

Introduction

Italian *film noir*: A special issue of *Studies in European cinema*

In 2017, Italian crime films were the focus of two substantial and valuable journal contributions; a special issues of *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies* dedicated to Italian horror cinema and a special issue of *Bianco e Nero*, the oldest film journal in Italy, on the Italian *giallo* (1910-1972). These publications have been instrumental in opening up a renewed academic discussion on a popular genre from a vantage point which aims to go beyond the nationalistic scholarly tendencies. With this special issue, *Studies in European Cinema* allows us to continue this discussion by exploring crime films from a different thematic perspective, namely the influence of the concept of *noir* on Italian cinema. A special issue of *SEC* dedicated to Italian *film noir* therefore seems apt because the noir element in this context has seemingly been limited to a mere handful of articles and methodological approaches. Most importantly, this issue will continue to engage with this theme by embracing a transnational and transcultural approach to help illuminate the complexities at work within this particular national context.

Film noir is a difficult term to define. Desser claims that, unlike the musical, the western, and the horror film, ‘Hollywood had no genre which it called “film noir”’ (628). The originality and the salient characteristics of this cinematic trend were interestingly perceived more clearly from a distance, in Europe, than they were in America itself. Indeed, the term *film noir* was a *critical genre* coined retrospectively by French critics during the 1940s, to describe a particular American cinematic movement addressing questions of social and political morality through crime films or detective stories.¹ The fact that the concept of *film noir* was first coined in Europe and was given serious critical attention there, suggests that it had a special relevance to the European context.

In the last decade or so, film scholars have identified a variety of national manifestations of *film noir* in Europe, Latin America, and Asia which provide details on local instances of this transnational phenomenon that exhibits a complex process of adaptation and assimilation (Spicer 2007, Fay and Nieland, 2010, Spicer and Hanson 2013, Broe 2014, Pettey and Palmer 2014). Although some scholars have postulated the existence of a contemporary *global noir* arising from transnational filmmaking, cross-cultural influences, and the idea of global culture (Desser, 2012), it is also true that such national manifestations still need to be carefully identified and delineated. This emphasis on the internationalism of *film noir* is part of the revisionist impulse that drives this special issue on Italian *film noir*. It aligns with a major strand of the construction of the concept of *noir* as not an exclusively American phenomenon. So, the aim of this special issue reflects the critical move of remapping the *noir* canon from a transnational and transcultural perspective by

locating not an overarching Italian film noir but the presence of film noir in Italian cinema through time and space.

The presence of a *noir* influence across the Italian context has already been noted by some critics (Caldiron 1999, Giovannini 2000, Wood 2007, 2010 and 2016, Broe 2014, Marmo 2018) who have demonstrated, across Italian cinematic genres (*filoni*) and time, the presence of *noir* elements mainly drew from American and French cinema. Stylistically, the characteristics of Italian *noir* include: intense lighting contrast (*chiaroscuro*), dark atmosphere, visual/aural disorder and disturbing asymmetry, and visual/aural, narrative, kinetic and performative excess. Thematically, Italian *noir* typically explores Italian societal and/or political context aiming at provoking anxiety, disturbance and disruption.

What follows is meant to be representative only of the limited scope of this special issue. In other words, what we have assembled in this special issue is just a partial analysis of the Italian picture of *film noir*, which still is a relatively unexplored area. The point here, then, is not to debate the existence of Italian film noir as a genre, but rather, to emphasise that film has always been a global enterprise and mode of transnational communication and that the concept of *noir* can help understand this interdependence of local product with international and global phenomena.

