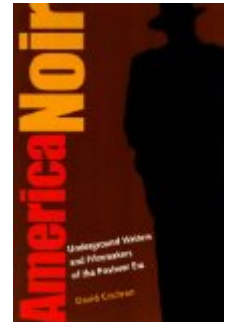




David Cochran. *America Noir: Underground Writers and Filmmakers of the Postwar Era.* Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000. 312 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-56098-813-7.



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David Cochran's *America Noir: Underground Writers and Filmmakers of the Postwar Era* analyzes the role played by popular writers and filmmakers in the two decades following the Second World War. He argues that "the underground culture would play a crucial role in the development of a counter-hegemonic culture in the sixties and, in the longer run, the growth of postmodernism" (15). The extensive introduction surveys the "wide range of options, both political and cultural" that were available to Americans as immediate consequence of the war (2). Abroad, one now had the Soviets to deal with and domestically, a "wave of wildcat strikes and labor militancy" occurred (2). A bewildering paradox began to form between the hard line taken against the threat of Marxism and Trotskyism and the labor unrest that now marked American capitalism. At the same time, the array of film-noirs available for public consumption at the box office marked the nation's "fundamental moral chaos" (3). A doubt had crept into America's vision of itself just as communists seemed to be tiptoeing across her borders.

One of the most fascinating moments in Cochran's study occurs when he documents the tide of pamphlets and orders that descended on Hollywood to counter the menace of uncertainty. He quotes Ayn Rand: "Don't give your character-as a sign of villainy, as a damning characteristic-a desire to make money[^]. It is the moral duty of every decent man in the motion picture industry to throw into the ash can, where it belongs every story that smears industrialists" (4). Politically, liberal intellectuals sneered at McCarthyism. But, covertly they cleaned up what they saw as culturally harmful popular trash. The result, according to Cochran, was an "the creation of a broad cultural consensus with a right and a left wing" (6). The consensus, in turn, reinforced and sanitized American culture through a unified vision. Cochran points out that this was the climate that spawned both studies on the American mind and American Studies as an academic discipline.

Cochran argues that the post-war proliferation of popular culture, kitsch and commodities posed a threat to the unification of the American Mind. Historically, periods of mass publishing and

distribution have always brought out critics who defend the crypt and see the increased availability of texts as an indisputable sign of the apocalypse. Again, Cochran's strength is his well-presented research. Through copious examples, he delineates and strengthens his own position against the post-war tendency to read popular culture as a threat to the unified American mind. Cochran uses Frederick Wertham as an example of this tendency. Wertham wrote a study on the negative connections between comic books and juvenile delinquency which in turn was used to all but shut down the comic book industry. Cochran sees similar occurrences throughout Middle America. All popular culture that depicted an opposing picture to the unified vision of the American dream was driven underground. Cochran argues "Culturally, the purpose of this policy of censorship was to repress the darker aspects of American social thought-the strong sense of doubt and contingency, the fears born of World War II, the atomic bomb, the cold War-and replace them with a much more affirmative vision" (13). Of the newly cleaned landscape, James Gilbert, whom Cochran quotes, says "The radical dreamers of the 1930s awakened to the dystopia of suburbia" (13).

Cochran's book claims that the vision of "violence, chaos, moral ambiguity, and alienation that marked such disparate popular-culture forms as film-noir and comic books, did not disappear" (13-14). Instead, as studies of both Freud and the gothic will teach us, they resurfaced in other venues signaling a return of the repressed. What is buried does not stay hidden for long. Cochran states that these other forms "took the very basis of cold-war consensus-that American society fundamentally worked-and challenged it on every level" (14). As an additional point, Cochran sees the challenge that Modernism makes to the status quo as once again reappearing in American culture through these texts. He finds the grotesque features and characters of Modernism, particularly in Faulkner and Anderson coming back to life

in these "underground" texts. Strangely enough, Cochran gazes at the lowbrow culture of the 1950s and finds the tenets of highbrow Modernism.

Cochran concentrates on eight different writers, from Charles Willeford and Chester Himes to Patricia Highsmith and Ray Bradbury. In addition he provides a chapter "Little Shop of Horrors; Independent Filmmakers" to add to his case about the film industry. His chosen method of close-reading, each chapter is written around a single author or filmmaker, works well for this kind of study because he shows the way each individual text provides a challenge to the dominant forces of unification. He notices that "Artists in the underground culture played off dominant cultural ideas and images but frequently provided them with and ironic twists" (216). For example, he makes the case that Highsmith discusses homosexuality through her character Thomas Ripley in order to dispute 1950s ideas about masculinity. These underground visions, then, are fraught with complexity. They do not merely transmit the ideas of Modernist culture, but consider them, question them, and sometimes throw them out entirely.

At times, Cochran relies too heavily on the opposing forces of the underground and dominant culture. His explanation of the birth of a post-war dominant and unified culture is excellent, but he seems to lean on the concept too heavily. Even as he demonstrates the contrary: that the culture is not monolithic he seems to need it to be to simplify the task of cultural criticism. The concept of the underground is useful, even though it is also a term laden with unifying implications. Ultimately, Cochran seems to repeat the mistakes most often ascribed to the post-modern theorists that he claims the underground texts of the 1950s anticipate. In the same moment he fights against the unification and brightness of the dominant vision, he casts his own study in these same terms. It seems the study draws a battle plan in which the forces of the dark, dominant empire will be abol-

ished by the scrappy underdog texts of Chester Himes and Jim Thompson. The study inadvertently repeats the dominant cultural mythology that it argues so fearlessly against. *America Noir: Underground Writers and Filmmakers of the Postwar Era* is a well-researched, innovative study that offers a fresh view in what has become a monotonous field. The book offers well-documented insights into a range of texts and will be of great use to scholars and students of popular culture.

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