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***Siren City: Sound and Source Music in Classic American Noir*, Robert Miklitsch. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011 (xxii + 288 pages). ISBN: 978-0-8135-4899-9.**

A Review by James A. Wren, San José State University

Unsettlingly ambiguous, oft-times nonlinear narratives; dialogue-driven actions announcing acts of violence among a barrage of stark, angular shadows; isolating metropolises, beautiful and scheming women, and their ensuing battles against all odds—if not to rise above, then to survive until sunrise: whether in unison or discord, these elements both inscribe and orchestrate the very measures through which a unique body of films (and their literary antecedents) are interpreted. It is hardly surprising, then, that American film noir retains a popularity today wholly reminiscent of that in its heyday, well over half a century ago. We need only recall on the one hand contemporary referencing such as Tarantino's ubiquitous trunk shot or the highly stylised visuals that resonate throughout the work of Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-wai, or, on the other hand, its predominance in the narrative framing commonly given free reign by such acclaimed *literati* as Japanese-born, Hawai'i-based Murakami Haruki or Seattleite Peter Bacho, to comprehend the hunger and the uncompromising loyalties of a contemporary global audience.[1]

Just as evident, the academy maintained its own particular, at times peculiar, fascination with the form. Beginning with the collaborative monograph by French critics Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton, *Panorama du film noir américain 1941–1953* (1955; released the same year in translation as *A Panorama of American Film Noir: 1941-1953*), an explosion of scholarly treatments appeared, most of which might best be termed as "systematic zoologies" and no more. In 1999, we welcomed the somewhat more comprehensive *Film Noir Reader* (Silver and Ursini, 1999). This was published at roughly the same time as a variety of strong monographs that examined the genre in detail, among them James Naremore's *More Than Night* (1998), Steve Neale's *Genre and Hollywood* (2000), Thomas Leitch's *Crime Films* (2002) and Andrew Spicer's *Film Noir* (2002). Each led to larger debate as they questioned whether film noir qualified per se exists as a distinct genre in its own right.

Almost absent from or underappreciated in discussions heretofore has been the role of sonic effects and source music in classic American film noir. Enter Robert Miklitsch, Professor of Film, Media Studies and Popular Culture at Ohio University. Sensing something beyond the

scintillating promises of a flamboyant cinematic technique, stunning edits and strikingly composed shots, all located within a suitably seedy background—he listened. What he heard and reveals in *Siren City: Sound and Source Music in Classic American Noir* amounts to nothing less than a revolutionary revision of all that film noir is and can be.

Insofar as his subtitle, "Sound and Source Music in Classical American Noir", reconceptualises the works in a refreshing manner; by juxtaposing sound and music with the previously delineated visual elements, he places both aspects on an equal footing and, thereby, requires a far more judicious rereading of these works. His choice of titles, however, is very much another matter. With tantalising obdurate "slippages" between *siren* and *city* and an ubiquitous synergy that results as words and worlds come together, we quickly recognise what others seemed to leave unheard, namely the polyphony and playful intertextual nature that characterises noir films. In the engagement of the intertextual dimensions of vision and sound, readers are able to appreciate just how widely sound articulates texts, bodies and spaces in these works.[2]

Miklitsch's monograph's primary contribution to this scholarly discussion is seen first and foremost in his thorough and wide-ranging analysis of sound and music—what he terms "audiovisuality"—in the films themselves (xi). Engagingly illustrative of how sound tracks in 1940s film noir are often just as compelling as its vaunted visuals, *Siren City* represents realignment, balancing as it were the neglected study of film sound with the oft-cited characteristics of the genre, whether it is derided pulp or extravagantly stylised period noirs.

Focussing in his "Preview", "Introduction" and "Prologue" on the hybridity of noir, for example, he moves beyond the limits of stark literary antecedents and obviously stunning visual graphics arising from the combination of "Dutch" chiaroscuro lighting and images, and montage coupled with frequent and odd camera angles; as he does so, he dismisses any question of genre as inconsequential. Instead, he privileges the "centrifugal and inclusive" over the "centripetal and exclusive" as he moves from one close reading to the next (xi, xii).

