

## FROM CRIME FICTION TO NOIR NEW HISTORICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

### 1) GENERAL ISSUES

#### 1.1 Problems of definition

“The noir genre, by constitution, is not a genre in the classical meaning, it's something different, maybe something more. In this lies its strength and its life.”

(Pasquale Pedè)

“Noir is not a genre. It's a color, a state of mind, a sensation. More than indicating a specific genre, it refers to a general tone, a series of motives, a group of sub-genres.”

(Giorgio Gosetti)

“Noir is like mercury, it multiplies at every attempt to finally catch its essence.”

(Leonardo Gandini)

The term “noir” is usually used to define a tendency that crosses different kinds of genres and it is not based on a poster nor a precise program.

At the end, in a detective novel, or in a classical one, the forces of good and reason, represented by the detective, always prevail over evil when the author of the crime is found and brought to justice. Therefore, the novel has its rules: it obeys the norm that wants it to be a narration, which, by the use of reason, reconstructs the mechanisms of the murder (or of crime in general); it requires the detection of crime and it needs heroes and antiheroes, with well-defined roles. At the end, a sort of positivism brings order out of chaos. The splintered reality comes back to its harmony made of truth and justice. Therefore, the detective story is a postponed drama, a work of fiction. The narrative tension is not left to facts but to the mental process that leads the investigator to solve the mystery.

On the other hand, in the noir genre, the narration seems to be focused on the discovery of the causes of crime, the context in which it has matured and the social or psychological elements that

have generated it. Noir recalls everything obscure and murky that can be found in human nature and which pushes us to commit criminal actions. The detective himself becomes part of the storyline not as an executioner who represents truth, justice and infallibility, but as a person who can make mistakes and is subject to emotions. Someone who is the direct protagonist of the events.

Tzvetan Todorov in “The Poetic of Prose” (1971) claims that “The ‘dark’ genre subverts the dual structure of the classic detective novels”. Crime and inquiry come to merge together, and the mystery assumes a subordinated function, which is no longer the main one. In fact, in noir fiction the boundaries of evil and good can mix or become blurred, ambiguous and confusing. This genre refuses a binding structure and a happy ending is not to be taken for granted. The focus on the future is replaced by a focus on the past, and it is not necessary to reassure the reader through the identification of the guilty. Instead, the reader is led to a horrifying, disturbing and distressing reality, despite his or her tendency to avoid it. Its DNA is similar to that of detective novels. They are contiguous, identical at first glance, but profoundly different.

“In the traditional detective story the crime is an exceptional event which suddenly alters the established social order. On the other hand, noir has a narrative characterized by disillusion, lost innocence and unreachable salvation.”

(Pasquale Pede)

Therefore, with an easy sociology we could say that the detective novel tends to move forward to a positive social effect (in order to reassure the reader of the functioning of the rules of order); whilst so-called “noir” is located in a dimension of political negation of the value of “collectivity” and refuses the proposition of any solution to the conflict between subject and society that is staged in its most extreme form, precisely that of the gratuitous act.

Evil does not lie somewhere else, but builds its nest in the darkest side of apparent normality, it continually tries to find a place in history, as well as in that of society. For obscure reasons it cannot act in first person; therefore, it is forced to find the instruments that can allow it to impose its obscure plan. Evil is cunning, it knows better than anyone else how to act vicariously, and human beings, along with their pettiness, their hatred, their envy, their thirst for money and power, are usually its favorite choice.

“Hell is other people” wrote Sartre in “No Exit”. “Hell is oneself” declared Eliot in “Cocktail Party”. Symbolically, these two definitions could be adopted as an indicator of the different perspective between crime fiction and noir.

## **2) HISTORICAL TRAITS**

### **2.1 The ancestors of noir: from crime fiction to the detective story**

In “Le roman policier” (1998), author Yves Reuter claims that this literary genre can be divided into three categories: enigma-novel, noir, and suspense. The main characteristic of the noir sub-genre is that the reader finds himself in an inner perspective, in media res, in the middle of things, therefore he knows the story as if he were one of its characters. The point of view of the narrator, the investigator, and the reader could fit together neatly.

