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TROUBLE IN THE "PSYCHOSPHERE": HBO'S *TRUE DETECTIVE* (2014) AS A HYBRID GENRE

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ABSTRACT

Recently, many contemporary TV shows have raised the stakes as far as the quality of their contents is concerned. They welcomed certain challenges that contributed to lend them the status of cult series. *True Detective* (2014) certainly forms part of this selective group. Nic Pizzolatto, the creative mind behind *True Detective* (2014), decided to take up all these challenges and ended up by creating a hybrid show in the sense that it gathers elements of Gothic genre, weird fiction, criminal investigation, and *film noir* that, once mixed up, paved the way to the upcoming success. Other feature that fuels *True Detective*'s allure lies precisely in the ties that it openly shares with literature, since it purports references that point to well-known *oeuvres* or authors. In this light, it is the purpose of this essay to examine how Pizzolatto's eclectic recipe combine its ingredients that result in a TV show anchored upon the parameters of originality and quality. The undeniable quality of *True Detective* (2014) goes beyond the well-thought script, Adam Arkapaw's mesmerizing photography, the protagonists' amazing performance, and the careful direction of Cary Fukunaga. It has become a true postmodern visual monster that unexpectedly came straight from the Lousiana bayous to haunt us, bringing along an aura of cosmic horror that, interlinked with suspense and criminal investigation, will relentlessly take a grip on us.

Keywords: *True Detective* (2014); Gothic; Southern Gothic; *Film Noir*; Cosmic Horror; criminal investigation.

PERTURBAÇÕES NA 'PSICOESFERA': *TRUE DETECTIVE* (2014) ENQUANTO GÉNERO HÍBRIDO

RESUMO

Recentemente, tem-se assistido a uma crescente qualidade a nível das séries televisivas. Ao assumirem novos desafios, muitas delas tornaram-se séries de culto. *True Detective* (2014) figura neste grupo privilegiado. Nic Pizzolatto, a mente crativa por detrás de *True Detective* (2014), decidiu abraçar novos caminhos e acabou por criar uma série híbrida, no sentido em que conjuga elementos que vão desde o género Gótico, à investigação criminal, e se estendem até ao *film noir* e à *Weird fiction*. Outra característica que contribui para a popularidade de *True Detective* (2014), reside nos laços que tece com a literatura, uma vez que são evidentes as influências literárias a que alude. À luz deste cenário, pretende-se examinar de que forma é que a receita eclética proposta por Pizzolatto combina os seus diferentes ingredientes com o intuito de criar uma série que aposta nos parâmetros da qualidade e da originalidade. Com efeito, a

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inegável qualidade que se desprende de *True Detective* (2014) vai para além do consistente guião redigido por Pizzolatto; da brilhante atuação dos protagonistas; a hipnótica fotografia de Adam Arkapaw, à minuciosa realização a cargo de Cary Fukunaga. A série tornou-se num verdadeiro monstro visual que saiu inesperadamente dos pântanos da Louisiana, trazendo consigo uma aura de horror cósmico que, uma vez associado ao suspense e à investigação criminal, acaba por deixar o telespetador hipnotizado, em frente ao écran.
Palavras-chave: *True Detective* (2014); Gótico; Gótico Sulista; *Film Noir*; Horror Cósmico; Investigação criminal.

"The detective traditionally has been a truth-seeker" (TUSKA, 1978, p. xviii).

INTRODUCTION

Filmed in the South landscape of Louisiana, the first season of HBO's *True Detective* was heralded by the critics as one of the most outstanding shows of 2014. The emblematic scene that marks the premiere of *True Detective* is the arrival of the two detectives in charge of the investigation, Marty Hart (Woody Harrelson) and Rustin Cohle (Mathew McConaughey), to a gruesome crime scene, set in Vermillion Parish, located in the state of Louisiana. There, in the middle of a scorched cane field, they find the body of a young girl, named Dora Lange (Amanda Batz), curved and bound to a tree, with deer antlers crowning her head. Apart from other abrasions, they note that she has suffered multiple knife wounds to the abdomen. In her back, she has a painted black spiral. The crime scene seems carefully staged: her body is curved in a submissive position, the red hair spread to the sides, and, hanging from the tree, the detectives notice the presence of devil's nets[2]; one of them resembling a cross. These rudimentary sculptures appear to work as the killer's signature as they will appear again in other locations outside town.

It is undeniable that one of the most notable features of *True Detective* resides in its hybrid nature. Its visual narrative follows the dark paths inaugurated by *film noir* and it is likewise informed by tropes of the Gothic genre and weird fiction which endow it with a literary penchant. In this way, more than a show carrying the label of a criminal investigation, it becomes a sort of Gothic story where the conventions of *film noir* are

[2] These are twig lattice sculptures, also known as bird traps, that Cohle and Hart find near the crime scenes. They are very similar to ladders or tripods and are usually connected to witchcraft and Santeria.

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revisited, traits that contribute to turn *True Detective* into a TV show that defies the borders of the classical unified genre and openly assumes its postmodern format.

