

Audun Engelstad
Associate professor
Lillehammer University College

Doing genre history – the case of the Norwegian film noir

Genre films are usually discussed within the parameters of Hollywood film and the studio system. As a consequence, film genre theory generally has American films as its center of interest. The film genres are explained as a way of organizing film production and the marketing of films within the studio system, or as shaped by how audience respond to the films (by buying tickets), or as a way of formulating some of the dominating myths within a culture, or as part of a ritual approach to culture, to name some of the oft repeated explanations. Changes within film genres, as part of film historical developments, are then taken as a change within the studio system, as a shift of taste within the audience, a development within the culture that calls for renewed myths, or a need for new types of stories to engage ritually with.

Within the concept of national cinema, genres are often seen as a means to compete at the market place, by way of importing and imitating international genres (which most often means Hollywood genres), or as finding ways to rework these genres within a national and cultural context. One of the challenges this approach raises is to point out how genres develop within a national film culture.

This paper will discuss a number of Norwegian crime films and the way they interact with certain international cinematic trends from dominating cinemas, and how this is played out at different historical stages. All the selected examples can be related to film noir, which is a reputedly slippery term, but which also cuts across issues regarding sub-categories such as the private eye story, the police detective story, the criminal adventure story, the court room drama, the thriller, etc. Film noir is also, for good and for worse, one of the genres (let's call it that) that has been most strongly contextualized.

The idea of a Norwegian film noir might seem strange at first, at least regarding Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton's seminal book on film noir, *Panorama du film noir américaine*, from 1955.¹ As the title suggests, film noir is solely treated as belonging within the limits of America – a point that repeatedly has been reiterated, from Paul Schrader to Alain Silver.² However, several articles the past

¹ English translation: Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton, *A Panorama of American Film Noir 1941-1953*. San Francisco: City Lights, 2002

² See: Alain Silver and James Ursini, eds., *Film Noir Reader*. New York: Limelight, 1996

15 years, as well as the edited collection *European Film Noir*, have brought up the idea of film noir also finding its place within various European cinemas, and not only as a forerunner to the American films, as was the case with the French Poetic Realism.³

Consider the following sequence, from Tancred Ibsen's *To levende og en død / Two living and one dead* (1937): In a busy street, at a dark winter evening, the camera picks up a man, wearing a trench coat and a fedora hat, standing in the shadow of the gates to the post office, his back to the camera. Inside the clerks and patrons are getting ready to leave, while the accountants look over the day's records. As soon as the last person has left, the man sneaks through the empty back alley, and halts by the door, his face still turned away from the camera. He pulls a scarf around his face, draws a gun and enters the post-office. The robber gets the money without much difficulty, but one elderly accountant die of a heart attack, while another faints when he is pushed aside. With swift movements, the robber approaches the last accountant, Erik Berger, threatening to shoot him. At gunpoint, the Berger looks the robber in the eyes, and in a brief flash we see the image of his beloved wife and son. The accountant then steps aside and lets the robber get the money without any resistance.

The sequence, which lasts for about three minutes, is an effective piece of suspense filled filming, and is (probably) the first example of its kind in Norwegian cinema. The robber, with his coat, hat, drawn gun, and scarf around his face, is reminiscent of the iconic gangster figure and the cowboy outlaw. It could be tempting to state that this film represents the inception of the modern Norwegian crime film.

The film deals predominately with the aftermath of the robbery. As a result of his compliant behavior, he is denied his expected promotion, he is considered a coward in the newspaper coverage, and he loses the respect of his wife and son. The larger body of the film deals with this downfall and his one wish to meet the robber once again – the only other person present at the events that fatal evening – and have him tell whether he would have fired the gun or not, thus giving the robber the final say in judging his actions. Did Berger do the right thing when he stepped aside or did he act as a coward?

With the exception of the abovementioned heist sequence, the film has little of the pace or suspense that the crime film is recognized by, and instead lingers on Berger's petty self concern, and how he more or less shrinks under the burden of the resentment he is met with, even from his wife and son.

³ Andrew Spicer, ed., *European Film Noir*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007

And to make matters even worse, his colleague, Lydersen, whom fainted during the robbery, is made a hero (his bruised head is seen as a token of his courageous resistance) and given the promotion.

