

A LOOK AT BLACK FILMS

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Pedro Armendariz and Andrea Palma in *Distinto Amanecer* (Julio Bracho, 1943) Photo by Alejandra Novoa.

“It’s about the dynamics of violent death”, was Nino Frank’s commentary on *cine noir* —a genre filled with stories of extortion, robbery, drug trafficking, perversions, statements and all those characteristics which surround a violent death.

A basic characteristic of black films is that the action and the violent death are seen from the point of view of the

protagonists, that is, of the criminals themselves, in contrast with police movies, where the action is seen from the official police point of view. There are other differences worth pointing out between police movies and black films; in the former the police force is made up of brave and honest men ready to act and able to penetrate the criminal world, while in the latter, the film is made from within the criminals’ context, the police are corrupt and rather stupid. Considering that this vision might bring them certain problems, the creators of *cine noir* created another

character, located between law and order and the world of crime, the private detective, who has few scruples, committed only to himself and to his desire for adventure.

What is *cine noir*? When was it born? Black films were born -I say born- at the end of World War II. Born as a possible system, a possible genre, in an articulated way. There are always precedents: in this case we could mention *Underworld*, directed by von Sternberg (1928), and *Scarface* by Howard Hawks, (1931). But the real



Black films are characterized by violence exercised both by criminals and by those in charge of administering the law. *La sombra del Caudillo* (Julio Bracho. 1960) Photo by Alejandra Novoa.

birthing process began in 1941, with *The Maltese Falcon*, by John Huston. Black films have their origins in the English and north American police novelists, such as Dashiell Hammet, whose book *The Maltese Falcon* was adapted to make the first great film of this genre.

Authors such as Hammet, Chandler, Cain, Burnett and others came to Hollywood on calls from producers who saw a possible salvation of the film industry in these police novels

with their stories of corrupt police, dark and rainy streets, exotic bars, daring men and insensitive women. Film producers were looking for new themes, a new genre, which did not demand big budgets or famous stars.

And thus we have the beginnings of *cine noir* in 1941 with *The Maltese Falcon*, a cheap movie filmed almost always in interiors, with few characters, no extras, no technical innovations, with one star and another one who made his debut. Any analytical or

historical study of black films begins, develops and ends with this New York personality: Humphrey Bogart.

After 1945, there is a verbal confrontation, a collision between the bourgeoisie in power (represented by the United States) and the bureaucracy in power (represented by the Soviet Union). The infamous Senator Joe McCarthy began his witch hunt in the United States, and put north American intellectuals in the position of having to choose between making movies or losing their mansions. We know as an historical fact that, apart from counted exceptions, the north American intellectuals were faithful to their class (the bourgeoisie) and to their role as intellectuals. That is, they kept on making movies and kept their mansions. But this is to touch on a series of personal stories which only marginally affect the problem. The fact is that McCarthyism temporarily prohibited all political discourse in north American film.

Black films arose from this impossibility of political discourse. The situation explains the search for marginality as a concrete political choice. The world of organized crime is distinct, it is an invention of the great city bred from the new metropolis. It is an underworld, underground. In film -as in everything- the break with cultural duality, the refusal to assume imposed cultural roles, is represented by isolated events, by personal adventures. Black films do not escape this duality, this birth as opposition to the pre-existing system.

The genre matured and gave recognized norms and characteristics to the concept of the criminal gang: the slouched hat, the overcoat with the turned up collar, the solitude of the characters, the persecution they suffer, their laconic dialogues (different from the westerns, whose characters have more humor), the climate of defeat, specific settings (pool tables, game rooms, dark streets, innumerable card games). All these elements give black films an independence and exactness in construction, which brings them into existence as a possible genre.

There are also various famous figures associated with black films: Bogart, Richard Conte, George Raft, Sterling Hayden, Veronica Lake and others.

The marginality of black films is not a marginality in the film world, but a search for real worlds which exist outside the existing legal system. This is the contradiction which cuts short the life of *cine noir* as a genre. Due to this contradiction at birth, to this co-existence of its own elements and its vocation of reality, *cine noir* does not exhaust its possibilities of reflection (in contrast with north American comedy). The castration of the political discourse (McCarthyism) made a fusion between film and the criminal gangs, resulting in black films.

Cine noir does not have the long life of the western, nor the intensity of American comedy. Its literary origins weigh it down, but so too does its search for a new reality. Black films look towards the crime world, they do not dare to examine themselves.