Yvonne Tasker, in her work *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (1993) observes that in the contemporary artistic *milieu*, the concept of "genre" cannot keep its purity anymore, meaning that the frontiers of a certain catalogued genre are not so fixed anymore. Conversely, they are fluid, which is a notable characteristic of both the postmodern cinema and TV series. In this sense, the author uses the concept of "bricolage", in order to define the process whereby elements of certain genres are recycled and interwoven in order to create new mixed visual products. "Bricolage" gives rise to hybridity and this quality produces films in which the classical characteristics of a given genre appear intermingled with features that traditionally belong to other genres. According to Tasker, postmodernity and the hybridity it produces have inherent a certain fragmentary nature. This aspect does not affect the film's cohesiveness and enrichens its visual and narrative content. It is precisely this mixed nature that turns the category of genre into something more elastic and inclusive in the context of postmodernity. As the author notes

> Genre is in fact a mobile category, and the bounds of generic purity cannot be clearly drawn within an industrial context which is constantly developing, shifting the terms of popular narrative. (…) The development of generic hybrids, along with other forms of intertextuality, adds a further complexity to our understanding of genre in the contemporary Hollywood cinema (1993, p. 55).

In keeping with the hybrid essence tangible in *True Detective*, Charles Scaggs provides a definition of *film noir* that firmly associates this cinematic manifestation with the Gothic literary genre. The author states that

> The term 'film noir' is derived from the French term 'roman noir,' which was used to describe the American hard-boiled fiction that was popular in France (…) and which became an enormous influence on French writing. The word 'noir', meaning 'black', codifies the dark, shadowy atmosphere and setting of the hard-boiled fiction, which is a clear indicator of the Gothic heritage of crime fiction, and film noir emphasised this 'darkness' both thematically and through the use of lighting techniques that emphasised or created shadows on screen (2005, p. 69).

This darkness that pervades both the *film noir* and Gothic fiction is implied in *True Detective*, generating an uncomfortable atmosphere. The name of each episode is reminiscent of the Gothic short story, as they evoke the supernatural as "Haunted

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House" or "Seeing Things" and raise suspense as in "The Locked Room". The lyrics of the series' main theme, "Far From Any Road" by The Handsome Family, also bears Gothic echoes, since it tells the story of a murdered girl, presumably Dora Lange's.

In the same vein, Paul Schrader also alludes to the resurgent interest of the cinema industry in the bleak universe of the *film noir*, bringing back its moods and conventions to the big screen. The author observes that

> Hollywood's film noir has recently become the subject of renewed interest among moviegoers and critics. The fascination film noir holds for today's young filmgoers and film students reflects recent trends in American cinema: American movies are again taking a look at the underside of the American character (…) (1972, p. 8).

However, many critics and scholars have divergent opinions as regard to the definition of *film noir*.[3] That is why James Naremore remarks, "[i]t has always been easier to recognize a *film noir* than to define the term" (1998, p. 9).

Foster Hirsch, for instance, considers *film noir* a genre, and asserts that

> Unified by a dominant tone and sensibility, the noir canon constitutes a distinct style of film-making; but it also conforms to genre requirements since it operates within a set of narrative and visual conventions…Noir tells its stories in a particular way, and in a particular visual style" (1998, p. 72).

Concurrent with Hirsch's opinion, James Damico also perceives *film noir* as a genre, on the grounds of its specific and recurrent narrative pattern (1978, p. 103).

Contrary to the opinion of the latter authors, Paul Schrader denies *film noir* the status of genre, arguing that it can, above all, be defined "by the more subtle qualities of tone and mood" (1972, p. 9). R. Barton Palmer offers a somehow more conciliatory and inclusive view on *film noir*, one that is reminiscent of Yvonne Tasker's definition applied to postmodern artistic manifestations. Palmer considers *film noir* as a

[3] Coined by French film critic Nino Frank in 1946 and popularized by French critics Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton in their 1955 study *Panorama du film noir américain*, the term describes, in its most narrow application, a series of American films made during World War II and in the years following, punctuated by violence and pervaded with a profound sense of dread and moral uncertainties.(…) Stylistically, film noir is distinguished by its stark chiaroscuro cinematography, influenced in large part by German expressionism. Films are shot in black and white, lit for night, favor oblique camera angles and obsessive use of shadows, and, most importantly, take place in a city. Film noir tries to make sense of the complexities and anxieties of the postwar urban experience" (RICH, 2005, p. 8). *The Maltese Falcon*, directed by John Huston,; *The Third Man* (1949), directed by Carol Reed; *Double Indemnity*, directed by Billy Wilder; *The Blue Dahlia* (1946),directed by George Marshall; *Crossfire* (1947), directed by Edward Dmytryc; *Detour* (1945), directed by Edgar J. Ulmer; *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), directed by Robert Aldrich, are films that form part of the *noir* canon.

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"transgeneric phenomenon"[4] (1994, p. 30), a categorisation that is very up to date considering the appropriation of *noir* conventions present in nowadays cinema and TV shows. As so, it intersects the crime melodrama, the detective film, and the thriller.

