

Working Through and Against Conventions: The Hollywood Career of A.I. Bezzerides

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Albert Isaac Bezzerides (1908-2007) belongs to a generation of writers who came into relative prominence in the 1930s at a time when “the open door” immigration policy of the U.S.A. had become a thing of the past (1924).¹ The consequences of the Reed-Johnson Act were almost immediate and felt by the “new immigrants” and the “natives.”² The realization that the majority of the immigrants were there to stay and become part of the U.S.A. was solidified.

In the meantime, the 1930s and the Great Depression had created the need for another kind of literature still modern and experimental yet socially more aware. William Faulkner refocused the attention of his audience on the regional, giving voice and valorizing the under trodden who established their presence in the New South after the Civil War. Their domain was Yoknapatawpha County, Faulkner’s mythological terrain; and their representation emerged as part of the modernistic project of the 20th century. F. Scott Fitzgerald, on the other hand, sensed the tremors that the immigrants and their children created in a U.S.A. society which in the 1920s was divided between new and old money. Chapter five in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) provided the names of those who claimed not only the space of Gatsby’s mansion, frequented his parties, and were eager to draw their host’s attention, but also those whose parents had responded to “the pandering voice” of America. Fitzgerald’s Nick Carraway the novel’s narrator creates an aura of ambiguity around Jay Gatsby. Nick’s Gatsby is in the rackets, but he is also admirable, according to Nick, although he pursues his “meretricious dreams.” For Nick these dreams never become vulgar; he is clear about it: he believes that in Gatsby’s mind they equal the pursuit of the Holy Grail. Nick Carraway, however, would be less ambiguous and less forgiving for the openly ethnic characters of the novel. Wolfsheim,

comic and threatening, looms as the representative of the vulgar mob that surrounds Gatsby and frustrates his pursuit of the Holy Grail. If the corrupt representatives of the old money, Tom, Jordan, Daisy are condemned and called “careless people,” it is the ethnic who is stereotyped, ridiculed and made to appear sinister, threatening. They represent a world turned topsy-turvy. Consider also the scene of the “modish negroes” crossing the Queensboro Bridge.³

A. I. Bezzerides follows the lead of the “other” writers of his time when he realizes that there is a space opening up for young, literate, gifted men and women to speak from inside the immigrant communities from which fictional characters like the ones Fitzgerald depicted in his famous novel originated. Class but also ethnic [*avant la lettre*] issues take prominence in these young writers’ fiction. Perhaps a *caveat* is necessary here: ethnicity is rather integrated within and defined as an aspect of class in the 1930s fiction especially in the longer works. Bezzerides would not give ethnicity a prominent role in his first novel; this notion is absent from his second, but it is dominant primarily in the first part of his third.

Authors who spoke from within ethnic communities had similar professional aspirations as those considered mainstream modernist writers. John Fante, Nelson Algren, and Anzia Yezierska wanted recognition but they were also practical. They needed to make their living. Hollywood was beckoning to them and they were ready to oblige. In fact, they saw Hollywood as an opportunity to achieve both recognition and financial independence. They were not the first. F. Scott Fitzgerald who saw an opportunity to re-make his career there in the thirties failed miserably; William Faulkner fared a little better, but he was ready to flee Hollywood once his novels began selling. On the other hand, Bezzerides gave up his aspirations to become a writer of novels as he became more and more entangled with the Big Studios and in the end emerged and is remembered as an accomplished screenwriter. Two of his novels were filmed, but he remained dissatisfied with the result and always complained that in the production of these films, he was taken in by his agent and the producers, the “swindlers” as he kept calling them. Nevertheless, his work as a screenwriter of adaptations and original scripts including the scripts of his novels remains for most his enduring legacy to American culture.

Bezzerrides started his career in the 1930s, selling stories to *Scribner's*, *The New Republic*, and *Esquire*. He was inspired by the success of his contemporary William Saroyan, whom he knew in Fresno and corresponded with until the 1950s.⁴ Unlike Saroyan, who was born in Fresno in 1908, Bezzerides was born in the same year in Samsun, the Black Sea area

of the Ottoman Empire. Bezzerides was technically an immigrant although he was still an infant when his family emigrated. They were Presbyterians working at a missionary school in Samsun. His father Bondos Azarias Bezzerides was an ethnic Greek, an itinerant peddler by profession; his mother Noorahn/Ourania Kaladjian was an ethnic Armenian, and sixteen years old when she married Bondos Azarias. Albert Isaac was the only child born from this union.

