

James Naremore

American Film Noir

The History of an Idea

Only that which has no history is definable.

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

The past is not dead. It isn't even past.

—WILLIAM FAULKNER

It has always been easier to recognize a film noir than to define the term. One can easily imagine a large video store where examples of such films would be shelved somewhere between Gothic horror and dystopian science fiction: in the center would be *Double Indemnity*, and at either margin *Cat People* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. But this arrangement would leave out important titles. There is in fact no completely satisfactory way to organize the category, and nobody is sure whether the films in question constitute a period, a genre, a cycle, a style, or simply a "phenomenon."¹

Whatever noir "is," the standard histories say it originated in America, emerging out of a synthesis of hard-boiled fiction and German Expressionism. The term is also associated with certain visual and narrative traits, which some commentators have tried to localize in the period between 1941 and 1958. Others contend that noir began much earlier and never went away.² One of the most comprehensive (but far from complete) references, Alain Silver and Elizabeth

Ward's *Film Noir: An Encyclopedia of the American Style*, begins in 1927 and ends in the present, listing over 500 motion pictures of various stylistic and generic descriptions.³

Encyclopedic surveys of the Silver and Ward type can be educational and entertaining, but they also have a kinship with Jorge Luis Borges's fictional work of Chinese scholarship, *The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, which contains a whimsical taxonomy of the animal kingdom: those belonging to the Emperor; mermaids; stray dogs; those painted with a fine camel's-hair brush; those resembling flies from a distance; others; etc. Unfortunately, nothing links together all the things discussed as noir—not the theme of crime, not a cinematographic technique, not even a resistance to Aristotelian narratives or happy endings. Little wonder that no writer has been able to find the category's necessary and sufficient characteristics, and that many generalizations in the critical literature are open to question. If noir is American in origin, why does it have a French name? (The two Frenchmen who

**HUMPHREY
BOGART**
**MARY
ASTOR**

THE
Maltese Falcon

by
**DASHIELL
HAMMETT**



*Author of
"THE THIN MAN"*

GLADYS GEORGE • PETER LORR
BARTON MACLANE • LEE PATRICK • SYDNEY GREENSTRE
Directed by
JOHN HUSTON • WARNER BRO

supposedly coined the term, writing separate essays in 1946, were referring to an international style.) More intriguingly, if the heyday of noir was 1941–58, why did the term not enjoy widespread use until the 1970s? A plausible case could indeed be made that, far from dying out with the old studio system, noir is almost entirely a creation of postmodern culture—a belated reading of classic Hollywood that was popularized by cinéastes of the French New Wave, appropriated by reviewers, academics, and film-makers, and then recycled on TV.

At any rate, a term that was born in specialist periodicals and revival theaters has now become a major signifier of sleekly commodified artistic ambition. Almost 20 percent of the titles currently on the National Film Preservation List at the Library of Congress are associated with noir, as are most of the early volumes in the British Film Institute "Film Classics" series. Meanwhile, "neo noirs" are produced by Hollywood with increasing regularity and prominence. Consider the last three American winners of the Grand Prize at Cannes: *Wild at Heart* (1991), *Barton Fink* (1992), and *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Consider also such big-budget television productions as "Twin Peaks," "Wild Palms" (marketed to ABC as "TV noir"), and "Fallen Angels."

Some of these instances might be described as "pastiche," but pastiche of what? The classical model is notoriously difficult to pin down, in part because it was named by critics rather than film-makers, who did not speak of film noir until well after it was established as a feature of academic writing. Nowadays, the term is ubiquitous, appearing in reviews and promotions of many things besides movies. If we want to understand it, or to make sense of genres or art-historical categories in general, we need to recognize that film noir belongs to the history of ideas as much as to the history of cinema; it has less to do with a group of artifacts than with a discourse—a loose, evolving system of arguments and readings, helping to shape commercial strategies and aesthetic ideologies.

It seems odd that film theorists did not arrive at this conclusion long ago. After all, the Name of the Genre (or Mood, or Generic Tendency, or whatever) functions in much the same way as the Name of the Author. Michel Foucault has pointed out that the "author function" is tied to the "institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses."⁴ The author, Foucault says, is chiefly a means of textual classification, allowing us to establish "a relationship of homogeneity, filiation, authentication of some texts by the use of others"

(147). At bottom, these relationships are psychological "projections," governed by the belief that there must be "a point where contradictions are resolved, where incompatible elements are at last tied together or organized around a fundamental and originating contradiction" (151).

