Noir building? Understanding the immersive fandom of Noir City

Gill Jamieson & Anne McVitie,

Abstract:
Noir City has become one of San Francisco's most popular film festivals with residents and visitors alike. Moreover, the event has been franchised and now takes place in other major US cities: Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, Seattle, Portland, Kansas, Austin and Washington D.C. This research project explores fan engagement with film noir through the festival, deploying a participant-observational approach which is primarily immersive. The investigation explores the appeal of a sub-genre which typically features characters in dark urban settings on the margins of society, distinguished by their ability to navigate the threatening underbelly of the city. We draw on recent scholarship on participatory cultures such as Paul Booth's work on games (2015), in which he argues that the construction of 'detailed worlds…strengthen and cohere these cult worlds (and) *can actually make these storyworlds more real*' (177, emphasis in the original). The objective has been to identify the unique package of attractions film noir and events like Noir City pose for the fan. What is it that appeals in the 'typical' noir universe? To what extent do they identify and engage with a 'typical' noir world? We speak to actual fans and participants at a number of events to get their view of film noir as, to adapt Umberto Eco's concept (1987) a 'living text' that continues to resonate far beyond the classic era.

Keywords: film noir, cinephilia, cosplay, film festivals, nostalgia, vintage, community

Introduction

The third week in January in San Francisco heralds the start of a ten-day extravaganza of film noir. The Castro Theatre plays host to Noir City, an annual film festival that has become a place where fans of film noir can meet and indulge in an imaginary world of dark, rain slicked city streets, ports, bars, and nightclubs where smoke and smoking is *de rigeur,* and

style is paramount. This is a place where gender is defined by the tropes of the wounded male and the duplicitous femme fatale. Such an event promotes and consolidates the 'living textuality' (Eco, 1986) of film noir as a sub-genre that continues to resonate for fans. Specifically, the festival promises the sensation of an 'authentic' experience consolidated by social practices such as film screenings, with opportunities to dress in vintage style clothing, meet like-minded fans, and engage in post-screening discussions and parties.

Following Michael Saler's (2012) intervention in the debate about 'geographies of the imagination,' we ask: are the film noir fans drawn to Noir City constructing an imaginary noir world? And if so, what kind of imaginary world *is* the noir world? We anticipated that Noir City is an event which builds a noir world for the fans as consumers that is 'rooted in the imaginary soil of non-existent places' (Saler, 2012: 4) which, as Saler notes, is the difference between places of the imagination and imagined places on-screen (25). The former involves an 'immersive more prolonged experience' (26) and encourages participation in 'collective exercises of world building' (25). Our research suggests that the festival creator, Eddie Muller, has been remarkably successful at creating an event that provides an opportunity for the fan of noir to immerse in a loosely defined imaginary noir world. Although rooted in a sense of place that seems far from the fantastical worlds created by fans of fantasy and horror-based product such as *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011) and *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010), noir fans invest in a world defined by criminal acts, dark desires and inhospitable city spaces. We framed the project by posing some deceptively simple questions: how are noir fans distinctive? How do they 'sojourn', as Saler (3) describes it, in imaginary worlds? In this respect we found it useful as researchers to think through the constitutive elements of the noir universe. Not surprisingly, we found that such a world is instantly recognizable. Despite the impact of neo-noir, the imaginary noir world promoted by the festival is a black-and-white world, a place where bars and nightclubs are 'joints' selling liquor to people who are 'down on their luck', where the only light comes from shafts of neon falling on a rain slicked streets. This is a world that resonates with the noir fan and it is this aspect that is embraced in the following response to an online questionnaire: 'I love the storytelling of noir, and that most films are in glorious black and white.'[1]

The event attracts many participants in vintage costume (a point we will return to in more detail later), and what is striking is the complete eschewal of neo-noir as an influence for these fans. There is a strict adherence to the look of the classic noir period, and the festival presents an opportunity for sharing and display as this fan suggests: 'vintage clothing is a way of life for some of us and film noir fest is a great way to show off some of our best pieces.'[2] This eschewal seems remarkable given the impact of neo-noir and the contribution these films have made to the endurance of the cycle. Although these films often feature in the program for the festival, they appear to offer little in the way of inspiration or influence for the fan who remains committed to an idea of noir that is synonymous with the classic era. Eddie Muller (2015) explains the appeal of the sub-genre succinctly, 'noir is suffering with style', and while we found little evidence of suffering at the event (except for on-screen), we did detect a preoccupation with 'style'.

Methodology

We employed a participant-observer immersion in the Noir City film festivals at San Francisco, Los Angeles and Chicago; and dialogic methods of research by focus group, interview and questionnaire, with the aim of building a picture of the allure and appeal of these films on the one hand, and the Noir City Film Festival for participants on the other.

An initial pilot study was undertaken with a focus group arranged in San Francisco on 18th January 2015 during the Noir City festival. The initial point of contact was Jeanne B., a San Francisco resident first encountered at the opening night of Noir City 11, two years previously. Describing herself as a film noir fan, cinephile and member of the San Francisco Film Society, Jeanne arranged for a further five Noir City attendees and film noir fans to meet with a member of the research team prior to attending the Sunday afternoon session of Noir City 13. They were Catherine M., Lynn, C., Julie, C., Peggy, W. and Stacy, I. The women are all San Francisco residents, professional businesswomen and all aged 45 or over. These were knowledgeable fans, some attending Noir City since its inception and all had attended for at least 9 years. As stated in the introduction, our objectives were initially fairly general: what are their expectations of the festival and how does the festival meet these expectations? Additionally, we speculated that the festival constructs a fluid and loose appropriation of the term 'film noir' for the purposes of programming. We were interested in the extent to which the fans as consumers of the festival event endorsed and invested in the rhetoric of noir as a fluid discursive category, or whether there were potential areas of contestation around the appropriate use of the term. We set out to explore the 'idea' of noir adopted by Noir City, with a view to ascertaining whether it is an elastic and mutable construct. How do fans negotiate their expectations of noir with the reality of the event? Are they more inclined to accept at face value films that have previously been excluded from the so-called noir canon[3] but now find their way onto a Noir City programme or perhaps even as the centre piece of the festival?

