

**Author's Accepted Manuscript (AAM) of the following chapter:**

**García, Alberto N. "The Rise of 'Bright Noir'. Redemption and Moral Optimism in American Contemporary TV Noir", in *European Television Crime Drama and Beyond*, edited by Kim Toft Hansen, Steven Peacock, and Sue Turnbull, Palgrave, 2018, pp. 41-60.**

**Published version: <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9783319968865>**

**The Rise of “Bright Noir”**  
**Redemption and Moral Optimism in American Contemporary TV Noir**

**Alberto N. García**

Lou Solverson: We’re just out of balance.

Betsy Solverson: You and me?

Lou Solverson: Whole world. Used to  
know right from wrong. A moral centre.  
Now...

*(Fargo, “Fear and Trembling”, 2.4)*

Seated on the porch of their home, the Solversons reflect on evil and its masks, consequences and origins. Such ruminations have always been implicit, and sometimes explicit, in film noir since its emergence. However, as the above scene illustrates, *Fargo* (FX, 2014–) addresses evil from a classical moral perspective, as opposed to the anti-heroism and cynicism of angry, contradictory protagonists that have characterized the first decade of the golden age of television fiction (Martin 2013; Lotz 2014; Vaage 2015). *Fargo* is unlike other ‘quality TV’ crime series – such as *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007), *The Wire* (HBO, 2002–2008) or *The Shield* (FX, 2002–2008) – because the Solversons demonstrate hope, the “cousin” of optimism.

*Fargo* embraces optimism, which, as defined by the anthropologist Lionel Tiger, is “a mood or attitude associated with an expectation about the social or material future—one which the evaluator regards as socially desirable, to his advantage, or for his pleasure” (1979, 53). During the first two seasons and against all odds, the Solverson clan exhibits an anthropological hopefulness that, far from being naïve, is characterized by courage and reason; they rely on patience and persistence to rectify and overcome human evil.

This article explores how some recent American TV crime dramas (and to a lesser extent, some British)<sup>1</sup> that can be specifically labelled as noir address the issue of hope and redemption by undermining one of the main thematic and ideological features that both spectators and critics tend to assign to noir narratives – i.e., the logic of hopelessness, of “no way out”, to paraphrase Porfirio’s classic article (1996). Or, as Turnbull puts it, “A

useful full-form of the acronym ‘noir’ may therefore be: Negative Outcome Is Requisite. In other words: It’s only going to end in tears” (2014, 29). In what I have coined as “bright noir”, several recent, influential and popular TV noir series offer stories in which brave protagonists achieve a positive outcome and defeat evil while fulfilling a higher purpose or attaining an honourable end.

To approach this idea, the article first recalls that existentialism and moral alienation became essential features of film noir, which remains a controversial term. It then explains the sociological and artistic reasons that have led to this wave of morally hopeful noir. Finally, this thesis will be demonstrated with in-depth analysis of key series from recent American TV crime fiction, with particular attention given to *Justified* (FX, 2010–15) and *Fargo*.

### **A morally grey area**

As Steenberg recently summarized, “noir is a worn and frayed category—much discussed by scholars, critics, and filmmakers themselves” (2017, 62). This article does not intend to widen the fluidity of the term, but rather to focus on one particular strand of the TV crime drama, broadly characterized by moral ambiguity, a mood of unhappiness, and a bleak realism. Nowadays, noir is “a fusion of nostalgia and imitation that can never fully function as a generic category but nonetheless becomes a widely circulating way of identifying certain types of television shows” (Steenberg 2017, 63). Consequently, although they share several features, TV noir is not synonymous with TV crime; it would be more precise to affirm that noir is a specific subtype of the broadest crime fiction genre.

Unlike procedural morality—a generally friendlier police genre (see Turnbull 2014; Nichols-Petchick 2012)—film noir, although it may sound contradictory, has always been coloured by grey areas because it blurs notions of good and evil and draws dramatic energy from constant uncertainty. Following classic scholars of film noir (Frank 1946; Borde and Chaumeton 1996; Schrader 1996; Naremore 1998), there are two prominent moral features, among others, within the genre: ethical ambiguity and an ultimate sense of despair. These features are articulated to an even greater degree in neo-noir (Conard 2007), where, after the downfall of the Hays Code, narratives portray criminals who can, and often do, succeed - even getting away with murder. In their analysis of the classical period, Borde and

Chaumeton already began to point to moral ambiguity as a determining feature: “The old motto ... ‘Crime does not pay,’ is still the order of the day, and there must be moral retribution. But the narrative is manipulated so that at times the moviegoer sympathizes, identifies with the criminals” (1996, 21). Along with this ambivalence, the classic period exudes an American existentialist air, ill-fated destiny, and imminent misfortune, like that of Melville:

Far from being steeped in optimism, film noir projects a nightmare world of deceit and death. The detective becomes, in many ways, existential man personified. A seeker after truth, no less than Ahab, the existential detective looks hard at existence and finds meaning only in temporary truths, not in conforming absolutes (Cotkin 2012, 135).