Albert Isaac (Al and Buzz) was heir to two ethnic traditions: Pontic Greek and Pontic Armenian. In interviews with an older Bezzerides, which were conducted for the documentaries *The Long Haul of A.I. Bezzerides* (2005) directed by Efrosyni Lelios and *Buzz* (2006) directed by Spiros Taraviras, the ninety-year old man expressed his strong emotional ties to the Armenian side of his family and the Armenian community of Fresno. In *Buzz*, he even spoke Armenian when he narrated an exchange between his mother and his grandmother (Disroohi) that he had witnessed when he was very young. His use of Armenian occurs at a seminal moment in the documentary: Bezzerides narrates not only his closeness to his mother and maternal grandmother, he describes it in terms of his budding awareness of the power of language to affect people emotionally. He also expresses his discovery that the language spoken at home (Armenian) could be manipulated into a language of literature and therefore elevated into a high cultural artifact.⁵ As he described it, this moment gave him the inspiration to write his first poem that was eventually published, through the intervention of his mother, by the *Fresno Bee*.

This poem expresses in a few lines the lament of a mother for her son. We notice that it is family—centered, in a female voice, reminiscent of popular folk songs of separation from the family perhaps because of emigration; it expresses the loss of family ties and the abandonment of the older generation by the younger one. In a few words, it has elements that distinguish what came to be known as immigrant and ethnic literature.

When Bezzerides reads this poem in front of the camera, he does so with pride and self-consciousness that this was the beginning of his career as a writer. Such a career started in an ethnic/immigrant context and expanded to a more mainstream one, thanks to the intervention of Hollywood and his choice to work for that industry. His exposure to a more global audience through the movies and his choice to work as a screenwriter precipitated other choices as well.

Bezzerides' status as the son of immigrants relegated him to a certain socio-economic class and to a professional career that had to be practical. Hence this led to his decision to study engineering and to get his first job at a camera factory; he never completed his degree. His own

family had to be supported, and he had also to support his mother after Bondos Azarias' death. His move to Hollywood came after his first novel *The Long Haul* (1938) was bought by Warner Bros. This meant that he had to become part of another type of factory, an assembly line, that of screenwriters who were employed to adapt or fix scripts, provide additional dialogue, and "translate" stories or novels into filmable material. It is to be assumed that Bezzerides like so many others before or after him was lured by the steady income such a position offered.

Like everything else such a choice came with a price. Bezzerides always complained that he was never appreciated for what he had to offer. The screen adaptations of his novels are not faithful to the books; the studios and the agents did not pay the author what he deserved. Furthermore, the rough edges of Bezzerides' critique of the thirties and the Great Depression, his depiction of a capitalist system that exterminates the downtrodden and destroys families, his attempt to speak of the harsh family conditions the children of the immigrants had to face in the midst of the Great Depression, all these elements were reworked by "the assembly line" of Hollywood screenwriters into tinsel fantasies with happy endings. Moreover, his connection with Jules Dassin, who filmed his third novel, his relationship with and marriage to Silvia Richards,⁶ a screen writer who worked closely with Fritz Lang and who had been an avowed Communist, largely marginalized him and placed him in a "Grey List" during the McCarthy period. His accomplished work on *Juke Girl* (1942) and later on *Thieves Highway* (1949), *On Dangerous Ground* (1951), *The Track of the Cat* (1953) but particularly on *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) was recognized only after the French New Wave theorists and directors began referring to "film noir." In the meantime, Bezzerides had made the transition to television, a logical outlet for "black and grey listed" artists; he created and co-authored among other series the quite successful *Big Valley* (1965-1969).

We will bypass the film *They Drive by Night* (1940) whose script was loosely based on his novel *The Long Haul* and was directed by Raoul Walsh starring Humphrey Bogart, George Raft, Anne Sheridan, and Ida Lupino. His first original script was for *Juke Girl* (1942), a film directed by Curtis Bernhardt and starring Ronald Reagan and Anne Sheridan. The film focuses on the struggle between California tomato growers, the packers who exploit them and the workers. It is essentially a film of social protest that valorizes union organizing and communal opposition to vertical monopolies. It is a film that could not have been produced in the late 1940s, a time when Buzz wrote and sold another script of social protest based on his novel *Thieves Market*. *Juke Girl* prioritizes class camaraderie and opens up space for the depiction of Greek ethnicity. The juke girl, Lola (Sheridan) and Steve (Reagan) grow close to and

essentially speak for and protect an immigrant Greek farmer, Nick Garcos (George Tobias). Garcos is depicted as kind--hearted, aware of the injustices he suffers but rather inarticulate. He is a man who needs Lola to step in before a crowd of other farmers and speak for him.

