



AMERICA ERIK DUSSERE *18* ELSEWHERE

The Noir Tradition in the Age of Consumer Culture

America Is Elsewhere

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CONSUMER CULTURE

Erik Dussere



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For Stephanie and Liv

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America Is Elsewhere

Introduction

The American self can be taken to be a microcosm of American society, which has notably lacked the solidity and intractability of English society; it is little likely to be felt by its members as being palpably *there*.

—LIONEL TRILLING, *SINCERITY AND AUTHENTICITY*

My critique of America remains fundamentally incoherent. . . . All I know is that although I live a freer life than many people, I want to be freer still; I'm sometimes positively dazzled with longing for a better way of being. What is it that I need?

—WILLIAM T. VOLLMANN, *RIDING TOWARD EVERYWHERE*

This book is an attempt to understand the relationship between consumer culture and conceptions of national authenticity as it is expressed in American fiction and film from the 1940s to the present. I will argue that the unprecedented rise of consumer culture that followed World War II reshaped American national identity in important ways, and that as consumption and citizenship were increasingly conflated, American cultural productions expressed a newly urgent desire to discover or rediscover a version of the nation imagined as authentic and opposed to consumerism. Over the decades that followed, this cultural conflict between authenticity and consumption has evolved, and I follow that evolution by tracing the tradition initiated in film noir and hard-boiled fiction as it changes shape during American culture's movement into the postmodern era.

The book is divided into three sections, which follow a loosely chronological development. The first part sets out the key issues I discuss here by looking at the late-modernist postwar period, during which hard-boiled fiction and classic film noir became firmly established in American culture as exemplars of the authentic. In part 2, I examine how this ideological structure of noir is carried over into the conspiracy texts that define the emergence of postmodernism. Part 3 follows the noir tradition into the era of dominant postmodernism, examining novels and films that reformulate noir's assertion of national authenticity, as well as those that ultimately undermine that assertion. Throughout the book, my central focus is on the ways that the texts I examine

represent space, with particular attention to places of commerce—the sites of material culture where conflicts between authenticity and consumption are negotiated.

To make this argument requires a new way of reading noir, one that defines it as a response to the rise of consumer culture, as a *noir tradition* that continues and evolves long after the era of the forties and fifties in which it is generally located.¹ Studies of noir—which have generally focused either on film noir or on the “noir” hard-boiled fiction that is one of the key sources of the film cycle—nearly always pose the question, what is noir? In some cases the question is one of categorization: is it a genre, a style, a critical category, a free-floating principle? But my own analysis is concerned more directly with something like the question that Joan Copjec poses in her introduction to *Shades of Noir*, the question of “the genre’s ‘absent cause,’ that is, of a principle that does not appear in the field of its effects” (xii). In arguing that the “principle” of noir is an ideological attempt to imagine a negation of American consumer culture, or a space outside of that consumerist national space, I am arguing for a continuity that links noir film and fiction of the forties and fifties, the “countercultural” conspiracy logic of the sixties and seventies, and the postmodern cultural productions of the last thirty years. While critical writings on film noir have often treated it as a response to the crisis and instability of the era of World War II and the decade that followed—a discontinuous reading in which noir arises from American transition and flux and then fades away²—I read noir as a response not to crisis but to affluence and national consolidation. This reading of noir as a response to consumer culture links it to the rise of the counterculture, with its critique of American affluence, and to the postmodern concern with exploring the contradictions of capitalism in the global consumer economy.

Reading noir as a response to, or an effect of, the pervasive presence of consumer culture in the postwar era makes it possible for me to build on previous noir scholarship—which has often looked at noir as a critique of American mainstream values—in order to offer a new conception of the term. The structural basis of the noir texts, in my reading, is contained and expressed in their staging of a conflict between consumerist America and an authentic American identity that takes the form of a negation of consumer culture. These texts are certainly not the only ones where these issues are present—indeed, these are issues that are absolutely central to postwar culture at all levels—but in the noir tradition the issues are framed in terms of a conflict that renders the issues and their relationship to questions of national authenticity visible, and that allows us to see how the problems raised by postwar consumer culture persist in the present. Noir is the site where this confrontation between two versions of America takes place most clearly, because noir texts are in their essence *about* authenticity; they are machines for the production of what I will be calling “authenticity effects.”

