Ominous Faultlines in a World Gone Wrong: Courmayeur Noir In Festival

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In the sublime shadows of the Italian Alps, Courmayeur Noir In Festival’s 23-year run suggests America’s monopoly on this dark cinematic tradition may be on the wane. The roots of film noir wind broadly through the geography of film history. One assumes it’s American to the core: Humphrey Bogart, Orson Welles, Dashiell Hammett. But au contraire, the term itself (obviously) emanates from a Gallic sensibility: French critic Nino Frank planted the flag when he coined “film noir” in 1946. He was discussing American films, but still: it took a Frenchman to appreciate them. Or maybe the genre is German, growing out of Weimar expressionism, strassenfilm (street stories), Lang’s M.3

In fact, film noir is a hybrid which began to flourish in 1940s Hollywood, but was molded by displaced Europeans (Billy Wilder, Alfred Hitchcock, Otto Preminger) and keenly inflected by their continental aesthetic and philosophical influences: surrealism, existentialism, nihilism, and Freudian psychology.4

American cultural chauvinists may be forgiven for claiming ownership of noir: crafted in the hard-boiled brassy national image, its edgy, cynical worldview subversively foregrounded the unsettling underside of U.S. hegemony. Its debut accompanied and reflected the early Cold War/McCarthy period’s shady venality. Though it abated during Eisenhower’s Happy Days, noir soon reemerged amid Vietnam-era angst (Cape Fear, Klute, Dirty Harry, The French Connection).

The quintessential mood and voice bequeathed by such writers as Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, even Ernest Hemingway, pervaded the cinematic iterations of American noir: Chinatown, Taxi Driver, everything by Quentin Tarantino, the Coen Brothers, David Lynch. Noir became the country’s indigenous artform, and even as it evolved into neo-noir (slipstream, fantasy, magical realism: L. A. Confidential, Mulholland Drive, The Dark Knight trilogy), hyper-noir (even ‘noirer’ than noir! Sin City, Django Unchained), and tech noir (The Matrix, cyberpunk) it remained a made-in-America commodity.

Courmayeur’s 2013 program proved that contemporary noir, like anything poised to thrive nowadays, is indubitably global. Its December event featured Hong Kong filmmaker Johnny To’s wonderfully macabre comedy, Blind Detective (with the funniest crime reenactment scenes ever); Erik Matti’s Filipino killer-thriller On the Job; and Argentinian Lucía Puenzo’s resonantly disturbing Wakolda, an adaptation of her own novel about Josef Mengele’s 1960 refuge in a remote Patagonian Naziphile community.

The Black Lion jury award went to Denis Villeneuve’s Enemy, a Canadian production adapted from José Saramago’s Portuguese novel The Double (and with a bona fide binational spirit). If the prize was meant to recognize the noirest competitor, Enemy is indeed highly worthy: an almost comically overloaded compendium of betrayal, paranoia, alienating cityscapes, ominous haunting silences, obsessive (failed) searches for authentic self-awareness, jarring cuts, and shadowy fragmented narratives. A Cronenbergian car crash taps into the distinctly Canadian noir tradition, while an enormously large spider calls out unsuitably to Kafka.

But otherwise, Courmayeur’s North American presence was unspectacular.

It’s risky to overgeneralize based on two dozen films, but festivals inevitably invite us to extrapolate the trends they present. So, allow me to accept the dare: all indications are that American film noir is on life support, but Europeans are resplendently reclaiming the genre they helped craft in Hollywood with a fresh and rich burst of noir that more than adequately compensates for the American exhaustion.

This European profusion confirms the same kind of existential and systemic shocks seen in the heyday of American noir. Their massive economic crisis (with its concomitant social collapse and political turmoil) is a likely culprit here. Terrorism, too, is a probable precipitator. Widespread
anxiety has seized European nations in the wake of myriad assaults: al Qaeda-inspired transit bombings in London and Madrid; Norway’s domestic right-wing bloodbath; Chechen attacks in Moscow’s subway and theater; cartoon-based violence reflecting Islamic alienation in Denmark and the Netherlands; anti-Semitic attacks in Toulouse and Bulgaria.

