

# Researching European Crime Narratives and the Role of Television: An Introduction

Luca Barra, Alice Jacquelin, Federico Pagello



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Television screens across Europe are more and more filled, in their channels' schedules as in the digital platforms' libraries, with detectives, investigators, police(wo)men coming from abroad. After a long-lasting prominence of US figures, reflecting a larger hegemony often read as cultural imperialism, the last decades have complicated the picture, offering an increasing visibility (with different roles and resonances) to characters coming from the UK, the Nordic regions of Scandinavia, the major continental markets as France, Germany, Spain and Italy, the Mediterranean regions, the Eastern and Central European countries, and so on. This partial yet relevant opening has been saluted as a change of direction in global circulation flows, leading many to think about its consequences on a larger, shared idea of European culture; at the same time, many limits and complexities in this increased presence have also emerged. In both perspectives, European crime narratives are seen as complex objects and need therefore to be adequately researched. Television detectives are national, and global, and often glocal. Their popularity and circulation in European markets bring cultural diversity and put audiences in touch with other not-so-far yet distinct cultures, while also – sometimes – laying some ground for the development of a truly transnational, cross-European, shared popular culture.

This special issue presents some of the research findings of the H2020-funded project DETECT – Detecting Transcultural Identity in European Popular Crime Narratives (2018-2021), led by Monica Dall'Asta (University of Bologna) in collaboration with more than 40 scholars and professionals affiliated to 17 institutions, located in 10 European countries.<sup>1</sup> This large consortium examined a set of questions about the emergence, circulation, promotion and representation of European transcultural identities in the field of popular media: are popular narratives conveying and supporting the shaping of a new, shared feeling of belonging to a same continental cultural heritage – or do they instead highlight the crisis in the process of European integration that has been politically and socially visible during

## Keywords

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the last decade? Do private and public institutions across the continent encourage or hamper the production, distribution and consumption of European popular culture? What role can European policies play in this context? Do audiences take advantage of the increasing opportunities to be confronted with popular narratives coming from other parts of Europe? The research specifically examined the crime genre as a crucial vehicle for the circulation of popular narratives across the continent, facilitating the growth of transnational networks in European creative industries as well as a continuous cultural exchange among European citizens.

DETECT built on a series of previous research programmes. With EU-funded project EPOP: Popular Roots of European Popular Culture in Film, Comics and Serial Literature (1850-1930) (led by Monica Dall'Asta in 2008-2010) and the AHRC-funded Visualising European Crime Fiction: New Digital Tools and Approaches for the Study of Transnational Popular Culture (led by another DETECT scholar, Dominique Jeannerod, in 2014-2015), the many ways in which European popular narratives have circulated across borders and across media since the rise of modern cultural industries in the last two centuries were explored from different perspectives. Other researchers have addressed more specifically the question of the Europeanness of European popular culture in the contemporary era. In the late Nineties, an international group led by Milly Buonanno looked at the issue of European cultural identity in television series for the 'Eurofiction' project but their conclusion, in fact, was quite harsh: 'Whether we like it or not, we have to conclude that "TV fiction expressing a European identity" is a fiction and will continue to be one unless something drastic happens in Europe these next few years'.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, the findings of the HERA-funded project MeCETES: Mediating Cultural Encounters through European Screen (led by Andrew Higson, Ib Bondebjerg and Caroline Pauwels) supported a different, more encouraging view, emphasizing how significant changes have occurred in the European media industries, and in society at large, during the last couple of decades, promoting what they called 'banal Europeanisation'.<sup>3</sup> Building on the idea of a 'soft' European integration promoted through the inclusion of European popular culture as a part of the everyday experience of the Union's citizens, MeCETES highlighted the transnational dimension of the production and circulation of popular film and television in Europe, to insist on their ability to give shape to a variety of 'cultural encounters' and, therefore, to the emergence of a shared European identity.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, they warned against any simplistic assessment of this process, stressing how even the circulation of the most successful example of European TV series – including, not coincidentally, those in the crime genre – appear to be quite uneven and always in need to face the strong competition of US television.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, while it is undeniable that a 'European television fiction renaissance'<sup>6</sup> has been really taking place during the last recent years,



