

Post-noir: getting back to business

For anyone attempting to periodise a genre, let alone discuss its *postness*, there is a vital lesson in perspective to be learned from Tag Gallagher's critique of evolutionary models of genre. He points out that Robert Warshaw, writing in 1954, 'found differences between early-1950s and pre-war westerns almost identical to those which critics like [Thomas] Schatz ... detect between westerns of the 1970s and early 1950s' (263). Gallagher attributes this, at least in part, to critics often being 'unsympathetic to the subtleties of "old" movies' (268), perhaps loving them 'for their supposed naïveté' but nonetheless setting them up 'as the "fall guys" for invidious comparisons' (268-269) which favour recent films that are thus purported to be more 'complex, ... amoral, and ... vivid' (263). Thus it becomes clear that any film that might now seem to be *post* will inevitably – and soon, perhaps even in the lag between writing and publication – fall back into the mass of genre productions. Whatever distinctiveness and exceptionality was created for it by the sheer contemporaneity of its specific variation upon generic repetitions will be speedily forgotten, levelled out, homogenised into a general pattern. Furthermore, as current understandings of genre suggest, to speak of post-noir is to speak of that which, in an important sense and like all genres, does not, and cannot, exist. It is not a material object, but a contingent and contested discursive construct; it is a claim, an argument, a manoeuvre.

This essay begins with a reflection on the notions of *post* and *postness* and how they function. It indicates the ways in which dominant understandings of noir as primarily a US phenomenon might be challenged and refreshed by a turn towards noir in other national, international and transnational contexts. Finally, inspired by Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland's treatment of noir 'as an always international phenomenon concerned with the local effects of globalization and the threats to national urban culture it seems to herald' (ix), and by one of Richard Dyer's propositions about the consequences of neo-noir pastiche, it considers a range of films which, in the light of their work, can be regarded, at this current conjuncture, as post-noir.

Genre, periodisation, postness, pastiche

Writing at the turn of the millennium, Jack Boozer refers to 'the classic *noir* period', 'the neo-*noir* era of the 1960s and 1970s' and the 'contemporary or post-*noir* films of the 1980s and 1990s' (20), as if this represents a consensus terminology and periodisation. However, a rather defensive endnote anxiously hedges his bets and proliferates terms. Neo-noir and post-

noir are lumped together as ‘post-classic *noir*’, although it is unclear if this evocation of ‘classic’ noir intends a periodisation by mode of production (i.e, classical, that is, Fordist, rather than post-classical or post-Fordist, Hollywood) or whether it is just a journalistic gesture towards a popular noir canon. Boozer describes neo-noir as ‘transitional’, but it is unclear where this transition leads, since his ‘post-*noir* is merely a convenient term to describe the period following Hollywood’s transitional or neo-*noir* era’ (33). Furthermore, since his post-noir is ‘not meant to suggest specific stylistic changes’ (33), the purpose of introducing the term at all remains elusive.

Greg Tuck, writing a decade later about irony and black comedy in neo-noir, moves beyond mere chronology to make subtler use of ‘post-noir’. For him, David Lynch ‘remains true to the underlying darkness of the original cycle’ of US noir, while demonstrating ‘the potential for surrealism in this hard-boiled world’, and the Coen brothers ‘maintain strong links to the ironic anti-sentimental underpinnings of noir’ despite parodic ‘elements’ that ‘risk diluting ... it’ (‘Laughter’ 165-6). However, Quentin Tarantino, produces films that are so ‘deeply sentimental and ideologically complicit’ that ‘they are simply not dark; they are not noir’ (166). This ‘does not mean that they are not neo-noir’ – rather, that Tarantino’s ‘mode of pastiche’ does not regenerate but consumes and negates noir: ‘What his films offer us, therefore, is a *post-noir* world where we no longer laugh at the dark and nor are we afraid of it. We have simply been anesthetised against it’ (166). For Tuck, then, describing a film as post-noir is a matter of political and aesthetic judgement. In place of the more-or-less distinct periods/categories proffered by Boozer, he suggests a model of genre that acknowledges its ‘combined and uneven development’, but without the teleological impulse Trotsky’s phrase is sometimes taken to imply.ⁱ

However, while Tuck’s approach to post-noir offers something more flexible than chronology, Chuck Stephens straightforwardly confounds it. In a short piece from 2012 on ‘blindingly blonde Fifties no-good-girl Beverly Michaels’, he refers to ‘her greatest films’ as ‘post-noir low-rent masterworks’ (18).ⁱⁱ His description of *The Girl on the Bridge* (Haas 1951), *Pickup* (Haas 1951) and *Wicked Woman* (Rouse 1953) as post-noir might seem so temporally errant as to render the term effectively meaningless – they were, after all, made some years before the original US cycle is usually considered to have come to an end with, say, *Touch of Evil* (Welles 1958). However, what this actually represents is, like Boozer’s and Tuck’s usages of ‘post-noir, the complex process of negotiation between multiple discursive and material agents, including writers, producers, distributors, marketers, readers, fans, and critics, through which a genre’s identity is unendingly formulated and reformulated.ⁱⁱⁱ

John Rieder makes five key points about current theoretical understandings of genre: any genre is ‘historical and mutable’; it has ‘no essence, no single unifying characteristic, and no point of origin’: it ‘is not a set of texts, but rather a way of using texts and of drawing relationships among them’; its ‘identity is a differentially articulated position in an historical and mutable field of genres’; and the ‘attribution’ of a genre ‘identity ... to a text constitutes an active intervention in its distribution and reception’ (200). For anyone who has waded through the endless debates about how to define film noir – including the question of whether or not it is ‘really’ a genre – such principles, which recognise that a genre is not a ‘thing’ (Bould and Vint) or an ‘event’ (Frow 1630) but a complex series of discursive and material structures and processes, should come as both a relief and a release. It should enable us to set aside old questions and generate new and more interesting ones.