The notions of moral incertitude and even nihilism that typify the noir genre have become a sort of cliché because, as Skoble points out, moral clarity and redemption can be found in several classic noir pieces: “These protagonists may be nihilists, but the films are not thereby nihilistic, inasmuch as the films portray their characters’ impulsiveness or narcissism as ultimately fruitless or self-destructive” (2006, 44). Skoble is right in his diagnosis, but it is also true that cliché continues to determine the genre both for those producing noir—the recent European revival is rather fatalistic, as exemplified by *Southcliffe* (Channel 4, 2013), *Forbrydelsen* (DR1, 2007–12) or *Wallander UK* (BBC1, 2008–16)—and for spectators and critics alike, as seen in their frenzied reaction to *True Detective*’s first-season finale.

### **Reasons for an upsurge**

The term “bright noir” is not to be confused with “sunshine noir”, which Sanders, using *Miami Vice* (NBC, 1984–90) as a prime example, coined to point out how aesthetic postmodernism subverted the style and spatial characteristics of the genre (2007). In contrast, those series included under my definition of “bright noir” maintain the typically dark style of noir. The difference lies in a more benign tone and, above all, in the moral reading taken from the conclusion, which implies social optimism, narrative happy endings, protagonists who overcome grim prospects, and even several instances of redemption, recovery, and healing from identity fragmentation and social alienation that

typically characterize the noir genre. This article suggests three main explanations for this bright, hopeful trend in recent TV noir: (1) the emergence of an intellectual trend that favours an optimistic reinforcement opposed to a pervasive pessimistic, and sometimes even misanthropic, culture, (2) the exhaustion of the antiheroic formula, and (3) the logic inherent in any genre's evolution.

As professor of cultural policy Oliver Bennett explains in his *Cultural Pessimism. Narratives of Decline in the Postmodern World*, variants of apocalyptic, terrifying, and negative visions have grown exponentially in Western civilization during recent decades (2001, see especially 1–19, 178–97). In fact, pessimism is a constant in Western countries' cultural elites, where the world appears to be full of *Cassandras*: “Pessimism had not only become deeply embedded in the practice of cultural criticism, but it had also to some extent become a mark of moral and intellectual seriousness” (Bennett 2011, 302). In a similar vein, Tallis describes how narratives<sup>2</sup> not only reflect the contemporary *zeitgeist*, but also actively influence it through a process whereby “contemporary humanity is taking itself into a terminal state of despair, self-disgust and impotence” (1997, xiv). However, in his latest book, Bennett explores the paradox of a cultural pessimism that markedly contrasts with institutionalized forms of optimism, including that of governments, churches, and associations of all kinds (2015). Bennett's argument can be linked with a recent influential academic and popular movement that, with a countercultural and contrarian air, reclaims optimism as a rational argument, as seen in recent publications<sup>3</sup> in fields like history, psychology and science. Some of the biggest non-fiction bestsellers of the last decade come from the scientific essayist Matt Ridley (*The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves*, 2010), evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker (*The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*, 2011) and neuroscientist Tali Sharot (*The Optimism Bias: A Tour of the Irrationally Positive Brain*, 2011), to name just a few of the best known cases. Similar positive approaches continue to be successful in socio-economics (*Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future*, Norberg, 2016), ecology and environmentalism (*Inheritors of the Earth: How Nature Is Thriving in an Age of Extinction*, Thomas, 2017), and progressive politics (*The Optimistic Leftist: Why the 21st Century Will Be Better Than You Think*, Teixeira, 2017).

Secondly, there is an institutional explanation: television, as a medium, is constantly evolving in order to offer spectators new takes and refreshing views on genres, themes, and archetypes. Today, most crime drama on television does end in a rather positive manner, and it is mainly within so-called “complex television” (Mittell 2015) that we have seen the predominance of the antihero. But, after years of incredible success – both in terms of critical praising and cultural resonance – narrative fatigue appears to be setting in around antiheroes. “Difficult men” (Martin, 2013), such as Don Draper, Jimmy McNulty, Nucky Thompson or Tommy Gavin, have pushed the boundaries of audiences’ identification with complex, contradictory characters. The audience seems to have reached the limits of empathy for “morally murky” characters (Vaage 2015, 1–38), given the viewing numbers and the not-so-positive reviews.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, American crime fiction is now witnessing a re-emergence of classical heroism in the form of noble protagonists who restore the moral and social order. Overall, in my definition of “bright noir”, there is more victory than tragedy, and more hope than despair. The protagonists of bright noir embody both the agency and the optimism that, according to professor of philosophical anthropology Josef Pieper, defines hopefulness: “Hope is an *intentional movement* toward an object (...). Every act of hope *presupposes* the existence of *something good*, something the subject is aware of before setting off in its pursuit” (Schumacher 2003, 66). The emphasis is mine and seeks to highlight the double nature of optimism; in bright noir, the good is explicitly sought and is neither an unforeseen consequence nor an element of chance, but rather a matter of principle.

