

**Detectives with pimples:  
How teen noir is crossing the frontiers of the traditional noir films<sup>1</sup>**

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**1. “If you’re like me, you just keep chasing the storm”**

In the last ten years, films and TV series such as *Heathers* (1999), *Donnie Darko* (2001), *Brick* (2005) or *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007) have become increasingly popular and captivated cult audiences, both in the United States and in Europe, while arousing the curiosity of critics. These productions present characters, plots, motives and a visual aesthetic that resemble the noir films created between 1941, when *The Maltese Falcon* premiered, and 1958, when *Touch of Evil* was released. The new films and series retain, for instances, characters like the *femme fatale*, who drags men to a dreadful destiny; the good-bad girl, who does not hesitate in resorting to dubious methods in order to achieve morally correct objectives; and the lonely detective, now a troubled adolescent — as if Sam Spade had gone back to High School. In the first decade of our century, critics coined the expression *teen noir* to define this new genre or, in my opinion, *subgenre*, since it retains numerous traits of the classic film noir, especially in its contents, thus not creating a significant rupture.

In this article, I intend to a) examine the common elements between teen noir series and classic noir films; b) analyze how this new production reinvents or subverts the characteristics of the old genre, generating a sense of novelty; c) detect some of the numerous intertextual references present in *Veronica Mars*, which may lead young viewers to investigate other series, movies or books.

Within this frame, I will concentrate my study on TV series *Veronica Mars*, created by Rob Thomas, premiered on UPN, on September the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2004, and concluded on May the 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2007, on CW Television Network, spanning over three seasons. In the context of Joseph Campbell’s classic study on comparative mythology, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949),

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these stages correspond to Veronica's departure, initiation and return (Zinder 111; Campbell 115-18).

Even though *Veronica Mars* did not achieve the expected success — the third season was abbreviated and the fourth didn't go beyond the pilot episode — it conquered numerous loyal fans, and became a cult series, enjoyed both by teenagers and adults, regular viewers and academics, heterogeneous audiences composed of Generations X, Y and Baby Boomers. Even worldwide famous author and demanding critic Stephen King recognized the quality of this production, when he argued, "Why is *Veronica Mars* so good? . . . I can't take my eyes off the damn thing" (Bolte 110).

The series received considerable critical praise from *Village Voice*, *Time*, *Variety*, *TV Guide*, etc., elevating it to the status of "canonical television . . . that should live on the video library shelves of the future" (Wilcox and Turnbull 2). Moreover, the reflections of several journalists, scholars in the field of Media Studies, and young researchers gave origin to two collections of essays, *Neptune Noir: Unauthorized Investigations into Veronica Mars* (2007), and *Investigating Veronica Mars* (2011), a clear evidence of the interest this series generated.

It is my perception that the reason for *Veronica Mars's* artistic success lies primarily in its innovative characteristics, and in the concomitant rupture with a myriad of easily digested series destined to adolescents, that have been plaguing American television since the fifties. Even though this teen drama was broadcast by two networks which aim at young audiences, UPN and CW, it does not fit in the traditional soap opera format. As Lisa Emmerton points out:

In a market already oversaturated with images of 'sexy kids doing sexy things', *Veronica Mars* took the all-too-familiar scenario in which privileged 'So Cal' kids revel in their anguish produced by their glamorous lifestyle and turned it on its head. *Veronica Mars* simultaneously points to the inadequacies of many contemporary youth dramas and provides a demonstration that it is possible to produce quality series that deal with teen issues. (Emmerton 124)

The wish to innovate within the frame of the noir genre played a determinant role in the spirit of the series. Rob Thomas had quit his career as a high school teacher, in San Antonio, Texas, to try his luck as a writer, in Los Angeles. Thomas began by publishing a few novels — of which only *Rats Saw God* (1996) obtained significant critical acclaim. Eventually, he invested his time and talent in a more daring project: he departed from the unpublished manuscript of a new novel, revolving around the character of a young man called Keith Mars, who worked for his father's private detective agency, to reinvent him as *Veronica*, a sixteen-year-old

