

**Getting away with murder:  
Why do criminals succeed and detectives fail in neo-noir films?<sup>1</sup>**

**João de Mancelos  
(Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Viseu)**

“Mother of Mercy, is this the end of Rico?”  
— LeRoy, Mervyn. *Little Caesar* (1930).

**Palavras-chave:** Cinema *noir* e *neo-noir*, criminosos, detetives, feminismo

**Keywords:** Noir film, neo-noir film, criminals, detectives, feminism

### 1. How *neo* is noir?

Fast cars, smoking revolvers and murder scenes spattered with blood... Stories where crime, sex and betrayal are inextricable... Tough detectives and *femmes fatales*, beautiful to die for — and you just may, for they will drag you into their disgrace... Dark alleys and sleazy bars where you can sell your soul, or have your enemies murdered by contract killers... Half a century afterwards, an aura still radiates from film noir, which became a cult genre, and marked an era.

Initially, the label *noir* applied only to the cycle of films made between 1941 and 1958, in Hollywood, beginning with John Huston’s *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), and ending with Orson Welles’ *Touch of Evil* (1958). However, nowadays, it is considered that this period can be expanded to include Josef Sternberg’s *Underworld* (1927), as the first film noir picture, and Robert Wise’s *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959), or even Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), as the last one (Hirsch, 1999: 3).

From mid-seventies onwards, a new phase begins, called neo-noir or, in the terminology of other specialists, contemporary, post-classic or modern film noir. At the same time, several subgenres emerged in the past few years: retro (neo-)noir — such as Curtis Hanson’s nostalgic *LA Confidential* (1997), the Coen brothers’ *Miller’s Crossing* (1990), or Brian de Palma’s *The Black Dahlia* (2006); future noir — represented by pictures like Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* (1982); and even teen noir — namely the TV series *Veronica Mars* (2004), starring a few *jeunes filles fatales*, a hard-bitten detective in a solitary quest for justice, and other characters that could easily be

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found in the pages of a Dashiell Hammett novel.

Could it be the industry is capitalizing upon a well-established popular label, which ended when black and white pictures were replaced by colored ones? Is there a neo-noir genre — or does it simply reflect a postmodern nostalgia? In other words, how *new* is neo-noir? It is a complex question, since there are numerous variables to be taken into account, both thematically and aesthetically.

On one hand, it is true that neo-noir films retain some of the characteristics associated with noir cinema: “chiaroscuro lighting, skewed framing (...), dense shadows, silhouettes, oblique lines and unbalanced compositions” (Buckland, 1998: 91). On the other hand, when the technologic advancements allowed the introduction of color, the visual iconography of film noir changed, and nowadays neo-noir pictures take full advantage of that. For instances, director David Lynch poetically uses vibrant, saturated colors, soft and unrealistic lighting, to more adequately narrate his dreamlike stories, in pictures like *Lost Highway* (1997) or *Mulholland Drive* (2001), while Curtis Hanson, in *LA Confidential* (1997), prefers “a visual style (...) as lustrous as a studio classic but without sentimentalism” (Dargis, 2003: 47).

Other aesthetic changes are also noticeable, sometimes in the director’s cut of a successful film. For instances, film noir resorted so frequently to voice-over and first person narration that these became two of the distinctive characteristics of the genre. Those strategies help viewers follow the plot; give access to the character’s reflections; place the audience in the mind and shoes of the protagonist; and makes us identify more closely with the narrator — be it a detective or a criminal, such as the main character in Billy Wilder’s *Double Indemnity* (1944), Walter Neff.

However, in neo-noir cinema, voice-over is becoming rare, which allows the audience more room for interpretation, based on the dialogues and behavior of the characters, and avoids breaking suspense. Significantly, in the director’s cut of *Blade Runner*, the voice-over was suppressed, letting the instrumental and futuristic soundtrack by Vangelis excel, and stimulating the audience’s interpretative capabilities.

Besides the aesthetic changes I mentioned, themes and plots also present some interesting differences. That occurs partly because in neo-noir there is a clear conscience of the conventions of the genre and how to *recycle* or *reinvent* them, frequently in an intertextual homage to film noir. Both these processes are visible in Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974); Curtis Hanson’s *LA Confidential* (1997); or Robert Rodriguez’s *Sin City* (2005).

This paper addresses one particular aspect of this reinvention: the pervasiveness of amorality in the new cycle of films. I understand *amorality* as the belief that moral systems are arbitrary, or even the denial of any religious commandments or specific ethical notions. In

practice, this means that the vast majority of neo-noir pictures do not attempt to teach a moral lesson; instead, they take a much more realistic approach to existence, one where the victory of evil over good sometimes occurs. In this context, resorting to three neo-noir films (*Chinatown*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Basic Instinct*) and to one TV series (*Miami Vice*), I discuss how directors creatively use time and space to generate an atmosphere of insecurity; I present and examine several examples of criminals who succeed and detectives who fail; and I analyze the moral implications of these changes.

## 2. An atmosphere of perpetual insecurity

There's no *la vie en rose* in film noir. The dark themes are an essential and easily recognizable part of this genre: alienation; pessimism; moral ambivalence; ambition; loss of innocence; crimes of passion; and double, if not triple, crosses (Hirsch, 1999: 14). In film noir, night and shadows are omnipresent and contribute to a claustrophobic atmosphere of danger — just think of John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), or Nicholas Ray's *They Live by Night* (1949), among many others.