The plot depicts how fate intervenes in a decent man's life, and turns his good fortune into misery. At the outset, this might sound as reminiscent of the darker films of the French poetic realism, although here is no dangerous passion or troubled willpower, and the source novel, written by Sigurd Christiansen, from 1931, is a far cry from the Zola-like stories the French films were associated with. As elsewhere in Scandinavia and Europe, French film was held high in esteem. From 1936 to 1940, more than a hundred French films had theatrical release in Oslo, among them films by Marcel Carné, Jean Renoir, Julian Duvivier and Pierre Chenal. Many of the films of Poetic realism were produced at the same time, or later, as Ibsen's film, and released in Norway even later, so this is not a question of a causal relation. Rather, we are witnessing a current trend, predominately known from French cinema, featuring in Ibsen's *To levende og en død* as well.

There is something un-decisive about this film, as it in part can be seen as related to the contemporary French films, as well as it has elements we recognize from the social crime dramas of American cinema. Yet, the film does not quite fit with these cinematic trends, which should work to illustrate some of the difficulties that relates to film genres, in particular when the cinema in question is that of a small nation with only a modest film production.

It is tempting to see *To levende og en død*, and in particular the post robbery sequence, as an early precursor of a Norwegian film noir. The sequence is (probably) the first of its kind in Norwegian cinema, and it is relevant to ask what issues might have played a contributing factor, as in ways of informing how the sequence came to be. Evidently we are not talking about a decisive element or source of influence that shaped the sequence, rather to point out some of the cultural conditions took place at the time of the production of *To levende og en død*.

When the sources of film noir are listed, hard-boiled writing and French poetic realist cinema are usually held among the most important ones. The hardboiled writing because many of the American noir films from the forties and fifties are either adapted from hardboiled novels, have hardboiled authors credited as screenwriters, or can in other ways be associated with this type of literature. In France, the hardboiled crime novels were termed roman noir, and appeared in translation in the paperback series,

Série noire / The Black Series.⁴ As for the films of French poetic cinema, some of the films (in particular those of Carné) were named film noir by some critics.⁵ But more importantly, they share with film noir the disillusioned tone, the inevitable downfall of the doomed characters, the hotel rooms and small studio apartments, and the dark streets lit with gaslight.

As was the case in France, where American popular writers were received with admiration, and discussed alongside with modernist writers, the literary scene in Norway was also open to these trends. Gyldendal's *Den Gule serie / The Yellow Series*, under the editorship of the author and leading intellectual Sigurd Hoel, ran from 1929 to 1959, and presented modern fiction writers like Ernst Hemingway, William Faulkner, Franz Kafka, Graham Greene, as well as James M. Cain. Often the translations would appear before the authors had become well known. In fact the series was often among the first venues where the novels were presented outside their home country. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* appeared in *Den Gule serie* already in 1935, just a year after its American publication. Gyldendal also had another paperback series, *Flaggermusserien / The bat series*, which issued predominately crime fiction, of all kinds. Here Norwegian authors were published side by side with names like Dorothy Sayers and Dashiell Hammett. In fact, Dashiell Hammett's *The Thin Man* featured in *Flaggermusserien* in 1935, the same year as *The Postman Always Rings Twice* appeared in *Den Gule serie*.

The one Norwegian author most relevant to noir is Arthur Omre, who for the most part published at Gyldendal, under the guidance of Sigurd Hoel. Omre's early novels depict restless men engaged in crime, always on the run from the law, and sometimes operating under multiple identities. Tired of being chased, they long to lead steady lives with their families. But caution does not suit them, and they plan for the one last job big enough to enable them to withdraw from the life of crime and settle down. Inevitably, the last stop is always the jailhouse.

Omre's first novel, *Smuglere / Smugglers*, was published in 1935, the same year as Cain and Hammett's novels were translated, and became an instant success. Omre's writing style is clipped and fast paced. At hardly any point does Omre get into the mode of description or report the thought of the characters. The action moves quickly along by the means of clipped sentences and brief lines of

⁴ According to Marcel Duhamel's preface to *Panorama*, more than 75% of the 250 books in the *Série noire* have been filmed.

⁵ Charles O'Brien has found that a number of French films before the war were referred to as film noir, then as an unfavorable term. See: Charles O'Brien, "Film Noir in France: Before the Liberation." In: *Iris*, no 21, (Spring) 1996

dialogue. Dagbladet's critic, the author Johan Borgen, who had recently translated Hammett, compared *Smuglere* to Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. The hard-boiled style and the matter-of-factness of the encounter of the events are obvious similarities.

The point that all of this leads to is that by the mid 1930s, the first hardboiled novel by a Norwegian author became a literary hit, in addition to that hardboiled crime fiction was presented in popular and well-respected series, translated and reviewed by prominent authors, and French cinema was held high in esteem both by critics and the audience. A kind of masculine sentimentality in combination with a crime plot found footing within the cultural scene in Norway at the time *To levende og en død* was produced. *To levende og en død* can then be seen as carrying elements that point towards a Norwegian film noir.