Third, the evolution of noir has also influenced the emergence of “bright noir”. Any genre implies, as Neale has written, a contained and controlled heterogeneity, which balances between repetition and difference, discursive strain and contradiction. Thus, following Neale, a genre can be defined as a “system of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject” (1981, 6). Nevertheless, at the same time, genres can also be approached from a diachronic perspective. For any genre, it is normal to delimit, even if roughly, a stage of experimentation, classicism, mannerism and subversion. As Schatz explains, this evolution comes from the fact that a genre “must continually vary and reinvent the generic formula” (1981, 36). However, this timeline is not rigid or entirely accurate. On the contrary, it is normal that, within the same genre,

classic proposals coexist together with others that renew, upset or parody predominant codes. As Gallagher insists, “a superficial glance at film history suggests cyclicism rather than evolution” (quoted in Keith Grant 2007, 36). That is why, as shown below, it is possible for contemporary series that are quite faithful to the essential aesthetic and scenic characteristics of noir to exist – for example, the extraordinary success of Nordic noir, Celtic noir and its American remakes, as well as recent products such as *Bloodline* (Netflix, 2015–17) and *Twin Peaks. The Return* (Showtime, 2017–) – while others boldly violate some of its constant iconographic or moral themes.

### **The sense of an ending**

Based on the largest academic attempt to systematize TV noir (Sanders and Skoble 2008), we can see how the label has been applied to products that are as temporally, morally and aesthetically different as *Dragnet* (NBC, 1951–59), *The X-Files* (Fox, 1993–2002) and *The Sopranos*. However, in the last decade, as a genre, some of TV noir’s main features have been destabilized in order to surprise the viewership and provide a fresh take on old patterns. “Bright noir” narratives, as a whole, also suggest a world where, after all the bleakness, crime and atrocities, there is still explicit room for hope, redemption, forgiveness and optimism. Of course, “bright noir” stays away from a reductive, Manichean view that proposes a clear-cut and happy ending or denies uncertainty. Dramatic and narrative complexity is not at odds with optimism. In fact, we can catalogue different intensities or shades of “bright noir”. As we will see, sometimes it is an overall feature that permeates the whole narrative, such as anthropological hopefulness and the vindication of family and community in *Fargo*, or coming to peace with one’s own heritage and a fulfilled promise of salvation in the western noir *Justified*. Nevertheless, at other times, the seeds of bright noir are more dispersed, and their obvious presence in a series finale further complicates the moral conclusion of the story as a whole.

Consequently, I will first explore some TV series that, despite the claustrophobic and pessimistic nature of their plots, offer final twists that force us to re-read the story from a brighter perspective. In this sense, to paraphrase the literary critic Frank Kermode, the sense of an ending is crucial. As Abbott explains, “all successful narratives of any length are chains of suspense [lack of closure] and surprise that keep us in a fluctuating state of

impatience, wonderment and partial gratification. We are held this way until the final moment of closure” (2008, 57). TV series, however, offer a fragmented structure—episodes, hiatuses, and seasons—that prevent audiences from grasping the full meaning until initial conflict is definitively resolved. A TV show’s ending aims for circularity, emotional climax, reasonable surprise, and internal narrative coherence. However, a good ending usually provides some kind of moral closure. As Creeber summarizes, “Endings are important because they allow a drama to make a final statement, to wrap up loose ends, offer some kind of closure and perhaps even hint at a moral conclusion” (2015, 33). In fact, in film and TV noir, the ending is decisive for understanding the narrative’s positive, bright, moral stance. In all the cases discussed below, the conclusion points to an ecumenical or universal sense of hope, where redemption is dependent on accepting the other and on relying on one’s community. Not surprisingly, Pieper attributed this collective impulse to hope: “Hope is indeed always related to communion, namely, it cannot exist and flourish except insofar as it is related to a ‘thou’ as part of a ‘we,’ rooted in love” (Pieper as cited in Schumacher 2003, 82).

