

# Crime Fiction Import/Export in European Publishing

## The Emergence of Euro Noir through the Process of Translation

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### Abstract

The term ‘Euro Noir’ has been recently proposed to account for the emergence of a shared, cosmopolitan *koinè* in the current production of crime fiction across Europe (Forshaw 2014, Hansen et al. 2018). While the characterization of the specific aesthetic and narrative features of this production is currently underway and constitutes one of the objectives of the DETECT project, the study of the role of translation in the circulation of crime fiction can contribute to better understand the emergence of such cosmopolitan form of expression. Inspired by the methodology proposed by Franco Moretti in his *Atlas of the European Novel* (1999), this article throws light on how both forms of translation – *extratranslation*, or the exporting of literary works into another language, and *intratranslation*, or the importing of foreign works into a given country by way of translation – are products of economic and cultural competition (Sapiro, 2008 and 2010). The research results are in line with both Moretti’s conclusions about the past concurrence for hegemony between the dominating poles of English and French publishing and Pascale Casanova’s work on the geopolitics of *The World Republic of Letters* (1999 and 2015).

**Keywords:** Crime Fiction, Euro Noir, Distant reading, Translation, Cultural transfers.

### **Introduction: Describing the corpus**

This article examines the processes of import/export of European crime fiction works on a pan-European scale, as a contribution to the DETECT project's research around the notion of 'Euro Noir', its origins and developments as a shared narrative and aesthetic *koinè* on the continental level. While the characterization of the specific features of contemporary European crime fiction is currently underway, the study of the pathways by which these works travel across the continent can contribute to better understand the role of translation in creating the conditions for the emergence of cosmopolitan forms of expression, such as that which has been recently labelled as 'Euro Noir' by critics and scholars such as Barry Forshaw (2014), Hansen, Peacock and Turnbull (2018), Amir, Migozzi and Levet (2020).

In the following, I present the results of an analysis of data collaboratively collected by the Limoges research team from the online catalogues of all European national libraries. The datasets includes metadata about the releases, the translations and awards relative to the works of a representative sample of contemporary European crime writers. The goal was to bring a new perspective on mass-scale phenomena such as the production, marketing and circulation of literary crime fiction in Europe during the last three decades, thus highlighting the rise of Euro Noir from a quantitative perspective.

The analysis of exports is based on metadata harvested through Zotero from the websites of all European national libraries, complemented, where necessary, with data available from the websites of European publishers. The sample includes data about the foreign European editions of 15 European crime writers. On the one hand, 10 French authors have been selected on the basis of a number of different criteria. In the first place, out of all the awards attributed between 1990 and 2018 by the main French crime fiction festivals, the authors who had received at least 6 awards were included in this selection: Fred Vargas, Olivier Truc, Hervé Le Corre, Dominique Manotti, Marcus Malte and Caryl Ferey. All of these writers, at the exception of Vargas, are known for producing critical narratives about contemporary societies and their dark side, and can thus be

affiliated to the French noir tradition. In the second place, this list was complemented by three internationally recognized authors of thriller novels, Pierre Lemaître, Michel Bussi and Franck Thilliez, who have also been the recipients of festival awards, plus one notorious best-selling writer, Maxime Chattam, who is poorly recognized by the legitimizing institutions of the “polar” scene. On the other hand, for comparative purposes, similar criteria have been used to select a sample of international writers who are widely recognized to be currently the most renowned crime authors of their respective country: Petros Markaris (creator of the Kostas Charitos series, Greece), Andrea Camilleri (creator of the Montalbano series, Italy), George Arion (creator of the Andrei Mladin series, Romania), Vilmos Kondor (author of the Budapest Noir trilogy, Hungary) and Jo Nesbø (creator of the Harry Hole series Norway). The harvest of metadata, which covered all the European editions of crime novels published by these 15 authors after 1990, was then sorted using Excel pivot tables and used to produce graphs (through Excel) and maps (through the Khartis free software).