enhancing both the quality and the quantity of series able to circulate outside the national borders and to reach an international audience, it remains dubious whether this phenomenon can be seen as the advent of a truly European popular culture, since its circulation often stays within the conventional borders of nations and other geographical and cultural macro-regions, with the exceptions of a few shows that reach an urban, cosmopolitan niche audience. To this day, the ironic consideration of the Eurofiction research team thus perhaps still partially stands: 'The closest thing the researchers turned up, the one programme that fostered a pan-European sense of identity and elicited dialogue *sans frontières* an indirect reference also to the "Télévision sans frontières" European directive, authors' note, was the annual Eurovision Song Contest' (and, we could possibly add, the UEFA European Football Championship).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, cultural, economic and policy obstacles keep limiting the transnational circulation and, crucially, the international reception of these European TV series, to those sectors of the foreign audiences that are already inclined to watch foreign products, confining them to a 'large niche' of affluent, educated, culturally-savvy viewers.

In what follows, we will highlight some overall considerations about the transcultural significance of European crime narratives, before briefly discussing the specific case of TV crime series, which are the focus of this special issue. A short presentation of the articles will end the introduction.

## FROM 'EURO NOIR' TO GLOCALISED, INTERMEDIAL CRIME NARRATIVES

The question about Europeanness of European popular culture, in general, and crime narratives, in particular, can be addressed in radically different ways: from exploring theoretical debates about the concept of European cultural identity to analysing their concrete manifestations in the current historical and political context; from studying industrial strategies and EU policies promoting international cooperation to examining the textual representation of cultural identities and the audiences' responses to it. As proven by the articles included here, the DETECT consortium has engaged with all of these perspectives, trying to develop a comprehensive framework and to identify some general trends. Two main perspectives have been particularly helpful in approaching television crime series.

A first line of enquiry concerns the labelling of contemporary European crime narratives, and their role in defining how cultural identity is (re) presented and marketed. In particular, DETECT scholars examined whether a label as 'Euro Noir' could be fruitfully used to indicate the emergence of a shared identity in European crime narratives. Fully aware of the many objections to this hypothesis, the researchers examined how and why popular culture in Europe is more often described using national



or regional labels (e.g. Nordic Noir, Mediterranean Noir, Tartan Noir, the French *polar*, the Spanish *novela negra*, the Italian *giallo*, etc.), rather than by emphasising its European dimension. At the same time, the broad transnational circulation and influence of these localised labels (as in the paradigmatic case of Nordic Noir), and the inherently transcultural nature of these phenomena (as in the crucial example of Mediterranean Noir), have been emphasized. As Kim Toft Hansen wrote in the introduction to *European Television Crime Drama*, edited with Steven Peacock and Sue Turnbull, it is possible to argue that:

*[if] the stories [...] clearly cross borders in the narratives, and if the films or television series also appear multilingual and international in their financial and creative collaboration, then Euronoir may indeed be a way of articulating transborder identities and investigative collaboration. Euronoir is, then, more than just crime fiction from a European place; Euronoir may rather comprise narratives that identify, negotiate, criticize, establish or even destabilize cross-continental realities, translocal signifiers or transnational geopolitics.<sup>8</sup>*

The last few decades have seen a growing effort to develop strategies to increase the truly transnational dimension of European crime narratives, especially as a result of the creatives', producers', commissioners' and policy makers' awareness of the existence of a variety of obstacles. The articles included in a special issue of the *European Review* have engaged with the difficulty to offer a clear definition of 'Euro Noir',<sup>9</sup> the limitations encountered by the distribution of crime films,<sup>10</sup> the role of gatekeepers in the circulation of crime novels,<sup>11</sup> the frequent absence of any labeling as 'European' for crime novels.<sup>12</sup> Such studies show how, despite a clear diversification in the offer of crime narratives from across the continent, an immediately recognizable representation of European identity is hard to be found in contemporary popular culture.