Californian student (Wilcox and Turnbull 1). Focusing on the genesis of this series, Thomas explains the reasons that led him to select a girl for the protagonist:

This idea that I was attracted to, and had been thinking about since I taught high school, was this vague notion about teenagers being desensitized and jaded and sexualized so much earlier than I feel like even my generation 15, 20 years before had been. That seemed like a perfect thing to try to shine a spotlight on. [That concept] was interesting to me when the protagonist was a boy, but when I started thinking in terms of a girl who had seen too much and experienced too much at too young of an age, it became even more potent to me. (Thomas, "The Origins" 192)

And so, Veronica is born: an attractive, sarcastic and streetwise blonde, who has a paradoxical tendency to fight crime by breaking the law. On a first approach, this teen would correspond to the stereotyped image of the 'American Sweetheart' in media — white, blonde, beautiful, slim, modern —, another Shirley Temple, one more Lolita, simply a Gidget (Mayer 138).

However, after viewing the first episode of the series, the audience realized Veronica belongs to a different stock of heroines. Far from being a futile young lady, this young detective is a complex and mature individual, who challenges preconceptions, meeting not only the usual teenage angst, but also some problems most adults never had to struggle with. In this sense, she belongs to a new trend of heroines, breaking with the canonical protagonists, a girl who can act as a role model for the new generation. Ilhana Nash remarks this is a rare case in television series:

The dominant discourses of American teen narratives have yet to represent a girlhood that truly serves girls. One that deserves and demands a respectful reaction from adults . . . Instead, we continue to train girls to accept and even request their own subordination, encouraging them, through a well-established system of rewards, to fashion their identities with signifiers of a romance plot that conflates paternal(ist) interests with sexual commodification. This is the girlhood we call normal, the one that populates the 'wholesome' family comedies that comfort and reassure us with their fables of averageness. (Nash 227-28)

But how different is Veronica from the mentioned stereotype? And how close is she to noir characters? Like Sam Spade, the epitome of the classic noir detective, created by Dashiell Hammet, Veronica is an outcast who operates in the most sinister margins of society. However, it was not always like that: as the only daughter of the sheriff of Neptune, Keith Mars, and the girlfriend of Duncan, son of billionaire Jake Kane, young Veronica was accepted

or, at least, tolerated, by her wealthier peers.

To grant the audience access to Veronica's thoughts about the dramatic changes that took place in her life as young female, the director used the voice-over technique, so typical of the classic noir films, but granted it with a more feminine and sensitive tone (Vaughn 44-45). For instances, in the episode titled "Meet John Smith", Veronica meditates upon her existence, with wisdom unusual for someone of her age:

Tragedy blows through your life like a tornado, uprooting everything, creating chaos. You wait for the dust to settle, and then you choose. You can live in the wreckage and pretend it's still the mansion you remember. Or you can crawl from the rubble and slowly rebuild. Because after disaster strikes, the important thing is that you move on. But if you're like me, you just keep chasing the storm. (Thomas, "Meet John Smith")

In the context of this series, the voice-over functions as the chorus in Greek tragedies, commenting upon incidents; bridging several steps of the episodes; and representing the opinion of a middle-class endangered by the power of the rich families of Neptune.

## **2. "Neptune, California, a town without a middle class"**

This series presents an unusual dimension that makes it enormously appealing for ethnic audiences: the attention paid both to social struggle and multicultural interaction. Within this frame, Veronica's high school functions as a microcosm for the entire nation, a dystopian space where conviviality, alliances and conflicts are frequent. At the beginning of the series, Veronica remarks:

This is my school. If you go here, your parents are either millionaires or your parents work for millionaires. Neptune, California, a town without a middle class. If you're in the second group, you get a job; fast food, movie theatres, mini-marts. Or you could be me. My after-school job means tailing philandering spouses or investigating false injury claims. (Thomas, "Pilot")

In fact, most of Veronica's colleagues have wealthy parents and inhabit a prestigious area, whose zip code is 90909, and because of that, they are known as the *09ers*, a term that resembles the word *onanist*, and hints at the selfishness of that group. On the other side, there are the destitute students, who coincide with the African-Americans, such as Wallace, Veronica's right arm, or the Hispanics, like Weevil. In this sense, and similarly to the classic noir films, the series *Veronica Mars* mirrors the problems of an era, the zeitgeist of the USA in

the first decade of this century. In high school, the socioeconomic asymmetries are easily revealed, and status derives from wealth and power. The richer students display their prosperity through luxury gadgets, clothes and powerful cars; the underprivileged ones hold part-time jobs, and compete for scholarships, realizing education can be a way of climbing up the social ladder.