A second, more coarse-grained source of metadata was used to provide additional information about the extranation of the 10 selected French writers. In this case, the results provided by the analysis of their performance in terms of foreign editions were compared with those of 20 more European authors (including the 5 non-French writers mentioned above) who have been widely translated into several European languages. The test sample was selected to reflect a broad spectrum of countries, so as to include authors from the same “artistic generations” – to quote the term used by Pierre Bourdieu in his reference book *The Rules of Art* (1996) – as the 10 French authors. For each of these writers, we collected the number of entries archived before December 31, 2016 on the European Library portal. This enabled us to compare, regardless of the author’s country of origin: 1) the number of entries retrieved for any single translated edition work European editions in translation, and 2) the number of European languages that each author was translated into. These two figures were used as basic quantitative indicators of a book’s as well as a writer’s cultural influence outside of their country of origin.

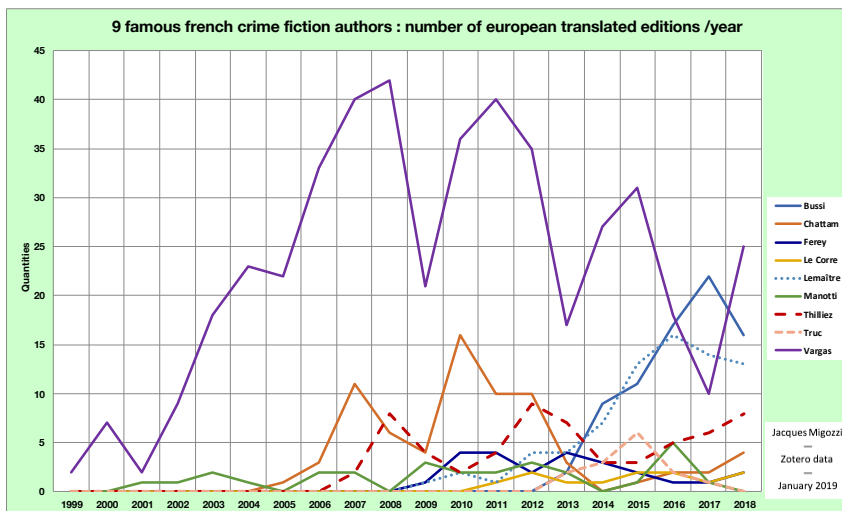
These observations about the import-export dynamics of literary crime fiction on a pan European scale have been complemented by

an acute focus on the intranslation of foreign crime fiction in France. For this purpose, we mined the post-1990 catalogues of 5 major French publishers of crime/noir and thriller fiction (Gallimard, Le Seuil, Rivages, Métaillié, Actes Sud), some of which have a special series dedicated to these genres (for instance, Gallimard's most iconic "Série Noire"). We also included the catalogues of three particularly active up-and-coming publishers (Le Mirolebo éditions, Agullo, Les Arènes).

