

# BEYOND THE NIGHT, AMERICAN NOIR (1940-1950) BETWEEN LITERATURE AND CINEMA

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Here we propose some considerations by **Beatrice Balsamo**, psychoanalyst and noir expert, author of *Hitchcock. Il volto e la cosa* (2010), and coordinator of the exhibition that was held in Bologna (February-March 2016) in which, among the others, writer Valerio Varesi took part. The APUN Association promoted this exhibition approaching the subject in contemporaneity: the noir genre, in fact, allows us to inquire into the shadowy aspects of our lives, and legality as their symbolic boundaries.

We can trace the beginning of American noir back to Dashiell Hammett's writing and to John Huston's film *The Maltese Falcon* (U.S.A. 1941, int. Humphrey Bogart, Peter Lorre, Mary Astor, Gladys George). The characteristics of noir delineate a world in which shadows thicken and steal ground from the light, appearances often hide very different realities, and anguish and nightmares cause internal conflict in its characters, who no longer have any control over themselves. This genre blossoms in the 40s and is long-lived in the history of cinema; films of this genre present a hero who no longer dominates events, and if he does, it is only after having questioned many of his initial certainties. In those years, Freudian ethic took hold, reminding us of the necessity to take a qualitative leap out of innocence into adulthood. It is in this context that noir takes shape, influenced by the dry hard-boiled narrative and by the need to rethink the connection with reality (it is not by chance that, in Hollywood, noir films promoted the practice of shooting on location, to avoid the over-controlled aesthetics of studios and leave way to the harder and "dirtier" concreteness of filming on city streets). Even the acting becomes more nervous and realistic, putting aside traditional acting techniques and "theatrical" influences in favor of more realistic language and more natural acting. This defined two new cinematographic characters: the private detective, who bears the burden of a past full of disappointment yet refuses give up when facing the world's immorality and irrationality; and the dark lady, the charming temptress. The hero and the heroine of noir cinema discover that they have to deal with what they had "put aside": their deepest urges, their uncontrollable passions. The relationship between present and past becomes complex. The increasing number of flashbacks reminds the spectator that the choices of the past affect the actions of today in a way that is not simply cause and effect. The past seems to be a burden that makes the present less and less clear and decipherable, just as the camera focuses on the characters in a more complex and more mysterious urban setting. The shadows, mists, dark corners, and hazy images multiply. Even the dialogue is no longer indispensable in following the plot since it is often deceiving or misleading. The characters' vicissitudes lose direction; they lose themselves in labyrinths, not only real ones, but often metaphorical mazes that allude to the most secret vices: greed, jealousy, hate, the envy that drives people. Through this journey, the spectator will face the darkest depths of the human soul. This is expressed through a radical change in narrative through subjective shooting, a more decisive use of off-camera dialogue, of short and even shorter shots that deform images, and on the screen give shape to subconscious torments and fears. The reflections that are stirred by the noir genre, in our opinion, are of particular significance in understanding our present as well.

A. C.