

THE INTROSPECTIVE REALIST CRIME FILM

Luis M. García-Mainar

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

(by Jesús Ángel González, Universidad de Cantabria)

jesusangel.gonzalez@unican.es

123

Even though crime fiction, both in its literary and cinematic forms, has been the most popular genre for a long time now in Western societies (Cavender and Jurik 2016: 323), there is no absolute agreement as to its generic definition and boundaries. Detective novel, thriller, hard-boiled detective film, film noir, shocker, suspense thriller or mystery novel are all terms that have been used to define novels or films that deal in different ways with crimes and their investigations. Even one of its most important practitioners (Raymond Chandler) had trouble defining and classifying it when writing about the other big name in the hard-boiled detective school (Dashiell Hammett) in *The Simple Art of Murder*; he described him as an author of “realistic mystery fiction” as opposed to “the traditional or classic or straight deductive or logic and deduction novel of detection” ([1950] 1988: 4), in a clumsy attempt at definition that underlines the extreme difficulty of the task at hand. Luis M. García-Mainar’s choices in *The Introspective Realist Crime Film* (‘crime fiction’ and ‘crime film’) seem to have caught on in the last few years as umbrella terms for works where the primacy of crime structures the text and imposes a certain hierarchy that leaves out of the canon works like *Little Red Riding Hood* or *Crime and Punishment*, as Jerry Palmer pointed out: “What constitutes crime fiction as such is that the presentation of crime comes to dominate the fictional structure by taking a particular place in the hierarchy of discourses that constitute the text” (1991: 142). As French critics Borde and Chaumeton

indicated already in 1955 about film noir, the presence of crime is the defining feature of these films —“c’est la présence du crime qui donne au film noir sa marque la plus constante. [...] le film noir est un film de mort” (5-6)— and imposes a general feeling of unease that characterizes not only film noir but crime fiction and crime films in general: “La vocation du film noir était de créer un malaise spécifique” (1955: 15). The feeling of unease is also related to the social commentary developed by crime films when they delineate and manipulate the boundaries of the ‘criminal triangle’ created around crime —the victim, the criminal and the investigator. As Thomas Leitch has pointed out, the central problem that defines the crime film is its attempt to challenge the status of the law by setting clear-cut positions regarding it and then showing their fluid nature, since, for example, the investigator may become a criminal and the criminal may be shown as a victim (2002: 1-17).

Luis M. García-Mainar has identified a group of Hollywood and international crime films that since the early 2000s have shifted their focus from action or suspense onto the characters’ personal experience of crime and onto the social contexts of crime. He has coined the descriptive, albeit none-too-catchy term “introspective realist crime films” and has published a monograph with Palgrave Macmillan devoted to this new subgenre, exemplified by films such as *Mystic River* (2003), *Michel Clayton* (2007), *A Mighty Heart* (2007), *Zodiac* (2007), *Tropa de élite* (2007), *El secreto de sus ojos* (2009), *Un prophète* (2009), or *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2011). In contrast with the crime films of the 1980s and 1990s, characterized by action, spectacle and the aesthetics of postmodernism, “introspective realist crime films” look back to the visual and narrative features of crime films from the 1970s like *Klute* (1971), *The Conversation* (1974), *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) or *All the President’s Men* (1976), and show an interest in the social dimension of their stories, expressed “through the characters’ complex subjectivity, heightened by means of an aesthetic of pathos and realism” (2). In order to define these films, García-Mainar uses an open concept of genre that, drawing from Altman —the idea of genre as process—, Derrida —the idea of participation in a genre without actually belonging to it— and Wittgenstein —the idea of family resemblances inside categories—, relies on a flexible perspective of conventions, groups and categories. García-Mainar relates the realism of these films to their use of conventions typical of melodrama, but prefers to use the term ‘drama’ for these films since it “provides the connections with everyday life central to the crime film subgenres” (19), helping to emphasize pathos, sympathy with the victims’ suffering, as an element essential to creating the illusion of realism.