However, because this contemporary view of genre is sensitive to both historical mutability and the range of discursive and material actants who use, draw relationships among, differentially articulate, attribute, intervene and so on, it cannot escape the inertia of earlier conceptualisations of genre or of specific genres. For example, in the early 1940s the term ‘film noir’ was used in France to describe some 1930s French films, but Jean-Pierre Chartier’s 1946 suggestion that, in the light of *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), *The Lost Weekend* (1945) and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1946), they no longer deserved the name proved prescient. Films such as *Quai des brumes* (1938) and *Hôtel du nord* (1938) are, in Anglophone criticism at least, routinely excluded from the genre and treated, at best, as poetic realist precursors of ‘real’ (i.e. classical Hollywood) film noir of the 1940s and 1950s. Attempts to recover them as fully-fledged films noir typically end up doing so in relation to ‘real’ noir, sometimes explicitly – as when Ginette Vincendeau identifies the first forty years’ worth of French films noir in terms of ‘a systematically more cynical and morally ambiguous worldview’ arising from France’s ‘different censorship codes’ – and sometimes implicitly – as when she foregrounds their representation of women and their ‘downplaying of action and plot in favour of atmosphere, self-reflexivity, cinephile citations and stylistic flourishes’ (45).

This example also helps to identify the complex temporalities that generic labelling involves. Film noir is often depicted as peculiar because Anglophones did not start using the term until the 1970s, arguably two decades after the genre came to an end; but all genres are named retrospectively. That is, in an important sense, a genre only comes into being *after* it has been successfully named. For all that the texts within the genre existed *prior* to its naming, the naming that produces them as part of the genre simultaneously renders them *post*

– they become, for example, noir only *after* noir has been named and *after* they have been named noir. This is evident in the French naming of wartime American films noir in the immediate post-war years, and again three or more decades later as Anglophone cinephiles, filmmakers, and film studies scholars adopted the term. Furthermore, to an extent this adoption came about because of a desire to label certain US films of the late 1960s and 1970s ‘neo-noir’ – if neo-noir existed, it implied (and thus required and produced) a more or less coherent corpus of 1940s and 1950s US crime movies that contemporary films were seen to revisit and revise. In this way, classical Hollywood film noir, despite its *prioriness*, can also be seen to come *after* neo-noir. Similarly, attempts to recover the *prioriness* of 1930s French films noir cannot avoid, despite an obvious appeal to simple chronology, simultaneously situating them *post* classical Hollywood noir.

This complex, counterintuitive temporality can be understood in terms of the recursivity that marks genre definitions – they all ‘infer the defining characteristics of’ the specific genre ‘from films that are already deemed to belong to’ it (Moine 60) – but it is also a product of the desire to periodise. As Fredric Jameson, writing about modernity, notes, ‘We cannot not periodize’ (5). However, we must also recognise that a period is primarily ‘a narrative category’ (40), ‘a useful trope for generating alternate historical narratives’ (214). For example, such common terms as proto-noir, classical noir, neo-noir, modernist noir, postmodernist noir, global noir and post-noir not only serves to constitute classical Hollywood noir as a category, but also to tell certain kinds of stories about the genre: primarily, that noir is, first and foremost, a Hollywood product of the 1940s and 1950s, and that there was some kind of historical rupture, after which neo-noir appeared. The ‘neo’ prefix implies change, and the ‘noir’ suffix continuity. Some subdivide neo-noir into a modernist phase, usually associated with the Hollywood renaissance of the 1960 and 1970s, and a postmodernist phase, associated with Hollywood in the 1980s and 1990s. Global noir suggests that it is only since the heyday of neo-noir, whenever that might have been, that other cinemas have produced films noirs. And post-noir implies ... well, what does it mean for something to be *post*?

Writing in 1992, Anne McClintock argued that a recent proliferation of *post* terms – ‘post-colonialism, postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-Cold-War, post-Marxism, post-apartheid, post-Soviet, post-Ford, post-feminism, post-national, post-historic, even post-contemporary’ – indicates ‘a wide-spread, epochal crisis in the idea of linear, historical “progress”’ (254). For example, postcolonialism ‘marks history as a series of stages along an epochal road from the “pre-colonial” to “the colonial” to “the post-colonial,”’ betraying ‘an

unbidden, if disavowed, commitment to linear time and the idea of “development” (254). Furthermore, that postcolonialism is only one among many concurrent *posts* troubles teleology, perhaps even marks the ‘end of history’, in the words of neo-liberalism’s wishful-thinker Francis Fukuyama, and the onset of ‘centuries of boredom’ as western-style liberal democracy and its supposed corollary, deregulated capitalism, triumph everywhere (1989 online). At the same time, as McClintock notes, the prepositionality of *postness* tends to produce a hierarchical binary in which that which has passed continues to be privileged over that which comes after. Furthermore, such binarism tends to homogenise the phenomena corralled under each term, and often leads to a fetishised denial both of distinctions within each phenomenon and of other schemes by which they can be approached, interrogated and understood. Indeed, as Jean-François Lyotard writing about the *post* in postmodernism notes, while *post* can imply ‘a simple succession, a diachronic sequence of periods in which each one is clearly identifiable’, the clarity of the distinction between periods implies a radical break, a rupture. However, he adds, ‘this “rupture” is in fact a way of forgetting or repressing the past, that is repeating it and not surpassing it’ (77). For him, *post*

does not signify a movement of *comeback*, *flashback*, or *feedback*, that is, not a movement of repetition but a procedure in “ana-”: a procedure of analysis, anamnesis, anagogy, and anamorphosis that elaborates an “initial forgetting.” (80)

Each of these ‘ana’ terms suggests a creative approach to the past so as to make sense of the present – respectively, the analyst and analysand’s co-operative working through of dream images; the recollection of those things that have been forgotten; the interpretation of the *prior* phenomenon so as to foreground those elements that can be claimed to simultaneously foreshadow and typify the *post* phenomenon; and the examination from a specific angle so as to uncover the ‘natural’ appearance of that which was ‘distorted’ when viewed from a conventional perspective.

