

A HISTORICIST PROPOSAL: *BLOOD SIMPLE*, NEO-NOIR AT THE END OF THE AMERICAN CENTURY

Fabián Orán Llarena

ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on Joel and Ethan Coen's debut film *Blood Simple* (1984), one of the main exponents of the neo-noir. After a surveying overview of the historical discussion on neo-noir's main wellspring (classical film noir), I move on to contextualize the film historically, providing a critical account of the decade of the 1970s. Thus, the aim of the following pages is to analyze neo-noir by paying attention to the cultural, social, and political discourses that permeate into the film. By considering that the conjunction between the immediate past of the film and the narrative and stylistic repertoire of film noir is the main informing force of *Blood Simple*; its close reading intends to configure an alternative historicist approach to a generic form dominated mostly by discussions that disregard the chronotope of the films.

KEY WORDS: film noir, neo-noir, the 1970s, *Blood Simple*, James M. Cain.

RESUME

«Una propuesta historicista: sangre fácil, neo-noir en el final del siglo americano». Este artículo se centra en la ópera prima de Joel y Ethan Coen, *Sangre fácil* (1984), uno de los máximos exponentes del nuevo cine negro. Tras compendiar brevemente la discusión histórica a la que ha sido sometida la principal influencia del género (el cine negro clásico), paso a contextualizar el film en sus coordenadas históricas, dando un repaso crítico a los años 1970. Así, el propósito de las páginas que vienen a continuación es analizar el nuevo cine negro en relación a los discursos políticos, sociales y culturales que permean la película. Al considerar que la conjunción entre el pasado inmediato del film y el repertorio estilístico y narrativo del cine negro es el principal pilar e influencia de *Sangre fácil*, un análisis profundo de la cinta tiene como objetivo ofrecer un modelo de análisis alternativo, por historicista, a una forma genérica dominada por un debate que excluyen el cronotopo de los films.

PALABRAS CLAVE: cine negro, nuevo cine negro, años 1970, *Sangre fácil*, James M. Cain.

There are two paths to choose. One is a path I've warned about tonight, the path that leads to fragmentation and self-interest. Down that road lies a mistaken idea of freedom, the right to grasp for ourselves some advantage over others [...] it is a certain route to failure

Jimmy CARTER, 39th President of the United States (1977-1981)



1. A NEVER ENDING STORY

One of the very few agreed-upon characteristics of the *ex post facto* phenomenon known as film noir is its temporal span. It ranges from 1941 to 1958, the years in which *the Maltese Falcon* (John Huston) and *Touch of Evil* (Orson Wells) were released respectively. The first to engage critically with the distinct form and content of what would later become one of the most problematic corpus of films ever produced in Hollywood were the French cineastes, eager to enjoy the American films the Third Reich had banned during occupation (1940-1944). After watching *Murder My Sweet* (Edward Dmytryk, 1944), *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944) or *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), they noticed that the *mise-èn-scène*, the stories, and the atmosphere of American cinema had veered dramatically into darkness. As forerunners of film noir criticism Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton wrote “[f]ew cycles in the entire history of film have put together in seven or eight years such a mix of foul play and murder. Sordidly or bizarrely, death always comes at the end of a tortured journey”.¹

Drawing from the sharp-edged, existentialist-flavored writings of hard-boiled fictionists such as Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, and Dashiell Hammet, these noir narratives did not proffer moral grips². The emotional distance, skepticism, and despair of the male characters was matched by the fetishized and deceiving *femme fatale*. The cinematic texture of the films, richly stylized by means of *chiaroscuro*, unorthodox framing, low-key lighting, and deep-focus cinematography, situated characters in shadowy, rain-washed cityscapes and ill-lit rooms. Their narrative structures often splintered, privileging time-juggling plots laden with fragmentation and unreliability. The audiences, both disoriented and fascinated, were unable to find the viewing protocols and cinematic traits of the highly classical 1930s film grammar: linearity, compositional frontality and balance, moral guidelines, high-key lighting, and symmetrical *mise-en-scène*.

Since the discussion crossed the Atlantic in the 1970s, thousands and thousands of pages trying to conceptualize film noir have been written, and yet, very little consensus has been achieved. On the one hand, some authors have considered it a movement, “like German Expressionism or the French New Wave”,³ based on a very particular visual signature tailored to address some malaises at play during

¹ Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton, “Towards a Definition of Film Noir”, in *Film Noir Reader*, edited by Alain Silver and James Ursini, New York, Limelight Editions, 1996, p. 19. This is a seminal text for the historical discussion on film noir since it is referenced in virtually all works dealing with the subject.

² See “No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir” in *Film Noir Reader*, *op.cit.*, pp. 77-94, where Robert Porfirio analyzes film noir and hard-boiled fiction under the light of Existentialism.

