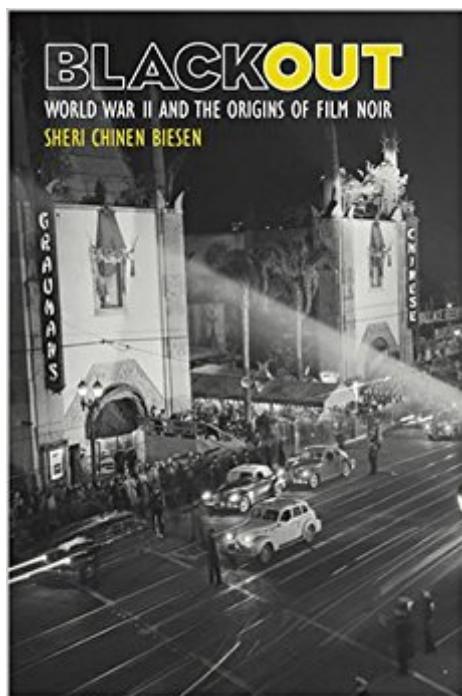


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Blackout: World War II And The Origins Of Film Noir



Synopsis

Challenging conventional scholarship placing the origins of film noir in postwar Hollywood, Sheri Chinen Biesen finds the genre's roots firmly planted in the political, social, and material conditions of Hollywood during the war. After Pearl Harbor, America and Hollywood experienced a sharp cultural transformation that made horror, shock, and violence not only palatable but preferable. Hard times necessitated cheaper sets, fewer lights, and fresh talent; censors as well as the movie-going public showed a new tolerance for sex and violence; and female producers experienced newfound prominence in the industry. Biesen brings prodigious archival research, accessible prose, and imaginative insights to both well-known films noir of the wartime period—*The Maltese Falcon*, *The Big Sleep*, and *Double Indemnity*—and others often overlooked or underrated—*Scarlet Street*, *Ministry of Fear*, *Phantom Lady*, and *Stranger on the Third Floor*.

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Customer Reviews

"Biesen adds a new perspective that enhances scholarship on the subject and makes this book a must." (Choice)"Ms Biesen describes too how film noir drew on societal anxieties as Americans faced fear, loss and shortages during the war and viewed ever-more-harrowing newsreel footage. 'As life on the homefront became increasingly hard-boiled,' she writes, 'so too did American film.'" (Nina Ayoub Chronicle of Higher Education)"Biesen's book is readable, informative and jargon free... Biesen uses her research into studio archives, the films' attendant publicity and the contemporary press to bring alive the wartime period of film noir and its transformation into a

post-war genre for dealing with troubled veterans returning home, the coming of the Cold War, nuclear angst and the effects of McCarthyism on Hollywood and the nation at large." (Times Literary Supplement)"Readers will come away from *Blackout* with a fuller understanding of the industrial and historical contexts of wartime film noir." (Charles Maland *Cineaste*)"This text offers a compelling history of wartime Hollywood and a provocative challenge to current noir scholarship." (Southern California Quarterly)"An important contribution to the history of film noir." (Jan-Christopher Horak *Screening the Past*)"A film noir aficionado, Biesen provides the most detailed and thoroughly researched interpretation of this era's American film noir." (Clayton Koppes *American Historical Review*)"The author is to be congratulated on producing an exemplary study in empirical film history." (Brian Neve *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television*)"This volume stands out as one of the best and perhaps the single most essential book in English on film noir. Biesen reveals an untold part of the movement with originality, sophistication, and vitality. Her work will become a foundation for subsequent interpretation of film noir, as well as an ideal text in film, history, and cultural studies courses." (Brian Taves, film historian, author of *The Romance of Adventure: The Genre of Historical Adventure Movies*)

Sheri Chinen Biesen is an associate professor of radio, television, and film studies at Rowan University.

"*Blackout*" is subtitled "World War II and the Origins of Film Noir," and Sheri Chinen Biesen, an assistant professor of radio, television and film studies at Rowan University, delivers the goods in this scholarly book. At the end of World War II, a large backlog of American films suddenly became available overseas. The French, seeing these films for the first time "all at once" instead of over a period of years, noticed a "dark" trend in them that had not been especially obvious to their American producers. French critics coined the term "film noir" to describe what they saw as virtually a new genre in filmmaking. Films noir typically (but not exclusively) featured hard-boiled private detectives, alluring but deadly "femmes fatale," stories told in flashbacks, complex plots, unconventional camera angles and stark black-and-white photography. Many of them involved crimes gone wrong, double- and triple-crosses, murder and mayhem, and the nastier side of human relationships. "*Blackout*" shows how these characteristics arose from the political, social, cultural and material conditions that existed in America during World War II. For example, films noir are "dark" because: a) lights were in short supply, b) power was rationed, and c) the West Coast (where most films during the War were made) was blacked out nightly because of the fear of Japanese