In a similar vein, Kwame Anthony Appiah argued in 1991 that the insistence on the *postness* of postmodern architecture, postmodern literature, postmodern art and so on was a space-clearing exercise, a means by which cultural producers distinguished themselves and their work by constructing and marking differences (341-342). He argues that the *postness* of the postcolonial functions in the same way, and as such is ‘not concerned with transcending, with going beyond, coloniality’ (348). Such space-clearing gestures require ‘the manufacture of Otherness’ (356), and in both cases, *post* implies a coming-after that also ‘challenges

earlier legitimating narratives' (353). Although he strongly identifies such space-clearings with the product differentiation demanded by the ubiquity of capital and capitalist social relations, that does not have to be the only reason for *posting* a phenomenon.

For example, although Jennifer Fay and Justus Nieland never actually use the term 'post-noir', their focus on the long multinational, international and transnational history of noir *posts* earlier understandings of the genre as a US, or even Euro-American, undertaking.^{iv} Such a position opens up discussions of noir in two directions. First, it promotes an understanding of the genre in terms of different national film cultures, and the relationship of the genre and those national cultures to other national and global film cultures. Second, this reframing of the genre enables a better understanding of US film noir by not treating it as synonymous with or definitive of the genre as a whole but as an expression of American experiences, whether of the Depression (Dinerstein), labour history (Broe), the wartime film industry (Biesen), German emigrants in Hollywood (Bahr), US citizenship (Auerbach), the American Dream (Osteen), or music and sound (Butler, Miklitsch).

Evolutionary models typically assert that the contemporary version of the genre is more self-reflexive than earlier versions. Writing about pastiche, Richard Dyer at first seems to accept but ultimately rejects this teleological fallacy. His suggestion that films such as *Body Heat* (Kasdan US 1981) affirm 'the existence of a genre by the very fact of being able to imitate it' (132) implies a necessary ordering of noir developments in distinct, temporal stages. However, he also suggests that a period in which pastiche is, or at least seems, prominent is one in which there is a broader wave of genre production, 'so that making things noir becomes simply a way of doing things, aware of where the style supposedly comes from but not especially nostalgic or ironic about the fact, not so much neo-noir as just noir now' (129). Consequently, pastiche, rather than representing some self-reflexive pinnacle, or waning, of a genre's evolution, can 'also be a stage in generic renewal (neo-noir being a step towards normalising contemporary noir production)' (132-133). For example, he points to an a cycle – *A Rage in Harlem* (Duke UK/US 1991), *Deep Cover* (Duke US 1992), *One False Move* (Franklin US 1992), *The Glass Shield* (Burnett France/US 1994) and *Devil in a Blue Dress* (Franklin US 1995) – that moved African Americans 'from the margins of 1940s and 1950s noir' to centre stage (129).

However, he also acknowledges 'a common model of the history of noir' that identifies pastiche neo-noir as a phenomenon that comes between 1960s and 1970s modernist/revisionist noir and 1990s films that 'either use the genre with a heightened sense of ironic intertextuality, pastiche gone mad', as in *The Two Jakes* (Nicholson US 1990),

Reservoir Dogs (Tarantino US 1992), *Romeo Is Bleeding* (Medak UK/US 1994), or that ‘have simply got over noir’s provenance and distinctiveness and got on with working with its tropes and styles’, as in *Someone to Watch Over Me* (Scott US 1987), *Red Rock West* (Dahl US 1993), *The Last Seduction* (Dahl UK/US 1994) and *Bound* (Wachowski and Wachowski US 1996) (129). In a footnote, he argues against ‘consider[ing] this process only as one phase succeeding another’, pointing to the ongoing production of pastiche neo-noir in films such as *Miller’s Crossing* (Coen US 1990), *Mortal Thoughts* (Rudolph US 1991), and *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (Coen US/UK 2001), as well European films, such as *Shallow Grave* (Boyle UK 1994), *The Near Room* (Hayman UK 1995) and *Croupier* (Hodges France/UK/Germany/Ireland 1998) ‘whose geo-cultural difference are liable to lead to the sense of pastiche’ (135-136). The idea that some contemporary noirs are, thanks to the cycle of pastiches, now able to get back to the business of just being noir is extremely appealing. Indeed, it is largely responsible for the selection of films discussed in the remainder of this essay. However, the examples of such films that Dyer lists – the wording of his footnote implies that he accepts this description of them – appear, less than a decade later, indistinguishable from those listed as pastiches; and, given the style-consciousness of their directors, Ridley Scott, John Dahl and the Wachowski siblings, it is surprising to find that anyone ever thought otherwise.

Lest I should be charged with committing the very error identified by Gallagher, to which the opening of this essay referred, they did always seem to me like pastiches. However, this does not necessarily exclude them from the business of noir. To whatever extent Fredric Jameson is correct to describe pastiche as ‘speech in a dead language’, ‘neutral ... mimicry’ and ‘blank parody’ (*Postmodernism* 17), he is only normalising his own response to textual features. Pastiche can be a major element of a film without being a totalising dominant; and the social relationships within which films are encountered, engaged with, and consumed do not produce uniform results. For example, while I personally find nothing of political value in *Someone to Watch Over Me* and *Red Rock West*, there can be no denying the cultural/political impact of *The Last Seduction*’s Bridget (Linda Fiorentino) and *Bound*’s Corky (Gina Gershon) and Violet (Jennifer Tilly) – and the fact that this lesbian couple get away with it – when the films were released, regardless of both films’ narrative and visual pastiches of classical Hollywood noir.

Therefore, just as construing noir after the 1980s as necessarily having moved beyond pastiche is problematic, so too is any assumption that because a noir is partly, or even primarily, pastiche it cannot also perform the genre’s critical work.

Post-noir: going global, and local, in the era of globalisation

Manuel Castells describes the goals of the capitalist global information network that dominates our world as

deepening the capitalist logic of profit-seeking in capital-labor relationships; enhancing the productivity of labor and capital; globalizing production, circulation, and markets, seizing the opportunity of the most advantageous conditions for profit-making everywhere; and marshaling the state's support for productivity gains and competitiveness of national economies, often to the detriment of social protection and public interest regulations. (19)

The imposition, implementation and enforcement of neoliberal policies worldwide by such institutions as the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the OECD and the UN, and by individual nations, has produced a 'elite specialty labor force' that is highly mobile and 'increasingly globalized', while further constraining the 'bulk of labor' to the 'local' (131). As Zygmunt Bauman notes, 'the world of the "locally tied", of those barred from moving and thus bound to bear passively whatever change may be visited' upon their locality, 'the real space is fast closing up' (88). The spaces of these two classes are the spaces of post-noir.