³ Paul Schrader, “Notes on Film Noir”, in *Film Noir Reader*, *op. cit.*, p. 53.



the 1940s and 1950s (e.g. Postwar disillusionment and Cold War)⁴. Many hold that the charismatic visual discourse of film noir, with its emphasis on leaving diegetic spaces and characters partially out of sight, encapsulates the moral ambiguity and bottled-up uneasiness experienced by male Americans re-adjusting to the changes of the epoch. Coping with women entering workforce and the paranoia-driven atmosphere of Cold War have been regarded as the main socio-cultural triggers for film noir's iconography⁵. For others, film noir was a genre, a set of conventions regarding plot and characterization, as well as the actualization of the desire Hollywood had at the time to furnish their productions with a new realism. Film noir's stylization, a series of new tinges that, nonetheless, conformed to the range of choices constituting the classical paradigm, embodied the result of such demand. The process was facilitated by the arrival of European émigrés such as Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder or Richard Siodmak, who incorporated the sensibility of German Expressionism (an assorted repertoire of somber and distorted images).⁶

Within this cascade of conflicting theoretical writings, we will focus on the critics who, regardless their stance on whether film noir is a genre or a movement, have pinpointed the political and social disclosures embedded in film noir. In his study of American film and WW II, Francisco Ponce lays out the tragic conception of cinematic narration fostered by film noir:

[E]l *film noir* abunda en todo tipo de consideraciones sobre el hecho narrativo. La omnisciencia del narrador bélico [...] se sustituye por la limitada fiabilidad de los narradores *noir*, que a menudo ignoran información decisiva para la comprensión de la trama: los protagonistas/narradores de *Double Indemnity* (1944), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948) o *Sunset Boulevard* pretenden llevar las riendas del relato sólo para comprender demasiado tarde que han sido simples comparsas de una trama bien distinta⁷.

Thus, individualism and personal freedom, which quintessentialize the cultural narratives of upward mobility and “pursuit of happiness” so entrenched in

⁴ To get a grasp of this stance, I would recommend the paradigmatic “Notes on Film Noir” by Paul Schrader as well as “Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir” by Janey Place and Lowell Petterson, an attempt to certify film noir as a visual code, both in *Film Noir Reader*, op. cit.

⁵ One of the pithiest overviews of film noir and its context(s) is Susan Hayward's definition in *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts, 3rd Edition*, London-New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 148-153.

⁶ There are two particularly persuasive texts that define the essence of film noir as generic: “Film Noir: A Modest Proposal” in *Film Noir Reader*, op. cit., by James Damico, an openly critical account on the research carried out on film noir during the 1970s, and a succinct note by David Bordwell entitled “The case of film noir” in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, London-New York, 1985, pp. 74-77. With his neo-formalist framework, Bordwell ascertains film noir, with its sleazy textures, is a slightly more unorthodox approach to classical narration.

⁷ Francisco Javier Ponce Lang-Lengton, *El Frente Audiovisual: Un Estudio Narratológico del Cine Norteamericano de la Segunda Guerra Mundial*, dissertation, Universidad de La Laguna, 2006, p. 415.



American collective consciousness, are deprived of positivist tenors and, in turn, morph into a route of mayhem and death. Attuned to this thought, and recalling Paul Schrader's observation that film noir thrives in response to "rips and tears in the social fabric"⁸, Gonzalo Pavés summarizes the violence-ridden nature of the series:

Los protagonistas (casi siempre masculinos) de las películas de la serie *noir* son víctimas de un mundo inestable, inseguro, donde los sólidos valores morales de la tradición se han visto dinamitados por una inusitada violencia social e individual y por la corrupción generalizada de sus más representativas instituciones.⁹

Instead of embracing the iconicity of *Sin City* (Robert Rodríguez and Frank Miller, 2005), the carnivalesque reinterpretation of *The Big Lebowski* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1998) and *Brick* (Rian Johnson, 2005), or the nostalgia-based re-reading of *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) and *L.A. Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, 1997), *Blood Simple* perpetuates the idea of film noir as a particularly eloquent locus to (re) present social fracture and political crisis.

2. DESOLATION ROW

Fraught with national traumas and popular despair, the decade of 1970s is a period plunged into a noir-infused ambiance. The host of events that created such malaise is diverse yet equally underpinned by the coming of limits. The culture of exceptionalism, the political system, economic prosperity¹⁰, and the alleged moral strengths¹¹ of the country were no longer worthy of confidence.

Americans were bombarded with events and trends that created "a psychological sense of sudden boundaries" that demanded "insistent revisions in the creed" of unlimited progress. On all fronts, the liberal idea of progress "collided with the philosophy of limits".¹²

On August 9, 1974, President Richard Nixon became the first president in history to resign. For the last two years, American population had been informed of the government's spying on radicals, journalists, university teachers, and members of

⁸ Quoted in Forster Hirsch, *Detours and Lost Highways: A Map of Neo-Noir*, New York, Limelight Edition, 2004, p. 7.