Could we not say exactly the same things about the "genre function"? And could we not ask of it many of the same questions that Foucault asks of authorship: What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it? (160) In the case of film noir, one of the most amorphous yet important categories in film history, these questions seem particularly apt. As a start toward answering them, the following pages offer a commentary on early writings about noir. Instead of looking for the essential features of a group of films, I shall try to explain a paradox: film noir is both an important cinematic legacy and an idea we have projected onto the past.

Noir Is Born Paris, 1946–59

The end of World War II in Paris gave rise to a noir sensibility, but this sensibility was expressed through many things besides cinema, and if I had to choose a representative artist of the period, it would not be a film-maker. Instead I would pick the somewhat Rimbaud-like personality Boris Vian, who was a friend of the surrealist Raymond Queneau and the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. Vian wrote witty avant-garde novels, proto-absurdist plays, satiric columns for *Les Temps Modernes*, music criticism for *Jazz Hot*, and over 500 Dylanesque protest songs (including "Le Déserteur," which has remained an anthem for French antiwar movements down to the present day); meanwhile, he also played trumpet and sang in the Club Tabou and other St-Germain nightspots. During his lifetime, however, he was best known for a *roman noir* that did not bear his name.

In the summer of 1946, Vian was approached by an editor who wanted to create a list of murder novels that would rival the popular, black-covered *Série noire* recently inaugurated at Gallimard. Within two weeks, Vian composed *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* (*I'll Spit on Your Graves*), which he published under the name "Vernon Sullivan," an identity he adopted on several occasions, claiming to have translated Sullivan's work "from the American." An ultra-vio-

lent mixture of plot situations from William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*, the novel concerns a black man who passes for white in a Southern town and who exerts racial vengeance by dominating, raping, and murdering two white women. In a preface, Vian said that the book could never have been printed in the United States because it involved black violence against whites. But there were also problems in France, where *J'irai cracher* became the first novel to be prosecuted for obscenity since *Madame Bovary*. The case took a bizarre turn when a middle-aged Parisian salesman strangled his young mistress and committed suicide in a hotel room near the Gare Montparnasse, leaving an open copy of the book next to the murdered woman's body, one of its grisly passages underlined. Vian was briefly jailed and required to pay a fine, and for the rest of his life he suffered from notoriety and ill health. Although he remained active on the literary and cabaret scenes, he sometimes described himself as "*ex-écrivain, ex-trompette*." Then, in the summer of 1959, he entered a Paris movie theater to watch a press screening of French director Michel Gast's adaptation of *J'irai cracher*, a project he disliked but had been unable to prevent. As he sat alone in the dark auditorium, his heart failed and he died.⁵

The themes of Vian's life and work—indigo moods, smoky jazz clubs, American fiction, romantic isolation—resemble some of the movies of his day, and his scandalous novel foregrounds two issues that seem especially relevant to film noir: sexual violence and racial blackness or otherness. Psychoanalytic feminism tells us something about the first issue (much feminist theory grows out of the study of American films noirs), although the discussion needs to be historicized and linked to changing patterns of censorship. In regard to the second issue, we need a close examination of the metaphor of darkness. The discourse on noir grew out of a European male fascination with the instinctive (a fascination that was evident in most forms of high modernism), and many of the films admired by the French involve white characters who cross borders to visit Latin America, Chinatown, or the "wrong" parts of the city. When the idea of noir was imported to America, this implication was somewhat obscured; the term sounded more artistic in French, so it was seldom translated as "black cinema."⁶

Where my immediate purposes are concerned, Vian's life story is also relevant, because the publication and eventual adaptation of *J'irai cracher* coincide with what I would call the first age of film noir:

the years between the postwar arrival of Hollywood movies in Paris and the beginnings of the French New Wave. We can never say when the first film noir was made, but everyone agrees that significant writings on American noir began to appear in French film journals in August, 1946, at exactly the moment when "Vernon Sullivan" was composing his novel. The term was used in discussions of five Hollywood features made during the war, all of which had just been exhibited in succession on Paris movie screens: *The Maltese Falcon*; *Double Indemnity*; *Laura*; *Murder, My Sweet*; and—somewhat surprisingly, in light of the fact that it disappears from most subsequent writings—*The Lost Weekend*. Another picture released in Paris that summer, *Woman in the Window*, described by one French reviewer as a "bourgeois tragedy," was later to become a noir classic.⁷ The forthcoming MGM production of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was mentioned alongside the initial group of five, and *Citizen Kane*, which was also mentioned, was placed in a class by itself. Critical discussion centered mainly on the first four thrillers—which, even though they were not exactly alike (*The Maltese Falcon* does not have a first-person narrator or flashbacks, and *Laura* is not based on a hard-boiled novel), seemed to belong together. These films would become the prototypical members of an emergent category, and they would have an unusual influence on French thinking for over a decade.