In *The International* (Tykwer US/Germany/UK 2009), a rather bedraggled Interpol agent Louis Salinger (Clive Owen) – who was forced out of Scotland Yard several years earlier, when a previous investigation into the blandly ominous-sounding International Bank of Business and Credit got too close to uncovering their criminal activities – joins forces with Eleanor Whitman (Naomi Watts), a New York Assistant District Attorney, to pursue evidence that IBBC is money-laundering for organized crime. Their Europe-wide and Atlantic-hopping investigation uncovers evidence not only of collusion with state agencies and police forces, and of corporate assassination to ease business deals and cover tracks, but also, curiously, that IBBC wants to buy hundreds of million dollars worth of missile guidance and control systems. When Umberto Calvini (Luca Giorgio Barbareschi), one of only two manufacturers of these systems and possibly Italy's next prime minister, refuses to deal with IBBC, he is assassinated so that his more pliable sons will take over the business. However, he has already revealed the grander scheme of which the deal is just a small part. IBCC have bought billions of dollars of Chinese missiles that are inoperable without a particular kind of guidance

system. Although they do intend to sell the missiles, the purchase was only a gateway deal in order to secure a future role as the broker for China's international trade in small arms, which play a major role in global conflicts, especially in the developing world. Whitman assumes IBCC intends to control conflicts by controlling the flow of weapons. Calvini promptly disabuses her: conflicts create debt, and IBCC wants control of that debt – banks are only interested in enslaving us all, whether individuals or countries, to debt.

To suggest that the global scope of this international thriller removes it from the purview of noir would be mistaken. Noir always exists in relation to general filmmaking and cultural norms of its period. For example, classical Hollywood noir typically played out on a smaller scale – a town, a city – without glamorous international locations, and it was frequently driven by dialogue, interspersed with occasional action scenes. However, after the rise of the action movie and in an era of international co-productions, the same anchorings in language and locale need not apply. *Force of Evil* (Polonsky US 1948) could establish the parallels between a gangster's attempt to consolidate the numbers racket and the inherent violence of monopoly capitalism, even capturing something of its transformation into finance capitalism, without leaving New York; and both Philip Marlowe and Jake Gittes could map out the operations of capital and its attendant social relationships within and across classes without needing to go much beyond Los Angeles' city limits. But in the time of global digital interconnectedness and neoliberal hegemony, such restrictions are optional. *The International's* roaming narrative enables Tykwer to capture, primarily through architecture and design, the interrelatedness of a global capitalist class. There is little to choose between the echoing, tastefully spartan banks, businesses and hotels located in Berlin, Luxembourg or Milan and the Guggenheim in New York, which is at least more distinctive, if equally deracinated. In this visually dark film, which even includes a shot of a window blind's shadow falling across the protagonist, these spaces of the global capital class possess the same kind of sheen as their immaculate limousines. In contrast, the offices of those who seek to police them are cramped, cluttered or both; and the New York of on-the-ground policework resembles the city in *The French Connection* (Friedkin US 1971), *Serpico* (Lumet US 1973), *The Taking of Pelham 123* (Sargent US 1974) or *Dog Day Afternoon* (Lumet US 1975), only glossier because that neoliberal sheen is everywhere and inescapable.

Salinger is a dogged investigator, driven by a somewhat inarticulate code of ethics that seems out of place in this fallen, if glossy, world – 'true-hearted, determined, full of purpose', in the words of William Wexler (Armin Mueller-Stahl), a former Stasi Colonel who is now a senior IBCC counsellor. Whitman possesses similar qualities. When the District Attorney

(James Rebhorn) reprimands her for what she defends as her pursuit of ‘the truth’, he reminds her ‘that there’s what people want to hear, there’s what people want to believe, there’s everything else, then there’s the truth’. ‘And since when is that okay?’ she snaps back, adding ‘the truth means responsibility’. He agrees: ‘Which is why everyone dreads it.’ As this exchange suggests, it seems that she will soon, like many a hardboiled detective before her, be a former employee of the DA.

Wexler acknowledges that, as a young man, he was every bit as upright and purposeful as Salinger, but circumstances overwhelmed him, made him into someone else; on the contrary, Salinger insists, life is always a matter of making choices. Wexler then persuades him that he must choose to step outside the law in order to find justice (in truth, he has already done so multiple times, albeit without realising). IBBC cannot be brought down by legal means because the whole system of global capital – multinational corporations, governments, terrorist networks, organised crime – need banks like IBCC to exist in order to operate in the grey and black economies that are intertwined with, rather than distinct from, the legal economy. Salinger and Wexler inform the Calvinis brothers that IBBC ordered their fathers death, thus forcing the CEO, Jonas Skarssen (Ulrich Thomsen), to buy guidance systems from Ahmet Sunay (Haluk Bilginer) instead. However, Sunay has already sold to Israel countermeasures that will render the missiles ineffective; so all Salinger needs to do is record Skarssen admitting to this knowledge and release the tape to his Syrian and Iranian buyers, who will pull out of the deal and bankrupt IBBC. This is not defeating the system, but unleashing it upon itself. Of course, in the way of noir, Salinger’s plan goes awry, and he finds himself drawing a gun on Skarssen. His big moral dilemma, whether he should shoot or not, is quickly rendered utterly redundant. The Calvinis’ hitman steps in from nowhere and kills Skarssen. The system rumbles on.

