Introduction

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NOIR IS THE NEW BLACK: SHADES OF NOIR IN WORLD LITERATURES

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Noir aesthetics are experiencing a boom in contemporary literature, partly due to the enormous success of American noir, Scandinavian noir and Tartan noir, although this trend is also noticeable in other national literary traditions. Myriam Laurini’s *Qué raro que me llame Guadalupe* (1999), Fred Vargas’ *Pars vite et reviens tard* (2001), Massimo Carlotto’s *L’oscura immensità della morte* (2004) or the Akashic noir series, among others, bear witness to this global phenomenon in which literature, in parallel with the visual arts, continues probing the cultural dimensions of violence. The study of noir presents itself as timelier than ever, as not only do noir texts scrutinize the seemingly ever-increasing problems of violence and social disorder, but in doing so, they also address fundamental questions of identity, politics and gender. This special issue of *FMLS* focuses on noir in a World Literature framework in order to acknowledge the parallel evolution of narrative techniques towards noir aesthetics in what are nevertheless very different literary traditions. Whilst in such a short special issue we cannot hope to address the breadth of World noir, nevertheless we hope to contribute to opening up new axes of comparison between different noir traditions by identifying a series of recurrent characteristics in the studied texts, which are nevertheless manifested in varying ways depending on the socio-political and literary context from which they emerge.

The term ‘World Literatures’ here refers to cultural fictions from different parts of the world which have consciously reached beyond their national borders. Globalization has assisted this expansion, since readers have increasing access to texts from a great variety of locations either in their original language or translated. This special issue aims at showing how authors from the most diverse literary traditions – ranging from France to Galicia, Canada to Africa, England to South America – utilize shades of noir for both aesthetic nuance and political intervention, as they deal with the dialogic relationship between real life and fiction which is illustrative of a reflective and critical attitude towards the new world order. The expression ‘noir
aesthetics’ makes reference to a narrative style that offers a special sensitivity as regards its approach to crime and violence, favouring the adoption of a new consciousness towards cultural politics whilst facilitating the connection between literature and the public sphere. Persistent binaries such as centre vs periphery, power vs resistance, global vs local can be identified amongst the themes and topics explored by the authors in the novels that shape this special issue. Crime, detective or hardboiled fiction are some of the overlapping terms beneath the umbrella of noir which shape the contours of this ever-expanding corpus in contemporary literature, a corpus that engages with the increasing violence in societies which are still trying to adapt to contemporary challenges.

To put the current noir situation in context, it was during the second half of the twentieth century that crime fiction began to be taken as a serious object of academic study, having previously been considered a minor genre. There is a general critical consensus that Edgar Allan Poe’s ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, published in *Graham’s Magazine* in 1841, is a foundational text with its basic plot structure based on the resolution of a crime through rational means. Accordingly, in much of the crime fiction that followed Poe’s inspirational short story there is a murder, a disappearance or a robbery as well as a rational detective who solves the case. The literary figure of the detective was, according to Catherine R. Nickerson, ‘developed in response to the emergence of actual detectives in the middle of the nineteenth century, a period shaped by the tumultuous forces of urbanization, social stratification, geographical mobility and changing gender roles’. Indeed, research on crime fiction usually follows the history of the country from which it springs since, as Christine Matzke and Susanne Mühleisen emphasize, ‘crime fiction, especially of the ‘classical’ clue-puzzle type, has always been a genre with moralising potential’. However, this conventional structure has evolved and shifted into different avenues in recent times to the point that some scholars, such as John Scaggs in his *Crime Fiction* (2005), consider that it has metamorphosed into an unclassifiable genre.

