

Noir, Eastern Europe, and the Global Imaginary

Originally, the idea for the present theme issue of *Caietele Echinoc* germinated in the hotbed of the DETECt project, which reunited fourteen universities from ten European countries around a research agenda that becomes apparent in the unfolding of the above administrative (but also poetic...) acronym: Detecting Transcultural Identity in European Popular Crime Narratives. The project explored the manner in which, on the lines of the free circulation of persons, capitals, and labour, a productive European circulation of rhetoric, narrative, symbolic, and thematic structures connected to crime fiction (in its extended understanding as literature, cinema, television, and all their imaginable hybridizations) could also be identified and described. The main working hypothesis was that the spreading rate of such productions across the flexible inner borders of the European Union from 1989 to the present was indicative of both their impact on collective imagination, and of a rhizomatic identity dynamics exposing not homogenization, but complex, to time problematic, even contentious, but always relevant and vibrant *intrication*.

DETECt exercised its European comprehension through a policy of mapping and exploring the different geo-cultural and historical areas of our continental union. The task of covering, if not actually producing “Eastern Europe” was shared by academic representatives of the University of Debrecen and the University of Bucharest. And since one of the most convergent of the theoretical premises of the project was that *noir* might be the concept best suited to overarch the different subgenres and tendencies of contemporary crime narratives – together with our Debrecen colleagues we set the course for discovering and displaying *East-European noir*, mainly in its present but also in its historical hypostases. Our collaboration resulted in a number of project deliveries and scientific articles,¹ but we all agreed on the fact that there is still a great deal of work to be done, concerning actual comparative research on all the relevant fields (i.e. production, textual articulation, distribution, reception), but also for extending the network of scholars interested and with relevant expertise in these fields. The core expectation of the original concept of the present thematic issue of *Caietele Echinoc* was that enlarging the network of scholars interested in East-European crime/noir fiction (equally implying the printed and screened varieties) is the only way of obtaining a more accurate image of the diverse regional developments. I embarked on this exploration together with dr. Sándor Kálai, who currently teaches at the Department of Communication and Media Studies of the University of Debrecen,² and dr. Roxana Eichel, my colleague at the Literary Studies Department of the Faculty of Letters of the University of Bucharest.

But the project actually gained momentum when it intersected, almost providentially, the endeavours of our friends and colleagues from the *Phantasma* Centre for Imagination Studies. We were happy to discover on the rich research agenda of this prestigious research hub coordinated by professor Corin Braga a distinct interest in symbolic concretions that obviously and expressly intersected the sphere of the *noir*. From this point on, the project underwent a substantial change of design. We reframed East-European contemporary *noir* not only as a subject in itself, but also as opening a perspective on, or granting a way of access to larger processes of what might be called, with a bit of conceptual stamina, the global cultural imaginary.

The structure of this thematic issue is the result of the interaction of the above vectors. Its first segment, titled “East European Noir – General and Particular,” stakes out a specific, regional way toward the general problems of defining and understanding *noir*. Caius Dobrescu and Doru Pop approach the subject matter with the instruments of interdisciplinary area studies rooted mainly in the textual analysis of screened fiction. The former contribution attempts to substantiate, via a genetic and transformative social-cultural model, the notion of East-European *noir*, while the latter enticingly narrows the comparative focus to East-European cinematic and televisual detective fiction for children and adolescents. Marcela Poučová offers a very dense presentation of the development of crime fiction in the Czech literature of the 20th century, while Katre Talviste and Primož Mlačnik concentrate each on an individual contemporary author (namely Juhan Paju and Sergej Verč) in order to open the gate towards Estonian, respectively Slovenian crime fiction. The last contributor in the section, Radu Toderici, offers a reading as close as it is subtle and penetrating of two masterpieces of the Hungarian “Black Wave” of the 1990s: Béla Tarr’s *Damnation* and György Fehér’s *Passion*.

