HARDBOILED HISTORY

A Noir Lens on America’s Past

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University of Warwick

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Abstracts

Panel 1: (Re)Creating/Marginalising History

Alex Pavey (University College London), ‘Something is wrong here’: James Ellroy and the Historiography of Noir Los Angeles

James Ellroy, reflecting on the noir short story, writes: ‘The thrill of noir is the rush of moral forfeit and the abandonment to titillation. The social importance of noir is its grounding in the big themes of race, class, gender, and systemic corruption’ (Ellroy 2011: xiii). This is a tension that is alive in Ellroy’s own fiction. His ‘L.A. Quartet’ novels (1987-1992) are rooted in the history and geography of post-war Los Angeles. In pursuing their investigations into largely fictional crimes, his protagonists encounter historical figures and uncover intersections with historically documented controversies and conspiracies. Acknowledging Ellroy’s debt to antecedents such as Roman Polanski’s Chinatown (1974), this paper argues that his L.A. novels develop a specific vision of the city – a milieu in which both prominent and obscure moments in Los Angeles history are implicated in a single pessimistic vision of violent crime and ubiquitous municipal corruption. The growing influence of this vision can be seen clearly in subsequent representations of L.A. across diverse media, from the 2011 videogame L.A. Noire to the HBO television series True Detective (2014-). If the tension between the titillating ‘thrill of noir’ and its social importance is often strained close to breaking point in Ellroy’s fiction, it is also valid to question the ethics of his appropriation of L.A. history. The paper concludes by reflecting critically on the potential consequences of transposing noir’s existential fatalism into a historical context of pervasive systemic corruption.

Thomas Travers (Birkbeck, University of London), “Cuban Breach: Don DeLillo’s Libra as Historical Noir”

In an essay on James Ellroy’s novel Blood’s a Rover, John Kraniauskas sketches a provisional outline of what he describes as ‘historical noir’. Developed out of Georg Lukács’s theorisation of the historical novel, historical noir, Kraniauskas suggests, offers a ‘statist’ history organised around ‘subaltern enforcers’. This paper will aim to expand on Kraniauskas’s account of historical noir as a peculiar offshoot of the historical novel, focussing in particular on Don DeLillo’s Kennedy assassination novel Libra (1988). Scholars have tended to treat Libra through the grand narratives of conspiracy and contingency, concentrating on Kennedy’s death as the irreducible traumatic kernel of post-war American history. What such readings omit, however, is the presence of another ‘dislocatory’ moment that haunts the novel: the actuality of the Cuban revolution. Before pursuing Libra through a noir optic or lens, the paper will situate historical noir within debates around historiography, literary form, and late capitalism. With such an account of historical noir in place, the presentation will propose that Libra’s dual narratives can be rewritten in terms of the state and civil society. On the one hand, there is a ‘white’ code which designates the C.I.A conspirators and
registers the intellectual labour of the state. On the other, a beleaguered ‘red’ revolutionary code can be identified with Lee Oswald’s wayward biography, which takes him across the slums and emergent ‘sacrifice zones’ of the United States. From here, the paper will conclude by suggesting that these threads of the historical noir combine to de-fetishize the myth of the unified state and produce a cartography of regions abandoned by capital.

Michael Docherty (University of Kent), “All Pachucos go to Heaven: Grim Fandango’s Interactive Requiem for the Mexican Dead of 1940s Los Angeles”

