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Exegesis

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Not Going Gentle into That Good Night

Deceptively Deadly Characters in the Neo-Noir Genre

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Introduction: The Premise for *The Edge of Blood*

The Edge of Blood is a full length creative work set within the neo-noir genre. It follows four professional assassins as they are thrown together by a ruthless criminal Boss on a job to take down his lifetime ally who has recently turned against him. Each assassin is drawn into the game based on blackmail and trickery by the Boss. Now faced with an uncertain future, and each deeply suspicious and untrusting of the other, they take refuge in a small village in the hostile environment of central Spain. As the great mafia clans also turn against them, they must face up to their violent pasts and prepare themselves to come up against a formidable foe, who has been sent, in turn, to kill them. The novel explores themes of alienation, loss, free will, personal responsibility, redemption, childhood trauma, violence, vengeance, betrayal, and senses of identity.

This exegesis sets out to explain my reasons and methodology for writing *The Edge of Blood*. In doing so I will focus on two areas: the antihero alienated from society, endemic to the neo-noir genre, who is forced to recognise themselves and to look inwards existentially rather than outward *a priori* for answers; and following closely on this idea, I will also discuss the inescapability from the world of the ‘self’ as reflected in the ‘other’ - both techniques I have intentionally utilised throughout *The Edge of Blood*.

But first I wish to turn to the uncertainties of defining the differences between the classic noir and neo-noir novel.

The Uncertainties of Defining Classic and Neo-Noir and Motivation for *The Edge of Blood*

The French word *noir* (which means “black”) was first connected to the word *film* by a French critic in 1946, and has subsequently become a prodigiously overused term to describe a certain type of film or literary work. Curiously, *noir* is not unlike *pornography*, in the sense that it is virtually impossible to define, but everyone thinks they know it when they see it. Like many other certainties, it is often wildly inaccurate. (Penzler, 2010).

Otto Penzler’s opening statement in his foreword to the collection *The Best American Noir of the Century* (2010) immediately raises an important issue in recent studies of noir fiction: How does it (and has it ever?) neatly fit into a definition? In other words, noir fiction has been largely, and unavoidably, defined within the parameters of its twin, film noir. But whereas in film noir one can easily detect certain motifs and characters – a femme fatale, a hardened (and hard-drinking) cop, a tough but flawed protagonist, seedy rooms in back alleys

infested with cockroaches, a predominance of night scenes with neon lights striking through the half-opened slats of venetian blinds; and cigarettes, always cigarettes with fancy names like Lucky Strikes or Camels or John Players (I have used these extensively in *The Edge of Blood*) – in noir fiction, as Penzler states, these motifs narrow the cordon of the ‘mystery’ down to the simplistic view of noir detective type fiction at the risk of excluding other types such as the crime novel and the suspense or thriller novel notwithstanding a host of other complicated character traits.

George Tuttle (2006) goes further with this distinction:

“Film noir” is not the cinematic counterpart of the “roman noir” or “noir fiction.” The concept of film noir developed independently and has only an indirect relationship. As film critic Raymond Durnat pointed out and many have echoed, film noir is not a genre, instead, it is a cinematic style that uses chiaroscuro lighting effects with black and white film to create dark, nihilistic mood.

Film noir and noir fiction had its heyday between 1941 – 1958. This period is what is now considered as the flourishing of ‘classic’ noir. Film noir is easily and predictably distinguishable (although hardly less digestible): the use of light and shade (and made more apparent, of course, by being produced during the period of mostly black and white cinema); distinctive camera angles and editing that are not used in mainstream cinema (think *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), *Kiss of Death* (Henry Hathaway, 1947), *Obsession* (Edward Dmytryk, 1949), *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles, 1958), and the use of unique colouring to drive (post)modernist narratives found in films like *Point Blank* (John Boorman, 1967). The focus on the detective-type character, usually pursuing leads and suspects through wet, darkened, mysteriously empty streets; and in particular the focus being on a murder or crime to be solved. But noir, as opposed to the detective or mystery genre, seeks to go further. Classic noir centres on what Abrams (2007) calls the “key noir element of inescapability.” In other words, noir fiction delves into the human psyche to reveal, examine and expose the human character. Abrams talks of the fusion of the detective and the villain. A bringing together of many elements that make up a set of complex characters. A classic antihero is placed into a situation from which he (or she) can never escape, and rather, by twists and turns, like being trapped in the foliage hidden beneath the surface of a deep lake, as they struggle to free themselves, only get entangled more and more until they are finally dragged under by the sheer panic and pointlessness of their situation.

