Ph.D Theses

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FILM NOIR: THE FIGURE OF TRANSITIONALITY

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I. INITIAL SUPPOSITIONS

Independently of the stakes of the examination, the common factor of all literature on film noir is highlighting the definitional difficulties. Heading towards historical or medial directions, investigating genre or narration, soon we get confronted with the mobile and transitional nature of film noir. Most scholars regard the lack of definition as a problem, or even as a source of frustration to be cured by repeating certain statements without further consideration. Thus, film noir, as some critical voices warn us, froze to some kind of a "cinephilic readymade" (Marc Vernet), and its history became a textbook example of falsehood (Thomas Elsaesser).

Nevertheless, the problematic identity of film noir can actually be turned into a prolific concept, rather than regarded as something to hide or to be denied as threatening with formless chaos. In order to do so, James Naremore suggests a network-model, where understanding involves the use of metaphoric, metonimic and associative networks of relationship. This network idea not only works for the "internal" dynamics of film noir (e.g. its absent-centredness and its ability to adapt to various combinations), but also for "external" use. Framing noir by relations between genres, transnationality, or its transitional historical position, my take on film noir regards it as a figure constantly on the move.

II. THESES AND CHAPTERS

The basic idea is thus to study the "discursive construction" (James Naremore) of film noir in the metaphoric framework of transitionality. This endeavor, on the one hand, helps to display noir's potential for the displacement of historical and theoretical categories, while on the other hand facilitates a better understanding of film noir, whether talking about its historical position and corpus (chapter I and II), its medial characteristics and narratological tools (chapter III and IV), or its transcultural nature (chapter V). My approach simultaneously maintains the two aspects (noir's "outer" critical vigour and its "inner" instability) in order to show how that potential for displacement works in progress when analyzing film noirs. The dissertation does not undertake an overall examination of genre theory, the critique of modernity or metahistorical approaches, it rather focuses on the transitional practices of film noir.

Alongside a historical-theoretical introduction, the first part (chapter I) enumerates problematic angles preparing the way for further investigations in the following chapters. The schizoid nature of film noir is already coded in its confused genesis. Partly due to this, noir has

a double character, hard to define from the perspective of film theory and history, but easy to recognize as brand for producers and audiences. By examining the process by which the term was shaped and used in its reception, my study emphasizes noir's core problematic of identity, present in its overall framework as much as in noir movies on a thematic level. Definitional difficulties go beyond noir itself. James Naremore considers film noir as an allegory about how to shape definitions, and J. P. Telotte reads film noir's ambiguity as a critical take on genre theory in general. This approach emerges mainly in chapter II, viewed together with noir's social criticism.

Besides probing the stability of its framework, it is important to treat some basic statements on noir with due criticism (see the arguments of Marc Vernet and Thomas Elsaesser). The revision of noir "facts" maintained through and by repetition is one of the main issues of noir studies, and a primary objective of my thesis. Revisiting accepted statements and adding a new point of view can help to reconsider noir clichés: see the non-customary treatment of the questions of the first film noir (chapter II) or the European noir (chapter V). Difficulties and anomalies shouldn't be repressed by returning to safe commonplaces. Instead, why couldn't noir's "disordered" identity become the fuel for further theoretical discussions and film examinations? As an experimental answer to this question, I analyse *I Wake Up Screaming* (1941) in order to challenge periodization and genre limits. While revoking noir's birth myth, chapter II also conflicts various genre registers, exposing film noir's double-sided position towards modernity.

The connection between noir and modern(ity) is another aspect of noir's transitional character. It can be examined in the context of film history (between classical and modern film), regarding the interchanges between Europe and Hollywood (European roots and the aftermath of classic Hollywood noir), and even on a larger scale as an interpretational framework, detecting noir as a filmic expression of ideological, historical and social changes of modernity. Similarly to the questions of genre theory, transitionality is a recurrent context throughout the whole text.