However, departing from that scenery, an increasing number of neo-noir pictures establish broad daylight as the perfect setting for the most violent scenes — which generates in the audience a feeling of perpetual insecurity. In order to describe this new tendency, Steven Sanders coined the expression *sunshine noir*, and associated it with Michael Mann's *Miami Vice* (1984-1989), a television crime series, where the vast majority of the episodes take place in subtropical Miami (Sanders, 2007: 186).

Throughout five seasons, the two main characters, detectives James "Sonny" Crocket and Ricardo "Rico" Tubbs, with the help of Gina Navarro Calabrese and Trudy "Big Booty" Joplin, work for the Miami Vice Unit of the Organized Crime Bureau, under the supervision of the silent Lieutenant Martin Castillo.

If one excludes the remarkable absence of the *femme fatale* (most of women in *Miami Vice* function as redeemers), all these characters are typical of noir films. They face dissociated identities due to their work as undercover agents (in one episode, Sonny Crocket even suffers a concussion and regains conscience thinking he is, in fact, Sonny Burnett, his code name); they struggle against a traumatic past (Castillo was a Drug Enforcement Administration Agent in Southeast Asia, and Sonny is a Vietnam Veteran); and, up to a point, they are all antiheroes in a confusing world, at times looking too much like the individuals they fight against (Sanders, 2007: 187, 189).

Mann uses music video techniques to show Sonny and Rico defeating prostitution,

pornography, trafficking and corruption, in a godless, amoral world. Both policemen seem to believe the means justify the ends or, in Sonny's words, "You've got to know the rules before you can break them. Otherwise, it's no fun" (Mann, 1984). To be sure, some of the most memorable moments in their combat against crime occur under the moon: any fan will recall Sonny driving a black Ferrari, down Biscayne Boulevard, at night, while Phil Collins sang, ominously, "In the Air Tonight", and Rico loaded his gun, getting ready for action (Mann, 1984). However, most of the endless battle against the forces of evil took place in broad daylight, in sites like Coral Gables, Coconut Grove or Key Biscayne.

Neo-noir film directors also take a new approach to space. The setting for classic noir was Los Angeles, San Francisco, or New York, metropolis of modernity with dead-end alleys and dark streets gleaming with danger. Those urban landscapes were easily recognizable to the audience, thanks to certain monuments such as the Hollywood sign, the Golden Gate Bridge, or the Empire State Building. In neo-noir, this centripetal space does not seem to captivate filmmakers any longer, being the post-modern *locus* fundamentally anonymous and emphatic of new forms of alienation (Abrams, 2007: 8).

One perfect example can be found in Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), where most of the action takes place inside a warehouse, an uncharacteristic space that will, however, be the perfect locus for some of the most disturbing scenes of this violent film. The warehouse is the rendezvous point where the surviving members of a gang reunite, after a diamond heist gone wrong. The police had showed up at the robbery site, thanks to an inside informant, Mr. Orange. It is also inside the warehouse that sadistic Mr. Blonde tortures Marvin Nash, the epitome of the good cop, by slashing his face and ear, while dancing around to "Stuck in the Middle with You", a song by Stealers Wheel, played on the radio. This is one of the most twisted scenes of the film, which led some of the audience members to walk out, and established the warehouse as a genuine place of nightmare.

### **3. Criminals who succeed and detectives who fail**

Film noir depicted masculine aggressiveness, and — one of its key ideological aspects — the dominance of the *femme fatale* over vulnerable males in love. The devilish Phyllis Dietrichson in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), Kitty Collins in Robert Siodmak's *The Killers* (1946), or Kathie in Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* (1947) are some of the most well-known examples. The *femme fatale* corresponds to the romantic stereotype of the she-devil, beautiful and destructive, thanks to her sexual allure e twisted mind. As the French expression indicates, in *film noir*, these women ruined both men and themselves in the process.

According to some feminists, *femme fatale* is a masculine construct, reflecting the male insecurity over the changing roles of women, which took part during and immediately after the Second World War (1939-1945). Since many women entered the sphere of the workplace, and took several jobs and tasks traditionally assigned to men, they gained economic independence, and relegated setting up a family to a secondary position (Buckland, 1998: 92). In the context of film noir, demonizing women who had seized power could be seen as a misogynous attempt to return them to their antebellum role, and reinstating masculine supremacy (Hirsch, 1999: 7).

In neo-noir films, the revamped equivalent to the *femme fatale* still leads men into temptation, but she does not destroy herself and, frequently, gets away with murder (Holt, 2006: 27). For instances, in Paul Verhoeven's erotic thriller, *Basic Instinct* (1992), Johnny Boz, a former rock star and proprietor of a night club, is tied to bed with a white scarf and stabbed to death with an ice pick, while having sex with a mysterious blonde. Detective Nick Curran, from San Francisco Police Department, a man who struggles to control his hostility, is called to investigate, together with his fellow, Gus Moran.

He interrogates the enigmatic Catherine Tramell, who is the prime suspect, since she used to date Johnny, and was with him in the night the murder occurred — though she denies having killed him. Catherine is a wealthy woman, has a BA both in Psychology and Literature, and writes mystery novels, one of which describes in accurate terms the murder of a former rock star, similar to Johnny's. Could her book be an alibi prepared in a long advance? Or was the crime the work of a copycat murderer?