The crime plot in tandem with masculine sentimentality came in full bloom in 1949, with the film *Døden er et kjærtegn / Death is a caress*. The film was made by the producer Otto Carlmar and his wife, the film director Edith Carlmar, who together recently had formed Carlmar Film. This was their first film, and it became a great success. 12 years and a world war have passed from *To levende og en død* and *Døden er et kjærtegn*, so it is unlikely that the latter is indebted to the former in any direct way, although Edith Carlmar was introduced to film making when working as a script girl for Tancred Ibsen in 1939.

It seems to be a general opinion that film noir was first recognized as such in the fall of 1946, when American films flooded the Parisian cinemas. Some months later the films arrived at the movie theaters in Oslo. In 1947, at least 15 films found in Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward's extensive encyclopedic reference guide to film noir could be seen in the movie theaters in Oslo.⁶ This number increased to 21 films noirs in 1948, while in 1949 the number was down to six films. In contrast with the French reception of the films (and the American as well), none of these films were called film noir, or any equivalent of the term, by Norwegian film critics. They were simply presented as crime films. By the end of 1949, Carlmar's adaptation of *Døden er et kjærtegn* premiered, to triumphant reviews. Although film noir had been around for a couple of years at that time, it is still evident that *Døden er et kjærtegn* was reasonably concurrent with the trend.

In August 1947, *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) premiered in Oslo, Norway, *Mildred Pirece* (Michael Curtiz, 1945) followed in March 1948, and *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett,

⁶ Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward [and James Ursini], eds., *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style*, 3rd Ed. Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1996

1946) in May 1948. As is well known, all three films are based on novels by James M. Cain. Furthermore, in November 1948, a small novel by the Norwegian author Arve Moen called *Døden er et kjærtegn* (*Death is a Caress*) was published. This novel carries strong resemblances to James M. Cain's novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, both in terms of style and of content. Moen's novel about a car mechanic's love affair with a socialite woman is a story about stormy passion and jealousy leading to murder. As with Cain's writing, Moen's novel shows a taste for sentimentality and the melodramatic, still the story is told in a tough and downbeat style.

About two months in advance of its publication, *Døden er et kjærtegn* was optioned to be developed into film by Otto Carlmar and Edith Carlmar. In Hollywood, the film adaptations of Cain's novels made quite a stir, and this was reported in Norwegian film magazines. It is likely that this is part of the reason for why the Carlmars picked Moen's novel to be filmed. Carlmar's adaptation of *Døden er et kjærtegn* shares several patterns with the contemporary Hollywood adaptations of Cain's novels. Some of these patterns cannot be accounted for by the similarities among the novels, but are the result of having the Hollywood movies as its model.

In essence, the opening sequence and the film's structure at large in *Døden er et kjærtegn* are both variants of those in *Double Indemnity*. The opening shot has a car as its dramatic center – a police car with blaring sirens drives through a busy street before it stops in front of a building, recognizable as the prison house at Møllergata 19. Two policemen escort a prisoner to the entrance, but the camera is positioned behind the man and does not expose his face until he is inside. Here the man starts his confession to his lawyer. As he talks, the film cuts to a flashback of the first day he met the woman, who, as we will learn by the end of the story, he has just killed. The opening shot of *Double Indemnity* has a car driving at high speed at night, before it stops outside a building. The camera is positioned behind the man as he makes it to the entrance, and does not expose his face before he is inside. When the man arrives at his office, he starts to dictate his confession. As he talks, the film cuts to a flashback to the first time he met the woman, who, as later will be revealed, he has just killed. In both films, as the story unfolds, the voice-over occasionally comments upon the events, and at some points also returns to the frame narrative. At the end of the film these two temporal levels are brought together.

There are also some striking similarities between the film versions of *Døden er et kjærtegn* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Both films use as a title line a close-up of the novel they are adapted from. In this case, this is obviously more than just a conventional way of crediting a literary source, since the final scene in the two movies correspond as well. The retrospective story has just caught up with

present time. The man is now in prison, and concludes his reflections about what has happened. He regrets nothing, and as the film closes, with the prison bars casting shadows across the man's face, he expresses his hope that there is a heaven or hell where he can be united with the woman again.