The origins of noir and of its very closest ancestor, the detective-novel, are the source of many discussions and arguments. Reuter's hypothesis is one of the many that try to retrace points of contrast and common topics. In reality, it is difficult to retrace an univocal and precise definition of the meaning of both, even among lovers of this genre. We can concur with those who claim that this unclear classification is due to the many elements that form a novel.

To discover the origin of “noir”, some trace back to the English novels of the late XVIII century, defined “black” because of their terrifyingly evil characters, the victims of their conspiracies, and their huge and very ancient castles filled with mysteries and hauntings. It is an adventurous tradition from which the so-called thrillers or spine-chillers came from. In continuation from this genre we find the detective novel, where the main roles are held by the criminal deed and the technique used by the detective to discover the rascal.

The detective genre was born in the XIX century, when each state started to create modern police organizations to fight crime (or to repress any threat to the established order).

The unquestioned father of the modern detective novel is without doubt Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), American poet and writer. In his stories, along with the amateur detective Dupin, the narrative technique of a detective novel takes its characteristic shape: the crime, the detailed description of the inquiry and, lastly, the solution to the mystery (almost always in an unpredictable and unexpected way). Therefore, the rational procedure is the privileged element of the drama. The greatness of Poe lies in his ability to transform the detection into narrative material.

The British writer Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), is considered Poe's heir and pupil. His great creation, Sherlock Holmes (and his loyal Dr. Watson), stands as the prototype of the scientific and analytical detective, endowed with an unerring rigorous logic. Holmes makes this genre popular and definitely can be considered the absolute champion of the science of detection.

“Holmes is not only an infallible hound, a champion of positivistic rationality. [...] With Holmes the detective becomes one of the most emblematic heroes of the 20th-century epic, the Ulysses of the city.”

(Pasquale Pede)

Although in “A Study in Scarlet” (1889), Holmes says that “Dupin was a very inferior fellow”, Sir Conan Doyle acknowledges his debt toward the American writer.

“Poe was the father of the detective tale. Dupin is the best detective in fiction. Dupin is unrivalled.”

(Sir Arthur Conan Doyle)

Also Valery, Benjamin, Eliot and Borges agree with him.

Among the greatest writers of the XX century we must mention Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936) and Agatha Christie (Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller, 1890- 1976).

## 2.2 “Black Mask” and the hard-boiled school

“The explosion of the present noir is nothing more than the qualitative and quantitative expansion of the hard-boiled tradition.”

(Pasquale Pede)

In the '20s in the U.S.A., on the pages of the magazine “Black Mask”, some writers tried to renew detective stories popular until that time. After, the later-defined *hard-boiled* school came to life.

Dashiell Hammett (1894-1961) is unanimously considered the father of this new literary genre, a sort of back bone of the later “noir”. This tradition breaks the schemes of the supposed enigma-detective book, since the detective novel becomes first of all a novel of strong realistic instances.

“Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; [...] He put these people down on paper as they are, and he made them talk and think in the language they customarily used for these purposes.”

(Raymond Chandler)

The faith in science, the rational and analytical way of thinking and the detection cannot naively rely on these values. The inquiry procedure based on logic is no longer enough. Now the main qualities are knowing how to follow tracks, having the strength to keep going even if the situation is not one of the best and, most importantly, knowing the territory in which you live. Furthermore, violence, deeply set in the American culture, also becomes an integral part of the event, just as crime is an integral part of society. Therefore, its solution becomes secondary, almost deceitful: the

detection can be missed because no longer necessary.

“It is not funny that a man should be killed, but it is sometimes funny that he should be killed for so little, and that his death should be the coin of what we call civilization.”

(Raymond Chandler)

The psychological dynamics of the characters stand out, especially that of the protagonist, the tough boy, solitary and disillusioned, cynical and individualist, sharp and sadistic, romantic but not sentimental, hard working even if always down and out, who does not put up with the official rules, but with an irreproachable aestheticism.

The main common element is the presence of the city, the dark city, rainy and corrupted, cold and nocturne, never cozy but always a safe place, ominous but also bright, brazen and greedy, a negation of identity and a place without a history, nearly abstract.

“Of this realization of a great city itself as something wild and obvious the detective story is certainly the Iliad.”

