

Mark Osteen, *Nightmare Alley: Film Noir and the American Dream* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, \$34.95. Pp. 336; ISBN 978 1 4214 0780 7.)

The question facing Mark Osteen's *Nightmare Alley* is that facing any author considering film noir: how to say something new about what is both, as Dennis Hopper suggested, every director's favourite genre, and, it seems, every film scholar's favourite topic? Osteen's answer, as his subtitle indicates, is to approach noir through the idea of the American Dream (another vexed notion), stating that, "[t]hese crime melodramas diagnosed a spectrum of social ills and fears, promulgating troubling messages about American values and institutions" (18). Such a perspective is, of course, nothing new: since at least Paul Schrader (whom Osteen references) and Raymond Durnat (whom he does not, which is curious given their overlapping thematic concerns), the idea that noir constituted a form of social critique has been widely accepted. Osteen's basic thesis, then, is that noir challenges the belief that "personal effort enables one to determine one's own destiny" (2).

As such, *Nightmare Alley* shares concerns with Robert Pippin's recent *Fatalism in American Film Noir*, in terms of questions of agency and destiny in noir. However, while Pippin's emphasis is squarely on philosophy, Osteen takes a more literary critical approach, focusing on textual analysis with theory taking a minor role. My own preference is for a fuller engagement with critical theory, in dialogue with textual analysis: for example, the chapter on noir and dreamscapes draws to such a degree upon secondary commentaries on Freud (rather than the work itself) that it begins to present as "someone else's psychoanalysis", unlike the more meaningful engagement with psychoanalytic concepts and film noir as demonstrated by Joan Copjec or Todd McGowan. However, Osteen's lighter theoretical touch will no doubt appeal to readers with less of an investment in this particular praxis.

What Osteen does bring is a novel take on this question of self-fashioning that puts it into the context of a specifically American intellectual tradition. He frames his investigation in terms of two opposed philosophies, represented by Benjamin Franklin and Ralph Waldo Emerson. In the former, Osteen recognises the “archetypal American success story” (2) of a self-made and constantly remade life independent of origins, and in the latter, the endeavour to discover and refine one’s “aboriginal Self” (3) through individual self-reliance. In sum, then, it is the question of creating or accepting one’s fate that runs through Osteen’s analysis of identity, mobility and success.

In general, this “giving back” of film noir to the American tradition is worthwhile. If, as Marc Vernet so memorably put it, film noir was made in America, invented in France, then the truth of this observation has always been in danger of overshadowing film noir’s emergence as an American phenomenon (albeit profoundly indebted to European traditions): not the wholly American genre that Alain Silver would have us believe, but certainly a grouping of films made in the United States and responding in varying, complex ways to conditions of the time. The strength of Osteen’s project is to recognise this and critically to engage with the films on these terms.

Osteen frames his investigation in terms of the eponymous *Nightmare Alley* (1947), which provides a useful line to sum up his central question: “‘Is a guy born that way?’ (...) What is the relation between personal history and present character?” (1). This choice also signals the project’s coverage more broadly, as Osteen – necessarily – draws on well-known titles such as *Double Indemnity*, but also brings to the reader’s attention some more obscure ones, such as *The Prowler* (1951), which is offered an extended reading in the book’s conclusion in terms of the *American nightmare* of radical individualism and “happiness at any cost” (260).

The book seems to fall into three parts: a first analysing well-established themes of noir through Osteen's specific lens of identity and destiny, so false identities become a question of escaping the past (*Out of the Past*); and both psychoanalysis and war trauma mostly a matter of recovering and returning to society (*Spellbound*; *Somewhere in the Night*). Particularly striking here is Osteen's conclusion vis-à-vis *Dark Passage* that "the pursuit of happiness via self-interest produces a world oppressed by fear and animosity" (69): a damning verdict on the "American Dream" indeed. The second part turns to more interestingly esoteric concerns, such as the presence of paintings in films noirs (predictably, *Laura* and *The Woman in the Window/Scarlet Street*, but also *The Dark Corner* and *Crack Up*), as well as the central importance of the car to both noir and American society more broadly, with "automotive spaces" (142) playing important roles for the literal and figurative mobility of noir characters.

The third is where Osteen sees noir opening up possibilities for new identities and politics. The chapter on jazz as symbol of otherness allows Osteen to emphasise moments where a film such as *Blues in the Night* points to an alternate, African American experience, thus – importantly – putting "blackness" back into *noir*, and hinting at a "new world in the making" (155). The next, on "femmes vital" ("vital", surely?), presents a compelling overview of the variety of roles available to women both before and behind the camera in noir. Certainly, Ida Lupino is a filmmaker that deserves more critical attention, and the focus on her filmmaking as offering new models for female authorship is most welcome. Osteen's analysis finishes with the Hollywood Left in the context of HUAC and the Black List. And it is here Osteen finds particular value, suggesting that the cinematic exploration of corruption and abuse "challenged American citizens and institutions to live the values they professed to endorse: an abhorrence of tyranny, freedom of speech and the press, equality under the law

for all classes and races” (247): thereby finding an important place in the culture, society and politics of the USA for those once dubbed “un-American”.

Osteen’s book will appeal to film noir specialists looking to take deeper their understanding of the already-established critical categories and concerns, such as war veterans, altered identities and the Red Scare, even if some of the conclusions feel familiar. It will also provide some more novel conclusions about the potentially progressive possibilities for gender and racial politics hinted at by the jazz films and femmes noirs, and brings attention to some less-studied areas of the noir category. In a sense, *Nightmare Alley* feels like a book that has (or at least should have) already been written, and this is no bad thing: a drink with old acquaintances, as well as some new light peeking through those venetian blinds.

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