

Narratives of Negativity: Contesting Neoliberalism in Noir Fiction

Dr. Kopal

School of Undergraduate Studies, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University, Delhi, India

ORCID: 0000-0002-3334-5318

This research was supported by the AUD MRPG grant for the project
Contemporary Crime Fiction from the Global South: Crimes of the Neoliberal Capital

Abstract: This paper examines how noir fiction provides a distinctive lens for analysing neoliberalism by foregrounding the affective dimensions of life under late capitalism. While crime fiction has long interrogated the tensions between legality, justice, and social order, noir's sustained commitment to negativity—its moods of dread, paralysis, cynicism, and obstructed agency—renders it uniquely attuned to the lived contradictions of neoliberal restructuring. The paper first surveys key scholarly interventions that interpret crime fiction as a critique of global capitalism, drawing on Andrew Pepper's account of crime fiction as a genre capable of exposing the hidden violence of capital; Misha Kokotovic's formulation of "neoliberal noir" in post war Central America, where cynical aesthetics dismantle the fantasy of the sovereign neoliberal individual; and Matthew Christensen's analysis of crime genres as contemporary sites for exploring crises of sovereignty and social obligation under neoliberal governance. Together, these readings demonstrate how crime fiction maps shifting formations of power, precocity and dispossession. The second part turns to affect theory to extend this critique by considering how neoliberalism is sensed, inhabited, and emotionally managed. Through Lauren Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, the paper situates neoliberalism as an affective regime that attaches subjects to fantasies of the "good life" even as material conditions render those fantasies unattainable. Additional insights from Sianne Ngai highlight how negative affects like paranoia, stuckness, anxiety, and other "ugly feelings", reveal the obstructed agency and suspended action characteristic of neoliberal subjectivity. Bringing these strands together, the final section argues that noir fiction operates as a privileged site of affective critique. Noir's atmospheric negativity does not merely accompany its plots; it becomes a mode of knowledge that makes visible the emotional and ideological pressures structuring contemporary life. The paper contends that noir's refusal of optimism, closure, or sovereign agency exposes the affective costs of neoliberal rationality and offers a counter-sensorium through which readers can apprehend the contradictions of late capitalism. By joining ideological and affective analysis, the paper proposes a framework for understanding noir as a form that renders neoliberalism not only narratively legible but viscerally felt.

Key words: Noir fiction; neoliberalism; affect theory; cruel optimism; negative affect; crime fiction; neoliberal subjectivity; obstructed agency; precocity; genre critique

Introduction

Fiction responds to the times it is written in, crime fiction even more so. Being the most prolific genre in contemporary times, it has a wide and ready readership that eagerly laps up each new title. Far beyond entertainment, crime fiction has become a

cultural record of the fears, desires, and contradictions of contemporary life. As a genre it deals with questions of law and order, justice and its failure, legality and criminality – all conditions primarily linked to survival, approval existence. These conditions are urgent to not just the wellbeing but often to the being itself. Crime fiction becomes a container to manage narratives and feelings around safety and fear. Within the larger genre of crime fiction, it is the sub-genre of noir crime fiction that is specifically attuned to free ranging negative emotions without easily giving in to the pressure for neat resolutions and hence, noir becomes a barometer to measure the fears and anxieties around what people think can go wrong with our social existence.

What often goes wrong in the narratives of crime fiction is moral and affective breaking down in the form of staging of corruption, greed, distrust, betrayal. Under neoliberalism, these familiar moral failures are no longer individual, isolated symptoms but structural-economic demands of survival. In the simplest terms, by neoliberal capitalism we understand a world with increased privatisation, deregulation of economy, increasing withdrawal of state and community, individualisation of responsibility and economic logic organising all domains of life to an extent never seen before. Crime fiction, then, can be read as registering how neoliberal restructuring turns social breakdown into ordinary life. Crime fiction has long shown us that legality does not guarantee justice. In the neoliberal era, this familiar tension mutates: the state retreats, market logic dictates care, and individuals are told to survive as entrepreneurs of the self. Noir offers a stage where this merger can be confronted. It becomes a form through which the everyday disquiet of neoliberal life is rendered palpable.

The aim of this paper is to trace how crime fiction, particularly noir, has been read as a critique of neoliberalism and to explore how affect theory deepens this critique. Rather than treating noir merely as a reflection of social disorder, the discussion foregrounds how the genre's moods, atmospheres, and emotional textures register the lived contradictions of neoliberal rationality. In doing so, it situates noir as a privileged site for examining how capitalism is felt, how power, dispossession, and survival take affective form in narrative.