The 1998 videogame Grim Fandango engages extensively with the tropes and imagery of film noir. Two of the films to which the game refers—The Big Sleep and Double Indemnity—are set in Los Angeles, while its other filmic reference points, though set elsewhere, were products of Hollywood’s studio backlots. The game’s visual intertext thus situates it implicitly in 1940s Los Angeles. Yet Grim Fandango transposes the familiar images and plot devices of its noir sources to a strikingly original setting. Its world combines the technology, architecture and fashion of deco modernity with the pre-Columbian central American mythology of the Land of the Dead (and its endurance in Mexican Day of the Dead traditions). It presents a perilous afterlife navigated by a cast of dead-people-turned-skeletons; most of whom have Hispanic names and speak English with ‘Mexican’ accents. I will argue that this idiosyncratic juxtaposition of two frames of cultural reference has hitherto unremarked-on political implications. L.A. during the mid-‘40s may have been the land of Bogart noir, but it was also in a horribly literal sense a Mexican land of the dead—as the Sleepy Lagoon murder trial presaged the zoot suit riots, and Mexican-American youth found its right to cultural self-identification, even to existence, challenged more directly than ever before. Thus, I will argue that Grim Fandango’s unique blend of cultural contexts—Anglo-American film noir and pre-Columbian ‘Mexican’ afterlife ritual—renders it a subtle but powerful piece of historical commentary on the marginalisation of Mexican-Americans in mainstream U.S. culture at mid-century. Even in death its Mexican-American characters must struggle through liminal spaces—borderlands of the soul—as they traverse a confounding afterlife, but they simultaneously articulate a reclamation and repurposing by Latino/a peoples of Anglo-American cultural vernacular, embodied in the game’s film noir reference points.

Panel 2: The “Historical” Female Body

Katherine Farrimond (University of Sussex), “Black and White and Dead: The Femme Fatale as Corpse in Retro Noir”

The female corpse is a complex cultural object in terms of agency because it is a moment at which the fragile control a woman has over her own body in patriarchal culture can be comprehensively denied. In films such as The Black Dahlia (2006), Mulholland Falls (1996), Where the Truth Lies (2005), and Shutter Island (2010), the femme fatale frequently appears as a corpse. The films concern the
investigation of their murders, while the detectives become obsessed with the murdered women, and the woman as corpse becomes more dangerous than the woman alive. Deborah Jermy argues that the female corpse ‘resonates as the final outcome of everyday misogyny’ (2004) and in this paper, I discuss these films in relation to the politics of representing the corpse, and the gothic returns found in remediation of dead women in film footage and photographs. The dismembered and disintegrating corpse is both summoned and sidelined by the cinematography of the films discussed here, and while some films are preoccupied with the dead woman’s haunting beauty, others are more concerned with the power of the brutalised female body to disturb. In other films, a desire to emphasise the deadness of the beautiful woman while replacing clear images of the object of death – the dead body – with the more glamorous and consciously fabricated images from black and white movie reels suggests a tension in the representation of dead, and, more specifically, murdered women. In this paper, I suggest that the retro noir film allows a complex range of interventions into the violence and misogyny of classical Hollywood through these haunted and haunting images.

Esther Wright (University of Warwick), “‘It’s a sad story but this town has seen it play out a thousand times’: L.A. Noire’s ‘Historical’ Women”

L.A. Noire (2011)—co-produced by Team Bondi and Rockstar Games—was marketed as a video game which paid tribute to the history of the “classic” cinematic and literary noir canon. It also claimed to offer a “faithfully” recreated 1947 Los Angeles in digital, virtual form for player exploration, while being representative of the ‘real’ lived experience of the city at the time— as retold through some of the “real” crimes that occurred there, and by reimagining the “real” people who once populated it. Though receiving generally positive critical reception of its inherently “cinematic” qualities, the repercussions of using a noir lens though which to represent a “true” history of Los Angeles in the 1940s are profoundly felt in L.A. Noire.

This paper will explore these repercussions where they apply to the portrayal of women in the game, to discuss the ways in which “historic” and “cinematic” Los Angeles (and its people) compete for representational currency. To do so, it will explore the promotional strategy Rockstar employed before and after release, and how this strategy embedded the game amidst a male-oriented canon of noir cultural texts. By then focussing on the use of the (dead) female body as the centre of a number of “homicide” investigations players must undertake, this paper will argue that L. A. Noire’s female characterisations capitalise on a “zeitgeist”-legitimised view of American history—preoccupied with the allowing players to experience an men’s historic, post war experience, and particularly their supposedly troubled relationship with “liberated” post-war women.

Kulraj Phullar (King’s College London), “Veronica Lake and L.A. Confidential: Nostalgia, anachronism and film history”

“You look better than Veronica Lake.”