The end-credits display a series of newspapers, moving from front-page coverage of Skarssen’s murder, to business section accounts of IBBC’s expansion into a third world newly awash in Chinese small arms. The final headline returns us to Whitman, who parted ways with Salinger at his behest when he joined forces with Wexler. She has moved on to bigger and better things, and is now heading an investigation into the money-laundering activities of offshore banks. While it seems like a moment of personal triumph, it is just global capitalism maintaining the façade of legality while ensuring its supposed watchdogs remain powerless to check its lawlessness.

The International does not give any clear view of the primary victims of IBBC’s machinations, reducing them to some briefly glimpsed footage on a peripheral television

screen. Although films such as *Perder es cuestión de método/The Art of Losing* (Cabrera Colombia/Spain 2004) and *Manorama Six Feet Under* (Navdeep Singh India 2007) perhaps prove ultimately less pointed in their critique, they do get us closer to those immiserated and impoverished by globalised capital. In the former, police Colonel Moya (Carlos Benjumea) gives Víctor Silanpa (Daniel Giménez Cacho), a middle-aged and rather shabby journalist whose girlfriend has just left him and whose haemorrhoids are playing up, an exclusive to investigate the murder of an unknown man, impaled on a pole, by a lake outside Bogotá. Silanpa gradually uncovers a web of conspiracies and counter-conspiracies concerning the ownership of the lakefront, over which gangsters and other financial speculators are competing since it is ripe for development. In this mildly comical thriller, no layer of society is left untouched by the often-fatal consequences of such dealings, from leading politicians and lawyers to the teenage Quica (Martina García), who pretends to be older than she is in order to work as a prostitute who pretends to be a minor. When Silanpa's findings lead to the arrest of the key conspirators, Moya merely strikes a deal with them that will benefit him financially before releasing them. He concocts a rather implausible story that pins it all on people who are already dead or arrested, and blackmails Silanpa into going along with him. As the theme song tells us, when 'cash is king', when 'politics means theft, millionaires, money and golden papaya', when 'they've bribed us all', then 'nobody's innocent any more' and social relations have dissolved into a war of all against all in which only 'the most violent' will survive.

Manorama, which is modelled after *Chinatown* (Polanski US 1974) and full of allusions to *Kiss Me Deadly* (Aldrich US 1955), has an even more complicated narrative. It is set in Lakhori, in northwest India, an inconsequential town that makes the news twice a year, once in summer, when about a hundred people die from the heat, and once in winter, when roughly the same number die from the cold. There has been a drought for three years, and construction of the much-hyped Rajasthan Vikas Canal has stopped before it barely started. Satyaveer Randhawa (Abhay Deol), a junior Public Works Department engineer, has been suspended for accepting a bribe or, rather, for being the one person in a thoroughly corrupt department to get caught doing so. He is also a writer and journalist, the author of *Manorama*, a novel that sold only 200 copies. One night, a woman (Sarika) who claims to be the wife of P.P. Rathore (Kulbhushan Kharbanda), the right-wing Hindu nationalist state minister for irrigation, appears out of the night, in a shot that echoes the first appearance of Kathie (Jane Greer) in *Out of the Past* (Tourneur US 1947), to hire Satyaveer. Since she has no access to a private detective, she wants to hire the author of her favourite detective novel to find evidence

of the affair she suspects her husband is having; all he manages to photograph, however, is the minister arguing with a young woman. He hands over the undeveloped film, thinking that will be the end of it, but he becomes suspicious after his client, who admits she is not Meenakshi Rathore and that her name is Manorama, apparently commits suicide.

Manorama was actually a social worker and activist opposed to the construction of the canal. Satyaveer tracks down her roommate, Sheetal (Raima Sen), follows her to the orphanage where she works. It is supported by, and named after, the childless Rathore, whose real wife is confined to a wheelchair. The woman he photographed arguing with the minister turns out to be Sameera (Poonam Gibson), the fiancée of Rathore's personal physician, Anil Poddar (Rajesh M), who also runs the orphanage clinic. Mistaking Satyaveer for another journalist, she reveals that she is Rathore's illegitimate daughter, and that she needs him to admit to this publically so that Anil's parents will permit their marriage to go ahead, only he refuses to do so because her mother was a muslim. After witnessing the inflated prices being paid at auction for plots of deserted wasteland that will face onto the canal, if and when it is built, Satyaveer begins to piece the mystery together. He discovers that Sheetal died some time ago and that Neetu, the woman pretending to be her, actually works for Rathore. He is framed for the bloody murder of Sameera and Anil, and while on the run finds the roll of film Manorama shot the night after his failed attempt. It shows Rathore sexually abusing, and accidentally killing, a young girl who had gone missing from the orphanage.^v Satyaveer concludes Manorama was using it to blackmail Rathore into not restarting construction on canal. He could not be more wrong.

Manorama worked for Rathore, infiltrating NGOs and protest groups. Anil is her brother, and when they discovered that Sameera was Rathore's daughter, and that Rathore had terminal cancer, they kept the latter a secret from the minister while trying to persuade him to recognise Sameera. Acknowledged as his only child, she would inherit everything, including all the land he owns through and alongside the canal route. They were just in it for his money – the political corruption around the development project, even the decades of child abductions and abuse, which seemed to be the very core of the narrative turn out to have been peripheral to the scheme actually driving the narrative.

It is a clever switch. Early on, posing as a journalist writing an article on an organisation protesting the canal, Satyaveer tries to gather information about Manorama's life and background. He explains to her colleagues that he needs the human interest angle provided by her death to shape a story that will allow him to express their shared 'socio-political views'. In a similar manner, *Manorama* resolves into a melodrama about the

conniving of greedy relatives, but not before foregrounding the socio-political backdrop to their actions. After attending the auction, Satyaveer comes across the temporary encampment of some dispossessed peasants, and asks an old man where they are going. He replies

just moving along. We'll go where our hunger takes us. Our land is gone ... I'm just a peasant, son. All this land belongs to Rathore. Our families worked this land for generations, eked out a living from this dry dirt. But now the canal's coming – the Raja's barren land will yield gold. There's no room for us or our hunger here now. May God have mercy on us.

