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**ENCYCLOPEDIA OF FILM NOIR**

**GEOFF MAYER AND BRAN MCDONNELL, GREENWOOD PRESS, WESTPORT, 2007**

**EUROPEAN FILM NOIR**

**ANDREW SPICER (ED.), MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS, MANCHESTER, 2007**

It sometimes seems to me that if you haven’t produced a book on film noir you count for nought in academic film studies. As research topics go, it is surely the hottest or coolest or sexiest (strike out whichever is least hip) and, here, we have two further ambitious and admirably useful additions to what is already a prolific field.

Mayer and McDonnell’s handsomely produced *Encyclopedia of Film Noir* is arranged in two sections. The first consists of a series of valuable essays on the subject, the second and much longer one devoted to entries on individual films, directors and actors. The Preface is entitled ‘The Problem of Film Noir’, in which the authors raise questions about the nature and historical parameters of film noir, whether or not it can be considered as constituting a genre, its relation to literary forms and to political and cultural climate change.

Subsequently, Mayer, in his essay ‘Readings on Film Noir’, takes on the challenge of asking ‘What Is Film Noir?’ and explores the question through three case studies of noir films and their antecedent literary sources, of which John Huston’s 1941 adaptation of Dashiell Hammett’s novel *The Maltese Falcon* is the best known. Instead of allowing an easy slippage between noir and melodrama, he goes on usefully to investigate its affiliations with certain kinds of realism and, especially, with ‘The Hard-Boiled Influence’. The latter is the title of a very well-researched study of the key crime writers on whom film noir so profitably drew: most notably Raymond Chandler, W.R. Burnett, James M. Cain, Cornell Woolrich and Dashiell Hammett. And it was not just a matter of adapting tales of urban crime, but of embracing certain character types (tarnished, vulnerable heroes, femmes fatales etc.) and in the case of Woolrich a ‘florid style [that] anticipated the high contrast lighting and visual touches that were seen as characteristic of film noir’.

In a fine essay, ‘Film Noir and the City’, McDonnell argues for the centrality of the urban setting in that group of films that came to be labelled film noir. This exploration includes the semi-documentary approach that perhaps first made itself felt in Jules Dassin’s *The Naked City* (1948), while conceding that ‘the distorted, expressionistic portrayal of [the city] as an existential site of alienation’ was more in the noir line. McDonnell’s is a sophisticated and suggestive account of the city as labyrinth, as a place of traps, of the possibility of becoming ‘hopelessly lost’, and, in the case of American cities (New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco are offered as prime examples), ‘morally ruined’ even though not physically reduced to rubble like some of their European counterparts.

Mayer adumbrates the impact of McCarthyism and the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) on Hollywood filmmaking, suggesting provocatively that it led to a decline in overtly liberal films but that ‘film noir’s ability to critique various aspects of capitalism’ went into copier films, citing *The Asphalt Jungle* (John Huston, 1950) as a prime exemplar. And the final essay in the book’s first section is McDonnell’s on ‘Film Noir Style’, stressing this aspect rather than genre or ideology, and linking it not merely to, say, German expressionist lighting habits, but also to budgetary constraints. In fact, one of the strengths of the *Encyclopedia* is its acknowledgement of how far certain noir characteristics were in fact products of studio constraints.

This was especially true of those films emanating from ‘Poverty Row’ studios such as Monogram, and in the second section of the book the authors pay tribute, without recourse to mere camp celebration of the second-rate, to these lesser films and the directors and actors who made them. Thus we find entries on, for example, actors Steve Brodie and Hugh Beaumont and films such as *Blonde Ice* (Jack Bernhard, 1948) and *My Name is Julia Ross* (Joseph H. Lewis, 1945). This is in addition to, more predictably, director John Huston, actors Gloria Grahame and Robert Mitchum, and the films *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourner, 1947) and *Phantom Lady* (Robert Siodmak, 1944). These individual entries on filmmakers are rewarding in the way they offer critically appraised career trajectories; the entries on films, often stimulating, could do with less plot description. Am I right to assume a personal homage in the account of Otto Preminger’s *Laura* (1944) when, on page 262, the investigating detective Mark McPherson morphs into ‘McFarlane’? Naturally I was very touched – and don’t tell me it’s just a typo or a bit of absent-mindedness.

My one serious cavil about the *Encyclopedia* is that it would be better called a ‘Companion’. Part of my reason for this is that it is not really an ‘encyclopedia’ about film noir but rather draws intelligent attention to some of its key aspects and then adds a sometimes idiosyncratic list of examples and of two kinds of key personnel. From this point of view, it might have been better to concentrate on shorter accounts of individual films, reducing plot outlines, so as to allow space for other important contributors such as cinematographers and production designers (the latter should be listed in the credits of the highlighted films as their contribution is often definitive).