In one sense the French invented film noir, and they did so because local conditions predisposed them to view Hollywood in certain ways. As R. Barton Palmer has observed, France possessed a sophisticated film culture consisting of theaters, journals, and "ciné-clubs" where movies were treated as art rather than as commercial entertainment.⁸ Equally important, the decade after the liberation saw a resurgence of Americanism among directors and critics, many of whom sought to refashion the French art cinema along the more "authentic" lines of Hollywood genre movies. A *nouvelle vague* would eventually grow out of this dialectic between America and Europe, and the so-called film noir—which was visibly indebted to European modernism—became the most important category in French criticism.

The French were also predisposed to invent noir because it evoked a golden age of their own cinema. They were quick to observe that the new Hollywood thrillers resembled such films as *Pépé le Moko* (1936), *Hotel du Nord* (1938), and *Le Jour se lève* (1939)—a group of "poetic-realist" melodramas set in an urban criminal milieu and featuring doomed protagonists



who wore fedoras and behaved with sangfroid under pressure." Indeed when *Double Indemnity* was released in the United States in 1944, a reviewer for *The Hollywood Reporter* noted that it was "more than a little reminiscent of the late lamented, excellent French technique." (To reassure moviegoers, he added, "This is not to say that it is 'arty'" [8/24/44].)

French writers might have recognized the equally significant contributions of other European nations. For example, they could have alluded to Hitchcock's British thrillers of the 1930s, and—had they known it—to Carol Reed's *Night Train to Munich* (1940). These were the films to which American reviewers compared the 1941 version of *The Maltese Falcon*; in fact, when Billy Wilder completed *Double Indemnity*, he told the *Los Angeles Times* that he intended to "out-Hitchcock Hitchcock."¹⁰ Significantly, however, the French not only ignored the British, they also failed to mention the Germans.¹¹ Instead, the two earliest essays on film noir—Nino Frank's "Un nouveau genre policier: L'aventure criminelle," published in the socialist *L'Écran Français* in August, 1946, and Jean-Pierre Chartier's "Les Américains aussi font des films 'noirs,'" published three months later in the more conservative *Revue du cinéma* (an ancestor of *Cahiers du cinéma*)—treated the American pictures as if they had only a few Gallic predecessors.

For Nino Frank, it seemed that a young generation of Hollywood auteurs, led by Huston, Wilder, and Chandler, had rejected the sentimental humanism of "museum objects" like Ford, Capra, and Wyler.¹² The new film-makers specialized in the *policier*, which, according to Frank, always deals with the "social fantastic" and the "dynamism of violent death" (8); unlike earlier practitioners, however, the Americans were concerned with "criminal psychology," and were therefore making "criminal adventures" or "films 'noirs'" (14). Such films were convoluted, harsh, and misogynistic, but they made the characters in most movies seem like "puppets" (14). Moreover, they often employed a first-person narration and flashbacks that fragmented the story, producing a montage. Frank claimed that Sacha Guitry had been the first to use this technique, in *Le Roman d'un tricheur* (1936), but he wondered whether or not Hollywood had outclassed Paris. Henceforth, French cinéastes would need to make "somber" films in which there was "more dynamism in an unmoving shot than in a majestic panorama" (14).

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Jean-Pierre Chartier also treated the American films as a group, but he disliked their "pessimism and disgust toward humanity," and suggested that the Breen Office had deflected the characters' sexual motives into an "obsessive criminal fatality."¹³ Although he admired the first-person narration in *Murder, My Sweet* (which reminded him of "the old avant garde"), he was appalled by the moral effect of the series as a whole:

One may speak of a French school of film noir, but *Le Quai des brumes* or *Hotel du Nord* have at least accents of rebellion, a fleeting image of love that gives hope for a better world, . . . and if the characters are desperate, they rouse our pity or sympathy. Nothing of that here: these are monsters, criminals whose evils nothing can excuse, whose actions imply that the only source for the fatality of evil is in themselves (70).