As the action unfolds evidence points, first towards Roxy, Catherine's lesbian lover, and later to Beth Garner, a psychiatrist who attended the same university as Catherine, and had had a brief liaison with her. Together with Catherine, these women embody the typical *femme fatale* — however, only one of them survives, in the epilogue.

Both Nick and Catherine live in an obsessive relationship, fueled by torrid sex, and this involvement, together with the writer's capability to manipulate people, threatens to change the course of the investigation. Near the end of the film, evidence found in Beth's apartment (a gun and copies of Catherine's novels) seem to indicate beyond the shadow of a doubt she was the criminal. With the mystery *apparently* solved, both Nick and Catherine seem to be free to "Fuck like minks, raise rug rats and live happily ever after" (Verhoeven, 1992). However, in the last scene, when Nick and the writer have sex, the camera pans down to show an icepick ominously lying on the floor, giving the impression that the true killer is yet to be caught, and that Catherine, the *femme fatale*, had managed to escape the not-so-long arm of the law.

Another typical character in film noir and neo-noir is the tough police detective or private-eye. This element was almost absent during the sixties and seventies, but returned in

full glory in the eighties. Chronologically, there are three types of detectives in the history of fiction. The classic detective, embodied by Sherlock Holmes, in the narratives by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), was a predominant figure during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the twentieth century, detectives like Philip Marlowe, in Howard Hawk's *The Big Sleep* (1946) or Sam Spade, in John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), chase gangsters and keep the city clean (Abrams, 2007: 9). In his essay, "The Simple Art of Murder" (1944), Raymond Chandler describes this kind of detective: "[he] must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it" (Dargis, 2003: 38).

However, in neo-noir, directors take a different approach to the character of the special agent, criminal investigator or private eye. He is frequently presented as a morally ambiguous man — like Harry Callahan, in *Dirty Harry* (1971) —, dealing with personal issues — as it is the case of David Mills in *Seven* (1995) —, who fails, at least partially, in his mission to solve the crime or bring the villain to justice — like Jake 'JJ' Gittes, in *Chinatown* (1974).

The latter is a retro noir film, set in Los Angeles during the late thirties, which won an Academy Award in 1975 for Best Original Screenplay for writer Robert Towne, and was also elected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry. This psychological drama is pervaded with nostalgia, has a convoluted plot, and presents a not so happy ending. The protagonist, a private detective named Jake, has been hired by three different individuals, each one with specific motivation. The first one is a woman who falsely claims to be Mrs. Evelyn Mulwray, wife of Hollis Mulwray, a civic engineer for the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. She suspects her husband may be having an extramarital affair with a younger woman and, therefore, wants Jake to spy on him, to confirm or refute this possibility. The second client is the *real* Mrs. Mulwray, who hires the private eye to investigate the death of Hollis, who was found drowned, in a freshwater reservoir, strangely with salty water in his lungs. Finally, Jake's third and most disquieting client is Noah Cross, Evelyn's father, who wishes to know where Katherine Cross, Mulwray's lover, is presently living.

Throughout the film, Jake does not seem to be a very competent detective, in spite of his sincere efforts to solve the water scandal. Not only is he cheated by his clients (starting with the false Mrs. Mulwray, who knows more about the intricate situation than he does), but he also appears to be always one step behind the events related to the crime. For instances, when he seeks out Mulwray at the reservoir, he finds out that the police had been called and arrived first. When, at night, he returns to what then seemed to be the crime scene, in order to gather evidence, he gets caught by water department security, Claude Mulvihill, and his vicious partner, who cuts his nostril, explaining: "You are a very nosy fellow, kitty cat. You know what happens to nosy fellows? No? Wanna guess? No? Okay. They lose their noses" (Polanski, 1974). His

bandaged nose, the symbol of a castration, can also be read as a sign that Jake will not be able to provide a solution for the case (Hirsch, 1999: 152-153). Later, while investigating the surrounding orange groves, he is confronted by some farmers who, thinking he might be the responsible for the drought, beat him up.

Near the end of the picture, Jake's efforts become almost pathetic. He falls in love with the widow, Mrs. Mulwray, but is unable to have her successfully flee to Mexico, or to prevent her from being shot; he is taken away a pair of bifocal glasses, the only physical evidence against Cross, the man behind the drought, orchestrated to depreciate the land; he puts the pieces of this intricate puzzle together, but fails to transmit his interpretation of the events to the authorities. The end is tragic in nature, and proves to be devastating to Jake, when he realizes that Evelyn is dead. As Jason Holt summarizes:

Gittes lacks the wherewithal to negotiate the increasingly dark vicissitudes of the neo-noir world. While less capable, less admirable than their classic-era prototypes, they are, for that very reason, more realistic. Efforts to correct injustice often enough fail, and, in the face of this unpleasant fact, sometimes the best that one can hope for is stoic resignation. As Gittes is finally told: 'There's nothing you can do, Jake. It's Chinatown'. (Holt, 2006: 27)

#### **4. Amorality is the name of the game**

In classic film noir, most of the characters were immoral or, at least, morally ambiguous, leading the audience to reflect, and generating an atmosphere where black and white gave way to many shades of gray (Borde and Chaumeton, 2002: 2). Those villains and *femmes fatales* were nearly always punished for their crimes and transgressions, since the Production Code demanded poetic justice, according to the ethical and moral principles of the forties and fifties. Its preamble read: "No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of the crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin" (quoted in Maltby, 1998: 242).