The focus group session was a very lively meeting with everyone wanting to get their recollections across of how they discovered Noir City, and how they viewed it as a film festival as well as more general discussion of film noir. Following the focus group, we asked all of the group if they would complete a questionnaire, which was also distributed to a wider audience group. One additional responder is a vintage dresser, Annabelle, Z., another is a historical noir author Kelli, S., and one was a first timer at Noir City 2015, (and the only male in the group) Lon, S. The questionnaire was designed to widen the field with other participants as the focus group was uniform in terms of gender composition. We anticipated that the questionnaire might complement and reinforce the focus group responses, but we were open to the possibility that there might be contradictions. We felt that the questionnaire would also give each member scope to express their own opinion without influence from other participants.

Muller light?

According to Eddie Muller (2015), the theme of the festival is more important than actually adhering to rigid definitions of noir. The films shown are often not really film noir, but this is not conceived as problematic for Muller because he perceives the 'event' to be more important as an opportunity for social interaction within a distinct fan community. Muller is himself a fan of noir and hugely influential in disseminating knowledge and awareness of noir in his numerous writings and his public appearances in support of the festival. He exemplifies the 'hybrid scholar fan' as described by Matt Hills (2002: 2). As a well-known authority on noir, having written a number of books on different aspects of the cycle including, *Dark City: The Lost World of Film Noir* (1998), *The Art of Noir: The Posters and Graphics From the Classic Era of Film Noir* (2002) and *Dark City Dames: The Wicked Women of Film Noir* (2002), he could be considered one of the most significant examples of the influential 'fan as producer' or 'poacher' (Jenkins, 1992); in this case his production is an annual event that is a social experience, a get-together for other fans, a champagne reception and a movie, and all could be considered to contribute greatly to the fan's continuing engagement with noir. In an interview with PulpCurry to promote his new book on *Gun Crazy* (Joseph H. Lewis, 1950), Muller suggests '(t)hanks to my previous books and my Noir City film festivals I've established something close to a brand.'[4]

One striking characteristic of the focus group discussion was the many references to Muller. All knew of him and his nickname as the 'Czar of Noir'. In fact it appears from their discussion that Noir City Film Festival is synonymous with Muller and he enjoys a strong rapport with the audience, acquiring something of a cult following in his own right. 'Eddie is loved by the crowd, he is very visible at all the screenings and knows many of the recurring audience members'[5]. This is a very personal view of an organizer that is unusual not only in the film festival world, but in business generally. Noir City is Muller's business, his livelihood. Muller's credibility with noir fans was enhanced when he established the Film Noir Foundation following the success of the festival, which in turn has given him access to rare films, as this fan observes: 'Eddie Muller is really well connected due to his love and passion for noir, Martin Scorsese lent him a film print from his personal collection.'[6] The film in question was Try and Get Me (Cy Endfield, 1950). Also known as The Sound of Fury, Martin Scorsese possessed the only print and it could only be shown once at the film festival. This film has since been restored by the Film Noir Foundation. Scorsese also lent another film City That Never Sleeps (John H. Auer, 1953) to Muller, which was shown at the second Noir City Film Festival Chicago in 2010 (Ferdinand, 2010). The perception that Muller has access to films that are otherwise difficult to obtain, positions him as a very powerful gatekeeper for other fans and makes it more likely that the programme of films will be well-received by the festival-goer.

In interviews Muller often rejects strict definitions of the noir canon, in favor of a much looser appropriation of the term. This is a pragmatic and commercially astute move ensuring the event's longevity and wider dissemination to other urban hubs in North America. In an interview with McVitie (2015) Muller says:

> There's no point in trying to pin down a definition of noir for the festival, what's to be gained? I prefer to have the elasticity and the ability to go tangentially to fit the theme. I'm not here at this festival to teach film noir, I'm putting together a festival that brings movies to people and they enjoy them. When I write about film noir then I am sticking to the rules, the film festival is different. If someone wants to learn about film noir in depth then they will read about it.

This is suggestive of the complex set of relationships posed between the different contexts for the consumption of noir; in wrestling the term from academia for the purpose of the festival, Muller is effectively reconfiguring the term for a potentially new audience to access in a manner that privileges the playful and inclusive. However, this creates a potential source of conflict over an idea of noir with other fan-participants, as alluded to by one respondent to the questionnaire distributed by the researchers: 'when Eddie picks an overarching theme for the whole festival, sometimes it shoe-horns in some movies that are not actually "Noir." I love almost all old movies, so that's not a problem per se, but I feel like this year I saw quite a few that were more melodrama than Noir.'[7] This fan is alluding to the kind of generic slippage that can take place in the design of the festival and while it is not a problem for this particular fan, (because they are happy just to be watching old movies), it could possibly be a problem for other fans attending the festival. Muller's presence and endorsement of the event therefore provides a coherence, which could be regarded as his 'authorial stamp' on the event, the 'brand' supplanting other potentially incoherent elements (the point at which a festival-goer might reject a film as not being 'truly noir'). While it is perhaps disingenuous and simplistic to conceive of the educational dimension to the fan's engagement with noir at the festival in this way (the notion that if they want to learn about noir then they can read a book), in refusing to pin down a definition of noir for the festival, Muller is insisting on the tangential importance of the festival 'theme' as the overarching framework pulling the programme of disparate films together. Designing a festival for people to enjoy as an experience, rather than an educational interface for the participant, is then a commercial imperative.

Many of the films screened at Noir City could also be described as 'cult films'. Anne Jerslev (1992/2008) argues for the centrality of a 'position of playful mastery' (90) as a key part of the experience of the cult event as opposed to the singularity of the film as cult, instigating a shift in discussions of the cult film that deliberately moves away from a preoccupation with the generic and intrinsic properties of the film in question, to focus on the experience of watching the film and the moment of reception, particularly the 'ironic' and knowing position adopted by the 'connoisseur' (Jerslev's preferred expression for the 'cinephile'). This shift is further developed by Matt Hills in which he argues against 'final and absolute classification of the media cult' (2002: 131). Hills maps out a position to challenge Umberto Eco's definition of the cult film which predates Jerslev's. However, what these

definitions have in common is an emphasis on 'play' as a factor in the relationship between the fan and the cult object/experience.