When I use this terminology, I am drawing on a tradition—one that is expressed most clearly by Lionel Trilling, as I discuss below—that conceptualizes “authenticity” as a negative principle, one that is motivated by a desire to locate a space outside of social or economic systems perceived as artificial. The version of authenticity that concerns me—the one that is found in the texts of the noir tradition—is a discourse with a particular history, one that emerges as an oppositional response to traditions of commerce and the artifice that commerce seems to introduce into human relationships in general and American society in particular. In postwar America, this discourse takes the form of an assertion of and desire for an American authenticity imagined as the opposite of a mainstream American identity that has become indistinguishable from consumerism. In this sense, one could say that the capitalist dynamics of consumption and the commodity form *produce* authenticity as their inevitable opposite. Noir is a privileged site of investigation here because it consistently creates the effect of authenticity through its gritty-realist aesthetic, its claim to a cynical debunking, and its project of unmasking what it sees as the pretty lies and petty pieties of mainstream American discourse to discover the essential rot that they disguise. But in doing so, it makes the gap between authenticity and authenticity effect visible; its authenticity-based opposition to consumer culture emerges in the form of films and novels that are conscious of their status as commodities but that nonetheless attempt to take a critical posture toward the system of commodification.

The strategy by which noir texts represent this confrontation between consumer culture and authenticity is most clearly seen in their evocations of particular commercial spaces, which take both literal and symbolic forms. Space, in the terms set out by Henri Lefebvre and others, is produced in ways that correspond to the dominant ideological and economic order. In the postwar era, consumer capitalism’s imbrication with American citizenship has been linked to its reorganization of American space. The familiar changes in the American landscape that we generally associate with the forties and fifties—suburban living, automobile culture, the new ways of buying represented by supermarkets, chain stores, and so on—all suggest the commodity as the dominant structure underlying our national space. Noir represents these new spaces in ways that claim a separation between two versions of America: the degraded, commercialized mainstream and the darker and more vital alternative offered by the noir aesthetic. The omnipresent national consumer culture produces anxiety, as citizens come to feel that the nation they inhabit is pervasively artificial and inauthentic. This feeling is particularly powerful when the spaces those citizens inhabit and negotiate every day are also organized by the logic of the commodity.³ Noir responds to this experience of alienation by staging authenticity effects, which suggest the presence or possibility of an alternative America—one that is located outside of the commercial sphere.

This somewhat lengthy introduction is divided into two parts. The first part, "Authenticity Effects," is concerned with explaining and defining the central terms that I am using—*authenticity*, *noir*, *consumer culture*, *American (national) identity*—all of which are large and amorphous and therefore require me to explain exactly how I am using them. I will discuss the particular versions of these terms that I will be using, as well as the relationships between them, all of which is necessary in order to describe the shape of the argument I will be making. In the second part, "Out of the Past, into the Supermarket," I examine commercial spaces as representatives of postwar American consumer culture, taking the supermarket as an emblematic example. Then I bring all these threads together in a reading of three supermarket scenes in the noir tradition that recreates in miniature the evolution described throughout the course of this book.

1. Authenticity Effects

[In pulp fiction of the twenties and thirties we can] recognize the authentic power of a kind of writing that, even at its most mannered and artificial, made most of the fiction of the time taste like a cup of luke-warm consommé at a spinsterish tearoom. I don't think this power was entirely a matter of violence. . . . Possibly it was the smell of fear which these stories managed to generate. Their characters lived in a world gone wrong. . . . The law was something to be manipulated for profit and power. The streets were dark with something more than night. The mystery story grew hard and cynical about motive and character, but it was not cynical about the effects it tried to produce nor about its technique of producing them.

—RAYMOND CHANDLER, *TROUBLE IS MY BUSINESS*

Defining authenticity is a tricky thing. To begin with, the word "authentic" comes to us trailing a host of not-quite-synonyms—true, real, original, genuine—each of which requires explanation in itself, and all of which are used differently in different contexts. But the more onerous problem is that the term "authenticity" has no positive definition; it only has meaning when it is contrasted with some notion of the "inauthentic," so that any understanding of the word depends upon what a given writer or community imagines to be its opposite. In its various contexts, authenticity may be defined as the antithesis of society, artifice, imitation, modernity, conformity, or alienation—among other things. The authenticity I am talking about here refers to a historically defined cultural discourse with its own particular logic and rhetoric, one that emerges out of other discourses over time and is frequently given expression in American film and fiction during the twentieth century. It is imagined as

the opposite of consumer culture, and because consumer culture had come to define the national identity by the 1940s, it is an authenticity conceived in national terms.

