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Dark Borders: Film Noir and American Citizenship. **Jonathan Auerbach. Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2011 (268 pages). ISBN: 9780822350064.**

A Review by Christina Parker-Flynn, Florida State University

Over the past few decades, many scholars of film noir have displayed a certain repetition compulsion, often proclaiming as their starting standpoint the very incongruity of defining film noir as a genre because of its resistance to being labelled as such. Part of this identity crisis in noir studies has roots in the origins of the term "noir", a label that was retroactively applied by French critic Nino Frank in 1946 to a cycle of North American films that bore a striking resemblance to the *série noire*, a collection of hard-boiled detective thrillers published in France and authored by pulp writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler (Silver and Ursini 83). This "foreignness" that separates the thing and its defining principle continues to vex scholars, and contributes greatly to the sense of noir studies being inherently more ontological than most other film genre scholarship. Upon reading any sizable amount of noir scholarship, one comes to recognise that most authors make the same, repetitive first move—either an assertion of noir's complexity or, and often concurrently, a plea for "noir" to be looked at as indicative of a certain "genre", "style" or "mood".

There exists a certain mirroring between noir films' content and scholarship, because many analyses operate as if on a "chase" too, attempting to track down an elusive core definition of a film cycle that is mostly defined by its clearest visual traits. Inevitably, this has produced a puzzling classification, as many scholars as well as actors, such as Sydney Pollack when interviewed for the documentary *Film Noir: Bringing Darkness to Light* (Gary Leva, 2006), can only resort to the most ontologically problematic definitions of noir: "I know it when I see it". Yet despite this inherent circularity, noir has also provided occasion for scholars to redefine the notoriously slippery concept.

While doubts about noir's definition persist, Auerbach's *Dark Borders: Film Noir and American Citizenship* presents a compelling neoteric take on the question of drawing delimitations around noir as a concept, precisely because the book questions this compulsion and turns it into an analysis of how these aesthetic "border confusions" reflect the political ones emerging in the historical period (8). In sum, Auerbach examines "issues of national belonging" and the pressing nature of politically motivated "worries over delineating borders" in the 1940s as the primary concern emerging in a number of films one might define as noir (3).

Much noir scholarship scrutinises the inherently philosophical premises of the "genre", seeking not only to define the identity of the film cycle but the identity of postwar America as

well. The recent *Fatalism in American Film Noir: Some Cinematic Philosophy*, for instance, ultimately exposes how this American malaise gets mapped onto the male protagonist(s) of noir (Pippin). Though not completely forsaking the psychoanalytical underpinnings of these explorations, the oft-mysterious "identity" of noir, and its main features, becomes the "citizen" in Auerbach's study. Rather than define noir philosophically, Auerbach bases his study on the political attitudes and orientations that emerge in noir. *Dark Borders* responds to the history of noir scholarship deftly and methodically from its Introduction, and even challenges the possible existence of an evanescent truth of noir, at least at a metaphoric level, by reference to the opening scene of Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946). In the sequence, cited by Borde and Chaumeton in their foundational 1955 text "Toward a Definition of *Film Noir*" as one of the most striking scenes in American cinema, a customer asks one of the hired killers: "What's the idea?", to which he replies, "There isn't any idea" (19).

Early in *Dark Borders*, Auerbach discloses how effective and appropriate his focus on noir's meditations regarding political borders really is, considering that noir studies seems mostly to participate in border patrolling in terms of genre study—this constant insistence on "a barrier between the internal and the external is erected to protect cinema and the cinematic image from contamination by supposedly outside nuisances" (11). He displays a certain delicacy in the framework of his study, revealing that the sceptics of the generic and formulaic tropes of noir (rainy streets, femme fatales, etc.) "replay the very same sorts of anxieties about constructing and patrolling thresholds that are central to the postwar period itself" (9). Indeed, Auerbach's study of noir and its anxieties stays true to somewhat usual standards of psychoanalytic analysis, but in a more thoughtful and unique way. While entertaining noir's well-cemented bond with visually stylistic imperatives, Auerbach chooses instead to focus more on its visceral aspects, a realm of affect he addresses primarily through Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny. This proves quite suitable for a study of borders, or the threat of their transgression, since the uncanny denotes the familiar as well as its opposite—that which feels unfamiliar, uncomfortably strange.