Nevertheless, *cine noir* searched for its birth as an independent system, and curiously enough, this was not in the U.S. but in France, as late as the 1960's, with the director Jean Pierre Melville -who adopted his surname because of his admiration for the author of *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville. J.P. Melville was the genial arranger of the elements placed in his hands by north American black films. An unusual person - film maker before the "new wave" (Godard, Truffaut, Chabrol)-he died in 1973 from a heart attack before he reached the age of 60. His death also meant the death of his genre-*cine noir*.

In this case we cannot speak of an author and his style on the one hand, and films grouped in the genre on the other. Here the fusion is absolute. If *cine noir* reaches the category of a genre, it achieves its absolute emancipation exactly when the other two grand film genres, comedy and the western, were collapsing, and at his point we must admit that *cine noir c'est Jean Pierre Melville!*

Melville began working on other people's stories, and gradually created his own universe which would emerge with greater force in a second stage, marked by extraordinary simplicity and poetic atmospheres. With Melville, French movies have their own aesthetics, which although similar to the north American model, break with this in many aspects. His last three films were written by Melville himself: *Le samurai*, *Le Cercle Rouge*, *Le Flic*;

the first two are maximum expressions of his style, and have influenced his many followers.

Although it can be said that black films are specifically north American and French, and that they generate a series of characteristics in their visual style, themes and personalities, Mexican film also participated and collaborated in this genre: for instance, the film *Distinto Amanecer* (A Different Dawn) by Julio Bracho (1943), where the city is discovered as an essential character, takes certain elements from *cine noir*, so as to give greater reality to the portrait of the city. The action takes place during one night and the city offers its most varied social contexts, but the protagonists do not find the desired solidarity and safe refuge; they only confront corruption and death. Another example from this epoch would be *En la palma de tu mano* (In the Palm of your Hand), by Roberto Gavaldón, film director from Chihuahua in northern Mexico.

In 1978 the film *El Complot Mongol* (The Mongol Complot) was made, directed by the Spaniard Antonio Eceiza and based on the novel of the same name by Rafael Bernal. Here the story is reinforced by the ambiguous and shadowy atmosphere of the city. Meanwhile, film director Arturo Ripstein, together with Vicente Leñero, adapted Luis Spota's novel *Lo de Antes*, and the result was one of Ripstein's best films: *Cadena Perpetua* (Condemned for Life), which exposes the scandalous and cynical corruption of Mexican police. *Motel* by Luis Mandoki and *Nocaut* by José Luis García Agraz are another two Mexican films with characteristics and narrative rhythm very similar to black films.

Talking about his film *Nocaut*, García Agraz comments: "this film came from my fascination with black films and especially with certain films such as *The Big Sleep*, *White Heat*, *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*. While these are most representative of the genre *cine noir*, I tried to recall some Mexican films as a visual reference. I knew that Mexico City has all the formal elements for making a film with the visual and thematic characteristics of *cine noir*. Mexico City becomes a trap, a cross roads with no way out for the

personality who tries to flee from his destiny."

Film critic Nelson Carro had the following comments about black films: "The first surprising thing about *Nocaut* is its formal quality. The production is impeccable and makes excellent use of the locations in the city's central districts before dawn. The general atmosphere is very effective, and Angel Goded's photographic work, extraordinary. ...It is rare to see a Mexican film where the boxing fights seem real (along with the fact that in this case they are reduced to a few short scenes), and where the physical and moral choices of the characters are understood without useless reiterations, where the car chases achieve the dizzying speed and movement that has always characterized them, a film where the ellipses play an important part - where, moreover, one ends up believing in the existence of scenes not shown, one accepts that they happened. As in the case of *Motel*, in *Nocaut* we have a re-elaboration of elements from *cine noir*: a cornered individual commits a crime and is pursued by the police and by a series of gangsters connected with boxing, drugs, cabarets and burdels. Fear, money, the power of the enemy, all make it impossible to find a safe refuge - friends betray him, and the city becomes a labyrinth where all the exits are closed. Finally the protagonist, Rodrigo Sarancho, loses strength and gives up, and the circle closes."

Tomás Pérez Turrent comments about the director García Agraz that "he knows how to tell a story, how to give it tone and atmosphere, how to make real characters and establish relationships with a few indications, how to give the set and the decorations certain weight, a real existence. (Mexico City, before this film, was virtually non-existent in the film world.) His black universe is frequently touched with humor, he directs his actors with confidence." □