I have suggested that this specific sort of authenticity that emerges in noir texts is really an authenticity effect, a simulation of something that the texts desire and posit, and definitions of authenticity frequently return to that problem of simulation. Conceptions of the term seem, in other words, to contain their own debunking; authenticity is always an effect. This is certainly the case that emerges in Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity*, a series of lectures that he gave at Harvard University in 1970, which offer a powerful and subtle account of the discourse of authenticity. Trilling begins with the concept of "sincerity," which he describes in what are now fairly conventional terms as a component in the conception of the self that takes shape in the early modern era. The idea of sincerity—the desire to be faithful in outward expression to one's inner truth—becomes possible with the alteration of feudal class hierarchies and the breakdown of the assurance of immanent meaning provided by the premodern God. This change is aligned with the emergence, in more or less the terms in which we know it today, of the idea of society; the desire for sincerity is the desire for the self to be aligned truthfully with its expression in society.

Authenticity, Trilling argues, emerges out of the Romantic imagination and finds its fullest expression in modernism.⁴ Within its logic, there is no longer any question of the self being aligned with society, because society is the opposite of authenticity and the authentic self is perpetually alienated from the social realm. This Romantic conception of authenticity is the one that informs existentialist philosophy. The individual, freed from the dogmas engendered by God-based belief systems, rushes headlong into the comfortable fetters provided by social norms and the commonplace; we act inauthentically when we model our particular existence on preexisting social frameworks, making an individual life an incarnation of the generality. Jean-Paul Sartre, in particular, devotes himself to depicting and delineating the modes of inauthentic behavior and "bad faith" at length, while authenticity itself is defined primarily in negative terms—as the opposite of the inauthentic norm—or in vague evocations of the importance of acting in accordance with one's individual freedom.⁵

This conception of the authentic has been taken up frequently in texts of the postwar era that are concerned with the problem of the individual's relationship to society and mass culture, and the prescription remains essentially the same. Authenticity is consistently conceived as a reaction; to act as an individual is to act in opposition to the surrounding culture. In the fifties and sixties a number of popular writers—David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd* (1953), William Whyte in *The Organization Man* (1956), Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and *One-Dimensional Man* (1964)—made this argument, diagnosing the problem of these American decades as the problem of

individuals who abandon their individuality by identifying themselves with the larger society. Marcuse's work made this point with particular passion. Adapting the Frankfurt School critique of mass culture so as to place the emphasis (literally: look at the italics in the following quote) on the abhorrent loss of individuality, he wrote in *One-Dimensional Man*, "Mass production and mass distribution claim the *entire* individual. . . . The result is not adjustment but *mimesis*: an immediate identification of the individual with *his* society and, through it, with the society as a whole. . . . In this process, the 'inner' dimension of the mind in which opposition to the status quo can take root is whittled down" (10). Like Trilling and the existentialists, these writers saw the problem of inauthenticity as a loss of selfhood, a false consciousness in which the individual subject "finds itself" in the society of which it is a part.⁶ I will be arguing here that noir authenticity is a response not to the crisis of the existential self but rather to a crisis in the national imagination: the "problem" is not that individuals recognize themselves in society, but that they recognize themselves as Americans through their relationship to consumer culture. (That conflation of society and consumerism is itself visible in Marcuse's famous formulation: "People recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split level home, kitchen equipment. The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed" [9].)

Leaving aside for a moment this crucial difference—my analysis of the way that authenticity becomes a cultural and ultimately national concern rather than (only) an existential one—I share with Trilling and the others a structural understanding of authenticity as the desire for something that is perceived to be lost and perhaps unrecoverable. For example, Trilling argues that the texts of modernism are crucial for understanding the problem of individuality in relation to mass culture because of the concerns about the loss of originality that emerge in the era of machines and mass production: "That the word [authenticity] has become part of the moral slang of our day points to the peculiar nature of our fallen condition, our anxiety over the credibility of existence and of individual existences. An eighteenth-century aesthetician states our concern succinctly—'Born Originals,' Edward Young said, 'how comes it to pass that we die Copies?'" (93). The assertion of authenticity, then, is a response to social anxieties about being inauthentic, the fear that one is not an original but rather a copy of the norm dictated by social forces. Alienation is the condition produced by the self so that it can prove to itself that it is not produced by society. From these comments we can extrapolate a first important point: Authenticity is not a thing or a state of being; it is, rather, a desire motivated by a sense that something has been lost, although it is not necessarily a nostalgic desire. As the nonexistent opposite of a reviled "inauthentic," it is the longing for a vaguely defined and perhaps unimaginable state of affairs, the longing for an *elsewhere*.