Moreover, gangsters like Caesar Enrico Bandello in Mervyn LeRoy's *Little Caesar* (1931), or Tony Camonte in Howard Hawks's *Scarface* (1932) were punished precisely because they were or desperately tried to be *successful*, as Robert Warshow maintains:

No convention of the gangster film is more strongly established than this: it is dangerous to be alone. And yet the very condition of success makes it impossible not to be alone, for success is always the establishment of an individual pre-eminence that must be imposed on others, in whom it automatically arouses hatred; the successful man

is an outlaw. The gangster's whole life is an effort to assert himself as an individual, to draw himself out of the crowd, the final bullet thrusts him back, makes him after all, a failure. . . . In the deeper layers of the modern consciousness, all means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is punished for success. (Warshow, 1970: 133)

Neo-noir films present a different approach: firstly, the thug gets away with murder, proving that "good things happen to bad people". Secondly, as I have pointed out, the tough police detective or private-eye, like Sam Spade, were replaced by more humanized characters, who sometimes fail in their mission. Finally, there seems to be an indifference regarding moral principles, beginning with the lack of respect towards the value of human life. In Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), for instances, there is this dialogue between two criminals, code-named Mr. Pink e Mr. White. Mr. Pink asks: "Did you kill anybody?" Mr. White answers: "A few cops". Mr. Pink asks for confirmation: "No real people?" Mr. White happily replies: "Just cops" (Tarantino, 1992). Mark Conard comments on the pervasiveness of amorality in neo-noir:

There's no god's eye perspective or absolute commandment to say, for example, that you shouldn't murder people or that you should tell the truth. There are only individual perspectives about these things, and there's no way to argue or prove that one perspective is more correct than another. (Conard, 2007: 112)

Amorality is much more than just a sign of the times. It becomes a process of emphasizing realism; surprising the audience with the complete subversion the traditional happy ending; and humanizing both the villains, whose motives become more clear, and the heroes, whose flaws and limitations bring us closer to them and reveal the true dimension and heroism of their fight.

There is a new tone of black in these pictures: contemporary directors changed the genre's classic conventions and archetypes, combining auteurism and traditional characteristics (Buckland, 1998: 97). Borrowing and twisting the well-known tag-line of Jules Bricken and Lawrence Doheny's *Naked City* (1958-1963), one can say: there are millions of stories in film *neo-noir*. And each director tells one of them.

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### Abstract

In classic film noir, villains and *femmes fatales* were nearly always punished for their crimes and transgressions. The Production Code demanded poetic justice, according to the ethical and moral principles of the forties and fifties. However, neo-noir films take a more realistic approach to life: on one side, the thug gets away with murder, proving that "good things happen to bad people"; on the other side, the tough police detective or private-eye, like Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade, was replaced by more humanized characters — morally ambiguous men or women who deal with existential issues and sometimes fail to catch the criminal. In this paper: a) I give evidence of how neo-noir film directors creatively use time and space to generate an atmosphere of insecurity and fear; b) I present and examine several examples of criminals who succeed and detectives who fail; c) I analyze the moral implications of these changes. In order

to do so, I resort to several neo-noir films; to the work of specialists in film studies; and, of course, to my personal opinion.

## Matar sem castigo:

### Por que têm êxito os criminosos e falham os detetives nos filmes *neo-noir*?

João de Mancelos

(Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Viseu)

“Mother of Mercy, is this the end of Rico?”  
— LeRoy, Mervyn. *Little Caesar* (1930).

**Palavras-chave:** Cinema *noir* e *neo-noir*, criminosos, detetives, feminismo

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#### 1. O que há de novo no *neo-noir*?

Carros velozes, revólveres fumegantes e cenas de crime salpicadas de sangue... Histórias onde o crime, o sexo e a traição se confundem... Detetives duros e mulheres fatais, belas de morrer — e tal pode acontecer, porque levam qualquer um à desgraça... Becos escuros e bares manhosos onde se pode vender a alma ou mandar matar um inimigo, através de um assassino a soldo... Meio século depois, uma aura ainda irradia dos filmes *noir*, que se tornaram num género de culto e marcaram uma era.

Inicialmente, o rótulo *noir* apenas se aplicava ao ciclo de filmes feitos entre 1941 e 1958, em Hollywood, principiando com *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), de John Huston, e terminando com *Touch of Evil* (1958), de Orson Welles. Contudo, na atualidade, considera-se que este período pode ser dilatado, de modo a incluir *Underworld* (1927), como a primeira película *noir* e *Odds Against Tomorrow* (1959), de Robert Wise, ou *Taxi Driver* (1976), de Martin Scorsese, como o último (Hirsch 3).