⁹ Gonzalo Pavés Borges, *El Cine Negro de la RKO: En el Corazón de las Tinieblas*, Madrid, T&B, 2003, p. 373.

¹⁰ Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Jimmy Carter came to office when the economic prosperity of the Cold War was starting to disintegrate.

¹¹ We should not forget the heinously famous My Lai Massacre of 1968, a mass murder of South Vietnamese civilians committed by the American army, or the Kent State shootings of 1970, where four students protesting against military involvement in South East Asia were killed.

¹² Stephen Depoe, *Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and the Ideological History of American Liberalism*, London, University of Chicago Press, 1997, p. 102.



the Democratic Party, a series of illegal activities known as the Watergate Scandal. Among the numerous structural damages Nixon's government caused, one of the most crucial ones was the way his wrongdoings subverted people's understanding and interaction with politics. The ties between political leadership and American population were disintegrated, unleashing an era of popular estrangement and discredit that would be exacerbated throughout the decade: "Watergate only intensified Americans' alienation from public life; their contempt for the secrecy, inefficiency, and failure of "big government".¹³ However, the Nixonian narrative (as well as any event of the decade) is inextricably interwoven with the Vietnam War (1955-1975), a multifaceted reality of loss and horror that fuelled the existential despair of the nation as well as the pointedly and pervasive noir atmosphere of personal displacement and distrust towards institutions. One of the most piercing consequences of the Vietnam War is how it compelled different sectors of American society to reconsider the values and information acquired via popular culture and official discourse(s) against the backdrop of the war:

High officials, journalists, antiwar activists, GIs, Americans of all sorts regularly described the war or simply the times in terms of a bad dream and experienced a shared sense of disorientation. Vietnam was like an ambush that refused to end and for which no retribution proved satisfying.¹⁴

By contrasting this sense of epistemic fragmentation and nightmarish bewilderedness with the sanitized and unifying official reports, the gulf between Americans and their rulers was continuously widened:

[T]he victory that was about to complete the official narrative suddenly vanished into an indefinite future. It became impossible to say with any authority whether we stood near the end of the Vietnam scenario, in the middle, or had been pushed back to "square one".¹⁵

Just as the helpless characters of film noir find no moral grips or solid traditions to hold on to, American society of the 1970s saw the mainstays constituting their early cultural landscape in tatters: "Toda vez que la retórica del complejo Casa Blanca-Pentágono no se correspondía con la realidad de la victoria, Vietnam anulaba la educación política de la Guerra Fría".¹⁶ When Saigon was captured by South Vi-

¹³ Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*, Cambridge, Da Capo Press, 2002, p. 42.

¹⁴ Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1988, p. 194.

¹⁵ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America*, Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1998, p. 578.

¹⁶ Juan José Cruz Hernández, *Desnudos, Muertos y Ofendidos: La Experiencia de Estados Unidos en Vietnam y su Construcción en la Narrativa Norteamericana*, volumen 1, La Laguna, Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de la Laguna, 1999, p. 30.





etnamese forces in 1975, the cultural narrative of America as an exceptionalist land disappeared. The twentieth century had been the American century, a notion built up upon military solidity, a long-standing drive of triumphalism in which “defeat was only a spring-board for victory”¹⁷, and a sense of moral strength and worldwide dominion and respect after WW II. This idea ceased to exist in the 1970s, a time that seemed to deny all the myths and narratives that have shaped American culture in previous decades.

With the wounds of Vietnam and Watergate still cut open, Jimmy Carter got the nomination for the Democratic Party and campaigned successfully against President Gerald Ford (Nixon’s vice-president), whose mandate was seriously damaged after granting unconditional pardon to his former boss. With no experience in Washington politics and having to cope with a stagnant economy and a Congress apt to align with business and the right wing, Carter’s term is usually conceived as a political failure¹⁸. Under his presidency, all the national pessimism that had been accrued throughout the decade, and even earlier, crystallized most eloquently.

Instead of disguising the severe crisis that was eroding the nation with triumphalist rhetoric, Carter underscored the need to accept boundaries and embrace restraint¹⁹: «[h]e told the American people what few presidents before or after have dared to say, that the energy crisis that gripped the nation could be solved only “with some sacrifice from you”»²⁰. Unwilling to boil down their expectations, Americans reacted with disaffection—something further proved when Ronald Reagan’s conservative message of reinvigoration through patriotism and economic anti-interventionism won over Carter’s measured call for limits in the 1980 election. Carter realized (too late, maybe) that, in coping with the traumas that have marked the symbolic body of the country, the nation have become a careless and alienated entity:

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns.²¹

¹⁷ Tom Engelhardt, op. cit., p.3.

¹⁸ See Ian Derbyshire, *Politics in the United States: From Carter to Bush*, Edinburgh, Chambers, 1990, pp. 32, 33, 37, to see all the lobbying pressures Carter had to endure. Also, here are some examples on how Carter’s lack of popularity at the time William C Berman, *America’s Right Turn: From Nixon to Clinton*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, pp. 46-49, and Tom Schulman, op. cit., pp. 128, 132, 142-3.