Reviewers in the United States had already seen a vague connection between the pictures discussed by Frank and Chartier, but they made no attempt to invent a new term.¹⁴ *The New Yorker* described *Double Indemnity* as a "murder melodrama" (9/16/44), and the *Los Angeles Times* called it an "intellectual exercise in crime" (10/10/44). (*Times* critic Philip K. Scheuer noted, "I am sick of flash-back narration and I can't forgive it here.") *Newsweek* said that *Murder, My Sweet* was a "brass-knuckled thriller" (2/26/45), and *The Hollywood Reporter* remarked that Paramount seemed to be investing heavily in the "hard-boiled, kick-em-in-the-teeth murder cycle" (1/28/46). The American critics also grouped the films in unusual ways: the *Los Angeles Times* compared *Double Indemnity* to the MGM adaptation of William Saroyan's *The Human Comedy* (8/6/44); and Manny Farber, writing in *The New Republic*, compared it to Preston Sturges's *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (8/24/44).

French writers, on the other hand, were fascinated with the noir metaphor, and in subsequent discussions they elaborated the tensions between the Frank and Chartier essays. Over the next decade, as the category expanded and became the subject of retrospectives and catalogues raisonnés, French critics often praised noir for its dynamism, its cruelty, and its irrationality; but they also searched the dark Hollywood streets for what Chartier called "accents of rebellion" against the "fatality of evil." Some of the reasons behind this

On Dangerous Ground: Ida Lupino
(opposite page, top); *Laura*: Dana
Andrews and Gene Tierney (bottom)

potentially contradictory response were briefly evident during a round-table discussion at *Cahiers* in 1951, when André Bazin remarked in passing that in the French prewar cinema, "even if there wasn't exactly a genre there was a style, the realist *film noir*." Bazin was nostalgic for a lost national identity, but he also recognized that noir had philosophical or ideological significance; French films of the type, he argued, were indebted to surrealism and might have been developed along the lines of literary existentialism.¹⁵

As Bazin's remarks suggest, French discussion of American film noir was conditioned by the prevailing and sometimes conflicting trends in Left Bank intellectual culture. The importance of existentialism to the period has long been recognized; what needs to be emphasized is that French existentialism was intertwined with a residual surrealism, which was crucial for the reception of any art described as noir. Gallimard's *Série noire* was conceived and edited by Marcel Duhamel, who assisted in the development of the "Exquisite Corpse" game in 1925, and who participated in the surrealist *recherches* into sexuality during the early 1930s;¹⁶ the *Anthologie d'humeur noir* (1940) was edited by André Breton himself, and critical discussion of films noirs in the 1950s was conducted chiefly in surrealist journals. Indeed, Nino Frank's seminal essay, which emphasizes "criminal adventure" and the "dynamism of violent death," is replete with surrealist values.

From their beginnings in the years after World War I, the surrealists had used cinema as an apparatus for the destruction of bourgeois art and the desublimation of everyday life. Breton and his associates would pop briefly in and out of movie theaters and write lyrical essays about their experiences, developing what Louis Aragon called a "synthetic" or tangential criticism that extracted latent, chiefly libidinal meanings from images or short sequences. This project was facilitated by movies with improbable, confusing, or incoherent narratives: the bad film, the crazy comedy, the horror film, and—especially in the post-World War II era—the Chanderlesque detective film, which often lost control of its plot, becoming a series of hallucinatory adventures in the criminal underworld.¹⁷

The surrealists were "dreaming" cathected details from the cinematic *mise-en-scène*, but not just any detail caught their eye. They were attracted to the cinema of the "social fantastic," to stories about doomed erotic love, and to Hollywood thrillers with Sadeian titles. Among their particular favorites were

movies about gangsterism and murder, partly because such pictures depicted violent, antisocial behavior, and partly because they bestowed an aura of the marvelous upon ordinary urban decor. As Aragon had written in 1918, American crime films "speak of daily life and manage to raise to a dramatic level a banknote on which our attention is riveted, a table with a revolver on it, a bottle that on occasion becomes a weapon, a handkerchief that reveals a crime, a typewriter that's the horizon of a desk. . . ."¹⁸