This cannot help but recall the controversial Narmada dam project,^{vi} which displaced at least 70,000 people and, while state governments apparently turned a blind eye, failed to comply with almost every mandated environment and health safeguard. Such lucrative development projects, long favoured by the regulatory and directive organisations that work to ensure the extension and perpetuation of the capitalist global economy, are commonplace, as are such consequences.

Despite Hollywood's much commented upon turn to (occasional) narratively complex, broad tapestry, ensemble cast, cross-class melodramas in the new millennium, such overt political commentary is relatively rare; John Sayles' semi-independent *Lone Star* (US 1996) and *Silver City* (US 2004) are obvious exceptions. Instead, this kind of narrative has found a home in the 'quality' dramas of the TVIII era, most obviously *The Wire* (US 2002-2008), *Forbrydelsen/The Killing* (Denmark/Norway/Sweden/Germany 2007-2012), *Engrenages/Spiral* (France 2005-) and, in a more fantastical mode, the abruptly cancelled *Day Break* (US 2006).

In contrast, one particular strength of lower-budget post-noir film lies in its capacity for realist narratives focused on the lives of those Bauman describes as the 'locally tied'.^{vii} *Frozen River* (Hunt US 2008) is set in upstate New York, on the US border with Canada. In the winter, it is difficult to tell the grey sky apart from the snow-covered ground. Ray Eddy (Melissa Leo) lives in a battered, old single-wide, with her two sons, fifteen-year-old TJ (Charlie McDermott) and five-year-old Ricky (James Reilly), and a gambling addict husband, Troy, who has just disappeared with their savings – money they need to take delivery of their dream home, a double-wide with three bedrooms and wall-to-wall carpet. She spots Troy's car at the bus stop by the Territorial High Stakes Bingo hall on the edge of the reservation, just as it is being stolen by Lila Littlewolf (Misty Upham). When Ray confronts her, the

young Mohawk woman tells her where she can sell the car to a smuggler who is always on the look-out for a good car with a button release trunk; but instead, cons her into crossing the over the frozen river that passes through the reservation, and is thus not patrolled, into Canada in order to smuggle a pair of Chinese workers into the US.^{viii}

Lila is unpopular with the tribal council, in part because of her husband's death, and is allowed no real contact with her infant son, who was taken away from her and is being raised by her mother-in-law. Ray is reduced to serving her sons popcorn and Tang for two successive meals, and with their television about to be repossessed, she unsuccessfully pleads with her boss at the Yankee Dollar store to put her on full-time, as he promised he would after six months when he hired her two years ago. Faced with losing the deposit on the double-wide if she cannot make the balloon payment by Christmas, she sees no way out other than to go into business with Lila; for each person they smuggle into the US, they are paid \$1200.

Despite their initial antagonism, and the particularities of their different situations, Ray and Lila grow to recognise their shared marginalisation and immiseration. A kind of class solidarity emerges between them, affectively figured as a bond shared between mothers whose children have no-one else. This is cemented when Ray, who knows she will be treated much more leniently because she is white, gives herself up to the police so that Lila can avoid arrest and expulsion from the reservation. Equally significantly, Ray trusts Lila (who snatches back her own son) to take care of TJ, Ricky and their new home while she serves a couple of months in prison.

As well as capturing the ceaseless, wearying precarity of minimum-wage (and below) workers, *Frozen River* carefully links the constraints on its protagonists to global capital. When Ricky asks his mother what will become of the single-wide when the move into their new home, she explains that it will be flattened, shipped to China, melted down and turned into toys that will be shipped back to the US for her to sell at Yankee Dollar. Although she does not seem to connect this to the Chinese Lila tricked her into smuggling across the border, on their next trip, the first at her own suggestion, the nature of this commerce in people becomes clear. Their cargo have their shoes taken away from them so that, once in the US, they cannot flee; each undocumented worker is destined to indentured servitude to the snakehead gang behind the trafficking operation until they have paid off the cost – some \$40-50,000 each – of being brought to the US. On their final trip, Ray even risks her own safety to protect two young women, clearly destined for sex-work, from a trafficker's physical abuse. Despite their global movement of such *sans papiers*, they are every bit as locally tied as Ray and Lila.

Mang jing/Blind Shaft (Li China/Germany/Hong Kong 2003) is set in Shanxi in northern China, one of the country's poorest provinces. The high, cold, dry plateau often appears like nothing more than a succession of open cast mines. In this coal-rich region, mine bosses cut corners so as to make their quotas, and with thousands of deaths in the mines every year, they are anxious to avoid investigations. As the opening minutes of the film show us, Song Jinming (Yi Lixiang) and Tang Zhaoyang (Wang Shuangbao), two of China's millions of unemployed and underemployed migrant workers, have found a way to take profitable advantage of this. Having convinced a third man that it is necessary to pose as Tang's brother in order to get a job at this particular mine, they murder him mid-shift then fake his death in a cave-in. So as to contain news of the fatality, the boss orders thugs violently to turn back anyone who tries to leave the mine camp, and then sets about persuading Tang to accept cash compensation for his bereavement in exchange for signing a waiver stating that his brother died from his own carelessness. When a henchman suggests just killing off Tang and Song, the only thing that keeps the boss from doing so is the prospect of the much larger bribe he might have to pay to the police if their deaths are discovered. Once Tang accepts the money, he and Song are fired, which enables them to make their way to a nearby town to remit their earnings to their distant families, and to find another victim for their lethal scam.

Tang is a stone killer, indifferent to everyone except Song and, presumably, the family he supports. Song is more humane, concerned about being able to pay for his son's tuition, and is genuinely reluctant when Tang tricks Yuan Fengming (Wang Baoqiang) into posing as Song's nephew. Yuan is just fifteen, naïve and goodhearted. His father left home six months earlier to look for work and has not been heard from since. Yuan left school because he can no longer afford it, and is desperate to earn the money necessary to keep his younger sister in school. He even hopes to find his father while wandering in search of work. When the threesome are eventually hired at a distant mine, they must work a trial period for nothing, and pay for their boots and helmets, before receiving even the meagre pay typical of the industry. Song becomes attached to Yuan, although he denies it, and even wonders whether he is the son of the last man they killed. He cannot bring himself to murder the boy, but on day, after setting blasting charges in the shaft in which they are working, Tang kills their snooping foreman and does not hesitate to strike down Song to get to Yuan. Yuan flees, and Song manages to knock out Tang before collapsing beside him. If either of them is still alive, they are both killed when the charges are ignited. Over his confused protests, Yuan is bullied by the mine boss into accepting compensation for his supposed uncle's death.