¹⁹ Carter tried to enact a series of laws to economize the use of energy, see Tom Schulman, op. cit., pp. 126-127 and Wilentz, Sean. *The Age of Reagan: A History, 1974-2008*, New York, Harper, 2008, p. 81.

²⁰ David Farber, “The Torch Had Fallen”, in *America in the Seventies*, edited by Beth Bailey and David Farber, Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 2004, p. 18.

²¹ Jimmy Carter, Crisis of Confidence Speech, July 15th, 1979, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/primary-resources/carter-crisis>.

The society that Carter had to govern was, indeed, one worthy of a film noir, guided by a general mood of defeatism and dread, of “fear for the future”²²:

[F]or the most of the white middle class, and for a great many others, the events and developments of the decade seemed to coalesce to mock one’s dreams and ambitions and to deflate expectations [...] Americans lamented the decline of heroism and the heroic, defining themselves instead as survivors. (Graebner 158)²³

Conditioned by the pervasive reality of economic recession and with two-thirds of the population with no involvement in politics whatsoever²⁴, people did no longer hold the future as a promising spot. By 1979, “six of ten Americans believed that their children would never enjoy a decent standard of living”²⁵ and that “the next five years will be worse than the past five years [already plunged into a dramatic economic crisis]”.²⁶

Blood Simple operates in the conjunction between its gloomy and dispirited historical moment and the ethos of film noir. Thus, America’s crisis of confidence merges with the bitterness and fatalism of the noir essence.

3. THE CASE OF STUDY

Written in 1981, shot in 1982, and released in festivals through 1984, *Blood Simple* is a story set in contemporary Texas. It is also a palimpsestic artifact, a reformulation, with bits of Hitchcock, of James M. Cain’s stories of greed, adultery and murder that gives away the Coen Brothers’ film and literary background.²⁷ These influences as well as some others are, nonetheless, re-contextualized, tinged with a series of new subtexts leading to the historical and generic framework previously sketched.

The first images of *Blood Simple* deploy the visual code of the Western: a prologue constituted by long shots foregrounds vast territories of land, drawing from the landscape presentation typical of the genre: “before the human figure appears [...] [a]ll there is is space, pure and absolute, materialized in the desert landscape”.²⁸ Although we find a film lexicon historically attached to spatial and

²² Paul Schrader, op. cit., p. 58.

²³ William Graebner, “America’s Poseidon Adventure: A Nation in Existential Despair”, in *America in the Seventies*, op. cit., p. 158.

²⁴ See Jimmy Carter, op. cit.

²⁵ Kenneth J. Heineman, *God is a Conservative: Religion, Politics and Morality in Contemporary America*, New York, New York University Press, 1988, p. 96.

²⁶ See Jimmy Carter, op. cit.

²⁷ See Fernando de Felipe, *Joel y Ethan Coen: El Cine Siamés*. Barcelona, Glénant, 1999, pp. 35, 37, 130. De Felipe’s book is, by far, the best work on the Coen Brothers written in Spanish.

²⁸ Jane P. Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 70.





Fig. 1. Claustrophic opennes.

aesthetic exuberance, frame composition renders the vastness unappealing and decadent, pointing out visually that the American soil is no longer associated with richness and resourcefulness. The low-angle shot, oddly close to the ground and including a piece of tire, transmutes amplitude into claustrophobic wasteland (fig. 1). Thus, the Western imagery is devoid of its usual discourse and is substituted by a genuinely noir-based content, that is, how “open [...] environments can suddenly become places without exit”.²⁹

As the rough images flow, a voice-over ponders about the naturalistic impulses that dominate life in Texas: “Now, in Russia, they got it mapped out so that everyone pulls for everyone else... that’s the theory, anyway. But what I know about is Texas, an’ down here... you’re on your own.” These ominous words exemplify the type of extremely individualistic mindset harbored by many Americans after the traumatic 1970s and which, according to Carter, would further destroy the social fabric of the nation. It is also what ultimately causes the deaths of three main characters. The voice we hear is that of Leon Visser (M. Emmet Walsh). Although the use of voice-over may lead us into thinking that the narration will adhere to his range of knowledge, no character in the film has a high degree of control over the narrative (an idea highlighted by a quite Hitchcockian use of dramatic irony). *Blood Simple* exacerbates the tragic conception of narration interred within film noir as all characters are dispossessed of any command over the events.

Right after the inauspicious prologue, the visual accent of the film changes radically, and so, the noir signature, which was the underlying subtext governing the

²⁹ Forster Hirsch, op. cit., p. 15.



Fig. 2. Ownership in the foreground 1.