In *Dark Borders*, Auerbach seeks to probe the "problematic hybridity" of film noir in an extremely fresh way, in terms of how the impossible borders of this body of films gesture toward the situation of Cold War citizenship. These dark borders of noir serve firstly to reflect a "curious liminality" (17) within the films he chooses to explore, which include some of the most frequently analysed ones, such as *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) and *Kiss Me Deadly* (Robert Aldrich, 1955), as well as films not quite as familiar in noir analyses, including *Key Largo* (John Huston, 1948) and *Ride the Pink Horse* (Robert Montgomery, 1947).

The first chapter, "Gestapo in America", investigates the deportation panic that arises in noir (*Confessions of a Nazi Spy* (Anatole Litvak, 1939) and *Stranger on the Third Floor* (Boris Ingster, 1940)) as indicative of the widespread, Cold War surveillance of "un-American activity". Auerbach's analysis in this chapter, overtly political from the beginning, takes the concept of the "fifth column" as its central reference point. Coined by Emilio Mola during the Spanish Civil War and borrowed by Ernest Hemingway, the term "fifth column" refers to the clandestine "enemies within" that undermine and infiltrate a group or nation (Auerbach 3; 205). While in *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, "the first mainstream Hollywood film to directly attack Hitler" (27), the agency of deportation is the Gestapo, Auerbach's more exciting contribution here is to illustrate how in *Stranger on the Third Floor* it is the American justice system that

serves as the brutish and nightmarish mechanism of repression. His analysis depends on a close examination of Albert Meng (Charles Halton), a bespectacled, ambiguously orientalised neighbour serving as an assimilation of the two Axis enemies (Germany and Japan) as well as a representation of the film's paranoid xenophobia. Meng becomes the figure for repression and the disruption of desire in the film, thus, in Auerbach's analysis, turning the psychoanalytically "castrating father into a functionary of the state" (47). He fashions a forceful connection here between personal and political "watching" in the film, which only serves to reflect the greater force of voyeurism compelling the cinematic spectator in terms of film viewing. Auerbach extends the meta-level analysis in a compelling presentation of how, in the film's Kafkaesque nightmare sequence, the courtroom momentarily becomes a movie theatre and Meng (now deceased) reappears as the Gestapo informer, a set of images that "points to the repressive function of the Production Code Administration" (52) serving to patrol the boundaries of morality and decency in 1940s motion picture production.

Other unique contributions made by *Dark Borders* include its examination of noir's probing of national boundaries in films that utilise Mexico's "south of the border" as America's "geopolitical unconscious" (123), and those films that foreground Cuba as another emblematic space for taking noir abroad. In "Cuba, Gangsters, Vets, and Other Outcasts of the Islands", Auerbach explores the "striking triangulation" of these figures and places (92). He makes an especially compelling argument for the returning soldier as noir gangster, and provides a deft demonstration of how Rocco, the key gangster figure played by Edward G. Robinson in *Key Largo*, operates as a thinly veiled surrogate for contemporary mobster Lucky Luciano. The only criminal of *Time* magazine's "hundred most important people of the century" list, Luciano reinvented the mafia as corporate enterprise and also famously battled against deportation back to Italy by aiding the U.S. government in various ways, including identifying fifth-column sympathisers (Auerbach 114–15).