A second, connected, strand of inquiry concerned the notion of glocalism. A special issue of *Academic Quarter* edited by a group of DETECT scholars has particularly engaged with this concept to insist on the ability of crime narratives in all media to combine local, national and regional cultural traits with a transnational attitude.<sup>13</sup> The label 'Euro Noir', it is suggested there, can be used to indicate the (qualitative) effects of a (quantitative) increase in the translation and marketing of European crime novels between the late 1990s and the early 2000s, which stimulated a variety of transcultural exchanges and transnational cooperation.<sup>14</sup> The lens of glocalism proved to be particularly suited to address the field of television, as proven by other telling cases addressed in that publication: the circulation of Nordic Noir TV series in Eastern Europe and the emergence of what has been called "Hungarian Nordic Noir," a paradoxical label;<sup>15</sup> the increasingly cosmopolitan audio-visual industry in Berlin and the subsequent change



in the perception of German popular culture throughout the continent;<sup>16</sup> and the abandon of traditional urban settings to make use of a variety of 'peripheral locations' in Italy,<sup>17</sup> a shift that can be found everywhere in European TV crime series, as proven by two articles included as proven by two articles included here.

Glocalism is also linked to another key feature of crime narratives: inter-mediality.<sup>18</sup> Crime narratives are indeed able to cross borders more easily than other genres also thanks to the peculiar success of 'glocalised' literary crime fiction in attracting international audiences, which then leads to the creation of films and television series able to give expression to local cultural identities as well as to circulate (again) on a transnational level. In the last decades, European television in particular has benefitted from the audiences' wide interest in this particular form of representation and cultural tourism, providing both the familiar pleasures of globalised crime fiction and the unexpected flavour granted by unusual, picturesque settings. A large number of successful European TV crime series is adapted from literary works, and this is a specific characteristic of this production (differently from its US competitor). To understand the continental dimension of European crime narratives in particular, and of popular culture in general, it is necessary to adopt a comparative approach able to take into consideration the systematic links among different media.

## THIS ISSUE: EUROPEAN TV CRIME SERIES

This issue specifically focalises on television crime series, undoubtedly the most popular kind of crime narratives in recent years. It is not surprising that the trends highlighted above are particularly evident in this field. In fact, a shift toward the production of TV shows that have a strong 'glocal appeal' has become more and more evident. The idea of a 'European television fiction renaissance' taking place since the mid-2000s is indeed based on the analysis of the many transformations that, with premium operators, on-demand platforms, and a renewed role of national public service broadcasters, have strongly reduced the traditional tendency of European players to address almost exclusively their national audience, with more and more frequent attempts to produce serial narratives able to reach a domestic and an international audience at the same time.

Interestingly enough, DETECT's focus on the crime genre helps us to stress how both the increasing transnational success of contemporary European TV crime series has benefited from such contextual changes and, vice versa, crime television has been a push towards industrial, narrative and consumption transformations. A significant number of the first-rate international hits in contemporary European television are indeed crime shows: from *Sherlock* to *La casa de Papel/Money Heist*, from *The Killing* to *Inspector Montalbano*, from *Peaky Blinders* to *Gomorra*, from *The Bureau*



to *Babylon Berlin*. Nordic Noir television series have been widely studied both for their circulation and for their ability to influence several productions across the continent.<sup>19</sup> A crime show as the Welsh *Hinterland* has been convincingly discussed as paradigmatic of the glocal strategies adapted by producers and consumers of popular culture, well beyond this specific genre.<sup>20</sup> What is most relevant, perhaps, is how the success of European TV crime series reflects both quantitatively and qualitatively the changes that impacted the whole of television, and popular culture more broadly. As in other cases, in fact, common and often discussed labels as 'quality TV' or 'complex TV'<sup>21</sup> clearly work here in two ways: on the one hand, they are used to facilitate the creation and critical appreciation of crime shows that thematically and stylistically aim to detach themselves from the classic procedural crime series traditionally produced by national broadcasters;<sup>22</sup> on the other hand, they are part of a promotional discourse that producers and distributors are never tired to repeat when discussing the international appeal of their new products.<sup>23</sup> In the DETECT framework, therefore, the complexity of contemporary TV crime series became a perfect example of transnational and transcultural European popular culture.

