Alan Nadel's 'Demographic Angst': The dark anxieties behind 1950s films...

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Alan Nadel, author of "Demographic Angst."

by Glenn C. Altschuler, For The Inquirer

Demographic Angst

Cultural Narratives and American Films of the 1950s
By Alan Nadel
Rutgers University Press. 250 pp. $29.95

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

In the aftermath of the Great Depression and World War II, Americans were eager to heed the advice of the lyric of the title song of Singer in the Rain and be “happy again.” Although public intellectuals warned of pervasive anxiety, Americans celebrated the 1950s as a period of prosperity, consensus, harmony, and homogeneity.

We now know that social and cultural tensions simmered beneath the surface of postwar America. In Demographic
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Angst, Alan Nadel, a professor of American literature at the University of Kentucky and the author of Containment Culture, builds on the work of other scholars to argue that 1950s films “exposed nuanced contradictions” related to gender, race, and unionized workplaces. Screenwriters and directors, he maintains, bowed to Cold War conformity by “closeting” deviations from “normality” in their movies. Though not always persuasive, Nadel’s interpretations are ingenious, insightful, and illuminating.

Embedded in postwar narratives (All About Eve and Sunset Boulevard) that discipline women for privileging their ambitions and satisfactions, Nadel points out, are women who do, indeed, sing in the rain and embrace the centrality of work. Nadel also writes, provocatively, that “Thank Heaven for Little Girls,” with its recognition that “little girls get bigger every day,” turns Gigi (a film audiences found “charming”) into the Nabokovian fantasy dreams of a dirty old man.

On the Waterfront, Nadel suggests, is not only about “informing” on Communists. Addressing anxieties about the labor movement that led to the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, the film, in which union bosses are omnipresent and corporate bosses are invisible, blames organized labor for protecting incompetent workers, reducing productivity, and raising consumer prices.

No Way Out and The Defiant Ones, Nadel notes, did not allow viewers to see the moment in which each black protagonist overcomes prejudice and oppression. After appearing to racialize juvenile delinquency (with students compared to zoo animals), Nadel notes, Blackboard Jungle “shifts gears,” blaming classroom chaos and sexual assault on a psychologically disturbed white teenager.

That said, Nadel’s interpretative readings, it seems to me, often fit films into his ideological Procrustean bed. He claims that the “central problem” of Singin’ in the Rain is “how to speak without incriminating oneself or others at a moment when remaining silent was no longer tenable.” Court Jester, Nadel maintains, “provided the little man the chance to serve the nation by becoming interchangeable parts of the organization, conforming perfectly, even down to the medieval setting,” amid “the impossible demands he had” to support the baby boom. North by Northwest, according to Nadel, makes visible “the farcical relationship” between the United Nations, which is “more a pawn than a force,” and the “free world.”

Engaging and thought-provoking, Demographic Angst leaves us wondering whether 1950s audiences “read” these films as Nadel has.

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