This was one of the first films to depict a Greek immigrant as a main character and to introduce some ethnic elements such as in the scene where Nick “reads” coffee cup grinds to the young lovers. It was also the first time that Buzz introduced a Greek character in his work. His previous ethnic characters either in his novel *The Long Haul* or his early short stories had been Armenian. What has brought about such a change is not clear, especially since Buzz always testified to his emotional ties with his Armenian parents and their language as well as his knowledge of Armenian and Turkish but not Greek. I would propose that the legitimization of ethnicity because of the American participation in the WW II and most particularly the legitimization of Greek ethnicity due to the successful Greek resistance to the Axis Powers in 1940-41 brought about this transition from Armenian to Greek for Buzz.

Be that as it may, what we notice in *Juke Girl* is that ethnicity and class struggle take center stage. The ethnic understands the need for a union of the farmers against the packers, but he is unable to expedite this without the assistance of the younger generation. And indeed, Steve and Lola and eventually Steve’s old friend Danny (Richard Whorf), who originally sided with the packers, win the day. On the other hand, Garcos gets killed accidentally so in the end he is not able to enjoy the union’s victory over the packers.

The film’s uplifting social and political message reflects the climate of the time when unity against a common enemy was necessary in a country which had just joined the Allies in the war against the Axis Powers. According to his testimony, Bezzerides had a contract with Warner Bros for \$1000 a week. Nevertheless, he was not credited with another film script until *Action in the North Atlantic* (1943), a war movie for which he provided additional dialogue. Then in 1944, he moved to Paramount to work; *Desert Fury* (1947) was the first film that he is credited for additional dialogue before he got involved in the production of *Thieves’ Highway* (1949), the film that was based on his novel *Thieves Market* (1948). This time he was to work with Twentieth Century Fox.

The novel *Thieves Market* is the last one he published. Scribner’s editor Harry Brague was very enthusiastic. In a series of letters he exchanged with Bezzerides, he called it stylistically a breath of fresh air among so many novels that imitate the Hemingway plain style.⁷ The editor praises the realistic depiction of the San Francisco wholesale fruit and produce

market and the truckers' life on the road. Originally, Bezzerides suggested *The Red of My Blood* as the title, but soon changed his mind once Hollywood bought the rights.⁸ Apparently, the film producers came up with the new title. A comparison of the novel and the film reveals the discrepancies between Bezzerides' intentions and vision and those of the filmmakers but not necessarily of the director, Jules Dassin.

Bezzarides' novel fulfills his dream of writing with passion about the fate of the children of the immigrants, in other words, the fate of his generation. The injustices that his family suffered, the ethnic and personal rift in his parents' marriage, and his struggle for success and social progress are to be found in one way or another in the book. Nick Garcos is the young son of Yanco and Parthena Garcos whose marriage has not been a happy one. The couple's unhappiness is exacerbated because the immigrant father has met only with failure in America. He is dead when the novel begins, and Parthena holds on jealously to the insurance money she collected after his death; however, the son claims the money and eventually steals it so that he can escape from a demeaning job and a miserable existence.

Even when he gets the money and buys a jalopy to carry produce to the San Francisco marketplace. Nick is taken in by the big bosses who control the produce and fruit that is delivered there. He remains an innocent while one of the bosses, Mike Figlia, becomes his nemesis who throws in his way Tex, a prostitute, who would expedite Nick's downfall. The ending remains open and ambiguous. Will Nick be able to salvage his freight? Will he prevail against many odds? This is certainly a bitter ending.

The film version, on the other hand, presents us with a family romance: Nick's parents are happily married, and Nick loves them both. He returns from an overseas trip with money and presents for everyone. Nick has travelled around the world but remains unworldly. He is shocked to realize that his father has suffered from a traumatic encounter with the *demi-monde* of the marketplace which left him in a wheelchair. Nick uses the money he earned as a sailor to buy a truck that would serve him to make up for his father's losses. In the marketplace, he clashes with Mike Figlia, the wholesale boss, and wins. In the film, the American Tex has become an Italian immigrant prostitute, Rica. The Armenians do not have a place here, although the film foregrounds Greek, Russian and Italian ethnicity and there is no ambiguous ending. The film concludes with a police officer who lectures to the angry workers on the evils of violence and who saves Mike Figlia from their ire. Dassin, who left the U.S.A. for Europe right after he directed this film, and Bezzerides complained about this pat ending imposed by

producer Darryl Zanuck. Certainly, the Red Scare boogiemer and the threat of HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) ready to investigate Dassin would not permit an unconditional representation of the workers' victory; perhaps Bezzerides and the filmmakers at Warner's could afford to depict such a conclusion in *Juke Girl*.⁹ But times had changed. The happy ending under the eye of the law was a must for this film. In spite of the sunny beginning and ending, there is desperation and darkness in the film as there is in the novel. That is the point where Dassin's film noir and Bezzerides' proletarian/immigrant novel cross paths.¹⁰