Aragon might well have been describing thrillers of the 1940s and 50s, which were perversely erotic, confined largely to interiors, photographed in a deep-focus style that seemed to reveal the secret life of things, and often derived from the literature of alcohol—a substance especially conducive to desire, enervation, euphoria, confusion, and nightmare. Not surprisingly, such films were admired and discussed in *L'Âge du cinéma*, a surrealist publication of 1951, and in *Positif*, which maintained strong connections to surrealism throughout the 1950s and 60s. They were also given their first important study in a book that was profoundly surrealist in its ideological aims: Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton's *Panorama du film noir américain* (1955), which has been described as a "benchmark" for all later work on the topic.¹⁹

Raymond Borde was a frequent contributor to *Positif* and an important second-generation surrealist. But we do not need to consult his or Chaumeton's vitae, since their intellectual heritage is apparent from the outset. The *Panorama* is introduced by Marcel Duhamel, who fondly recalls the years 1923–26, when he and other members of the surrealist group, including Breton, Raymond Queneau, Benjamin Péret, Jacques Prévert, and Yves Tanguy, watched American gangster films that were "curious, non-conformist, and as noir as one could desire."²⁰ If this were not enough, Borde and Chaumeton choose a phrase from Lautréamont, the surrealists' favorite poet, as an epigraph: "The bloody channels through which one passes to the extremities of logic."

Despite their obvious ideological purpose, however, Borde and Chaumeton often seem unclear or inconsistent. At various points they discuss film noir as a series, a cycle, a genre, a mood, and a *Zeitgeist*. In the introduction, Duhamel claims that noir is as old as cinema and has never been healthier, whereas in the text Borde and Chaumeton say that the American series began in 1941 and ended in 1953. (A postscript to the 1969 edition moves the end of noir forward to 1955, and then notes its "fascinating renaissance" in

such films as *Point Blank*, *Dirty Harry*, and *Badlands*.) Throughout, an "objective" tone serves as a mask for the celebration of kinky irrationality. Borde and Chaumeton have surprisingly little to say about visual style (the French were generally unimpressed by what Bazin called "plastics" or expressionist imagery); in fact they emphasize that the dark atmosphere of Hollywood crime movies is "*nothing in itself*" and ought not to be adopted for its own sake (180). On the other hand, they place great emphasis on the theme of death, and on the "essential" affective qualities of noir, which they list in the form of five adjectives typical of surrealism: "oneiric, bizarre, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel" (3).²¹ Sometimes one of these qualities is said to dominate: *The Shanghai Gesture* (which had prompted one of the surrealist experiments in "irrational expansion") is supposedly "oneiric," whereas *Gilda* is "erotic" (3). Sometimes, too, the traits are unevenly distributed, with the "noir aspect" manifesting itself in a fragmentary or tangential form that resembles Aragon's synthetic criticism: "*The Set Up* is a good documentary about boxing: it becomes film noir in the sequence where accounts are settled by a savage beating in a blind alley. *Rope* is a psychological film that can be linked to the noir series only because of its spellbinding sadism" (3).

But according to Borde and Chaumeton, there are also noir narratives and characters; and at this level film noir becomes a full-fledged outlaw genre, systematically reversing Hollywood's foundational myths. True films of the type, Borde and Chaumeton insist, not only take place "inside the criminal milieu," but also represent "the point of view of criminals" (7). Such films are "moral" in an approximately surrealist sense: instead of incorruptible legal agents, they give us shady private eyes, crooked policemen, murderous plainclothes detectives, or lying district attorneys. Often they depict the gentry as corrupt, and whenever they deal with gangsters, they replace the "grand primitives" of earlier gangster movies like *Scarface* with angelic killers or neurotics (7).

It follows that the ideal noir hero is the opposite of John Wayne. Psychologically, he is passive, masochistic, morbidly curious; physically, he is "often mature, almost old, not very handsome. Humphrey Bogart is the type" (10). By the same logic, the noir heroine is no Doris Day. Borde and Chaumeton never allude to the Marquis de Sade's Juliette, one of the most famous sexual terrorists in French literature,²² but the character they describe resembles her in every respect save the fact that she is "fatal even to herself" (10). Beautiful, adept with firearms, and "probably

frigid," this new woman contributes to a distinctive noir eroticism, "which is usually no more than the eroticization of violence" (10).²⁴ Her best representative on the screen, Borde and Chaumeton argue, is Gloria Grahame, who, even though she was never cast as a femme fatale, always suggested "cold calculation and sensuality" (125).