De meados da década de setenta até hoje, principiou uma nova fase, conhecida por *neo noir* ou, na terminologia de outros especialistas, contemporâneo, pós-clássico ou moderno *noir*. Paralelamente, emergiram vários subgéneros, nos últimos anos: *retro (neo)-noir* — como o nostálgico *LA Confidential* (1997), de Curtis Hanson, *Miller's Crossing* (1990), dos irmãos Cohen, ou *The Black Dahlia* (2006), de Brian de Palma; *future noir* — representado por películas como *Blade Runner* (1982), de Ridley Scott; e até mesmo *teen noir* — nomeadamente a série *Veronica Mars* (2004), onde brilham algumas *jeunes filles fatales*, um detetive numa busca solitária por justiça, e outras personagens que poderiam facilmente ser encontradas nas páginas de um romance de Dashiell Hammett.

Será que a indústria está a explorar um género popular já longamente estabelecido, que terminou quando os filmes a preto e branco foram substituídos pela cor? Existirá um género *neo-noir* — ou será apenas uma nostalgia pós-moderna? Por outras palavras, o que há de *novo* no *neo-noir*? Trata-se de uma questão complexa, dado haver inúmeras variáveis a ter em conta, tanto temática como esteticamente.

Por um lado, é verdade que os filmes *neo-noir* retêm algumas características associadas ao cinema *noir*: “chiaroscuro lighting, skewed framing (...), dense shadows, silhouettes, oblique lines and unbalanced compositions” (Buckland 91). Por outro lado, os avanços tecnológicos permitiram a introdução da cor, a iconografia visual do filme *noir* mudou, e os filmes *neo-noir* tiram completo partido disso. Por exemplo, o realizador David Lynch usa poeticamente cores vibrantes e saturadas, luz suave e surrealista, para melhor narrar as suas histórias oníricas, em películas como *Lost Highway* (1997) ou *Mulholland Drive* (2001), enquanto Curtis Hanson, em *LA Confidential* prefere: “a visual style (...) as lustrous as a studio classic but without sentimentalism” (Dargis 47).

Outras opções estéticas são também nítidas, por vezes na versão do realizador de um filme de êxito. Por exemplo, o filme *noir* recorreu com tanta frequência ao *voice-over* e à narrativa de primeira pessoa que estes se tornaram dois elementos marcantes do género. Tais estratégias permitem ao público seguir o enredo; dão acesso às reflexões das personagens; colocam a audiência na mente e lugar do protagonista; e fazem-nos identificar mais proximamente com o narrador — seja ele um detetive ou um criminoso, tal como Water Neff, o protagonista de *Double Indemnity* (1944), de Billy Wilder.

Contudo, no cinema *neo-noir*, a *voice-over* tornou-se rara, o que permite à audiência mais espaço para a interpretação, baseada nos diálogos e comportamento das personagens, e evita quebrar o suspense. Significativamente, na versão do realizador de *Blade Runner*, a *voice-over* foi suprimida, deixando respirar a banda sonora instrumental e futurista de Vangelis, e estimulando a capacidade interpretativa da audiência.

Para além das mudanças estéticas que referi, os temas e os enredos também apresentam algumas diferenças interessantes. Tal ocorre porque no *neo-noir* existe uma clara consciência das convenções do género e como *recriá-las* ou *reinventá-las*, frequentemente numa homenagem intertextual ao filme *noir*. Ambos os processos são visíveis em *Chinatown* (1974), de Roman Polanski, *LA Confidential* (1997), de Curtis Hanson, e *Sin City* (2005), de Robert Rodriguez.

Este artigo analisa um aspeto particular desta reinvenção: a persistência da amoralidade neste novo ciclo de filmes. Entendo *amoralidade* como a crença em que os sistemas morais são arbitrários, ou mesmo a negação de qualquer mandamento religioso ou noção ética específica.

Na prática, isto significa que a vasta maioria das películas *neo-noir* não tenta transmitir uma lição de moral; em vez disso, tece uma abordagem muito mais realista da vida, uma existência onde a vitória do mal sobre o bem, por vezes, ocorre. Neste contexto, recorrendo a três filmes *neo-noir* (*Chinatown*, *Reservoir Dogs*, *Basic Instinct*) e a uma série televisiva (*Miami Vice*), debato como os realizadores usaram com criatividade o tempo e o espaço, para gerarem uma atmosfera de insegurança; apresento e examino vários exemplos de criminosos que tiveram êxito e de detetives que falharam; e analiso as implicações morais destas mudanças.

## 2. Uma atmosfera de insegurança perpétua

Não existe uma vida cor-de-rosa, no filme *noir*. Os temas mais sombrios constituem uma parte essencial e facilmente reconhecível deste género: alienação, pessimismo, ambivalência moral, ambição, perda da inocência, crimes passionais, e duplas, senão triplas, traições (Hirsch 14). No filme *noir*, a noite e as sombras são onnipresentes e contribuem para uma atmosfera claustrofóbica de perigo — basta pensar em *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), de John Huston (1941), ou *They Live by Night* (1949), de Nicholas Ray, entre tantos outros.

No entanto, afastando-se desse cenário, um número crescente de películas *neo-noir* estabelece a plena luz do dia como o cenário perfeito para as cenas mais violentas, gerando no público um sentimento de perpétua insegurança. Para descrever esta nova tendência, Steven Sanders cunhou a expressão *sunshine noir*, e associou-a à série *Miami Vice* (1984-1989), onde a vasta maioria dos episódios tem lugar na subtropical Miami (Sanders 186).