Auerbach offers some useful moments of formal analysis, such as his point on the stylised artifice of *Gun Crazy* (Joseph H. Lewis, 1950), or his discussion of the fluctuations in shot scale as they correspond to volatile mood shifts in *Pickup on South Street* (Samuel Fuller, 1953). However, the volume lacks the firm formal analysis structure of some earlier monographs, such as J. P. Telotte's *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir*, in which he utilises voiceover, discourse and narrative strategies as the skeleton of his exploration of noir. The absence of an overall model may account for the occasionally underwhelming treatment of the more repetitiously studied noir films; for instance, Auerbach's analysis of *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), which many noir scholars consider the definitive film text of noir's historical period. However, the faltering here is not because Auerbach doesn't assume a bold position by claiming that perhaps the film is actually not so typical of noir, illustrating that its seemingly minor interlude in Mexico between Jeff Bailey (Robert Mitchum) and Kathie Moffett (Jane Greer) crucially settles the film's being "fixated on this question of national belonging" (150), and thus becomes exceptional in regard to noir concerns. Instead, Auerbach's reading seems to mischaracterise some of the film's characters in sweeping, accommodating gestures. For instance, Auerbach effectively overlooks the importance of Jeff's present-day love interest, Ann (Virginia Huston), who he calls a "fishing partner", when she serves an important function in terms of Jeff's desire to escape the past in exchange for an anonymous life in small-town Bridgeport. As Jeff says from the beginning, he hopes to build a house and settle down

“right here” with her, and in their first exchange it becomes readily apparent that Jeff treats people as places (Ann: “I bet you say that to all the places”). Indeed, in flashback we see Jeff telling femme fatale Kathie that maybe he’s come to Mexico in an attempt to be “home”, a curious reversal of border policing that Auerbach does address, but one that suggests the “home” he feels may be more Kathie than Mexico after all. At the end of the film, Kathie wants to go with Jeff “back to Mexico” and “sit in the same moonlight”, an indication that place solidifies and reflects characters’ inner relationships. Yet Auerbach’s assertion of Jeff’s capacity “to feel at home wherever he is” (150) does not hit the mark on the relevance of geography to temporality and character in the film—doubtless a product of an excessively brief reading.

At other points, however, Auerbach reaches the heart of the most figurative noirs with a precision often lacking in the multitude of earlier and sometimes seminal examinations. For instance, in his chapter on “White-Collar Crime” he completely overlooks the figure of the femme fatale—the genre’s mythological scapegoat—in his discussion of *Double Indemnity*, a film that furnishes what many would consider noir’s most potent poisonous fatal woman, Phyllis Dietrichson (Barbara Stanwyck). Auerbach builds his analysis from James M. Cain’s own affirmation, with regard to the source story he authored, that the femme fatale is not a root cause but a “triggering mechanism” (64) for salesman Walter Neff (Fred MacMurray) to plot to rook the system, something he admits to having thought about for years prior. This reflects, in Auerbach’s estimation, Neff’s deep-seated desire to cross over the border of propriety and defy the insurance business as the structure of authority, and more specifically to defy the figurehead of that authority and law, Barton Keyes (Edward G. Robinson). The most compelling idea in the chapter is Auerbach’s discussion of the historical precision of the term “white-collar crime”, which emerged in the Social Sciences vocabulary around 1939, just a few years before Cain published the novel on which the film was based. The term’s usage refers here to corporate fraud motivated primarily by greed and as a reaction against a burgeoning corporate culture, which ties neatly into noir’s oft-reactionary politics with regard to the business of the Hollywood studio system (71).

Due to the book’s political engagement, it serves scholars interested in a wide range of film history topics and in American history as/on film. Though perhaps not an ideal book for a classroom exploration in the universal context of Film Studies because of its intense political perspective, *Dark Borders* deserves to be highlighted as a major, thoughtful contribution to the landscape of noir studies, and as one that offers a sound and exciting theoretical premise on the protection of America’s political boundaries and the probing of noir’s filmic limits as being part of the same venture.

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Christina Parker-Flynn is an Assistant Professor of film and literature at Florida State University, where she teaches classes on “Film Noir & its Discontents”, “Hitchcock: Allegories for Seeing Cinematically”, and “Postmodern/Postmortem Film”.