### Exporting Crime Fiction Across Europe

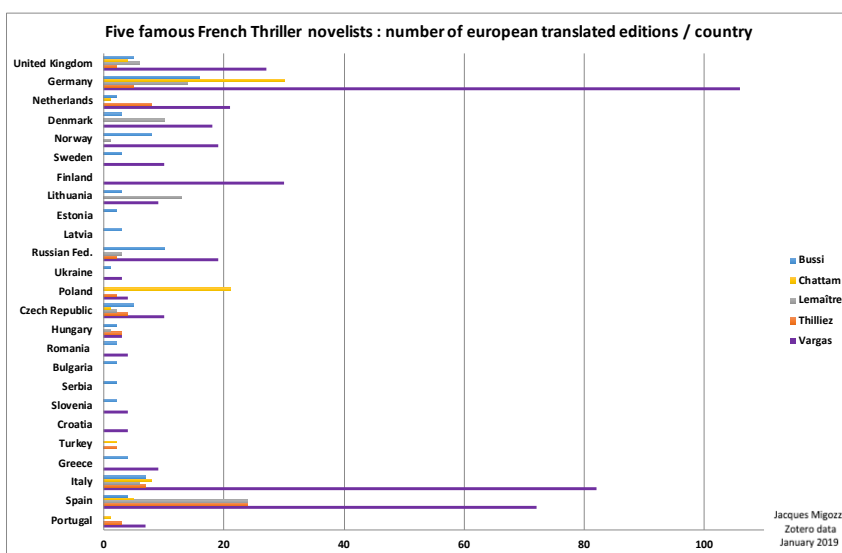
If we consider export figures for the translations of print crime fiction in Europe from 1990 to 2018, what conclusions can be drawn about the economic and cultural power relations that underpin cultural transfers in the contemporary European cultural sphere? Due to length constraints, this paper will offer only a few figures, and will allude to other graphs and maps available for consultation in the full digital portfolio hosted by the DETECT Atlas (see <https://www.detect-project.eu/portal/>, Tab "Atlas", Section Maps and Graphs, sub sections "Works" and "Authors").

First of all, if we focus on the case of French writers, the novelists who are associated with the noir tradition of social and political critique are characterized by relatively modest export figures, and, therefore, by a limited geographical reach. On the contrary, thriller authors, who are generally less politically engaged, tend to be more successful. This confirms the idea that, within the spectrum of crime fiction's subgenres, the thriller shows a higher potential for transnational translation on a pan-European level. This is clearly shown in the cumulative number of extratranslations into different European languages obtained over the past thirty years within the French sample: while for the main noir authors (Manotti, Ferey, Le Corre, Truc, Malte) the curve remains flat at a relatively low level, the export performance of the thriller authors is visibly more significant, with sharply ascending curves for authors of international best-sellers, such as Michel Bussi, Pierre Lemaître and, to a lesser degree, Franck Thilliez.

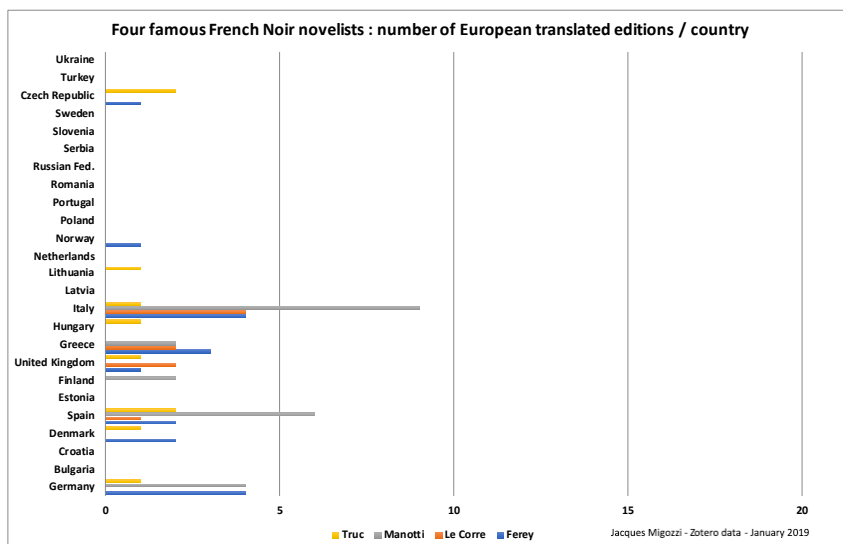


Graph 1. Nine famous French crime fiction authors; number of European translated editions per year (1999-2018)

A comparison between the two graphs produced to visualize the countries where noir and thriller authors, respectively, are published in translation also reveals that thriller novels are disseminated across a much wider area in Europe:



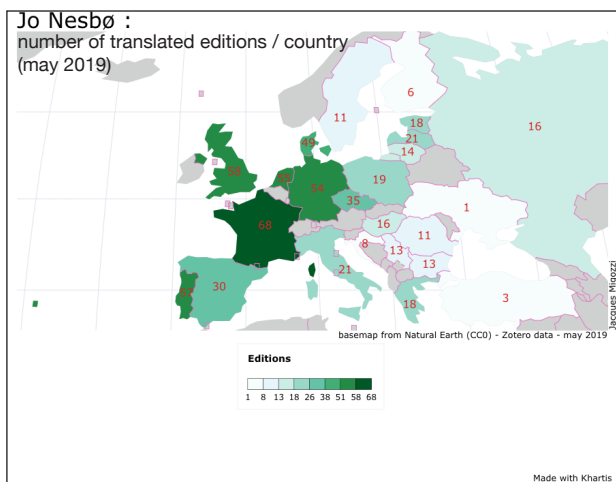
Graph 2. Five famous French thriller novelists: number of European translated editions/country



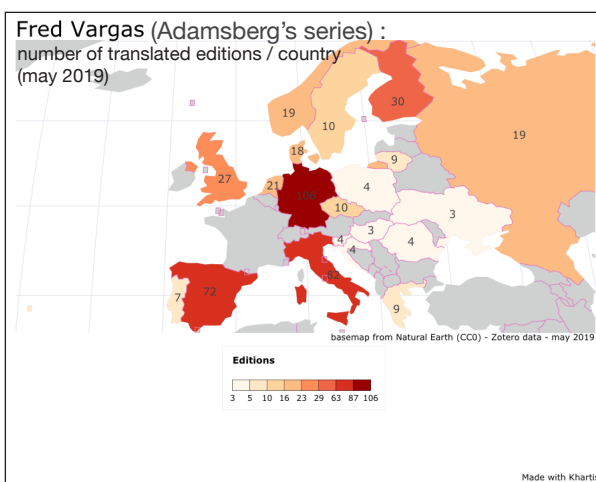
Graph 3. Four famous French noir novelists: number of European translated editions/country

This is particularly visible when the same metadata are used to generate maps on the authors’ popularity in translation: for instance, although her first polar novel was published in 1995, Dominique Manotti has a much narrower reach than Michel Bus-si, who only debuted in crime fiction in 2006 – and the same obvious evidence could be visually produced for both Franck Thilliez and Pierre Lemaître.

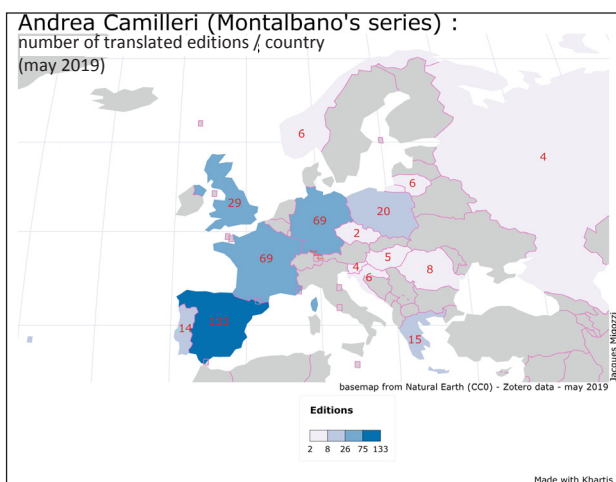
A second interesting insight emerges from a synoptic reading of the full digital portfolio that summarizes our investigation of the French crime fiction corpus: Fred Vargas stands out from the rest of the corpus, with 18 of her books translated in as many as 19 European countries: by the end of 2018, she had a total of 459 editions in translation across Europe. In addition, according to the European Library’s catalogues, she is the only French author in the shortlist of post-1990 European crime fiction writers who have been translated into over 15 European languages, or have over 400 entries outside of their country of origin due to publications in translation. If we map out the authors’ pan-European success, using color to mark territorial expansion and indicating the total number of editions in translation per country, Vargas appears to be part of the very exclusive category of pan-European crime fic-