The 175-plus years which have passed since the publication of Poe’s short story have borne witness to how crime and its investigation have moved centre stage in contemporary literature. It was during the interwar period (1918–1939) that the genre became really successful among the general reading public, thanks to the popularity of pulp magazines in the United States such as *Black Mask* (1920–1951). It was in this periodical publication that ‘The False Burton Combs’, by Carroll John Daly, appeared in 1922. This text is considered to be the first American
hardboiled crime story. Lee Horsley highlights the main characteristics of this sub-genre, which features cold-blooded criminals, mystery, *femmes fatales* and a final twist, whilst the narrator reflects on criminality. Horsley argues that American hardboiled fiction signifies a switch from traditional novels as it focuses on the figure of the antihero through the use of criminal protagonists. Thus, there is, broadly speaking, a dichotomy between British and American fiction. During the first half of the twentieth century, British narratives could be defined as detective fiction since they are focused on solving a crime thanks to the diligence of police or amateur sleuth protagonists, whereas American texts merge into crime fiction as they seem more fascinated with the perspective of the criminal. The difference between these two paradigmatic literary traditions relies on reason and logic. Whereas British detective fiction offers a tidy and ingenious resolution to a given crime, American hardboiled fiction concentrates on the impossibility of restoring order. Horsley finds a reason for this change in perspective. In the 1930s in the United States, after the Great Crash of 1929,

as unemployment and poverty worsened, crime fiction increasingly served as a vehicle for protest against an unjust economic and social system; criminal-centred narratives figured the failures of capitalism and developed a range of strategies for challenging, mimicking, and reproaching a society that had ceased to operate in a legitimate way.

Brutal capitalism, thus, is at the core of the problematics illustrated through such fiction. It was also during the interwar period that novels, rather than the short stories published in pulp magazines, started to appear. *Red Harvest* (1929), by Dashiell Hammett, is considered to be the first hardboiled crime novel. Hammett, alongside other precursors of hardboiled literature such as James M. Cain and Raymond Chandler, started his writing career publishing short stories in *Black Mask* magazine. These writers turned their backs on the characteristics of British detective fiction in several ways: by setting their plots in urban locations rather than rural or semi-rural ones; by focusing on criminals rather than on police officers or gentleman sleuths; by trying to mimic the language of the streets rather than using an elevated kind of literary language; and by sidelining the resolution of the crime. For Stanley Orr, this is manifested primarily through the figure of the detective, since
while the classical detective admits otherness into his own person, the hardboiled detective lives up to his moniker by maintaining an ethic of alienated heroism that might guarantee the borders between white domestic subjectivity and exotic otherness.  

In recent years, though, classical configurations have been challenged. As Cathy Steblyk highlights, ‘[t]he classical detective genre […] has reinforced traditionally or restated historical, patriarchal, normalized values, ethics and facts,’ which is an image that is questioned by contemporary authors of crime, detective and hardboiled fiction, who increasingly favour predominantly noir aesthetics. In such aesthetics, patriarchal gender norms may be either challenged or exaggerated, ethical dilemmas proliferate, and clear-cut notions of criminal vs law-abiding dissolve in a nightmarish ethical grey zone. Furthermore, as this special issue aims to show, lower-class protagonists, migrants, transcultural and multicultural subjects, feminist and transgender protagonists have become more visible in noir fiction, offering another layer of complexity and authenticity to the analysis of texts that are now common in global literary traditions. As the resolution of criminal actions carries less and less importance, noir aesthetics become predominantly a lens through which to focus on the decadence of society. Contributors to this collection of essays have identified a trend of using noir aesthetics to illustrate the most obscure side of our times. As pointed out by Scaggs,

[the word ‘noir’, meaning ‘black’, codifies the dark, shadowy atmosphere and setting of hardboiled fiction, which is a clear indicator of the Gothic heritage of crime fiction, and film noir emphasised this ‘darkness’ thematically and through the use of lighting techniques that emphasised or created shadows on the screen.]  

