Out from the Shadows: Class and Labor in Film Noir

Film Noir, American Workers, and Postwar Hollywood, by Dennis Broe. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009

reviewed by David Friedkin

Despite the growing body of literature surrounding it in recent decades, film noir – a style of Hollywood filmmaking that flourished in the postwar period – has proved difficult to define. (For every film clearly of the genre, there are dozens more that blur the boundaries of what constitutes 'noir.') Variously described as a genre, movement, cycle, or style, film noir is generally identified by a set of 'noirish' markers that may appear in any aspect of a film, including its iconography (dark urban settings, rain-soaked streets, lonely diners and such), characters (down-and-out private eyes, femmes fatales, petty criminals, etc.), style (low-key lighting, imbalanced compositions, extreme camera angles), theme (lots of treachery, murder, corruption, betrayal, sexual obsession), narrational techniques (a tendency toward the use of flashbacks, voice-over narrations, and convoluted plots) and mood (an overall atmosphere of cynicism, alienation and despair). Perhaps because of its strangely fluid nature - and because its pessimistic outlook stood in opposition to the optimism of most Hollywood products of the period – much of the criticism surrounding film noir has tended to focus on the genre's stylistic aspects and dark aesthetic. The near total disregard for such concerns exhibited in Dennis Broe's *Film Noir, American Workers, and Postwar Hollywood* provides just a small indication of the many ways this text sets itself apart from the larger body of film noir criticism. More than merely swimming against the current of noir criticism, Broe, by virtue of his resolutely political perspective and unconventional focus on issues of labor and class, carves out new streams of thought and inquiry for future film noir criticism.

While issues of sexuality, gender, and female representation have received much attention in the critical literature (an understandable tendency given the prominent role of the femme fatale in film noir, and the attendant issues of misogyny and female agency raised by her presence) issues of class have been largely ignored by most film critics who, as Broe explains, see "little or no evidence of [class] struggle on the screen." In contrast, Broe argues that film noir is "primarily an expression of class" – a bold assertion given the tendency of film scholars to downplay class. (Even those texts which claim to examine issues of "race, class and gender," seem to give short shrift to this quasi-taboo subject.)

But Broe's approach departs from the mainstream(s) of noir analysis in other respects as well. Attempts to explain film noir's emergence in the 1940s rarely move beyond broad references to a generalized "postwar malaise" (typically attributed to two world wars, Cold War paranoia, McCarthyite repression, and socio-

economic hardships faced by returning G.I.'s and displaced female workers). In contrast, Broe focuses on the class and labor tensions plaguing Hollywood and the nation at that time, and does so with a depth of analysis unmatched by previous film scholarship. Pointing out how film noir "appeared at a moment when working-class consciousness was heightened by a series of strikes, both in the nation as a whole and in Hollywood in particular, and when middle-class anxiety over increasing corporatization was acute," Broe goes on to trace the development, evolution and demise of the genre, showing in some depth how its various permutations mirrored specific phases of class conflict during those times.

And while considerable attention has been paid to the male protagonist in film noir, this alienated, morally compromised, and self-destructive figure is typically perceived as representing a "crisis of masculinity" in the postwar period. As helpful as this approach has been, Broe prefers to view the figure through a political (rather than a psycho-sexual or socio-cultural) lens, positing his (or occasionally, her) tribulations as a form of class struggle whereby a figure, nearly always "subworking-class, working class, [or] middle class" is forced outside the law, and in opposition to "a foe whose class position was that of someone in charge, in control" (usually of the "upper- or business-class"). Viewing the noir protagonist's condition as reflective of postwar class tensions, Broe argues that "the film noir hero's struggle with the law recapitulates the labor rank and file member's battle for his or her own legitimacy in this era**."** Central to his attempt to understand film noir from a political perspective, is the claim that lies at the heart of his argument - that "for one period, 1945-50, in one genre, ideas of the left were hegemonic [and] formed the core of the genre." For Broe, one reason for the critical and popular success of film noir was that many of its creators "were attuned to the left paradigm" and that they conveyed through their films "ideas unusual in Hollywood," among them, inequality, economic precariousness, and the struggle for survival – the sense that "the bottom could fall out of anyone's life at any time" – and that moreover, the fault for this condition lies "not in the working or middle classes but in a class that parasitically feasted off their labor."

