

BOOK REVIEWS

Jesús Ángel González López. *La narrativa popular de Dashiell Hammett: 'Pulps', cine y cómics.* Valencia: Universitat de València, 2004. 337 págs. ISBN: 84-370-6031-1. 20 euros.

The publication in 1994 of the book *Claves para un enigma: la poética del misterio en la narrativa de Dashiell Hammett*, written by M^a José Álvarez Maurín, marked the clearing of fertile ground for the field of U. S. Studies in Spanish academia, reluctant for so many years to publish anything having to do with the study of Popular Culture. That pioneering work is now followed, exactly ten years later, by another outstanding example of Spanish scholarship about the author of novels as popular as *The Maltese Falcon* or *The Glass Key*. Jesús Ángel González López has written a solid, well-documented and much-needed study on several aspects of Dashiell Hammett's career that still remained quite unknown, almost half a century after the writer's untimely death in 1961.

The scope of this book is quite ambitious, since it covers a wide variety of subjects, as the title already suggests: it ranges from short stories, to Hammett's lasting relationship with Hollywood and his contribution in the field of comic. The study is written in a clear and precise prose which does stimulate the reader; it is also notably jargon-free, since the author prefers to rely more on the texts themselves than on theory. Since the book does not fit the traditional mold of literary studies, its methodology often veers closely to the field of Cultural Studies, although it is never explicitly stated. Furthermore, *La narrativa popular de Dashiell Hammett: 'Pulps', cine y cómics* has a well-organized structure.

The opening chapter offers an extremely convincing rationale for the need of this kind of scholarly work today; the author makes extensive use of critics like Robert Scholes or Umberto Eco to ground his own research. This first chapter also includes a clarifying section on the often confusing terminology that characterizes the works of authors like Dashiell Hammett or Raymond Chandler: 'detective novel,' 'hard-boiled fiction,' 'crime fiction,' etc. Moreover, López González explains the equivalence of all those terms in Spanish and adds a chart that helps the reader visualize all the different aspects of this literary genre. As it happens throughout the entire book, Chapter 2 offers an insightful contextualization of Hammett's work, in this case of some of his lesser known stories, which are scrutinized here individually, in what might be the most arid section of the book.

On the contrary, Chapter 3, entitled "Hammett y el cine," both promises and delivers an intelligent analysis of Dashiell Hammett's complex relationship with the Hollywood system. López González makes it sufficiently clear that, even though the writer did not fit naturally with all the glamour and fashion of Tinseltown

because of his personality and his ideology, his vanity and hunger for money made him go there to work, like so many other first-rate authors during the 1930s and 1940s, when the presence of sound made dialogue a highlight of the film industry. The first half of Chapter 3 is devoted to studying the scripts Hammett wrote, in some instances adapting his own novels. Worth mentioning here are the sections on films the author himself wrote, but were never shot, or the analysis of the series of movies based on his novel *The Thin Man*. Arguably, one of the most rewarding sections of *La narrativa popular de Dashiell Hammett: 'Pulps', cine y comics* is the one devoted to Hammett's adaptation of the play *Watch on the Rhine*, written by his long-time partner, Lillian Hellman, another fascinating character of mid 20th-century US cultural politics, who wrote lovingly of Hammett in her contested books memoirs.

Equally thrilling is the second part of Chapter 3, which includes a penetrating study of the different adaptations made in Hollywood of most of Hammett's novels. Obviously, López González pays special attention to the impact the novel *The Maltese Falcon* (1930) made in Hollywood. However, he makes clear that, even though John Huston's 1941 legendary version with Humphrey Bogart in the leading role has deservedly become a landmark in film history, there were two previous adaptations of the novel: a very early one from 1931 and, quite surprisingly, a comic version made in 1936 with the title *Satan Met a Lady*. The analysis of the dynamics of film adaptation in this chapter relies at times too much on the traditional concept of 'fidelity' to the original text, a notion which in recent times has been expanded by critics such as Brian McFarlane in *Novel to Film: an Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*, or Robert Stam in books like *Literature through Film*.

Chapter 4 is the shortest one by far, since it is devoted to Hammett's work in comic, which was not too abundant. Nevertheless, this is possibly the most groundbreaking section of the book as far as Spanish academia is concerned, since it elevates comic as a field worthy of scholarly attention, something that would have been completely out of the question fifteen or twenty years ago. As usual, Spanish universities tend to react slower than the rest of Europe to new trends in intellectual and critical thinking, even though the situation has been improving in the last decade or so. After another solid introduction to the gradual rise of comic as a cultural--and social--phenomenon in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, López González makes a brief but suggestive analysis of *Secret Agent X-9*, a series for which Hammett wrote the dialogues in 1934-35. He also honestly points out that the novelist embarked on this project partly because of financial reasons, and that, quite often, the results were far from perfect.

In conclusion, a book like *La narrativa popular de Dashiell Hammett: 'Pulps', cine y comics* is a healthy contribution to the field of U. S. Studies in Spain and in the rest of Europe. José Ángel González López ends his volume with a very extensive bibliography, and with an appendix in which he offers a list of the many

hard-to-locate primary sources he had to consult in libraries and archives all over the United States. He also adds a reader-friendly chronological chart, surprisingly for a scholarly book published in Spain, offers a final index listing all the texts and concepts mentioned throughout the book. Volume 34 of the 'Biblioteca Javier Coy d'estudis nor-americans' edited by Professor Carme Manuel Cuenca at the University of Valencia, proves one more time that this collection is a brilliant project that deserves to be known and enjoyed by anyone interested in the many sides of U. S. Studies. This new work by José Ángel López González is an extremely solid contribution to the collection.

WORKS CITED:

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