(Gilbert Keith Chesterton)

Raymond Chandler (1888-1959) is another very important exponent of this tradition. He's the creator of the cunning private investigator Philip Marlowe, who distances himself from his successful colleagues of the past. Chandler has him say “I'm not Sherlock Holmes or Philo Vance. I don't expect to go over ground the police have covered and pick up a broken pen point and build a case from it” (“The Big Sleep” - 1939).

The extraordinary popularity of Marlowe is also due to the success of the movie and to the great performance of the American actor Humphrey Bogart, who is destined to become the legend of this genre.

### **2.3 The Emergence of Noir Films.**

The term “noir” is used more and more by some French critics to define a phase of the American Detective movies (between the beginning of the '40s and the end of the '50s). Again in France and during the same period, the publisher Gallimard inaugurates the “Série Noir”, publishing the first American hard-boiled novels.

“The variety is native to the United States, but the winemaking is basically French.”

(Pasquale Pede)

The most revolutionary movie, the one which transformed the detective genre, is “The Maltese Falcon” (1941), based on the homonymous novel by Dashiell Hammet. Later on defined as “the greatest detective film ever made” (Ottoson) and “the closer one to the ideal result” (Chandler), reached a remarkable success with a low budget, waiting for the audience to become accustomed to the new taste and being able to appreciate it. In fact, many scenes are filmed inside interiors, few are the characters, nearly inexistent the walk-on-parts, and the actor is at the end of his career (Bogart) and directed by a beginner director (Huston).

The main problem in the movies is no longer finding out the one who committed the crime. The only thing that matters is the enigma represented by the psychology of the characters. The script is loyal not only to the novel but also to the mood of Hammet, as well as the many dialogues emphasized by the keen editing. The cast is extraordinary, Bogart's acting is perfect, almost as if he were the character himself, and becomes the legend of the new hard-boiled. Even if it is accused of intellectualism (absurds characters absurdly chase an absurd object) it is a milestone of the new detective tradition.

“These kind of movies made the characters of the ordinary detective films seem like puppets.”

(Nino Frank)

### **3) THE EUROPEAN TENDENCY**

#### **3.1 The Cultural Basis**

We could start from the fact that the noir novel is not a North American literary creation, heir of many aspects of the “lost generation” that marked, together with Joyce and Kafka, the renewal of the novel in the XX century. Dos Passos, Steinbeck, Hemingway and, in a certain measure, Faulkner, were those who opened the way to a new narrative style characterized by a directive tone with an external focus, a style that takes in great consideration the characters and the dialogues that have radically changed the language, through detailed descriptions reduced to the essential, more syntactic flexibility, a realistic and critical manner of posing problems, not free of parodistic problems. The inclination of this new genre toward a crime-novel of popular bias, supported by the cinema and by the so-called pulps, generated the noir novel, that was immediately labeled as an inferior genre and which received a good recognition only in France.

In numerous cases, the cultural base finds its roots in the Age of Enlightenment and in the classical novelists of the XIX century, especially Balzac and Dostoevsky. On it, it is sketched the project for a noir-novel able to set up a narrative model capable of describing the chaos of a society crushed by the narrow relation between politics and crime, the super capitalistic competitiveness (inherited from the great North American capitalism), the almightiness of money as a degrading factor for society, the double moral and the maneuvers, that make justice a mere machine capable of producing only alienating laws and a leviathan fed by the money of everyone simply for the benefit of those who know and control the whole mechanism.

For these reasons, in Europe, there is the habit of considering a noir novel an excellent investigative instrument for examining social transformations, a literary and political formula to emphasize the new trends of organized crime, of corruption and of the socio-political decay that takes place, day after day, in every field of activity (as well as in the streets). In this way, the faith in the genre as some sort of sociological magnifying glass seems indestructible.

“There is no better way of shining a light on society than to resort to the *roman noir*. Every society reaps the whirlwind of its crimes it deserves and, in this respect, we decide our own destiny.”

(Val McDermid)

“No matter what I write I want to emphasize my opinion on what happens in our world, because there are many things that scares me.”

(Henning Mankell)

### **3.2 The Anglo-Saxon Model**

British noir, more episodic and uneven compared to the great American literature, configures itself as a cross-genre with undefined boundaries. All this kind of literature seems to be very tied to the mystery novel, or mystery thriller.