Andrew Spicer adds that the phenomenon of the *film noir* goes beyond a certain aesthetic and visual style provided by a certain camera angle, since it also "involves a sensibility, a particular way of looking at the world" (2002, p. 25). Robert Porfirio, in "No Way Out: Existential Motifs in the Film Noir", focuses his analysis essentially on the blackness and sense of doom that characterizes the *film noir* and highlights the endurance of a certain existential attitude towards life (1996, p. 86) normally linked to pessimism. The author contends that the dark mood and the pessimism that envelope these *noir* narratives is inherently American and does not originate in the ideas of European existentialists such as Albert Camus or Jean-Paul Sartre. He states, "It is more likely that this existential bias was drawn from a source much nearer and at hand – the hardboiled school of fiction without which quite possibly there would have been no film noir"[5] (PORFIRIO, 1996, p. 119). In this way, Porfirio believes that these dark and dismal moods were inspired by the literary works of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James McCain and David Goodis. According to the author, these were the true sources that might have triggered the creative impulse of the directors of the *noir* cinema.

Porfirio's theory is particularly relevant for the context of *True Detective*, as the author recognizes the dark vision inherent in the *noir* narrative as having its genesis is an existential pessimistic point of view, and this speaks volumes about one the protagonists of the TV series: detective Rustin Cohle. Emerging as a logical offspring of the *noir* narrative, the postmodern *noirs* still exhibit many of the features signaled above.

In this light, Andrew Spicer argues that the postmodern *film noir* constitutes a cinematic vehicle that enables directors to address important and controversial issues

[4] Palmer affirms "Classic film noir is a transgeneric phenomenon to the extent that it manifests through generic conventions" (1994, p. 30).

[5] The title of the HBO series might have been inspired by a magazine founded by Bernarr MacFadden, called *True Detective Mysteries*, published from 1924 to 1995. Initially, it included both fictional and non-fictional stories told in *noir* style. However, it gradually swerved away from this mixed model to become *True Detective*, a new title that emphasized its new vocational role a non-fiction crime magazine.

that haunt our contemporary society. The author stresses that, "Postmodern neo noir retains the capacity, handled intelligently, to engage with very important issues. The darkness of postmodern noirs is not simply a borrowed style but a continuing exploration of the underside of the American dream" (2002, p. 149).

Exploring this underside of the American dream, *True Detective* stands out in comparison to other criminal investigation series, since it displays the style and the cinematic techniques typical of film *noir*, exhibiting a narrative filled with flawed characters that tags along with the characteristics of the "genre". Remarkably, the photography of Pizzolatto's TV show bears traces of the German Expressionist artistic movement that also inspired the *mise en scène* of *film noir*.[6]

The detective of the postmodern neo *noir* also displays a new profile, different from his predecessors, which stands more in consonance with the dark atmosphere that, as Andrew Spicer remarks, permeates contemporary postmodern *noir* productions. *True Detective* can be said to subscribe to this premise.

As Phillipa Gates recalls, the traditional detective could reconstruct the story of a crime "through the analysis of physical clues and observation of human nature" (2016, p. 85). In short, the detective's main ability was fundamentally related to the skills he had to reach the solution for the case, and he usually was successful at it. In this sense, Gates refers that "the detective restored order to chaos, introduced in a society through murder" (2016, p. 85). However, the hardboiled detective fiction usually tells a different story, as its protagonist appears unable to find any kind of solid closure, and sometimes he is incapable of restoring things as they were before the crime occurred. This happens, because, as Phillipa Gates notes, the protagonist's "world was disrupted before the crime and would remain so after it was solved" (2006, p.85). In this context, Cedric de Maré remarks, "the postmodern detective novel introduced the failure of the detective by omitting the formal resolution of the mystery and reallocating the emphasis to ontological and philosophical questions" (2016, p. 22).

Straying away from the traditional profile, the postmodern detective is depicted as someone who is afflicted by personal crisis, who does not have many certainties in

[6] In *True Detective*, the influence of the German painter Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840) is tangibly felt, both in the photographic staging of the opening credits and in its episodes. Striking examples are the painting *Tree of Crows* (1822), *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818) or *Ruine Eldena* (1825).

life and tends to be self-reflective. As he strives to solve the case, he simultaneously tries to understand the roots from which evil originates. In this light, the disillusioned Rustin Cohle can be said to display a very Lovecraftian way of thinking since both he and the horror writer tended to lose themselves on "ruminations on the problem of evil" (GOHO, 2016, p. 1)

Therefore, finding the solution to the puzzle is not enough; he must understand the mind behind the puzzle and its inherent mechanics. In this way, in *True Detective*, and in the particular case of Rustin Cohle, two narratives overlap, since the detective's personal story becomes indissociable from the crime diegesis. These two narratives, the personal and the criminal, intersect with? each other, and this fact will inevitably take its toll in the detective. Gates observes, "In his search for the truth and the reconstruction of the crime narrative, the detective gained the knowledge of evil that he pursued, and that knowledge tainted him while simultaneously empowering him" (2006, p. 85). In his journey of fighting crime, the detective will gaze into the abyss, and the things he sees will inscribe an unforgettable mark upon his soul. These scars left by the memories of committed atrocities will then "taint" the detective but will also lend him a new kind of resilience and knowledge.