Fig. 3. Ownership in the foreground 2.

images of the prologue, is visibly brought to the foreground. We are introduced to the adulterous couple, Abby (Frances McDormand) and Ray (John Getz), through an ill-lit sequence. They drive to a motel for their first sexual encounter. Except for one shot, we are only provided with side close-ups that barely display the protagonists as they speak of their mutual attraction and Abby's unpleasant husband (and Ray's employer) Marty (Dan Hedaya). Both form and content activate the noir signs: an inexistent family (and hence, the failure of community) and personal dissatisfaction, elements that are emphasized by the distinctive visual idiom, which envelopes the diegetic space in darkness.³⁰

In the next scene, Visser, hired by Marty to have the couple followed, shows the deceived husband a handful of photos as evidence of the adultery. As opposed to James M. Cain's stories, in which the adulterous couple plots against a naïve husband, here the latter is well aware of the disintegration of his marriage (a piece of information that, due to the lack of command characters in the film possess over the chain of events, will prove ultimately meaningless). Apart from this rewriting of Cain's plot design; this sequence introduces a layer of meaning via *mise-én-scène* that puts forwards some vices at play during the 1970s. Prior to any dialogue or physical presentation of Marty and Visser, the camera focuses on their possessions: Marty's ostentatious boots and ring, and Visser's hat (figs. 2 and 3). Thus, characters are primarily associated with their material possessions, reflecting the consumerism and spiritual stagnation that, Carter contended, had ripped American society apart. Close-ups showing human presence come after ownership has been foregrounded. Later on, space is treated similarly. The camera scans Marty's house, full of stuffed animals and gaudy decoration, elements as important to understand the character

³⁰ Nonetheless, the aesthetics of film noir appears rather momentarily in *Blood Simple*. The connection with film noir is a matter of motifs and themes. However, film does resort to film noir's visual signature at some points. We can find elements such as the *chiaroscuro* and the "frame within a frame". Not surprisingly, the Coen Brothers would reconstruct the cinematic texture of film noir with outstanding fidelity in *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001).



as his obsessive and jealous behavior. Everything owned by Marty is dominated by the so called Americanarama, a penchant for baroque and tasteless decoration (something very much present in the Coen brothers' filmography) and which generally serves to point out characters' existential mediocrity and emotional sordidness³¹. Regarding Marty, the imbalance between his economic power and his personal incompetence is made explicit in almost every single scene he is included in. After the first encounter with Visser, he attempts to seduce a young woman at his bar, although she is obviously flirting with the waiter Meurice (Samm-Art Williams) and has no interest in Marty. Physically inferior to his employee and incapable to engage in a regular conversation, the only resource he can utilize is exploiting his status as employer and economic provider, and send Meurice away to, supposedly, help at the other side of the bar. Of course, Marty is rejected in the most obvious manner. Unlike the betrayed innocent men played by Edward G. Robinson in Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window* (1944) and *Scarlet Street* (1945) or the absent-minded husband Nick Smith (Cecil Kellaway) from *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Ray Garnett, 1946), Marty, as the deceived man, creates no sympathies as he embodies the consumerist and individualistic society condemned by Carter and deeply ingrained in the cultural discourse Reaganism would establish during the 1980s. Intersecting with the mood of the late 1970s, the Americanarama is yet another symptom of ultra-materialism, one that *Blood Simple* uses to present Marty as the most vicious example of it.

Humiliated and resentful, Marty breaks into Ray's apartment and drags Abby out, in a visceral sequence in which an incredibly fast-paced tracking camera movement shows Abby getting rid of his husband as she breaks his finger and kicks him in the groin. The self-consciousness of the *mise-en-scène*, attuned to the violence of the scene, highlights the importance of the moment: Marty decides to go further and have Abby killed (a task he entrusts to Visser). However, the private investigator has very different plans. He gets to steal a gun owned by Abby, and shows Marty some doctored photos of the couple, allegedly killed. Once he is paid, Visser shoots Marty with Abby's gun, placing it at the scene of the crime, so that the murder is pinned on her. Accidentally, Visser also leaves his lighter behind (a slip that is omnisciently and repeatedly emphasized in a Hitchcock-like fashion). In this same sequence, framing is employed to stress characters' existential shallowness. The narration keeps associating Marty with his possessions, even when bleeding to death, as the garish neon on the background remind us that his most defining traits were, first and foremost, his purchasing power and questionable taste (fig. 4). Rampant individualism, present from the first lines and images of the narration, starts to overtly govern characters' actions, who from then onwards will continue failing to engage with each other in any form except mistrust and violence, certifying the validity three elements: the maxim announced by Visser in the prologue (that in Texas "you're on your own"), the criticism proclaimed by Carter (that Ameri-

³¹ See Fernando de Felipe, op. cit., p. 47.



Fig. 4. Marty's neon.

cans' communal impulse was long forgotten attitude), and the fatalism embedded in the narrative model posit by film noir (characters' helplessness in a world whose dynamics they are unable to unravel).