Drawing on recent developments in affect theory across the humanities, it brings together scholarship that links neoliberalism, emotion, and literary form. By mapping this intersection, the paper clarifies how affect theory extends existing readings of crime fiction's political critique, revealing noir's negativity as a form of affective resistance.

The paper is broadly structured in three parts. It first surveys crime fiction's thematic and formal critique of neoliberal capitalism. The second moves to affect theory's broader critique of neoliberalism as an affective regime. The final section brings these threads together, reading noir's characteristic negativity as both an aesthetic and

political response that unsettles neoliberal narratives of optimism, self-making, and control.

This is not an exhaustive review of crime fiction scholarship, nor a comprehensive account of noir's history. Rather, it focuses on a cluster of theoretical readings across ideology critique and affect theory that offer the sharpest insights into how crime fiction, particularly noir, mediates the lived contradictions of neoliberal life. In doing so, it gestures towards a critical method that joins affective and ideological analysis to better understand how crime fiction texts register collective structures of feeling under late capitalism.

Crime Fiction's Thematic and Narrative Critique of Neoliberalism

This section will introduce three sharp ways in which scholars have analysed the relationship between crime fiction and neoliberal capitalism. It begins with the following of general but foundational critique of the global capitalism through the genre of crime fiction by Andrew Pepper in his chapter, "Crime Fiction and Global Capital" where he expands upon Marxist thinker and geographer David Harvey's comparison of crime and capitalism. Harvey has argued that both crime and capitalist enterprises are activities based on dispossession and appropriation of someone else's wealth. It is easy to understand how crime appropriates another's wealth by dispossessing them but he believes there are "grounds to believe that an economy based on dispossession is at the heart of what capital is foundationally about". That business is often understood as nonviolent civilised mode of exchange but the truth is the violence involved is thinly veiled. Pepper argues that crime fiction is uniquely placed to illuminate the hidden violence of capitalism that other genres of fiction and modes of representation are unable to capture. It does this in two ways: the first is by marking the accumulative tendency of capital in terms of criminality. This means the extra-legal activities like corruption, usury, predation, coercion and violent means in business are exposed as necessary but hidden part of all businesses and crime fiction exposes this interpenetration of crime and capital.

Secondly, crime fiction configures the criminal activities as "extension of capital production and the everyday activities of commercial exchange"(Pepper 354), that is, the criminal cartels, mafia organisations and violent gangs are shown as actually financial business enterprises run on regular business models. Furthering the same line of argumentation, Pepper shows how the contemporary global turn in crime fiction interrogates the attempts of global capital to solve the over accumulation of capital by shifting to colonies or neo-colonies through colonial practices of theft and dispossession.

Another key intervention comes from the critic Misha Kokotovic who coined the term "neoliberal noir" to mark the phenomenon of the boom in narratives that she noticed since the 1990s which used the elements of detective or crime fiction to criticise the

effects of neoliberal capitalism in Latin American societies (Kokotovic 15). She finds that the post war Central American noir narratives do not share with rest of Latin America's belief in utopian values of the revolutionary Left and are instead driven by aesthetics of cynicism. Kokotovic reads these cynical aesthetics not as apolitical withdrawal, but as a different mode of critique, one that refuses both revolutionary certainty and neoliberal accommodation. This reading is an important intervention that opens the way to understand political criticism beyond left revolutionary or Marxist traditions and expands the scope of understanding the complexity of the response that crime fiction offered. She identifies the locus of this critique to be "the foundational figure of the neoliberal theory: the sovereign individual...In these works the freedom of the individual is severely constrained by the violence and decay of the nations still ruled by corrupt elites, in which it is virtually impossible even to know what is going on, much less to freely act on such knowledge" (Kokotovic 19). This focus on the sovereign individual - a figure imagined in neoliberal theory as self-regulating, rational and free - is particularly significant because it exposes a central contradiction of neoliberal ideology: the promise of autonomy within a system that ensures disempowerment. The protagonists in these works are not free agents but are disoriented, immobilised, and unable to act meaningfully. Kokotovic's insight reframes noir not just as an aesthetic of cynicism, but as a space where the fantasy of neoliberal selfhood is actively dismantled. That this critique emerges even in the absence of utopian political visions is precisely what makes it powerful.

