

Voyeurism, Anxiety, and the Persistence of Trauma: Diversifying Film Noir in European Cinema

Thorsten Carstensen

New York

Abstract:

Following up on his 2002 book *Film Noir*—considered mandatory reading for every student of Hollywood cinema—Andrew Spicer impresses his readers with *European Film Noir*, a wide-ranging collection of essays by internationally renowned film scholars. The volume is as enlightening as it is accessible, mapping out a territory of films that are usually obscured by their more famous American counterparts. The book's significance to the field of film studies is twofold. Not only do the essays in this volume carve out the distinctive noir strains in French, British, German, Spanish and Italian cinemas, they also advance an updated understanding of film noir as both a cinematic legacy and an idea that critics have projected onto the past. One of the book's most compelling insights concerns the fact that European film noir was largely shaped by a common need to work through the traumatic experience of war.

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In the mainstream tradition, critics and scholars have focused on film noir as a distinctly American cultural preoccupation. Typically revolving around an unstable male hero desperately struggling to make sense of a seedy urban world in which blonde femmes fatales and sleazy private investigators face each other on the rain-slicked pavements of main-street America, Hollywood noir continues to fascinate viewers on both sides of the Atlantic. Independent cinemas in New York, Paris or Berlin attract enthusiastic crowds with reruns of canonical films such as *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *The Big Heat* (1953). While American noir, with its pessimism towards the American Dream and critique of an increasingly affluent as well as sexually and racially oppressive society, has always been a popular topic among film scholars, European variations of the genre have mostly been treated as curious but negligible relatives. Thematic and stylistic similarities notwithstanding, European noir simply did not seem to occupy the same cinematic world as Humphrey Bogart's private eye. Andrew Spicer's diverse essay collection *European Film Noir* thus constitutes a significant contribution to the field: it is the first—and to date, the only—comprehensive work to finally dispose of the persistent academic cliché that film noir is a self-contained meditation on the American psyche. Treating noir "as a transnational cultural phenomenon" (p. 1), the contributors succeed in reclaiming its proud European tradition.

French noir, starting with early adaptations of George Simenon's novels in the 1930s and stretching through the early 1970s, is arguably the most widely recognised film noir outside America. Humble characters in gloomy working-class surroundings embody the poetic realism of films such as *Le Quai des brumes* (1938) and *Le Jour se lève* (1939). As Ginette Vincendeau points out, these films presented pessimistic tales of male heroes embroiled in existential struggles by engaging in "social voyeurism" (p. 25) rather than focusing on action, suspense, and violence. Noting that French censorship codes allowed for greater moral ambiguity than possible within the constraints of Hollywood's Hays Code, the author contends that the orientation of genuine French noir, with its penchant for dystopias, was social rather than generic. In France, the genre culminated in the 1960s with Jean-Pierre Melville's sombre crime stories. Not only did these films sidestep the conventions of the gangster narrative, but they also re-

versed "the aesthetic glamour and emotional excitement" (p. 45-46) which Hollywood directors had established as a trademark of noir. Given the ironic and self-reflexive nature of Melville's thriller *Le Doulos* (1963), a key example of French New Wave cinema, it comes as no surprise that Quentin Tarantino would later cite this film as a prime inspiration for his own *Pulp Fiction* (1994), perhaps the epitome of neo-noir filmmaking.

British noir is explicitly informed by the trauma of the Second World War, "of lives lost, property damaged, debts incurred, distorted economic development, continued austerity and a rampant black market" (p. 89). Robert Murphy is eager to disprove previous critics, who have dismissed British noir as morbid, trivial, and inauthentic. He maintains that these movies should be regarded a valuable "tradition of indigenous British cinema, tantalisingly similar but fundamentally different from their American counterparts" (p. 103). After pointing out the connections between the crisis of the male protagonist in the so-called 'damaged men' films of the late 1940s and the mentally and physically disturbing experience of the Second World War, Murphy then goes on to show how British noir cinema in the following decade descended into the country's underworld in order to reveal a claustrophobic atmosphere of insecurity, anxiety, and existential despair.