García-Mainar uses an interdisciplinary approach to relate these films to Scandinavian crime fiction, such as Henning Mankell’s Wallander novels or the

Millennium trilogy, since they all share an introspective outlook, a sense of pathos and a social mind. Similarly, he establishes the connections between the introspective realist crime films that appeared in the 2000s and the television programmes from the 1990s —police procedurals like *Homicide: Life on the Streets* (NBC, 1993-1999) and *NYPD Blue* (ABC, 1993-2006)— and, more pertinently, ‘quality’ television series of the 2000s like *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013), or *The Americans* (FX, 2013-). These television series have influenced Hollywood and international films —in a process that R. Colin Tait has called the “HBO-ification of genre”— in features like realism —related to the lack of closure shared by the serial format and everyday life—, narrative complexity, a slow narrative rhythm, careful exploration of character psychology, ethical dilemmas and a certain pessimism about social matters. *The Wire*, in this sense, seems to be a paradigmatic case, not only in terms of direct influence, but also by the presence of scriptwriters who are also crime writers in their own right, like George Pelecanos, Dennis Lehane or Richard Price, who have created urban crime fiction with a realist aesthetic and strong social commitment. To this interdisciplinary approach, García-Mainar adds a transnational perspective that allows him to discuss influences like European art cinema, Italian neorealism, the Nouvelle Vague, the Dogme School or the films of the Dardenne brothers, and include in his analysis films from Argentina —*El secreto de tus ojos* (2009) or *El aura* (2005)—, Chile —*Tony Manero* (2008)—, France —*Un prophète* (2009)—, Brazil —*Tropa de elite* (2007)—, Germany —*Das Leben der Anderen* (2006)—, Italy —*Gomorra* (2008)—, or Spain —*Celda 211* (2009), *La isla mínima* (2013).

125

Having identified and defined the corpus of this analysis, García-Mainar undertakes the task of organizing this group of films into something more than a list and he does so by organizing them into four chapters: two of these (chapters 4 and 5) are structured around aesthetic issues —pictorial realism and the documentary look—, and the other two (chapters 6 and 7) around narrative ones —the peripheral point of view and the complex narrative. He then combines these issues with other features —like introspection and helplessness—, chooses two films that he discusses in depth as representative of each subgroup, and mentions other films that share “family resemblances” with the leading film of the group. For example, he chooses *Mystic River* and *Tropa de elite* as representative of the complex narrative and its use to dissect social issues, institutions and solutions, in order to expose the complicity of the forces that shape the characters’ worlds. He studies these two films in detail and reviews other films that constitute their ‘family’: *Silver City*, *Traffic*, and *Syriana* (*Mystic River*’s ‘family’), and *Tropa de elite 2*, *Gomorra*, and *Ajami* (*Tropa de elite*’s ‘family’). While this organizational strategy seems a bit forced at times, since some films could —and probably should— be included in several chapters, it allows García-Mainar to describe his corpus of films with varying

detail and simultaneously identify their main narrative and aesthetic features clearly. All the 'primary' films within each chapter are analyzed both from a thematic and formal point of view, paying special attention to the visual aspect and cinematography. The shots from these films that accompany the text are well chosen but have unfortunately been reproduced with a quality that does little justice to the films they come from or to the text that describes them.

The Introspective Realist Crime Film is a very valuable addition to the field of genre film studies; it develops a compelling argument about the contemporary evolution of crime film as well as very incisive readings of the group of films under consideration; it helps to understand in depth not only these films, but also the society and culture that has produced them as well as the general features of crime fiction in general. It will be of interest not only to the scholar but also to the general public keen on contemporary film and culture.

Works Cited

- BORDE, Raymond and Etienne CHAUMETON. 1955. *Panorama du film noir américain*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit.
- CAVENDER Gray and Nancy JURIK. 2016. "Crime, Criminology, and the Crime Genre." In Knepper, Paul and Anja Johansen (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Crime and Criminal Justice*. Oxford: Oxford U.P.: 320-337.
- CHANDLER, Raymond. (1950) 1988. *The Simple Art of Murder*. New York: Vintage.
- LEITCH, Thomas. 2002. *Crime Films*. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.
- PALMER, Jerry. 1991. *Potboilers: Methods, Concepts and Case Studies in Popular Fiction*. London: Routledge.
- TAIT, R. Colin. 2008. "The HBO-ification of Genre." *Cinephile* 4 (1): 50-57.