Later on, Ray arrives at the scene of the crime. He finds Marty's corpse and Abby's gun, conveniently left there by Visser, concluding that she killed her husband. He assumes he must finish her work. Up to this point, Ray had been characterized as a confident, sober man. He acknowledges his relationship with Abby to Marty and restrains from responding violently when the husband berates to him. But from the moment he finds Marty's body onwards, Ray goes into a state of shock and existential sedation, unable to interact with any other character out of paranoia. And thus, the most celebrated sequence of *Blood Simple* comes: the burial of Marty (who, in the middle of the process, turns out to be alive). Although Ray acts hesitantly and nervously all along, he refrains from speaking or establishing any connection with Marty, not even when the dying man grabs his foot in a desperate attempt to elicit some mercy (a scene worth of George A. Romero's zombie films). During the burial sequence, the narration is guided by a slow-paced tempo, which morbidly expands the length of the sequence while the camera remains focused entirely on both characters. When Ray is about to bury his employer alive, Marty draws a gun³². At that moment, Ray, at the peak of his emotional shutdown, stands solemnly, waiting to be shot until he, Marty, and the audience realize the gun is unloaded. Ray finishes his task, and the sequence, edited as unhurriedly as possibly so far, changes the pace radically through speedy and sudden cuts that match Ray's heavy breathing.

³² Early on, when Ray finds Marty (supposedly dead), he puts Abby's gun in Marty's pocket to erase the evidence along with the body.



Right after this passage, there is visual emphasis put on big spaces (both roads and lands) which, in the light of the macabre events just depicted, are utterly subverted, just as the first shots of the narration, creating an iconography clearly oriented to furnish the American plateaus with a genuinely noir entrapment. We find plenty of vast spaces in *Blood Simple*, but none of them symbolizes escape or relief. Furthermore, open landscapes, either because of their visual rendering or the layers of meaning added by the characters' immoral actions, do not connote expansion or amplitude, but quite the opposite.

This visual trope has also special resonance when applied to Abby and Ray.

[L]a pareja de amantes no intenta escapar del celoso marido poniendo millas de por medio. La vocación de su infidelidad no es la huida, sino la normalización, el asentamiento, el sedentarismo. La carretera se convierte así en la oportunidad desaprovechada, en el extrarradio de la pasión [...] Carreteras en las que la inexistente afluencia de tráfico parece ser la metáfora de la profunda soledad de los personajes, el símbolo de su monotonía existencial³³.

It is somewhat complicated to elucidate what Abby and Ray go after. Unlike the determined couples we find in *Double Indemnity* or *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, who aim to a very specific end (the murder of the husband and, purportedly, their freedom), Ray and Abby do not set an objective in this regard, nor their actions manifest what they strive for (we ignore if they mean to run away from Marty; or continuing with their adulterous relationship; or if their feelings are profound or mere sexual attraction). In *Blood Simple*, the idiosyncrasies of the noir couple are subject to re-conceptualization. Neither Abby nor Ray responds to the archetypes of the femme fatale (a cunning figure fetishized by the male gaze, who lures his lover into murder), and the noir (anti)hero (a disoriented man caught in the midst of lust and greed; usually betrayed by his sexual obsession with the femme fatale). The fact that Abby and Ray encounter violence and death has less to do with an impulse towards quick profit and sexual appetite than with their emotional isolationism, their incapacity to comprehend the other and express the preoccupations that grip them. They are a rather sedated, watered down version of the prototypical noir couple (much more definite in their quest for goals). Abby and Ray's purposeful dwelling and numbness also embodies the sense of undefined future and hopeless prospects so pervasive during the 1970's

[Americans] perceived and talked about themselves as bored—not bored with little things, or minimally bored, but bored big time. They were bored by what they saw as the collapse of meaning and values; bored with the absence of a meaningful work [...] bored, and more than a little frightened, by the blank face in the mirror.³⁴

³³ Fernando de Felipe, op. cit., pp. 59-60.

³⁴ William Grabner, op. cit., p. 159.



Intensifying the individual helplessness that conditions the noir microcosm of the film, Ray will remain in a state of emotional shutdown until the very end. After burying Marty, his task will focus on trying to cope with his violent deed and put himself together psychologically (whereas Abby will fail to understand Ray's erratic and paranoia-driven behavior). After the string of seismic disruptions that destabilized the social and cultural fabric of the nation, many Americans saw themselves the 1970s as "a disastrous era that defined life as survivorship"³⁵. And just as American society proved to be indifferent to political involvement and cynical towards sacrifice, embracing ego-centered attitudes instead, characters in the *Blood Simple* act out a similar sense of emotional detachment and alienation. Not surprisingly, "no scene in the film includes all four main characters, their physical and psychological disconnection from one another belying the web of ties that bind them fatally"³⁶. In this sense, *Blood Simple* re-contextualizes the group disintegration that underpins film noir, in which "the family is either nonexistent or negative"³⁷, a socio-cultural disclosure that bears strong kinship to the fall of collectivism diagnosed by Carter. In all of their scenes together after Marty's burial, Abby and Ray are unable to understand each other; dialogues turn into misleading obstacles that only create suspicion. See this brief exchange of words in which Ray phones Abby in the morning after the murderous event:

Ray: "-I love you."