Map 1. Fred Vargas's Adamsberg series: number of translated editions per European country by May 2019



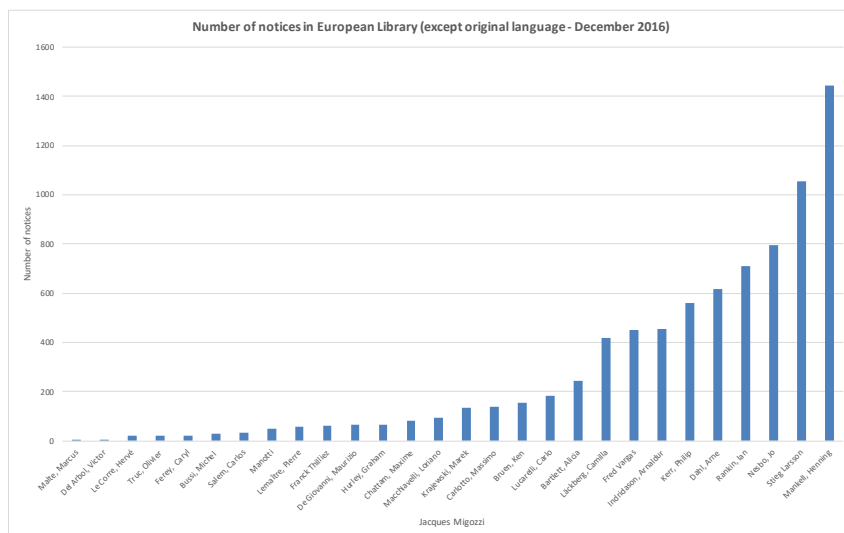
Map 2. Jo Nesbø: number of translated editions per European country by May 2019



Map 3. Camilleri's Montalbano series: number of translated editions per European country by May 2019

tion bestsellers, alongside with such literary superstars as Jo Nesbø and Andrea Camilleri:

If we now examine the results provided by our mining of metadata from the European Library's catalogues, another massive phenomenon appears clearly: the quantitative hegemony of Nordic and British writers among European crime novelists. The ranking of the most popular 9 authors, based on the number of languages they have been translated into, is as follows: Marek Krajewski, Fred Vargas, Arnaldur Indridason, Camilla Läckberg, Ian Rankin, Philip Kerr, Stieg Larsson, Henning Mankell, Jo Nesbø. The ranking based on the number of entries found in the same catalogues outside of the authors' countries of origin is almost similar, with only Arne Dahl replacing Krajewski.



Graph 4. Twenty-eight European crime fiction writers: number of translated editions referenced on the European Library’s catalogue

This graph reveals that the club of authors with over 400 entries stands out quite spectacularly from the rest of the selection: the 10th author on the list (Alicia Bartlett) has under 250 entries. What it shows is the existence of a compact group of pan European best-sellers, and the composition of this group is illuminating: 5 authors are from Nordic countries (Stieg Larsson, Arne Dahl, Joe Nesbø, Arnaldur Indridason, Camilla Läckberg), 2 from the UK (Philip Kerr, Ian Rankin), 1 from Italy (Andrea Camilleri), 1 from France (Fred Vargas). Nordic noir rules nowadays over the European literary crime genre, as it does on TV screens.

