

Donald Westlake's *Ordo*: Not Euro, not Noir, but Euro-Noir?

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Noir is a genre label with a long and complex history. The success of certain European home-grown forms of the genre (the French polar, the Scandinavian noir, etc.) invite us to reflect on the range but also the limits of the label in today's European culture. The seemingly paradoxical example of Donald Westlake's *Ordo*, an American noir novel that is perhaps neither 'truly American' nor 'noir' (and perhaps not even a 'novel') will serve here as a test case for some reflections on the actual use and function of the noir label in European literary culture.

Why Go On Worrying About the 'Euro' in Noir?

Noir is a text example of what makes genre theory so endlessly puzzling and exciting. The label itself has undergone dramatic shifts. In film theory, for instance, noir was initially an adjective, borrowed by US critics of French authors who used it to define certain movies that recalled the tradition of the 'roman noir', that is a certain type of crime fiction with forerunners in nineteenth century literature (there is in English no such thing as a 'black novel'). It is only much later that noir became a noun, qualifying a particular type of cinema and, by extension, crime fiction in literature. Also, the noir corpus has an eventful history, which is far from being closed. The first movies that were called noir (the word still being used as an adjective) were not necessarily what we would call today clear illustrations of the noir genre, while the divergences in the field of writing are even greater. There is of course no reason to panic. We all know that genres are fluid and that it is wise to adopt a prototypical stance when applying genre labels: a genre refers to a set of properties, moreover a set that is subject to change over time and whose geographical and cultural variations can be large, while not all genre occurrences are supposed to match the complete set of properties that define the genre in question. In the following, we would like to address some of the practical issues raised by the actual use of the noir label when reading books in the context of the Euro-noir universe. In addition, and this is

something to which we will return, genre is not something that can be defined by the mere use of either formal or thematic characteristics. Next to these ‘syntactic’ and ‘semantic’ features – we are using here the terminology by Rick Altman (1999), currently still the most useful and widespread framework in the field of genre theory – there are also ‘pragmatic’ elements which refer to the actual use of genre labels in social discourse, where each of them is the object of permanent negotiations between various social groups.

Euro-noir is as complex a notion as noir itself. At first sight, Euro-noir seems to be nothing else than the glocal appropriation of what has now become a global brand, but things are of course less straightforward. First of all, there is the cultural and linguistic diversity of Europe, which is both a reality and a false problem. As long ago as the early 1960s, Nina Berberova, one of the sharpest observers of exile and multilingual literature, noticed that:

Since three decades it is no longer possible to speak in Western literature, at least not on the highest level, of ‘French,’ ‘English’ or ‘American’ novels. The best works are becoming international. They are instantaneously translated in other languages or often published simultaneously in two different languages. In addition, it is no longer an exception that they are written in another language than that in which they should normally have been written. There exist at least five other languages in which one can express oneself today and find an audience. The choice between one of them is no longer a major issue. (Berberova 1989, 325; our translation)¹

In practice, such an optimistic(?) stance brackets problems such as, for instance, what about smaller languages? What about authors who cannot effortlessly (or seemingly effortlessly) migrate from one language to another, such as the writer that Berberova mentions in her text, Vladimir Nabokov? What about possible hierarchies between the ‘five languages’ that occupy the forefront of international occidental literature? The notion of Euro-noir certainly does not escape these kinds of problems and obstacles.

Second, and this may have to do with Berberova’s remark on ‘good literature’ (the ‘niveau le plus élevé’), genre issues do not function the same way in ‘serious’ literature and in ‘popular’ literature (Baetens and Cohen 2019). In the former case, genre labels are of secondary importance (whether an ambitious novel belongs to this or that subtype of novel has nothing to do with the way it will be judged by critics and other gatekeepers, and also by the public at large); in the latter case, however, genre labels are key (part of the pleasure of reading depends on the capacity of measuring the relationship between the general laws of a given genre and the application of these rules in a specific work). The fact that genres of the popular fiction domain are not culture-insensitive – a genre as apparently universal as hard-boiled fiction will