Paul Booth develops this idea still further in his discussion of a 'philosophy of playfulness' (2015: 7), which he applies to the leisure practice of board games. Arguably this playful mode can be extended to the festival experience in the sense that the fan is permitted to revel in a subversive world of 'mean streets' where men are played for 'saps' by dames with no moral compass other than that dictated by money. Rather than manifesting as overt role play in relation to these characters, the Noir City fan invests in a broader appropriation of noir 'style' often achieved through clothing to reclaim 'the denigrated, ignored, despised' (Hills, 2002: xii), adopting an attitude of oppositionality in relation to mainstream film culture. The preoccupation with style noted earlier, could be considered the manifestation of an emotional desire to identify with the oppositional: in the sense that 'style' can also be understood to refer to an 'attitude' as well as an aesthetic. Fans of noir are distinct from fans of sci-fi (as discussed by for example Jenkins 1995; Bacon-Smith 1999; Booth & Kelly 2013) or horror (see for example, Williamson 2005 on vampires and fandom, Welch Everman 1993 on cult horror, or Morgat 2013 on female fans of horror) but so far scholarship has focused on individual noir films, such as Jerslev's (2008) work on the noir classic *The Big Sleep*. As Hills points out, it is commonplace to discuss fandom in relation to specific cultural manifestations such as Elvis fans, or Trekkies (ibid.: xiv). To examine the practice of fandom within the context of an annual event, is less typical.

A striking characteristic of the fan's engagement with the festival, as evidenced by the focus group discussion and individual responses to the questionnaire, is a pronounced nostalgic longing for the retro-styling and kitsch moments that some of the programmed films afforded, which can even extend to sourcing an outfit that is appropriate for the year of release. This practice, although far from widespread, is suggestive of the desire for an authentic experience – one in which the fan can recreate the historical moment when a film was first released, to experience the immediacy of the moment. There is also longing for a sense of community cohesion afforded by the festival that augments and consolidates identity formation and self-actualization. This led us to Svetlana Boym's (2001) work on the various manifestations of the nostalgic, and their significance, in which she argues that:

> Invented tradition does not mean a creation ex nihilo or a pure act of social constructivism; rather, it builds on the sense of loss of community and cohesion and offers a comforting collective script for individual longing (42).

This is relevant to Noir City in the sense that noir is essentially an 'invented tradition' produced at a particular historical moment (post-war Europe) that has become enshrined through scholarship (see for example, Kaplan, 1980; Krutnik, 1991). The festival celebrates that tradition and offers the fan opportunities to build a sense of community cohesion through attendance at a screening or at post-screening discussions or party. Participation is

constructed around a shared passion for a cinematic past which, in this instance, is facilitated by a loose appropriation of noir generic constraints and boundaries and this cinematic past is often conceived by the fan in nostalgic terms. From a critical standpoint (that is, one which can be located within academia) reservations have been expressed about this type of reflective nostalgia; pejoratively regarded as a process which encourages the cinephile to wallow in a guilty pleasure. James Naremore, for example, alludes to this in the concluding remarks to his introduction to the history of the idea of noir:

> Obviously, a concept that was generated ex post facto has become part of a worldwide mass memory: a dream image of a bygone glamour, it represses as much history as it recalls, usually in the service of cinephilia and commodification. (Naremore, 1998: 39)

Boym goes on to develop the idea that nostalgia is manifest in 'certain social poetics', citing the work of anthropologist and social commentator Michael Herzfeld (2005) and his idea of 'cultural intimacy' in which the collective is complicit in practices producing 'rueful self-recognition'. Herzefeld's conceptual framework resembles Jerslev's cult viewing practices: specifically the joyful anticipation and recognition of well-known scenes and lines in a playful manner which she demonstrates through analysis of *The Big Sleep* screening. Not only are members of the audience participating in an event imbued with a sense of occasion, 'a must-attend event on the San Francisco winter calendar[8]', they are investing in noir as a discursive category that resonates as a historical moment in American film, or as one fan describes it: 'another level of history, without sentimentality.'[9] In this instance, the fan acknowledges the dark themes and subject matter as key attributes that resonate because they offer a subversive portrayal of a society that appears inauthentic in other film genres. Although they do not necessarily frame their understanding of the significance of the sub-genre in the terms routinely used by the scholar-critic or fan-academic positioned within an academic environment, they are nevertheless aware that the sub-genre represents an oppositional moment in American cinema that is worth preserving and celebrating.

Death in the fog[10]

> The gritty, mean streets of New York and San Francisco commemorate ethereal characters of never-never land … to a plaque at the juncture of Burritt Alley and Stockton Street in San Francisco that reads "On approximately this spot Miles Archer, partner of Sam Spade, was done in by Brigid O'Shaughnessy." (Saler, 2012: 4)

Saler's introduction to the concept of the imaginary world encompasses a brief but telling reference to San Francisco and a canonical noir text: the commemorative space of the

imagination (that of Dashiell Hammett's) that has spilled over into a cultural footprint that now forms one of the tourist attractions of the city, a place marked as the scene of a crime (the shooting of a man by a beautiful and ruthless woman) that is entirely fictional. Hammett's place at the centre of this tradition would of course be cemented by the publication of The Maltese Falcon in 1929 and further reinforced with John Huston's film adaptation in 1941. When we posed the question in the introduction: 'how do they 'sojourn', as Saler (3) describes it, in imaginary worlds?', this example of an actual physical location appropriated for the purposes of crime fiction appeared to confirm the potential for slippage between 'reel' and 'real' cultural geography: if the fan seeks out noir spaces in San Francisco then they will find them. As Stijn Reijnders notes in his study of media tourism and the Dracula tourist in particular, 'collective memory' is consolidated through the experience of actual locations that are marked out as special through association with cultural productions (films, television programs, novels) 'to serve as a symbolic anchor for society's collective imagination' (2011: 234). Certainly, beyond the generic 'urban space' San Francisco affords a number of noir landmarks such as the Burritt Alley/Stockton Street intersection for the fan to seek out: the pleasure derived from such an experience is one in which the mental image of gumshoe Sam Spade stalking the streets of San Francisco is a conduit for their own personal experience that satisfies 'an emotional desire for a contemporary symbiosis of both worlds' (Reijnders, 2011: 231).

