

## [Review] Jans B. Wager (2017) Jazz and cocktails: rethinking race and the sound of film noir

Article (Accepted Version)

Krutnik, Frank (2019) [Review] Jans B. Wager (2017) Jazz and cocktails: rethinking race and the sound of film noir. *Film Studies*, 20 (1). pp. 54-56. ISSN 1469-0314

This version is available from Sussex Research Online: <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/86977/>

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher's version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

### **Copyright and reuse:**

Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

*Jazz and Cocktails: Rethinking Race and the Sound of Film Noir*, Jans Wager, University of Texas Press: Austin, TX, 2017. ISBN: 978-1-4773-1227-8. 1. Paperback, 163 pages. £18.99.

**Reviewer:** Frank Krutnik, Film Studies, School of Media, Film and Music, University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, BN1 4AH. *Email:* [f.s.krutnik@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:f.s.krutnik@sussex.ac.uk).

Jans Wager's slender and engaging book focusses in the main on a small group of "late classic films noirs" with soundtracks by African-American musicians that were able to "implicate the social and cultural contexts of jazz music and composers, adding a revolutionary, if short-lived element to late classical Hollywood filmmaking practice".<sup>1</sup> These films explored new possibilities for integrating jazz and cinema that moved beyond the (racially coded) exoticism and depravity the music symbolized in noir movies like *Among the Living* (1941), *Phantom Lady* (1944) and *D.O.A.* (1950). By challenging traditional Hollywood scoring practices, Wager suggests, these soundtracks also encouraged spectators "to hear film somewhat differently" (131).

To set this remarkable group of films in context, Wager explores how jazz club sequences in *Out of the Past* (1947), *The Blue Gardenia* (1953) and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955) showed increasing acknowledgment of the music while struggling to find a satisfactory place for its African-American creators. Wager also scrutinizes Michael Mann's 2004 neo-noir *Collateral*, arguing that it offers a retrograde account of the jazz club by stripping away the social and cultural ambiguity of the earlier films and asserting "white male dominance over black masculinity" (49). In an unusual move, Wager provides further context for such cinematic depictions by devoting a chapter to the history of a real life jazz club, in Ogden, Utah - an enjoyable account in its own right, despite its tangential role in a book dedicated to screen representations.

The most substantial chapters in *Jazz and Cocktails*, however, are devoted to *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959), *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* (*Lift to the Scaffold*, 1957) and *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959). In a departure from earlier noir movies, jazz artists – respectively, Chico Hamilton and Fred Katz; Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn; Miles Davis; and John Lewis and the Modern Jazz

Quartet (MJQ) - actively participated in crafting their soundtracks. For Wager, these films “illustrate a vibrant and fleeting moment when Hollywood film noir and jazz music made remarkable and unique meaning together” (5). By giving voice to the creativity of African-American artists, they liberate jazz from the subsidiary role it played in earlier Hollywood productions, allowing the music to take on a life of its own. Wager argues that, through their diegetic and non-diegetic foregrounding of jazz, these films generate a Brechtian “alienation effect” by disrupting Hollywood scoring practices and overturning the traditional subordination of music to image and narrative (3). Whether or not they were familiar with jazz, she proposes, audiences were likely to perceive the disconnect with traditional Hollywood sound-image relations and consequently to pay more attention to the music (17-18). The presence of black musicians and composers, both onscreen and behind-the-scenes, carried a potentially dissonant force, as it “implicitly embedded black activism into the primarily white output of Hollywood” (18). These soundtracks insinuate an “Afromodernist” aesthetic (3, 61-2) that, from the mid 1940s on, rendered jazz a powerful vehicle for African-American cultural expression and social energies.<sup>2</sup>

*Sweet Smell of Success* illustrates the struggles involved in bringing jazz to the screen in a fully realized manner. Its producers vetoed the idea of having an exclusively jazz soundtrack by hiring Elmer Bernstein to supply a non-diegetic score that adhered closely to Hollywood protocols (62). This decision relegated the hip Afromodernist ‘chamber jazz’ of the mixed-race Chico Hamilton Quintet to a few sequences that show the band performing in a jazz club. In these scenes, Wager comments, jazz “functions as the soundtrack but also functions as jazz”, completely separated from a narrative that deals with power plays between white men (62). While *Sweet Smell of Success* represented a compromise between jazz and the

more Hollywood-friendly jazz-inflected soundtrack, *Anatomy of a Murder*, *Lift to the Scaffold* and *Odds Against Tomorrow* all have full jazz scores by respected African-American performer-composers. Besides seeking economic advantage, Wager notes, these musicians also sought to use film as a platform for popularizing jazz and showcasing its artistic potential (118). Ultimately, however, they were unable to secure lengthy Hollywood careers (128).

Louis Malle's *Lift to the Scaffold* was one of several European films of the late 1950s to use a jazz score. Wager identifies Miles Davis' distinctive and abstracted modal score as (once more) achieving an 'alienation effect' through its free-form relationship to the images - sometimes reinforcing them, at other times countering them (82). Davis' music contributes a distinctively chilly emotional resonance to the film, and while it may sketch a modern urban landscape of emotional alienation, this is not necessary 'alienation' as Brecht conceived of it. The Ellington-Strayhorn score for Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder* brings a sophisticated urban sensibility to the film's small-town setting, thereby managing "a detached but explicit commentary on the ambivalent morality of the film" (102). Unlike the other films Wager discusses, Robert Wise's *Odds Against Tomorrow* tackles the subject of race prejudice directly, its diegetic and nondiegetic jazz offering the most upfront Afromodernism found in these films.

Deftly blending textual analysis, historical research, and theorizations of music and race, Wager's lively and readable account exudes enthusiasm for the music and the films. There are some missteps, however. At times, her insistence on the alienation effect betrays the familiar tendency of noir critics to fetishize moments of alleged textual rupture or subversion. This leads to some clumsy assertions that would

benefit from greater care and nuance: as in her claim that when, in *Sweet Smell of Success*, “a black man [i.e. Chico Hamilton] appears as the coolest and best man in the movie, some questions are raised in the mind of the spectator. The alienation effect takes hold” (74-5).

The presentation of film noir is the book’s most troublesome feature. Wager may see it as a necessary move for the uninitiated, but her adjective-fueled account of this notoriously tricky group of films (8-9) indulges in film-noir-101-speak that strips sophistication from a critical account that merits more considered explication. This is a significant issue, given Wager’s reliance on film noir as the structuring framework for her study – a decision that inevitably excludes other encounters between jazz and film. Her detailed textual analysis may be illuminating, but it is also sometimes overly indebted to critics who have explored these topics previously – including Krin Gabbard on jazz and film, David Butler on jazz and film noir, and Christopher Coady on jazz and Afromodernism.<sup>3</sup> Thus, while it is hard not to like this book, it is difficult to be fully convinced that it delivers the ‘rethinking’ promised by its subtitle.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jans B. Wager, *Jazz and Cocktails: Rethinking Race and the Sound of Film Noir*, University of Texas Press, 2017, 2. Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition, with page number following in brackets.

<sup>2</sup> Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop*, University of California Press, 2003, 27-28, 97.

<sup>3</sup> Krin Gabbard, *Jammin’ the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema*, University of Chicago Press, 1996; David Butler, *Jazz Noir: Listening to Music from Phantom Lady to The Last Seduction*, Praeger, 2002; Christopher Coady, “Afromodernist Subjection of Film Noir Conventions in John Lewis’ Scores to *Sait-on Jamais* (1957) and *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959)”, *Musicology Australia* 34.1 (2012), 1-31.