In order to approach the connection between literary noir, and noir in visual culture, we need to focus on the production of both literature and visual arts in the United States. It was in the 1930s when Horsley identifies a definite turn in literature towards noir ‘with its damaged, defeated protagonists and fatalistic downward spiral of events’, causing him to consider that this switch definitely conditioned the appearance of film noir of the American mid-century. Crime, detective and hardboiled fiction, as Scaggs highlights, is paramount to understanding the success of noir aesthetics on screen, if we consider that twenty per cent of film noir thrillers produced between 1941 and 1948 were adaptations of hardboiled fiction, although authors such
as Slavoj Žižek expand beyond detective and hardboiled fiction the influence of noir aesthetics on screen. Moreover, Scaggs considers that ‘the voice-over technique that characterises much film noir is a direct cinematic adaptation of the first-person narrative voice of the majority of hardboiled texts’.

Whilst thus originating in cinema, the term noir has turned universal in contemporary literature in recent years. Orr considers that the noir aesthetic ‘projects a not-too-distant future in which borders, political, geographical, and textual, collapse alongside those of the embodied subject itself’. He also highlights that noir should be considered not so much a reflection on a grim reality as an ideological technique for the generation of reality. If, as a cinematic style, film noir favoured the use of chiaroscuro lighting to generate nihilistic and dark atmospheres, noir fiction is typically determined by its brutal realism and the exoticism of violence present in certain texts as authors try to find a (dubious) light in the darkness. Furthermore, noir aesthetics are inextricably bound to realism. Noir aesthetics have a tendency to emphasize the negative side of society whilst offering a harsh critique of the political and economic affairs that condition contemporary society. As characteristics of noir sensibility, Andrew Pepper cites an unknowable, morally compromised protagonist who is implicated in the sordid world he inhabits, an overwhelming sense of fatalism and bleakness, and a socio-political critique that yields nothing and goes nowhere.

It is not incidental that Pepper’s protagonist is ‘he’, since women protagonists (whether criminals or investigators) continue to be an exception to the norm, perpetuating patterns established in the earlier classic days of crime fiction. Pepper goes on to identify the following as similar thematic and political concerns between filmic and literary noir: ‘the corrosive effects of money, the meaninglessness or absurdity of existence, anxieties about masculinity and the bureaucratization of public life, a fascination with the grotesque and a flirtation with, and rejection of, Freudian psychoanalysis’.

Succinctly then, issues related to subalternity, oppression, hegemonic masculinity, class struggles, globalization and the neoliberal era are paramount to understanding the emergence of noir aesthetics in contemporary literature. The exploration of troubled human psychologies and the development of violent characters challenge the reader to engage with cold-blooded
protagonists who will frequently drive the story towards a completely unexpected dénouement. The primary reason for focusing on the figure of the anti-hero is to explore people’s fears and phobias caused by neoliberal societies in which everything can be commodified, including human lives. In early crime fiction, this began with a portrayal of a

new subjectivity, a new white man, able to withstand the shocks of […] urban transformation [through the exploitation of] the figurative and narrative resources of misogyny – not only to dramatize a tension between traditional and consumer society, but also to displace a more profound racial antagonism from conscious expression.20

Such a figure has now, in this turn towards noir, metamorphosed into a more politically engaged discourse that challenges stereotypes of hegemonic white masculinity. This special issue pushes for the need to reconsider the way in which established paradigms around crime, detective and hardboiled fiction have evolved in recent years, seeking both to engage with and expand upon proposed research avenues whilst having World Literatures at its core.

