

CRITICAL BOOK REVIEWS

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Dennis Broe, *FILM NOIR, AMERICAN WORKERS, AND POSTWAR HOLLYWOOD*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009.

This book is an admirable attempt to expand the parameters of a particular Hollywood genre (the so-called “noir” subset of the crime film) to accommodate a class-based analysis of the postwar entertainment industry. While recent books have endeavored to fragment film noir and focus critical attention on previously unacknowledged connections (Nathaniel Rich’s 2005 *San Francisco Noir*, to take a pop example, is a biography of both genre and city, showing their mutually supportive relationship and contributions to public consciousness), Broe’s work is the first to concentrate on class, and one of the few scholarly works to argue persuasively for the leftist origins of a Hollywood genre. In fact, the inclusion of the word “workers” in the book’s title betrays the rareness of Broe’s critical task, and prepares the reader for a thoroughgoing account of the postwar labor movement’s impact on film content.

For Broe, the labor movement in general and working-class consciousness in particular helped shape, even constitute, the noir genre. Broe notes the preponderance in postwar Hollywood of émigré directors who, in his analysis, were uniquely “attuned to the left paradigm” (xxvii). But he also, wisely, acknowledges the formation of “a hegemonic bloc of working- and middle-class positions that together call[ed] into question the (usually hegemonic) assumptions of the postwar American corporate class” (xxvi). Adopting Antonio Gramsci’s description of the subaltern, which in Gramsci’s “On the Margins of History” includes the working class, Broe examines the extent to which film noir operated to first reflect, under a rubric of realism, the experiences of labor as a whole.

Those films that sought to depict urban life in all its squalor were also, according to Broe, offering uniquely sympathetic portraits of working-class protagonists. One such protagonist, Alan Ladd’s Johnny Morrison, provides the famed 1946 noir *The Blue Dahlia* with a clear narrative stand-in for labor strikers. In Broe’s reading, war veteran Morrison lucidly articulates his “alienation from the more individual and greedier values of the atomized capitalist home front” (49). *The Blue Dahlia* is therefore exemplary of trends

in early noir that endeavored, albeit symbolically, to denounce the government's repression of labor movements during the immediate postwar period. Morrison, like many a postwar striker, seeks class allies while finding himself at variance with criminal figures from the corporate world. The collapsing of gangster and businessman becomes a significant trope for Broe, who notes that as conservatism crept into noir, so too did sympathy for the corporate class. By the early fifties, noir was no longer suggesting that labor could combat the law from without or oppose it from within.

While the latter option, couched cinematically as a conflict between working-class cops and working-class criminals, initially entered noir as a leftist formulation, it soon developed into an endorsement of vigilantism that, in Broe's reading, betrayed the genre's original, avowedly leftist, anti-corporate mandate. For Broe, the vigilante cop became a closet apologist for corporatization, his aggressive stance less a reaction against postwar consumer culture than a self-loathing capitulation to it. According to Broe, the vigilante violence that came to characterize crime films during the mid-fifties "might be read as an unacknowledged rage by a now immobile working class that has traded its right to contest both its role in the process of production and the larger direction in which the society is moving for a few pieces of silver in the form of more commodities and a more affluent lifestyle" (102).

In tracing this history, Broe pays obeisance to previously established chronologies but offers his own nuanced understanding of noir's progression. For Broe, the seeds of noir proper were planted in the pre-war period, by such literary luminaries as James M. Cain and Raymond Chandler, but needed the nourishment provided by postwar dissent, which culminated in the militant, country- and industry-wide strikes of the 1945-47 period. In Broe's novel analysis, "film noir... cannot but bear the mark, or at least the repressed trace, of a time when heightened class conflict was in the forefront of American consciousness" (xxi).

In perceptive passages examining the near-continuous strikes that characterized the immediate postwar period, Broe acknowledges the craft unions and creative guilds that sought to reform the entertainment industry from within. Still, the book might conceivably have benefited from a more expansive analysis of Hollywood's specific financial woes. Indeed, the industry's immediate postwar experiences (and filmic output) conform to the affective trajectory that Broe tracks. For Broe, the transformation of working-class optimism into corporatized fatalism formed the emotional landscape of postwar America. By the close of the forties, Americans were

no longer conditioned to celebrate the efforts of labor organizers struggling for, say, wage parity. What's more, works of popular culture had ceased, by about 1949, to honor or even acknowledge progressive change. The decade that had begun with the naming of 1940's *The Grapes of Wrath* as the Best Picture of the Year by the Motion Picture Academy ended with the equivalent elevation of 1949's *All the King's Men*, a far less encouraging account of American political activity that proffered moral ambiguity as a trait to replace Tom Joad's humanist homilies.