Neo-noir, or the 'new' noir (although it's hardly new any longer), while keeping to the classic noir tradition in many ways, aims to shake up some of the recurring themes seen in classic noir. But rather than turning away from classic motifs, it aims to expand on these, by delving ever deeper into dark territories of the human condition, and so further disorienting the readers'/viewers' expectations with a result of producing an unsettling, a discomfort. Not only do the characters of a neo-noir novel hold this mirror up themselves, but in doing so, they also turn that mirror on the reader and make us question who we are, our place in the world, and our relationship to the 'other'. Not only that, but also our relationship to ourselves. As Gilmore (2007) states:

Neo-noir is also something somewhat different from classic noir. It is more general, more detached, more ironic, more philosophical than classic noir. It involves a level of self-reflexivity that classic noir lacked. To use Freudian vocabulary, classic noir tends to be obsessed with the problem of the return, the return, Freud would say, of the repressed. (p.120)

In *The Edge of Blood*, I have taken this theme of the relationship to 'self' and the 'other' and made it central to the creative work's premise: how does a character suffering from a cold, disoriented, alienated, brutal background see their place in the world and react to that place in order to finally come to understand and accept their fate? Conrad (2007) sums this idea up when he states: "Good things happen to bad people, and bad things happen to good people (just like in real life!), which seems in line with noir's cynicism and pessimism." But there is bad and there is bad, of course, and worse things happen to some people more than others to force them to make bad choices. Conrad goes on to say, (in quoting Abrams (2007)) that "...whereas in classic noir the detective searches the modern cityscape for an external villain, in neo-noir, by contrast, the detective's task is to reorganise a disjointed time continuum, in which what is effectively hidden is the detective's own identity as the villain." (For my own purposes in regards to *The Edge of Blood*, I would replace 'detective' here with 'antihero').

There is a common theme here emerging from Conrad, that is further exemplified by Abrams. That neo-noir, in a point of difference from classic noir, centres on two aspects: The protagonist's position in space and time, and the protagonist looking inwards rather than outwards for his or her search for identity. By outwards here, and by time and space, Abrams refers to the classic noir setting of a large city-scape, traditionally Los Angeles, being shifted out of the narrow boundaries of the 'pestilent' city limits to enable the broadening of the genre into class, race, religion, social issues and gender, in order to address the issues of a

contemporary society, and a contemporary, in some ways even more complex, postmodern character. We see this in the modern noir novels that are largely set in more diverse surroundings, with varying shifts in time and settings and narrative structures. The most classic example that springs to mind is *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982 – based on the Philip K. Dick’s masterpiece *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* (1968)), but there are also the novels of Dennis Lehane (*Shutter Island* (2004), *Gone, Baby, Gone* (1998), *Mystic River* (2001)), Cormac McCarthy (*No Country For Old Men* (2005), not to forget the French¹ neo-noir writer Jean-Patrick Manchette (*The Prone Gunman* (1981, trans. James Brook 2002) and the master of recent Japanese noir Natsuo Kirino (*Out* (1997, trans. Stephen Snyder 2006), not to mention the uniquely New Zealand neo-noir settings of Chad Taylor in the novels *Shirker* (2000) and *Electric* (2004), and the ‘next big noir writers’ from Mexico, Daniel Saidaña Paris (*Among Strange Victims* (2016)) and Yuri Herrera (*Transmigration of Bodies* (2016)). All these writers break the boundaries of traditional noir and distort plot, time and narrative and (dis)place their characters in settings and challenging landscapes outside the traditional city of Los Angeles and of America itself. All these novels situate their characters into their own hostile environments, and although familiar to them these are still environments they must face head on and deal with in order to crawl out of their predicaments so they may hold that mirror up to ‘themselves’ and so in turn sets them against their own cultures and identities that appear, at every step, to be forsaken².

In *The Edge of Blood*, I have intentionally started the novel in two large cities, Barcelona and London, as a nod to classic noir, but have quickly moved the characters and the action into the mostly deserted, desolate, hot and dry interior of central Spain³. There’s not much there, as the characters frequently comment on, but that’s not the point. The point is there is a sense that the shift is away from an importance placed on the ‘problems’ of the harsh cities to an awareness that such problems are faced in the more insignificant of places, by ordinary people, by those who on the fringes of a postmodern society. It only makes matters worse, of course, that Frederico and the assassins bring a whole new set of problems

¹ The French, of course, gave the genre its name, Roman Noir (Black Noir), and they remain the most voracious readers of noir (see Duncan (2003) and (Penzler’s (2009) introduction).