Besides presenting social problems, this series approaches the delicate theme of ethnic interaction in a kaleidoscopic society, and frequently displays how class and race intermingle. That is a rare trait in most teen series, which prefer to avoid serious or contentious matters, to concentrate on who sleeps with who, who gets pregnant or who climbs up the ladder of popularity. In this context, Rhonda Wilcox and Sue Turnbull argue that:

The series is far from color-blind. Overt remarks about race are made from the pilot on. Eli 'Weevil' Navarro calls Veronica's soon-to-be-friend Wallace 'that skinny Negro' . . . In the second episode, Logan taunts the Latino Weevil with the fact that his grandmother works as a domestic in the Echolls household. At a Christmas holiday high stakes poker game at the Echolls house, that Weevil talks his way into, a young movie star who is another one of the players complains to Logan, 'That's like the tenth racist thing you've said.' (Wilcox and Turnbull 11)

In this tense community, Keith Mars (Veronica's father) commits professional suicide when he dares to accuse billionaire Jake Kane of having assassinated his own daughter, Lilly Kane, causing a sudden commotion in Neptune's high society. Criminal research concludes that Kane is innocent and Abel Koontz, a former employee of his enterprise, is convicted of murder and condemned to death. Consequently, all the members of the Mars family suffer the revenge perpetrated by the rich community of Neptune: an emergency election is called and, as a result, Keith is replaced by sheriff Don Lamb, an unscrupulous officer; shocked by this sudden loss of status, Lianne Mars, Keith's wife, abandons her home; while Veronica is banned from the circle of her wealthy colleagues. Suggestively, the title song, performed by alternative rock band The Dandy Warhols, states:

A long time ago, we used to be friends  
But I haven't thought of you lately at all  
If ever again, a greeting I send to you,  
Short and sweet to the soul is all I intend.  
(The Dandy Warhols 2)

### 3. "Do you want to know how I lost my virginity?"

The culmination of this silent revenge occurs when Veronica goes to Shelley Pomroy's party, to prove that backstabbing did not affect her, and drinks, without knowing, "rum, Coke and a roofie". Early morning, when she wakes up, she realizes that she had been raped. In her own words, simultaneously sarcastic and painful, she asks: "Do you want to know how I lost my virginity? So do I" (Thomas, "Pilot"). When Veronica reports the rape to, Lamb, the sarcastic new sheriff, he refuses to believe her testimony, thinking this is a clever revenge against the town's rich boys.

According to Deanna Carlyle, Veronica symbolizes the victim in a society where law benefits the rich and governors do not protect the country's frailest citizens. Carlyle also points out that, in a certain way, the young lady embodies post-9/11 America or the country after the New Orleans' flood, i.e., a nation raped and abandoned by its leaders:

Just as 9/11 was the defining event for America's current sense of violation, the New Orleans flood was the defining event for America's current sense of abandonment. When Hurricane Katrina destroyed much of the Louisiana and Mississippi coastline and endangered thousands of American lives, national resources were not mobilized as efficiently as they were, say, to invade Afghanistan or Iraq . . . The New Orleans debacle and Veronica Mars have this in common: they bring to the surface an American theme that has been psychologically denied and barely kept in check for much of the present decade — namely that many of our high-ranking authority figures, our political leaders, the 'fathers' and 'mothers' of our nation, may not truly care about protecting us, their citizen children, but may in fact be more interested in bending the truth and securing their power-base. (Carlyle 153)

The sexual abuse constitutes the turning point in Veronica's life: the happy and careless girl becomes the angry and bitter young adult, acquiring the toughness of classic detectives. The emotional transformation presents a physical counterpart: similarly to what happens with other females traumatized by rape, Veronica now wears long sleeved shirts and layers in spite of the Southern California weather (Burnett and Townsend 98). Such care for details just proves how careful the screenwriter and the directors of the series were, when breathing life to the character of the young detective.