Beyond this, an intriguing factor underlying the transatlantic reconfiguration of noir is demographic evidence showing widespread declines in US crime over the last generation, counterpoised by sharply rising European crime rates. Of course the criminal milieu, with its consequent cultural and moral destabilization, comprises film noir’s fundamental tableau. Europe’s crime spike has three main causes. First, the collapsing economy creates an air of desperation that motivates more people to turn to crime. Second, the European Union’s growth means freer borders and more extensive international infrastructures, abetting crime. And finally, Communist regimes had stifled crime, which has exploded since their demise. The post-Communist rekindling of ethnic tensions in the east and the European-Union-era aggrieved nationalism of the west have both fostered an increase in social discord and criminality.

The popularity of European noir suggests ominous faultlines in the collective civic cohesion that Europe—with its richer social contracts, older and stronger communities, more bikes than SUV’s, less “bowling alone”—is supposed to have sustained better than the United States. European film noir may or may not literally portray the specific crimes filling the continental police blotter, but it does convey a pervasive corruption indicating that something is very rotten in Denmark—and far beyond (but actually, as I’ll explain in a moment, perhaps especially around Denmark).

Fittingly, Courmayeur highlighted excellent Italian films. Ferdinando Vicentini Orgnani’s Vinodentro (Rewined), a zesty Faustian parable laced with notes of Fellini and Buñuel, depicts a dull Trentino bank clerk who makes a deal with the devil to become a world-class oenophile. I can’t recall a better wine movie, not just because it’s gurgling with luscious Pinot-porn but also because Orgnani’s bacchic flavoring betokens a giddy, carnivalesque strain that produces a fine vintage of noir.

And Stefano Incerti’s Neve (Snow) is a simultaneously brutal yet tender account of two mysterious travelers on the run through quaint villages in a timeless Italian landscape. Its rough criminal backdrop accommodates, unexpectedly, a shyly charming romantic chemistry. The film ends with a fundamental plot point unrevealed—an especially delicious touch for a director whose name literally means “uncertain”—that leaves the audience hanging open-endedly between redemption and depravity. I approached Roberto De Francesco, the film’s male lead who was in attendance (he won the festival’s best actor award), as he was smoking outside the theater after the screening and couldn’t resist trying to nail down the ending: “So does she give him back the money?” He responded with a palms-up shrug of apologetic indeterminacy: “We don’t know.”

From the UK, Jude Law dazzles as the title character in Richard Shepard’s Dom Hemingway, playing an intensely
crude safecracker who faces giddy highs and dark lows as he careens around the wheel of fortune trying to get what’s coming to him. It’s worth seeing if only for Shepard’s brilliantly inspired use of Dom’s penis as a framing device: ineffably resplendent (albeit just offscreen) in the opening shot when his fortune is rising, it’s considerably less salubrious toward the end as noir’s inevitable vicissitudes take their toll as Dom and his member come a hair’s-breadth away from corporeal separation.

And finally, circling back toward Denmark: Scandinoir, as many have dubbed it, comes from the periphery of Europe, a region that was less devastated than most by the twentieth century’s upheavals but which is lately exploding with noirish energy emanating from a dawning traumatic realization (as I interpret it) that they are no longer safely protected from the shocks of modern life.

Scandinoir may enjoy worldwide popularity because we are drawn to a sense of innocence relatively recently lost, giving these films an immediacy and real-world accessibility that America’s more mature noir can’t convey. Tarentinian levels of explosive, destructive chaos weren’t invented yesterday—they’ve been around for generations. In American noir, any remnant of normalcy tends to be ironic: for example Fargo, in Fargo, is simply a foil for an all-consuming noireness. But a laconic, stolid (if often claustrophobic) Nordic composure still endures in Scandinavian cinema, keeping a total noirish collapse at bay even as individual victims may fall prey.

Indeed, much European noir retains a lurking sense of order. Perhaps that’s due to all the ancient castles, cathedrals, and piazzas that still dot its communities. The European noirscape tends to sustain a sedate, civilized order (except when it doesn’t, which is when the moment of noir surfaces).