² This is evident also in the amount of quality neo-noir writing coming out of non-English speaking countries, and in the series of Noir collections published by Akashic Books. See <http://www.akashicbooks.com/subject/noir-series/>

³ I reference here *Touch of Evil*. Welles dramatically shifted the setting from the traditional Los Angeles to the barren deserts of Mexico, signalling the end of the classic film noir era (Abrams 2007, p.8). Also Hirsch (1999) adds: “Touch of Evil, Orson Welles’ 1958 crime thriller, is often cited as the end of the line, noir’s rococo tombstone.”

to the village. They bring the noir setting from the enclosed city out into the wider world and to an unsuspecting, and largely unprepared, public.

But set against this new sense of environment, Abrams goes on to say that the antihero rejects these traditional forms of place, a place that he or she cannot make sense of, and so therefore turns away from the external and focuses, instead, on the internal, for this is where the character has a mere grain of a chance to make sense of things, to make things right. But of course, because this is noir we are speaking of here, things will not go right, as much as the characters' try to force them to be.

So, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century and certainly in the 21st century, as communities expanded and transformed, people left the overcrowded cities for new lives, to find work, to recapture hope, and traditional notions of "centripetal space dissolved" (Abrams, 2007, p.9). There became an awareness of other wider issues at stake, of culture, of diversity, of social class, of social injustice, resulting in dramatic shifts in consciousness and morals. Of 'something more going on out there.' And as a result of this, an even larger shift came about. Now as the city and sense of community fractured and became less important, less centrifugal, the individual turned inwards, became more aware, and the 'self' emerged as key.

I have mentioned that this resulted in the noir characters holding a mirror up to themselves, rather than just their reactions to the world around them. In *The Edge of Blood*, I wanted to take this idea further and have the four main assassins put into a predicament which forces them to also hold that mirror up to each other. Each is a reflection of the others' unknown darkness, as if to step too closely to each other would risk falling into an abyss. For this reason, I chose a linear 3rd person limited perspective storyline with flashback narrative. In doing so, this allowed me to keep in time with the real events unfolding, while stepping out of that linearity momentarily, like snippets of distorted recurring memory, to explore each characters' backgrounds, firstly from their own narrow point of view then slowly expanding this in a peeling away of their self-awareness in order to face up to their violent pasts through their relationships with the others who are similar to them. The novel, in many ways, is a gradual journey to inventing new self-identities. I intend to explore this existential⁴ motif

⁴ It should be acknowledged here that the term 'Existentialism' has been used as an umbrella term to cover a plethora of philosophical thinking, that "revolts against traditional philosophy" (Kaufman, 1975, p.11). Kaufman goes on to say that those great philosophical thinkers - Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Sartre among them - who have been branded as existentialists would have rejected such a label. For the purposes of this exegesis, however, I use the term existentialism to cover these philosophies.

further in the next section by turning to other noir authors who have influenced, along with those mentioned above, my journey in similar ways through my creative project.

Influences and Analysis

In this section, while bringing into the discussion a range of noir works, I will focus on several exemplary neo-noir works that represent the genre from the 1970's onwards and relate these back to my own work. The works discussed align with the argument given above concerning the existential self, the unknown, the inescapability from circumstance, and complex notions of redemption all found in neo-noir film and fiction.

In *Get Carter* (1998 (republished)), the central protagonist, Jack Carter, a London mobster, leaves the 'smoke' and heads north in search of his brother Frank's killers. The opening scene is essentially a scene of 'leaving' behind the hermetically sealed life of London. Later we discover he has left this life against the will of his boss. He is now a man alone. In fact, he sits as the sole occupant in the train carriage that becomes also a hermetically sealed box. Coffin-like. We feel Carter's suffocation and disorientation along with an indication of the dirty mission before him: "Inside the train it was close, the kind of closeness that makes your fingernails dirty even when all you're doing is sitting there looking out of the blurring windows." (Lewis, p.5). The rain and mist 'blurs' the windows so he can't see out, can't connect with the world. It is as if he already has a sense of his impending fate. The town that he heads for is unnamed, and remains nameless throughout the novel. Although it's the town he and Frank grew up in, it is now alien, strange, hostile. While he can internalise the town of his birthplace, of Frank's death, he can no longer personalise it.