submarine attacks. Many film noir stories took place at night, because the Government prohibited daytime photography that could accidentally include defense installations--thus eliminating most of the favored movie-making locations in Southern California. Relationships between men, serving overseas in combat, and women, who now did many of the previously male-dominated jobs on the Home Front, changed during the War, and films noir could not help but reflect these changes. One of the most fascinating aspects of film production in World War II was the interaction of the movie studios with the Production Code Administration (PCA). "Blackout" describes in detail how the PCA enthusiastically carried out its "responsibility" of censoring screenplays that the studios presented to it in order to obtain the important "seal of approval." For example, the PCA banned "excessive drinking...references to sex, suggestive dancing, [and] any condoning of divorce..." from the screenplay for "Phantom Lady." This is just one very minor example. One wonders not only how films made under the heavy hand of PCA censorship could be very good (which many are), but indeed how any meaningful films could possibly have been made at all. "Blackout" covers the evolution of film noir trends in great depth. It focuses on genre classics such as "Double Indemnity," "This Gun For Hire," "The Postman Always Rings Twice," "Murder, My Sweet" and "Laura," but it also covers many other films. The text is detailed, readable and thoroughly footnoted, although I did find it somewhat repetitive in parts. For example, the point about location filming restrictions is similarly made many times. "Blackout" may be heavy going in some places for readers with just a casual interest in the subject, but it is nevertheless an excellent primer on the development of a uniquely American film style.

Not the easiest of reads. It is more of an academic volume than I had expected. The author makes good points in the pre-history and history of film noir pointing out the dark corners of films such as "The Maltese Falcon" and even "Casablanca" as well as other more recognisable films noir. If the reader can stay with the treatment, there is a good reward at the end of the book with a much clearer view of film noir, how it came about and what caused its final demise. Good.

Outstanding. Highly Recommended. Excellent Book. A fascinating, engaging, innovative and original work. A fine account of film noir and 1940s Hollywood filmmaking, film censorship and propaganda, and wartime conditions in America's movie capital during World War II. Ample noir stories of Los Angeles, Raymond Chandler, Humphrey Bogart, James M. Cain, Billy Wilder, Fritz Lang, Alan Ladd, Peter Lorre, Howard Hawks with hardboiled crime, venetian blinds, swirling cigarette smoke and smoldering seductive femme fatales like black widow Barbara Stanwyck,

Veronica Lake and Rita Hayworth. A rich provocative study. Terrific and enjoyable read for film buffs, cineastes, film critics, movie fans, industry insiders, cultural historians, researchers and cinema scholars, and an insightful and compelling look at the unexplored history of film noir and wartime Hollywood in the 1940s. Biesen's *Blackout* is quite a find, a must-read book on film noir. Wonderful revelations and essential reading for lovers of film noir.

if you are a fan of film noir buy this book. Excellent!!

was exactly as advertised if not better

Yes, Shari Chinen Biesen has detonated a landmine in the field of film noir studies with her contention that, far from being a postwar movement, noir is totally tied up with actual conditions of the war being felt and fought during Hollywood studio production; so we might come to see the heyday of film noir as not the release of *OUT OF THE PAST*, nor any of the location-dominated "March of Time" inspired docudramas, but much earlier on, with the filming of *THIS GUN FOR HIRE* with Alan Ladd and Veronica Lake. She invites us to attend to the way WWII scared the daylights out of Los Angeles and curtailed social activity through a literal blackout in which the previously iconic klieglights were darkened "for the duration," while West Coast citizens and government officials and conspiracy theorists worried about how soon the Japanese would attack southern California by bomber or submarine or from within. Secondarily the arrival of so many talented artists from Nazi-dominated Europe gave film a darker cast, both in front of the camera and behind. She points to *STRANGER ON THE THIRD FLOOR*, *THE MALTESE FALCON*, *PHANTOM LADY*, and *DOUBLE INDEMNITY* as beneficiaries of this process. With the top male stars in uniform, like Gable, Jimmy Stewart, Robert Taylor, the studios had to improvise and invent a new sort of cinema, one in which their female stars would henceforward be paired with freaks--old men, foreign men, little boys--the refuse of the draft. This was a time when an actor like Albert Dekker, Orson Welles, Peter Lorre, Laird Cregar, George Sanders, could dream of Hollywood stardom; when super short actors like Alan Ladd were suddenly magnified; when gay actors who'd been declared unfit for military service could become huge box office draws, their heterosexuality reinscribed by press flacks; and older men found their stardom artificially extended by a decade or more (William Powell, Ronald Colman, guys like that.) A few remaining tall, handsome, young and heterosexual men remained employable--John Wayne, Ronald Reagan, becoming stars no little thanks to the vacuum around them. And they were talented too, of course. And women moved behind the camera too, as

editors, producers, writers: Joan Harrison, Catherine Tunney, Harriet Parsons, Virginia van Upp, Leigh Brackett. As BLACKOUT progresses towards the end of the war in 1945, we relive a strange moment in history in which Hollywood once again hardened itself for the invasion--the re-entry into their midst of all the returning vets, stars, writers, directors and miscellaneous personnel--who would put these trends on fast track and bring them outdoors.

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