But more directly, there is also a narrative characteristic, pointing towards transitionality. The narrative technique of classical film noirs shows some special features which are frequently considered as examples of alienation from institutionalized narrative patterns, or even as a detachment from classical narration and a transition towards modernity. Using theories and models from Jean-Pierre Telotte, András Bálint Kovács, Marc Vernet and Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, I am to depict noir's narrative transitionality and explain its (dis)location between classic and modern film: though film noir penetrates into the irrational territory of the

psyche and plays with the spreading unsteadiness of subjectivity, it always strives to restore – at all costs, even by taking the protagonist's life – the unambiguous universe of classical Hollywood cinema.

This forcefully united dualism seems to ground and direct noir's narrative trajectory, and also explains the frequent use of flash-back and voice-over as characteristic of noir's narrative tools. The flash-back–voice-over technique systematically carries subjectivity, filtering information through a narrator figure who tries to regain control or at least give meaning precisely by interpolating a distance from a story that was uncontrollable and senseless at the time. But this attempt is the very proof that film noir is the symptom of a fissure on classical narrative's steady structure, and a step towards modern film narration. Furthermore, if we consider the noir flash-back from a technical or formal point of view, we can see a certain tension arising between word and image: the stubborn but failed ambition of the narrator-protagonist to monopolize the diegesis disjoints the classical unity of visual and verbal layers.

The medial figures of transition and fissure gets analysed in three classical Hollywood noirs (*The Woman in the Window, Laura, The Lady from Shanghai*) in chapter III using the concept of *appearance*, within the theoretical framework of spectacle and narrative (Scott Bukatman). By these examples I demonstrate the way verbal narration tries to overwrite and dominate visuality embodied in a woman and her images, in order to prevent the threat of the multilevel, heterogeneous film-material that might resist the domination of the verbal narrative. This medium specific tension between image and narration is no more a conflict to arrange for modern film, but a mode of self-expression by elaborating alternative narrative trends with the liberation of the inherent forces of the image (like dreaming, imagination, subjectivity).

Chapter IV scrutinizes the use of flash-back and focalization à la noir (meaning it is equally conformist and subversive), based on Edward Branigan's narrative "accordion" model. *Possessed* (Curtis Bernhardt, 1947) mainly demonstrates the slip of the middle section (con)fusing the boundaries and functions of narrative levels while operating within the structure of classical Hollywood cinema and narrative. This confusion, motivated by the thematic presence of madness, flashes the very act of the transition itself, launching a troubled connection of past and present. The half-narrative zone of simultaneous narration (terms from Manfred Jahn) is another figure of transitivity that shows how these techniques can embody the concerns of noir regarding the unfinished past and the circularity of recollection by an unhinged subjectivity.

The last chapter (V) deals with the same concerns, taking an intercultural standpoint, and concentrates on film noir's historically implanted transnationality. Though largely

considered as a genuine American genre or style, the "Europeanness" of film noir can be examined from a double perspective – inspecting the genesis of the concept and its European roots on the one hand, and the aftermath of classic Hollywood noir on the other. I argue that the first group (French name giving; relating noir to poetic realism; the so-called émigré argument in connection with German expressionism) provides metanarratives supporting the cult of film noir and is primarily important for the reception. Thus, in the generalized repetition of "Europeanness", this characteristic remains an outer point of reference with a distinct identity. The actual cultural transfers (or parallel processes with no direct connections) and their noir-specific aspects can be traced best by researching international careers within the peculiar international milieu of film industry (Andrew Spicer, Thomas Elsaesser). Peter Lorre – the textbook example of transculturality and multilayered identity – not only played several film noir roles during his international career (his layers are examined in *The Face Behind the Mask,* classic Hollywood noir from 1941), but also directed the German noir *Der Verlorene* in 1951 that enables me to analyse European noir from various angles (basic sources: Sarah Thomas, Tim Bergfelder).

