From this standpoint, *Riddles* and *Dora* have much more in common with *Mary Poppins* or *Cabaret*—setting aside the whole question of entertainment value—than they do with *L’Age d’or* or *Zéro de Conduite* or *Weekend*. Indeed, their very function is to make certain theoretical notions “hummable”—if not exactly danceable.)

Feuer is especially good in charting various instances of intertextuality in musicals. This is not only a matter of, say, the multiple rip-offs or spinoffs of *Meet Me in St. Louis* (such as *Centennial Summer, State Fair* and *On Moonlight Bay*) or the direct citations of *That’s Entertainment*, but also the complex resonances of Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly and Judy Garland (among others) as they develop from film to film, accumulating more and more supplementary meanings en route. Thus in the excellent discussion of Garland which concludes the book, and focuses on many of its preceding issues, the argument is persuasively made that the dramatic structure of *A Star is Born* is largely predicated on extra-filmic matters relating to Garland’s past at MGM and elsewhere more than any autonomous interest in Vicki Lester as a character. “The movement from [the film’s] opening number to Garland’s second number in the film, *The Man That Got Away*, parallels the movement from Garland’s MGM persona to her exposure to the public”; and spectators like myself who have always wondered why the dramatic impact of the latter number seems so asymmetrically disproportionate—an unbeatable early peak, rather like the ball sequence in *The Magnificent Ambersons*—are provided with a plausible context for an answer.

Thanks in part to the popular format of the BFI Cinema Series, which is edited by Ed Buscombe—whose only previous volume to date has been Colin MacCabe’s *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics*, and whose avowed aim is to popularize difficult and/or unfamiliar work in recent film studies—many of Feuer’s best insights are highly compressed, economical without seeming unduly elliptical or aphoristic. The following conclusion to her chapter on “Dream Worlds and Dream Stages” is characteristic:

Musicals are unparalleled in presenting a vision of human liberation which is profoundly aesthetic. Part of the reason some of us love musicals so passionately is that they give us a glimpse of what it would be like to be free. We desperately need images of liberation in the popular arts. But the musical presents its vision of the unfettered human spirit in a way that forecloses a desire to translate that vision into reality. The Hollywood version of Utopia is entirely solipsistic. In its endless reflexivity the musical can offer only itself, only entertainment as its picture of Utopia. The very terms it set up for itself, however unconsciously, as an apology for mass art, prevented the musical from ever breaking out of its self-imposed hermetic universe.

On the other hand, in a brief consideration of *Nashville* that follows—in a section on “The Evolution of the Audience in the Film”—Feuer succinctly shows how “entertainment indicts its own audience at the risk of losing it.” And in the course of clarifying multiple aspects of this paradox, she takes us through a pocket-sized history of her chosen genre that manages to be both fresh and informed, as well as a pleasure to read.

—JONATHAN ROSENBAUM

**THE DARK SIDE OF THE SCREEN: FILM NOIR**


This large-format book, with its abundance of stills, studiously assembles the basic perspectives on *film noir*, but provides little in the way of new insights. Hirsch’s approach is scholarly without being abstruse, and yet he seems more concerned with promoting the academic respectability of his subject than with giving it fresh critical examination.

Hirsch’s first chapter, called “The City at Night,” dwells at length on two central examples of the genre (*Scarlet Street* and *Double Indemnity*) and concludes with a definition of the genre which is very nearly self-defeating in its expansiveness: “Film noir is a descriptive term for the American crime film as it flourished, roughly, from the early forties to the late fifties. It embraces a variety of crime dramas ranging from claustrophobic studies of murder and psychological entrapment to more general treatments of criminal organizations. From stylized versions of the city at night to documentary-like reports of the city at midday, from the investigations of the wry, cynical sleuth to the ‘innocent’ man moment-
tarily and fatally trapped by luxury, to the desperate flailings of the confirmed and inveterate criminal, the genre covers a heterogeneous terrain. . . ."

The seven subsequent chapters cover a variety of concerns pertaining to the genre’s qualities: literary background, cinematic background, “stylistics,” directors, actors, narrative patterns, and the genre’s legacy. For literary background, Hirsch focuses on Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, and Cornell Woolrich—a grouping which perhaps gives a little too much emphasis to the private-eye authors when the Cain-Woolrich “school” is probably more crucial. The chapter on cinematic background ranges, as its subtitle indicates, from (German) expressionism to (Italian) neorealism, though the only thing Hirsch puts in between them is the gangster film genre: he sees film noir as diluted expressionism which tends to be less “upbeat” morally than the gangster film and less progressive politically than neorealism. The “noir stylistics” chapter includes groups of stills chosen for their genre motifs (and, somewhat puzzlingly, limits its graphic arts references chiefly to the paintings of Reginald Marsh).

The chapter on directors pointedly excludes some figures (Hawks, Walsh, Ophuls) from Hirsch’s occasionally peculiar genre “canon” and then proceeds to auteurist summaries and comparisons of Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak, Billy Wilder, and Otto Preminger; to notation of noir tendencies in Orson Welles’s work; to observations on a number of other noir directors (including Nicholas Ray, Jules Dassin, Joseph Losey, Joseph H. Lewis, Don Siegel, Phil Karlson); and finally to a noir-related survey of Alfred Hitchcock’s work. The “Noir Actor” chapter, meanwhile, is less concerned with acting than with roles (esp. for actresses and “character actors”) and with screen personae (especially for male stars).

Hirsch’s chapter on the genre’s “narrative patterns” is somewhat misnamed, since it classifies stories in terms of their central character types, but the attention it pays to individual films makes it perhaps the most interesting section of the book. It is also here that Hirsch makes a small case for his claim that film noir is an exceptionally challenging genre (by which he means that its characteristic world view is disturbing and dark). After that, the final chapter briefly traces the outlines of a “noir legacy” via genre variations, influences, revivals, and remakes.

All in all, the book is a conscientious, respectable introduction to film noir. But serious students of the genre will probably find much more stimulation in E. Ann Kaplan’s Women in Film Noir (with its more intensely focused analyses) and in Carlos Clarens’s Crime Movies (which includes film noir in its wide-ranging, perceptive mixture of social history and film criticism).

—PETER HOGUE

THE J. D. FILMS

Juvenile Delinquency in the Movies

For a contemporary audience, the chief attraction of the films made during the fifties and sixties that deal with juvenile delinquency is probably their unintentioned humor; because the films claimed “to mirror [teenage] life today, no matter how shocking the revelation” (as one poster declared), they have become time capsules of outdated morals and fashions. Although a few of the films, most notably Rebel Without a Cause, overcame the sensational material to communicate the rebelliousness, resentment, and difficulties of growing up, the bulk of the films dwelled on the sex, violence, and drugs that were supposedly a routine part of teenagers’ lives.

Since the films were supposed to have been so attuned to their times, studying them could tell us how teenagers were perceived during the fifties and sixties, how teenagers like to see themselves, and how the producers exploited the material. Such a study seems to be McGee and Robertson’s aim when they state that they will “study the J. D. films in the context of the cultural events which inspired them.” However, rather than study a few archetypal films, the authors record the plot summaries of what seems like every J. D. film ever made, which makes the book more like a catalogue than a critical study. Furthermore, the contexts tend to be glib generalizations of eras; the authors describe the motorcycle films’ time period as “draft dodging became a way of life and Canada seemed far more desirable than the jungles of Asia.” Although the authors offer