into a meaningful exchange in metaphorical language which again humanizes Hammer but also elevates his character from the Neanderthal type to the literary-minded one.

Finally, but most significantly Hammer's connection with Nick, the Greek auto-mechanic (Nick Dennis), provides an emotional context which goes beyond that of Hammer's bland middle class social milieu. Nick often uses the boisterous but semantically ambiguous exclamation "va-va-voom-pow!," an exclamation with which he expresses his consternation at the attempts against Hammer's life, his

surprise at the life he leads, his commentary on California culture and ultimately his unintended anticipation of the film's apocalyptic ending. Nick is the one character who has been close to him for a long time and whom Hammer likes the best. When we first meet him, Nick playfully but affectionately calls Hammer, who has just come from the hospital *adelfaki* (little brother), while in the end he risks his life and then sacrifices it for him. It is to this sacrifice that Hammer responds very emotionally, seeking revenge. Thus, however tenuously, Bezzerides revives his earlier theme of human solidarity that the ethnic and racial margins of the U.S. have to offer. This is a possible response, albeit ineffectual in this particular case, to the modern wasteland of the affluent, racist, and conformist fifties.

Bypassing *The Jayhawkers* (1959) a western directed by Melvin Franck and starring Jeff Chandler, one notices that Bezzerides' last movie script involved a repatriation of sorts not to Asia Minor where he was born but to Greece. *The Angry Hills* (1959), directed by Robert Aldrich and starring Robert Mitchum, is a confusing movie whose script Bezzerides was called to rewrite. Based on a Leon Uris novel, the storyline centers around the political awakening of a war-time, easy going journalist who accidentally gets trapped in German-occupied Greece, and who finds himself in possession of a valuable list of names connected with the Greek resistance.

The Angry Hills presents a picture of Greece as both an urban and a rural/rustic society. However, although the village and the mountains teem with life, the city, in this case German-occupied Athens, appears strangely silent and empty. This is perhaps an unintended effect, for the production of the movie required filming in actual locations (Plaka, Hotel Grande Bretagne, the Gennadios Library, the Kapnikarea Church) and the recreation of pre-war settings and costumes especially might have raised the cost of the movie. Thus the producers chose to keep the casual passer-bys altogether

away from these locations while filming. Still the effect of silence reflects unintentionally on the repressive political and social conditions prevalent in Greece at the time.

After the Second World War, the Greek resistance had suffered a bitter defeat by forces sponsored by the Britain and the United States who went on to establish the repressive regime mentioned earlier. In *The Angry Hills*, however, Greeks are depicted either as collaborators, as by the characters Dimitris and Maria Tassos, for example, or ambiguously close to the occupying army, as by Lisa Kiriakidis. On the other hand, resistance fighters such as Leonidas, Andreas, and Eleftheria are simple peasants who, although heroic are, nevertheless, naïve and look up to Mike (Robert Mitchum) for final guidance. At the same time, the depiction of the Germans is far more complex. For instance, Conrad Einsler (Stanley Baker) is portrayed as a very reluctant representative of the occupying forces. Whether the script is faithful to Uris' book or has been reworked by Bezzerides, the fact remains that neither Uris nor Bezzerides and certainly not Aldrich, knew much about Greece or Greek history. Thus, the final product shows that Aldrich and Bezzerides had no desire to go against the limitations of the movie story line or of the Hollywood clichés and provide a more complex view of Greece. In other words, Bezzerides' only so-called Greek movie script remains on the surface of things. It is a project for easy consumption by a matinee audience. The easy-going Mike remains detached from, and at best patronizing towards, the country and its people and this attitude reflects the general approach of the movie.