In this way, a certain cloud of ambiguity can be said to envelope the protagonist of the postmodern *noir*. This dubiousness if fed by Cohle, in "Seeing Things". When he pays a visit to a prostitute in order to obtain Quaaludes for his chronic insomnia, she flirts with him and tells him that he looks dangerous. The detective ironically answers her, "Of course I'm dangerous. I'm police. I can do terrible things to people with impunity" ("Seeing Things").

Andrew Dickos in *Street with no Name: A History of the Classic American Film Noir* (2002) likewise sees the detective as focus of personal crisis, claiming that *noir film* detectives are usually depicted as guilt-inflicted individuals, who tend to "run away to escape their complicity in some actual or perceived incident of negation" (2002, p. 65) In Cohle's case, this premise holds true, because the ongoing investigation of the Lousiana homicides work as a refuge from his self-inflicted guilt that derives from his daughter's demise. In this regard, Mark Osteen points out the metonymical link between masculinity at crisis and the car, an iconographic presence in the *noir* narrative.

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In this respect, the author contends that literally "becomes a stage where the men enact a crisis of masculinity" (OSTEEN, 2013, p. 147). Dickos calls our attention to the fact that cars play an important role in the context of the *film noir*. Their symbolism stretches beyond masculinity and industrialism to include America as a troubled geography:

> …as symbol of the modern urban landscape, the car comes to mean much more: it functions as the symbol of all that has brought America to its ambiguous space of spiritual anxiety. Taunting us as the apex of industrial achievement with its commercial appeal and status, the car in the film noir has been transformed into an object of dubious distinction, like a desperado of sorts, an accomplice. Whether noir characters use it to escape their pursuers (legal or criminal) or their past, the automobile symbolizes the dangerous flight into the unknown that contrasts with its other importance as a symbol of established success in modern American culture. (2002, p. 176)

In the episode "The Locked Room", the scene where Cohle is mowing the grass of Marty's yard with no permission, he is portrayed as somehow machinic. The viewer can perceive this when Cohle goes back to his car (after being told off by Hart) with a mechanical type of walking, adopting a straight vertical position, turning his whole body into source of tension. In this scene, more than a flesh and blood individual, visually, Cohle does resemble a machine. Osteen remarks that the proximity that emerges in the *film noir* between the car and the protagonists operates as a kind of warning which insinuates that they might transform themselves into machines (2013, p. 135), therefore losing their human qualities.

In *True Detective*, the car also works as a symbolic division regarding Hart and Cohle. There is one scene, in which the vehicle is stopped near a swampy area, where it is clearly positioned as a frontier between the two detectives, as Cohle stands on its right side whereas Hart stands on its right. This is an image that alludes to their two different ways of thinking, their two ways of envisioning the world. Once immobilized, the horizontality of the vehicle is enhanced, thus making it aligned with the heavy petrochemical industry that figures as backdrop. In this perspective, the car can be said to mark the frontier between technology and wilderness, toxicity and health, machinic and pastoral, modernity and the ancient rituals based on occult beliefs.

Still within this context, Osteen also believes that, in *film noir*, both cars and guns constitute "prosthetics with which American males bolster their identities" (2013, p. 147). Interestingly, in Rustin's Cohle's specific case, the prosthetic artefact is not the

gun, but his notebook instead. In *True Detective* he is given the nickname of "taxman" because he constantly carries the notebook wherever he goes to take notes. In this vein, he plays the role of the philosopher, of the criminal researcher that has read a lot about criminology and psychology. From this perspective, Cohle's construction as a character is quite original as he seems like a "literary detective".

In fact, the action of *True Detective* is anchored upon the dynamic interaction between Marty Hart and Rustin Cohle. Although they are quite different in terms of their personality, they have a strange kind of chemistry that, combined with a thorough investigation and professional commitment, will then contribute to the discovery of Dora Lange's killers. While Marty is down-to-earth, sociable and impulsive, Cohle is very introspective, lonely and has a cold way of analyzing the facts. He is quite educated and does not seem to fit in with the coworkers at the Louisiana police station.

In this perspective, he is the outsider, and affirms to have the privilege of self-knowledge. In 2012, when he is called by the colleagues to revisit the details of the Lange's case, he tells the agents, "I know who I am. And after all these years, there's a victory in that." ("The Long Bright Dark") In this regard, Rust Cohle fits the profile of the postmodern protagonist that make him akin to the "tortured gothic hero-villain" (BRAUDY, 2016, p. 144), in the sense that he displays an ambiguous and complex personality and tends to be a solitary man.

Another typical feature of the *film noir* that integrates the context of *True Detective* is the use of flashbacks as a strategic device to unfold the mystery narrative in a more compelling and diversified manner. Operating as a complement to storytelling, the flashback enables the viewer to see beyond the words of the character and complements, in a very clever way, the story that is being told by one or more characters. It has implicit the idea that the memory must be revisited, and facts and events re-examined and reconstructed. As Foster Hirsch notes in *The Dark Side of the Screen: Film Noir* (1981) "In a fractured time sequence, as flashbacks intersect present action, characters try to reconstruct the past, combing it for clues, facts, answers." (1981, p.72)

These flashbacks are given special emphasis in *True Detective* not only because they will unveil occult essential parts of the narrative, but also because they bear the

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implicit presence of the unreliable narrator. At first, the viewer can legitimately doubt what Marty and Cohle are telling the detectives when they are called to the police station to go through the case once more. Moreover, it is hinted that the detectives in charge of the new case might suspect Rust Cohle's involvement in the homicides.

