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## High Heat in the Cold War

David Cochran. *America Noir: Underground Writers and Filmmakers of the Postwar Era*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000. 280 p., \$27.95.

With the recent interest in all things noir, especially noir novels and film noir, David Cochran's *America Noir: Underground Writers and Filmmakers of the Postwar Era* reminds us of the importance of not separating these works "from their historical contexts and the social and cultural struggles that formed them." For a study of the cultural and market forces at work in this revival, or co-optation, one would do well to examine, as Cochran does, how the original oppositional tendencies of modernism were "incorporated into the postwar consensus" by the elite critics and cultural arbiters—in effect, "servant[s] of the state"—and how the modernist impulses then went "underground" into the disreputable genres of crime and science fiction, film noir and horror movies. In such culturally suspect areas, rather than in the embalmed works of high modernism like *The Old Man and the Sea*, one was more likely to find art willing to blur simplistic Cold War dichotomies and subvert the status quo.

By "underground" Cochran doesn't mean, as he points out, "the self-consciously avant-garde," but, taking his cue from Manny Farber, voices within popular culture "far darker and more critical than the period's dominant cultural tendencies." His ten representative suspects are not necessarily the usual ones, consisting of the roman noir authors Jim Thompson and Charles Willeford; Ray Bradbury and Charles Beaumont (science fiction/fantasy); Chester Himes and Patricia Highsmith ("minority" crime novelists); Samuel Fuller and Roger Corman (independent filmmakers); and the popular liberal artists Richard Condon and Rod Serling. Cochran explores their works in relation to "the dominant cultural sensibilities" during the postwar years and makes the case for each artist's underground status. Serling, for example, "was forced to go underground, to raise the issues that interested him through indirection, irony, and paradox." In *The Twilight Zone*, he destabilized, deconstructed, and subverted the certainties and eternal verities of the dominant Cold War worldview.

Cochran describes the films of Roger Corman as "simultaneously claustrophobic, barren, paranoid, vacuous, and absurd"; the same could be said, with varying degrees of emphasis, of the work of the other nine artists he discusses, as well as, for that matter, the postwar era itself—"a world," as Cochran says of *The Twilight Zone*, "steeped in paranoia with humans at the mercy of vast forces beyond their control, a universe marked by absurdity and governed by a strong sense of irony [. . .] a world both recognizable and frighteningly unfamiliar."

There are mistakes here: in Fuller's *The Naked Kiss*, Constance Towers, in the film's opening, does not "throw a punch" at the camera, but beats a man (and the camera) with her purse; the science fiction editor and author John W. Campbell Cochran calls Robert Campbell; and in his discussion of homosexuality in the novels of Patricia Highsmith, he never takes into account Highsmith's lesbianism. One would like to see other directors examined in relation to the Cold War, for example, Phil Karlson, Don Siegel, Billy Wilder, Joseph H. Lewis, Robert Aldrich, Anthony Mann, Frank Tashlin, Douglas Sirk, and Jack Arnold. But this is not a criticism; Cochran's book is not meant as an overview of the period, but instead is a clear and thoughtful examination of the themes of ten significant writers and directors during the remarkably fertile and frightening fifties.