San Francisco hosts many film festivals throughout the year, including the popular Indiefest and the Mostly British (both held annually in February), OceanFest and Asian American Film in March. Noir City has grown since its inception into one of the most important film festivals in a city, which is perceived to be a 'film festival town.'[11] For many of the participants, attending Noir City is a way of tapping into a source of the city's rich heritage: 'San Francisco is a cradle of noir, thanks to its history as the epicenter of the Gold Rush and a man named Dashiell Hammett. I'm thankful to the Noir City Film Festival for reminding us all of that fact every year.'[12] Another comment mentions that 'Dashiell Hammett, the noir writer still has a certain mystique in the city.'[13] This suggests fans feel they are intersecting with a sense of heritage when attending the festival and that heritage has a logical starting point (one identifying San Francisco 'as a cradle of noir', the city where a writer integral to the cycle lived and worked 'Dashiell Hammett'). Although the event itself has now been successfully franchised to take place in other cities across the US, participants in the San Francisco event often expressed a belief in San Francisco's uniqueness and appropriateness as the premier venue for this event.

Participants were aware of the history of the festival in some detail and they were often keen to provide the research team with deep background history. For example, the focus group were aware that in 2004 the owners of the Castro Theatre wanted to change the focus of the theatre programming to more family-oriented viewing, potentially changing the distinctive character of this premier independent venue that catered to film festivals, special events, art and independent cinema, particularly gay cinema (Batey, 2004, Huston, 2010). The inclusiveness of San Francisco and this particular district within the city has been

acknowledged to have had a massive cultural impact, as Ralph Willett notes in his discussion of crime fiction and the hardboiled tradition: 'The city's openness to experience, embracing groups of outsiders, enabled the Castro district in the 1970s to become the politically active centre of the gay community in the USA' (Willett, 1996: 38). It could be argued that the debate around this film festival and the venue is one that is about the identity of this particular area; preserving the festival becomes about protecting a unique area from changes that might be construed as eroding the liberal ideals of the city. This level of knowledge, dating back to only the second year of the film festival, demonstrates a level of commitment on the part of the participants to the film festival from the beginning and an interest in not just the films being shown but in all associated aspects that could affect the festival itself. Comments on the Castro theatre show the importance of this venue to the festival, now back in its original 'home' after a two year absence from the Castro in 2005 and 2006: 'the Castro theatre, where the festival is held, is beautiful, authentic, was built in the 1920s and adds an atmosphere that really makes the festival everything it needs to be to convey film noir.'[14] Identifying the Castro theatre as an integral part of the experience, one perceived to be an appropriate context for an authentic noir experience, is borne out in the response of other participants such as Stacy I. in answer to the question ('What is your favourite memory of the film festival?') 'The first time I went to the Castro for the film festival. I had seen the film fest at the Balboa way out in the outer Sunset. And fun as it was to see *Kiss Me Deadly* there, how much more of an impact it would have had being shown on the big screen at the Castro.'[15] Kelli S. adds, 'I've attended the Palace of Fine Arts; I've attended the Balboa (which I loved); however, the Castro is capable of bringing in far more money for the foundation and, as SF's last movie palace, is the perfect venue in space and ambiance for a classic film festival.'[16] This is the kind of comment which suggests an appreciation of the physical setting for the film festival, an appreciation that understands the distinctive urbanism of San Francisco and believes that distinctiveness to be conferred on the event in a tangible way. Participation is also about preservation for these fans: not just preservation of individual films, but preservation of a San Francisco landmark and way of life. Muller confirms this:

> But in San Francisco, forget it. People still believe in going out for a night on the town. They still believe in going to the movies, like it's a special thing. They really appreciate how great the Castro Theatre is, and how … when it goes, that's it. The game is over when the Castro Theatre stops showing films. That doesn't mean my game is over, but in large measure, the whole idea of a movie palace and watching a movie with a big audience [would be over]. (Lisick, 2015 [online])

The Castro Theatre is a registered San Francisco landmark and the oldest single screen theatre in San Francisco; in addition to being one of the oldest in the country. It was built in 1922 (Castro Theatre, 2013). This is a venue as far removed from the multiplex environment

as could possibly be imagined (for a discussion of the general differences in viewing experiences see Aveyard and Moran, 2011 & 2013), and there is no doubt that this is one of the draws for the festival participant. Confirming the appeal of the venue are other responses which explicitly reference the Castro as a locus of nostalgic longing: 'We get to travel back in time to see our favorite city in one of the last grand movie palaces in San Francisco'[17]. Conflating a sense of place with a historical moment is evident in another participant's enthusiasm: 'The Film Noir Fest ties together patrons of the Art Deco Society, vintage lovers, film enthusiasts and just lovers of the unique. Whenever I tell people about it they are delighted, and always want to go if they haven't already. They say 'I love old movies!'[18] The Castro then, affords an 'authentic' movie theatre environment within which to stage a shared viewing experience with an educated and nostalgic audience.