Resembling a novel, *True Detective* slowly unfolds, highly focused on the mechanism of storytelling. In an interview given to Adam Sepinwall, Pizzolatto highlights the importance of storytelling within the series:

> …if there's one governing thing in "True Detective" that encompasses everything that is happening…and that the show is telling you – constantly, …is that everything is a story. Cohle tells you that who you think you are, your identity, is a story you tell yourself. He tells us that religion and philosophy are stories we tell ourselves. The show was… concerned with supernatural thinking to the degree that it was concerned with storytelling (PIZZOLATTO, 2014, online).

Micah Conkling acknowledges this literary quality[7] that traverses *True Detective*'s visual narrative, an aspect that is emphasized by means of its anthology format:

> One feature that distinguishes *True Detective* from the majority of American television shows…is its anthology style format. (…) The anthology format allows the creator and actors to give a more detailed, devoted run at a single story. It goes deep, rather than wide. As well, the tight-knitness of the constraint of the eight-episode project leads to a more novelistic approach to storytelling (2014, online).

Bearing this literary quality in mind, Matthew Brennan adds that "*True Detective* (…) might in fact be seen as a competition between the narratives – supernatural and literary, religious and psychological, philosophical and pragmatic, historic and of-the-moment -from which the south is made" (2014, online).

Interestingly, detective Hart also looks at the criminals' confession as if they were narratives. We are left wondering if he has inherited this particular way of seeing things from Cohle, since at the time of the investigation, they were spending a lot of time together. Marty tells their colleagues: "It goes on like that, you know the job. You're looking for narrative... interrogate witnesses... parcel evidence... establish a timeline... build story... day after day" ("Seeing Things").

[7] The literary nature of *True Detective* cannot be dissociated from Nic Pizzolatto's background as novelist and college Professor.

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Concerning the literary influence that permeates *True Detective*, Matthew Brenan argues that "The real mark of the series is its Faulknerian fascination with the mechanics of storytelling. The only thing on which Hart and Cohle seem to agree is their compulsion to fashion a narrative" (2014, online). Michael Arntfield, in *Gothic Forensics: Criminal Investigative Procedure in Victorian Horror and Mystery* (2016), goes further and contends that *True Detective* "is a Gothic text that, in the Victorian tradition, imbricates the criminal with the grotesque and the uncanny" (2016, p. 115).

Nic Pizzolatto also acknowledges in an interview the relevance of the supernatural as a literary device to enrich a narrative (2014, online). In a literary context, the supernatural that pervades Gothic fiction destabilizes the narrative's terrain for the reader. Like the Louisiana's swamps, Gothic supernatural stories, whether told in the form of literature or assuming the form of a TV series, comport a degree of unreliableness that leave the audience in a state of suspense and eager to discover the true nature behind the narrated events. In this way, by imbricating the supernatural and cosmic horror into a real criminal case, both the ambience and the landscape of *True Detective* become imbued with an uncanny quality that inevitably leads to a space of ambiguity, and thus invites double interpretation which raises doubt concerning the real nature of events.

In the course of their investigation, and as the detectives interview some of the suspects, they can be said to have close encounters with elements of Gothic, horror and weird literature. Many speak of a land named Carcosa and refer the name of the King in Yellow.[8] Even the geographical locations that Hart and Cohle investigate are permeated by this strange mythology that will turn increasingly complex, hence assuming a pastiche-like configuration, since these literary references become intermingled with religion, local superstitions, Voodoo, Santeria and ritualistic practices. For example, Cohle investigates the ruins of a church located outside the town and finds drawings that allude to the way the body of Dora Lange was adorned. There are also words, spirals and other symbols that despite being interrelated, do not seem to form a logical

[8] The city of Carcosa appears for the first time in Ambrose's Bierce's tale called "An Inhabitant of Carcosa" (1886). The figure of the King in Yellow was originally created by Richard W. Chambers and is a mysterious character of a play named "The King in Yellow" , alluded in some of the short stories that form part of the collection *The King in Yellow* (1885). H. P. Lovecraft has brought these references to his literary universe, thus making them part of the so-called Cthulhu mythos.

reasoning. Overall, Marty Hart and Rust Cohle become immersed in a case that is permeated by the influence of Lovecraftian cosmic horror, as the influence of the author's Cthulhu mythology seems to be omnipresent.[9]

Cosmic horror infiltrates a narrative when it introduces the unknown into the meanders of reality, causing a fearful encounter that is liable to demolish all the preconceived ideas that the human being has regarding the true nature of reality. In these terms, the reality as humans know it is quite deceitful, as its frontiers are permeable to the intrusions from other dimensions, such as alien life forms. H. P. Lovecraft's Cosmicism is informed by existential nihilism and philosophical pessimism, aspects that resonate with Cohle's view concerning the world. In "Form and Void", he states that humans are nothing less than "sentient meat" and the individual's identity is a mere illusion.