The third important critique of neoliberalism understood through crime fiction is put forward by Matthew Christensen who identifies crime fiction/films as the dominant and primary form through which effects of neoliberalism are responded to unlike earlier dominant genres of bildungsroman and literary realism. Similar to Kokotovic, he reads sovereignty as a core function attacked by neoliberalism and positions crime fiction/film genres to be the sites where crises of sovereignty, selfhood and collective obligation under attack by neoliberal governance are explored. He expands on this by noting that two formations that have come under most pressure by neoliberal rationalities are the sovereignties of the individual political subject as well as the nation state; and it is these two that genres of crime fiction extensively deals with (Christensen 106). The social and epistemological crises wrought by neoliberal structural adjustments of governance weakening safety net and support extended by welfare governments fosters an environment where everyone looks out for themselves, their individual self-interest and there is often a paranoid feeling that no one can be trusted. Crime genres traditionally relied on sovereign bodies of the individual political subject and the nation state. He argues that African film makers and writers in their attempts to resist neoliberal formations transform the aesthetics of the crime genres. The genres had the potential for ideological conservatism in its clean temporal progression from crime to investigation to identification to punishment ending in socially sanctioned closure. In Christensen's analysis of the African crime fiction, the

new detective figures have the hard boiled individualism of the traditional detectives sans their internal moral code and ethical responsibility. These novels show the impossibility of affirming the social ties by the antisocial detective by failing to give them any transformation till the end of the novels. This bleakness though is not apolitical. It presents a world in which collective struggles have collapsed and neoliberalism rules through atomised existences. The genre by refuting the comfort of moralist protagonist or closure turns this condition into critique.

Read together, these perspectives do not form a single tradition but a shared critical impulse to read crime fiction as a cultural form that exposes neoliberalism's fractures: ethical, systemic, and emotional. This constellation provides the groundwork for my next section, which turns to affect theory to explore how lived reality is felt under neoliberalism.

Affect theory and the Critique of Neoliberalism

Affect in simplest terms is often understood interchangeably with emotions or feelings. It is often beyond linguistics and is expressed bodily through non-verbal gestures and symptoms. In its understanding that "power is a thing of senses" (Kathleen Stewart), affect theory breaks the mind-body binary and makes a strong bridge between the two. Power then is no longer something operationalized through reason, thought and language only but also through emotions and feelings. Affect theory opens up body as another domain where workings of ideology can be observed and read. Within the Marxist tradition such an approach "seeks to capture the psychosocial effects of cultural pressure on the individual, manifested in how citizens are interpellated into affective regimes (Louis Althusser) or caught up in emergent structures of feeling (Raymond Williams)" (Ahern 104).

Affect theory, across its many branches, does not simply ask what neoliberalism is, but how it feels and what those feelings reveal about the limits of critique, agency, and social imagination. Several affect theorists have turned their attention to the formations and consequences of neoliberal capitalism, offering conceptual tools to understand the emotional texture of late capitalist life. Among the most influential are Lauren Berlant, Brian Massumi, Sara Ahmed, John Protevi, Ann Cvetkovich, and Kathleen Stewart. The main theorist whose work this paper wants to engage with is Lauren Berlant who in her highly influential formulation of cruel optimism.

Berlant formulates affect especially seen in cultural and aesthetic texts as exemplifying what she calls the historical sensorium. The historical sensorium is the entire perceptual apparatus that is constantly shifting and is collectively a cultural, historical and political construct. In other words, our feelings and emotions are shaped by social and historical context we live in. Cultural texts help us see the ways in which society teaches us to feel and respond. Emotional response to and in the texts are like windows to see patterns, expectations and culturally coded ways of being.

The post-world war optimism for democratic and mass access to good life which included liberal-capitalist promise of job security, upward mobility, abundance of choice and opportunities, fair access for the meritorious, slowly started showing a gap between the attachment to these ideals of good life and the increasing impossibility of achieving these. To maintain the optimism towards the supposedly imminent structural transformations which refused to be realised, the hope started to acquire a fantasmic quality. Berlant's work is to seek out the historical sensorium that develops to reflect this fantasmic part of optimism. She looks at this hope and optimism as an attachment form to the object of good life. She finds Freud's observation that "people never willingly abandon a libidinal position" to be relevant to this discussion. Her larger point is that neoliberal discourse requires "cruel optimism", a relation of attachment to an object that is significantly problematic to one's wellbeing. Hence, she theorises cruel optimism to be an effective response of people to adjust to neoliberal restructuring of society where they desire the very thing that is an obstacle to their flourishing. In other words, they form an attachment with an object that is harmful to their well-being. The fantasy of good life is not supported by conditions of its existence.