1. Original French: ‘Depuis ces trente dernières années, on ne peut plus parler dans la littérature occidentale, du moins au niveau le plus élevé, de romans “français”, “anglais” ou “américains”. Les meilleures œuvres deviennent internationales. Elles sont traduites aussitôt dans d’autres langues ou souvent publiées simultanément en deux langues différentes. De plus, il n’est pas rare qu’elles soient écrites dans une autre langue que celle où elles auraient dû normalement être écrites. Il existe au moins cinq langues dans lesquelles on peut s’exprimer aujourd’hui et être entendu. Le choix de l’une d’elles n’est plus un problème majeur.’

assume very different forms and meanings according to the culture in which it is produced or received – has major consequences for the way in which works may circulate or not between linguistic areas and traditions.

In addition, and this is a third issue, the Euro-noir cannot sever all ties with the noir subtype that today represents the genre's hegemonic model: the American hard-boiled. Whatever form a Euro-noir may take at present, it will inevitably be read through the prism of the post-Chandler and post-Hammett model, at least through its recent remediations in film and television. In the context of noir, the room for glocal manoeuvring is not unlimited as may be in the case of 'high literary' forms, where the link between genre features and specific traditions is much weaker.

In short, the frequent use of the term Euro-noir is no guarantee that it actually covers a single reality. In the following, we would like to substantiate some of the general questions raised by this term by considering a novel that readers may feel surprised to discover here: Donald Westlake's *Ordo* (1977). Westlake (1933–2008) is not a European author. His book is perhaps not a real noir (the extremely prolific Westlake, who used countless pen names, is not always writing crime fiction and *Ordo* is definitely not part of his two best-known crime series). Yet bizarrely enough, there seem to be good reasons to consider it a Euro-noir.

***Ordo*, a Text, a Book, a Series, and a Publisher**

Let us introduce the book via the three first reviews on the (now Amazon-owned) *Goodreads* site, which gives it an overall rate of 3.79 (*Goodreads* 2019).

Cbj: A truly unusual story by Donald. E. Westlake whose work I'm reading for the first time. An American seaman Ordo Tupikos discovers that his teenage bride whom he was forced to divorce by her conscientious mother is now a big star called Dawn Devine in Hollywood. After being ribbed by his fellow seamen and fearing that he is living a life of mediocrity, the seaman decides to pay his ex-wife a visit. [...] Anyway, this was a really intriguing little story. [...]

David: A tiny tiny non-judgmental story about people who need to re-create themselves while growing up, and people who don't and how everyone has their own way to deal with things left behind.

Ryan Helton: One of those classic noir stories that makes your skin feel gritty and raw. This story is remarkably well written and a must for macho readers.

These reviews, all of which appear to be quite appropriate and sensitive, tend to emphasize less the American element of the story (Hollywood) than its 'universal' dimension, while strangely diverging on the genre qualities of the work (the first two reviewers do not mention genre at all, the third one underlines its 'classic noir' character, adding a strong concluding remark on the intended 'macho' readership, which is both perfectly normal, classic noir clearly catering to macho readers, and utterly absorbing, as the novel is strangely deprived of both noir and macho aspects – and this is of course what makes this final remark so interesting for the reading we would like to develop here.

European readers, however, may access Westlake's story differently, with everything that this involves for its reading and interpretation. Like the authors of this article, they may have come across Westlake's story through its French translation in a famous noir series. In the francophone market there are, next to many series built around one character (the Maigret series, the Nestor Burma series, the San Antonio series, etc.) two leading 'general' series, each with a strong profile and pedigree. Historically speaking, the one that launched the noir genre *qua genre* was Gallimard's *Série noire* (created in 1945 and still in business; some novels by Westlake, such as *Adios Scheherazade* (1970) contain direct allusions to the series). In 1948, the series editor presented it in the following way:

