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Andrew Spicer (Hg.): European Film Noir
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Andrew Spicer (Ed.): European Film Noir

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I approached *European Film Noir*, edited by Andrew Spicer, with a certain amount of trepidation. We all use the word 'genre' quite freely and the concept of genre is a very handy short form when talking about (or advertising) films in general. Yet, the concept of genre and the definitions of genre can be quite slippery. What makes *Alien* (1978) a classic horror film and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) classic science fiction cinema? Being trapped alone on a squeaky-clean spacecraft far from earth with a homicidal computer seems as much a nightmare as being chased around darkened corridors by a carnivorous alien. Clearly, specific iconography can be associated with particular genres but it is also the interplay of codes, discursive structures and drives, and the social, ideological and commercial environment in which these films are made, which help define individual genres.

One of the slipperiest genres to define is that of film noir. It has been described in terms of a particular look using low-key or strongly opposing patterns of light or with a disruptive narrative structure, the use of voice-overs and flashbacks, and let us not forget those dangerous *femme fatales*. Some people are reluctant to admit that the genre exists and talk about a 'noir sensibility' characterized as cynical, pessimistic, morally ambivalent with a strong sense of alienation and existential crisis, but even if we accept the term as imprecise it is an indispensable category.

Film noir has often been described as a series of American films made between 1940 and 1959. The term was coined in late 1946 by French critics fascinated by a group of American thrillers, including *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and *Double Indemnity* (1944), through its analogy with Série Noire, a label given to French translations of American 'hard-boiled' crime fiction (James M. Cain, Dashiell Hammett etc). Anglo-American criticism caught up with the French in the early 1970s and the academic studies which followed have reinforced the term and minted a new one for film noir's post-modern cousin: neo-noir.

The question this book tries to answer, and does so successfully in my opinion, is whether film noir is a purely American phenomenon or a transnational cultural phenomenon with European counterparts. It has long been accepted that European émigré writers, directors, cinematographers and even actors (the iconic Peter Lorre, for example) have had a strong, or even determining, influence on American film noir. But do the countries from where they originally came from have their own indigenous noirs?

What follows in this book is a series of well-written and interesting chapters from different authors which survey and analyse film noirs and neo-noirs from France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy and Spain. Each chapter gives a comprehensive overview of the noir or noir-like films produced over that country's cinematic history, charting their indigenous origins, internal and external influences and explains how the individual country's past, politics and social conditions have adapted the genre to its own ends.

Ginette Vincendeau argues that French film noir has its roots in French crime fiction extending back to the eighteenth century and continues for a longer period than in America into the 1970s. She classifies "its key concept as 'social voyeurism', a concentration on atmosphere, character and place rather than action, as exemplified in pre-war poetic realism" (p.7), which is even bleaker in post-war films as a sense of disillusionment in the aftermath of the war and Nazi occupation set in. If French noir was originally separate from American noir that changed in the 1960s when French New Wave directors such as Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut appropriated American noir conventions affectionately but also critically as part of their explorations of rebellion and alienation. Phil Powrie then argues that French neo-noir tends to be more genre based (*La Balance*, 1982) or within

the *cinéma du look* a return to the visual conventions of classic American noir but with a postmodern playfulness.

Britain's noir also has its roots in American hard-boiled fiction but with more emphasis on sadism and irrational violence from the British gothic-macabre tradition. British film noir makes less use of expressionistic lighting than its American cousins, showing a greater debt to French poetic realism. There were many maladjusted veterans portrayed post-war and an emphasis on ordinary people in keeping with the social realism depicted in British New Wave cinema in the 1960s. American directors such as Joseph Losey who had fled the blacklist also influenced British noir. Because British film noir had never received critical recognition, Andrew Spicer argues that British neo-noir had to reinvent itself anew with little continuity with its predecessors and is often hybrids, usually variations on the crime thriller. The central focus is on masculine identity and women are marginalized.

It has been mentioned that Weimar cinema has a special relationship with American film noir but there was no critical climate in post war Germany that acknowledged this relationship. Naturally, German cinema had been distorted before the war by the oppressive Nazi regime. Post war, even film noirs made by German exiles were met with scorn as morally corrupt. However, Tim Berfelder argues that there was a post-war German film noir that can be retrogressively defined, which crossed several cycles of films but concerned itself with the key noir theme of the inability to live comfortably in the present, haunted by the past and fearful of the future. Paul Cooke identifies two periods of neo-noir. One in the 1970s and 1980s in films by Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Wim Wenders. The second in the 1990s when a more commodified cinema produced more popular genre-based filmmaking which emulated the fast-paced American mode without critiquing Hollywood.

Rob Stone's chapter on Spanish film noir is relatively short as Franco didn't approve of American cinema and used tough censorship laws to prevent similar themes entering Spanish cinema. However, this chapter is very interesting as it illustrates how art can be distorted by a dictator but still finds a way of resistance.

Italy's film noir also has its roots in crime fiction (but *giallo* rather than noir) but is distinguished by its masculinist and highly politicized nature, critiquing a corrupt public life constantly rocked by political scandals.

European Film Noir is a very satisfying read. What emerges most strongly from this survey is its national specificity. In each country, noir and neo-noir have individual trajectories that reflect the nation's history, political organization, cultural and cinematic traditions. Having said that, there are certain important similarities. In each case, with the exception of Spain, pre-war development took place in parallel developments in crime fiction. Films are populated with *femme*

fatales and maladjusted veterans. There was usably a break in the 1970s between noir and neo-noir. Spicer's conclusion is, that film noir is a discursive transcultural construction, an idea "that the French projected onto American cinema that the Americans later adopted and re-exported" (p.17). He points out that European noirs have been critically neglected and worthy of more attention.

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