Scribner's, who published the novel, advertised it as the author's first although Bezzerides had already published *The Long Haul* and in *There Was a Happy Land* (1942). The publishers also saw it as an autobiographical novel that foresaw the direction Bezzerides had to take as a writer. And it seemed that he was ready to do so. He had already announced to Harry Brague a first draft of *Sponge Diver*, a story about the Tarpon Springs Greek American community in Florida. Unfortunately, he could not afford the time to concentrate on another novel. Perhaps, as an old friend from Fresno claims in the documentary *Buzz*, "Hollywood spoilt Buzz." "The Gilded Cage" that Dassin refers to in his interview in the same film would not afford him the freedom to write for himself. He belonged to the "assembly line" of the Hollywood script writers.

Bezzarides, however, was a conscientious professional. He travelled in police cars in order to reproduce authentic police dialogue for his next project, *On Dangerous Ground* (1951) directed by Nicholas Ray. This is a film about police enforcing the law in the city and the country. The main character (Robert Ryan) is a lonely policeman who turns vigilante as he is drawn more and more into the violent underworld he polices. Brutality becomes his second nature and his nemesis. He is forced to accept the transfer to the countryside and investigate the murder of a young girl while ironically preventing the local vigilantes from taking the law in their hands. The story was perceived as split in two by critics at the time, but the two parts fit well together, not so much by the redemption of the brutal police plot as by the irony that Bezzerides worked into the story. Kindness toward the culprit in the countryside remains as ineffectual as brutality toward the criminal in the city. The romantic ending, nevertheless, tends to draw the viewer's attention away from such a dark conclusion.

As mentioned above, Bezzerides had been preoccupied with the story of his next novel. The statement in one of his letters to his editor in Scribner's, Harry Brague, that he is working on a story called *The Sponge Diver* would lead us to believe that the script of his next film

Beneath the 12-Mile Reef (1953) was an offshoot of that story. Tarpon Springs, Florida, had become a unique Greek “colony” of sponge divers from the Dodecanese. Quite prosperous before World War II, the community was experiencing financial problems because the sponges in the Gulf of Mexico were affected by a deadly germ and artificial sponges were replacing the natural ones. The film could be read as a farewell to that reality, i.e. the Greek economic presence in the town. The community was on its way of becoming the tourist destination that is today. The film was instrumental in promoting the new function of this town. In the 1950s, it was also a source of pride for the Greek Americans. Novelist George Pelecanos reinforces this view in the documentary *The Long Haul of A.I. Bezzerides*. It was not only the subject matter of the film that made them proud; the name of the screen writer, Albert Bezzerides, advertised in their minds one of them who made it big in the U.S.A.¹¹

In retrospect, one might consider such a film as a testimony to an ethnic renaissance in the 1950s. Such films positively showcased Euroamerican ethnic groups. Bezzerides’ film, however, certainly does not fall into this category. It serves a very different ideological purpose. It argues strongly for the Greek Americans becoming “people without culture.”¹² In other words, they are presented as “whites,” Americans of Hellenic descent. Robert Webb, who directed *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef*, the same year directed another film with Greek American subject matter: *The Glory Brigade*. Filmed in Tuscumbia, Missouri, around the Osage River and in the Ozark Hills, it was a film about the Korean War; one of the very few that dealt with that war at a time when World War II films in cinema and television were very popular.

Starring Victor Mature as a Greek American officer and Alexander Scourby as a Greek officer, *The Glory Brigade* also includes a youthful Lee Marvin in its cast. Furthermore, it casts Nick Dennis, a character actor of the 1950s, who appeared in films such as Elia Kazan’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1950), Curtis Bernhardt’s *Scirocco* (1951), and Robert Aldrich’s *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955).¹³ *The Glory Brigade* foregrounds the feud developing between Mature and Scourby over the different war tactics of the Americans and the Greeks. Misunderstanding and suspicion replaces the original ethnic pride of Mature. The story resolves the feud when the two sides conclude that what they have in common is the universal value of heroism and the belief in democracy. The final scene depicts predictably the triumph over the Chinese, their mutual enemy. Social and political consent unites the two men.