As he nears the town, Lewis separates out onto its own a description that echoes a descent into hell:

And a little later the train passes through a cutting and curves away towards the town, a small bright concentrated area of light and beyond and around the town you can see the causes of the glow, the half-dozen steelworks stretching to the rim of the semicircular bowl of hills, flames shooting upwards – soft reds pulsing on the insides of melting shops, white heat sparking in blast furnaces – the structures of works black against the collective glow...

In *The Edge of Blood*, Frederico also arrives at the beginning a man alone, into Cervantes' saloon, into the other's personal hell. He too has left behind all that he knows, has reached the start of an unknown journey, a critical impasse. His life has also been stripped away from him. Anja, his wife and only hope of salvation, has died of cancer. He has rejected his young

daughter, Ema, sending her off to be cared for by her elderly grandparents (this comes out later in the novel). He has been exiled from some hope of normal domesticity and launched fully back into his old life of professional killing, as if there is nothing else for him but to return to what he knows best. Like Jack Carter, he is also almost resigned to his fate, resistant but submissive to Cervantes, but at the same time yearns for some sort of justice. He talks little, but takes everything in. They are, what Paul Duncan (2002) in describing the state of the noir antihero, would call tainted men:

I am not well. By that I mean that I am sick. Emotionally, physically, psychologically. The world is horrible. I wake in the morning, in my room, a small box at the end of a cement garden, and I look out at the black walls and grey skies, and I think myself better off in my room. Why do I need to go out there? What can I find out there that will make my life better? People? People are obnoxious, smelly, violent, impolite slabs of meat that travel from one place to another like ants following the invisible trails of their dead ancestors. (p.7).

But come out of their enclosed 'knowable' lives they indeed do. Both Frederico and Carter are forced out of their hermetically sealed existences to 'put things right.' The world is a horrible place, a place they don't feel they belong, but a place they are thrust into and must face. Andrew Spicer (2007) discusses the existential condition of the antihero in neo-noir fiction as "no transcendent values or moral absolutes, and man is forever struggling for self-definition, trying to forge an identity from the confusing assault of experience" (p.48). Spicer argues that noir intensified directly in the post-war years, when people attempted to piece together and make sense of what happened during, and as a consequence of, the war. There was a turning inwards, a self-examination, and Sartre's famous mantra "existence precedes essence" was re-visited and the concept of God was questioned and all the previous structures of religion and how we viewed ourselves slowly disintegrated and a new set of morals and awareness emerged. Spicer goes on to cite William Barret in defining the existentialist condition as "alienation and estrangement: a sense of the basic fragility and contingency of human life; the impotence of reason confronted with the depths of existence; the threat of nothingness, and the solitary and unsheltered condition of the individual before this threat (p.48). Finally, Spicer concludes that the noir protagonist, while faced with a world that seems pointless and absurd, is shrouded by the past, particularly past events that have significant impact on the present and the future, destroying any singular linearity which in turn disrupts the continuity of time. Therefore, it is no mistake that neo-noir writing and film

uses many narrative devices, such as fragmentary plots, flashbacks and tricks of memory (think *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000)), to make sense of this irregularity.

When Jack Carter arrives at his brother Frank's house to view Frank laying in state, he shows little emotion. In fact, the passages preceding his entry into the room where Frank's body lies, are fuller and more descriptive of Frank's possessions and his house than the encounter with Frank himself. Jack lists them: the tongue and groove shelving that holds the TV, framed photos, glass ornaments, fruit bowls, *Reader's Digest*, *Guns Illustrated*, *National Geographic*; paperbacks by numerous authors, his record collection, to name just a few. When he finally looks into the coffin, he comments: "Death didn't really make much difference at all; the face just reassembled the particles of memory" (p.20). In classic existentialism style, he ponders on death, thinking it impossible to relate a corpse to the memory of someone when they were alive. His only reaction: "'Well, Frank,' I said. 'Well, well'" (p.20).