However, in spite of her rape, Veronica refuses to be a victim and decides not to change the world or society, but to protect as many individuals as she can. In an interview granted to *Portrait* magazine, commenting upon the character she plays, young actress Kristen Bell states:

I think the whole premise of the show is about what she [Veronica]

chooses to do with a bad set of events that are forced on her . . . the show is about her saying ‘am I going to sit in my room and cry, or am I going to go out and make the most of it and become the person I need to be to get through this?’ and that’s what she does. (Lee 16)

#### 4. “I hear you do detective stuff for people”

Working now as private detectives, Veronica and her father move to a humbler house and suffer ostracism. In a typical North American town, where prestige results from material and professional success, the Mars became an example of failure and exclusion. Like numerous characters from classic noirs, Veronica is an individual with a troubled past: her best friend, Lilly, was murdered, her mother run away, and she herself was raped. As Thomas points out, in an interview granted to *The Observer*:

I wanted to create a character who was so far down her outlook was: ‘There’s nothing anyone can do to me now. I’ve been through it all. (...) I wanted a teenage girl who no longer got embarrassed or worried about what others said about her, or fretted over what she was going to wear. (Hughes 6)

A pessimistic perspective of the world is another element Veronica shares with the classic detective. In an article titled “The Simple Art of Murder”, published in December 1944, on the *Atlantic Monthly*, Raymond Chandler draws the psychological profile of the private eye:

He is a relatively poor man, or he would not be a detective at all. He is a common man or he could not go among common people. He has a sense of character, or he would not know his job. He will take no man’s money dishonestly and no man’s insolence without a due and dispassionate revenge. He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him. He talks as the man of his age talks — that is, with a rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness. (Chandler 33)

Like a regular detective, Veronica solves cases — but in the context of the student’s community of Neptune High School. Normally, the adolescent deals with thefts, credit card schemes or harassment, at affordable prices, while assisting her father with several tasks. According to Thomas:

Using noir ideas in a high-school setting does lend itself to juicy storylines. An adult noir storyline might be a husband murders his wife for the insurance money. Our high-school noir storylines need

to dial back a bit — a quality story for us would be: My boyfriend took dirty pictures of me. Help me get them back. (Calvillo 8-9)

Veronica is both moved by a desire for justice and by financial needs. A few excerpts of dialogue reveal her entrepreneur spirit: “Jackson: I don’t care what they say about you, Veronica Mars. You rock! Veronica: Yes, I do. I also take cash” (Thomas, “Silence of the Lamb”). Another example: “Jackson: I hear you do detective stuff for people. Veronica: I do favor for friends. Jackson: I can pay. Veronica: Sit down, friend! What can I do for you?” (Thomas, “Silence of the Lamb”).

Other quick and tense dialogues resemble the typical conversations one finds in noir and neo noir films. In my opinion *Veronica Mars* only departs from the classic dialogues in the sense that her tone is often more humorous than sarcastic, and more sarcastic than threatening, as one would expect from a streetwise girl. One example: “Keith: Have you been playing nice with the other children? Veronica: You know Dad, I’m old school, an eye for an eye. Keith: I think that’s actually Old Testament” (Thomas, “Meet John Smith”). Another father/daughter conversation: “Veronica: Tough day? Keith: [imitating Phillip Marlowe] That ain’t the half of it. See, this dame walks in, and you should’ve seen the getaway sticks on her. Says something’s hinky with her old man. Veronica: [imitating Marlowe]: Did ya put the screws to him? Keith: You ain’t kiddin’, he sang like a canary. Veronica: [normal voice] You’re in luck, Phillip Marlowe, because it’s dessert for dinner night, and I’ve got a sundae thing set up here. Keith: [normal voice] If child services finds out about this, they will take you away. Veronica: Well, that’s a risk I’m willing to take. Keith: Honey, shouldn’t we try something at the base of the food pyramid? You know, fruits and vegetables. Veronica: [gasps] What is that? A maraschino cherry?” (Thomas, “Return of the Kane”).