Here Broe teases out a meaning in film noir which has gone largely unnoticed in the literature – that the genre reflected the frustrations of a postwar population "having to make a living in a wage scheme that was said to be a fair engagement of worker and owner but where in reality the cards were always stacked against the wage earner who did not own the means that ensured his or her survival."

This sense of unfairness, "felt but not given voice in society," was in part responsible, Broe argues, "for the cynical expressions of [noir's] tough guy and girl" whose language is "used as a way of warding off the harshness of a world controlled from above" – a novel interpretation made possible by Broe's class-based perspective.

Outlining the social conditions that coalesced to produce noir's leftist character, Broe highlights a range of factors seldom addressed in the literature. Many of the Hollywood workers behind the creation of the genre, Broe explains, had brought with them the values of their working-class immigrant parents, or had witnessed the

"fascist crushing of the working class," or had arrived from the "class conscious cauldrons of the New York stage," while others were politicized by the militant crafts unions which came under vicious attack by the studios. As a result, Hollywood's postwar films featured, as a legacy of the 1930's popular front culture, "a promotion of the common man." It was in this way that "working class attitudes…began to proliferate in Hollywood films, culminating in the film noir." As a product then, of both the "impulse for change and its repression," film noir could "not help but bear… the repressed trace of a time when heightened class conflict was in the forefront of American class consciousness."

Broe classifies film noir into three periods: the first during the war (1941-45), when "ideas of the left" first emerge, the second in the postwar period (1945-50), where left ideas become dominant within the genre, and a third during the cold war (1950-55) when the subversive nature of film noir is finally repressed. Throughout, Broe shows how the three periods reflected the class and labor tensions confronting Hollywood and the nation.

In his analysis of wartime film noir, when "class contradictions present in the detective film" come "to the fore," Broe demonstrates how the noir protagonist – often the hard-boiled detective common to such films (a la Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe) - has an ambiguous relationship to the law and is, moreover, increasingly forced outside it as the genre progresses through the war years, a movement, Broe argues, that mirrors that of the labor figure, forced to do the same in the course of war-time labor struggles, "when the protesting of work conditions were likely to be labeled traitorous."

Broe identifies in noir films of this period, five key elements in the hard-boiled detective films that he claims align the protagonist with the labor movement during this time: a focus on the process of work, a focus on getting paid, a resentment toward the rich and the upper-middle professional classes, an increasingly antagonistic relationship to the law, and a manner of plain speaking on the detective's part that counters the obfuscatory speech of others. Workers, Broe asserts, took on similar qualities in this same period, suffering as they were from soaring prices, wage freezes, mass layoffs, longer workweeks, no-strike pledges, and more than ten times the number of casualties suffered on the battlefield. With business receiving millions in war contracts, wages at their lowest point since the Depression, and "union leaders…operating as guarantors of union docility," workers, in their struggle against this "broad confluence of forces," find themselves forced outside the law in the form of wildcat strikes.

By comparing two seminal films from the wartime period, *The Maltese Falcon* and *Murder My Sweet*, Broe shows correlations between the hard-boiled detective and the unionist in the five categories cited, and in so doing supports his argument that "[a]t the beginning of the war, the hard-boiled detective…conforms, as does labor, to the dictates of the law… By the middle of the war though, this figure is much more questioning of the ability of the law…to administer justice."