It was not until the 1960s that German cinema took up Hollywood noir on a broad scale. During the first two decades following World War II, German critics were quick to condemn American cinema for its candid display of moral corruption. And yet, as early as the 1950s, quite a few films made in West Germany betrayed traces of film noir anxieties and oscillated—as Tim Bergfelder puts it—between "amnesia, unfocused nostalgia and determined reconstruction" (p. 141). Bergfelder identifies a corpus of films that constitute a specifically German tradition of noir with distinctive thematic and visual penchants. One of the fascinating contrasts to Hollywood noir is found in the role of the woman in post-war German cinema. Since conservative gender politics did not allow for the appearance of morally ambiguous femme fatales, German movie theatres saw the advent of an idealised representation of the *Trümmerfrau* (rubble woman), an almost religiously virtuous figure "who literally sweeps away the past to rebuild a new national future, and who shields traumatised and infantilised men in their period of recuperation" (p. 147).

If German noir arrived belatedly, Spanish noir must be called a veritable straggler on the international cinema scene, the reasons for which can be found in the authoritarian dictatorship that Franco had formed in 1936. According to Rob Stone, Spanish noir was practically non-existent until Franco's death in 1975, as there was simply no place in Spanish society for its rebellious undertones and demoralising, disruptive aesthetics. Since cultural expression was subjugated to the will of the state, Spanish attempts at noir often dissolved in the "complete antithesis" (p. 186) of the genre's characteristic challenging of values and moral absolutes. While copying certain American character types, Spanish films were sure to deliver upbeat conclusions and "prescribed righteousness" (p. 191). Ironically, it is this lack of a noir tradition that helped fuel a vibrant neo-noir movement exploring the dissonances in contemporary Spanish society as well as the legacy of the Francoist past. According to Ann Davies, neo-noir films

of the past three decades have displayed an outright cynicism regarding law and order and the public sphere; they have also taken a prominent stance on gender roles by often casting women as victims. Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of recent Spanish cinema is the immense success of so-called 'retro noir,' a sub-genre that, as Davies observes, attempts to recover "lost historical meaning" (p. 224) through the stories of those who came out on the losing end of Franco's politics.

The volume's concluding essay calls attention to the general elusiveness of the concept of film noir. Mary P. Wood demonstrates that even after several decades of research, critics have yet to arrive at a generally accepted definition of Italian film noir. In fact, as Wood argues quite persuasively, the use of noir conventions in Italian cinema is so omnipresent that noir constitutes "an intellectual and creative choice, rather than a genre" (p. 238). According to Wood, Italian noir is shaped by visual excess and a unique simultaneity of realist and fantastic modes. What distinguishes it from Hollywood noir is the authenticity of place and setting that lends credibility to auteur films such as Michelangelo Antonioni's *I vinti* (1952) and *Cronaca di un amore* (1950), both of which juxtapose noirish and naturalistic elements. Wood considers Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (1942), a film that realistically portrays characters trapped on the margins of society, to be one of the first Italian noirs. Like many scholars writing on cinema today, Wood's readings are informed by theories of trauma, which prove especially illuminating with respect to her thesis that Italian noir challenges official versions of events, investigating "massacres, spectacular crimes, scandals for which no rational explanation is found, and no one punished" (p. 247).

Given the book's effort to challenge perspectives on film noir as an 'indigenous American form,' it is somewhat disappointing that Andrew Spicer fails in his otherwise fine introduction to provide a more thorough reconstruction of the specifically American brand of noir. Such a solid frame of reference would have helped to underscore transcontinental similarities and differences, as well as the specific richness of European noir. However, considering the book's achievements, these are minor issues. Andrew Spicer's essay collection is highly insightful, revealing among other things that the preoccupation with traumatic experience is one of the dominant concerns of post-war European noir. The essential inability of film noir "to dwell comfortably either in the present or the past," as Edward Dimendberg puts it elsewhere in discussing Hollywood, is quite obviously also at work in European cinema (*Film noir and the spaces of modernity*, 2004, p. 1). The book's articles are extremely well-researched and instructive, presenting the reader with an impressive and unprecedented topography of European film noir.