Book Review

Nicholas Christopher's

Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City

"Somewhere in the Night" is an insightful look into one of the most influential genres of the 20th century. Poet and scholar Nicholas Christopher delivers to his readers a compelling personal journey into the mysteries of movies as diverse as *D.O.A., Sunset Boulevard*, and even Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*. It is a sprawling subject, since there are up to 300 films spread over three decades that can be called "noir," and Christopher approaches the subject with zeal.

He begins the book with *Out of the Past* and uses that as an entry point to a discussion of larger themes. Here he analyzes an important element of the typical noir story:

> In film, as in the novel, a primary element must always be the manner in which the narrator, or a set of characters in concert, suspends and discloses information: this is what determines the element of suspense, which is the nervous system of the plot … But film noir relies on many varieties of suspense, with ingenuity and sophistication.

Here are two of his passages about lighting and the central role it plays in the noir story:

> In speaking of lighting in film noir, the French cinematographer Allen Daviau said, "Darkness is not a negative space. Darkness is the most important element in a scene. The most important lights are the ones you don't turn on." Or the ones you begin by turning off.

> As in many film noirs, it is the mundane, daylit world that seems unreal, while the night, complex, frictional, sensorially explosive, stimulating in its contrasts, envelops us with an exotic … pleasure.

Christopher is at his most penetrating when he looks at the heart of the genre, the city. "The city is a world, is *the* world," he asserts, quoting Oswald Spengler. "… Twentieth Century man is seized and possessed by his own creation, the City, and is made into its creation … its victim." Because the city " … is a projection of the human imagination, and also a reflection of its inhabitants' inner lives; and this is a premise of the film noir … hence

the obsessive emphasis on urban settings that are precarious and dangerous: rooftops, walkways on bridges, railroad tracks, high windows, ledges, towering public monuments … unlit alleys and industrial zones, not to mention moving trains and cars."

Christopher's chapters on "Into the Labyrinth" and "Night and the City" draw out the many virtues of using the city as setting for so many of these films. Here are three passages in which he evokes the contribution of cityscapes to the genre:

> Most elementally … there is the way the city literally works … sewers, water mains, gas pipes, electrical and telephone cables (all subterranean), as well as the processes by which fuel, food, and other goods are supplied it from the outside, the other world …

> Everywhere – in the home, the office, the church, the nightclub – there are pitfalls, blind spots, booby traps. Tripwires that set off elaborate chain reactions. Jolts and shocks and boomerang effects of every variety.

> Much of film noir is concerned with people cut off not just from Nature, and from their own natures, but from one another and from any vital knowledge of the environment they themselves have created. Film noir represents 'human solitude in a world of steel' …

Christopher goes on to connect film noir to urban poetry. He traces its literary roots back to Edgar Allan Poe, and the antecedents of its visual style to the German expressionist films of

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the 1930's, and the paintings of (among others) Edward Hopper. He offers specific breakdowns of film passages as illustrations of his arguments. He calls Robert Aldrich's 1955 film *Kiss Me Deadly* "perhaps the most perfectly realized film noir ever made."

Somewhere in the Night: Film Noir and the American City is a valuable and interpretative introduction to this unique American genre. No doubt that more and more of us will follow Nicholas Christopher's lead into the realm of film noir, and emerge with treasures. In these fierce, quirky gems, we can see the roots of American film as well as the roots of television shows.