This “we, rooted in love” is found in the literal and figurative pastoral ending of *Broadchurch* season 1 (ITV, 2013–15), in which the community, after a gloomy narrative triggered by a horrific murder, bands together to heal its wounds: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgive one another as God in Christ forgave you,” Rev. Paul Coates counsels. In general, the resolution of mystery absolves the characters of all evil, and good intentions are even found in secrets from the past: for example, the “murder” of young Danny Latimer is revealed to have been an involuntary homicide – somehow an accident – rather than an act of cruelty.

*Happy Valley* (BBC1, 2014–), to give another example, is a successful British crime series in which good exists, justice never falters, and pain finds redemption. Far from the existentialist cynicism that weighs down noir, Sally Wainwright’s series supports a stance of resistance, as illustrated, for example, by the bright rural scene that wraps up the second season. *Happy Valley* is hard to swallow, but a deeply humanistic tale in the word’s most inclusive and contemporary sense. Far from the atheistic connotations that the term carried for decades, humanism, as defined by Cummings, “is about what brings us together as human beings and what we can hope to achieve as such, about the barriers to success and



how we might overcome them” (2006, 2). After scratching the surface of characters’ conflicts and running right into them in the midst of so much violence and misery, *Happy Valley*’s depth and profound optimism are achieved by combining, in equal parts, melodrama and cop show genres. The protagonist’s honesty and courage, as a brave and conflicted sergeant with a keen sense of duty, comes close to a *Chandlerian* noir stereotype. The distress transmitted by the contradictory, tormented soft villains Steve Pemberton and Kevin Doyle—both Machiavellian but with an itch of guilt—resembles another classical noir trope: the normal guy who makes a wrong move. After two seasons of following the untiring Catherine Cawood—her hardships, her professional struggles, and her family difficulties—the moral of the series seems to be summed up in Tolkien’s quotation: “There is some good in this world, and it’s worth fighting for.” It is worth fighting for her grandson, for the memory of her deceased daughter, for her sister’s rehabilitation and for her community’s stability.

A powerful and unexpected glimpse of hope also characterizes the ending of *True Detective*’s first season (HBO, 2014–), with Rust Cohle, an eccentric and highly existentialist character, giving an explicitly idealist speech that subverts not only his character traits, but also the defeatist expectations typical of noir. During the first season, the series is rich in Sartrean philosophical dialogues, which profoundly question the human capacity to resist and overcome: “Look, I’d consider myself a realist, all right? But in philosophical terms, I’m what’s called a pessimist ... I think the honourable thing for our species to do is to deny our programming. Stop reproducing, walk hand in hand into extinction” (“The Long Bright Dark”, 1.1). However, the plot’s closing not only cracks the puzzle, but also radically alters Cohle’s way of seeing the world: “Well, once there was only dark. You ask me, the light’s winning.” This contrasts sharply with the monologues that McConaughey’s character gives during the previous eight episodes. The co-star’s splendid farewell was so resounding and confronted genre stereotypes<sup>5</sup> in such a way that it received an abundant critical backlash for becoming an “awkward buddy comedy” (*Guardian*), a “predictable, simplistic finale” (*Washington Post*), “a retreat to cliché and convention” (*Just TV*), or a “near-total wash” (*New Yorker*).

### **Redemption and moral optimism**

In addition to the aforementioned series, in the last decade, we find other noir titles that present morally complex, non-Manichean proposals where optimism and hope are reclaimed from a structural perspective, and not just in the positive re-reading the conclusion suggests. This occurs, for example, in *Terriers* (FX, 2010), where humanist principles guide the actions of the two losers who defeat corporate power. Hank Dolworth and Britt Pollack are private investigators in a very neo-noir LA. But they are pretty normal people who lack any remarkable features of value or intelligence. Very much in line with Marlowe, Spade and Co., they adhere to an incorruptible work ethic. More than antiheroes, Hank and Britt are tired heroes. They do not give off a sense of despair or nihilism, because they have assimilated their professional and everyday defeats. Although their business is “too small to fail” (the show’s tagline), Hank and Britt know that their main strength is loyalty to their customers and perseverance in pursuit of good and justice. The latter is their honest professional and human goal, and they apply a kind-hearted moral compass in attempting to accomplish it.

*Daredevil* (Netflix, 2015–) presents another positive assessment, rooted in classical morality, with a comic noir set in Hell’s Kitchen. Despite being a dark, enormously bloody and brutal series, the protagonist struggles to maintain his moral code (he does not want to kill even the most detestable villain), and a Catholic reading of evil constantly resonates in the plot. Masked Matt Murdock not only argues about good and evil with his confessor, but he also appears to embody, in a subsidiary way, the values that Chesterton described in “The Divine Detective”: “The Church is the only institution that ever attempted to create a machinery of pardon. The Church is the only thing that ever attempted by system to pursue and discover crimes, not in order to avenge, but in order to forgive them” (2014). Of course, forgiveness is not at odds with justice, but it is certainly contrary to vengeance.