But he does connect and bring Frank back to life in a series of flashbacks. The time he seduced a girl when they were young and Frank taking the moral high-ground; how they saved up money to buy a gun (that Jack later uses) against their father's wishes, and so on. The scene is reminiscent of Camus' (2012) Meursault who leaves his job, also against his boss's wishes, to go and attend his mother's funeral. When he first hears the news of his mother's death, instead of an emotional reaction, he debates to himself over the exact time of death: he thinks it could have been either today or yesterday. It's not clear. When he is shown into the rest home's mortuary, he describes in detail the room's "whitewashed" interior, its "glass roof", along with the smallest of details of the casket. But much to the caretaker's shock, Meursault does not want to see inside the casket. When questioned further as to his reasons why, he says, simply, "I don't know."

In *The Edge of Blood*, I have Frederico casting his memory back to his younger self, to the time he witnesses the execution of his beloved Eduardo Vasquez, the Carpenter and master bowsman. In the scene I focus on the details of the village, the hot day, the dusty road, the "late model Mercedes", the trouser leg of the man in charge; his polished shoe. After they execute Vasquez and drive away, Frederico comes out from his hiding place, and goes to look at the man's bloodied carcass. He stares at the body, unemotionally, then takes the red

⁵ Spicer also cites Steven Sanders here which strengthens this argument: "Noir is imbued with a strong fatalism that emphasizes not freedom but constraint and entrapment, pervaded by a strong sense of absurdity that stems from the seriousness with which the protagonist views his actions and their ultimate insignificance." (p.49)

silk handkerchief discarded by the mafia boss, and places this gently over Vasquez's obliterated face. Like Jack's turning away from Frank, like Meursault's refusal to see the dead face of his mother, Frederico is also overwhelmed by seeing the 'other' in himself. To face death in the eye; to know what is coming. But further, Jack, Meursault and Frederico are the harbingers of death, and they know this. After Jack briefly pays his respects to Frank, he goes to retrieve the gun they bought as kids. Meursault goes on to shoot a man to death. Directly after Vasquez is executed, Frederico has one thing on his mind: to claim what is rightfully his – the crossbow, the signifier of death and destruction.

I have mentioned the phrase "existence precedes essence." In her essay *Blade Runner and Sartre* Judith Barad (2007) discusses this concept in detail. When talking of *Blade Runner*, Barad gives the analogy of a genetic engineer who designs and builds an android. The engineer decides all the qualities and abilities of this android in advance. The android doesn't get to choose these qualities; the engineer gives the android its essence before it comes into existence. She moves this analogy to Sartre. For Sartre, God is the engineer of us humans. He knows exactly what he will create and gives us our purpose in advance, and so therefore "Neither the human nor the android is a free being; they are determined by their makers." (p.22).

But there is a problem. Sartre refuted God. And if there is no God, then there is no one or nothing that determines our essence. So that, therefore, is left up to the human being herself to determine what she will become. Existence precedes essence. And this raises the great existential dilemma: what makes me do the things I do, or be the person I am, act the way I act? What drives me to make such choices? Is it something I create through free will? Or has this been predetermined for me? And if so, are we trapped in an absurd world, with no way out? In noir fiction, this theme haunts us time and again. One only has to think of James N. Cain's (1997, originally published 1934) homeless Frank Chambers who drifts into a remote gas station and falls for Cora. The infamous lines sum up his personal choice: "Hell could have opened up for me then, and it wouldn't have made any difference. I had to have her, if I hung for it." (p.37). Or Lou Ford, the frighteningly psychopathic, violent, and sexually masochistic Deputy Sheriff from Jim Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me* (1991, Vintage edition) who revolves into his former, killer self, or Thompson's Nick Corey from *Pop. 1280* (1964), a murderous sheriff who leaves a trail of brutality because he sees nothing but hypocrisy around him and therefore thinks he's justified in his actions (Duncan, 2002,

p.61). Or again Meursault⁶, who coldly shoots the Arab on the beach and shows no remorse because he thinks every man is condemned already in a Godless, absurd world.

In Jean-Patrick Manchette's (2002, trans. James Brook) novel *The Gunman*, Martin Terrier is a hitman trying to escape his past, break from his profession, and keep a promise he made to an old flame 10 years previously. The novel begins, appropriately, with the line "It was winter, and it was dark." He is on a job in Worcester, in the north of England (again the neo-noir setting has broken away from the large city-scape). In an intense scene, he traps the target, who is with a woman, and Terrier shoots him once in the "open mouth" and once "at the base of his nose." The woman is innocent, but Terrier coldly shoots her in the heart. He does this without emotion. Later, when he is questioned if he knew the girl, Terrier shrugs nonchalantly. Again, when Terrier is tailed by a car, he confronts the driver. Although it looks as if the young man has been manipulated by Terrier's enemies into tailing Terrier, an innocent pawn in a deadly game, Terrier still shoots him, also in the heart. It's noteworthy that both these victims are shot in the heart, while his real enemies are shot in the face or head. It's as if Terrier unconsciously connects the heart with innocence; the head with cold calculation.