Moen's novel, although not an imitation of *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, carried strong affinities to Cain's novel. The Carlmars further highlighted the strong connection to Cain in their adaptation, this time by using the film versions as a model. In this case then, there is little doubt that a certain kind of Hollywood film served as an ideal for the Norwegian film. None of this was mentioned in the reviews or elsewhere. Instead, *Døden er et kjærtegn* was compared to French cinema – more specifically, to films starring Jean Gabin and Hedwig Feuillère.⁷

This comparison is by no means unheard of. In the years before the war, French cinema was quite popular in Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe. Norwegian film magazines would regularly report from Paris about the latest going-ons in the French movie world, and French film stars were household names in Norway. Although French film could not compete in numbers with American films, they were still a regular item on the cinema program. French cinema's Poetic Realism established a new standard for filmmaking that was widely noticed. Even though these kinds of films were absent during the war, due to censorship, the ideals persisted when film production was picked up again after the war, although it now merged with new impulses from American cinema.

Taken as a whole, Norwegian film noir does not consist of a large body of films. For several decades after the war, Norwegian film production in general was scarce, adding up to no more than five to ten films per year. Naturally, cinematic trends are limited in scope, rarely numbering up to more than a few films – except for comedies and films about the war, or a large category like the social problem film. Only the past decade or two have we seen a consistent production of genre films. Given these conditions it is hard to distinguish a steady production of noir films. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify a corpus consisting of about a dozen noir films, spanning from 1949 till today, and also that noir today finds its place within serial television drama.

What is interesting is that these Norwegian noir films correspond roughly with the timeline that film noir relates to internationally, both with respect to its classical period and its period of reconfiguration and of postmodern revival. That is, *amour fou* in the forties (but no detectives), represented by *Døden er et*

⁷ See Elsa Brita Marcussen, "Døden er et kjærtegn. En analyse", in *Filmjournalen*, no 5, 1950

kjærtegn, followed by documentary style in the fifties, as seen in *To mistenkelige personer / Two Suspicious Characters* (1950), by Tancred Ibsen, adapted from a novel by Gunnar Larsen. *To mistenkelige personer* is far more action paced than *To levende og en død*, but both films take an interest in depicting the aftermath of a serious crime, either as an innocent victim who gets his life wrecked, or as an involuntary complicit, who no longer can return to his old life.

Then there was a recess in the sixties, followed by psychological thrillers in the seventies. Pål Bang Hansen openly credited Hitchcock and Chabrol as important sources of inspiration for his *Bortreist på ubestemt tid / Away for indefinite time* (1974), based on a prizewinning crime novel by Sigrun Krokvik, a thriller clearly indebted to the novels of Patricia Highsmith. Later, the hostage drama *Angst / Anguish* (1976) by Oddvar Bull Tuhus represented the directors shift towards audience friendly storytelling, Hollywood like, which he further explored in the 1980s. *Angst* depicts deviant behavior and how it unfolds in a tense situation. The film is related to the politically or socially oriented thriller that the cinema of New Hollywood is known for, and can perhaps best be seen in line with films by Sydney Lumet, such as *Serpico* (1973) and *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975).

In general, Norwegian films did not go well with the audience in the 1970s, which led to a radical shift in the 1980s, with the incorporation of a Hollywood style of storytelling and a vast increase of genre movies, especially crime and action dramas. Among the contributing reasons to change was a tax shelter program that made it attractive to invest private capital in Norwegian film production, introduced by the newly elected conservative party. Incentives like this, along with a deregulation of the finance market, brought about some lofty ideas on behalf of Norwegian cinema, one of them being that Norwegian films should compete on the international market place. Among the genres that prevailed was the crime film that came at a bundle. According to film historian Gunnar Iversen, this cycle of films represented foremost a market-driven film production, geared at reaching a large audience by imitating Hollywood genre films, and downplaying or ignoring culturally or artistically based aspirations.⁸

The crime films of the 1980s were spread along a number of different types. The list includes the political thrillers *Orions belte / Orion's belt* (Ola Solum, 1985) and *Etter Rubicon / Rubicon* (Leidulv Risan, 1987), the journalist-turned-investigator historical drama *Over grensen / The Feldman Case* (Bente Erichsen, 1987), the buddy action thriller *Blücher* (Oddvar Bull Tuhus, 1988), the private

⁸ Gunnar Iversen, "Learning from Genre". In: Andrew Nestingen and Trevor G. Elkington, eds., *Transnational Cinema in a Global North. Nordic Cinema in Transition*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005

detective stories *Blackout* (Erik Gustavson, 1986) and *Brun Bitter / Hair of the Dog* (Sølve Skagen, 1988) and the police story *Karachi* (Oddvar Einarson, 1989). In addition we had the suspense-oriented films *Veiviseren / The Pathfinder* (Nils Gaup, 1987) and *Dykket / The Dive* (Tristan de Vere Cole, 1989), as well as the post-apocalyptic drama *Sweetwater* (Lasse Glomm, 1988) and the erotic drama *Hotel St. Pauli* (Sven Wam and Petter Vennerød, 1988). While all these types can find its kin within the Hollywood crime film, the variety within the genre that the cycle, at a closer look, is quite diverse.