The Angry Hills, and in fact Bezzerides entire oeuvre, raises one urgent question: what are the personal and professional stakes for the ethnic artist in the movie business, especially when he is called to represent his ethnicity belatedly? The case of Bezzerides' most famous compatriot is instructive. Elia Kazan filmed his first Greek film late in his career. In the

final scenes of *America-America* (1963), the main character, Stavros Topouzoglou, arrives at Ellis Island. He cannot disembark, however, because he has offended Mr. Kebabian, the Armenian-American merchant, by sleeping with his wife. Thus, Kebabian threatens to have him deported. But Stavros' friend, Hohanness Gardashian, knowing that he himself can not survive long in the New World with tuberculosis, sacrifices his life so that Stavros could assume his name and be permitted to disembark. Consequently, in front of the immigration official, Stavros adopts his friend's name, Hohanness Gardashian. As the official finds the name too long, he proceeds to Americanize it: Hohanness becomes Joe Arness. The Ottoman Greek assumes an Armenian identity in order to become an American.

This fictional interface among ethnicities in *America-America* seems to have its origin in Kazan's life. It reflects in a somewhat different order the interface in Bezzerides' life and art as well. Kazan is an Ottoman Greek who became an American by assuming deliberately (?) an Armenian sounding last name; Bezzerides, on the other hand, is an Ottoman Armenian-Greek who became an American writer by posing as an Armenian-American, but who legitimized his professional identity as a Greek-American. Thus, much like Elia Kazan's, Bezzerides' life and work testifies to ways that the ethnic's identity after emigration was sublimated, constrained, reshaped, given new meaning, and finally articulated under circumstances which reflected the ethnic's professional and socio-political affiliations.

But what is the meaning of such an ethnic interface in the context of the American entertainment industry? Apparently, and according to the fictional testimony of Kazan's only Greek movie, "Armenianness" translated into a political commitment which militated against repressive authority and bourgeois conformity; the movie claims that such was lacking in the Greek tradition of prospective immigrants like

Stavros. *America-America* depicts political commitment at a historical moment when such commitment was becoming increasingly important in the United States. All the same, *America-America* tried to have it both ways. It presented prospective Armenian immigrants who militate against social and political conformity, but die heroically, while it focuses primarily on the social and political expediency of prospective Greek immigrants who survive by complying with mainstream pressures either in Anatolia or America.

On a parallel level, Greekness, for Bezzerides, equaled an unknown and largely exotic ethnicity which made sense for the novelist and screenwriter only in the context of ethnic or proletarian politics as prescribed by the conventions of film noir and of proletarian literature of the 30s and 40s. Ethnic discontent becomes muted or marginal as the screenwriter develops his scripts in a more conformist era and under the imminent threat of the HUAC. Despite the achievement of *Kiss Me Deadly* one cannot overlook Bezzerides' complete identification with mainstream political and social choices. Hence in the end, Greekness for Bezzerides was an ethnicity discovered and articulated as a helpmeet to professional achievement and recognition within a broader national political consensus.

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NOTES

¹The exception is Garrett White's (1997) essay in the new edition of *Thieves Market*. Marcus Klein seems unaware of the writer and his work while discussing extensively the contribution of other authors in his *Foreigners* (1981). To be fair, the fiction of the period has only recently attracted the attention of critics received the study it deserves.

²Greek ethnicity became legitimate in the U.S. only after the victory of the Greeks against the Italians in the fall and winter of 1940-41. The Greek War Relief Association was formed after the invasion of Greece by the Nazis and Spyros Skouras of 20th Century Fox was designated the first National Chairman (Moskos 50).

³Bezzerides was closely connected with Faulkner whom he admired and knew well while they both worked for Warner Brothers. In the 70s, Bezzerides produced an award winning documentary on Faulkner for PBS called *William Faulkner: A Life on Paper* that was consequently published in a book form with Bezzerides' introduction.

⁴In the early 1940s, William Faulkner moved to Hollywood and worked, for example, on the script which was based on Raymond Chandler's *Big Sleep*. He also became closely associated with Bezzerides.

⁵The terms belong to the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo and come from his book *Culture and Truth*.