The 1941 aviation drama I Wanted Wings launched Veronica Lake as a film star, celebrity, sex symbol and style icon. The emergence of her star image as a glamorous and hardboiled modern
vamp coincided with those mysteries, thrillers and melodramas we now recognise as films noirs. This paper considers the legacy of Lake’s stardom for film noir through a case study of the acclaimed retro-noir *L.A. Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, 1997). The story is set in the early 1950s, when Lake’s Hollywood career had been “washed up” for several years. This suggests a complex negotiation of classic Hollywood and film noir histories. I will examine Lake’s star image as an anachronistic, nostalgic and disruptive presence in the film, aligned with the characterisation and visual appearance of the prostitute Lynn Bracken (Kim Basinger). The film mobilises explicit parallels between prostitution and the Hollywood studio system, particularly in the fabrication of identities and glamour, and the precarious currency of star images. As the first “new” star of film noir, Lake has also been one of its most overlooked and misunderstood icons. Her presence in the self-conscious *L.A. Confidential* therefore extends beyond nostalgia to enable critical reflection on the film noir canon and status of female images within it, and on the ways in which retro- and neo-noir productions engage with the history of film noir.

Panel 3: New and Old Fatale Figures

Agata Frymus (University of York), “‘The Marryingest Girl in Hollywood’: Romance and Rita Hayworth’s private star persona”

Film genres are instantly associated with its chief stars, a set of narrative and aesthetic archetypes or specific geographical locales. The leading roles in such films as *Gilda* (1946), *The Lady From Shanghai* (1947) and *Affair in Trinidad* (1952) made Rita Hayworth one of the most recognisable faces of film noir. The aim of this paper is to explore the mutual imbrications of Hayworth’s on-screen femme fatale persona and the narrative of her private life, particularly in the context of her romantic relationships with Orson Welles and Prince Aly Khan. My analysis will delve on the reformulation of femme fatale figure proposed by Mary Ann Doane (1991). According to her critical evaluation, the femme fatale is a carrier of tragedy who confounds agency and subjectivity with the very lack of these attributes. In a sense, the woman’s power is independent of consciousness and, as such, cannot be controlled; it is a destructive force embedded in her very being. A well-known piece from by Louella Parsons, for instance, criticised Welles for treating Hayworth like one of her cinematic portrayals; ‘a beautiful statue, something to admire.’ This paper will investigate the portrayals of Hayworth’s ‘unhappy love life’ (as it emerges from the pages of *Movieland* and other American film magazines of the late 1940s and early 1950s) and the manner in which suffering became a consistent element of Hayworth’s image.
Scott F. Stoddart (Saint Peter’s University), “History Repeats Itself: The Femmes Fatales of Laura and Gone Girl”

This paper poses a reading of two noirs, Otto Preminger’s Laura (1944) and David Fincher’s Gone Girl (2014) to reveal, through historical context, how parallel the vision of the femme fatale remains. Independent women pose the same threat to the fragile American male ego seventy years later.

There are many similarities between Otto Preminger’s Laura and David Fincher’s Gone Girl. Both male-directed films are adapted from women’s texts that seek to tell a woman’s story through the eyes of the men who idolize them. The social unrest of a country in conflict overshadows both narratives, causing the women to seek control on their own terms. Both films open with male voice-over delineating a tale of murder, the victim a beautiful professional woman. Both films use the flashback, dominated by the male voice, to detail the woman’s professional desires and her attempt to remain autonomous while seeking male companionship, and both women fall victim to men of questionable sexual appetites that try to make them into something they never sought. Hard-boiled detectives enter the scene to solve the crimes, pass judgment on the suspects, and wallow in the excess of each woman’s privilege.

Both films come to a screeching halt once the murdered woman “re-appears,” allowing them to begin constructing their own narratives, sharing with their spectators a clearer picture of what drives them to defy societal norms. Laura Hunt (Gene Tierney) shows us that her ambition to be taken seriously as a professional causes her to fall victim to men who “permit” this behavior, so long as she continues to suit their ideals of her remaining a model of feminine virtue. Amy Dunn (Rosamund Pike) seeks a marriage of equals when she meets Nick Dunn (Ben Affleck); however, once trouble hits, she falls victim to her husband’s lack of purpose and her own need to “control” her own narrative causes her to take control in a destructive manner. Both women emerge from their narratives reconstituted by the events we witness, taking on roles suited to societal norms, but roles designed by them are controlled by them – causing each noir to end ambivalently.