My other objection to the title is that the book doesn’t go beyond Anglophone noir in its entries. There are some
well-chosen British noirs, but, to complete the picture and justify ‘Encyclopaedia’, I’d have thought some representative German and French titles at least should have been included. Since an exception is made for British titles, perhaps, too, some rationale for this might have been given in the first section.

Notwithstanding this reservation, there is a great deal to enjoy and be grateful for in Mayer and McDonnell’s book. It has the advantages of committed enthusiasm and a willingness to research in out-of-the-way avenues. It makes me want to see again some of those long-ago masterworks in the noir mode, as well as titles I haven’t thought of in years (Nightmare Alley [Edmund Goulding, 1947], for instance), just as the other book under review, Andrew Spicer’s European Film Noir makes me wish that so many of the European titles that have never come my way would do so.

Andrew Spicer has already established his credentials as a commentator on the film noir phenomenon, and is indeed quoted often in the Mayer–McDonnell Encyclopedia. In 2002, he published what is almost certainly the best introduction to the field, and a glance at the chapter headings in his Film Noir reflects his grasp of noir as a style, its relation to conditions of production, what happens to it in British cinema, and so on. Now his European Film Noir extends the discussion beyond the Anglophone versions of noir, though British cinema is now treated in terms of noir and neo-noir. Spicer himself is responsible for the eloquent Introduction and for the chapter on British neo-noir; Robert Murphy, another expert on the scrotulous underside of British cinema, writes about its high noir period of the 1940s and 1950s; and other European noir and neo-noir outputs have been allocated to some very safe hands.

The distinction between noir and neo-noir is by now pretty much accepted as being along these lines: the classic noir period, inducted in the US by John Huston’s The Maltese Falcon (one hears fitful quibbles about its harbinger status), is seen off by Orson Welles’ Touch of Evil (1958). What is most impressive from the outset is Spicer’s coming to terms with the fact of noir’s being a style and an attitude of mind rather than a genre (not all his authors adhere to this distinction) – and his looking for its aesthetic roots beyond, as it were, Barbara Stanwyck’s anklet in Double Indemnity (Billy Wilder, 1944) or the slatted shadows cast by a venetian blind. Hence, the decision to explore the influences and reactions of several European countries: France, Germany, Spain and Italy, as well as Britain.

Ginette Vincendeau’s chapter on ‘French film noir’ is, unsurprisingly, one of the best. She judiciously assesses the varied influences of German Expressionism, the literary imprint of Série Noire (which published translations of hard-boiled fiction from English), Hollywood noir and French poetic realism at work in the films she examines as examples of French noir. In analysing the stages of French noir, she takes in the gangster films of the 1950s and the nouvelle vague homages of the succeeding decade, arriving finally at a very evocative account of the specificity of French noir.

Since German expressionism is everywhere cited as one of the formative stylistic influences on film noir, especially in Hollywood where so many émigré directors and other filmmakers had sought pre-war refuge, I turned to Tim Bergfelder’s chapter on ‘German film noir’ with particular interest. He offers a perceptive discussion of the generically heterogeneous incidence of noir influences in German films, claiming that ‘only in rare instances do these films display the same generic consistency as classical noir’. He is particularly interesting about post-war German noir which evinces ‘a strange mixture of amnesia, unfocused nostalgia and determined reconstruction’, and looks for without necessarily affirming linear heritage with pre-war Weimar cinema or classic Hollywood noir.

These two essays set a scholarly standard in dealing with European, focusing as they do on two key exponents. Rob Stone on ‘Spanish film noir’ argues for an absence of noir under the political and clerical oppressiveness of Franco’s regime. Since part of noir’s agenda is to be inherently critical of the status quo, it is not surprising that it would have a hard time asserting itself during a dictatorship. Despite too much plot description, Ann Davies intelligently pursues the liberating effect of the post-Franco years, in which ‘Neo-noir also granted Spanish culture an opportunity to explore more positive social and cultural changes’.

What is persistently fascinating about this volume (and its contributors achieve a pretty well uniform high standard) is the way in which the history of noir and neo-noir is intricately tied to the history of the countries involved. Its thematic preoccupations, its characteristic protagonists and the outcome of their aspirations, and the genre range in which its stylistics find expression are all canvassed with critical rigour. The very subversiveness of the films which exploit the noir aesthetic seems to ensure its ongoing seductive appeal, an appeal that effortlessly crosses national boundaries.

The lingering appeal of film noir receives some thoughtful interrogation in these two books, each in its way the result of the most thorough research and, equally, likely to offer provocation for further studies. Perhaps because film noir was identified after the event, as it were, the challenge to go on explicating it is the stronger.

Reviewed by Brian McFarlane •

Endnote

1 Andrew Spicer, Film Noir, Pearson Education, 2002.