Comparing the number of European editions accumulated by the 15 writers of our core sample (10 French authors plus Camilleri, Nesbø, Kondor, Markaris, Arion) reveals another interesting fact: there is a huge gap, in terms of both the numbers of translated editions and the number of countries intranstrating foreign authors, between the major pan-European bestsellers, such as Nesbø, Vargas and Camilleri, and other writers who are nonetheless considered the most renowned ones in their own country. For instance, Markaris quantitative and geographic spectrum is much narrower than those of either Camilleri or Nesbø. The cases of Vilmos Kondor and George Arion are even more striking. As for Kondor, only the first opus of his Hungarian series, *Budapest Noir* (5 volumes), has been



translated in 7 countries (the Netherlands, France, Poland, Italy, Greece, the United Kingdom and the Czech Republic), while German and Finnish bookstores only hosted the translations of, respectively, two and four of the series' volumes. A similar situation is found in the case of Romanian author George Arion: of the 17 crime novels he had published in his country by 2018, only one had been translated into English in the UK and 3 into French by a small independent Belgian publisher. These observations confirm Pascale Casanova's thesis (2002) about the inequality of the symbolic exchange embedded within translation, as a cultural result of economic and geopolitical domination.

Despite some distortions due to the somewhat arbitrary acquisition strategies that might have been adopted of the different national institutions that share their data with the European Library, it appears difficult to challenge the trends revealed by these findings. I will now present a few additional conclusions to attempt to explain some of the factors that have impacted the exportability of European print crime fiction over the last 25 years.

First of all, although festival awards may definitely increase the popularity and symbolic capital achieved by a work of fiction and thus facilitate its extranation, their role should not be overstated. For instance, while most of the novels by Olivier Truc, Dominique Manotti, Hervé Lecorre and Pierre Lemaître that have been translated abroad had previously received awards from the main French crime fiction festivals, other authors like Maxime Chattam, Franck Thilliez and even Michel Bussi are widely translated without ever being acknowledged by the genre's legitimizing institutions. The only obvious example of an award's boosting effects in terms of extranation is provided by Pierre Lemaître, who received the 2013 Prix Goncourt for *Au Revoir là-haut*.

Outstanding library sales figures that bring a writer into the highly selective club of bestseller authors can undeniably have boosting effects in terms of extranation: this was the case with Michel Bussi's *Nymphéas noirs*, which, according to our informant Sophie Lajeunesse, Bussi's editor at Presses de la Cité, sold up to 800,000 copies. This was also the case with the takeoff of Fred Vargas' international career after the phenomenal success of *Pars vite et reviens tard* (2001): in France, Vargas went from an early print run of under 100,000 for *L'Homme à l'envers* (1999) to a run of 400,000 cop-

ies in just two years. A successful film or television adaptation can also pave the way to the extranlation of both the original book and the author's other works: this was the case with the 2013 French/South African adaptation of Caryl Ferey's 2008 novel *Zulu* (directed by Jérôme Salle with a high-profile international cast, including Orlando Bloom and Forest Whitaker) as well as with the many TV adaptations drawn from Michel Bussi's novels.