This sets up a problematic series of events that span the rest of the novel. We, the reader, are hard-pushed to sympathise with Terrier. Again, like in *Get Carter*, bits of his past are drip-fed to us, and these give us a better understanding of who Terrier is, and why he has made those choices: his struggles with his alcoholic father who kills himself on a motorcycle after father and son have a huge fallout; his tough life in the army and how he saved the day in a hostage situation, was wounded but then 'recruited' by a questionable, callous agency.

Alaattin, the Turkish-Cypriot killer in *The Edge of Blood*, is similarly complex. We are introduced to him while he is situated on a rooftop in Vienna, lining up a target from a great distance. He shoots the target, but at the last minute he also nudges the gun and shoots the female the target is sharing a hotel room with. At the time, like Terrier, he also does this without emotion. It's just 'his job', something he does. He has no compunction about destroying something beautiful (unlike Frederico, who has a stronger moral compass).

But as the novel progresses, I explore more deeply the complex character of Alaattin, by delving into his past – the harsh life in the poverty-stricken neighbourhood in Nicosia; the

⁶ Robert Zaratesky (2013) when examining Meursault, says "Camus creates a character whose life is empty of the shade offered by self-reflection. A lover who is incapable of love, a son unable to mourn his mother's death, and a murderer without a motive for his act. Meursault lives with no thought to either past or future, but instead glides through an endless procession of present moments" (p.24). This could describe the existential state of any of my four main characters – Frederico, Alaattin, Vernon, Estel.

need at an early age to learn to fend off thieves as he delivers bread to the tourist hotels; him being taken at a young age by Cervantes and placed into a camp for child soldiers, the isolation, loneliness and rejection he feels; and the fact that he has never married, remaining childless, and so is harshly looked upon by his sister and his own religious and cultural customs and expectations. He is an outcast. And he is full of contradictions. He sketches birds and appreciates nature but destroys life. He carries with him his Koran, (a pocket edition, not his real clap-board covered Koran, for that is too cumbersome) praying five times a day between killing targets. But this seems only a token religion. It is an absurd world he lives in, and while he tries to hold a mirror up to himself, what reflects back is nothing he can recognise. He is, perhaps, the classic automaton that Barad examines; he cannot look. He is existence without the essence. For Alaattin, God is dead, but he doesn't know it. Meaning remains only in the act of killing, the only thing he is good at and feels is worthy. He carries with him only token impedimenta of his existence in the here and now (as all my assassins do, knowing that their lives could end at any moment), while back in his home town he builds a colossus high in the mountains to impress a God he knows, deep down, has already "cast him out."

Nowhere is this notion of existential freedom and responsibility addressed more acutely than in the Japanese neo-noir novel *Out* by Natsuo Kirino (2003). It is also a novel, like *The Edge of Blood*, that brings together a set of characters sharing the same fate who are forced to look to each other for redemption and salvation. Whereas, as Barad points out (p.23), the four fugitive replicants from *Blade Runner* are desperately trying to reach their maker in order to plead with him to extend their lives, my four assassins in *The Edge of Blood* are pulled together and thrust on a journey of redemption from which there is no going back. In a similar vein, *Out* revolves around four characters who are each facing their own predicaments, and who are driven to desperate acts. In particular, Yayoi is a woman whose abusive husband is obsessed with a nightclub worker and has gambled away all their savings on playing baccarat. Things come to a head, and after he hits her in the stomach that leaves a deep and painful bruise, she kills him, by strangulation with his own belt.

She enlists the help of fellow worker, Masako, to dismember the body. Masako in turn enlists the help of Yoshie and finally Kirino, to dispose of the body in small plastic garbage bags and distribute all over Tokyo. All four women who at the beginning are only known to each other as fellow workers on the night shift production line in a Bento lunch box factory are each roped into the aftermath of Yayoi's crime by Masako. Each woman sees in the other a similar set of circumstances that opens them to eventual blackmail and extortion.