Among its authors we find world-famous ones such as Ian Rankin, Ruth Rendell, P.D. James, Denise Mina, Philip Kerr, Val McDermid and William McIllvanney.

### **3.3 France: The Roman Polar**

French noir presents a production of black imagery comparable to the Anglo-American one but with the disadvantage of a market linguistically not as extensive. The

polar highlights politics and the topics that touch the raw nerves of society, such as the Nazi collaborationism and the revolts in Algeria. It reflects on the problems of identity, it wonders about who lives in its metropolitan area and on the contradictions and conflicts which characterize it.

Among the most important authors we find Léo Malet, Jean Patrick Manchette, Didier Daenincks, Hervé Prudon, Auguste Le Breton and Jean Claude Izzo.

### **3.4 The Scandinavian Miracle**

The Scandinavian peninsula has been prolific, for what concerns the publication of noir novels, since the beginning of the XX century. The ultimate rebirth of crime fiction takes place with the ten novels written by the Swedish couple Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahloo, from 1965 to 1975.

Nowadays, a large number of successful Scandinavian writers – such as Henning Mankell or Stieg Larsson – write imitating the style of Sjöwall and Wahloo, or usually adopt a private detective or a journalist as their main character.

## **4) THE ITALIAN CASE**

### **4.1 Popular Origins**

In the summer of 1929, publisher Mondadori launched the first detective series called “I libri gialli” (“The Yellow Books”) in Italy. According to some, the choice of this name was inspired by the English expression “yellow back”, used to indicate the popular novel. Others say that it simply comes from the characteristic yellow cover.

In fact, other series of that period also took their names from the color or from a particular drawing on the cover: starting from the “Libri verdi” (“The Green Books”) to the “Libri azzurri” (“The Blue Books”), and again from the “Libri della palma” (“The Palm Tree Books”) to the “Libri della Medusa” (“The Medusa Books”). On the Yellow Book covers we could find the motto “this book won't let you sleep”. The circulation of the first volumes (in the '30s and the '40s) stands at half a million copies (a considerable amount for that period), but some books surpassed the million mark.

Since the beginning, the “yellow book” stood out as a new and important element in Italian literature: a successful and long lasting publishing event. The first published title was “La strana morte di Mr. Benson” (“The Benson Murder Case”) by the American writer S.S. Van Dine (1888-1939), whose real name was Wright, the creator of the famous, aristocratic, well-educated and



refined detective Philo Vance. After him we find Edgar Wallace, Robert L. Stevenson, Edgar Allan Poe, Agatha Christie, Ellery Queen, Georges Simenon and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

At that time it was easy to note, among many foreign authors, the absence of an Italian writer. To find one, a successful one, we have to wait for quite a long while. Under Fascism, the publishers did everything they could to obey the Fascist cultural policy which imposed them to publish some Italian writers along with the many foreign writers. Thus begins the “confection” created to break the Anglo-Saxon crime-novel canon and the one that tried to move its national and traditional literature forward.

The Italian “yellow-book” was officially born in 1931 with the publishing of “Il sette bello”, by Alessandro Varaldo (1879-1953), in the series “I gialli Mondadori” (volume XXI). And with this publication was also born the first and authentic Italian detective, Ascanio Bonichi. The Italian crime novel took its first steps oscillating, with regard to foreign classics, between diversity and imitation. If Varaldo stakes all on the “Italianization” of the genre, Ezio D'Errico (1892-1972) follows the tracks of Simenon's Maigret creating the investigator Emilio Richard and placing him in Paris. With the journalist Augusto De Angelis (1888-1944) the stories return to being strictly Italian.

The production of detective novels increases after the initial success, and with them the number of the authors. The experiments emphasize the influence produced by crime fiction on the readers and on the publishers. But soon Fascist censorship hits even the crime novel, marking its death.

The authors and their works resurrect after the war, but the detective novel becomes a novel designed for adults only. The new American production, even if profoundly different, is placed side by side with the classic thriller, which was based on the narrative mechanism of rational investigation and where good triumphed over evil. The crime scene is the metropolis and the story unfolds in a mixture made of action, violence and sex. The investigator himself is more of an avenger than a law officer, because he often makes use of techniques and weapons similar to those used by the outlaws. Many Italian authors swung between imitation and experimentation, but without great success.