Berlant's argument that the present is perceived, at first, affectively, is a very useful intervention in illuminating the relationship between ideology and affect and decisively puts affect as pre-ideology. She views the present moment not as an object but as a mediated affect. In other words, as something that is sensed. Since the experience of the present is to be made sense of and organised, this organisation or making sense of occurs from a negotiation between the personal and the public.

Noir fiction as a Site of Affective Critique

Noir fiction, more than any other branch of crime writing, translates social unease into feeling. Its narrative identity lies not in the mechanics of crime and solution but in the sustained mood of dread, paralysis, and moral corrosion. It is a format that carries the possibility of addressing the affective regime of capitalism and subverting it. Affect theory is able to provide unprecedented insights into noir fiction that capture something essential about the famously difficult to define genre. This quality of noir has been identified by Hatmaker and Breu in the excellent introduction to their edited volume on the subject, *Noir Affect*. They argue persuasively for identifying the noir genre through the use of "noir affect" in the text instead of surface level markers of plot-features. They define noir affect as a resolutely negative affective disposition found in the noir texts that centres on negative emotions/affects like "rage (including murderous rage), loss, sadness, shame, guilt, regret, anxiety, humiliation, resentment, resistance, and refusal" (Hatmaker and Breu, Introduction). They argue that the thing we call noir excels at staging the negative power of affect. The feelings of pessimism, melancholia, discontent or dread that pervade through the noir texts are constitutive of the identity of the genre. The noir mood is primarily a narrative affect that does not

just accompany the story but instead is at the heart of the story. Noir as a genre foregrounds affect instead of making it secondary to the plot or characters.

Breu and Hatmaker's argument that noir narratives work by inverting the affects of neoliberal narratives. Here, we must clarify what the term neoliberal narratives signifies. In their use, it would refer to narratives that support the good life fantasies projected by neoliberalism. This must be distinguished from narratives generated in response to actually existing life under neoliberalism. Mathew Christensen for instance referred to genres of neoliberalism as genres that responded to life under neoliberalism which include precarity, isolation, helplessness. This is different from neoliberal narratives referred to by Hatmaker and Breu who speak of propaganda narratives generated by neoliberalism. This clarification is necessary to avoid conflating responses to neoliberal life with the promotional narratives generated by neoliberalism itself.

Berlant has shown how under neoliberalism positive narratives of happy life keep the subject tied to the impossible object that is responsible for its misery. So then narratives of good life and noir narratives run counter to each other in their organising of affect on the sensorium. The attachment formed by the "good life" fantasies of the neoliberal optimism is geared to keep people aligned behind the neoliberal systems by keeping them complacent. The reorganisation of negative affect focused and heightened by the noir narrative, could potentially help in object detachment and hence, can have radical potential.

While charting the noir historicism in the introduction, Breu and Hatmaker delineate two different noir forms developing under neo-liberalism that they categorically distinguish between: the post-modern nostalgic neo-noir as opposed to the present-oriented, international, hybrid neo-liberal noir that actively and negatively responds to neo-liberalism. The distinction is important since it clarifies that noir is not intrinsically and necessarily radical or oppositional to the dominant forces. The neo-noir can have conservative function if it adopts noir only as a style with angular shadows, femme fatales, slick violence without activating political critique. The neo-liberal noir challenges the positive rhetoric of self-help, self-reinvention and self-maintenance that is central to contemporary neo-liberalism. These narratives highlight the precarity and disposability of workers as opposed to stories of success and affluence. So, noir has radical potential, but it's contingent on how affect is mobilised.

Another theorist whose work on negative emotions/feelings worth following is Seanne Ngai, in particular her book on aesthetics of negative emotions, *Ugly Feelings*. Drawing on Baruch Spinoza's description of emotions as that which can increase or decrease the power to act which in turn are central in Arendt's definition of a political being, emotions have an inherently directly political capacity. Ngai further writes

about the ambiguous agency of “ugly feelings”. Even though Ngai does not speak specifically of the noir narratives, she finds that negative affects in the texts are ways to mediate between the aesthetic and political in a non-trivial way. What is most useful for our purposes is her identifying and delving into negative effects that emerge from the situations of obstructed agency that can be read as politically meaningful. The situations of passivity then, conditions of political inaction, are not useful only in textual analysis but for her stand in as an allegory for “an autonomous or bourgeois art’s increasingly resigned and pessimistic understanding of its own relationship to political action”(Ngai 3). This shows why noir’s moments of waiting, futility, or passivity are not politically empty. They can embody the condition of obstructed agency itself.