But please beware: it would be dangerous to put the volumes of the *Série noire* in the hands of any reader. The amateurs of Sherlock Holmes-like enigma stories will not find their fare here [...] One will see here police officers as corrupt as the criminals they pursue. The nice detective does not always solve the mystery. Sometimes there is not even a mystery. And once in a while not even a detective at all. But then. Then, there is always the action, the fear, the violence. (Quoted in Mouret 1995, 2; our translation)²

More than three decades later, in 1986, at a time when the *Série noire* was running out of steam, the publishing company Rivages started a new series, *Rivagesnoir*, which distinguished itself from the Gallimard model in two ways: on the one hand, the new series abandoned the highly institutionalized cover with white and yellow characters on a black background, replacing it with attractive full-colour image covers; on the other hand, Rivages also aimed at upgrading the cultural status of the genre by replacing the one-shot model of the *Série noire* by a policy of publishing the complete works of important authors (and the fact that all works of an author appear in a single series generally suffices to transform her or him into an 'important author').

Ordo appeared in the *Rivagesnoir* series in 1995 (actually as a reprint of the first translation with Futuropolis in 1986, when this company, currently a Gallimard imprint, was still an independent publishing house). The publication venue immediately gave a certain 'literary' flavour to Westlake's novel, but there is more. First of all, the book appeared in a translation by Jean-Patrick Manchette, himself one of the essential voices of the 'new' French variant of the 'old' noir. Second, the novel also benefits from an introduction by Robert Soulat, one of the former editors of the *Série noire* (which he edited between 1977 and 1991), who underlines the poetic and psychological qualities of a text that is not being qualified as crime or noir. Third, although this aspect is not mentioned in the book's paratext, readers may remember other contacts between Westlake and 'high art', for instance through a 1967 Godard movie, *Made in USA*, inspired by Howard Hawks' 1946 *The Big Sleep*

2. Original French: 'Que le lecteur non prévenu se méfie: les volumes de la *Série noire* ne peuvent pas sans danger être mis entre toutes les mains. L'amateur d'énigmes à la Sherlock Holmes n'y trouvera pas souvent son compte [...] On y voit des policiers plus corrompus que les malfaiteurs qu'ils poursuivent. Le détective sympathique ne résout pas toujours le mystère. Parfois, il n'y a pas de mystère. Et quelquefois pas de détective du tout... Mais alors. Alors, il reste de l'action, de l'angoisse, de la violence.'

but unofficially based on the novel *The Jugger*, by Richard Stark, aka . . . Donald Westlake (because neither Godard nor the producer paid the book's adaptation rights, and following legal action by Westlake, the film was long unavailable in the United States).³

In short, all the institutional fairies were gathered at the cradle of the French *Ordo* to make it not just a noir, but a very prestigious as well as a 'French' one. Not in the sense that the *Rivagesnoir* edition tends to dissimulate the fact that Westlake is a translated author, but in the sense that the novel's paratext creates a new frame for the reception of the work. The aura of the series, the prestige of both the translator and the prefacer, the blurb which guides the reader to the literary and psychological qualities of a text by what it calls 'the other Westlake', that is the Westlake who is not a crime fiction writer but a writer *tout court*, all these elements point toward the same goal: that of transforming popular fiction into literature. Moreover, this cultural upgrade is also presented as a decidedly French operation, as if the migration from original to translation helped disclose what the US context seemed to have been unable to underscore. Although this manoeuvre may seem to remain purely implicit, any French reader is definitely aware of the fact that what is going on here is one more repetition of what happened at the decisive moment of *auteur* theory in the 1950s, when the French had proven capable of telling the Americans that it was time for cinema to make room for the director as artist, the real artist in the French tradition being of course a writer, as theorized in the camera–pen theory and terminology (Astruc 1948). Some readers may even have been conscious of the fact that the emphasis on France's capacity of setting the agenda of the cultural and artistic debate was still there at a time when power relationships had changed, as shown by the US appropriation of what was called 'French theory', a somewhat strange gathering and rebranding of recent philosophy that only through American eyes was seen as a more or less homogeneous movement (Cusset 2008 [2003]).