The current omni-presence of noir aesthetics in crime, detective and hardboiled fiction is a relatively recent phenomenon. As suggested by Pepper:

the term roman noir – literally translated as black novel – was only deployed in relation to a particular kind of American crime fiction as late as the 1980s and, as a term denoting a field of critical study, it has only been operative for about the past twenty years. In a similar fashion, the related label ‘film noir’ did not describe a dedicated cinematic genre, with its own codes and conventions that film-makers self-consciously borrowed from and adapted, but it was coined retrospectively by French critics.21

However, little attention has been paid to the presence of noir aesthetics in other World Literatures, and this special issue aims to juxtapose the Anglo-European traditions with the representation of noir aesthetics in literature and film of other literary traditions. By bringing different traditions into dialogue, this collection of essays will provide fresh and timely insight into some of the most representative debates surrounding the contemporary study of crime, detective and hardboiled fiction. As guest editors, we have gathered a multifaceted collection of contributions in terms of the range of texts considered, some of which are relatively understudied in the field. Our priority is to examine the extent to which different shades of noir manifest
themselves in World Literatures in terms of nation, gender, identity and class; and to explore continuities and idiosyncracies, reproductions or adaptations of noir tropes in distinct spaces through transnational and intercultural approaches, in recognition of the fact that as regards fiction dealing with crime,

[...]he boundaries of the genre have become fuzzier than ever, stretching over a wide range of registers, themes and styles, from pulp fiction to highly literary novels with elements of crime, from cosy mysteries with a sense of closure to fragmented narratives focusing on racial tensions, gender conflicts or the morals of violence.22

The first article in this special issue, “‘Burminggaon? Nottinggaon? Biradforrd?’: British-Asian Noir Depictions of Bradford’ by Claire Chambers (University of York), sets the scene for this approach by focusing on diasporic literature. Chambers examines noir representations of the United Kingdom as a host country for South Asian communities, examining M. Y. Alam’s trilogy Annie Potts is Dead (1998), Kilo (2002) and Red Laal (2012), together with A. A. Dhand’s tetralogy Streets of Darkness (2016), Girl Zero (2017), City of Sinners (2018) and One Way Out (2019). Chambers shows the kinship system evoked by Atia Hosain in her neologism ‘Biradforrd’, a term uttered by one of the British-Punjabi characters of the novels. Her analysis of these texts illustrates how, despite the different religious backgrounds of the authors of these novels, Alam and Dhand are both from the ‘myth of return’ class and portray Bradford’s ghettoized deprivation from the inside by using noir aesthetics.

Moving towards the north of the American continent, Manina Jones (Western University, Ontario) offers ‘Canadian Noir: Consumer Culture, Colonial Nationalism and the Cardinal Series’, a thoroughgoing analysis of Blunt’s John Cardinal. All set in the fictional northern Ontario community of Algonquin Bay, reminiscent of the real-life North Bay, the series has been adapted for television. In this article, Jones is interested in connecting literature and visual arts by examining the way in which noir is generated through the cross-fertilization of verbal and visual aesthetics. Both in text and on screen, Canadian culture appears to struggle to adapt itself to the transnational aesthetics of noir, evoking its US roots in hardboiled fiction and film. As Jones shows, the texts under analysis illustrate the tensions of modernity in a context dominated by a distinctive multicultural background.
In ‘Galician Noir: Diego Ameixeiras, from Parody to Social Critique’, Javier Rivero Grandoso (Universidad de La Laguna, Spain) analyses two novels by one of the most renowned contemporary authors in the Galician language. *Baixo mínimos* (2004) and *A noite enriba* (2015) are the two texts used to illustrate the structural and aesthetic evolution that can be noted in Ameixeiras’s fiction. The article also provides an overview of Galician literature in the last few decades, focusing on the importance of crime and detective fiction. Rivero Grandoso considers that, whereas *Baixo mínimos* follows a series of stereotypes of the American hardboiled tradition through the use of parody and humour, *A noite enriba* engages with social problems by turning the tone of the narration into a more sophisticated and politically engaged discourse.