Ao longo de cinco temporadas, as principais personagens, os detetives James “Sonny” Crockett e Ricardo “Rico” Tubbs, com a ajuda de Gina Navarro Calabrese e Trudy “Big Booty” Joplin, trabalham para a Miami Vice Unit, parte do Organized Crime Bureau, sob a supervisão do silencioso tenente Martin Castillo.

Se excluirmos a nítida ausência de *femmes fatales* (as mulheres em *Miami Vice* funcionam como redentoras), todas as personagens são típicas dos filmes *noir*. Enfrentam uma dupla identidade devido ao seu trabalho à paisana (num dos episódios, Sonny Crockett chega a sofrer um traumatismo e recupera a consciência, pensando que é, de facto, Sonny Burnett, o seu nome de código); lutam contra um passado traumático (Castillo era um agente da Drug Enforcement Administration no sudoeste da Ásia, Sonny era um veterano do Vietname); e, até certo ponto, todos são anti-heróis, às vezes parecendo-se demasiado com os indivíduos que combatem (Sanders 187-189).

Mann usa técnicas do teledisco para mostrar Sonny e Rico derrotando a prostituição, a pornografia, o tráfico e a corrupção, num mundo sem deus nem moral. Ambos os polícias

parecem acreditar que os fins justificam os meios ou, nas palavras de Sonny: “You’ve got to know the rules before you can break them. Otherwise, it’s no fun” (Mann, 1984). Por certo, alguns dos mais marcantes momentos no seu combate ao crime ocorrem sob o luar: qualquer fã recorda Sonny a conduzir um Ferrari negro em Byscayne Boulevard, à noite, enquanto Phil Collins canta ominosamente “In the Air Tonight” e Rico carrega a arma, pronto para a ação (Mann, 1984). No entanto, a maior parte da batalha contra as forças do mal tem lugar em pleno dia, em lugares como Coral Gables, Coconut Grive ou Key Byscayne.

Os realizadores dos filmes *neo-noir* também assumem uma nova abordagem do espaço. O cenário dos filmes clássicos era Los Angeles, São Francisco, ou Nova Iorque, metrópoles da modernidade, com becos e ruas escuras brilhando de perigo. Estes cenários urbanos eram facilmente reconhecidos pela audiência, graças a monumentos como o anúncio de Hollywood, a Golden Gate Bridge ou o Empire State Building. No *neo-noir*, este espaço centrípeto já não cativa os realizadores, e o *locus* pós-moderno é fundamentalmente anónimo e amigo de outras formas de alienação (Abrams 8).

Um exemplo perfeito pode encontrar-se em *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), de Quentin Tarantino, onde a maior parte da ação decorre no interior de um armazém, um espaço incaracterístico que, contudo, funciona perfeitamente para algumas das cenas mais perturbadoras deste violento filme. O armazém é o ponto de encontro onde os membros sobreviventes do gangue se reúnem, após um assalto que correu mal. A polícia surpreendera-os no local do crime, graças a um informador, Mr. Orange. É também dentro do armazém que o sádico Mr. Blonde tortura o agente Marvin Nash, o epítome do bom polícia, ao retalhar o seu rosto e orelha, enquanto dança ao som de “Stuck in the Middle with You”, uma canção de Stealers Wheel, na rádio. Esta é uma das cenas mais macabras do filme, que levou alguns membros do público a abandonarem o cinema, e estabelece o armazém como um genuíno lugar de pesadelo.

### 3. Criminosos que têm êxito e detetives que falham

O cinema *noir* representava a agressividade masculina e — um dos seus aspetos-chave ideológicos — o domínio da *femme fatale* sobre os homens vulneráveis e apaixonados. A demoníaca Phyllis Dietrichson, em *Double Indemnity* (1944), de Billy Wilder, Kitty Collins, em *The Killers* (1946), de Robert Siodmak, ou Kathie em *Out of the Past* (1947), de Jacques Tourneur são alguns dos exemplos mais conhecidos. A mulher fatal corresponde ao estereótipo romântico da mulher demónio, bela e destrutiva, graças à sua aura sexual e mente perversa. Tal como indica a expressão francesa, nos filmes *noir*, estas mulheres levavam à ruína tanto os homens como

elas próprias, no processo.

Segundo algumas feministas, a *femme fatale* é uma construção masculina, refletindo a insegurança dos homens acerca da mudança nos papéis da mulher, que ocorreu durante e imediatamente após a Segunda Guerra Mundial (1939-1945). Dado que numerosas mulheres entraram no mercado de trabalho, e assumiram vários empregos e tarefas tradicionalmente reservadas aos homens, obtiveram a sua independência económica (Buckland 92). No contexto do filme *noir*, demonizar as mulheres que tinham sucesso pode ser visto como uma tentativa misógina para as fazer regressar aos papéis que desempenhavam antes da guerra, e reinstalar a supremacia masculina (Hirsch 7).

Nos filmes *neo-noir*, a versão equivalente à da *femme fatale* ainda faz os homens caírem em tentação, mas não os destrói e, frequentemente, consegue escapar à justiça (Holt 27). Por exemplo, no *thriller* erótico *Basic Instinct* (1992), de Paul Verhoeven, Johnny Boz, uma ex-estrela de rock e proprietário de um clube noturno, é atado à cama com um lenço branco e apunhalado até à morte com um picador de gelo, durante um ato sexual com uma loira misteriosa. O detetive Nick Curran, da polícia de São Francisco, um homem que tenta controlar a sua própria hostilidade, é chamado a investigar, juntamente com o seu colega, Gus Moran.