Mary Wood's article investigates the origin of the term *giallo* in the prehistory of the Italian *noir* context by exploring the magic lantern shows, popular nineteenth-century literature, media and silent cinema up to and around the First World War. Wood discusses the crucial role of colour in understanding the interaction of painting, photography, literature, theatre and publicity in the transnational construction of silent film culture. This also helps the author identify the stylistic elements of silent films which would coalesce in later Italian film noir. Through a selection of texts – the French serials *Fantômas* (Feuillade, 1913–14) and *Les vampires* (Feuillade, 1915–16), *Assunta Spina* (Serena, 1915), the Italian populist serials featuring the character *Za-la-Mort* (Ghione, 1914–1924) and to *Die Flucht in die Nacht/Enrico IV* (Palermi, 1926) – Wood's analysis suggests that the colour yellow was a constant presence in Italian silent film and its appeal lay in the nature of the crime stories with which it came to be associated, the French *feuilletons* and crime films. The transnational and transcultural element emerges very clearly from Wood's contribution, which reveals not only the fruitful borrowings from early French popular literature and film, but also how 'film noir techniques, such as the use of the long shot of landscapes, disturbing asymmetry in diagonal compositions of the framing of space and *chiaroscuro* lighting, narrative, visual and performative excess, can be seen across silent film genres'.

In his contribution, **Alberto Zambenedetti** explores Italian film noir in the Mediterranean context. Starting from Jean-Claude Izzo's assertion of the crucial role played by the Mediterranean

spaces in the global rise of *noir*, Zambenedetti situates ‘the Mediterranean noir within an ongoing critical reassessment that has reconsidered the anglocentrism of the noir canon, foregrounded the discourse’s temporal and spatial resilience, and underscored its continuing transartistic currency across the globe’. In the second part of his essay, Zambenedetti discusses the connections and shared concerns among a selection of films that emerged in the Mediterranean basin during the period 1937-1958. Through a comparative analysis of the cinematic visualization of the Casbah in three films based on Henri La Barthe's crime novel *Pépé Le Moko – Pépé Le Moko* (Julien Duvivier, 1937), *Algiers* (John Cromwell, 1938), and *Casbah* (John Berry, 1948) – Zambenedetti compellingly demonstrates that the reasons for the main protagonist’s displacement from ‘a pre-occupied colonial of the Second French Empire’ in Duvivier’s *Pépé Le Moko* to ‘the politically neutered soundstage of Universal-International Studio’ in Cromwell’s *Algiers* and Berry’s *Casbah* can be discussed not only in the context of American’s appropriation of foreign cultural properties but also within a larger international context that should refine ‘the verticality of the “national cinema” paradigm with a horizontal, transnational, global and regional dimension,’ and in this particular case, in the Mediterranean context. Zambenedetti concludes by providing a series of cinematic examples that can be interrogated through a spatial theory of the Mediterranean noir.

Lorenzo Marmo’s essay investigates the intertwining of the aesthetics of *film noir* and neorealism in the context of Italian cinema after the Second World War. In particular, the article explores the cinematic rendition of post-war modernity, specifically in terms of urban space and development, in order to individuate and understand the relationship of *film noir* and neorealism in the wider discourse of melodrama. Starting from Gilles Deleuze’s category of ‘any-space-whatever’ and Edward Dimendberg’s reflections on urban space in the ‘classical’ period of American noir, Marmo’s analyses the deployment of late-modern spatiality in a series of Italian noir films dealing with the post-war process of reconstruction including *Ai margini della metropoli* (Lizzani, 1953), *Ai margini della città* (Ferroni, 1956) and *I vinti* (Antonioni, 1953). By associating a form of spatial anxiety with the urban experience of late modernity which can be detected in both neorealism and *film noir*, the discussion crucially highlights the importance of the transnational models of melodrama and American film noir to the interpretation of Italian cinema on the verge of the economic boom.

Massimo Locatelli’s contribution investigates the 1960s and 1970s as the turning point when ‘cinema began to incorporate the need to redefine and reflect the very structure of emotional quality and involvement through new languages and styles’. The focus of this contribution is emotions in film experience, which is explored by using the intensified mediascape of the Italian *giallo* as a case study due to its experimental orientation and its relevance to the study of *film noir*

in the Italian context and its reception by critics and scholars. The study of film on a psychological basis serves thus as fertile field for an analysis of an innovative *filone* and its “fear-relevant” conventions and “emotionalized” tactics of bodily involvement aiming at provoking anxiety, disturbance and disruption. In particular, Locatelli explores *Don't Torture a Duckling/Non si sevizia un paperino* (Lucio Fulci, 1972) as a crucial example of this transition towards a cinema of emotion. Italian *giallo* with ‘its forms and techniques aimed at excitement and its amused anxiety of appropriation of the past glory of the *noir* psychological thriller’ becomes essentially instrumental in paving the way for an audiovisual age of emotional reflexivity.