The Glory Brigade makes this last point forcefully in the final battle between the Greeks, the Greek American, and the American soldiers on the one side and the Chinese on the

other. The Greeks are admirably heroic; the Greek American sees that his own heroic attitude coincides with that of his compatriots. He is finally proud to see that they are part of the Greek heroic tradition that is earlier discussed by him in the film. Both the Greek and the Greek American, however, understand that these values now serve America to protect the world democracy. The old-world values then are passed on to the ethnic and in the end, they reappear as American values.

A revelatory dramatic scene of confrontation takes place between the Greek American Adonis/Tony (Robert Wagner) and the Anglo-American Thomas Rhys (Richard Boone) in *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef*. Adonis' boat has been burned accidentally by Rhys' men while they were in the process of robbing it of the sponges Adonis' father's (Gilbert Roland) brought up before he died. In this scene of confrontation an important point is made. Tony walks into Rhys' house during dinner time. His eyes wander around the dining room. It all seems familiar, he thinks. He exclaims that the room looks just like his own family's dining room; no difference can be detected. After all, Tony's and Thomas' families belong to the same country; in spite of the epiphenomena of Greek ethnicity, language, religious rituals, the rowdy behavior at the bar, the social conventions of middle class America are the same for the two families. In the end, this similarity will be sealed by the marriage of Tony to Gwyneth.

Furthermore, the broken English that Tony's parents, crew and Greek friends speak gives way to the standard idiom used by the young generation. The emphasis in this cinemascope Romeo and Juliet story and the feud over the sponge beds of the Gulf is on the assimilation process ethnic groups have undergone in the American 1950s after the immigrant generation has departed. *Beneath the 12-Mile Reef* does not separate the two communities at the end of the film. In fact, they are united when Tony marries Gwyneth Rhys. Nearly a decade after the production of these two movies, Theodore Saloutos, the pioneering historian of Greek America, would also proclaim that we no longer have Greek Americans but Americans of Hellenic descent.¹⁴

Bezzarides conformed to the dictates of Hollywood and of the prevalent spirit of the 1950s as far as ethnicity goes in order to continue to work as a script writer. Two scripts that he produced in 1955 demonstrate, on the one hand, how deeply influenced his work had been by American politics and propaganda; on the other, one of them provides ample evidence for his ability to fathom the undercurrents in American society and to depict deeply felt anxieties behind the official façade of what has been called "the silent 1950s." Bezzarides was able to

transform low quality material, material that was representative of the 1950s consumer society, into a filmable script and provide for himself an inspiration to write up a political allegory.

Lewis Allen's *A Bullet for Joey* (1955) is based on a Bezzerides script and stars George Raft, and Edward G. Robinson. *A Bullet for Joey* is typical of its time in that it is based on the idea of the red scare aesthetics. The story focuses on a criminal (Raft) who longs to return to the U.S.A. from Canada where he has fled to escape arrest. In order to do so, he collaborates with "the other side." Paid to abduct and deliver nuclear physicist to the enemy, he organizes a gang, that includes a *femme fatale*. In his way, he finds his old nemesis Inspector Raoul Leduc (Robinson). The latter, in an inspirational speech, forces Joe Victor to admit that he is a patriot, and wins him over to the powers of democracy and justice. In the end, Joe is shot dead by one of his accomplices, but the nuclear physicist returns to freedom.

This gangster-style Cold War movie, clearly a work of propaganda, involved the collaboration of two very significant screenwriters: Bezzerides and Daniel Mainwaring (1902-1977) author of *Out of the Past* (1947) among other well-known *film noir*. Perhaps, when Bezzerides was assigned to write a script for Robert Aldrich out of Mickey Spillane's pulp novel *Kiss Me Deadly* (1952), he had *A Bullet for Joey* still in mind. Spillane's predictably lurid book involved the chase after a package of drugs; the Spillane text had plenty of violent scenes and treated the female characters sadistically.

Bezzarides completely transformed the book's focus into a critical statement about private sleuthing, the dangers of industrial espionage and political defection. Apparently, the script was so well written that Aldrich admitted to Bezzerides that he did not change anything and went on to film the movie in twenty-two days. Watching Fay Lelios' documentary *The Long Haul of A. I. Bezzerides*, it is entertaining to hear what Bezzerides and Spillane have to say about each other in retrospect regarding *Kiss Me Deadly*. "It was awful stuff" says Bezzerides, "needed a lot of fixing I told Bob [Aldrich]"; "Why did they mess up such a good book?" asks Spillane; "Hollywood does that to a lot of good books." Neither one mentions the other by name.