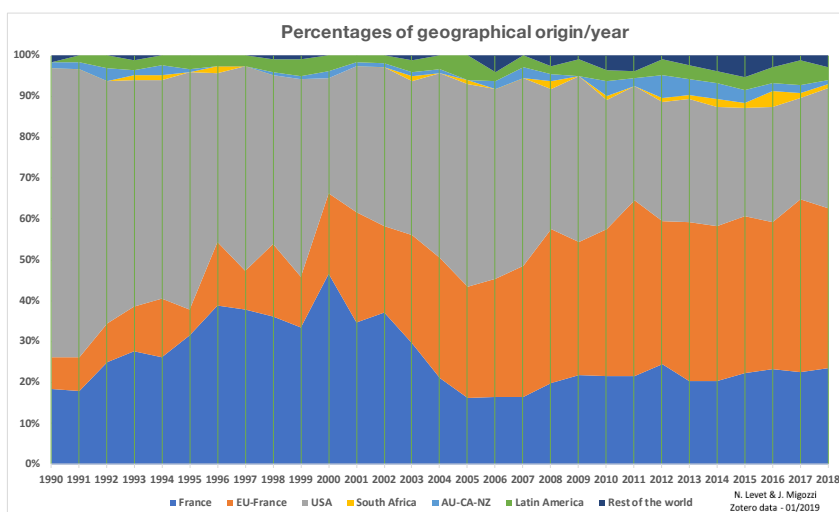
Finally, it can be interesting to interrogate a specific trend in Southern European crime writing, which I will call a 'Mediterranean tropism'. Indeed, research data indicate that the most politically aware among French crime writers are mostly translated and published, unlike authors of thrillers and Fred Vargas, in the Mediterranean countries. A possible explanation for this trend is that these countries are historically part of the French publishing's sphere of influence, as pointed out in various studies (Moretti 1999; Sapiro 2008; Boumediene and Migozzi 2012). However, I would like to suggest an additional hypothesis. France, Italy and Spain may be indeed 'culturally' more predisposed than other European countries to welcome noir novels with a strong political and critical dimension, so much that the corrosive potential of crime fiction as a 'literature of crisis' – according to Jean-Patrick Manchette's formula – is at the core of all the national traditions of French and Italian noir novels since the 1970s and Spanish noir since the 1990s. This could be explained by the specific national histories that characterize the three countries: in the 20th century, both Italy and Spain supported the burden of their fascist regimes, while France was by the stigma of Collaboration and the colonial wars. This may have triggered the engagement of many intellectuals, who have embraced the mission to denounce and uncover the dark corners and traumas of their country's collective memory (Collovald and Neveu 2004; De Paulis-Dalambert 2010).

### Importing European Crime Fiction in France

Let us now move on to what we can learn in terms of cultural transfers from a quantitative analysis of the catalogue of the main French publishers with a dedicated crime writing collection, specifically, Gallimard, Le Seuil, Rivages, Métailié, Actes Sud, Le Mirobole, Agullo, Les Arènes. Our aim is to assess the importance of the different national varieties of crime fiction intranlated within the flow

of French imports after 1990, so as to use this national lens to highlight in a different way the transnational contemporary trends we have already pointed out in our previous remarks.

First observation: although the share of European crime fiction in imports has been tendentially growing since 1990, the French ‘re-public’ of crime fiction is overwhelmingly dominated by products from the United States.

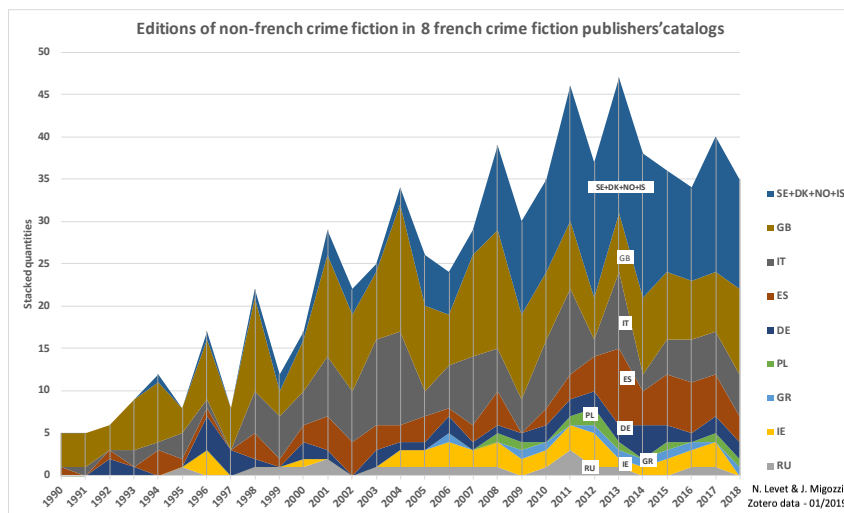


Graph 5. Percentage of novels per country of origin in the catalogues of 8 French crime fiction publishers (1990-2018)

Intranslations from American English account for 40.5% of the total amalgamated catalogue – far ahead of French crime titles (26.4%), leaving just under a third for novels from all other countries, including European countries. If we add up the shares of novels by British (6.7%), Irish (1.2%), Northern Irish (0.2%), Australian (0.7%), Scottish (0.6%) and Canadian writers (0.6%), English does come out as the predominant language of crime fiction, with over half of published titles.