Though not a noir, *All the King's Men* does depict the opposition to progressive change that came to characterize the postwar American political landscape, and shares noir's brutal "truth-telling" mandate. Brilliantly, Broe shows how this mandate mutated from early noir's capacity to counteract the optimism and "patriotic gloss" of the Hollywood combat film (primarily by foregrounding the cynicism of service veterans, as in 1946's *The Blue Dahlia* and 1947's *Crossfire*) to late noir's emphasis on the inevitability, and attendant inhumanity, of corporatization. If a working definition of the genre can be extracted from Broe, it is that of noir "as an articulation of working- and middle-class critiques of postwar American corporatism" (xxvi). For Broe, such articulations originated in energized and iconoclastic terms and ended, around 1955, in a legitimate "lament for a desired change that was not to be" (xvi), a lament most brutally substantiated by the right-wing, apocalyptic *Kiss Me Deadly*, which ends with the detonation of a doomsday device.

Such an apocalyptic sensibility seeps into most examples of what Broe calls "the McCarthyite Crime Film," a subset of noir that flourished in the fifties. According to Broe, this subset "signal[ed] the end of the line for the noir period," replacing the working-class concerns of earlier, more left-leaning films with the right-wing commands of a new kind of protagonist, the fascistic vigilante cop whose chief concern is to enforce corporatism (88). Broe notes that the novels of Mickey Spillane, whose hero Mike Hammer had come to symbolize mid-century vigilantism, provided abundant source material for Hollywood studios. The resultant films offered salient (and saleable) strategies for resisting labor concerns, strategies that included glorifying suburbia at the express expense of working-class enclaves, and lionizing conformist cops while maligning female workers.

What emerged was, for Broe, a subgenre that served to remind American audiences "of the fate of the women who constituted a majority and the leadership of many of the outlawed unions" (102). Broe connects the con-

cerns of these fifties films, in which the vigilante protagonist is “the ultimate enforcer of the corporate consensus against the remaining pockets of urban resistance” (102), with those of the Hollywood film industry itself. Reminding the reader that, during the first half of the fifties, “Hollywood was in the forefront and a model of how to repress union struggles under the guise of anti-Communism,” Broe convincingly explicates the ways that this repression manifested itself, from the dispensing of subpoenas by studios complicit with the anti-Communist aims of the HUAC investigations, to the making and marketing of films in which the working-class, activist protagonist became “a psychotic killer whose underground life menaced society” (86).

One of the most compelling sections of Broe’s book is that devoted to the novels (and film adaptations) of Cornell Woolrich. Broe reads these works as proto-feminist: “Beginning during the war and dominating the postwar noir period in terms of adaptations... [the novels of Woolrich] went some way toward righting the masculinist predisposition of the detective films.” For Broe, the novels (which include *Black Angel* and *I Married a Dead Man*) do so by celebrating female resourcefulness, which Woolrich couches, according to Broe, as “a testament to the newly acquired independence won by working women during the war” (28). If a caveat could be added to these passages on Woolrich, it would arise from an acknowledgment of the man’s now-well-known homosexuality, and of certain queer reading strategies. Woolrich may have, in Broe’s words, “refus[ed] to displace the crimes of power onto the woman,” permitting the detective film to discard “its archaic patriarchal past,” but he was also crafting first-person narratives of female heterosexual desire, and so can seem, at least according to the foundational clichés of the so-called “gay sensibility,” a writer most at home in the cloak of womanhood. Read in this way, Woolrich’s female-centric stories seem less responses to generic predispositions, less expressly celebratory of women’s wartime agency, than a series of alibis for depicting an emergent queer consciousness.

As Paul Schrader famously suggested in his 1972 essay “Notes on Film Noir,” the noir genre is defined primarily (if not exclusively) by its tonal elements (among them an anti-humanist hopelessness, on the one hand, and, on the other, a foregrounding of the trope of crime-as-contagion). Since Broe consents to this rather expansive classificatory system, it seems odd that his book should omit mention of *The Big Knife*, a 1955 film by Robert Aldrich (who directed *Kiss Me Deadly* immediately thereafter) that is rarely labeled noir but that fits the descriptions offered by both Schrader and Broe. Indeed, rather than subvert Broe’s central argument, *The Big Knife* forcefully confirms

it: based upon the controversial stage play by Clifford Odets, the film focuses on one actor's efforts to free himself from (and thereby condemn) the increasingly corporatized postwar film industry, an industry that has made him famous but that insists on operating under ever more exploitative business models.

While one could offer an endless list of titles that might have entered into and strengthened the author's analysis, it seems clear that Broe's omission of *The Big Knife*, while not necessarily an impediment to the book's success, at least provides an impetus for future studies of film noir that, building upon Broe's model, will surely seek to address the range of ways that class conflict is made manifest in mid-century media production. Admittedly, Broe, who writes so cogently on the extent to which the capitalist system is metaphorized in noir, is not writing industrial history, although he acknowledges that the Hollywood film industry has itself been among the most corporatized of American institutions. *The Big Knife* sharply captures the tensions between actors' efforts to gain some autonomy in (even ownership of) film production as well as the widely condemnatory responses of studio bosses, and Broe's book, because itself concerned with precisely these tensions, would have gained from an engagement with the film. At any rate, *Film Noir, American Workers, and Postwar Hollywood* is a stimulating and original analysis of a particular Hollywood genre, and provides an uncommon account of the centrality of labor concerns to an earlier mode of media production.