Looking at the reviews of Robert Aldrich's film version of Mickey Spillane's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) today, we understand that the movie has acquired an emblematic and representative status in film history. Considered as a *film noir*, Aldrich's *Kiss me Deadly* differs significantly from Spillane's pulp fiction. Although Mike Hammer was promoted by Spillane's publishers as a private eye in the same category as Richard Chandler's Philip Marlowe,

Aldrich's and Bezzerides' Hammer (Ralph Meeker) is anything but that. For them, Hammer, unlike Marlowe, is a rather shady character involved in nefarious divorce cases where he and Velda, his secretary, frame people. The FBI and the police both look down upon him; he is brutal and violent, yet in no control of the circumstances. In Spillane's book, women are promiscuous and arouse him sexually; in the film they are intelligent, always one step ahead of him and often critical and satirical of his pretensions.¹⁵

On the other hand, Bezzerides added to this character a side which is absent from the book. Buzz's Mike Hammer is very close to a Greek mechanic, he listens to jazz, is friendly with at least two black characters, and shows respect for the opinions of an old Italian mover. In other words, there is an ethnic context suggested by the script which is absent from the book. Moreover, the film introduces and sustains a literary discourse which draws on the Bible, Greek mythology and the Pre-Raphaelite Christina Rossetti's poem "Remember Me."¹⁶

That Mike Hammer is initiated by Christina Bailey (Cloris Leachman) to Rossetti and Rossetti's poem is in itself a remarkable invention for a script of many levels. The Rossetti name constitutes a direct reference to an influential literary family in England whose father, an Italian patriot, read Dante and wrote commentaries on Dante's poetry to discover evidence of mysterious ancient conspiracies. His daughter's poetry and this particular poem emphasize an aesthetics of renunciation but also suggest the theme of redemption. Naturally, the inevitability of death and the consequent oblivion are prevalent in this poem as in the rest of Christina Rossetti's work.

Having considered the facts presented above, I want to suggest that Aldrich's and Bezzerides' *Kiss Me Deadly* is not simply a Cold War period film, and is certainly more accomplished than *A Bullet for Joey* but still within the same ideological frame. It is not a film about industrial espionage, Communists and western democracies alone. It is not just another end-of-the-world fantasy although it concludes with a nuclear holocaust. It does not provide a cinematographic representation of a Mickey Spillane sleazy pulp fiction although it has its origins in such inauspicious beginnings. Finally, it is not a film only about the mafia and the powers of order and justice.

Clearly, this film is also a statement about political conspiracy and paranoia.¹⁷ Furthermore, it is a film about the possibility of moral redemption through the protagonist's contact with the ethnic in an urban world of technological progress that teeters on the verge of destruction. These two themes essentially come together through the ambiguity of Nat King

Cole's blues song at the beginning and towards the end of the film and the idiosyncratic exclamation of Nick, the auto-mechanic character: "va-va-voom-pow!"

Through Nick, Bezzerides created a positive portrait of a Greek/Greek American character who adds comic relief to the narrative, foregrounding the human aspects of Hammer's personality and prefiguring the movie's irresolute ending. In the Italian mover scene, Bezzerides created another ethnic character who guides Hammer through the intricacies of figurative language and makes him look less like the Spillane Neanderthal-type and more like a literary-minded hero.

One question raised by the film is whether Mike Hammer is another all - American hero; the film answers its own question in the negative. The ending of the film is notoriously irresolute.¹⁸ Two endings were released at different times. The first, does not allow Mike and Velda to escape. They both perish in the fire and explosion that follows the opening of the box. In the second version, Hammer and Velda run out of the building and embrace, standing in the water watching the destruction from the safe space of the ocean. One naturally wonders, what about the nuclear fallout? Are they safe from it? Are we to understand that the two are doomed anyway? In that case too, we witness the death of the hero. So, are we to assume that the hero and his efforts at sleuthing make no difference? Moreover, does his death take place in a context that signifies the gap between man's scientific, technological skills and his political, social and moral ineptitude? In the film, we imagine Power (the police, the FBI) and Science (the Atomic Power Commission) operatives as a corporate fact; indeed, the script suggests that the corporate style is somehow no longer merely an aberrant business subculture, but some deeper quasi-ontological law of the social world itself. In such a world order, the hero is superfluous and ineffectual.