The neo-noir stories in the eighties introduced the detective for the first time in several decades within Norwegian cinema, in *Blackout* and *Brun Bitter*, along with the obstinate policeman, in *Karachi*. Film noir and neo-noir were now household terms in film journals and newspaper articles, and internationally there was a great output of films that were related to the genre. Although the three films come relatively close in time, spanning from 1985 to 1989, they are quite different in their orientation. *Blackout*, which was tagged a melancholic thriller on the poster, is quite openly a pastiche over the 1940s private detective noir films, such as *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941) and *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1945), a point that was made in various interviews with the director as well as in a number of review articles. *Brun Bitter*, too, can be seen as a postmodern amalgamation of a number of references, such as *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), but unlike *Blackout*, the story was situated in a contemporary and local setting. Also *Karachi* played out its events in a recognizable Norwegian environment, and the film also took issue with a recent type of crime, drug traffic from the south. But whereas Gustavson's *Blackout* can be related to a postmodern nostalgia, Skagen's *Brun Bitter* to what Andrew Spicer has termed postmodern revivalism, Einarson's *Karachi* has more in common with the modernist noir of the 1970s.⁹

From the mid-1990s, there was yet another cycle of crime films. At the same time, the independent film embraced film noir internationally, and received considerable attention at festivals and in the press. Norwegian film noir was part of this trend, and Erik Skjoldbjærg had remarkable success with *Insomnia* (1997). The independent film take on noir has proved quite enduring, internationally, and found its way to Norwegian film production once again with Stefan Faldbakken's *Uro / Restless* (2006). The film can be seen as part of a renewed interest in the vigilant cop.

Despite the many shared characteristics that span a period of sixty years, there is little indication of a Norwegian film noir *tradition* – that is, if tradition is taken to mean that the films relate to each other by

⁹ Andrew Spicer, *Film Noir*. Essex: Longman, 2002

way of earlier films providing a model the later films consciously are aligned with. Instead of seeing a direct lineage between the noir films in Norway, each film can be related to international tendencies – predominately American and, to a lesser degree, French. The historical divisions film noir is usually organized by can be found in Norway as well, which suggests that the Norwegian films are part of that international trend, even if they are few in number. These international impulses have found breeding ground within a set of local cultural conditions that have shaped how the themes are treated within Norwegian film noir. Film noir exists within the realm of Norwegian film history as part of an international tradition, and as a local trajectory

When looking at the Norwegian film noir corpus at large, we find that the international impulses are merged with a set of local cultural conditions that operate for each individual film. Despite their differences, the films do include at least one common denominator that appears less consistently in the American noir corpus. This is the decency of the characters and the sympathy they call for. The reception of the classic noir films, both in France and America, raised the idea that the characters seemed to be morally remorseless, ready to commit their hideous crimes without any hesitations. As for those representing the law, they can hardly be distinguished from the criminals. The American noir protagonist is calculated in his affiliation with crime, but this is not the case with the Norwegian films. On the contrary, the Norwegian noir films invite us to take pity in the characters. Here, the noir protagonist is not premeditated in his criminal endeavor, in stead he finds himself more or less by accident in a situation involving the death of another person. Once he is caught up in the events, there seems to be no way out that can offer any reconciliation. Throughout the films, the different men are confronted by their shortcomings, when trying to redeem their faults. In their efforts, their vulnerability and inability to control the situations they find themselves in are put on display.

Norwegian film noir is invested in pessimism, which is different from the disillusion and cynicism often found in American film noir, but perhaps closer to what we see in the films of Poetic Realism. Norwegian noir films tend to end with a sense of loss, an awareness that nothing can make up for the miseries of the past events. Perhaps this pessimism can be attested to the firm grip realism holds on much of Norwegian film in general. As such, the noir films fall into a general pattern within Norwegian film history – which it shares with much of European cinema – where the Hollywood happy-ending for a long time was denounced as untrue. Norwegian film noir plays a part in the circulation of aesthetic impulses. As it is, a strand of Norwegian cinema participates in an international film genre, while still holding on to a national orientation.