Moreover, acknowledging the vast number of works that have over time been linked in some way with the term *noir*, often defined as running from 1941 to 1958 (although some would argue that it continues to the present day), from the outset he limits his focus to those works "*released* in the United States between 1940 and 1949" (xii). To do so limits the sheer volume certainly, but it is only with such parameters that he can demonstrate the importance of "diegetic music"—live jazz performances by Duke Ellington and "big numbers" by the likes of Lauren Bacall, Veronica Lake and Rita Hayworth, as well as the audio technologies (e.g. radio and jukeboxes) as part and parcel of the noir aesthetic (xiv). Thereafter, he is able to organise and analyse satisfactorily the variety of sounds he encounters.

In Chapter One, Miklitsch provides the historical and sociocultural contexts behind the sound track, allowing him to problematise and thereby reclaim the importance of sound, placing it on a par with the visuals that drive motion pictures as a whole. By locating characteristic voiceovers alongside the often-overlooked use of enhanced reverberation to heighten the

hallucinatory nature or the paranoia characteristic of dream-like sequences and off-screen sounds—it is hardly surprising that, by the 1940s, RKO had come to recognise the importance of the acoustic echo chamber—he briefly outlines a theoretical framework that makes room for the aural. His methodology—scant by his own admission—is constructed around "point of audition" (3) (the parallel of the point-of-view shot) using thorough and perceptive shot-by-shot analyses.

Chapter Two stresses the heterogeneity of sounds in film noir. Without denying the importance of hard-boiled dialogue and stark interior monologue, he moves to reclaim other, equally significant, sounds filmgoers experience: the "discrete sonic phenomena" (251) inherent to the punctuation of blood-curdling screams or the staccato of stiletto heels and off-screen footsteps; the unanticipated shots in the dark alongside the temptations of the songstress/femme fatale, or the bay of blood hounds in pursuit (*Moonrise*, Frank Borzage, 1948) or the "chuffing" (81) of a tractor disc's bearing down on a suddenly fallen, helpless federal agent (*Border Incident*, Anthony Mann, 1949). Unmistakably, these are sounds that further highlight the nature and define the danger and the mystery of a sprawling metropolis that much of America moviegoers in the 1940s would have known only from hearsay and, more often, realised in their imaginations as perhaps unfamiliar, sometimes daunting, always unwelcoming and isolating.

Chapter Three focuses on the "sound track of the forties" (5) and its role as a persuasive device, both in its contribution to the fictional world of film noir and its propelling forward of the storyline. Suddenly, those technologies dominating the world of entertainment prove just as vital to storytelling as any image or dialogue. The overarching suspense behind an intercom (*The Big Clock*, John Farrow, 1948), the mind-numbing sameness of the Dictaphone (*Double Indemnity*, Billy Wilder, 1944) or the mesmerising lull of the record player in a private setting (*Black Angel*, Ray William Neill, 1946) and the jukebox in the public arena (*Detour*, Edgar G. Ulmer, 1945), each used in such a manner as to construct dreams enough to intoxicate women, and a sense of confusion or paranoia or a moment of temporary insanity enough to drive men to distraction or, worse, murder. Similarly, those technologies at the forefront of communication, the telephone with its piercing ring, for example, provided the tightly-strung roots of suspense and suspicion that would result in an instinctive need for fight or flight (*Sorry, Wrong Number*, Anatole Litvak, 1948) or that would, doubtlessly, herald sudden and immediate danger with every passing moment, with every corner yet to be turned (*Dial M for Murder*, Alfred Hitchcock, 1954). Again, our reliance on the technological innovations of the day might merge, say, with the use of the most significant introduction to North-American households of the period, the radio, not to distract but, rather, to provide meaningful information to the overall narrative, while also contributing to the ever-increasing mood of suspense (*Raw Deal*, Anthony Mann, 1948).