Finally, **Barbara Pezzotti and Marco Paoli** explore the development of the Italian gangster film and its interconnections with film noir. Their contribution focuses on Carlo Lizzani’s *Bandits in Milan/Banditi a Milano* (1968) and Michele Placido’s *Romanzo criminale* (2005) and their attempts to explore post-war Italian culture, society and political context through the portrayal of some of the most important Italian criminal figures of this period, namely the Cavallero gang and the Banda della Magliana. Pezzotti and Paoli argue that, while sharing with its American counterpart some characteristics of the gangster movie, such as the femme fatale, flashback structures and a narrative of betrayal, the Italian gangster film also presents a flexibility typical of the noir genre. This characteristic allows these films to reflect on the connection between criminality and capitalism in two different periods of Italian history: the Economic Boom of the 1960s, and the consumerism of the 1970s and 1980s. By investigating how the protagonists and their victims are represented in these films, and how this intersects with the social critique featured in these films, this contribution reevaluates the Italian gangster film as a creative and artistic output that should be analysed beyond its generic conventions.

This special issue provides an overview of the history of film noir in Italy and its interconnections with the global output. By highlighting how silent films were precursors of Italian film noir; analysing the relationship between neorealism and melodrama on the one hand and film noir on the other; focusing on the Mediterranean as a fruitful space for the global rise of *noir*; the role of emotions in film experience; and the interconnections between gangster film and film noir, this special issue contributes to a debate on the transnational and transcultural features of the concept of *noir* in its generic conventions and as an exclusively American phenomenon. Each contribution explores *noir*’s features, meanings, boundaries, and preoccupations from different chronological and theoretical perspectives, often consolidating earlier work but also extending and deepening it, indicating a fruitful avenue for further analysis.

As previously stated, due to its limited scope, this special issue gives only a partial analysis of the Italian picture of *film noir*, which still is a relatively unexplored area. In fact, in these specific cinematic and national contexts, there is a plethora of aspects that have not been subject to a detailed and extensive analysis; these include, among others, gender, race and ethnicity issues that respond to political, social and cultural changes, depictions of space (i.e. the figure of the city and architecture), soundtrack, film (post-)studio production practices (i.e. posters and other promotional visual and/or media tactics), the influence of indigenous sources (i.e. Italian painting and photography) and audiences reception. This lack of analysis is even more evident with regard to the concept of *noir mediascape* (Naremore 2008: 254-77) – that noir elements including plots, themes, and style can be detected in other media and artefacts – in the Italian context. Specifically, the noir influence on radio, television, comics and graphic novels, and other forms of audio-visual storytelling, both in digital realms and offline, has been given scant critical attention.

While today studies of Italian crime fiction form a specific area of literary criticism, critics have only recently started to recognise the important role played by the concept of *noir* in response to changing cultural, societal, political, technological, and industrial conditions in an increasingly transnational and transcultural world by embracing its impact on Italian films as a valid area of study. This special issue is, we hope, an informed contribution to the ongoing debate about this fascinating under-researched subject, thus paving the way for further analysis. As guest editors of this issue, we would like to thank the authors, the anonymous reviewers, and the editor of the journal Owen Evans.

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¹ The use of the term *films noirs* to describe certain American films – John Huston’s *The Maltese Falcon*, Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity*, Otto Preminger’s *Laura*, and Edward Dmytryk’s *Murder, My Sweet* – is generally held to date from an article by the Italian-born French critic and scriptwriter Nino Frank in August 1946 (1946 and 1999).