

Film Review

- *Latin Noir*, directed by Andreas Apostolidis, Greece, France and Mexico, 2020

Latin Noir looks at five contemporary Latin American writers representing the region’s “noir” genre – a category that, although admittedly loose, could be called murder novel in English or *novela negra* in Spanish.¹ The 55-minute documentary places the genre in the context of the political and social changes taking place in Latin America since the 1960s. With interviews, archival footage and photographs, and some striking aerial shots of large cities, director Andreas Apostolidis provides a visual introduction into a creative and socially relevant literary genre – and an interesting bridge between the page and the screen.

Latin Noir is divided into sections anchored on the landscape of the cities of Mexico City, Havana, Santiago, Lima, and Buenos Aires. Each section features a writer associated with that city, Paco Ignacio Taibo II, Leonardo Padura, Luis Sepúlveda, Santiago Roncagliolo, and Claudia Piñeiro respectively, and offers readings from their novels as well as commentary from others experts, most prominently Philip Swanson from the University of Sheffield, a specialist on modern Latin American literature. Archival materials serve to amplify the explanation of the emergence of the genre as a direct response to the state violence, poverty, corruption, and inequality that have characterized Latin American societies in the last decades. A jazzy soundtrack conveys the sophisticated urban tone that is conventionally associated with noir cinema (although it has little connection with the rest of the context provided by the documentary and creates a strange dissonance with the dramatic images).

The central thesis of *Latin Noir* is that the murder novel is in fact the social novel of our times, a window to understand the dark side and existing tensions of Latin American countries. Rather than discussing the rules of the genre (something which Taibo dismisses as non-existent), the authors explore the connections between their fiction and reality. Noting the absence of justice at the end of the story, they reflect on the artificiality of the truth about specific crimes when violence and impunity still define reality. The emphasis, in other words, is on the political and social causes of the genre rather than its intrinsic

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capacity to attract a broad readership to plots that are structured in a predictable and satisfying way, as the resolution of a mystery. If anything, the documentary notes the role of the detective as the anchor of the narrative, with Taibo, Padura, and Roncagliolo stressing character over plot. The figure of the author himself, implicitly connected with that of the detective, is also a prominent aspect in the cases of Taibo and Sepúlveda, because of their personal involvement in the political struggles against authoritarian governments in the 1960s and 1970s.

There are some aspects of *Latin Noir*, however, that can be deceptive for viewers who are new to the genre in Latin America as well as to those who are seeking a more nuanced understanding of the region's recent history. The overwhelming emphasis on the political and social factors of writing neglects the dialogue between the murder novel and other movements in the rich literary history of Latin America. Although Swanson and Rocagliolo refer to the Latin American Boom as a negative antecedent to these gritty stories, shorn of magic and folklore, Latin American noir writers are not providing a mere reaction to a difficult reality, but a complex, highly mediated recreation of that reality.

The main problem with the documentary is the literary genealogy it proposes. The wave of crime fiction that emerged in the 1970s, called by some *neo-policíaco*, is depicted as a wholly novel and original apparition in the literary field. In reality, Latin American writers had been translating and writing detective and murder stories since the early twentieth century.² Yet, there is no mention of the writings of Jorge Luis Borges, Adolfo Bioy Casares, Rafael Bernal, Rodolfo Usigli, and others. Readers had long been consuming national versions of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* and editions from the *Séptimo Círculo* series and other presses. Although it might seem unfair to ask from a documentary to provide a thorough literary history, the director should have known that the early emphasis on Taibo's version of that history would shape viewers' interpretation of the rest of the film. Taibo claims that the repression of the 1968 student movement in Mexico City was the revelatory moment that created the genre – out of nothing, so to speak, in literary terms.

This story of origins echoes a common interpretation in the history of Mexican politics, where the Tlatelolco massacre that year opened the eyes of a generation to the authoritarian regime that had ruled Mexico for decades. Yet, perhaps with the exception of Sepúlveda and the Chilean coup of 1973, this is a very different historical context from that relevant for the other authors: the decay of the socialist revolution in Cuba since the 1980s (repressive indeed but not as bloody as in Mexico and Chile), the horrors of the Sendero Luminoso insurrection in Perú (where, as Roncagliolo notes, the largest number of victims were rural inhabitants and fell to the guerrillas), and the structural violence of neoliberalism in Argentina in the 1990s (that led to street protests but no coup or armed movements). The emphasis on the Mexican version of the story may not be so surprising as the documentary is a co-production involving

Mexican institutions, but it inaccurately homogenizes the very different national contexts in which the noir genre developed.

Nevertheless, *Latin Noir* is definitely a visually rich and engaging documentary, and a successful invitation to reading. It will require, if used in classes on Latin American literature and crime fiction, a more solid historical framing, one, for example, that would show that there is more to the region than criminal violence and baton-wielding cops. As part of a movie series it could be a useful complement for films that represent the rich cinematic production of noir movies in Latin America (not mentioned in this documentary but clearly another antecedent for the genre). As with fictional Latin American detectives, the investigation here does not aim for perfect justice or objectivity, but to reveal a compelling story.

Pablo Piccato, Columbia University
pp143@columbia.edu

Notes

- 1 “Latin” here seems to refer to Latin America, although it reproduces a racially-tinged English usage conflation of Latino and Latin American.
- 2 See for example Glen S. Close, *Contemporary Hispanic Crime Fiction: A Transatlantic Discourse on Urban Violence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).