In the next article, Thibaut Raboin (University College London) turns this analysis of noir aesthetics in World Literatures towards French literature beyond the much-studied metropolis, focusing specifically on the representation of the Lorraine region. The deindustrialization of this area, once known for its rich manufacturing history, has as a backdrop one of the most shocking mutations of post-industrial scenery and economic models. As Raboin illustrates in his article “Le Feu est de retour dans la vallée”: The Noir Landscapes of Deindustrialization in Lorraine’, noir tales set in the region are paradigmatic of the social problems arising from this phenomenon. Raboin examines what noir aesthetics do to these landscapes through the scrutiny of novels by five different French authors. These texts turn unemployment into crime and factories into crime scenes. The wasteland that deindustrialization leaves behind is illustrative of how noir genre conventions allow fiction to critique brutal capitalism, above all in relation to racism and optimism.

Sam Naidu (Rhodes University, South Africa) presents “‘That Ever-Blurry Line Between Us and the Criminals’: African Noir and the Ambiguity of Justice in Mukoma wa Ngugi’s *Black Star Nairobi* (2013) and Leye Adenle’s *When Trouble Sleeps* (2018)’, highlighting the intertextual and intercultural connection between British and North American traditions and African literature. Postcolonial theory serves the author as a framework for analysing Mukoma Wa Ngugi’s novel *Black Star Nairobi* (2013) and Leye Adenle’s *When Trouble Sleeps* (2018), two texts that exemplify the way in which socio-political justice, ontological and existential dilemmas, aesthetic concerns, and the epistemological quest are rendered as ambiguous and murky. The article focuses on demonstrating that the chiaroscuro effect of African noir is not so much a ‘dark’ sensibility as it is one of abstruseness and poignant Afro-pessimism.
Finally, in ‘Moronga, by Ignacio Castellanos Moya, and the Diversions of Latin American Noir’, Carmen Luna Sellés (Universidade de Vigo, Spain) takes the final step of this journey through shades of noir in world literatures by focusing on the latest novel by this Honduran-born, Salvadoran-naturalized and U.S.-based author. The article explores the evolution of noir aesthetics in Latin American crime fiction, a genre that is undergoing a literary boom due to the huge success of authors such as Claudia Piñeiro, Jorge Fernández Díaz, Paco Ignacio Taibo II, Iris García or Leonardo Padura. In Moronga, Castellanos Moya utilizes, in a non-traditional way, resources characteristic of the American hardboiled tradition in order to explore the social and ideological conditionings of contemporary corruption and state violence in the American continent. Castellanos Moya’s essayistic production also serves Luna Sellés to address some of the main concerns raised by the author in this novel, a text conceived as a literary response to some of the main conundrums of the new world order.

The six essays that shape this special issue take the reader on an eye-opening and thought-provoking journey across a range of World Literatures. The essays encompass various locations and time periods, bringing fresh insight into the textual renderings of both canonical and lesser-known cultural producers whose work correlates with distinct manifestations of noir aesthetics.

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NOTES

1 Some of the names that appear in this introduction, such as the Americans Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain or Raymond Chandler, have deeply inspired authors from diverse other literary traditions. Although Maj Sjöwell or Per Wahlöö are usually considered to be precursors of Scandinavian Noir, it was not until the publication of Stieg Larsson’s Millennium trilogy (2005–07) that this sub-genre became world-famous. Similarly, Tartan Noir is now treated as one of the most influential forms of crime fiction thanks to the works of Ian Rankin, Christopher Brookmyre or Val McDermid, amongst others.

2 In their book Combined and Uneven Development. Towards a New Theory of World-Literature (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), the Warwick Research Collective refer to World Literature as ‘what happens to comparative literature when [...] it “goes global”’ (5), since they consider the term ‘an extension of comparative literature’, which ‘might be understood as the remaking of comparative literature after the multicultural debates and the disciplinary critique of Eurocentrism’ (4; emphasis in the original).

3 In Alex Martín Escribá and Javier Sánchez Zárate, ‘Introducción’, in La (re)invención del género negro, ed. by Alex Martín Escribá and Javier Sánchez Zárate (Santiago de Compostela: Andavira, 2014), pp. 17–18.


8 Ibid., p. 338.

9 Scaggs, Crime Fiction, pp. 50–56.

INTRODUCTION