Festival opening nights are much anticipated events and set the tone for the films to follow. The research lead attended three opening nights of Noir City San Francisco (2013, 2015 & 2016), and had the opportunity to observe the excitement, fun and enjoyment the festival creates, and the utopian feel of the atmosphere created by the communal cinema audience. The champagne reception (figs. 6 & 7) provides an opportunity for people to mingle, and regular attendees greet each other warmly in the foyer, there is a tangible buzz prior to the first film screening. This is followed by clapping and cheering when the movie starts and when the cast names appear on the screen, much as Jerslev (2008:88-89) describes the experience of watching *The Big Sleep* at a major art cinema in Copenhagen in 1979. When the actors come on screen for the first time there is an audible response from the audience, suggesting pleasurable recognition. The clapping and cheering at the end of the movie suggests the screening has fulfilled audience expectations. All contribute to the utopian atmosphere created by the cinema audience as noted by Aveyard and Moran (2011). As McCulloch points out in his study of a screening of the cult film *The Room* '(a)udiences collectively but unconsciously establish etiquette and social norms' (2011: 2), to affect a transformative experience in which the earnest and dramatic becomes comedic; and as the Noir City opening night audience has already experienced Eddie Muller and Ms. Noir City working their way through some well-rehearsed comedy skits on stage before the screening, they could be considered 'primed' to respond with humor and appreciation. Both opening nights were sold out (Fig.1). The Castro Theatre holds 1400 people, and it was standing room only. 'The Castro theatre adds massively to the experience! It's an old historic movie palace, made for films like those shown in the Festival. The crowds at the Castro are always so into the event. And you can't beat the start of the show with some songs from the Mighty Wurlitzer!'[19]

The audience at play
One peculiarity of film noir is that the films typically feature nightmarish worlds with characters in distress and desperation, but these narratives attract a distinctly 'upbeat' audience. Specific comments on film noir from the questionnaire helped build a picture of

Fig. 1: A snapshot of the interior of the Castro Theatre during the opening night of the 2013 festival.

the key attractions of the sub-genre, 'people engage with the dialogue as it seems modern and clever,'[20] which relates to one of the key noir components - dialogue that is witty, uses double-entendres, is razor-sharp and caustic (for an overview of the significance of dialogue and the hardboiled tradition see Krutnik, 1991 and Naremore, 1998). Less detailed comments do nevertheless stress the entertainment value of the sub-genre: 'It's fun to escape into the noir world'[21] and 'it's a film genre I find very enjoyable'[22]. 'I love the storytelling of noir',[23] the main draw is 'the clothes, the dames, the guys.'[24] The most detailed response came from vintage dresser, Annabelle Z.: 'I love seeing the fashion and styling and hair, of course, but that could be said of any film from those decades. With film noir I appreciate everything from a particularly unique, well written story that keeps you in suspense, to some of the more over used dramatic elements that might almost be comedic at times. And of course, in really well done films, the beautiful chiaroscuro lighting and angularly composed shots.'[25] It is perhaps remarkable, however, that none of the participants expressed strong feelings of identification with characters on the edge, specifically female characters often positioned within the narrative to manipulate men. This did surprise the research team given the gender composition of the focus group, and the prominence of this characteristic (the femme fatale) in the noir universe. It seems there is a reluctance on the part of the fan to express solidarity with the figure of the femme fatale, perhaps in 'rueful self-recognition' that they know that in reality her refusal to adhere to the values of 'hearth and home' and a life of domestic drudgery solidifies her status as a subversive and oppositional figure. And although this would make her an even more obviously attractive figure for the fan, it is not inconceivable that the participants did not mention her because they would not want to be perceived as 'man-haters'. They might

agree with Muller's belief that noir is all about 'the stupid man lusting after the wrong woman!' (2015), but perhaps this remains a sub-conscious appeal. Nevertheless, the femme fatale remains a pivotal figure for the festival that is evident in the paratextual elements (Gray, 2010; Geraghty 2015), such as the accompanying Noir City poster in which the femme fatale takes centre stage. The festival paratexts seem to invite an appreciation for her unbridled lust for money and freedom. Additionally, the fan is encouraged to invest in the search for the next poster girl of 'Ms Noir City', and in this way, the poster could be considered the first script in the 'collective script' that permits 'individual longing.'
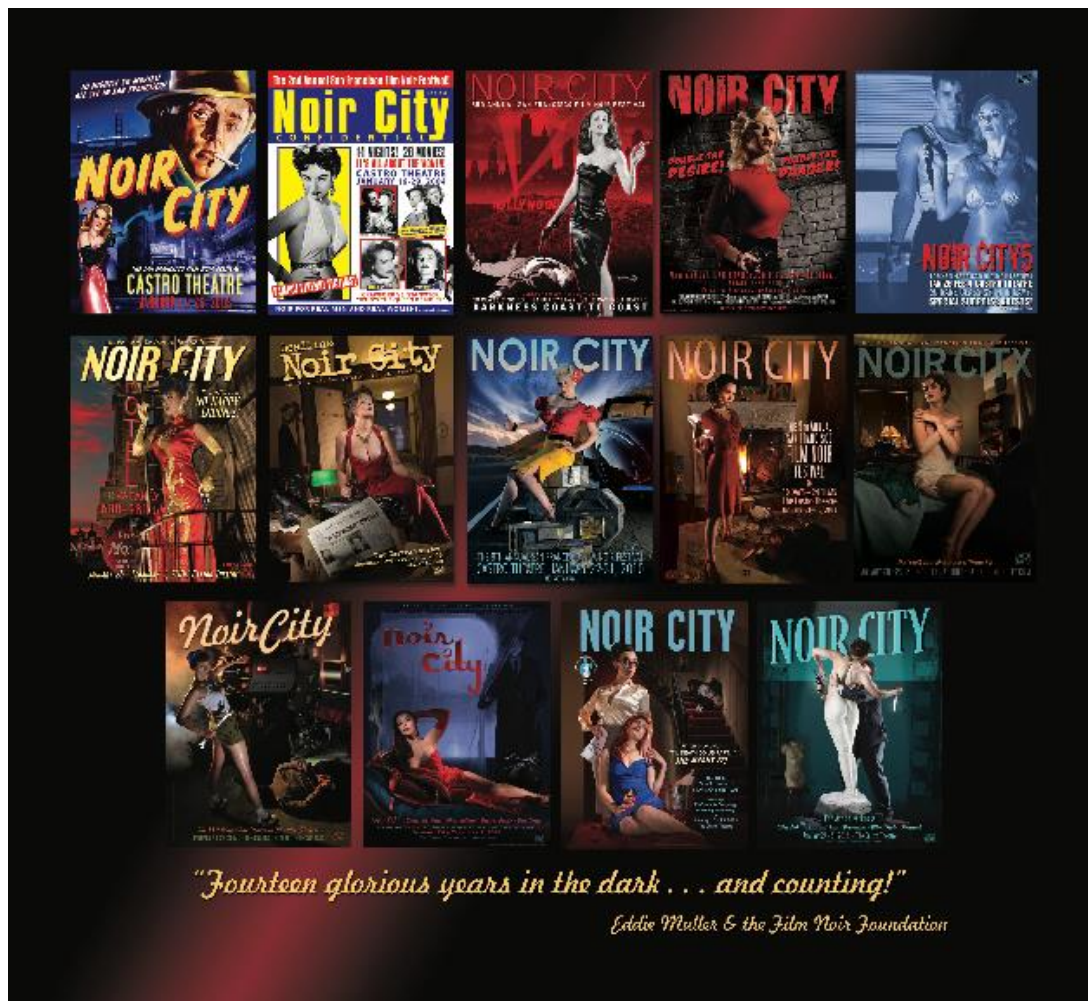