Second overall observation: if we now only consider European novels (or 25.5% of the total catalogue), it appears that, since 1990, the most represented country is the United Kingdom (224 titles), followed by the countries that are associated with the Nordic Noir sub-genre (178), and then Italy (131) and Spain (78). In fact, while the public at large showed a clear preference for Nordic Noir nov-

els, at the same time European crime fiction as a whole became increasingly diverse in both cultural and geographic terms.



Graph 6. Numbers of translated novels in the catalogues of 8 French crime fiction publishers (1990-2018)

As shown in the graph above, every year since 2009 the number of translated Nordic Noir novels from Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Iceland has been greater than the number of British novels: France does not escape the trend shown in Graph 2 toward the in-translation of Nordic Noir novels, which has a particularly clear example in the pan European expansion of Jo Nesbø’s novels. The year 1998 appears to be a pivotal point in the history of the French crime fiction publishing industry: after this year, over 20 European novels were translated annually. Italian and Spanish fiction (from 1998) and to a lesser extent Irish and Greek fiction (respectively from 2004 and 2006) also carved a new place for themselves in French publishing catalogues.

If we connect these symptomatic French phenomena and the apparent periodization obtained through data analysis with a few emblematic cases of European dissemination via extratranslation, we may, perhaps recklessly, propose a more general hypothesis: there appears to have been a historical turning point, which marked the genesis of what could be today amalgamated under the very plastic label of ‘Euro Noir’.

The various graphs obtained from the analysis of the catalogues of French crime fiction publishers suggest that the year 2005 was marked by the boom of what we might call a 'seduction of the exotic'. In other words, these data suggest a surge of interest from French crime fiction readers for novels of more diverse origins than the dominant Anglo-American one, novels that opened up the imagination to territories other than the United States and presented a new kind of local colour. If we consider Graph 3, showing the percentage of foreign titles translated into French, grouped according to their spatial/linguistic origin, it also appears that since 2011 the share of North American fiction has dropped in parallel with the increase of intranlations from other European languages – so much that since 2009, these latter have become quantitatively more important than North American crime fiction. At the same time, the share of French fiction has sharply dropped since 2004, reaching an average of just 20 to 24%, meanwhile the importance of even minor crime fictions from Latin America, South Africa and other faraway countries has been constantly increasing.

Significantly, according to the datasets harvested through Zotero, it was also around this time, the beginning of the 21st century, that the three most successful exporters in our sample (Fred Vargas, Andrea Camilleri and Jo Nesbø) had one of their novels translated for the first time into another European language. Fred Vargas was published for the first time in 17 European countries between 1997 and 2005 (in 8 countries between 1999 and 2002). The first volume of Camilleri's Montalbano series was translated in 12 European countries between 1998 and 2005 (in 8 countries between 1998 and 2002). And Jo Nesbø was published for the first time in translation in 9 European countries between 1997 and 2000. Based on this cluster of convergent evidence we can therefore postulate that, from a pan-European perspective, an impressive, continuing process of transculturation is today on the way, one that mixes a background trend toward a cosmopolitan reach with the strong appeal of local colour and local anchorage.

## Conclusion

This first sectorial approach certainly needs to be completed and reinforced by other quantitative surveys, but it already allows us to spot some major trends in the contemporary process of European

transculturation, as observed through the lenses of crime fiction's translation strategies. The contemporary European market of crime fiction seem to be torn between a unifying cosmopolitanism driven by a small group of international bestsellers and the specificities of local national identities. Beyond the blurring 'Euro Noir' label, research results also reveal the inequality of the symbolic exchange embedded within translation as well as the cultural and economic competition that shapes crime narratives and representations in our contemporary globalized media culture.

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