All the articles included in this special section have been researched and written by members of the DETECT consortium. Coming from seven different countries and looking at television series in almost every corner of the continent, these studies present a multi-faceted analysis of the diversity of contemporary European crime television. With no ambition to provide an exhaustive mapping of the enormous, and constantly growing, production in this field, the articles nevertheless touch on all the analytical perspectives adopted in the DETECT project, taking into consideration phenomena pertaining to the production, distribution, consumption of TV crime narratives in Europe as well as their ability to give shape to significant representations of its varied cultural identity.

The first contribution – 'BBC's *Sherlock* and Europeanness: A Case Study on the Circulation of a European TV Crime Series in Italy' –, by Luca Antoniazzi and Sara Casoli, closely follows the creation, international dissemination and reception of one of the most relevant European TV crime series. *Sherlock* can be first seen as a quintessentially British show, but this specific case study helps to emphasise the contradictions at the core of the process of European integration, focusing first of all on the obstacles and resistances to its emergence. The production, distribution and reception of *Sherlock* can be seen as exemplary of the development of contemporary quality crime shows in Europe, a trend that was crucial for the creation of truly transnational series in Europe but that also highlights their difficulties in becoming truly popular phenomena at a European level. The article closes with an analysis of the Italian circulation of the series, showing how even though a significant section of the audience has deeply engaged with the show, its quantitative success remained comparatively limited.



Laetitia Biscarrat's 'On the Circulation of European TV Crime Series: A Case Study of the French Televisual Landscape (1957–2018)' also combines the study of the distribution and the consumption of European crime series to explore the circulation of non-domestic series in a specific territory. Building on a far-reaching quantitative analysis of the foreign shows imported by French TV over seven decades, Biscarrat is able to highlight the increasing diversification in the type of shows broadcast by linear television in France, as well as the obstacles that persist in promoting a deeper kind of diversity both behind and in front of the camera.

Valentina Re and Kim Toft Hansen's 'Producing Peripheral Locations: Double Marginality in Italian and Danish TV Crime' takes more literally the topic of glocalisation, working in the framework of 'location studies.'<sup>24</sup> The article examines in parallel two case studies, offering an unusual and thought-provoking analysis comparing two TV industries in the North and South of Europe. As it is currently the case with crime narratives on a global and intermedial level, both Italian and Danish TV series have engaged more and more with locations far from their typical metropolitan settings. Re and Hansen explore the idea of "peripheral locations" and discuss how the production and the representation strategies both contributed to strengthen this phenomenon.

A rather similar subject is at the centre of the fourth article included in this special section, 'Away from London: Crime and Regional Film Commissions in the UK.' Here, Markus Schleich explores closely the policy background against which this widespread move away from the traditional use of the capital cities as the privileged setting of TV crime series happened. In particular, the author examines the impact of United Kingdom's film policies through the case of the Yorkshire Film Commission, and discusses a specific crime series, *The ABC Murders* (BBC One, 2018).

Anna Keszeg and Roxana Eichel's 'Paths to Quality Television in Eastern Europe: Where Hungarian Romanian HBO From?' takes again a wider perspective, looking at different aspects of the production, distribution and representation of Eastern European TV crime series to illustrate some key traits of the important development in this market. The article focuses on Hungarian and Romanian shows produced by HBO Europe. Eastern European crime series confirm larger trends that shape the creation and circulation of popular narratives in general, and crime stories in particular: the strategies of the US corporation, the strong ties to Nordic Noir, the role of remakes as well as the connection with art cinema and the film festival circuit prove once again how a fully comparative perspective, looking at intermedial relationships and critically building on glocalism, can be crucial to understand the complexity of European crime narratives.