The way the villains of *True Detective* are characterized or physically described clearly allude to the anthropoid creature with tentacles that is present in one of the most famous horror tales by H. P. Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu" (1928). Reginald Ledoux, who is seen wondering in his underwear, with a machete in his hand, wears a gas mask that recalls the monster's tentacles. In a similar fashion, Erroll Childress description as "the spaghetti-face monster" (due to the scarring on his face) likewise parallels him with the Lovecraftian monster. But it's not only in the characters' descriptions that vestiges of this creature can be noticed. Cthulhu emerges in *True Detective* in the guise of the huge and massive oil refineries that punctuate the "jungle" of the Louisiana landscape. They stand in the horizon as dangerous threats, both to the environment and to the locals. It's noteworthy that Cohle tells his partner Hart, "[This]place is going to be under water within thirty years" ("The Long Bright Dark"). The detective's ominous comment also connects to Cthulhu to the extent that this is a creature that lives under the sea, in a city called R'lyegh.

[9] The Cthulhu mythos is the name given to the literary mythology that the horror writer H. P. Lovecraft created over time in his short stories, resorting to recurrent characters and motifs. The Cthulhu creature belongs to that mythology and appears in a tale called "The Call of Cthulhu", published in 1928. The term owns its origin to August Derleth, a friend and correspondent of H. P. Lovecraft.

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Within this framework, where the Gothic and horror move hand in hand with criminal investigation, Paul Meehan calls our attention to the enduring link between the horror element and the *film noir*:

> When it first emerged as a genre during the 1940s, film noir derived its distinctive visual style from the horror film. Like horror, film noir exists inside a shadow realm of fear, darkness, fate and death. Both forms exhibit a propensity toward nightmarish dream and surrealism (2011, p. 1).

Thus, emerging out of this nebula of "nightmarish dream and surrealism" Nic Pizzolatto series can be said to comply with tropes and imagery intrinsic to the subgenre of the Southern Gothic. Peter Hutchings states that this subgenre

> …refers to gothic fictions set in the American South and is associated with the work of 20th-centurywriters such as William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor. It is not a subgenre of horror, yet in its engagement with various aspects of southern American history it often features horror-like elements, such as themes of insanity, the supernatural, the grotesque and violence (2018, p. 306).

Therefore, in this Southern Gothic visual narrative, it is not only the detective of postmodern neo *noir* that is immersed in crisis; the landscape is also soaked in a dark atmosphere that links the wilderness, the petrochemical industrial complex, the ruins and the suffering inhabitants, all together in a dismal portrayal of the Southern American spatial reality.

Teresa Goddu, in her seminal work *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (1997) signals the otherness that permeates the South: "The American Gothic is most recognizable as a region form. Identified with Gothic doom and gloom, the American South serves as the nation's 'other', becoming the repository for everything from which the nation wishes to dissociate from" (1997, p. 4). Echoing Goddu's notion of the American South as the other, Edward Clough, in his analysis "The Darkness has a lot more Territory", notices this decadent environment that pervades the Southern imagery in Pizzolatto's criminal show:

> Popular representation of the south is dominated by images of ruin and decay. From skeletal plantation mansions, to rusted shacks and trailer parks, and (…) eroded bayous (…) the distinctive and defining tropes of 'southern' imagery articulate a startling consistent impression. The region, as an imaginative geography, is predominantly constructed as a site of physical- and, consequently, moral – decline and exhaustion (2017, online).

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True Detective's opening credits give away this harmful complicity that develops between the dwellers of that small town in Louisiana and the surrounding geography. In the opening credits the succession of images explicitly emphasizes the weight that the landscape exerts upon the characters.[10] Delia Byrnes observes, "Where the narrator's proper evades an explicit link between Louisiana's signal industry and the exploitation of bodies, the preface intimately traces these connections" (2016, p. 88).

In "Seeing Things", the detectives meet the fragile mother of Dora Lange, who stands as a vivid example of someone who has been the "victim" of those "poisoned landscapes of Louisiana" (2016, p. 86). They learn that she is afflicted by "headaches that come like storms" ("Seeing Things") while the camera also focuses upon her hands, highlighting her damaged nails. This toxicity that lies immanent in the landscape is symbolically associated with Cohle's hallucinations. There is one scene that features Cohle immerse in one of his hallucinations. After the moment in which he tries to get back to reality, the camera draws the attention to the oil refineries, as to symbolically indicate that the "evil" that torments the body and the mind of the inhabitants of the South is intimately related to their existence. Marian St. Laurent notices the similarities between the scarred bayou, the crimes and the massive oil industry. The author states, "The tattered bayou, like the violated bodies of ritual murder victims is 'cut up like a jigsaw' by oil pipelines and refineries, doomed to disappear like the voiceless 'unsolveds' whose records are 'filed in error' and don't get press" (2014, online).

As Delia Byrnes declares, "*True Detective*'s intimate entanglement of bodies and oil conjure temporalities that exist beyond the bounds of normative relations to time and space" (2016, p. 88). In truth, Rust Cohle affirms that time is a flat circle, that an individual's life is informed by a sequence of events that tend to repeat themselves in time, regardless of what he does. This point of view echoes, once more, Lovecraft's cosmicism, but also hints at a certain fatalism inherent in Nietzsche's theory of eternal return, that seems to infect human life.