Fig. 2: Noir City poster art

The inaugural Noir City in 2003 foregrounded the strong association between San Francisco and film noir by screening two seminal examples of the cycle set in the city: *The Maltese Falcon* and *Out of the Past*. Whenever a film that has been set in San Francisco is shown at Noir City, a short film after the movie depicts 'then and now' shots of the locations used in the films. This is unique to the San Francisco Noir City and is another example of a paratext actively working to make sense of the experience for the fan. The San Francisco audience clap and cheer whenever a San Francisco location is shown, in many cases these are

remarkably recognisable to the location shots in the film. On the occasion that two of the locations were filmed in Los Angeles, not only did the crowd cheerfully boo the locations, but also they were completely unrecognisable from the film. 'The before and after reels which show clips of SF in the movies, and how they are today'[26] is a feature of the festival which makes Noir City particularly San Franciscan. As with the Stockton Street/Burritt Alley location discussed earlier, this practice provides an opportunity for the audience and the fan to experience cultural geography as a symbiotic transaction in which the 'imagined' and the 'imaginary' intersect to produce an emotional response.

Paul Booth argues that games become productive for participants when 'performed at specific sites of audience play' (ibid 4), and we would argue that the playful response of the audience on these occasions, including the collective acknowledgement of playful rivalry with LA, is another example of site-specific play in action. Booth argues that playfulness is manifest in 'playful behaviour' in which the 'boundaries of the media text' are pushed (48). In this way openness is a consequence of play, and boundaries including those of generic definitions, are tested and challenged. Following Booth's argument, we have collected evidence that the world of the imagination is more prevalent at these events than attempts to adhere to a rigid definition of noir; this is play as 'fanciful imagination' (48).

Our research suggests that the sensation of experience is varied: 'I love Opening Night when I meet my friends for a pre-movie libation, and then enter the Castro Theatre and feel all the energy. That never gets old year after year.'[27] The focus group discussion touched on the audience appeal of the event, 'people meet up annually at this festival, they recognise each other and discuss film noir, then they don't see each other for another year.'[28] The group suggested that the festival offered a community spirit based on a shared interest in noir with participants 'seeking out a community.'[29] These comments convey a sense of the rapport and friendship that is generated by this shared love of film noir and the material reality of the imagined community coming face-to-face at the film festival (Iordanova, 2010:13). Further discussion with the focus group looked at festival extras, such as the guest appearances of famous actors: 'Eddie brings in actors from the films, there are not too many left alive now, Angie Dickinson came and talked as did Peggy Cummins, this adds a further emotional connection to the films and the festival.'[30] One respondent said, 'my favorite memory is Peggy Cummins getting 3 standing ovations in one night, we gave her something better than an Oscar.'[31] This suggests an experience that felt empowering and meaningful for the fan (and no doubt Peggy Cummins felt this too), an active celebration of a figure ignored by the Hollywood establishment.

Participant-observation from three opening nights at Noir City prior to the movie starting provided an insight into the collective mood: people were standing looking around trying to see fellow audience members from previous years (Figs. 6 & 7). It was very fraternal and felt like distant family members meeting up for a family reunion; it was lively and a palpable thrill of anticipation was in the air. Many of the audience were in vintage clothing, adding to the drama and spectacle of the event. Mark Duffett describes the significance of fans interacting with other fans as 'replacement communities that offer their

members a sense of belonging in an otherwise lonely world.' (2013: 243). Although Duffett cautions against oversimplification around the idea of fandom as community, as many fans will be members of multiple networks and online communities, the festival afforded an opportunity for face-to-face interaction in a social setting that was clearly very pleasurable for participants. And while we did not discern any 'religiosity' about the experience and interactions, as Duffett found in his own research, we did see an emotional investment in attending the event on a regular basis, so much so that it was easy to see how Eddie Muller has managed to make a living out of the event.