Out is undoubtedly a feminist-noir work, with Yayoi's deep-coloured bruise a map for navigating the largely unspoken issue of domestic abuse in modern day Japan (Gilhooly, 2016). The bruise becomes for her like Christ's wound in his side (it is similarly located), a punishment of others' sins. The character of Estel in *The Edge of Blood* has a scar across her shoulder, that Frederico at first mistakes for a tattoo, given to her by The Catalyst, who later hints was to mark her out for next time. For the women in *Out*, and for my female characters in *The Edge of Blood*, they are all seeking an escape, a 'way out', from both the here and now and from their pasts. Again, the characters all search for meaning within themselves. But as Kaufmann (1975) says when reviewing Dostoevsky's view of the world and reaction to romanticism in the writer's *Notes from Underground*, observes that "Romanticism is a flight from the present, whether into the past, the future, or deception. Romanticism yearns for deliverance from the cross of the Here and Now: it is willing to face anything but the facts" (p.13), and turns this thinking around by going on to scrutinize the existential character: "No prize, however great, can justify an ounce of self-deception or a small departure from the ugly facts. And yet this is not literary naturalism with its infatuation with material circumstances: it is man's inner life, his moods, anxieties, and his decisions, that are moved into the center until, as it were, no scenery remains" (p.13). In view of this critique, Kaufman outlines that much thinking around the inner dialogue came not from the philosophical thinkers that came later, but from the early Christian thinkers. And that came about in consequence of Original Sin, and hence the fallen state that came out of that great, inciting biblical moment. This brought about an "uncompromising concentration on the dark side of man's inner life" (p.13).

I read Kaufman in the light of humankind's search for redemption, and this I have attempted to reflect in *The Edge of Blood*. In the middle section of the novel (Act II, in technical terms) the assassins are locked together in the village in the north-most mountainous, arid La Mancha region. They, too, once arrived, seem not to be able to escape. Even Vernon, who has much at stake with the mission to 'save' his 'allegedly' kidnapped daughter, Natasha, appears resigned to his sickness and stricken with an inner paralysis, brought on by the cancer literally eating away at his insides and symbolically at his inner self. He stays mostly in his room, and as he lay dying, thinks back on his life he knows is now coming to a close, trying to make sense of things. He seeks redemption through internalising his life, and later through the final, external act of saving the others.

Conrad (2007) in his insightful analysis of redemption in his essay *Reservoir Dogs: Redemption in a Postmodern World* gives a definition of the characters' views on what

constitutes a 'real' person, and therefore a redeemed person. The characters of *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1992) draw a distinction between those in uniform (those who are not real) and those who are civilians (real people). As Conrad points out, because each of the gangsters in *Reservoir Dogs* is dressed in black and white suits, and therefore uniformed, the characters themselves yearn to be those 'real people', out of uniform, out of the cloak of their thug, jewel-heisting personas. To be redeemed, they need "to get out of the life" (p.103). At the end of the film, the gangsters do not succeed in gaining redemption, as they never do shed their uniforms; they only gain redemption through death.

When the assassins in *The Edge of Blood* reach the village, they too shed some of their previous lives. Estel changes out of her custom leather body suit, the one she first appears in while saving Frederico in London, and into a more casual tank top and blue faded jeans. Alaattin changes out of his *thawb* and into a shirt. Frederico changes out of his dark polo-neck type uniform in which he undertakes jobs and into a fresh shirt. Vernon changes into a casual Harley Davidson T-shirt. They all change again for the flamenco evening, into different personas, once again attempting to shed their previous lives, to become 'real people.' Only when the killing starts again do they change back: Estel into her cat suit; Frederico into his dark clothes; Alaattin into his *thawb*; Vernon his white shirt and 501 levis. And in doing so, they know that redemption is beyond them. The only character that doesn't change is The Catalyst (Jaw-long Wu). He remains as he is throughout wrapped in a scarf to conceal his face "like a *jinn*," as Alaattin imagines. It is only through death now that the characters will eventually find salvation. As Alaattin reflects, as he's tied to the chair after being captured by Delmazzo's men, "He was not afraid to die; he'd given that up when he reached the village" (Chapter 35).