The next topic has been abundantly researched, but not necessarily from the thematic and geo-cultural perspectives illustrated by the authoresses present in the section: the intersection between gender and noir/crime. Amalia Mărășescu makes the first move with the analysis of two Romanian fictional women detectives, coming from different epochs and with astoundingly different social-cultural backgrounds (a peasant woman of the 1920s, and a mathematics professoress turned intelligence officer in the 1970s). Roxana Eichel sets fort her research on gender from the perspective of the theory of interstitiality initiated in the frames of the DETECT project by applying these finely tuned analytic tools on the Romanian crime series *Umbre/Shadows*. Andrada Fătu-Tutoveanu hints at another form of intersectionality, by associating women representation in the classical film noir with fragmented avatars of the religious and mythical imaginary.

The third section, “East Seen from the West,” opens up with an attentive, considerate, and theoretically engaging study of Canadian scholar Paul Bleton on a comprehensive corpus of East-European crime novels recently translated in French. With comparable minutiae, Ioana Diaconu focuses on “Romanian characters in German television thrillers beginning with the Millennium.” Sándor Kálai continues on the same lines, but changes and broadens the area of reference and, at the same time, the artistic medium, in his investigation of “the Eastern Europe of Scandinavian detective novels.”

The last section, “Noir sans frontières: Beyond Genre and Geography” brings together salutary attempts of expanding the relevance of *noir* beyond conventional limits of genre, to wit of assuming a special connection between *noir* and genres and media hybridization. At the same time, all the contributors view *noir* as immersed in different forms of global, or glocal culture. Marius-Mircea Crișan and Carol Senf explore the osmosis of *noir* with vampire fiction against the backdrop of the East-European tensions between traditional and cosmopolitan mental frames on the basis of a post-communist Romanian novel: Alexandru Mușina’s *Nepotul lui Dracula/Dracula’s nephew*. Alex Văsieș equally anchors his survey of mystery and SF&F hybridization and of the mainstreaming of genre fiction in the analysis of a contemporary Romanian novel: *Greva păcătoșilor/Sinners Strike* by Florin Chirculescu. Maria Barbu raises the stakes of the redefinition of *noir* by associating it with utopian and dystopian venues of post-humanist prophesizing, in her approach of the world-famous HBO sci-fi series *Westworld*. Carmen Borbély, in her analysis of the novel *Zoo City* by South African authoress Lauren Beukes, and Ruxandra Cesereanu, in her highly empathetic reading of Roberto Bolaño’s *The Savage Detectives*, spectacularly extend the geo-cultural system of reference, while simultaneously deepening the aesthetic and philosophical implications of *noir*.

The final contribution to the present issue is not directly connected to the main topic. But the concepts tackled in Călina Părău’s essay “Residues and Presents in Contemporary Shrinking Temporalities” raise, taken apart as well as in all their possible connections, fertile theoretical provocations for the research of crime/noir fiction. The fact that, in different local/regional/global approaches, the latter has been almost entirely absorbed in what we use to term the “spatial turn” is an unavoidable evidence. Through its sharp rendering of new modes of problematization of temporalities, this final contribution might show the way toward a whole new world of crime fiction theory, or at least toward a possible second issue of *Caietele Echinoc* dedicated to this intricate and intriguing topic.

Caius Dobrescu

NOTES

1. I would especially mention Caius Dobrescu, Roxana Eichel, Dorottya Molnár-Kovács, Sándor Kálai, Anna Keszeg, “A game of mirrors: Western/Eastern European crime series and the struggle for recognition”, *Journal of European Popular Culture*, no. 12(2), pp. 119-134, 2021.
2. In order to offer a hyper-concentrated suggestion of all the personal qualities that make Sándor a great research partner and an ideal intellectual friend, I will reproduce here the ending of his presentation on the site of his department: “His motto is the same as Georges Simenon’s: *To understand and not to judge.*”