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Book Review

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Mortenson, Erik. *Ambiguous Borderlands: Shadow Imagery in Cold War American Culture*. Erik Mortenson. Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-0-8093-3432-2, p/bk 307 pp. Price: $35.00.

You've just crossed over: *Ambiguous Borderlands* and the shadow of the Cold War.

The eerie shadows that darken your television screen are pricked with uncertain stars, uncertainly seen, overlaid by a refrain of suspense. "You're moving into a land of both shadow and substance," intones a disembodied seer, "of things and ideas. You've just crossed over into the Twilight Zone."

In Erik Mortenson's study, the *Twilight Zone* you're moving into is the netherworld of the shadow, literal and metaphorical, that stretches across the first decades of Cold War America. Rod Serling's morality plays, weekly doses of intensely ironic twists and ethical pronouncements that cut across the grain of their plotlines, provided a way to rethink the binaries of postwar social and political assumptions, a means of widening the boundary between black and white, to refute the starkness of Cold War imperatives.

The *Twilight Zone* made television a new household appliance designed to evoke the uncanny. That uncanny was created by a story in which, at its center, sat a human consciousness made to question itself and the nature of its world. As such, the *Twilight Zone* is, to Erik Mortenson, a great example of the way postwar artists encouraged

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viewers to question Cold War truths and stark boundaries.

To organize the study of such a varied and fecund period in the arts of communication, *Ambiguous Borderlands* employs the trope of the shadow at the height of the Cold War. The various effects of shadow-imagery in postwar America—including its sense of the uncanny—is the theme of Mortenson's examination of a range of literary and visual arts from the mid-1940s to the early 1960s. And he shows how the figure and the symbolism of the shadow was a way for artists "to imagine possibilities outside the confines of Cold War logic" (53). He wants to find "a way of understanding what shadows signify, why they might be useful to writers and artists of the postwar, and why the public might have found this image to be an apt visual metaphor for the sort of issues that affected them daily" (13).

Mortenson sees shadows were everywhere in the Cold War, "and by folding the anxiety they produced back onto their viewers, these Cold War artists used shadows as a liminal space where thinking could continually be rethought" (241). They used shadows as "antidiscourse," that is, "an invitation to deconstruct the complex strands of Cold War thinking" (5). "Shadows, made perfect sense," Mortenson writes, "in a culture obsessively scrutinizing everyone and everything for traces of otherness" (36).

The book walks the boundary and distance between light and darkness in aspects of the 1950s from the rhetorical "dark threat of Communism" to the sinister foreboding within the lighting of film noir. The book is broadly conceived—partly cultural history, partly literary exegesis, partly film criticism—not only its sources, but in its handling of the period. The study draws together many strands. He covers ground from Beck to Paul Strand, Plato to C. Wright Mills. But the book analyzes half a dozen categories of postwar work and imagery: the light-and-shadow in the multi-various depictions of the era's dominant image, the atomic bomb; the character and portrayal of radio's famed Shadow; the atmosphere and effects of later film noir; a powerful "shrouded" figure imagined in common, oddly enough, by Jack Kerouac and Allan Ginsberg; the blurred, ambiguous quality of Robert Frank's 1950s photography; and it culminates in the *Twilight Zone*.

In his chapter on film noir, Mortenson's analyses of *Night of the Hunter*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, and *Touch of Evil* are offered as evidence of

the thesis that Cold-War shadows "both hide and reveal, forcing the viewer to continually revise assumptions and expectations" (173). *Touch of Evil*, then, in this reading, replaces Cold War certainties with ambiguity and "is an attack on binaries in general, binaries that people like [Senator Joseph] McCarthy fostered" (208).

Mortenson employs Freud and Jung to analyze Jack Kerouac's recurring, shadowy, dream-figure, a frightening "shrouded stranger," about whom Kerouac talked with Ginsberg at length over many years. "Kerouac placed his finger squarely on a defining aspect of human consciousness—a negativity within oneself that demands and defies explication" (p. 105). Mortenson sees in the shadowy figure of Kerouac's "negativity" a representation of the culture's fear of atomic annihilation.

The opaqueness of the shadows that cover all these varied works "reminds the viewer that the simple dichotomies between good and bad, light and dark, that Cold War rhetoric attempted to police was a myth" (235) But it's irony that ties everything he considers from atomic bomb to *Twilight Zone*. "The irony of a device that protected its citizens through the threat of world annihilation was not lost on Americans. Sublime enough to inspire awe and dread alike, the bomb was an everpresent force during the Cold War" (3).

The study occasionally oversells its theme, seeing every aspect of postwar America as fitting its perspective, filled with shadows. And the analysis is occasionally too fine-grained to move freely among its many subjects; the pages are occasionally heavy with supporting quotes. And the thesis is reasserted with great frequently. But these criticisms are always a hazard in a book that covers so much ground, an ambitious study that ranges, at the height of the Cold War, across so many and varied mysterious portrayals of a world of ambiguity.