Courmayeur’s Scandinavian films all emanate from an inbred community of filmmakers and actors that have been copiously churning out these gripping productions. For example, Søren Kragh-Jacobsen’s The Hour of the Lynx features Sofie Gråbøl (the sweatered detective from Danish television’s The Killing) alongside Søren Malling (the news editor in Denmark’s noir-ish tv political thriller Borgen), while Kragh-Jacobsen himself was a charter member of Dogme 95.
The Keeper of Lost Causes, also Danish, comes from Mikkel Nørgaard, who directed Borgen and the dark sitcom Kløvn – Denmark’s version of Larry David’s long-running HBO TV show Curb Your Enthusiasm (1999—). And The Troubled Man, Agneta Fagerström-Olsson’s rendition of writer Henning Mankell’s final Wallander story, comes from the same Swedish production house, Yellow Bird, that presented Stieg Larsson’s The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo trilogy. (Here, the world gets even smaller: Mankell’s wife, Eva, is Ingmar Bergman’s daughter.)

The Wallander series has been arguably the preeminent vehicle for the diffusion of Scandinavian crime stories to the rest of the world—40 million books published in 20 languages—and Henning Mankell appeared at Courmayeur in person to accept the festival’s Raymond Chandler Award. I asked at the press conference how he appraised the current fascination for Swedish and Arctic noir. “We have a tradition that is not like the ‘whodunit’ where you just turn to the last page and find out what happened,” he responded. “I don’t like that: why bother reading the rest of the book? Instead, our crime novels talk about society and its contradictions.”

Mankell said Swedish xenophobia prompted him to launch Wallander 25 years ago, growing from his conviction that “racism is a criminal gesture.” The world’s three biggest businesses are all crimes, he asserted: drug trafficking, human trafficking, and illegal arms sales. While I can’t vouch for the authenticity of his claim, it fits nicely with my own hypothesis that an increasingly ubiquitous criminal milieu is inspiring the contemporary rise of European noir. Looking at enormous yachts from his oceanside home, Mankell said he thinks, following Balzac, that “behind every great fortune there is a crime.”

The Troubled Man examines how a couple’s disappearance churns up unsettled mysteries from the Cold War, and, interestingly, touches on the 1986 murder of Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme—an event that singlehandedly punctured that culture’s sense of complacency. Walking home from a movie without bodyguards, Palme was shot by an assassin; a suspect was tried but never convicted. Placid Nordic society became a place where evil lurked.

Wallander’s spy investigation isn’t meant to be retro or nostalgic; it has a very current spark and setting as he seeks
to figure out what historical espionage means for Swedes in the 21st century. Palme’s ideal of non-aligned neutrality proved unsustainable after his death, another element in the anxieties bubbling to the surface today.

Significantly, here as in the other two Scandinavian noir offerings on the program, Wallander is working the case free-lance: he’s on vacation as he does his detective work, drawn in because the missing figures happen to be his daughter’s in-laws. It’s not the police—the socially-mandated representatives of order—conducting these inquiries. Instead, it’s characters who have gone rogue, carrying out investigations on their own (and the fact that they’re not officially employed to be conducting these investigations may be a commentary on the current European job crisis).

In The Keeper of Lost Causes, Detective Mørck investigates the five-year-old case of a missing woman, doubting an official determination of suicide. A former homicide detective, he was transferred after a botched stake-out to “Department Q,” a bureaucratic limbo created simply to close out cold cases. He transgresses its rules by actually caring about, and digging into, the first case he’s asked to rubber stamp. His meticulous detective work is, again, on display, as he turns almost psychoanalytic in his determination to probe beyond and beneath what the other cops think are dead ends.

The best noir is an outgrowth of tremendously troubled characters, and Mørck comes closer to solving the crime as he teases out deeper levels of depravity in old case notes, finally finding the perpetrator—who, incredibly, never killed the woman he abducted in all that time, but has kept her alive in a twisted torture fantasy—and rescuing the victim.

In The Hour of the Lynx, too, Gråbøl is an “off-the-books” investigator: she’s actually a (minimally competent) priest who jumps at the chance to meet with a psychotic killer, at the invitation of a psychiatrist who wants her to tell him the suicide he craves is not part of God’s plan. Haunted, pale, often almost unwatchable in his fragile internalized horror and his profound deviance, the killer serves well as the prototype of the contemporary Scandinavian noir anti-hero.