Other series that share this structural optimism include *Hit & Miss* (Sky Atlantic, 2012), *Luther* (BBC1, 2010–) and *Bored to Death* (HBO, 2009-11), which has a comical side. Nonetheless, the two products that most succinctly conform to bright noir are *Justified* and *Fargo*.

**“I said you'd be fine”: *Justified* and the light of humanism**

Based on a short story by the late American noir luminary, Elmore Leonard, *Justified* is one of the most relevant police series of this decade.<sup>6</sup> Combining a western fragrance with a multitude of noir tropes—quick and sharp dialogue, a criminal plot, a hard-boiled protagonist, empathic villains and the weight of the past—*Justified* is glued to a very specific place: Harlan County, Kentucky. The latter is essential for the moral luminosity that the series projects, as we will see. *Justified* reflects on forgiveness, inheritance and roots, which is one of the oppressive classic noir's leitmotifs: "A purposelessness fostered in part by feelings of estrangement from one's own past even as one seems driven to a compulsive confrontation with that past" (Sanders, 2006, 92).

Raylan Givens is a man without a place in the world because he and his father are mortal enemies. Raylan's unhinged, violent, creepy relationship with his dad gives the series a mythical, even Greek, air. "Kiss. My. Ass." might be the kindest compliment they give each other. It is most unsettling to watch how this dysfunctional father-son relationship weighs heavily on all of the protagonist's actions: "Well, well, whose eyes you gonna see when you kill me, Raylan? Your daddy's?" Boyd taunts towards the end of the story ("Collateral", 6.12).

The paradox is that *Justified* shows the family as both a problem and the only path to salvation. Faced with noir's existentialist determinism, Raylan Givens is always torn between following his deadly instincts and relying on his ability to break the cycle; contrary to the determinism of the genre, Raylan can exercise his freedom to go one way or the other. Thus, in his moments of bewilderment, Raylan returns to the notion of home, where he longs to find a place without hate, and to familial affection with his ex-wife, his Aunt Helen or his daughter. Moreover, he will have to apply himself adamantly to break the vicious circle, Harlan's curse, which causes Mags Bennett to *devour* his children ("Bloody Harlan", 2.13), and Arlo Givens to take Boyd Crowder under his wing while he shoots anything resembling his son ("Slaughterhouse", 3.13).

That is where the series takes on a decidedly moral stance. As exemplified by Raylan's own inner quarrel, *Justified*'s narrative erects a continual struggle between justice and revenge. That dichotomy mirrors Raylan's ambiguity in that he sometimes acts like a meticulous law-abiding marshal, while at other times, he flies solo. Of particular note is how the characters are aware that the maleficence they generate will eventually turn against

them. The scope of this boomerang effect is multiplied in the last season, when the story is arguably purified and returns to its beginning. Behind the ancestral hatred among the Crowders, the Bennetts and the Givens, one man's rage against himself peeks through, requiring courage to crush the inertia of death-radiating Kentucky. Raylan's eternal conflict—how might he be different from his father, how to escape his villainous fate, how to forgive—resonates throughout. Or, put in other terms, how to do things the “right” way without seeking justification. The title of the series, foreshadowed in the pilot, comes from this idea: “He pulled first, so I was justified.”

Raylan Givens is characterized by his mania for telling his plans to whomever will listen before he puts them into practice—like that he will draw his weapon first, break his antagonist's teeth, or get into some kind of mess—and then always proceeding with them. The fifth season ends with a promise that encapsulates the anthropological optimism that the protagonist exudes despite his internal contradictions:

Ava Crowder: I'm scared, Raylan.

Raylan Givens: Don't be. Everything's gonna be fine (“Restitution”, 5.13).

This optimism is ultimately justifiable. The series concludes with Raylan fulfilling his pledge: “I told you that everything would work out,” he reminds Ava before their long goodbye (“The Promise”, 6.13).

*Justified* does not just eschew the tragic outcome with which it so often flirted on these grounds alone. That flirtation is seen, for example, in a scene that shows Raylan's tombstone in the family cemetery with his name already on it. The series, however, navigates around tragedy because, deep down, its tone exhibits a self-consciousness that banishes solemnity. The plot's ever-present violence dialogues with a light pitch, full of humour, camaraderie and a not-so-serious take on life, which establishes a subtle ironic distance and ultimately makes the series cheerful.