Nick interroga a enigmática Catherine Tramell, que é a principal suspeita, dado que namorava com Johnny e estava com ele na noite em que ocorreu o crime — embora ela negue tê-lo assassinado. Catherine é uma mulher abastada, tem uma licenciatura em Psicologia e Literatura, e escreve romances policiais. Um destes narra com pormenor o assassinato de uma estrela de rock, semelhante a Johnny. Seria o seu livro um álibi preparado com grande antecedência? Ou teria o crime sido cometido por um assassino de imitação?

À medida que a ação se desenrola, as pistas apontam primeiro para Roxy, a namorada lésbica de Catherine e, mais tarde, para Beth Garner, uma psiquiatra que frequentara a mesma universidade que Catherine e tivera um breve romance com ela. Juntamente com Catherine, estas mulheres encarnam a imagem típica da mulher fatal, mas só uma delas sobreviverá no epílogo.

Tanto Nick como Catherine vivem uma relação obsessiva, galvanizada por sexo tórrido, e este envolvimento, a par da capacidade da escritora para manipular, ameaça mudar o rumo da investigação. Perto do final da película, as pistas encontradas no apartamento de Beth (uma arma e exemplares dos romances de Catherine) parecem indicar, para lá de qualquer dúvida, que esta era a criminosa. Com o mistério *aparentemente* resolvido, tanto Nick como Catherine estão livres para “Fuck like minks, raise rug rats and live happily ever after” (Verhoeven 1992). No entanto, na última cena, a câmara mostra um picador de gelo, abandonado ominosamente no soalho, e transmitindo a sensação de que o verdadeiro assassino ainda está por apanhar e

que Catherine escapara ao braço da lei.

Outra personagem característica do cinema *noir* e *neo-noir* é o detetive, quer da polícia, quer privado. Este elemento esteve quase totalmente ausente nas décadas de sessenta e setenta, mas regressou em toda a sua glória, nos anos oitenta. Cronologicamente, existem três tipos de detetives na história da ficção. O detetive clássico, encarnado por Sherlock Holmes, nas narrativas de Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930), predominou no século XIX. No século XX, detetives como Philip Marlowe, em *The Big Sleep* (1946), de Howard Hawk, ou Sam Spade, em *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), de John Huston, perseguem *gangsters* e mantêm as ruas limpas (Abrams 9). No seu ensaio, “The Simple Art of Murder” (1944), Raymond Chandler descreve este tipo de detetive “[he] must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it” (Dargis 38).

Contudo, nos filmes *neo-noir*, os realizadores adotaram uma abordagem diferente em relação aos agentes especiais, investigadores criminais e detetives particulares. Este último é frequentemente apresentado como um homem moralmente ambíguo — por exemplo, Harry Callahan, em *Dirty Harry* (1971) —, lidando com problemas pessoais — como é o caso de David Mills em *Seven* (1995) — que falha, pelo menos em parte, na sua missão de resolver o crime ou trazer o vilão à justiça — como Jake ‘JJ’ Gittes, em *Chinatown* (1974).

Este último constitui um filme *retro-noir*, passado em Los Angeles, no final da década de trinta, que obteve um óscar, em 1975, para melhor argumento original, para o guionista Robert Towne, e foi escolhido para preservação pelo Unites States National Film Registry. Este drama psicológico está imbuído de nostalgia, apresenta um argumento sinuoso, e um final não muito feliz. O protagonista, um detetive privado chamado Jake, é contratado por três indivíduos diferentes, cada qual com uma motivação específica. O primeiro é uma mulher que falsamente afirma ser Mrs. Evelyn Mulwray, esposa de Hollis Mulwray, um engenheiro civil do Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. Suspeita que o marido possa estar a ter um caso extraconjugal com uma mulher mais jovem e, por isso, contrata Jake para confirmar ou refutar esta possibilidade. O segundo cliente é a *verdadeira* Mrs. Mulwray, que pede ao detetive para investigar a morte de Hollis, que foi encontrado afogado, num reservatório de água potável, estranhamente com água do mar nos pulmões. Por fim, o terceiro e mais perturbador cliente de Jake é Noah Cross, pai de Evelyn que deseja saber onde Katherine Cross, a amante de Mulwray, vive presentemente.

Ao longo do filme, Jake não demonstra ser um detetive muito competente, apesar dos esforços sinceros para resolver o escândalo da água. Não só os clientes o enganam (a começar pela falsa Mrs. Mulwray, que sabe mais do que ele acerca da complexa situação), como também parece estar sempre um passo atrás em relação aos desenvolvimentos do crime. Por exemplo,

quando procura Mulwray no reservatório, descobre que a polícia já havia sido chamada. À noite, ao regressar à cena do crime, para recolher provas, é apanhado por um segurança do departamento das águas, Claude Mulvihill e o seu colega malvado, que lhe corta a narina, explicando: “You are a very nosy fellow, kitty cat. You know what happens to nosy fellows? No? Wanna guess? No? Okay. They lose their noses” (Polanski, 1974). O nariz ligado, símbolo de uma castração, pode ser também interpretado como um sinal de que Jake não será capaz de resolver o caso (Hirsch 152-153). Mais tarde, quando investiga os laranjais, confronta-se com alguns agricultores que pensam que ele é responsável pela seca e o agridem.