I Am An American, But Do I Remain Me?

The text of *Ordo* confirms the possibility of such an appropriative reading, that is the upscaling of a US hard-boiled fiction as a psychological narrative (the shift from 'novel' to 'story' in the paratextual presentation further suggests an increase in cultural capital, novel being a more commercially tainted term than story), thanks to an editorial and institutional intervention on the side of the intermediary instances.

First of all, the opening sentences of the work immediately challenge any 'local' US reading of the narrative:

3. Some ten years later, there will even be an eponymous French movie adaptation of *Ordo*, by director Laurence Ferreira Barbosa (Gémini Films, 2004; the film will be labelled, in the typical yet really untranslatable French genre terminology, a 'romance, comédie dramatique'). The trailer of the movie can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2yqr2sRhto>

My name is Ordo Tupikos, and I was born in North Flat, Wyoming on November 9th, 1936. My father was part Greek and part Swede and part American Indian, while my mother was half Irish and half Italian. Both had been born in this country, so I am one hundred percent American. (Westlake 1977, 207)

An opening like this is of course begging for a non-American reading of the text, whose universality is stressed from the very start. Later on, the increasing importance of the identity issue – not: who am I? but: do I remain the same person during my whole life? – matches quite well Westlake's ambition to address a general human question, in spite of the story being set in Hollywood, a quintessential American environment. In this sense, the intended readership is immediately global. One might even say that European readers are better qualified to cope with the irony of *Ordo's* opening, with its blunt exemplification of the US 'e pluribus unum' principle. European readers know that the melting pot idea does not always work as it is supposed to do – EU citizens often feel rather sceptical toward the 'unity in diversity' motto – and they are almost programmed to see in Ordo Tupikos's quest, which aims at discovering whether the movie star now known as Dawn Devine really is the young girl he married more than a decade earlier, the reflection of a nation's uncertain identity rather than the illustration of some individual concern.

Second, *Ordo* is undoubtedly not a crime fiction text, and certainly not a noir text. There is no crime involved, not even a failed or an attempted one, at least not in the traditional sense of the term. Perhaps there is not even a mystery, since the hero-narrator soon finds out that the Hollywood star who no longer resembles his first wife really is the person he married years ago. To a certain extent, there is also no violence, except in a very allusive sense when *Ordo* describes the unfriendly relationship between mother and daughter. But, in general, all genre markers of noir and crime fiction rapidly dissolve: no femme fatale, no real investigation, no strident tension between hero and heroine, no steamy sex scenes, no sharp contrast between light and shadow, no colloquial language, no punishment of the female protagonist, and no unhappy ending (in the final chapter, the hero goes back home and quietly resettles with the girlfriend whom he left after seeing the picture of Dawn Devine in a magazine). To put it otherwise: during the whole book, the reader feels that something is about to happen, yet never in a tragic or dramatic way, but eventually nothing happens at all, not even in the form of an open ending (the final chapter really wraps up the story and dreamily buries the phantoms of the past), and following the noir thread can only lead to a dead end.

Yet at the same time, and in spite of all these counter indications, Westlake's book is also a story that readers experience as noir. Just as the *Série noire*, according to its editor, needed neither a mystery nor a detective to frame its stories as noir and hard-boiled, the *Rivagesnoir* series takes this logic a step further and succeeds in offering a noir experience which can do away even with violence (the bottom line of Gallimard's *Série noire* and, more generally, of noir as it will be defined by this line of publications). What remains then is something like a noir atmosphere, that is a set of noir ingredients which do not coalesce – on purpose of course, since the hero's

interrogation of people's identity is reflected in the story's challenging of the consistency of a genre structure.