In the resolution of her cases, Veronica reveals another characteristic of the noirs: a belief that the ends justify the means. In this spirit, the young detective interferes in a police investigation; has less than legal access to her mother’s safe box; frames a colleague who humiliated her; threatens a secret society of young men with revealing publicly their identity; and steals from the sheriff squad the videotapes that may lead to the culprit in Lilly’s assassination. Thomas comments on the protagonist’s ambiguity:

The element that I find attractive about noir is the shades of grey in characters. It acknowledges that all of us have a dark side. I think that most television focuses on white-hatted heroes. Teen shows, particularly, tend to have good guys and bad guys. We work pretty diligently to keep Veronica from ever being too huggable. She’s overly bent on getting even. She’s brusque. She has a rather Old Testament sense of justice. (Hughes 6)

Veronica presents a profile similar to the so-called good-bad girl, one of the most intriguing characters in the gallery of classic noir movies, somewhere between the *femme fatale* (attractive and malicious) and the homebuilder (the detective's wife or girlfriend, or occasionally, his angelical secretary, like "Girl Friday" Effie Perine, in *The Maltese Falcon*). Those films sometimes reveal the presence of a good-bad girl, a woman who is on the hero's side, even though it may not seem so, at the beginning. She is a seductive and independent woman, as Gilda in the homonymous film (1946), Joyce Harwood, in *The Blue Dahlia* (1946), Susan Hayward, in *Deadline at Dawn* (1946) or Vivian Rutledge, in *The Big Sleep* (1946). Like the *femme fatale*, the good-bad girl can also have hidden plans — but these are well-intentioned and they don't cause the destruction of the hero (Spicer 92-93). In this tradition, Veronica always obtains what she wants, legally or manipulating her friends (Tucker 42). For instances, she obtains Weevil's protection, thanks to her charm: "Weevil: See, there you go with that head-tilt thing. You know, you think you're all badass, but whenever you need something it's all, 'hey'. Veronica: Just be glad I don't flip my hair. I'd own you" (Thomas, "An Echolls Family Christmas").

### 5. "That Maltese Falcon is still eluding us"

The directors of the several episodes of *Veronica Mars* also resort to many of the elements that characterize the visual the aesthetics of film noir and, to a certain extent, of neo noir: chiaroscuro lighting, skewed framing, shadows, silhouettes, scenes lit for night, etc. (Buckland 91). Concentrating on the first episode, Paul Zinder summarizes some of these features:

In the series pilot, scenes that catalyze Veronica's stubborn pursuit of the truth are introduced in a heavily-filtered (mind-altered) visual style pronouncing each moment a facet of Veronica's larger memory. Duncan's unceremonious (and unexplained) rejection of Veronica occurs near the Neptune High lockers, filmed through a dark blue filter as overexposed backlight shines in the far distance, as though Veronica's happiness just sits out of her reach. The hue covering the flash of Lilly's pronouncement that 'I've got a secret, a good one' is a softer blue, and accentuates the golden highlights in Lilly and Veronica's hair, making them angelic spirits of the past. When Veronica awakens in flashback to find herself victim of sexual assault, a counter-intuitive high-contrast cheerful yellow light mocks her despair, as she weeps quietly in the morning sun. The harsh blue filter returns when Sheriff Lamb dismisses her reported rape in his office, in images whose clarity confirms his infuriating

incompetence. A unique visual strategy transfigures each of Veronica's retrospections, separating the scenes from her current reality, which lends them an otherworldly (unconscious) significance. (Zinder 112)

Besides the character of the detective, the plots and aesthetics, *Veronica Mars* constantly pays a tribute to noir films, through intertextual references. For instances, when Meg, a colleague of Veronica, asks her: "So, are you working on any interesting cases with your father?", the young detective replies: "Well, that Maltese Falcon is still eluding us, but..." (Thomas, "Weapons of Class Destruction"). More recent films, such as *The Outsiders*, are also mentioned. When the motorcycle gang attacks a group of rich students, Wallace notices: "I suddenly feel like I'm in a scene from *The Outsiders*", and Veronica comments: "Be cool, Sodapop" (Thomas, "Pilot").