Broe then traces the movement of film noir through various postwar permutations, beginning with the "social problem noir" (exemplified by such films as *The Widow* (1949, about tenement life); *So Well Remembered* (1947, obliquely dealing with the taboo subject of strikes in the form of a newspaper editor in favor of labor reforms; and *Crossfire* (1947, about anti-Semitism, and a film that "helped to bring on the blacklist)" Here, Broe pays special attention to *Brute Force* (1947) a prison escape film that obliquely depicted the strike period through its focus on prison work, and by its violent end, where the warden orders "a machine gun to open fire on the prisoners in what is the closest screen depiction ever of the pitched battles that took place in Hollywood every day for two years." Given that this film was produced during "the most concentrated period of labor strife in the country's history" (with the number of strikes doubling every few months, and general strikes shutting down cities) - Broe's assertion may well be correct. The strikes in Hollywood were "highly combative," with the studios employing "scabs, thugs, tear gas, fire hoses and…private police and fire departments" to break them, while Darryl Zanuck threatened to "set up a machine gun on the roof" and "mow [the strikers] down," and Jack Warner (who had complained of "goddamn Commie bastards" wanting to take over his studio) watched as his employees were sprayed and gassed on "Bloody Friday," 1945.

But as Broe points out, the sense of hope embodied in the social problem films (and in the labor agitation occurring at that same moment) did not last long. With the Taft-Hartley Act (1947), labor unions were associated with communist subversion and criminalized, and union members compelled to sign affidavits claiming no affiliation with the Communist party. With the Smith Act, the Taft-Hartley Act, the FBI, IRS, INS, NLRB, HUAC and other congressional investigations arrayed against the labor movement, its members were made to feel outside the law, as was an array of film noir protagonists during this same period, all of whom are forced into some kind of "fugitive" status in the postwar years.

Broe groups the protagonists of noir's postwar period into seven types of "fugitive kinds" who, when taken together, form a "working and middle-class block aligned against corporatism," and, Broe argues, collectively demonstrate "the dominance of left ideas in film noir." Included are the "working-class fugitive" (as found, for example, in *Desperate*, *Body and Soul*, *Thieves Highway*, *The Set-Up*, and *Try and Get Me*); the "convict fugitive" (Examples: *Dark Passage, Raw Deal, Brute Force, I Walk Alone*); the "Depression-era drifter" (*The Chase, Fallen Angel, Gilda, The Postman Always Rings Twice,…*); the "criminal detective" (*The Dark Corner, Out of the Past, Railroaded…*); the "war veteran (*Somewhere in the Night, The Blue Dahlia, The High Wall…*); and the "middle-class fugitive"(*Double Indemnity, The Big Clock, Sunset Boulevard, House By the River, Underworld Story, In a Lonely Place…*) (Interestingly, Broe only mentions in passing that the last four films cited above depict writers who were blacklisted or forced to hide out, a rather startling fact given that each was made in the same year, 1950).

Broe then extends his analysis to the latter part of the noir period (1950-55), when, in the midst of the cold war - when HUAC and the blacklist have taken their toll, and labor has rid itself of its militant members -

"crime film directors respond with films that function as a lament for a lost opportunity for radical change." In terms of both structure and mood, the films of this period "exhibit the disillusioned sentiment of their directors at the end of the period of the cultural front and of the New Deal." In these films, the seven fugitive kinds who won the audiences' sympathies in the late 40's are replaced by the "psychotic fugitive," who warrants only our antipathy, and who, in representing a clear and present danger to society, must be eliminated by the dutiful and efficient forces of law and order. (*White Heat, Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye, Cry of the City…*) In many of these films, the hero becomes "the working-class cop of the police procedural, who is charged with subduing the dangerous outsider, before finally moving, in the last stage, outside the law, but only to more strongly defend society as a vigilante cop."

Broe makes clear how this radical transformation of the crime film in the cold war years was not merely the result of shifting cultural winds but a direct "attack on the content of Hollywood films." During this time the MPA (Motion Picture Alliance) called for an end to portraying industrialists as "slave drivers," and a return to "films as pure entertainment." The MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) announced they will "have no more *Grapes of Wrath*… no more *Tobacco Roads*… no more films that show the seamy side of American life… no pictures that deal with labor strikes [or] the banker as villain." Studio head Jack Warner vowed to "never again make a film about the Little Man," and Ayn Rand was enlisted to write a "Screen Guide for Americans" advising the following: "Don't Deify the Common Man," and "throw into the ashcan…every story that sears industrialists."