[10] The landscape photography, namely the photos that compose the opening credits, are highly inspired by the work of the photographer Richard Misrach's *Petrochemical America* (2014), which is focused on the so-called "Cancer Alley" region, a 150-mile section of the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Baton Rouge.

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Cohle has a condition called synesthesia that endows him with special powers that enable him to "read" the cosmic hints and clues that are lodged within the real landscape. We are informed in *True Detective* that he has trouble sleeping and suffers from hallucinations due to the time he spent working undercover as a narcotic agent. This "gift" that he purports endows him with a sort of sixth sense, as he is capable of sensing the trouble in the "psychospere". In "The Long Bright Dark", Rustin Cohle, while in the car with his colleague Hart, tells him: "I get a bad taste in my mouth out here. Aluminum, ash, like you can smell the psychosphere" ("The Long Bright Dark").

This "psychosphere" refers to all the features that inform the southern microcosmos: the polluted environment, the decayed landscape and the disillusioned people. These elements combined form a type of "psychosphere" that Cohle senses it is not positive, but almost claustrophobic and in consonance with Timothy Morton's idea of "dark ecology".[11]

Bearing as reference some of the Gothic tropes that are revisited in *True Detective*, Rachel Franks, "Fear of the Dark: Landscape as Gothic Monster in HBO's True Detective (2014)", contends that the Louisiana bayous "offer a contemporary re-imagining of the dark forest: the ideas of destruction and decay festering just below the surface of waters" (2016, p. 24). In a similar fashion, James Goho also interprets the forest (in *True Detective* envisioned as wilderness) as an incursion into the realm of the unnamable and the unknown. The author states, "the forest is both a metaphor of the experience of otherness and descriptive of an actual experience of an individual in the real woods, away from the battlements of home" (2014, p. 119).

In fact, the untamed Louisiana wilderness is strongly equated with danger in *True Detective*'s visual narrative:

> Wilderness is a constant threat to order in *True Detective*. Neglected weeds grow between the cracks, along deserted freeways and in the broken pavement of abandoned parking lots. (…) Orphaned bikes rust away in indeterminate piles of litter as the whole rotten post-hurricane mess melts into a lush overgrowth that swallows up traces of a civilization that once was. As if to flaunt the victory of chaos over order, the weeds show America as a forgotten afterimage of itself and reveals it for the "jungle" it has become and was before (2014, online).

[11] Timothy Morton's definition ties in with Rustin Cohle's ideas, to the degree that they are related to a dark depressive ecological awareness (Morton, 2016, p. 5) shaped in the form of Nihilism.

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In this way, *True Detective* assumes the shape of a country *noir* which is anti-pastoral, meaning that "the countryside is no longer the innocent, wholesome idyllic retreat from the depraved city – riven by incest and murderous hatreds" (SPICER, p.157-158).

Travelling across a desolated landscape, where nature seems to be taking over the decayed post-industrial America, Cohle emerges as the legitimate successor of the *noir* detective or the western cowboy.

Scott Ortolano, in *Popular Modernism and its Legacies: From Pop Literature to Video Games* (2018), provides an insightful analysis concerning *True Detective*'s particular photographic staging, that gives emphasis to the vastness of the southern landscapes (the jungle-like landscape e and the freeways), making the two detectives feel insignificant.[12] The author notes that

> Most establishing shots in *True Detective* show the detectives in movement across vast terrains, the upper part of the frame constantly about to engulf the lower part as though to remind us of the insignificance of the detectives themselves. In this way territory rather than something contested or successful mastered seems to disappear out of shot, evaporating into images of freeways and unfettered horizons (2018, p. 188-189).

Rustin Cohle says at some point, "This place is like somebody's memory of a town, and the memory is fading. It's like there was never anything here but jungle" ("The Long Bright Dark"), acknowledging the dream-like ghostly nature of the Louisiana town. In fact, it can be said that the photography of *True Detective* configures "a landscape that gives equal weight to the sky and the ground, the shots tend to be long in terms of both framing and duration, which deemphasizes any sense of movement to dreamlike effect" (WOLLIN, 2014, online).

Curiously, in *True Detective*, although the detectives move around by car, they are somehow overcome by the killer. This occurs because the killer is metaphorically equated with the untamed nature of Louisiana, the wilderness, while the car operates as symbol for all that is industrial, technological and machinic. Delia Burns, in "'I get a bad taste in my mouth out here': Oil's intimate Ecologies in HBO *True Detective*," remarks

[12] This depiction recalls the premises put forward by Cosmic Horror, that sees men as insignificant before the magnitude and vastness of the universe.

> The detectives' investigative skills are predicated on the modernizing logic of roads, freeways and maps, while the criminal's cabal's occult knowledges of the ever-shifting bayous elude the detectives' cartographies (2016, p.101).

As the title of the song of *True Detective*'s opening credits suggests, the killer's territorial expertise and his occult knowledge make him "Far From any Road", hidden and camouflaged under the Vermillion Parish's "jungle".

In the end, the crime's culprits are identified, but justice is not reached because they belong to the highest spheres of society.[13] This type of "unresolved" epilogue ties in with the postmodern *film noir*'s philosophy and is heavily present in the wise words of detective Cohle: "This is a world where nothing is solved" ("The Secret Fate of All Life").