III.   RESULTS

The primary goal of my dissertation is to reframe some aspects of film noir, liberating it from stereotyped contexts towards new problematizations in the name of transitionality. After establishing a starting point in the first section, all other chapters provide a specific perspective examining the same problem of transitionality: an imaginary reconstruction of the birthmyth of film noir; femme fatale and verbal narration through medial analysis and the notion of appearance; noir flashback and focalization eluding a cognitive narrative model; Europe–Hollywood interconnections as interpretational assets.

Moreover, as film noir is a perfect tool for detecting and dissecting various historical and theoretical problems (e.g. periodization, genre identity, narrative modes and levels, transculturality), my thesis aims to exhibit noir's critical potential. Given the small number of literature available in Hungarian, I also aspire to introduce a great deal of international noir studies for educational purposes. From the same motivation I used both well canonized classic Hollywood noirs and less known, borderline cases in order to display a material with polemic potential for further discussions in classrooms as well as for academic discourses.

IV.   PUBLICATIONS

1. Linda Huszár: *Megszállott*. Flashback, fokalizáció, film noir. [*Possessed*. Flash-back, Focalization, Film Noir] *Apertúra,* Spring 2017.
   URL: http://uj.apertura.hu/2017/tavasz/huszar-megszallott-flashback-fokalizacio-film-noir/

2. Linda Huszár: A film noir ébredése? I Wake Up Screaming (1941). [Awakening of film noir? I Wake Up Screaming (1941).] *Filmszem,* 6/1. 6–27.

3. Linda Huszár: Elkeveredett hősök – az eltévedt lovag és a pszichopata westernhős. [Troubled Heroes – the Lost Knight and the Psychopath Cowboy.] *Aperúra Magazin*, 2014.
   URL: http://magazin.apertura.hu/film/elkeveredett-hosok-az-eltevedt-lovag-es-a-pszichopata-westernhos/3149/ (29-10-2019)

4. Linda Huszár: Film noir és modern(itás). A látszat működése: látvány és narratíva. [Film noir and Modern(ity). Appearance in work: Image and Narration.] In *Összkép szavakban*. Ed. Farkas György. Budapest, Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, 2014. 108–123.

5. Linda Huszár: The Pleasure of Appearances: Image and Narration in Film Noir. In *The Pleasures of the Spectacle: Essays from the Third Annual London Film and Media Conference*. Ed. Phillip, Drummond. London, The London Symposium, 2014. 324–333.

6. Linda Huszár: Film noir. A filmtörténet kétes figurája. [Film noir. The Dubious Figure of Film History] *Apertúra*, Summer 2013.
   URL: http://uj.apertura.hu/2013/nyar/huszar-film-noir-a-filmtortenet-ketes-figuraja/

7. Editing (thematic issues of *Apertúra*):
    - Summer 2013: *Film noir, társadalom, modernitás* [Film noir, Society, Modernity]
    - Summer 2019: *Európai film noir* [European Film Noir]

V.   CONFERENCES

1. May, 2013: Storytelling: Global Reflections on Narrative (Inter-Disciplinary.Net), Prague
   Image and Narration in Film Noir

2. June, 2013: Film and Media 2013, The Pleasures of the Spectacle, London
   The Pleasure of Appearances

3. November, 2013: I. 'Összkép' PhD Student Conference, Budapest
   Film noir és modern(itás). A látszat működése [Film noir and Modern(ity). Appearance in Work: Image and Narration]

4. March, 2014: Tavaszi Szél PhD Student Conference, Debrecen
   Flashback a film noirban [Flash-back in Film Noir]

5. May, 2014: Thinking Reality and Time through Film, Lisbon
   Film noir flash-back: the symptom of an epistemological crisis

6. May, 2018: Tavaszi Szél PhD Student Conference, Győr
   Magyar film noir? [Hungarian Film Noir?]

7. March, 2018: Mirror, Mirror: Perceptions, Deceptions, and Reflections in Time, London
   Blank Mirrors. Surface and Depth in Film Noir Iconography

8. April, 2018: Festival of Faculty of Arts at Szeged
   Európai film noir [European Film Noir]