The Italian “yellow book” is not dead. For its revival, and to finally establish its credentials we have to wait until George Scerbanenco (1911-1969). With Duke Lamberti, a young doctor sentenced to prison for practicing euthanasia who later becomes a skilled private investigator, Scerbanenco clears this literary genre through customs, leading it to success.

## 4.2 What does “noir” mean?

The definition of noir is a capital problem. In the Italian scenario, the use of this term continues to be very particular and differs from the use made of it in France, America, and England. In the year 2000, this term replaced the French one for the first time (“Storia del noir”, by Giovannini) and is now widely used by newspapers, television, critics and even by writers to define the books where there is a mystery, a detective and a murder.

Noir, in the meaning used in other European countries or America, refers to a particular kind of story, character, style of writing and film-making which is very different from the police novel, from the detective story, from the inquiry based on evidence, from the classic model built on the solving of the crime, where the investigator seeks evidence and at the end of a journey discovers the guilty and hands him over to justice, re-establishing the order broken at the beginning of the narration of the crime. This is the police-novel: the genre that in Italy has been called "giallo" (yellow).

The closed-mindedness of the old dominant culture towards the genres according to which literature with a capital ‘L’ and a popular literature existed, to be looked at as secondary and substantially less interesting, in some way affected the entire course of the analysis and consideration of noir. That is why it was necessary to “dignify” this kind of writing with a different word, “noir”, to describe anything that is “yellow”. It's sufficient for a novel to have a crime, a policeman, a detective and some blood, to be defined as “noir”, as if it were “chic”, because it upgrades a piece of writing that would otherwise be snubbed.

In fact, in Italy the so-called “yellow book” was considered a “consumer product” and therefore it wasn't the subject of university studies, in contrast to what happened in other countries. Vice versa, this literary and cinematographic phenomenon has left a mark so strong in our modern culture that it is truly hard to believe that the University has left it out for so long or that it needs an excuse to be the subject of study. It is the same old problem of prejudice against genres. Therefore, the use of the term noir is distorted by the bizarre need to legitimate genres, simply by using a label which does not describe their actual content.

## **5) FUTURE PROSPECTS**

### **5.1 The mirror and the product of society**

Noir is far from disappearing, for a very simple reason: it represents the mirror of our society, a sort of telescope pointed at the world that describes it in a precise moment in history, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses. It tells how people behave, how they live, what their habits, desires and fears are. To sum up, their real lives. It is the darkest side, of course, but this doesn't mean the least important one. This is the reason why the public is so attracted to it. In addition to voyeurism, morbidity, curiosity, and perhaps even out of some kind of egotism, we all want to hear about ourselves, to be somehow protagonists. In this sense, the media only amplify feelings of fear and loss simply because the product sells.

Contemporary noir also plays a definite critical role: it describes, and therefore exorcises, our fears. In fact today, more than in the past, the writer must be a careful and implacable witness of the state of degradation of society, because it is precisely from this that he draws his inspiration. The lifeblood of the so-called "dark" stories that we read is precisely dictated by those principles which seem to no longer work, that can be corrupted. The noir author places himself and proliferates right where he finds a crack in the structure: he tells and shows the rawest aspects of the world around us, often turning himself into a megaphone of social protest.

In 1989, Laura Grimaldi had prophesied "noir literature is in excellent health and, if it is legitimate to predict, it will be the literature of the future." Over twenty years later, would anyone dare to prove her wrong?

## APPENDIX

“This young gentleman was of an excellent --indeed of an illustrious family, but, by a variety of untoward events, had been reduced to such poverty that the energy of his character succumbed beneath it, and he ceased to bestir himself in the world, or to care for the retrieval of his fortunes. By courtesy of his creditors, there still remained in his possession a small remnant of his patrimony; and, upon the income arising from this, he managed, by means of a rigorous economy, to procure the necessaries of life, without troubling himself about its superfluities. Books, indeed, were his sole luxuries, and in Paris these are easily obtained.”