Perto do final da película, os esforços de Jake tornam-se quase patéticos. Apaixona-se pela viúva, Mrs. Mulwray, mas não consegue que esta fuja para o México, nem evitar que seja alvejada; fica sem os óculos bifocais, a única prova contra Cross, o homem por trás da seca, orquestrada para depreciar a terra; consegue juntar as peças do puzzle, mas não alcança transmitir a sua versão dos acontecimentos às autoridades. O final é de natureza trágica, e torna-se devastador para Jake, quando se dá conta de que Evelyn está morta. Como resume Jason Holt:

Gittes lacks the wherewithal to negotiate the increasingly dark vicissitudes of the neo-noir world. While less capable, less admirable than their classic-era prototypes, they are, for that very reason, more realistic. Efforts to correct injustice often enough fail, and, in the face of this unpleasant fact, sometimes the best that one can hope for is stoic resignation. As Gittes is finally told: ‘There’s nothing you can do, Jake. It’s Chinatown’. (Holt 27)

#### 4. Amoralidade é o nome do jogo

No filme *noir* clássico, a maioria das personagens era imoral ou, pelo menos, moralmente ambígua, levando a audiência a refletir e gerando uma atmosfera onde o preto e branco davam origem a muitos tons de cinzento (Border e Chaumeton 2). Estes vilões e mulheres fatais eram quase sempre punidos pelos seus crimes e transgressões, dado que o Production Code exigia uma justiça poética, de acordo com os princípios éticos e morais das décadas de quarenta e cinquenta: “No picture shall be produced which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of the crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin” (Maltby 242).

Mais ainda, *gangsters* como Caesar Enrico Bandello, em *Little Caesar* (1931), de Mervyn LeRoy, ou Tony Camonte, em *Scarface* (1932), de Howard Hawks, foram punidos precisamente porque eram ou *desesperadamente* tentavam ser homens de êxito, como afirma Robert

Warshow:

No convention of the gangster film is more strongly established than this: it is dangerous to be alone. And yet the very condition of success makes it impossible not to be alone, for success is always the establishment of an individual pre-eminence that must be imposed on others, in whom it automatically arouses hatred; the successful man is an outlaw. The gangster's whole life is an effort to assert himself as an individual, to draw himself out of the crowd, the final bullet thrusts him back, makes him after all, a failure. . . . In the deeper layers of the modern consciousness, all means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is punished for success. (Warshow 133)

Os filmes *neo-noir* apresentam uma abordagem diferente: primeiro, o bandido mata sem punição, provando que “coisas boas acontecem a pessoas más”. Em segundo lugar, como referi, o duro detetive da polícia ou privado foi substituído por uma personagem mais humana, que por vezes falha na sua missão. Finalmente, parece haver uma indiferença acerca aos princípios morais, a começar pela falta de respeito em relação à vida humana. Por exemplo, em *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), de Tarantino, ocorre este diálogo entre Mr. Pink e Mr. White. Mr. Pink pergunta: “Did you kill anybody?” Mr. White responde: “A few cops”. Mr. Pink pede confirmação: “No real people?” Mr. White responde, alegremente: “Just cops” (Tarantino, 1992). Mark Conard comenta esta persistência da amoralidade no *neo-noir*:

There's no god's eye perspective or absolute commandment to say, for example, that you shouldn't murder people or that you should tell the truth. There are only individual perspectives about these things, and there's no way to argue or prove that one perspective is more correct than another. (Conard 112)

A amoralidade é muito mais do que um sinal dos tempos. Torna-se num processo de enfatizar o realismo; surpreender a audiência com a completa subversão do epílogo clássico; e humanizando tanto os vilões, cujos motivos se tornam claros, como os heróis, cujas falhas e limitações aproximam o espetador e revelam a verdadeira dimensão heroica da sua luta.

Existe um novo tom de negro nestas películas: os realizadores contemporâneos alteraram as clássicas e os arquétipos do género, combinando *auteurism* com características tradicionais (Buckland 97). Pedindo emprestado e modificando a famosa *tag line* de *Naked City* (1958-1963), de Jules Bricken e Lawrence Doheny, pode-se afirmar: existem milhões de histórias nos filmes *neo-noir*. E cada realizador conta uma.

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### Abstract

In classic film noir, villains and *femmes fatales* were nearly always punished for their crimes and transgressions. The Production Code demanded poetic justice, according to the ethical and moral principles of the forties and fifties. However, neo-noir films take a more realistic approach to life: on one side, the thug gets away with murder, proving that "good things happen to bad people"; on the other side, the tough police detective or private-eye, like Philip Marlowe or Sam Spade, was replaced by more humanized characters — morally ambiguous men or women who

deal with existential issues and sometimes fail to catch the criminal. In this paper: a) I give evidence of how neo-noir film directors creatively use time and space to generate an atmosphere of insecurity and fear; b) I present and examine several examples of criminals who succeed and detectives who fail; c) I analyze the moral implications of these changes. In order to do so, I resort to several neo-noir films; to the work of specialists in film studies; and, of course, to my personal opinion.