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Foreword

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The term ‘noir’ has undergone a peculiar process since its emergence within French film critique jargon in the 1950s. The genre was actually born in the United States in the 1920s around the *Black Mask* pulp magazine and was later reinforced by the films of the 1940s inspired by Dashiell Hammett’s and Raymond Chandler’s novels, which were also to encourage the birth of the *Série Noire* in France (1945). The name of this series became a generic term for detective fiction, and is considered to have inspired French critic Nino Frank to create in 1946 the phrase *film noir* to describe Hollywood crime dramas ranging from John Huston’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) to Orson Welles’ *Touch of Evil* and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958).

The word ‘noir’ then began to be used as a substantive within crime fiction and continued to be used as an adjective though not necessarily linked to film. It was soon clear that there was a socio-political critique involved (Pepper 2010), and *pour cause*: it was originally rooted in the 1920s and 1930s – two decades characterized by gangsterism, Prohibitionism, and the great Depression – and prospered in the 1940s and 1950s – characterized in turn by fear, when not paranoia, regarding the atomic bomb, by World War II, and the cold war (Duncan 2000). No wonder that the noir heroes, the mythical P.I.s, were bewildered tough guys who acted against the backdrop of violent and corrupted American cities where they were easily seduced by dangerous dark ladies and encountered gangsters, psychopathic killers, revenge-seekers, money-grubbers, social climbers, strangers, and outcasts (Horsley 2001).

Critics and scholars have discussed the noir as a genre, a sub-genre, or a sur-genre, some of them tracing protecting boundaries around the “classical period” and others expanding its territories so far as to include postmodernity and countries other than the USA. The academic debate variously incorporated Lacan, Cold War, gender and postcolonial studies, welcoming such controver-

sial issues as ethnicity and trauma. Now it must face the challenge represented by the global market, which has appropriated the term 'noir' (maybe for the industry's sake, as suggested in Schwartz 2002) as an all-inclusive label for detective and crime fiction, thriller, true crime, social drama, the procedural, TV series and video games.

Using 'noir' as an umbrella term is improper and may sound irritating to purists, but offers some advantages. Firstly, it constantly reminds us of the origins of noir, urging all those who are not yet familiar with it to rush and fill in the gaps. Secondly, it affirms the ongoing authority of the genre after so many decades. Thirdly, it gives us the rare opportunity to witness how traditional (and canonical) barriers can collapse and be rebuilt under different conditions, how literary and filmic genres can travel in time and space, and how much the reader/spectator/consumer is actively involved in the process.

From this perspective, the fact that noir has evolved into the neo-noir, post-noir, meta-noir, cyber-noir, etc. (Dimendberg 2004; Clute, Edwards 2011), far from representing a symptom of a crisis, actually adds to its persistence as a genre. Also, much good scholarship has been written by women (e.g. Gregoriou 2007; Worthington 2011) and many very good noir novels have been written by women – although *No Good from a Corpse* by Leigh Brackett (1944) is still waiting for due appreciation and *Hell of a Woman: An Anthology of Female Noir* (Abbott, McDermid 2007) went almost unnoticed.

This issue of *Linguae &* collects a number of essays which contribute to the above-mentioned debate from different perspectives, offering original and innovative interpretations of the noir. Rebecca Martin opens the volume by investigating the too often neglected connections between French poetic realism of the 1930s and American noir, followed by Luca Ambrogiani who goes back to the aestheticizing practices of the 'Yellow Nineties'. Giulio Segato chooses the symbolic universe of animals in James M. Cain's fiction, while Stephen Knight lets us have a (long) glimpse into the fascinating Australian noir. Gian Italo Bischi and Giovanni Darconza try a comparison between the evolution of Mathematics and the novel in the twentieth-century novel by analysing how chaos and complexity interface with thrillers and crime novels. Finally, Margareth Amatulli re-reads Hitchcock's masterpiece *Rear Window* through one of its best and stimulating re-elaborations, thus opening new paths of research among the many lives of the noir.

In spite of their diversity, each essay testifies, in its own way, to the fertility and cross-fertilisation of the noir both in place and time. If, on the one hand, we look increasingly backward in order to find its real roots, on the other we

want to acknowledge its legacy in our own time and even project it towards the future. The noir's resistance and flexibility account both for its (literary, cultural, filmic) enduring practices and its never aging metaphors; with respect to its powerful rendering of social/individual disturbances and disquietedness, only fractal geometry can be as exhaustive.

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