Abby: "You all right?"

Ray: "I don't know. I better get off now."

Abby: "Well, I'll see ya. And thanks, Ray."

Abby, still drowsy, appreciates Ray's calling, as well as his love statement, and naively thanks him for it, something he understands as her tacitly being grateful for getting rid of Marty's corpse. This aura of confusion will dominate all of their scenes until the end. The emotional distance between Ray and Abby is also articulated physically via *mise-en-scène*. Each character will rarely step into the diegetic space of the other. During the occasions in which they meet after Marty's murder, the narration emphasizes the rift between them, employing, for the most part, independent close-ups that insulate them. When both characters are included within the same shot, the aim is to evidence, in visual terms, the personal gap that alienates them. This is realized by means of long shots that either set both characters apart spatially or place them at different levels of the frame. Tellingly, one of the very few close-ups that incorporate the two of them situates an object in the middle

³⁵ William Grabner, op. cit., p. 168.

³⁶ R. Barton Palmer, "Thinking Beyond the Failed Community: *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There*" in *The Philosophy of the Coen Brothers*, edited by Mark T. Conard, Lexington, University Press of Kentucky, 2009, p. 279.

³⁷ John Belton, *American Cinema, American Culture, 2nd Edition*, Boston, McGraw Hill, 2005, p. 240.





Fig. 5. A physical/psychological barrier.

(fig. 5) —a scene in which Abby finds out Ray is about to leave town without telling her. Ray’s “zombified” state, emotionally divorced and in a sort of siege mentality, literalizes the nation’s crisis of confidence, equally underpinned by a sense of social insulation and lack of grounds (be them cultural and/or mythical): “Americans are now [in the 1970s] forced to inhabit a United States in which faith in god, in government and in the institutions of advanced American capitalism as well as faith in one’s fellow human have been perverted”.³⁸

Blood Simple’s visceral grand finale is a grotesque metonymy of the entire narration, a sublimation of film noir’s tragic take on narrative. Searching for his missing lighter, Visser ends up tracking down Abby and Ray. He erroneously thinks the couple will use the lighter to pin Marty’s murder on him, and so, the private investigator decides to eliminate both of them.

Still overwhelmed by his heinous deed, Ray tries to break free from his alienating mindset, and awaits her in her apartment to declare once more, and for the last time, his feelings for Abby. But Visser, who had been watching the scene from the opposing building, shoots Ray to death. He dies still believing that Abby killed Marty. Abby thinks Marty is doing the shooting as a revenge for their infidelity, and hides desperately³⁹. Visser breaks into the apartment and looks for the lighter in Ray’s pockets (the lighter, as the camera has continuously been reminding us, is still on Marty’s table). Enraged, he starts moving around the apartment, looking for Abby. At this point, Abby resembles the “final girl” typical of “slasher films”.

³⁸ Linnie Blake, *The Wounds of Nation: Horror Cinema, Historical Trauma and National Identity*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2008, p. 82.

³⁹ The film is crafty enough to organize the different strands of action so that in the climax Abby still believes his husband is alive.

Popularized in the United States during the 1970s, the slasher film usually revolves around a murderous figure that massacres most of the characters (generally in the most macabre and graphic manner possible), except for one, the final girl, who usually ends up escaping⁴⁰. Under the light of the horrors of Vietnam, slasher films are usually regarded as changing the paradigm of viewers' emotional engagement. No longer is this tied to patriarchal figures but to a feeble and brutalized youngster, a reality suitably attuned to the aftermath of American war involvement in Southeast Asia.

Abby outmaneuvers Visser and kills him. However, the sequence is executed in a way that she never gets to actually see who is trying to murder her. "I'm not afraid of you Marty", says a confident and relieved Abby after making the final shot. Visser, in his death throes, laughs out stridently, understanding the purposefulness of the endeavors he has made: "well, ma'am, if I see him, I'll sure give him the message". On the one hand, the last lines of the film ironically condense one of the main motifs shaping the narration how, in their own self-confinement, characters have ended up killing and torturing each other when, in actuality, they did not represent any danger for their respective interests. On the other, and in a more general way, the highly intricate climax represents one of the boldest, most culturally-specific revision of film noir's convoluted and fatalistic narrative strategies.

Meaninglessness (or, more accurately, the loss of meaning) was a cornerstone of the multilayered crisis of the 1970s. With the assumptions of national perfectibility and the philosophy of victory culture falling apart, American population saw the national identity built by them and their predecessors as a fallible narrative. As a piece of film, and always by means of genuinely noir understanding of narrative construction, meaninglessness is inscribed *Blood Simple* right down to the very last detail and gesture. In the film, characters act ignoring the actual facts, the consequences of their actions and, sometimes, even their purposes, and always manage to run into violence when, strictly speaking, there is no pragmatic need for it. The possibility of not grasping the truth until it is too late comes as the last point made by the film, an idea that run deep in the 1970s, and that the protagonists of many films noir suffer it themselves.