Broe also includes a final chapter on "neo-noir," where he describes how the 'sympathetic film noir fugitive of the cultural front" and the "stone-faced…cop of the McCarthyite cold war," re-materialized on television in several forms, the most interesting of which (to this reader) was a four decade-long "dual" between the cultural front-oriented Roy Huggins, producer of such 'outsider' shows as *The Fugitive*, *Maverick*, and the *Rockford Files*, and the cold war-oriented Jack Webb, producer of the police procedurals, *Dragnet* and *Adam 12* (which begat in turn, such similarly-minded shows as *Highway Patrol*, *M Squad*, and *Naked City).* Broe then extends his argument further with analyses of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* and *Twin Peaks*, and the more recent *24*, among other shows ranging from the 1980s to the present, explaining in the process how the anti-authoritarian impulse in such 1990s shows as *The X Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was countered after 9/11 by a seeming endless slew of police procedurals, including *The Agency* and *Alias* (both glorifying the CIA), and the expansion of the *Law and Order* and *CSI* franchises.

Beyond this unexpected look at television noir, Broe analyzes several neo-noir films of the early 1990s (including *Bad Lieutenant*, *Internal Affairs*, *Q and A, and Unlawful Entry)* explaining their resurgent noir aesthetic as "a style deployed to critique the conservative turn of the Reagan and Bush era." Curiously unmentioned in this argument, however, are the seminal neo-noirs of the seventies such as *The Long Goodbye*,

Night Moves, *Taxi Driver,* and most notably, *Chinatown*, a film mentioned only in passing despite its central importance.

Broe provides strong support for his primary argument with an appendix of over two hundred noir films that clearly demonstrate film noir's changing character over the three periods established by the author, and he concludes by noting the recent detective fiction of Grace F. Edwards and Michael Simon, where "the noir impulse survives and thrives" and we are brought "full circle." Just as the work of Chandler and Hammett "established the working-class-aligned conventions that were then brought to the screen a decade later," the new detective fiction, Broe explains, keeps alive "the antiauthoritarian tradition and the capitalist critique of the film noir fugitive outsider."

Although some of Broe's arguments may seem a bit strained (as when he claims a hotel clerk's betrayal of the hero in *The Blue Dahlia* serves as a "reminder that public opinion was being bought off and turned against the strikers"; or that the image of the deaf boy at the end of *Out of the Past*, "points to how any memory of the triumph of working-class consciousness immediately after the war was now being obliterated") his analyses are, on the whole, insightful and nuanced. Moreover, his unconventional approach demonstrates the importance of bringing a class-based perspective to the study of film noir.

But while Broe's overall argument is certainly cohesive, it at times seems too much so. One wonders, for instance, how his thesis might be impacted by films that don't fit so neatly into his schema. How, for example, do *The Wrong Man* (1956), a damning indictment of everything the police procedural stood for, and the seventies neo-noirs, figure into their respective moments and sub-genres? Perhaps more attention could also have been paid to the way many Hollywood films (particularly noir films) often manage to have it 'both ways,' simultaneously subverting *and* supporting the values and ideology of the capitalist order (*Double Indemnity*, for instance, is a case in point).

Despite some occasional minor errors (it was not Dick Powell, but William Powell who starred in *The Thin Man* series, and the killer in *The Naked City* is shot off the Williamsburgh, not the Brooklyn Bridge) Broe's text is well researched, and his knowledge of his subject impressive.

Moreover, in the face of the recent economic collapse, Broe's class-based approach to film noir, and his thesis placing notions of inequality and economic precariousness at the core of the genre, are relevant and timely. Indeed, labor tensions still run high in Hollywood as they did during film noir's heyday, replete with writers' strikes, divisive hostilities between the moderate and hard-line wings of SAG and AFTRA, and innumerable labor disputes between the unions and the studios.

It is hoped that Broe's focus on issues of labor and class will encourage further investigation into this curiously underdeveloped field, and point film historians into new areas of study. On a more cautious note, however, one hopes that film scholarship's tendency to marginalize class issues will not prevent this important text from receiving the attention it deserves.

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