The primary women of both Laura and Gone Girl – though historically seventy years apart – face similar obstacles as they pursue their goals, being read as problematic in regard to their aspirations and their place within society. Both texts, born out of worlds in conflict, use the female to represent a goal of the American Dream for men, and, consequently, show how much more difficult it is for a woman to become part of that discourse given the desires of the moral majority. Each woman needs to put the male ego in check so she can succeed with her own denouement – one that allows her to define how she will be read.

Maxine Gee (University of York), “Not so Damned Dames: How Posthuman Noir subverts traditional film noir tropes in Ex_Machina”

Posthuman noir sits at the intersection of posthuman science fiction and film noir, and includes Anglo-American films as Blade Runner (R. Scott, 1982) Gattaca (A. Niccol, 1997) and Dark City (A. Proyas, 1998) and anime such as Ghost in the Shell (M. Oshii, 1995), Ergo Proxy (S. Murase, 2006), and Darker Than Black (T. Okamura, 2007). I argue that, when a posthuman character in these films experiences an emotional awakening classic film noir
narrative and character arcs are subverted—rather than being damned and destroyed by their emotions it is these characters that survive and thrive. The central shift from negative to positive connotations for emotional awakening demonstrates how integral this is to concepts of what it is to be ‘human’ and how these intangible qualities of the ‘human’ are positioned as something important to be preserved in posthuman futures. In this paper, I will establish the subgenre of posthuman noir, before focusing on the ways one posthuman noir film, Ex Machina (Alex Garland, 2015), uses and subverts film noir narrative structure and characters, especially in relation to Billy Wilder’s 1944 film Double Indemnity, to reaffirm humanist concepts of the human in the posthuman science fictional future. I will explore the ways that film noir exists beyond its traditional basis in 1940s and 50s America, and the how the aesthetics, themes and narrative patterns of classic film noir have evolved into an investigation of the human and the posthuman.

Maysaa Jaber (University of Baghdad), “Breaking the Rules: The Noir Fiction of Charles Williams”

Charles Williams' fictional world is full of conflicts and contradictions. His novels are full of sexual undertone and grittiness that best describe the genre of noir fiction in which Williams wrote. Williams’ male characters are ruthless individuals who usually run into trouble with the law; they are full of greed and lust and eventually get involved with cunning women. His female characters are even more ruthless. They are take control of chaotic and distressing situations that the male characters create. Williams' female characters are not merely domestic beings who fall into the traditional gender roles. Rather they are wives, girlfriends, but at the same time they are instigators and perpetrators of crimes.

In one novel after another, Williams offers examples of complex gender schema that not only outlines the relationships between male and female characters, but fuses his narratives with paradoxes and polar opposites and ultimately creates what I would call a "deadly recipe" for noir fiction. This recipe can be said to constitute the prototype for what is known today as "domestic noir." This paper aims to explore the avenues through which Williams' crime narratives present this odd and curious combination of domesticity and criminality (particularly female criminality) in a way adds to the conventional noir narrative and indeed paves the way for the more recent genre of domestic noir. This paper also explores the ways Williams takes a chance with bringing together implausible ingredients in a way that invites to re-evaluate the components of noir fiction. Williams' novels present the domestic alongside the urban; the private alongside the public; the victim alongside the criminal in a mixture that instead of favoring one side of the continuum in these dualisms over the other, creates a space of coexistence of these elements, and by so doing outlines new parameters of the noir genre.

As such, this paper will look into how Williams' novels portray the stereotype of the femme fatale as an essential component in noir fiction, and simultaneously challenge it. Dolores Harshaw Hell Hath no Fury (The Hot Spot), Madelon Butler (Touch of Death), and Mrs. Cannon in The Big Bite all show facets of the spider woman, the ruthless criminal, the sexual predator but they subvert these stereotypes by emphasizing the domestic sphere in which these women are placed as wives or women in small towns in America. Hence while Williams’ narratives present a domestic female
criminal, I aim to read their subversive roles and the way their representation questions domesticity and the accompanying values of passivity and submissiveness of women all under question at that time.