I will be arguing here that this desire for an elsewhere in noir texts is motivated by the presence—what is experienced in the American postwar era as

the omnipresence—of consumer culture. Authenticity in this context is a reaction against the perception that the commercial principle has introduced artifice into every level of social interaction; it is the longing for an alternative to a national landscape rendered artificial by commerce. Trilling's more traditionally humanistic analysis, like the existential and psychoanalytic sources he draws on, imagines authenticity in terms of the alienated self, which is to say as the opposite of "society." In his brief discussion of Marxian alienation in *Sincerity and Authenticity*, he touches on the role of commerce in the development of modern authenticity. But Trilling reduces Marx's position to a bland humanism, wherein "money . . . is the principle of the inauthentic in human existence" (124), an idea so blithely generalized that Marx and Wordsworth can easily be contained in the same phrase, as in "the great enemy of being was having" (122). His naming of money as the inauthentic opens up the possibility of an inquiry into the role of the capitalist market in defining authenticity, but Trilling himself is ultimately interested in constructing a more general analysis in which commerce plays a supporting role.

But this generalization also suggests the extent to which Trilling sees authenticity as having a political dimension that goes beyond the concerns of the alienated individual. His addition of money to the discussion indicates that his definition of authenticity takes the form of a generalized negative political principle that opposes itself to large organizational systems such as "society" or "the market." As Amanda Anderson notes, Trilling's authenticity is "transgressive"; rejecting "the customary and conventional, authenticity is at heart an oppositional concept, built up out of negations" (*The Way We Argue Now*, 164). Here we can see the emergence of a second key point that builds on the first: as the desire for an elsewhere, authenticity takes the form of an attempt to locate a space or position outside of organizational systems associated with the mainstream or the dominant social or economic order.⁷

If authenticity is always an attempt to posit a space or position outside of some system, then the shape this dynamic takes in postwar America is the noir tradition's assertion of a national identity that is both alternative and central, an "other America" that is outside of and opposed to the capitalist formation that is manifested as a national consumer culture.⁸ To understand the problem of authenticity in this postwar context as more than a problem of the human condition or of the decline of individualism, we need to pursue the concept of commodification as a central element in the organization of consumer culture. It is only when things and experiences are expressed in the monetary language of exchange value, and made available as items in a market, that an economy based on satisfying needs and wants through consumption becomes possible—and only then can authenticity be imagined as the hypothetical outside of that market system. This process is centuries old, and the sense that something crucial about human being and interaction is violated or rendered artificial by processes of exchange and monetization is at least as old as the beginnings of

capitalism. But our current conceptions of commodification and the “consumer society” were shaped in the nineteenth century, and in the American context they are perceived as initiating a crisis in national identity in the middle of the twentieth.

This postwar crisis takes the form of a mutually dependent and evolving tension between authenticity and commodification—one that I will refer to as a dialectic, following Dean MacCannell’s description of “the dialectics of authenticity.” For an analysis of the simulation of authenticity in contemporary culture, I turn now from Trilling to the work MacCannell has done as a scholar of tourism.⁹ The movement from tourism to noir is not as surprising as it might seem at first glance. The experience of watching film noir or reading hard-boiled fiction is itself a kind of tourism, a virtual slumming in which we inhabit an underworld of crime and passion, decadence and vitality, that is generally unavailable and inadvisable in our daily lives. Indeed, MacCannell has written about noir in these terms, describing it as a space that is appealing precisely because no viewer of noir would actually want to live there: “The best way to characterize *noir* sensibility is as ‘false nostalgia’ or ‘constructed nostalgia.’ What is produced is a sense of loss of something that was never possessed, something that never was” (“Democracy’s Turn,” 280). This sense that the thing that noir desires is something it has “constructed” is echoed in the concept of “staged authenticity” that MacCannell discusses in his classic study *The Tourist*.

Although MacCannell’s subject is the way that rituals and events in other places are “staged” for tourists who come looking for the expression of a foreign culture, his analysis of this structure leads him to a more general theory. Staged authenticity, he argues, emerges from the condition of modernity, and what we look for when we travel to other countries is also what we look for at home: “The same process is operating on ‘everyday life’ in modern society, making a ‘production’ and a fetish of urban public street life, rural village life and traditional domestic relations. Modernity is quite literally turning industrial structure inside out as these workaday, ‘real life,’ ‘authentic’ details are woven into the fabric of our modern solidarity alongside the other attractions” (*The Tourist*, 91). In this way, the structure of tourist attractions allows us to reflect not only on our relationship to other cultures but also to our own. MacCannell concludes that the modern world is defined by a “dialectics of authenticity” in which people stage more and more elaborate, “spurious” structures in an effort to reproduce that which is perceived as genuine, and the more these spurious structures grow, the harder they quest for the authentic that seems forever to recede and to elude them.

This dialectics of authenticity is central to my reading of how noir operates, wherein the confrontation with consumer capitalism inspires noir to produce authenticity effects as a response. Given the importance of consumption to this understanding of noir, MacCannell’s analysis is especially pertinent because he