Graham Yost (the series' creator) recalled Leonard's motto, referring to the people of Kentucky who inspire *Justified*'s characters: “Make them interesting, and respect them. Don't let them be stupid” (Zoller Seitz 2015). This is why *Justified* seems to love its characters, even the villains, giving rise to the humanistic impulse that vindicates the story. Moments where this is clear include a scene of the lame veteran, Artie, running unsteadily behind an octogenarian fugitive dragging a bottle of oxygen (“Blaze of Glory”, 2.6),

Raylan's chivalrous gesture of installing a television for a villain's mother, after the guy exploded ("Loose Ends", 3.9), the memory of an astronaut who visited their school when the protagonists were children ("Decoy", 4.11), the poetic death of Hot Rod, a drug trafficker ("Wrong Roads", 5.9), the moral codes held by the lethal Choo-Choo, who knows that there are lines that the conscience, however damaged it may be from war, cannot cross ("Alive Day", 6.6) or the *rednecks* that deserve payment for all the damage that Raylan's father caused ("Collateral", 6.12). Affection and authenticity show through in the characters' relationships. At the narrative's conclusion, there is even an unexpected turn that allows the two protagonists, despite their enduring game of cat and mouse, to remember affectionately the camaraderie of their youth in the face of adversity: "We dug coal together."

### **"We are winning this thing!" *Fargo* and the vindication of community**

Conceived of as a series anthology inspired by the Coen film of the same name, the three seasons of Noah Hawley's series are a prime example of "bright noir". With its combination of savagery and parody, *Fargo* not only preserves its predecessor's moral and anthropological reflection, but also its narrative playfulness and dark humour. These glimpses of comicality also contribute to alleviating the gravity of noir. Also, despite being set in different places, *Fargo* and *Justified* both prioritize old wisdom, common sense, and the goodness of "regular folk" surviving in community with their emotional ties and moral responsibilities.

*Fargo's* sense of good and evil is simple, accurate, and lacks ideological postmodern hues. At this point of the argument, it is necessary to discern the ideological postmodernism of today from the notion of aesthetic postmodernism in the 1980s and 1990s (for a thorough and comprehensive account of the latter, see Hutcheon 1988). This article tackles the most vogueish concept of postmodernism: a set of ideological values and attitudes closely linked with cultural Marxism and identity politics. As Stuart Sim explains, postmodernism is a rejection of Western cultural certainties. It rejects the Enlightenment – modernity – because its project, though it could be once praiseworthy, has dived "into certain set ways of thought and action" that are oppressive for humankind (2011, vii). Therefore, as Grenz argues, postmodernism "affirms that whatever we accept as truth and even the way we envision

truth are dependent on the community in which we participate ... Further, and far more radically, the postmodern worldview affirms that this relativity extends beyond our *perceptions* of truth to its essence” (1996, 8).<sup>7</sup> In contrast, in *Fargo*, the good, as well as the truth, exists and can be known. That is why a *Panglossian* stereotype such as the one Bob Odenkirk incarnates in the first season works. His attitude in leading the police is not professional ineffectiveness, but rather total confidence in the goodness of the human race. “Don’t got the stomach for it, not like some. Wearing the badge, seeing the lengths people are capable of, the inhumanity. What ever happened to saying good morning to your neighbors and shoveling their walk and bringing in each other’s Toters?” (“Morton’s Fork”, 1.10). Marge Gunderson demonstrated that same perplexity in the face of the evil—even when the world is so stunning: “And it’s a beautiful day!”—in her perky rebuke of the cold-blooded killer in the original *Fargo*.

Community encouragement and family values are also seen in the collective effort that the entire Solverson clan deploys to combat evil in the first season. Molly lends her brains and intuition; Gus brings, in the end, physical courage; the grandfather has an almost animal protective instinct; and the granddaughter demonstrates her fire for fighting to uphold what society considers just. This moral backdrop—optimistic without need of sugarcoating—was already in place in the Coens’ original film.

Evil is at war in the Solversons’ world. In the first season, in addition, Lucifer divides himself between pure evil and acquired evil. The former, personified by Lorne Malvo, is a hilarious Darwinian representation, a harbinger of death, a mix between Anton Chigurh’s lethal arbitrariness and the Joker’s chaotic facetiousness. Malvo is “the consequence”, a predator at the top of the food chain perpetually ready for a snack, a wolf bent on frightening the flock, a person who has fun committing acts of wickedness. Malvo exudes a Kantian vision of evil, i.e., committing it does not require social causes or psychological excuses since there are immoral people, and being sinful is an option. Malvo simply exercises that freedom with surgical precision and with delight at seeing others scuttle whenever a storm of chaos, death, and destruction rolls in.