Seanne Ngai’s elaboration on negative affects and politics is interesting and even though her primary focus is not on noir, some of her ideas are useful to consider. She points towards the use of the feeling of paranoia as an emotion in noir films(also fiction) as opposed to fear in a genre like classical tragedy. Paranoia is more diffused an emotion that is linked to the tone of the work instead of a more sudden and concentrated emotion linked to specific events in the plot. The affective ambient tone of noir is anti-cathartic and for Ngai, crucially linked to obstructed agency which makes the political potential of the work ambivalent. These feelings of confusion, disconcertedness, stuckness, of loss of control are what define the scope of negativity in the noir narratives. Ngai particularly focuses on the subset amongst these which she calls “ugly feelings”. These are the moments of stalled and suspended action, the moments of waiting. In film noir, a lot of these confusion is translated through the technique of subjective or first person camera and in fiction, one could easily argue, through first person narrative of noir fiction. Thus, by foregrounding moods of paranoia and stuckness, noir dramatises the very ambivalence Ngai identifies by making visible how blocked agency can itself be politically legible.

Conclusion

This paper has briefly presented two registers of critique of neoliberalism with a focus on noir fiction’s use of negativity as a powerful site of resistance. From Pepper’s emphasis on capitalism’s hidden violence to Kokotovic’s notion of ‘neoliberal noir’ and Christensen’s analysis of sovereignty in African texts, crime fiction has emerged as a privileged site for mapping the structural dislocations of neoliberalism. Affect theory, from Berlant’s cruel optimism to Ngai’s ugly feelings, reveals neoliberalism as not only an economic regime but an affective one by organising moods, attachments, and the very ways people sense and inhabit the present. One strand exposes the external structures of dispossession; the other reveals the internalized moods that keep subjects tethered.

This paper argues that noir is particularly suited to an affective mode of critique, because its very identity as a genre is defined less by plot mechanics than by mood,

tone, and atmosphere. It is especially equipped to expose the emotional regime of neoliberalism by transforming mood itself into a social knowledge. While other crime genres subordinate feeling to the resolution of plot, noir sustains negativity as its central force. Pervasive dread, paranoia, or melancholia are not just atmospheres but forms of knowledge about social existence under pressure. The noir mood becomes a way of registering how neoliberal life is experienced affectively, as disorientation, suspension, or attrition. In this sense, noir does not simply describe neoliberal conditions; it makes the reader inhabit their affective charge. By incorporating the nonrepresentational and bodily realms into the critique of neoliberal capitalism, affect theory enriches the traditional ideological critique, offering a fresh lens to view how pervasive power structures impact individuals. In this light, noir's distinctive negativity emerges not merely as aesthetic but as politically and affectively potent, intensifying the genre's critique of neoliberalism in ways that go beyond conventional analysis.

This opens a broader critical horizon. Scholarship has largely focused on noir's thematic critique of corruption or greed, but attending to its moods and ugly feelings may illuminate how neoliberalism organises not only institutions but also subjectivity. Such readings could extend across geographies and media, asking how noir's negativity travels, transforms, and unsettles. In this way, noir becomes more than a genre study by becoming a resource for understanding how affect itself resists the common sense of neoliberal life.

Works Cited

1. Ahern, Stephen (2024). 'Affect Theory and Literary Criticism'. *Emotion Review*, vol. 16, no. 2, Apr. pp. 96–106.
2. Allan, Janice M., et al., (2020) editors. *The Routledge Companion to Crime Fiction*. Routledge.
3. Christensen, Matthew J (2013). 'African Popular Crime Genres and the Genres of Neoliberalism'. *Social Text*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 103–21.
4. Hatmaker, Elizabeth, and Christopher Breu (2020), editors. *Noir Affect*. First edition, Fordham University Press.
5. Kokotovic, Misha. (2006). 'Neoliberal Noir: Contemporary Central American Crime Fiction as Social Criticism'. *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, vol. 24, no. 3, Mar. 2006, pp. 15–29.
6. Massumi, Brian (2015). *The Power at the End of the Economy*. Duke University Press.
7. Ngai, Sianne (2005). *Ugly Feelings*. Harvard University Press.