(The Murders in the Rue Morgue)

“There was not a particle of charlatanerie about Dupin.”

(The Murders in the Rue Morgue)

“His very person and appearance were such as to strike the attention of the most casual observer. In height he was rather over six feet, and so excessively lean that he seemed to be considerably taller. His eyes were sharp and piercing, save during those intervals of torpor to which I have alluded; and his thin, hawk-like nose gave his whole expression an air of alertness and decision. His chin, too, had the prominence and squareness which mark the man of determination. His hands were invariably blotted with ink and stained with chemicals, yet he was possessed of extraordinary delicacy of touch, as I frequently had occasion to observe when I watched him manipulating his fragile philosophical instruments.”

(A Study in Scarlet)

“When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth.”

(The Sign of Four)

“Sherlock Holmes took his bottle from the corner of the mantelpiece and his hypodermic syringe from its neat morocco case. With his long, white, nervous fingers he adjusted the delicate needle and rolled back his left shirt-cuff. For some little time his eyes rested thoughtfully upon the

sinewy forearm and wrist, all dotted and scarred with innumerable puncture-marks. Finally, he thrust the sharp point home, pressed down the tiny piston, and sank back into the velvet-lined armchair with a long sigh of satisfaction.”

(The Sign of Four)

“He possessed two out of the three qualities necessary for the ideal detective. He has the power of observation and that of deduction. He is only wanting in knowledge, and that may come in time.”

(The Sign of Four)

“You know my method. It is founded upon the observation of trifles.”

(The Boscombe Valley Mystery)

“There is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact.”

(The Boscombe Valley Mystery)

“Never trust to general impressions, my boy, but concentrate yourself upon details.”

(A Case of Identity)

“It is of the highest importance in the art of detection to be able to recognize, out of a number of facts, which are incidental and which vital.”

(The Reigate Squires)

“Samuel Spade’s jaw was long and bony, his chin a jutting v under the more flexible v of his mouth. His nostrils curved back to make another, smaller v. His yellow-grey eyes were horizontal. The v motif was picked up again by thickish brows rising outward from twin creases above a hooked nose, and his pale brown hair grew down-from high flat temples-in a point on his forehead. He looked rather pleasantly like a blonde Satan.”

(The Maltese Falcon)

“I’m not Christ, I can’t work miracles out of thin air.”

(The Maltese Falcon)

“My way of learning is to heave a wild and unpredictable monkey-wrench into the machinery.”

(The Maltese Falcon)

“I know what I'm saying. I've been here before and I'll be here again. It doesn't matter what I want, at the end I always have to send everybody to hell, from the supreme court to the last rascal, and, nevertheless, I always get away with it. I get away with it because I keep in mind that at the end there's always a final showdown. I mean that I never forget that when it comes I've got to show up at the office pulling some criminal by the arm and announce: “Here's your criminal, my good friends”. When I do that, and if I do that, I can put my thumb to my nose and wiggle my fingers at every single law. The one time I don't, I get in trouble.”

(The Maltese Falcon)

“The chitchat doesn't change a damn thing. I don't care about who loves who. I'm not gonna save your ass. I can't help you anymore. Even if I could I wouldn't.”

(The Maltese Falcon)

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Doyle, Arthur Conan, *The Complete Stories of Sherlock Holmes*, Ware, Hertfordshire, 2007.
- Fabbri, M. Resegotti (a cura di), E. *I colori del nero. Cinema, letteratura, noir*, Mystfest, Ubulibri, Milano, 1989.
- Hammet, D. *Il falcone maltese*, Mondadori, Milano, 2009.
- Hammet, D. *The Maltese Falcon*, London, 2002.
- Hitchcock, A. *La donna che visse due volte (Vertigo)*, 1958.
- Huston, J. *Il mistero del falco (The Maltese Falcon)*, 1941.
- Pede, P. *Le radici del noir fra cinema e letteratura*, Fondazione Rossellini, Senigallia, 2009.
- Pezzella, M. Tricomi (a cura di), A. *I fantasmi del moderno. Temi e figure del cinema noir*, Cattedrale, Ancona, 2010.
- Poe, E. A. *I racconti*, Einaudi, Torino, 2009.