There are good reasons to understand why such a duplicity, both an ambiguity (how to choose between crime fiction and 'literature', in the sense of non-genre fiction?) and an ambivalence (it doesn't make any sense to make that choice), is possible, and why it is at the very heart of Westlake's writing in *Ordo* as well as in its editorial reframing in *Rivagesnoir*. Commercially speaking, it would be suicide not to exploit the author's excellent reputation as a crime writer, hence the incorporation of the book in a noir series. At the same time, the very publication of a crime fiction story in this series supposes that one makes an effort to distinguish it from its allegedly literarily less-valuable competitors, hence the downsizing of all noir elements at the benefit of non-genre aspects.

The very possibility of possibly conflicting readings is not a specific feature of low-brow fictions as read by high-brow audiences, crime fiction being a typical example of this kind of multiple layering (remember André Malraux's (1933) famous definition of Faulkner's art in the concluding sentence of his preface to the French translation of a scandal-ridden novel: '*Sanctuary* is the irruption of Greek tragedy in the crime novel' [*Sanctuaire*, c'est l'irruption de la tragédie grecque dans le roman policier]). It is instead a characteristic of reading, sophisticated or not, in general, as theorized by Gérard Genette with the help of the distinction between *essentialist* and *conditionalist*. Taking the literariness of certain texts for granted, the *essentialist* way of reading tries to answer the question: 'Which texts are works of art?' (Genette 1993 [1991], 4), whereas the *conditionalist* way of reading raises a totally different question: 'Under what conditions, or under what circumstances, can a text, with no *internal* modifications, become a work of art?' (Genette 1993 [1991], 4; emphasis in original). According to Genette, whose take on this problem is shared by most specialists, the essentialist approach means that non-literary genres or works can only be read in a non-literary mode. They can be well-written, instructive, emotionally involving, intelligent, etc., but never 'literary'. In the conditionalist approach, instead, it is perfectly possible to make a non-literary reading of a literary text or vice versa. To give some examples: a conditionalist mindset can read a novel as a purely historical document or as a mere symptom of the mental illness of its author. A legal document can become a poem (it suffices to think of Charles Reznikoff's (1934) *Testimony*, a collection of 'found footage' poetry based on transcripts of courtroom testimonies), a historical memoir can be read as a novel, etc. Moreover, these reflections on essentialist versus conditionalist ways of reading and writing tie in with Altman's ideas on the complex relationships between syntactic, semantic and pragmatic aspects of genres, which do not always 'behave' according to their own internal characteristics.

And the Euro-Noir, Finally?

If *Ordo* is neither a European work nor a noir novel, while perfectly functioning as a European reframed noir, what does that tell us about the notion of Euro-noir? Three

major lessons can be drawn from our brief analysis of Westlake's novel, both as a text (a story to be read) and as a book (an object for sale).

First, *Ordo* unmistakably demonstrates the extreme mobility not only of genre labels and properties, but of the very status and relevance of genres (the concept of noir is meaningful in the context of popular fiction, but it becomes a hindrance once one wants the text to function in a more literary environment). From this point of view, one should not worry too much about the conceptual vagueness of the Euro-noir, which is and is not something other than the genre universally known as noir, for like any other genre marker its use and circulation cannot be corralled. Second, *Ordo* further complicates the spatial and geographical underpinnings of the Euro-noir by its capacity to smoothly integrate a typically European cultural pattern, that of upgrading items and practices of American consumer culture and of repurposing them in properly European traditions, in this case that of the universalizing psychological novel. Third, there is the persistent influence of highly local properties, the Euro-noir appearing here with a French twist, as shown by the repeated insistence on the shortness of the novel. In France, the short story continues to be a barely recognized genre, in contrast with the exceptional popularity of the short novel, à la Camus' (1946 [1942]) *The Stranger*, and the French Euro-noir is no exception to this local rule.

Just like Donald Westlake's novel, which both is and is not an American noir, the concept of Euro-noir can refer to works and authors that are neither European nor noir, but that does not mean that it does not have precise functions and meanings in very specific European contexts. It is this mix of lack of real foundations and multi-layeredness that makes it such a fascinating label.

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