Lester Nygaard is born of one of Malvo’s experiments. In the pilot, after a chance encounter, an inner journey begins in which Lester manages to reverse his destiny as a loser by selling his soul to the devil. He becomes an aspiring *übermensch* who snuffs out

lives and reputations with hypocrisy and disturbing coldness, as if the world belonged to him or owed him something. Towards the end of the story, Molly tells him a parable of a man on a train who realizes he dropped a glove on the platform and then throws the other one off the train so someone will find the pair instead of a single glove. There is no doubt that Lester would have derailed the train in order to recover the single glove because *Fargo* echoes a message that human liberty allows us to take the wrong road. Our freedom is guided by moral principles; one can be satisfied with being disastrous and fearful, but maintain moral integrity, as Gus Grimly does—or one can *break bad* in Minnesota, as Lester Nygaard does. Nygaard’s evolution reflects one of classic noir’s archetypes – i.e., the normal guy who, driven by ambition, greed or lust, takes a wrong turn. A bloody emotional outburst—in this case, striking his wife with a hammer—unleashes the birth of a new Lester. He begins by questioning his principles, continues by losing pity, and ends up abolishing any sense of guilt. Even so, *Fargo* can be described as “bright noir” because Nygaard and Malvo fail, while the Solversons live happily ever after.

The second season maintains the same moral tenor; it is illuminating, positive in its heroism, and vindicates courage in the face of evil, as well as the traditional meaning of society, family and transcendence. In a sort of meta-commentary against the fatalism that defines traditional noir, Betsy Solverson even denies the existentialist defeatism of cultural pessimism. A minor and adolescent character, Noreen, reads Albert Camus with devotion in an episode entitled “The Myth of Sisyphus” (2.3), and later lectures Ed Blomquist on the absurdity of life (“What’s the point [of the American Dream]. You’re gonna die anyway!”). However, in the face of cancer, Betsy opts for a completely different perspective:

Noreen Vanderslice: Camus says knowin’ we’re gonna die makes life absurd.

Betsy Solverson: Well, I don’t know who that is. But I’m guessing he doesn’t have a six-year-old girl.

Noreen Vanderslice: He’s French.

Betsy Solverson: Ugh, I don’t care if he’s from Mars. Nobody with any sense would say something that foolish. We’re put on this earth to do a job. And each of us gets the time we get to do it. And when this life is over and you stand in front of the Lord... Well, you try tellin’ him it was all some Frenchman’s joke (“Palindrome”, 2.10).

This quote reinforces one interesting feature of what I am labelling as “bright noir”: the importance of family and offspring as a source of hope for the protagonists, both in *Justified* and *Fargo*. Familial bonds forge an antidote against cynicism while encouraging the actions of “bright noir” characters, because, paraphrasing Samantha Vice, in these familiar relationships “one must in some sense take the good of the other as one’s own project; one must care about it and have hopes for it into the future; there must be trust in the basic goodness of the other and the relationship itself” (2011, 177).

Without denying the complexity of evil and the impotence with which good sometimes battles it, the second season of *Fargo* concludes happily. Hank, who, in the face of Jabberwocky’s bloody semantic meaninglessness (“Rhinoceros”, 2.6), opposes Esperanto’s harmonious and peaceful attempt: “We’re sitting here together. That’s what matters. A man once said, ‘You’ll know the angels when they come ’cause they’ll have the faces of your children.’” Moreover, most relevant for bright noir, the Solversons succeed guided by the quote that opens this article—by differentiating good from evil.

### **How long will the light win out?**

Having attempted to define “bright noir”, it is still unclear how long it will last. If, as discussed, the evolution of genres, by the very logic of television innovation, is in perpetual movement, the scope of the term remains to be seen. In addition, this article only analyzes television fiction, but it would be fruitful to explore the validity of “bright noir” with other samples from contemporary popular culture, such as cinema, comics and literature. It is also conceivable that economic and/or political factors (changes of government, variations in political structures, financial crises, etc.) inflict surges in optimism and condition the ideological backdrop upon which fiction is produced.

In any case, the philosophical evolution of *Fargo*’s third and last season—as part of the series that, along with *Justified*, best exemplifies bright noir—is symptomatic. *Fargo*’s last episode (“Somebody to Love”, 3.10) is darker than usual, and the good does not appear to entirely win out this time. In a false ending, Emmet, after being hounded by Larue Dollard, nonchalantly leaves as a white-collar criminal. Nikki Swango—who certainly was not synonymous with charity, but was somewhat sympathetic—returns forever with the kitten from the bowling alley: dead. Even Sy Feltz, the most oppressed of the characters,



maintains his physical condemnation in life. And, to make matters worse, the great villain, V. M. Varga, escapes and does not pay for his sins. The triumph of good and justice, which, despite many difficulties, defined the previous two seasons, remains remarkably blurred this time. It is true that, in her last conversation with her son, Gloria Burgle insists on the anthropological and familiar optimism of the series: “So, for now, just know that sometimes the world doesn’t make a lot of sense. But how we get through it is, we stick together” (“Somebody to Love”, 3.10). However, an epilogue, in the form of the last duel between Varga and Gloria Burgle, diminishes it.