In this case, the final speech by evil Dr. Soberin describes an inevitability. The structures of political and scientific powers that remain invisible will bypass the threat of the "three-headed Cerberus" dog of Hell and will open the "Pandora's box" which will end the world as we know it. Gabrielle who opens it in the end remains unaware. Her vision and her knowledge are asymmetric: to see is no longer to know. And that is not because Bezzerides has complied with Spillane's misogyny. Every individual in this film remains unaware including Mike, Velda, and Carl Evello. Dr. Soberin who apparently knows is shot dead by Gabrielle without revealing the secret of the box. He simply insists on alluding not stating clearly to the danger of knowing. He understands that to know in this film is to die. *Kiss Me Deadly*, after

all, expresses the intolerability of the present order and a deep anxiety in the face of what might be involved in trying to actually know, in the Marxian sense, before you could change/save the world.

The collaboration between Bezzerides and Aldrich had another result. This time, ironically, Bezzerides had to revamp a book about his putative home country, Greece. At the time in the 1950s, Greece was recovering from a fratricidal war, was led by a right-wing government, had a parliament in which the Communist Party was outlawed, and for the first time was attracting Hollywood's attention. Already, Twentieth Century Fox's and Jean Negulesco's *The Boy on a Dolphin* (1957) had been filmed on the Greek island of Hydra and had been relatively well received by audiences and critics. It was the first Hollywood film made in Greece and Fox originally hired Leon Uris to write the script because he had recently published his novel *The Angry Hills* (1955) about Greek resistance during World War II. This collaboration did not work out; Metro Goldwyn Mayer bought *The Angry Hills* and asked Aldrich and Bezzerides to consider filming it.

Bezzarides transformed the main character from an American widower in mourning who comes to Athens to claim his Greek American wife's inheritance to a war correspondent. Mike Morrison is in Athens in transit from Budapest to London. He is trapped in Greece as the German troops take over the country. Mike is asked to be the reluctant courier of a list of sixteen names who would collaborate with the enemy while acting as undercover agents for the Allies. The plot develops loosely with narrative gaps and loose ends. In the end, Mike escapes to freedom and the list has become the perennial, Hitchcockian macguffin that has determined the action yet it is all but forgotten by the last scene.

Mike Morrison (Robert Mitchum) is definitely an anti-hero, not quite like Mike Hammer, but clearly from the same tradition. However, he is humanized in his contact with the only independent Greek female figure in the film who is symbolically named Eleftheria¹⁹ (Gia Scala). Nevertheless, the film cannot accommodate narratologically a female character who is worlds apart from the other female figures that cross Mike's way, particularly\; the half-naked seductive tavern dancer, Cleopatra (Marita Konstantinou);²⁰ the passive Maria Tassos (Jackie Lane) peddled to the German Konrad Einsler (Stanley Baker) by her half-brother (Theodore Bikel); and the deluded, indecisive Lisa Kyriakidis (Elizabeth Mueller). In the film, Eleftheria unexpectedly drops out of the plot.

The unconventionality of Eleftheria's character does not conform with the model of womanhood prevalent in the 1950s. Yet it is also tempting to assume that Eleftheria is quietly discarded from the plot because she and Mike represent two different worlds that cannot mesh. They cannot live together in time of peace. At least Hollywood would not represent even the possibility of such a fictional union. Consider the rustic, alien culture that the script and the cinematography depict, and the culture Eleftheria represents. She and her culture are too foreign for the American character. Cinematic miscegenation needs to be avoided.²¹

Bezzetides could not bypass Hollywood conventions. Nevertheless, in *The Angry Hills*, his only Greek movie, Greece had remained an unknown territory as he has declared in the two documentaries mentioned earlier. The two languages he claimed that he spoke other than English were Armenian and Turkish. Yet the film he wrote captured something of the ambiguous political atmosphere of the 1950s in Greece. Similarly, the cinematography conveys in *film noir* style the shadows and the silences prevalent in the country at the time. Thematically and cinematographically, the film goes beyond the *National Geographic* imagery of *The Boy on a Dolphin* or the exoticization of ethnicity proposed in *Beneath the 12 Mile Reef*. It also concludes on an open ending. Lisa's two children and Mike are leaving the occupied country, but Lisa remains with Konrad in an ambiguous union, Maria Tassos' absence is not explained, and the future of several characters is unclear.

The Angry Hills was Bezzetides' last film for the big screen. The project that carried him over the 1960s was the TV series he created, *Big Valley*, as well as individual episodes in *Bonanza*, *The Virginian* and other serials of the time.²² He would return to a project of his own with a PBS documentary on his relationship to Faulkner called *Faulkner: A Life on Paper* (1972).