Another interesting twist that occurs in *True Detective* has to do with the fact that Pizzolatto inscribes the classical figure of the *film noir*, the *femme fatale*, in a new category. In *True Detective*, it is implied that the *femme fatale* of contemporary *noir* television can actually be a dead woman. Even though Cohle is seduced by Megan (Michelle Monaghan), Marty's wife, this female character does not have enough relevance to become the woman who troubles Cohle's thoughts and disheartens him. Her role is significative in the show because she embodies the stereotype of the female who despite her stark intelligence, chooses the role of a domestic wife in order to look after her daughters. Although she is the reason behind Marty and Cohle's fall out, she does not seem to have enough "presence" to become the *femme fatale* in this postmodern *noir* narrative.

At that moment in time, the specter of Dora Lang is the propeller of Cohle's life, his muse throughout the arduous journey that will ultimately lead to the discovery of her murderers. Generally, *film noir* is characterized by a misogynist environment. The epicenter of the narrative is the male character and his dilemmas. As Joanne Clarke Dillman remarks, in criminal dramas and other shows, "(…) a woman comes to visibility *because* she is dead." (DILLMAN, 2014, p. 3) In the case of *True Detective*

[13] Subscribing to the traditional plot lines of hard-boiled fiction, the initial case of Dora Lange is connected to an extended network of missing persons, involving a high-placed and respected community figure. In the particular case of *True Detective*, this person is Reverend Tuttle.

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this assumption is valid as well. The first episode of the show begins with the body of a dead woman who poses as an enigma for the male detectives to solve. This ties in with Joanne Dillman's beliefs, when she states

> Dead women litter the cultural landscapes of the 2000s. Their bodies appear at the beginning of films and television shows, inciting the narratives that follow. The audience might witness a sequence of events leading to the moment of a woman's violent death; most often the audiences see the aftermath of murder: a woman's corpse. (2014, p.1)

While at the site where Dora Lange's body is discovered, Cohle refers to it as "a paraphilic love map" ("The Long Bright Dark"),[14] explaining to Hart that it consists of "an attachment of physical lust to fantasies and practices forbidden by society." ("The Long Bright Dark") In keeping with the design of this paraphilic lovemap identified by detective Cohle, Dora Lange's body appears defiled, as "a plethora of semiotic abjection is performed on her flesh" (STAPLETON, 2014, p. 169). Assessing the way the killer has staged the crime scene, rife with occult and pagan symbolism, the detective adamantly states "This is his vision" ("The Long Bright Dark").

Erin K. Stapleton observes "Of far more interest in death than she could have been in life, Dora provides a locus of necrophiliac intensity for the partners, as their lives become consumed by the details of hers." (2014, p. 172) In this way, Lange's body becomes "reorganised through and as the topography of the investigation-as-narrative" (2014, p. 169). As a result, Dora Lange's corpse is transformed into a sort of dreadful landscape which ties in with the dismal backdrop of the South of Louisiana. This bodily landscape will therefore be the object of Cohle and Hart's scrutiny in order to find the killer.[15]

Mark Hill, in "Seeking a Womanless Paradise: The Inflexibility of Southern Heroes in *True Detective*", remarks that the final episode of the series appears

[14] The paraphiliac lovemap is a concept coined by the sexologist John Money. In his study entitled *Lovemap: Clinical Concepts of Sexual/Erotic Health and Pathology, Paraphilia and Gender Transposition in Childhood, Adolescence and Maturity* (1986), the author defines it as "a developmental representation or template in the mind and in the brain depicting the idealized lover and the idealized program of sexual and erotic activity projected in imagery or actually engaged in with that lover." (1986, p.290)

[15] It's noteworthy that the name Dora Lange is reminiscent of the photojournalist Dorothea Lange (1895-1965), a woman who took a vast array of pictures of the American landscape during the Great Depression.

encapsulated in a masculine sphere where no feminine presence is allowed or referenced:

> When Marty and Rust find what they seem to believe is redemption, it is not within the family sphere – but in a womanless fantasy world where their masculine friendship reigns supreme. The denouement of the show focuses on the reconciliation between the policemen, not in any sort of reunion with their loved ones (2016, p. 195)

Given these circumstances, it does not come as a surprise that the only woman that managed to keep Hart and Cohle together was, in fact, the deceased Dora Lange. Instead of the traditional flamboyant and dangerous *femme fatale*, *True Detective* offers us instead a sort of dead emanation of the classic *femme fatale*, to the degree that Cohle becomes obsessed with the crime. Given the fact that her body is inscribed with symbology, she is turned into a semiotic enigma, hence becoming the story he wants to narrate.

Amassing stories of dead bodies, scarred geographies and dilapidated buildings, the American South remains suffocated by the tentacles of a Cthulhean powerful family, the Tuttles. The fact that the team of detectives manages to catch the serial killer is only a mere illusion that makes us believe that the light might be winning. However, the corruption and all the ancient sexual and sadistic rituals are liable to endure, because we are reminded by Cohle that time is a flat circle and history tends to repeat itself. Under the circumstances, Marty's words seem wise when, in the last episode of the series, he observes, "it seems to me that darkness has a lot more territory" ("Form and Void").

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