After a first part taking more an industrial perspective and completing it, in a systemic analysis, with narrative and consumptions aspects, the last two articles collected here forward with more strength some relevant questions about the politics of representation and reception of



European crime narratives, with a direct focus on issues of identity and diversity. Contemporary crime narratives, in all media, have indeed also become the ideal terrain to present new form of gender, ethnic as well as 'neurodivergent' identities. This process obviously challenges all simplistic notions of European identity as a self-evident, one-dimensional cultural construct and has been used to diversify the representation of stereotyped or marginalised communities both politically and commercially.

Álvaro Luna-Dubois's 'Constructing Ethnic Minority Detectives in French and German Crime Television Series' looks at how contemporary television crime series offer more room for the protagonism of characters from underrepresented social, cultural and ethnic backgrounds when compared to the past trajectories of the genre. After developing a taxonomy of different types of detective figures from a minority background, Luna concludes that, while we are certainly witnessing an important increase in the representation of minorities in European popular culture and society, the shows he analysed do not provide an entirely satisfying expression of the complexity of their rich cultural identities.

The closing essay, 'European Neurodivergent Detectives and the Politics of Autism Representation,' has been written by the principal investigator of the DETECt research project, Monica Dall'Asta, addressing a much-less discussed yet crucial kind of social and cultural identity through the frame of 'neurodivergence.' The article first offers an introduction to the current debates about the political significance of autism, a condition which has been widely, and controversially, re-defined in the last decades. The topic is suited to address contemporary crime series, as many protagonists of these shows are explicitly or (more often) implicitly portrayed as subjects with autistic traits. Through an insightful analysis of viewers' and critics' responses to a corpus of European TV crime series focused on 'autistic' detectives, Dall'Asta proves how the concept of 'neurodivergence' can be used to address how popular crime narratives represent, promote and question new cultural identities on both a national and transnational level.

The articles included in this special issue offer a rich and compelling account of the many perspectives, theoretical frameworks and methodologies that can be applied to better understand contemporary European television crime series, while at the same time touching and building upon some crucial, transversal concepts able to emphasize the relevance and variety of European crime narratives across nations and across media. While not providing a systematic mapping or a complete understanding of the many questions at place, we hope that this collection could give the reader at least a number of useful inputs on relevant concepts, issues, spaces, examples, and provide grounds for much needed further research in television and media studies.





# Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more details on DETECT, see the presentation of the project in this issue.

<sup>2</sup> Gunhild Agger, 'Fictions of Europe', *NORDICOM: Review of Nordic Research on Media and Communication* 22.1 (2001), p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Ib Bondebjerg, 'Transnational Europe: TV-drama, Co-production Networks and Mediated Cultural Encounters,' *Palgrave Communications* 2 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2016.34>.

<sup>4</sup> The main findings of the MeCETES project are presented in: Ib Bondebjerg, Eva Novrup Redvall, and Andrew Higson (eds.), *European Cinema and Television: Cultural Policy and Everyday Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Ib Bondebjerg, Eva Novrup Redvall, Andrew Higson (eds.), *Transnational European Television Drama: Productions, Genres and Audiences* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2017).

<sup>5</sup> An insightful study of the circulation and reception of European crime series in the UK, Belgium and Denmark is found in the chapter 'The Dark Side of Society: Crime Drama,' in Bondebjerg *et alii*, *Transnational European Television Drama*, pp. 223-255.

<sup>6</sup> See Luca Barra and Massimo Scaglioni, *A European Television Fiction Renaissance: Premium Production Models and Transnational Circulation* (London, New York: Routledge 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Agger, 'Fictions of Europe,' p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Hansen, Peacock, Turnbull, 'Down These Mean European Streets,' *European Television Crime Drama and Beyond*, (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2018), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> See Jan Baetens, Ana Schultze, Fred Truyen, 'Donald Westlake's Ordo: Not Euro, not Noir, but Euro-Noir?', *European Review*, published online 15 July 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798720001180>.

<sup>10</sup> See Stefano Baschiera, 'European Crime Cinema and the Auteur', *European Review*, published online on 10 August 2020, 1-13, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798720001143>.

<sup>11</sup> See Migozzi, Jacques, Natacha Levet, and Lucie Amir. 2020. "Gatekeep-ers of Noir: The Paradoxical Internationalization of the French Crime Fiction Field." *European Review*, published online on 16 July, 2020, 1-17, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798720001118>.