Finally, I'd like to bring in discussion of the role of the church and the village itself. I go back here to my previous mentioning of the characters' inescapability. This harks back to Abrams "key noir element of inescapability." In this middle part the action seems to stall, but the tension continues to steadily build. The village becomes a seething cauldron in which the characters reflect off each other and turn to one another in a search for meaning, for finality. It's a play around what Martin Esslin (1968) called "The Theatre of the Absurd" (from the same-titled book). In *The Edge of Blood*, we have the Church as the archaic, religious symbol at the one end of the village – sitting at its pinnacle like the crucifix sitting atop Golgotha – offset at the other end by the modernist Quixote Café run by the abstract painter Sofia. The church is also strewn with paintings, and is itself an abstract decaying modernism piece. Religious iconography and contemporary art link the two main buildings – the café and the

church – and within this forms an (existential) prison where Frederico and the others march incessantly between the two buildings. For a time, there no longer seems to be any pattern, any logic, or any meaning. They hang between an archaic, lost world loosely held together by a set of shared beliefs, and a contemporary, godless society. As Esslin elaborates:

It is an over simplification to assume that any age presents a homogenous pattern. Ours being, more than most others, an age of transition, it displays a bewilderingly stratified picture: medieval beliefs still held and overlaid by eighteenth-century rationalism and mid-nineteenth-century Marxism, rocked by sudden volcanic eruptions of prehistoric fanaticisms and primitive tribal cults (p22).

Frederico and his fellow assassins are for a time reminiscent of Estragon and Vladimir standing about a lone tree on an otherwise vast, empty landscape, waiting. But waiting for what? Or for whom? A mysterious character – Jaw-long Wu - who never appears, at least until it's all too late. Frederico only leaves the village twice – and both times these are to retrieve something lost. Once for some roof tiles (a dangerous task for something seemingly of low value, but loaded with symbolism); another time to rescue Nicolas (a task filled with value, with redemption). The final time, when he goes to face Delmazzo's and De Marco's armies, he doesn't come back. Death has freed him from the village. His only redemption. And he will never come back, as much as he may think he will. The door of return is closed to him forever.

Conclusion

There is a scene in *The Edge of Blood* where Frederico stares out the window of an outbuilding positioned in the ruins of the old disused farmhouse. It's night, and a full moon lights up the grounds outside and the olive trees and surrounding forest. A single light burns in the main farmhouse. They wait for Delmazzo and his men to attack. It is quiet; nothing moves but some wind through the branches of the trees. Frederico's uncle, the priest Alberto, comes and joins him at the window, the confessional box. It is a rare moment of reconciliation between the two men. Fr. Alberto 'confesses' to his nephew that he, too, was taught the crossbow by Vasquez, along with Frederico's father and their younger brother (Sofia's dead husband). He tells Frederico how he hunted down Vasquez's killers, how it took him a year, but he got every one of them. Then he donned the collar and came back to a godless world, a hypocrite. He came back changed, but in classic neo-noir style as opposed to

the traditions of storytelling structure, was it a change for the good? The tables are turned. It is now the killer priest seeking redemption, through confession, from the assassin, and death is the only true religion they both secretly believe in, the one true thing that binds them together.

In writing *The Edge of Blood*, I wanted to, and as Conrad (2007) also points out that Tarantino does, bring into the novel allusions to my love of noir and hardboiled fiction. It was no mistake that Tarantino called his movie with the most allusions to popular culture *Pulp Fiction*. But I also aimed to explore those grand existential philosophies that I have outlined in this exegesis: alienation, loss, betrayal, identity, death, redemption, the absurd. And I also aimed to bring into play the idea of what Richard Gilmore (2007) calls “The sense of the uncanny” (p.130), that is, a feeling that there is something more at stake, something more ‘out there’ going on (as I have previously mentioned, in my discussion of changing communities), a sense of something happening that one cannot quite grasp, is unable to clearly see (a little like the first audiences to witness *Waiting for Godot*).

I wish to end this exegesis with a startling quote by Paul Duncan (2000), which sums up the ending of *The Edge of Blood*, and recalls the unfamiliar in all neo-noir works, and also what I like to imagine Frederico feels after reaching Zagreb and waking up the next morning:

Bang, it is dawn. I open my curtain and see that it is light outside. I have made it through the night.

I know there are more nights to come (p.88).

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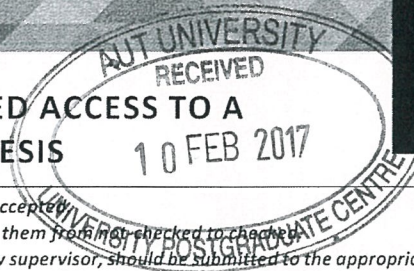
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