Bezzetides had a long life as he was almost 100 years old when he died in 2007. The twentieth century was his century. He stands not only as a successful fiction and screen writer, but also as the son of "new immigrants" who made the transition to the new culture successfully. He associated himself with Hollywood and made the most of the opportunities offered to a young ethnic who had to place himself within a predominantly powerful white culture. He wrote about the first generation of immigrants with bitterness and despair; however, his fictional work was compromised by the studios into typical genre B-movies. As a screen writer, he complied with Hollywood conventions, but he also crafted memorable scripts that reflected the ironies and anxieties faced by the common man in the 1940s and 50s. In short, he

might have been a fiction writer *manqué*, one of the assembly line script writers of the studio system, but he was also a talented creator.

¹ The Reed--Johnson Act imposed the quota system to curb immigration from southern and eastern Europe.

² As "new immigrants" we define all those who belong to the so-called Great Migration (1880-1924).

³ F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby*. NY: Penguin, 2010: pages 75-76.

⁴ More on the short stories and novels are available in Yiorgos Kalogeras. "Albert Isaac Bezzerides: Translating Ethnicity from Fiction to Film." In *Imagined Identities: Identity Formation in the Age of Globalization*. Edited by Gonul Pultar. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014.

⁵ Noorahn had been reading Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in English and Disroohi who spoke or read very little English asked her daughter to translate. Noorahn's ability to turn the English text into Armenian provoked Disroohi's admiration and exclamation. This performance sanctified for a young AI that a language spoken around the house could be transformed into a literary language. It also showed him that one of the family could create or recreate a work of art. Hence his first poem was created.

⁶ Silvia Richards (?-1999) wrote the scripts for *Possessed* (1947), *The Secret Beyond the Door* (1947), *Rancho Notorious* (1952), and *Ruby Gentry* (1952).

⁷ Scribner's where Bezzerides submitted his manuscript was also Hemingway's publisher.

⁸ Information on the publishing of *Thieves Market* comes from the correspondence between Bezzerides and his editor Harry Brague with whom he maintained a long friendship and correspondence. At the time, Bezzerides was working with Twentieth Century Fox on the script of this novel.

⁹ See a useful contemporary review of this film. Dan Georgakas. "Thieves' Highway, Night and the City, Riffifi." *Cineaste*, Spring 2007: pages 72-73.

¹⁰ In an insert included in the DVD release of the film, Michael Sragow compared it with Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* which he feels *Thieves Highway* anticipates; yet he maintains that: "*Thieves Highway* about honesty and cooperation versus betrayal and deceit among individuals, not about industrial corruption and codes of silence."

¹¹ In addition to Pelacanos and Bezzerides himself, *The Long Haul of A.I. Bezzerides* (2005) has commentary from Jules Dassin and Mickey Spillane. Now available on DVD.

¹² The phrase belongs to American anthropologist Renato Rosaldo and is analyzed in his *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis*. London: Routledge 1993.

¹³ In the seventies, Nick Dennis would make a name for himself on the television show *Kojak*.

¹⁴ Theodore Saloutos. *The Greeks in the United States*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1964.

¹⁵ See, for example, the opening scene between Mike and Christina (Cloris Leachman) where the latter makes fun of his narcissistic masculine pretensions.

¹⁶ The poem reads:

Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land;
When you can no more hold me by the hand,
Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.
Remember me when no more day by day
You tell me of our future that you plann'd:
Only remember me; you understand
It will be late to counsel then or pray.
Yet if you should forget me for a while
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
For if the darkness and corruption leave
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad.

¹⁷ It should be in the same category with Don Siegel's *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1955); these two films prefigure the more openly paranoid films of John Frankenheimer's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962) and Alan Pakula's *The Parallax View* (1974).

¹⁸ The ending of this film foreshadows the ending of Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). There are strong similarities in the punishment of the Nazis when they open the Ark complete with a distant shot of the island and what resembles an atomic mushroom exploding from its middle.

¹⁹ Eleftheria, the Greek word for freedom, is often used as a first name.

²⁰ The taverna scene is surprising since it presents Cleopatra half naked. There may have been two versions of the scene.

²¹ I would argue here that what is the issue is what has been called the immigrant complex by Balibar “a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences” (21). See also Yiorgos Kalogeras “Entering Through the Golden Door: Cinematic Representations of a Mythical Moment” *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 21:2 (2012): 77-99. There is a similar situation in the Greek film *Nefes/Brides* (2004).

²² Bezzerides used the name “Nick Garcos” over and over again in his screenplays and novel, even in the 1960s TV scripts. For him, it represented the Greek name par excellence!