In addition to these cultural references, there are allusions to noir and neo noir films: *The Big Sleep* (1946), *Chinatown* (1974), *Scarface* (1983), *Body Heat* (1981), or *Fatal Attraction* (1987). A fan will certainly enjoy discovering those references along the episodes, a *terra cognita* in an ocean of modernity, and an invitation to watch or revisit the classic noir films. Not surprisingly, cult audiences did their best to show their appreciation to Rob Thomas and the producers: "LiveJournal fans credited Veronica Mars's Season Three renewal to the fact that they hired a plane to fly "Renew Veronica Mars! CW 2006!" banner over the network offices in order to influence CW executives' decision about the fate of Veronica Mars" (Gillan 206).

## 6. "Normal Is the Watchword"

I would like to conclude by pointing out that *Veronica Mars* includes several characteristics of the classic noirs, while innovating within the conventions of the genre: it revolves around a lonely detective, but the protagonist is a girl; it resorts to the voice-over technique, but the reflections of the character deal mainly with problems faced by adolescents; the social struggle is present, but this time it focuses upon the situation of the middle class; the setting is not the big city, but chiefly suburban spaces attended by young people, namely the high school or the beach; most of the action takes place during the day — what Steven Sanders called "sunshine noir" (Sandler 185) — generating in the audience a sense of insecurity.

The plot and characters of *Veronica Mars* are simultaneously entertaining and thought-provoking, and demonstrate it is still possible to reinvent a genre, and create an

intelligent series within the frame of commercial television. The noir spirit haunts all the episodes of a series that remains the mirror of the nation — eternally young, dangerous and unpredictable.

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### Resumo

Nos últimos dez anos, filmes e séries do gênero *teen noir* — como *Donnie Darko* (2001), *Brick* (2005), ou *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007) — tornaram-se crescentemente populares junto das audiências norte-americanas e europeias, e suscitaram a curiosidade dos críticos. Estas aventuras *teen noir* apresentam temas mais sombrios e aspetos técnicos que as distinguem das numerosas produções dirigidas a jovens adultos. As suas características narrativas e estéticas reinventam e subvertem a tradição dos filmes *noir* clássicos das décadas de quarenta

e cinquenta, gerando, deste modo, uma sensação de novidade. Neste artigo, centro a atenção em *Veronica Mars*, uma famosa série *teen noir*, criada por Rob Thomas, para examinar: a) os temas *teen noir*; b) o novo perfil e papel do detetive privado; c) o poder das raparigas e jovens; d) os diálogos cortantes; e) as referências intertextuais aos filmes clássicos. Para tal, recorro à pesquisa de especialistas no campo do *neo noir*, como Mark Conrad, Foster Hirsch ou Roz Kaveney. O meu objetivo é provar que um novo (sub)género emerge lentamente e revivifica o cinema para jovens.

### **Abstract**

In the last ten years, teen noir movies and series — such as *Donnie Darko* (2001), *Brick* (2005), or *Veronica Mars* (2004-2007) — have become increasingly popular among audiences, both in the USA and in Europe, and aroused the curiosity of critics. These teen noir adventures present darker themes and technical features that distinguish them from numerous productions aiming at young adults. Their narrative and aesthetic characteristics reinvent and subvert the tradition of classic noir movies of the forties and fifties, thus generating a sense of novelty. In this article, I focus my attention on *Veronica Mars*, a famous teen noir series, created by Rob Thomas, to examine: a) the teen noir themes; b) the new profile and role of the private investigator; c) the empowerment of girls/young women; d) razor-sharp dialogues; e) intertextual references to old-school noir movies. In order to do so, resort to the research of specialists in the field of neo noir, such as Mark Conrad, Foster Hirsch, or Roz Kaveney. My main goal is to prove that a new (sub)genre is slowly emerging and revivifying teen cinema.