Chapter Four turns from the importance of sound technologies per se to the place of instrumental source music in the aestheticisation of physical violence. Put differently, Miklitsch illustrates how the instrumental music framing classic noir does in fact "choreograph" any ensuing visual action (*Kiss of Death*, Henry Hathaway, 1947). Classical music, he observes, as the embodiment of highbrow, reflecting the increasingly tightly strung nature of those who inhabit the endless rows of high-rise apartments, is recontextualised and demonstrated to signal the aloof and indifferent as audible discourses of madness and obsession (*Possessed*, Curtis

Bernhardt, 1946). In precarious balance we bask in the popular music—quintessential to the genre—arising from the streets below; we witness its quotidian appeal as it actively—even aggressively—frames and makes concrete such larger issues of race, gender and class. Listening to singer-pianists such as Lillian Randolph (*The Glass Key*, Stuart Heisler, 1942) and Dolores Parker (*House of Strangers*, Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1948), we bear witness and share a certain aesthetic experience; or recall, as in the case of a particular popular piece and its subsequent variations (*Laura*, 1944), or the "hot" jazz quintessence of the Harlem club scene (*Out of the Past*, Jacques Tourneur, 1947). In each instance, we find ourselves open to a far more nuanced portrayal of, say, African Americans than would have otherwise been expected in that period.

Chapter Five examines the place of vocal performance and instrumental self-accompaniment further as it plays an important role in our delineation of difference in character and personality. Without question, from the memorable *a cappella* defining Gaye Dawn (*Key Largo*, John Houston, 1948) to the acoustic guitarist who sings alone (*Gilda*, Charles Vidor, 1946), our usual sense of stock characterisation—and film noir has almost always been discussed in terms of such highly predictable types—is confounded and challenged. More to the point, the much-touted vocal performances of the 1940s had at this time quickly become so well integrated into the larger narrative that they were key to the success of the respective films. As performances themselves provided additional commentary on the true nature of the characters, they became the most practical, certainly most obvious, vehicles by which widely held stereotypes might fall. As an immediate result, for the first time ethnic females performed to question accepted representations of femininity, and their questions—framed in all that is heard and seen—moved them from sideline alleyways and unseen choruses to centre stage and the all-important leading roles of songbird, siren and hardened torch singers (*Road House*, Jean Negulesco, 1948) and songbirds and desperate jazz singers (*They Live by Night*, Nicholas Ray, 1948), for example. In each instance, this new breed of women owned "the big number" so characteristic of the period in order to rise above: in other words, to become stars in their own right.

Chapters Six and Seven juxtapose the latent male gaze with the overtly vocal perspectives of the likes of such independent women as "bad-girl" Elsa (*The Lady from Shanghai*, Orson Welles, 1948) and the striper Gilda in the eponymous film. In each instance, it is their musical performance—and not just their appearances—that problematises the nature of feminine respectability and, in doing so, lays waste to seemingly insurmountable images embraced in accepted stereotypes of femininity.

Ultimately, *Siren City* succeeds because of its fine analyses, certainly, but just as important to my mind, its many examples, resonating as sympathetic vibrations from the sounds and source music of classic American noir—gunshots and sirens, swing riffs and canary-screams and strangleholds. Miklitsch takes pains to underscore—insofar as audio elements serve to "illuminate" the various films examined—that his astute and prodigious observations are as informative about film noir as about the sound and source music that is given an audience. In fact, alongside the inexorable private eye and iconic femme fatale, audiovisuals, we now understand, form the very cornerstone of the noir aesthetic The sheer number of stills included

throughout and wedged snugly between analyses only serves to underscore this point, even as they serve as an extended conceit that holds his arguments together. As if in anticipation of would-be detractors, Miklitsch stresses with some sense of urgency that both his detailed and sophisticated readings and his at-times malleable style of presentation—his overwhelming privilege of contractions in the face of formality, his grating shifts between second- and third-person voices, or his overwrought conclusions smacking a bit too much of the poetic at the expense of further, fuller clarification)—in sum, are meant to embrace inclusivity among a wide range of readers.