<sup>12</sup> See Lucie Amir, Biscarrat Laetitia and Jacquelin Alice, 'Impossible Euronoir? Le polar européen dans sa réception critique française,' *Interrogations?* 32 (2021), <https://www.revue-interrogations.org/Impossible-Euronoir-Le-polar> [accessed 1 October 2021].

<sup>13</sup> Monica Dall'Asta, Natacha Levet, and Federico Pagello (eds.), *Glocality and Cosmopolitanism in European Crime Narratives*, special issue *Academic Quarter* 22 (2021), <https://journals.aau.dk/index.php/ak/issue/view/411> [accessed August 23, 2021].

<sup>14</sup> See Jacques Migozzi, 'Crime Fiction Import/Export in European Publishing: The Emergence of Euro Noir through the Process of Translation' *Academic Quarter* 22 (2021), doi: <https://doi.org/10.5278/ojs.academicquarter.vi22.6599>.

<sup>15</sup> See Sándor Kálai and Anna Keszeg, 'Is There such a Thing as a Hungarian Nordic Noir?: Cultural Homogenization and Glocal Agency,' *Academic Quarter* 22 (2021), doi: <https://doi.org/10.5278/ojs.academicquarter.vi22.6600>.

<sup>16</sup> See Lothar Mikos, 'Berlin's Cosmopolitan Production Culture,' *Academic Quarter* 22 (2021), doi: <https://doi.org/10.5278/ojs.academicquarter.vi22.6602>.

<sup>17</sup> See Massimiliano Coviello and Valentina Re, 'Translocal Landscapes: La porta rossa and the Use of Peripheral Locations in Contemporary Italian TV Crime Drama,' *Academic Quarter* 22 (2021), doi: <https://doi.org/10.5278/ojs.academicquarter.vi22.6601>.



<sup>18</sup> See Federico Pagello, 'Dal giallo al crime. Glocalismo, transculturalità e transmedialità del poliziesco italiano contemporaneo.' *mediAzioni* 28 (2020), 30-47, <http://www.mediazioni.sitlec.unibo.it/index.php/no-28-special-issue-2020/> [accessed 1 October 2021].

<sup>19</sup> On the impact of Nordic Noir see, among other sources: Glen Creeber, 'Killing Us Softly: Investigating the Aesthetics, Philosophy and Influence of Nordic Noir Television,' *The Journal of Popular Television* 3.1 (2015), doi: 10.1386/jptv.3.1.21\_1; Kim Toft Hansen, Steven Peacock, Sue Turnbull (eds.), *European Television Crime Drama and Beyond* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan 2018); Linda Badley, Andrew Nestingen, and Jallo Seppälä, Jaakko (Eds.) *Nordic Noir, Adaptation, Appropriation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2021).

<sup>20</sup> See Elke Weissmann, 'Local, National, Transnational. *Y Gwyll/Hinterland* as Crime off/for All Places,' in *European Television Crime Drama and Beyond*, eds. Kim Toft Hansen, Steven Peacock and Sue Turnbull (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan 2018), 119-137.

<sup>21</sup> See Kim Akass, Janet McCabe (eds.), *Quality TV. Contemporary American Television and Beyond* (London: IB Tauris 2007); and Jason Mittell, *Complex TV. The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press 2015).

<sup>22</sup> See Lindsay Steenberg, 'The Fall and TV Noir,' *Critical Studies in Television*, 18.1 (2017), 58-75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476416664185>; and Federico Pagello, 'Images of the European Crisis: Populism and the Contemporary Crime TV series,' *European Review*, published online on July 2020, 1-14, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798720001167>.

<sup>23</sup> See Valentina Re, 'Crime sì, ma di qualità. Sulla circolazione transnazionale del prodotto televisivo,' *Imago* 21.1 (2020), 167-183.

<sup>24</sup> For an introduction the methodology of location studies see Kim Toft Hansen, Anne Marit Waade, *Locating Nordic Noir* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2017), 53-76.