Above all, Borde and Chaumeton are intrigued by the way film noir has "revived the theme of violence" (10). One of the major accomplishments of the series, they observe, is to replace the melodramatic combat of arms between hero and villain (the swordplay at the climax of a swashbuckler, the gun duel at the end of a Western, etc.) with a richly elaborated "ceremony of killing." Death in such films usually takes the form of a professional execution (a locus classicus is the 1946 adaptation of Hemingway's *The Killers*) or a sadistic ritual. In *The High Wall*, a publisher of religious books murders an elevator repairman by hooking an umbrella under the stool on which the man is standing, sending him plummeting down an empty shaft; in *Kiss of Death*, a demented gangster laughs as he shoves a little old lady in a wheelchair down a flight of stairs; in *Brute Force*, a fascistic prison guard tortures inmates with an elaborate, stylized brutality; and in *Border Incident*, an undercover policeman is slowly run over by a tractor while his helpless confederate stands by and watches.

"In this incoherent brutality," Borde and Chaumeton remark, "there is the feeling of a dream" (12). Indeed the narratives themselves are often situated on the margins of dreams, as if to intensify the surrealist atmosphere of violent confusion or disequilibrium that Borde and Chaumeton regard as the very basis of noir. "All the components of noir style," they write, are designed to "disorient the spectator" (14). At the cinema, "the public has become accustomed to certain conventions: a logical action, an evident distinction between good and evil, well-defined characters with clear motives, scenes that are more spectacular than brutal, a heroine who is exquisitely feminine and a hero who is honest" (14). The "vocation" of film noir is to reverse the conventional norms—thus creating a specific tension which results from the disruption of order and "*the disappearance of psychological bearings or guideposts*" (15).

But film noir was also a prisoner of conventions. Borde and Chaumeton contend that in the 1940s, films about crime and gangs possessed a bizarre quality reminiscent of the surrealists or Kafka; by the 1950s, however, social criticism was smothered by banal plot conventions, and "incoherence" became predictable

(180). Even the original pictures were beginning to look dated: at a 1953 revival of *Murder, My Sweet* presented by the Ciné-Club of Toulouse, people laughed whenever Philip Marlowe lost consciousness and disappeared into a black pool, and in the discussion afterward the picture was treated as a "parody of horror" (181).

From the perspective of the mid 1950s, it appeared that noir was dying. Borde and Chaumeton attribute this "decadence" to the exhaustion of a formula and to the rise of neorealist social-problem pictures. There were also several economic and political reasons for the decline of crime movies. In response to television and a diversified leisure industry, Hollywood was turning to Cinemascope, color, and Biblical epics; at the same time, several of the key writers and directors of the previous decade had been blacklisted by the major studios. As if to signal the end of a cycle, urban thrillers were increasingly being produced by B units or Poverty Row studios. Hence the two pictures of the 1950s that the *Panorama* singles out as truly disorienting were both filmed on low budgets. The first was *Gun Crazy* (1950), the story of a murderous heterosexual couple of "exemplary beauty" (9), which allows the woman to wear pants and act as the aggressive partner. Borde and Chaumeton regard this film as a pure and unself-conscious expression of the surrealist credo; in their words, it is "one of the rarest contemporary illustrations of *L'AMOUR FOU* (in every sense of that term)," and it deserves to be called "a sort of *L'Age d'Or* of the American film noir" (118). Next in importance is the Robert Aldrich adaptation of Mickey Spillane's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), which Borde and Chaumeton discuss in their 1969 "postface." Like *The Maltese Falcon*, this film involves a private eye and the search for a mysterious object; nevertheless, Borde and Chaumeton describe it as the "despairing opposite" of the picture that inaugurated the noir series: "From the eve of war to the society of consumption, the tone has changed. A savage lyricism throws us into a world in complete decomposition, ruled by debauchery and brutality; to the intrigues of these wild beasts and spectres, Aldrich provides the most radical of solutions: nuclear apocalypse" (277).

Nowadays, both *Kiss Me Deadly* and *Gun Crazy* sometimes provoke the same unwanted laughter that greeted *Murder, My Sweet* in 1953. Even so, Borde and Chaumeton's achievement in discussing these and other films is remarkable. Without complete access to American culture, they call attention to scores of interesting movies that might have been forgotten,

and they create an entire category that functions *normatively*. Here and in many later writings, noir is not simply a descriptive term, but the name for a critical tendency within the popular cinema—an anti-genre that reveals the dark side of savage capitalism. For Borde and Chaumeton in particular, the essence of noirness lies in a feeling of discontinuity, an intermingling of social realism and oniricism, an anarcho-leftist critique of bourgeois ideology, and an eroticized treatment of violence. We might debate whether these qualities are in fact essential to the Hollywood thriller (if any quality can be essential), but there is no question that they are fundamental to surrealist art.