Mang jing possesses a kind of grubby, digital documentary realism. It is shot in such a way as to match the footage that was covertly shot on uncontrolled locations, including actual mining camps whose managers Li had to bribe in order to gain access. As with *Frozen River*, affective bonds, albeit considerably more attenuated, are intertwined with recognition of a shared class position. This is apparent in the relationship between Song and Tang, and in the paternal interest Song takes in Yuan, but its most potent and touching expression comes elsewhere. One of the excuses Song concocts to postpone Yuan's murder is that the boy should not die a virgin, so they take him to a brothel in the nearby town and set him up with a young prostitute, Xiao Hong (Jing Ai). She presents herself as a somewhat jaded professional to the older man, but lowers this front a little when alone with Yuan. Some days later, when the men have finally been paid, they return to town, and Yuan is eager to send his wages back home. As he queues up, a rather more conservatively dressed Xiao exits the office where she, too, has been remitting her earnings. He is too shy to respond to her greeting but, as she passes by, she reaches out and squeezes him gently on the shoulder. It is a tiny moment of human empathy, snatched from the cash nexus that otherwise dominates social relations.

Although *Blind Shaft* makes no reference to extensive western investment and profiteering from China's poorly regulated and extremely dangerous mining industry, the film is careful to signal the global flows of capital through the region. This is signalled by commodities – Song's shoulder bag has a logo saying 'Monterey'; the pornographic images on the walls of the miners' shack and the less explicit ones that decorate Xiao's small room in the brothel are all of western women – and also by the new lyrics to an old song that the two men are taught by the sex-workers in a karaoke bar. It no longer goes

Long live socialism, long live socialism
In socialist countries everyone is high status
Reactionaries overthrown
Imperialists ran away with their tails behind

but instead

The reactionaries were never overthrown
The capitalists came back with their US dollars
Liberating all of China
Bringing the sexual climax of socialism

This history has produced a world in which, according to Tang, ‘only a mum’s feelings for her kids are real’; and Song doubts that even that is true any more.

Conclusion

For Lyotard, *post* represents a discursive strategy, a manner of construing the present so as to shape our understanding of the past. It draws to the surface (or perhaps creates) the latent content of memories. It causes us to remember or, perhaps, creates memories (since, in a sense, that which has been forgotten is not available for recollection). It implies a past that apparently causes, makes necessary, the (construed) present. It normalises the past that can now be seen, freeing it from the distorted view that once concealed it.

In proposing a version of post-noir, one that deliberately marginalises expressionist visual style in favour of realist figuration and critique of capitalism, this essay is not just an attempt to outline some post-millennial trends in the genre. It also, in a modest way, remembers what noir, the pulp wing of Critical Theory, does when it gets over itself and gets back to business.

Works cited

- Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. London: BFI, 1999.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony. ‘Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?’ *Critical Inquiry* 17.2 (Winter 1991): 336-357.
- Auerbach, Jonathan. *Dark Borders: Film Noir and American Citizenship*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011.
- Bahr, Ehrhard. *Weimar on the Pacific: German Exile Culture in Los Angeles and the Crisis of Modernism*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2007.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. Cambridge: Polity, 1998.
- Biesen, Sheri Chinen. *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2005.
- Boozer, Jack. ‘The Lethal *Femme Fatale* in the Noir Tradition’. *Journal of Film and Video* 51.3/4 (1999/2000): 20-35.
- Bould, Mark and Sherryl Vint. ‘There Is No Such Thing as Science Fiction’. *Reading Science Fiction*. Ed. James Gunn, Marleen Barr and Matthew Candelaria. New York: Palgrave. 43-51.

- Broe, Dennis. *Film Noir, American Workers, and Postwar Hollywood*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2009.
- Butler, David. *Jazz Noir: Listening to Music from Phantom Lady to The Last Seduction*. Westport: Praeger, 2002.
- Castells, Manuel. *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Volume I: The Rise of the Network Society*, second edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 2000.
- Chartier, Jean-Pierre. 'The Americans Are Making Dark Films Too'. *Perspectives on Film Noir*. Trans. and ed. R. Barton Palmer. New York: G.K. Hall, 25-27.
- Desser, David. 'Global Noir: Genre Film in the Age of Transnationalism'. *Film Genre Reader III*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003. 516-536.
- Dinerstein, Joel. "'Emergent Noir": Film Noir and the Great Depression in *High Sierra* (1941) and *This Gun for Hire* (1942).' *Journal of American Studies*. 42.3 (2008): 415-48.
- Dyer, Richard. *Pastiche*. London: Routledge, 2007.
- Fay, Jennifer and Justus Nieland. *Film Noir: Hard-Boiled Modernity and the Cultures of Globalization*. London: Routledge, 2010.
- Frow, John. "'Reproducibles, Rubrics, and Everything You Need": Genre Theory Today'. *PMLA* 122.5 (2007): 1626-1634.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 'The End of History'. *The National Interest* (Summer 1989).
<http://ps321.community.uaf.edu/files/2012/10/Fukuyama-End-of-history-article.pdf>.
 Accessed 18 July 2013.
- Gallagher, Tag. 'Shoot-out at the Genre Corral: Problems in the "Evolution" of the Western'. *Film Genre Reader III*. Ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995. 262-276.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. London: Verso, 1991.
- . *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. London: Verso 2002.
- Liotard, Jean-François. 'Note on the Meaning of "Post-"''. *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondences 1982-1985*. Trans. Don Barry, Bernadette Maher, Julian Pefanis, Virginia Spate and Morgan Thomas. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 75-80.
- McClintock, Anne. 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the term "Postcolonialism."' *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory*. Ed. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iversen. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994. 253-266.