Panel 4: Space and Place, Aesthetics and Style

Mareike Jenner (Anglia Ruskin University), “Sunshine Noir and 1980s Television”

This paper explores the American television Sunshine Noir cycle of the 1980s. The television sunshine noir is part of the crime genre and describes detective narratives that draw on film noir of the 1930s and 1940s and neo-noir films from the 1980s and 1990s and reconfigure elements of style and narrative to fit the narrative and industrial needs of television. The television sunshine noir cycle can be described as a group of television series that used stylistic elements, such as voiceover or play with shadow, and thematic elements, such as (in some cases) moral ambiguity and alienation, usually through the trauma of the Vietnam War. These sunshine noir dramas span from Magnum, P.I. (CBS, 1980-8) over its high-point with Miami Vice (NBC, 1984-90) to its 1990s version with Silk Stalkings (CBS, USA, 1991-9) and slowly ‘fizzled out’ with low-budget cable productions.

Though many TV dramas have emulated film noir through style or thematic shorthand (see Butler 2010), there is no real equivalent in television. If we understand noir as largely a stylistic achievement, then television, until recently a vastly inferior technology to cinema, is unsuitable to emulate this. If it is understood as uniting certain themes of alienation and rebellion against corruption, then serialised formats seems unsuitable. However, this does not mean that the crime genre, one of television’s oldest genres, has not made frequent reference to noir, either through stylistic reference points or by invoking character types, such as the femme fatale. In the 1980s, the crime genre on US television went through a number of thematic and aesthetic changes, largely as a consequence the vast technological and industrial changes that took place during the decade. This paper traces the US television sunshine noir cycle to explore how stylistic and thematic features are emulated for a different medium.

Greg Keenan (University of Sheffield), “Blind History: Stranger on the Third Floor (1940)”

Central to noir’s affective power is the way in which it visualises obscurity by placing blindness at the heart of its narratives and images. This obscurity affects how noir’s knowledge is produced, and thus, how history itself is produced and interpreted. In narrative terms, noir’s complex cinematic and psychological structures serve to radically reconstruct knowledge retroactively, whereas visually, noir’s use of fascination (in the strict psychoanalytic sense), seen in such figures
as the *femme fatale*, presents us with objects we can never fully understand through looking, despite Hollywood cinema’s visual primacy. Thus, for noir studies, how we see becomes as important as what we see.

The paper will focus on Boris Ingster’s *Stranger on the Third Floor* (1940) and how space – physical, cinematic, psychological, and national – becomes tethered to fascination and the ways in which it produces blindness. In relation to noir, I will look at how such a spatial blindness (and its ties to the production of knowledge) leads to historical blindness and the loss of history itself.

After condemning a man to death on the weight of his expert testimony, Michael begins to feel guilty on his way home. Conveniently, he ‘remembers’ how he did not actually witness the murder occur. This reversal plays on our blindness and willingness to accept the testimony of the protagonist. Michael himself says that ‘it’s not my word against his, but what I saw with my own eyes’, but the trick is that he did not see the murder occur. In this way, vision and testimony is produced out of nothing, a void where vision should be.

**Lindsay Steenberg (Oxford Brookes University), “Transnational Television Noir”**

Using the BBC’s Belfast-set series *The Fall* (2013--) as an illustrative case study, this talk combines textual analysis with a critical reception study in order to unpack the way that noir is being used on contemporary television. The global success of recent programming labelled Nordic noir, for example Denmark’s *Forbrydelsen/The Killing* (DR 2008-2012), has spurred a complex web of re-makes, adaptations, and references. Glen Creeber (2015) argues that British programmes such as *Broadchurch* (ITV 2013--), *Hinterland/Y Gwyll* (BBC 2013--) and *The Fall* owe a debt to Nordic noir television and might usefully be labelled Celtic noir. Such programming highlights the ways in which noir is currently being used not only as a critical or production category but as a marketing and branding strategy.

This paper argues that *The Fall* is self-conscious, if not self-reflexive, in its mobilization of noir. The series uses noir as a legitimation strategy, often to excuse prurient stories of sexualized violence. Such strategies are part of the way that television noir is often framed as more than television; for example, aligned with the aesthetics of the cinema or the narrative complexity of the novel. The act of labelling something noir can be a way of insisting that it be taken seriously as art. This claim operates in direct tension with the sensationalist excesses of stories about serial murder and the gothic inflections of female victimhood. This paper looks in detail at this tension as it is explored through *The Fall* and the media debates that circulate around the show.