Via the *Panorama* and several other writings, surrealism provided an organizing metaphor and a kind of aesthetic rationale for the film noir. Perhaps it also fostered the tendency of later critics to read individual pictures against the narrative grain, emphasizing tone or mood—a technique frequently used to bestow cult value on mass art. But as I have already indicated, French discussion of noir was also affected by existentialist literature and philosophy, which placed emphasis on different matters. Existentialism was despairingly humanist rather than perversely anarchic, and it had a different attitude toward violence; thus if the surrealists saw the Hollywood thriller as a theater of cruelty, the existentialists saw it as an absurdist novel. For critics who were influenced by existentialism, film noir was especially attractive because it depicted a world of obsessive return, dark corners, and *huis clos*. It often employed settings like the foggy seaside diner in *Fallen Angel*, where Dana Andrews gets off a bus and seems unable to leave. ("I'm waiting for something to happen," he tells Alice Faye. "Nothing's going to happen," she responds.) Or like the dark highway in *Detour*, where Tom Neal keeps thumbing a ride to a violent destiny.

In the years before and after the war, when the French themselves were entrapped by history, several themes of French existential philosophy had been elaborated through readings of such novelists as Hammett, Chandler, and Cain, who were often bracketed with Wright, Hemingway, Dos Passos, and Faulkner; indeed the French "discovered" several of these talents, just as they later discovered the Hollywood auteurs. In 1946, even Faulkner was a relatively neglected figure in the United States, where most of

Shoot the Piano Player: Charles Aznavour
(opposite page, top); *Breathless*:
Jean-Paul Belmondo (bottom)



his income came from movies like *The Big Sleep* and from a story he had published in *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*; meanwhile, Jean-Paul Sartre described him as a "god." The interest of Parisian intellectuals in a certain kind of American fiction became so intense that the British author Rebecca West teased James M. Cain, "You were a fool not to be born a Frenchman. The highbrows would have put you with Gide and Mauriac if you had taken this simple precaution."²⁵

There was truth in West's observation. The French liked their Americans exotic, violent, and romantic;²⁶ they wrote a great deal about Southern Gothicism and tough-guy modernism, and they usually ignored anyone who did not offer what André Gide called "a foretaste of Hell." Gide himself declared that Hammett's *Red Harvest* was "the last word in atrocity, cynicism, and horror";²⁷ André Malraux described Faulkner's *Sanctuary* as "the intrusion of Greek tragedy into the thriller"; and Albert Camus confessed that he had been inspired to write *The Stranger* after reading Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*.²⁸

This passion for literary toughness has an interesting relation to the social and political climate after the war. Some American and French authors who had once been Marxist, such as John Dos Passos and André Malraux, completely reversed themselves; others, such as Dashiell Hammett, were imprisoned or blacklisted. The left had been in disarray in the West since the Nazi-Soviet pact, and the situation in France was complicated by the fact that the country had recently emerged from what the French themselves described as *les années noires*—a time of torture, compromise, and collaboration.²⁹ Faced with a choice between capitalism and Stalinism, many French artists tried to achieve "freedom" through individualized styles of resistance. For them, prewar American novels offered a model—especially novels depicting a violent, corrupt world in which ambiguous personal action is the only redemptive gesture. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1947), Sartre wrote,

As for the Americans, it was not their cruelty or pessimism which moved us. We recognized in them men who had been swamped, lost in too large a continent, as we were in history, and who tried, without traditions, with the means available, to render their stupor and forlornness in the midst of incomprehensible events.²⁹

That same year, Sartre claimed that modern life had become "fantastic," as if it were made up of a "labyrinth of hallways, doors, and stairways that lead nowhere, innumerable signposts that dot routes and signify nothing."³⁰ To convey such a life, he advocated a literature of "extreme situations" that was narrated ambiguously, without "all-knowing witnesses" (154–55). The novel, he insisted, must shift from "Newtonian mechanics to generalized relativity"; it should be peopled with "minds that [are] half lucid and half overcast, some of which we might consider with more sympathy than others, but none of which [should] have a privileged point of view" (155).