Were I to harbour any reservations, it would perhaps be that I found myself, all too frequently, searching for a more substantial historical and theoretical framework in support of Miklitsch's well-articulated argument and to provide a more satisfying unity to his many intriguing readings. But I recognise that I am likely to be in the minority on this point. Certainly, his argument steadily progresses forward with abundant analyses of film sequences, which, when explained, concretely demonstrate the importance of sound. Nor does he suffer from a personal lack of conviction that his particular way of reading ought to garner wide appeal—not least amongst specialists of film, media studies or popular culture. Critics agree: naming *Siren City* one of the Choice Outstanding Academic Titles of 2011. Perhaps of more immediate importance to the streetwise aficionado, his work goes a long way in presenting us with equal measures of variety, accessibility and entertainment. "Here we are now", he succinctly reminds us from the beginning, so "entertain us" (xv). And he does—in ways altogether unexpected.

Notes

[1] Underscoring the degree to which the genre, even now, generates an immediate and unyielding intense level of interest among a devoted readers, The Library of America has in April, 2012, released its fifth anthology of the postwar noir novels of David Goodis in *Five Crime Novels of the 1940s and 50s* (e.g., *Dark Passage* (1946); *Nightfall* (1947); *The Moon in the Gutter* (1953); *The Burglar* (1953); and *Street of No Return* (1954)). These popular crime novels proved a significant and bountiful source for filmic adaptations. In 1957, for example, Columbia Pictures released *The Burglar*, starring Jayne Mansfield, cast not in her sex-kitten persona, but as a helpless, hapless and confused Gladden. That same year *Nightfall* (Jacques Tourneur) was released as a low-budget film noir starring Aldo Ray, Brian Keith, and Anne Bancroft. In 1963, ABC began airing their immensely popular television serial drama *The Fugitive*, eventually demonstrated in the higher courts as having been based upon Goodis's *Dark Passage*. In 1983, noted French director Jean-Jacques Beineix relocated the Philadelphia docksides of *Moon in the Gutter* to Marseille in the French pulp-film *La Lune dans le caniveau*, starring Gérard Depardieu and Nastassja Kinski. As late as 1989, *Street of No Return* (Samuel Fuller) was released with Keith Carradine and Valentina Vargas in leading roles. As an indication of noir's economic potential in the current market, The Library of America recently brought out the 2012 reprinting of *Crime Novels: American Noir of the 1950s* (e.g., Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me*

(1952); Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955); Charles Willeford's *Pick-up* (1955), and *Down There* (1956); and Chester Himes's *The Real Cool Killers* (1959)). The prose and nihilistic worlds portrayed in the writing of these authors is so radical and blistering that they beg for cinematic reinterpretation. Thus, long before Anthony Minghella directed Matt Damon, Gwyneth Paltrow, Jude Law, and Cate Blanchett in the 1999 re-make, Patricia Highsmith's *The Talented Mr. Ripley* was adapted for the screen in the 1960 film *Plein soleil* (René Clément; released that same year in English as *Purple Noon*), featuring Alain Delon, Maurice Ronet, Marie Laforêt, and Erno Crisa. That same year, Charles Willeford's *Down There*, inspired—or, more accurately, was loosely adapted in—François Truffaut's neo-noir masterpiece *Tirez sur le pianiste* (*Shoot the Piano Player*), starring Charles Aznavour, alongside Marie Dubois, Nicole Berger and Michèle Mercier. In 1976, Jim Thompson's unrelenting *The Killer Inside Me* (Burt Kennedy) became the highly respected film of the same name, featuring Stacy Keach, Susan Tyrrell, and Tisha Sterling. Less appreciated, however, was its 2010 re-make by Michael Winterbottom, showcasing Casey Affleck, Kate Hudson, Jessica Alba, and Ned Beatty.

[2] The term *siren* evokes different meanings, whether as an allusion to the mythological songstresses who bewitched sailors (through sound and not sight) and drew them toward an almost-certain death, or as vocative, explicit in the suggestions of an emergency warning system and the requisite sense of danger at hand.

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