- Marcantonio, Carla. 'The Transvestite Figure and Film Noir: Pedro Almodóvar's Transnational Imaginary'. *Contemporary Spanish Cinema and Genre*. Ed. Jay Beck and Vicente Rodríguez Ortega. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008. 157-178.
- Miklitsch, Robert. *Siren City: Sound and Source Music in Classic American Film Noir*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2011.
- Moine, Raphaëlle. *Cinema Genre*. Trans. Alistair Fox and Hilary Radner. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008.
- Osteen, Mark. *Nightmare Alley: Film Noir and the American Dream*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 2012.
- Palmer, Lorrie. 'Cranked Masculinity: Hypermediation in Digital Action Cinema', *Cinema Journal* 51.4 (2012): 1-25.
- Rieder, John. 'On Defining SF, or Not: Genre Theory, SF, and History'. *Science Fiction Studies* 111 (2010): 191-209.
- Roy, Arundhati. 'The Greater Common Good'. *The Cost of Living*. New York: Modern Library, 1999. 1-90.
- Shaviro, Steven. *Post-Cinematic Affect*. Winchester: Zero, 2010.
- Shin, Chi-Yun and Mark Gallagher, eds. *East Asian Film Noir: Transnational Encounters and Intercultural Dialogue*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2013.
- Spicer, Andrew, ed. *European Film Noir*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.
- Stephens, Chuck. 'A Face in the Crowd: Attack of the 100-Foot Hotcha. Late-noir firestarter Beverly Michaels's moment in the Hollywood sun'. *Film Comment* 48.4 (2012): 18.
- Tuck, Greg. 'Laughter in the Dark: Irony, Black Comedy and Noir in the Films of David Lynch, the Coen Brothers, and Quentin Tarantino'. *Neo-Noir*. Ed. Mark Bould, Kathrina Glitre and Greg Tuck. London: Wallflower, 2009. 152-167.
- . 'Sex with the City: Urban Spaces, Sexual Encounters and Erotic Spectacle in Tsukamoto Shinya's *Rokugatsu no Hebi – A Snake of June* (2003)', *Film Studies* 11 (2007): 49-60.
- Vincendeau, Ginette. 'French Film Noir'. *European Film Noir*. Ed. Andrew Spicer. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. 23-54.

ⁱ On the problems with evolutionary models of genre, see Gallagher.

ⁱⁱ His subtitle adds a further confusion by describing Michael as a 'late-noir firestarter' (18).

ⁱⁱⁱ See Altman.

^{iv} They are not alone in this drive to treat noir in ways that are not Americo-centric. See, for example, Desser, Marcantonio, Shin and Gallagher, and Spicer.

^v Rathore's monstrosity is obviously indebted to *Chinatown's* Noah Cross (John Huston), himself a Richard Nixon figure. Some European post-noirs, such as *De zaak Alzheimer/The Memory of a Killer* (Van Looy Belgium/Netherlands 2003) and *Män som hatar kvinnor/The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Oplev Sweden/Denmark/Germany/Norway 2009), emphasise the monstrosity of the capitalist class and its politician-compradors through their paedophilia, incest and other, frequently murderous, sex crimes; others, such as *Intacto* (Fresnadillo Spain 2001), *13 Tzameti* (Babluani France/Georgia 2005), *Frontiere(s)/Frontier(s)* (Gens France/Switzerland 2007), *Frygtelig lykkelig/Terribly Happy* (Genz Denmark 2008), *Martyrs* (Laugier France/Canada 2008) and *Kill List* (Wheatley UK 2011), often spill over into fantasy or horror to convey this monstrosity by suggesting the hidden extension in to present day power relations archaic feudal privilege and abuses, often linked to Europe's fascist history and/or the occult. *The International's* Skarsen is perhaps unusual among such villain figures inasmuch as there is nothing overtly unsavoury about him, although the scenes in which he is seen at home with his young son, teaching him that relationships are instrumental, constantly to be weighed and strategised, do suggest the sociopathy of privilege, wealth and control that governs his business dealings – always seemingly rational, but never reasonable – extends into all aspects of his life.

^{vi} Familiar in the West from Arundhati Roy's *The Cost of Living* (1999) and the documentaries *A Narmada Diary* (Dhuru and Patwardhan India 1995) and *Drowned Out* (Armstrong UK 2002).

^{vii} This emphasis on more overtly realist filmmaking here is not intended to suggest that there is no place in post-noir for what could be broadly described as expressionism. Beyond such oddities as *Revolver* (Ritchie France/UK 2005) and *Haywire* (Soderbergh US/Ireland 2011) and such genuine one-offs as *Southland Tales* (Kelly Germany/US/France 2006), *The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call – New Orleans* (Herzog US 2009) and *Black Swan* (Aronofsky US 2010), there are several directors pushing post-noir expressionism in new directions while getting on with the business of noir, including: Tsukamoto Shinya, in *Tokyo Fist* (Japan 1995), *Bullet Ballet* (Japan 1998), *Rokugatsu no hebi/A Snake of June* (Japan 2002); Nicolas Winding Refn, in *Drive* (US 2011) and *Only God Forgives* (France/Thailand/US/Sweden 2013) especially, although this tendency has been evident since his earliest films; and Nevelidine+Taylor, in *Crank* (US 2006) and *Crank: High Voltage* (US 2009), which are frenetic, unofficial remakes of *D.O.A.* (Maté US 1950), and *Gamer* (US 2009). On Tsukamoto, see Tuck, 'Sex'; on Nevelidine+Taylor, see Shaviro 93-130 and Palmer.

^{viii} People trafficking is central to a number of post-noirs, including *Dirty Pretty Things* (Frears UK 2002), *Lilja 4-ever/Lilya 4-ever* (Moodysson Sweden/Denmark 2002), *Eastern Promises* (Cronenberg US/UK/Canada 2007), *Mang shan/Blind Mountain* (Li China 2007) and *Flickan som lekte med elden/The Girl Who Played with Fire* (Alfredson Sweden/Denmark/Germany 2009).