Fig. 3: Vintage dressers at Noir City

A further aspect of the audience at Noir City is the vintage dressers or cosplayers (Fig. 3) which presents perhaps the most obvious example of a 'philosophy of playfulness' in action. This is a philosophy cemented by the participation of festival organizer, 'Eddie dresses in 40's clothing all the time and encourages dress up at the festival.'[32]

Muller (2015) suggests that 'the dress up was tentative in the first years but it just grew and evolved naturally and now many come in vintage clothes.' The costume play is not so much in evidence at Los Angeles as it is in San Francisco, but for the party night in Los Angeles, many people dress up but they are not necessarily the ones that come for the films. The attendees enjoy the cosplay even if they don't dress up themselves. The cosplay was much more pronounced at the San Francisco event than the other festivals: in San Francisco every event can be regarded as an opportunity to 'dress up' which makes it a distinctive experience from other Noir Cities. 'A quirky dress up is San Francisco',[33] and

Fig. 4: Actors in vintage costume at LA Noir City

'younger people in attendance have no prior knowledge of the movies but like the dress up idea, it's an event to them'.[34] According to Muller the cosplay is encouraged because it can diversify the appeal of the films and the event beyond the middle-aged, cine-literate demographic: 'sexiness sells and Film Noir is sexy, in fact way sexier than what is available in film today. Youngsters will come to the cinema in dress up for the spectacle but they will get the films and come back' (Muller, 2015). A contrast was observed with Chicago Noir City, as no one was in vintage dress (as can be seen in Fig. 6). Also of note is a contrast with Noir City in LA where the visibility of actors in vintage costume was pronounced and suggested a professionalization of the performance and the experience that was not evident in San Francisco (Fig. 4).

However, some comments from the questionnaire appeared to distance themselves from the 'fannish subculture' (Lammerichs, 2011 [online]) of cosplay, as with this response from a vintage dresser Annabelle Z.: 'first of all I don't view it as dressing in 'costume'. Vintage clothing is a way of life for some of us and the Film Noir Fest is a great way to show off some of our best pieces. Many of us pay particular attention to the year of the film being shown, and try to match our outfit specifically to that time/decade. I always appreciate

seeing the same effort put forth in others, as it makes it feel like a real theatre-going experience and shows their appreciation for film genre.'[35] This insight into the world of

Fig. 5: Noir City Chicago opening night

the vintage dressers suggests that there is more than one category of cosplayer and that in some cases 'a way of life' is being augmented through dress codes. However, rather than vintage dressers using clothes as a 'catalyst for escaping the boundaries of self and acquiring multiple identities' (Peirson-Smith, 2014), as is the case in cosplay, within the imaginary world of noir, the practice is disconnected from the fantastical (but not fantasy as such) and specific characters which is the more common manifestation of the practice (Lammerichs, ibid.). Annabelle Z.'s comment about dress suggests a level of commitment that is not dissimilar to that evidenced by cosplayers, however, in arguing it is 'a way of life', she suggests it is possible for the fan of noir to adopt the practice of vintage as a 'norm' in order to reclaim the past for the banality of the everyday. This suggests a fully immersive experience that is not necessarily performative in accordance with Lammerichs' description of cosplay. Lammerichs' draws on Judith Butler's (1990) seminal work on gender in which she argues for a more fluid construction of notions of self and identity through 'practice' and behaviour, a reformulation that rejects essentialist notions of gender. In the context of the noir influenced vintage dresser such as Annabelle Z., the non-performativity of dressing in vintage might be further described as a practice that is not constituted as 'theatrical' and transient, but something that is personal and part of the everyday.

Conclusions

According to Wolf, world building depends very little on narrative (2012: 3). Certainly with noir fans it is the idea of noir that matters more than tangible plot developments. Our investigation into the fandom of Noir City has provided an insight into the connection between the imaginary and imagined geography that is constructed on-screen, and the variety of ways in which the fan uses the festival event as a gateway to engage with these

Fig. 6: Champagne reception, Noir City San Francisco

noir worlds. Fans feel involved and regularly participate, communicating their likes and dislikes. 'I think the nature of simply participating, plus reading up on the films and the genre, and discussing these subjects with friends makes me feel part of the community, although I'm by no means 'hardcore.' But the community is welcoming and accessible, rather than feeling closed off.'[36] The rejection of elitism and a reluctance to be seen as 'geeks' suggests that for these fans of noir participation in the event is the key thing, a social experience rather than an activity revolving solely around the pursuit of knowledge: an activity which could just as effectively be acquired through reading and domestic viewings. However, the opportunity for the fan to become part of an audience, and to share film consumption as a communal experience seems to be the main draw of the festival. Our research suggests that there are potentially two distinct but overlapping fan communities drawn to the festival; the event itself appeals both to wider consumers who like the social aspects of attending a festival but have only a minor or residual interest in film noir, and it clearly has a strong appeal for 'real' film noir fans, the kind of film buffs that could be described as 'cinephiles'. The refusal to adhere to strict definitions of noir in the

programming and design of the festival serves the purpose of appealing to a broad audience but with the additional proviso that there are additional 'elements' afforded by the festival to appeal to the connoisseur.   Matt Hills (2000) defines cult fandom as a symbolic,

Fig. 7: Champagne reception, Noir City San Francisco

emotional projection that can bring meaning to the fan's experience: 'It enriches (culture and heritage) due to its unique approach—I've met people who come from far away, domestic and international – It's exciting! We all share the same passion and interest collectively - so rare these days especially in the real world.'[37] Although Hills suggests that 'the isolation of the fan audience from a wider 'coalition' audience' (Hills, 2002: 13) potentially closes off the material to new fans and audiences, Noir City avoids this outcome in its broader dissemination strategy to roll the event out in an urban-based franchise beyond San Francisco. The fact that this dissemination has been remarkably successful suggests Muller is right when he says that:

> I really believe that not only are we preserving films, we are preserving the filmgoing experience. That's why people will come out to watch a 65-year old movie that they've never heard of. Because a thousand other people are coming out too… Then it must be OK. (Lisick, 2015 [online])