Just as in the Germanic prologue—where the obvious was dismissed and “facts” conformed to “false” communist “truth” (“The Law of Vacant Places”, 3.1)—the season’s ending echoes Varga’s relativist and conspiratorial warning: “But which of us can say with certainty what has occurred, actually occurred, and what is simply rumor, misinformation, opinion?” A postmodern ideological view creeps in: “There is no absolute truth; rather truth is relative to the community in which we participate” (Grenz 1996, 8). Through Varga and Burgle’s verbal duel, *Fargo* struggles between modernity and postmodernity and, in short, over whether moral certainties exist. The last season is not just markedly different from the previous seasons because evil remains undefeated, but also because its open-ended conclusion explores the possibility that relativism and postmodernity are next in line. This, in turn, suggests the return of classic noir.

However, while I was wrapping up this chapter, the iconic Scandi Noir *Bron/Broen* reached the end of its fourth-season run. In contrast to the grimy and bleak tone of the whole narrative, the ending provides a clear happy resolution for Saga Norén. She has unburdened herself of the guilt for her sister’s death, quit the police and explicitly states that she needs Henrik, someone to love. Echoing the last scene from the first season finale (a phone call to a lover, in order to have dinner), the series finale presages redemption and contentedness for the protagonists. It is a dazzling ending which supports the claim that the bright noir is, indeed, a transnational phenomenon.

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<sup>1</sup> This volume focuses mainly on European crime fiction, but nonetheless, the two main examples analyzed in this article are American TV series. The raison d'être for their appearance in a book on European crime fiction is the notion of transnational television drama and its relevance in the definition of a genre. As Weissman points out: "Audiences increasingly participate in the transnationalization of television content as they congregate in online spaces which themselves are usually transnational. Here, genres are formulated by audiences that constantly draw on international comparisons and hence define genres as transnational entities" (2012, 12).

<sup>2</sup> Here, "narratives" are understood in a broad sense that includes, following Mark Currie, "non-fictional domains of experience (representations, conversations, explanations, memories) alongside the plethora of fictional narratives that populate the contemporary world" (2011, 2).

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<sup>3</sup> The debate is even present in daily major newspapers, such as the *New York Times* or the *Guardian*. See Burkeman 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Three examples can support this affirmation. *Low Winter Sun* (AMC, 2013) was meant to receive the baton of *Breaking Bad* as edgy, antiheroic “Quality TV”, but it was cancelled after its first season; it received mediocre reviews: a metascore of 60 points over 100 on the *Metacritic* website. *Ozark* (Netflix, 2017) is a recent take on the antihero structure, but the television critics were not enthusiastic about it either (66/100 metascore). Lastly, *Ray Donovan* (Showtime, 2013–) is one of the few current successful antiheroes: the series’ fifth season was broadcast in 2017. However, *Ray Donovan* never received critical acclaim from the critics, like other antihero TV shows did, and its cultural resonance has been much more limited than other TV crime dramas such as *The Shield*, *The Sopranos* or *Breaking Bad*.

<sup>5</sup> Schuchardt synthesizes this pessimistic genre stereotype: “As the subsequent history of film noir shows, there really is no such thing as a happy ending, because a happy ending cannot result from an insoluble dilemma” (2006, 58).

<sup>6</sup> *Justified*’s relevance can be measured by its universal critical acclaim. According to the aggregation website *Metacritic*, all of *Justified*’s seasons, with the exception of the first, obtained a critical rating superior to 84 over 100 points. Certain seasons were especially praised: season 2 was the third most critically acclaimed season of 2011 (only surpassed by *Breaking Bad* S4 and *Homeland* S1), season 3 reached the seventh position of 2012, season 4 scored fifth, and the final season, 6, also made the top ten of the year (Metacritic n.d.).

<sup>7</sup> This idea of postmodernism is at the centre of the current battle of ideas and can, in fact, be considered mainstream in cultural elites and American universities. However, famous and diverse academics such as Jonathan Haidt, Steven Pinker and Jordan B. Peterson have recently denounced it. “The humanities – writes Pinker – have yet to recover from the disaster of postmodernism, with its defiant obscurantism, dogmatic relativism, and suffocating political correctness.” (2013, n.p.).