But in fact, suicide is the boy’s destiny. He seems temporarily within reach of returning to normalcy as the priest

Krister Henriksson reprises his television series role as scruffy Swedish detective Kurt Wallander in The Troubled Man, Agneta Fagerström-Olsson’s rendition of Henning Mankell’s final Wallander story.
Sonja Richter stars in *The Keeper of Lost Causes* as a woman presumed dead in a long-neglected cold case, but discovered after extensive investigation by a rogue detective to be still alive and being tortured in a pressure chamber.

Sofie Gråbøl plays a Danish priest who spends most of the film in the cell with a young man (Frederik Johansen) who has committed a gruesome double murder in a futile attempt to exorcise his demons.
helps bring his repressed pain nearer the surface. But when she finally leaves his cell—the claustrophobic box where the whole movie unfolds—we realize he has taken her scarf, and of course he hangs himself with it.

She leads his funeral, burying him along with a cat he had strangled (a noir ending, clearly, rather than a Christian one). And then she resigns the priesthood, having lost her faith, or, somehow transformed it from God to the cat as she believed the young man had done. His tormented perverse vision of divinity dislodged her own conventional faith, which proved useless in a noir world.

“Film noir is a film of death,” according to Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton; it is “a world gone wrong” writes William Luhr. A festival of noir provides its public with a sobering and somewhat overwhelming exposure to an admirably fervent corpus of films. They are dramatically powerful in their intrepid head-on accounts of social corruption and dysfunction, but leave one inevitably with a less exalted perspective on humanity than one might have expected from a week in the majestic airs of Mont Blanc at the top of Europe.

Notes
1. While there are several American film noir festivals, they all show only old “classic noir”: The Film Noir foundation sponsors Noir City Festival screenings in Washington, DC, San Francisco, Portland, and elsewhere; the Arthur Lyons Film Noir Festival convenes annually in Palm Springs. Courmayeur’s is the only established festival program highlighting contemporary—living—noir.

2. Frank’s essay, “Un nouveau genre policier: L’aventure criminelle” (L’Ecran Francaise 61, August 28, 1946: 8–9, 14) cited The Maltese Falcon, Double Indemnity, Murder, My Sweet, and Laura as a group “that indicated a new direction for the crime film.” Jean-Pierre Chartier’s 1946 essay “Les Américains aussi font des films ‘noirs’” also used the term, and by 1955, the French sealed their critical ownership of the label with the publication of Raymond Borde’s and Etienne Chaumeton’s Panorama du film noir americain. The term did not enjoy widespread familiarity until the 1970s according to James Naremore in More Than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

3. The critics are in disagreement among themselves about the cultural location of noir. Paul Schrader’s influential 1972 essay “Notes on Film Noir” characterizes it as American, but Naremore in More than Night calls it “not a specifically American form” (5), suggesting that it “occupies a liminal space somewhere between Europe and America” (220). William Luhr in Film Noir (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) writes that the earliest film noirs “were often categorized as revealing a ‘European’ or decadent sensibility” (20). Ultimately, it’s like a Rorschach test: we look at film noir and see what we want to see. Perhaps most judiciously, Andrew Spicer designates film noir as “a conceptual black hole” (Film Noir, Harlow: Pearson, 2002, 1), wary of any reductionist attempts to generalize or anatomize its polyvalent strands.

4. What exactly is film noir? Is it even a genre, or movement, or school? Perhaps it’s just a style, a milieu, or a loosely connected set of attributes so variable and subjective as to defy coherent labeling. In the voluminous discourse on this question—which I feel is best conducted, as here, in endnotes—my favorite conclusion comes from Luhr (cited above): he approaches the problem by invoking Terry Eagleton’s exhaustive study of tragedy (Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic, 2003), noting that Eagleton ultimately finds little commonality other than determining that all his examples of tragedy are “very sad”; by the same token, we may not ultimately improve upon the near-platitude that all film noir is “very dark” (69).

5. Television, of course, is where all the American noir has gone, with a masterful and vital noir legacy going back decades (Twin Peaks, The Sopranos) and flourishing lately with The Wire, Six Feet Under, Breaking Bad, Dexter, Homeland, and Weeds, among many other shows.


7. Palme had just seen Suzanne Osten’s comedy The Mozart Brothers.