4. CONCLUSION

As I hope the previous pages have detailed, *Blood Simple* is a film that participates in regenerating and re-functionalizing a series of characteristics proper of film noir. Its status as neo-noir is quite clear in that it nurtures and embraces the past (noir), while reformulating it by bringing up contemporary concerns (neo-). R. Barton Palmer summarizes with great accuracy how the Coen Brothers re-articulates the main thesis articulating James M. Cain's writing:

⁴⁰ See *Black Christmas* (Bob Clark, 1974), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974), and *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978).



Blood Simple offers a penetrating reading of Cain, dramatizing how the relentless and transgressive pursuit of self-interest, because it poisons human relations, inevitably proves suicidal. The instrumentalization (or objectification) of others and the miscommunication that mars personal relations lead to fatal misunderstandings, always a dark hazard in an inscrutable world.⁴¹

Blood Simple does not only redeploy film noir and Cain's take on human relationship by means of narrative complexities and a creative mise-en-scène. It also places this particular mode of narrative (and its attached subtexts of social fracture and instability) in a historical context congenial to it.

This paper is not intended to be a model for the analysis of the entirety of neo-noir, a category almost as problematic as its classical counterpart. It would be extremely naïve to think that a historicist approach could provide a satisfactory analysis of films such as *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981), *Miller's Crossing* (Joel and Ethan Coen, 1990), *Mulholland Falls* (Lee Tamahori, 1994), *The Black Dahlia* (Brian de Palma, 2006), or *The Good German* (Steven Soderbergh, 2006), to name a few. However, these pages do attempt to offer an alternative way of reading and making sense of this problematic cinematic corpus. In the aggregate, the literature on neo-noir focuses on spotting and summarizing the connections between the classical narratives and the new ones. But there is, in my opinion, very little analytical work made after the process of compilation.⁴²

The body of scholarship on neo-noir starts from the assumption that neo-noir films are, above all, self-conscious narratives, preoccupied first and foremost with the history of the genre:

La relación con el presente, aunque ocasionalmente intensa, ocupa un lugar secundario: la actividad principal de las películas [neo-noir] es la de revisitar/reinterpretar el discurso del *negro* 'clásico'.⁴³

Our definition of film noir in the following pages is quite loose and may be disputable, but it is based on the idea that in its latest manifestations [neo-noir], the genre cannot separate itself from its history.⁴⁴ (235)

⁴¹ R. Barton Palmer, op. cit., 269.

⁴² Here, I would like to make reference to some exceptions: Andrew Spicer's *Film Noir* (2002) which devotes two chapters to neo-noir, employing a framework informed by Modernism and Postmodernism to ponder on how the new noir narrative recompose the noir essence. Another in-depth study is the collection of essays *Neonoir* (2011) where an eclectic series of contributions shed some light on the subject, as well as proposing fresh approaches to the (sub)genre.

⁴³ Francisco Javier Ponce Lang Lengton, "Sombras Añoradas: Cine Negro y Nostalgia" in *Neonoir*, edited by Jesús Palacios, Madrid, T&B, 2011, p. 21.

⁴⁴ Roberto Cueto, "A Dose of Reality: Introduction to the Last 20 Years of American Film Noir" in *American Way of Death: American Film Noir, 1990-2010*, edited by Roberto Cueto and Antonio Santamaría, San Sebastián, UDL Libros, p. 235.



These are highly valid statements that structure the very analysis carried out in the previous pages (it is impossible to understand *Blood Simple* fully without taking into consideration the connections with past legacies). However, there are contemporary films that, adhered to noir guidelines, exploit the genre's conventions so as to address different national malaises and/or socially crumbling contexts. Let us think of *The Winter's Bone* (Debra Granik, 2010), a chronicle of the structural impoverishment of the rural heartland and the working poor articulated by the same plot device at the core of Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939): the search for missing man who had been dead right from the start; or *Killing Them Softly* (Andrew Dominik, 2012), a story that links the structures of organized crime with the current economic crisis; or *The Devil in Blue Dress* (Carl Franklin, 1995), a revisionist noir that "racializes" the genre; or *Shutter Island* (Martin Scorsese, 2010), a mischievous puzzle that taps into film noir's tragic narrative mode to deal and re-enact the (fallible) discourse of otherness and fear as a social drive (omnipresent from Cold War up to George W. Bush's War on Terror).

Therefore, this paper aims to suggest one more methodological option to the study of neo-noir: that the (sub)genre may not be exclusively bound to film history but also to the cultural, social, and political context(s) shaping the chronotope of the films, especially if these are related to structural damages or decadent spaces.