Far from being a 'fan-ghetto' (an expression used by Hills [12]), the event has contributed significantly to the on-going appeal of the sub-genre.
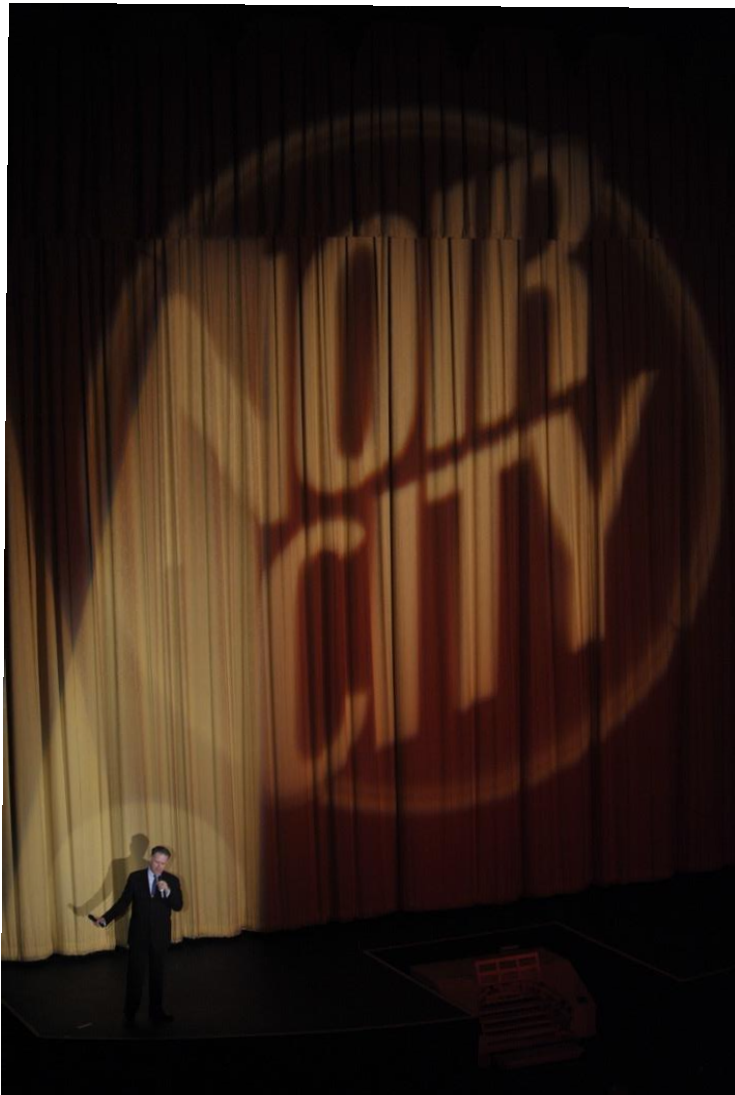
Fig. 8: Noir City stage and Eddie Muller, Czar of Noir/Wizard of Oz?

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Fig. 1 - Allen, D.M. (2013) Noir City 11 [Digital Print] Available via email from the Film Noir Foundation, 25th October 2015.

Fig. 2 - Noir City posters [Digital Print] Available via email from the Film Noir Foundation, November 19th 2015

Fig. 3 - Allen, D.M. (2013) Noir City 11 [Digital Print] Available via email from the Film Noir Foundation, 25th October 2015.

Fig. 4 - McVitie, A (2015) LA Noir City [Digital Print] Available from iPhone personal collection.

Fig. 5 - McVitie (2015) Chicago Noir City [Digital Print] Available from iPhone personal collection.

Fig. 6 - Hearne, D. (2015) Castro Theatre [Digital Print, Online] Available:

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Fig. 8 - Allen, D.M. (2013) Noir City 11 Eddie Muller on stage [Digital Print] Available via email from the Film Noir Foundation, 25th October 2015.

Notes:

[1] Noir City San Francisco Questionnaire 27-1–2015 Stacy.I

[2] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Annabelle Z.

[3] Nino Frank was the first film critic to use the term 'film noir' in 1946, followed by French film critics, Raymonde Borde and Etienne Chaumeton (also in 1946) when they were able to view these dark, stylish American films after the end of the Second World War. The canon of films described as noir relates to a series of black and white B movies made from 1941 to 1958 in the USA; this is the generally accepted classic period of noir from The Maltese Falcon (Huston, 1941) to Touch of Evil (Welles, 1958).

[4] Pulpcurry [online] 'Interview: Eddie Muller, Film Noir Foundation' 4 November, 2015 http://www.pulpcurry.com/2015/11/interview-eddie-muller-film-noir-foundation/
Date accessed: 1 March, 2016

[5] Focus Group Noir City San Francisco 18-1-2015

[6] Focus Group Noir City San Francisco 18-1-2015

[7] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Annabelle Z.

[8] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Peggy W.

[9] Questionnaire Noir City San francisco 27-1-2015 Julie C.

[10] The title of the second chapter of Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1929), sets the scene for the discovery of Miles Archer's body at the intersection between Stockton Street and Burritt Alley. The Maltese Falcon (Huston, 1941) is generally accepted as the first film noir. Hardboiled novels became the film scripts for film noir, featuring tough guys, living on the margins of society, often alienated from full acceptance by a society ill at ease with the values he embodies. The hardboiled writers had their roots in pulp fiction and their protagonists lived out a narcissistic, defeatist code, described as small time, unredeemed and anti-heroic (Schrader, 1972:10).

[11] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Catherine M.

[12] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Kelli S.

[13] Focus Group Noir City San Francisco 18-1-2015

[14] Focus Group Noir City San Francisco 18-1-2015

[15] Noir City San Francisco Questionnaire 27-1–2015 Stacy I.

[16] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Kelli S.

[17] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Stacy.I

[18] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Annabelle Z.

[19] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Peggy, W.

[20] Focus Group Noir City San Francisco 18-1-2015

[21] Focus Group Noir City San Francisco 18-1-2015

[22] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Peggy W.

[23] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Stacy I.

[24] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Jeanne B.

[25] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Annabelle Z.

[26] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Annabelle Z.

[27] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Peggy W.

[28] Focus Group Noir City San Francisco 18-1-2015

[29] Focus Group Noir City San Francisco 18-1-2015

[30] Focus Group Noir City San Francisco 18-1-2015

[31] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Lynn C.

[32] Focus Group Noir City San Francisco 18-1-2015

[33] Focus Group Noir City San Francisco 18-1-2015

[34] Focus Group Noir City San Francisco 18-1-2015

[35] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Annabelle Z.

[36] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Peggy S.

[37] Questionnaire Noir City San Francisco 27-1-2015 Jeanne B.