Sartre was particularly impressed by Faulkner's experiments with multiple-perspective narration in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), but he also praised the way Americans used a free-indirect style. In 1938, he had argued that Dos Passos was the greatest contemporary novelist; as proof, he quoted a passage from *USA* describing a fistfight in a Paris café:

Joe laid out a couple of frogs and was backing off towards the door, when he saw in the mirror that a big guy in a blouse was bringing down a bottle on his head with both hands. He tried to swing around but he didn't have time. The bottle crashed his skull and he was out.

Here was pure existential consciousness, divested of authorial comment, observing itself in a mirror and registering the action like a camera obscura, as if Descartes and Bergson were the "couple of frogs" laid out on the café floor. Here, too, though Sartre did not say so, was the familiar voice of American pulp fiction. Sartre believed that this voice amounted to "a technical revolution in the art of telling a story," and for over a decade he and other French novelists tried to emulate its effects, aiming for what Roland Barthes later described as a zero-degree style.³¹

Unlike the surrealists, who made the movies essential to their project, the existentialists were literary and somewhat dubious of Hollywood. Nevertheless, given the intellectual climate Sartre helped establish, it is not surprising that French cinéastes embraced American thrillers with special fervor. These pictures were often based on the novels of respected authors; they were sometimes narrated from multiple points of view; and they offered an attractively labyrinthine, enclosed *mise-en-scène* peopled with alienated characters. Thus in 1955 Eric Rohmer observed, "Our immediate predilection tends to be for faces marked with the brand of vice and the neon lights of bars rather

than the ones which glow with wholesome sentiments and prairie air."¹²

Rohmer and most of his colleagues at *Cahiers du cinéma* belonged to a younger generation that imbibed its existentialism and phenomenology through Bazin, who was a more conservative and in some ways a more consistent writer than Sartre. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, Sartre had struggled to reconcile modernist narration with political engagement; Bazin could avoid the problem, because his essays, posthumously collected in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (1958–62), were couched in terms of moral dilemmas or the problem of death. Like all the French, Bazin was interested in modern American fiction, and he often used a Sartrean vocabulary ("freedom," "fate," "authenticity," etc.); in fact, many of his theoretical writings seem to have been derived from Sartre, minus any hint of Marxism. On the grounds of "realism," Sartre had wanted to do away with both omniscient narration and temporal ellipsis in the novel; modern narratives, he argued, should resemble *Ulysses*, giving detailed renditions of a day, an hour, or even a minute (158). For his part, Bazin believed that cinema could achieve "the asymptote of reality" through long takes or *temps morts*, such as the coffee-making sequence in *Umberto D*. In place of Sartre's neutral or ambiguous literary narrators, Bazin valorized the camera, which he regarded as a phenomenology machine that could preserve ambiguous reality without the tendentious intervention of a human hand.

Bazin's style of existentialism is everywhere apparent in his 1957 eulogy for Humphrey Bogart, written only two years before his own death. According to Bazin, Bogart was important because "the *raison d'être* of his existence was in some sense to survive," and because the alcoholic lines on his face revealed "the corpse on reprieve within each of us" (Hillier, 98). Jean Gabin, the star of prewar French films noirs, seemed romantic by comparison; Bogart was a man "defined by fate," and because he was associated with "the noir crime film whose ambiguous hero he was to epitomize," he became the quintessential "actor/myth of the postwar period" (Hillier, 99). Bazin argued that Bogart's portrayal of Sam Spade was theoretically equivalent to the almost simultaneous release of *Citizen Kane*: "It must be the case," he wrote, "that there is some secret harmony in the coincidence of these events: the end of the prewar period, the arrival of a certain novelistic style of cinematographic *écriture*, and, through Bogart, the triumph of interiorization and ambiguity" (Hillier, 100).

The "ambiguity" of which Bazin speaks is quite

different from the disorientation or inversion of moral norms valued by the surrealists. It has more to do with ethical complexity, and with the cinema's ability to capture what Bazin elsewhere calls the "structure of reality" in all its phenomenological uncertainty. Likewise, Bazin's "interiorization" has little to do with the Freudian subconscious. It suggests instead a radical isolation or individuality that forces the subject to create identity out of existential choice. Bazin apparently believes that the "secret harmony" linking Bogart and Welles is a byproduct of what French literary critic Claude-Edmonde Magny (in a book heavily influenced by Sartre) had called "the age of the American novel."¹³ On a more general level, however, the themes of isolation, uncertainty, and ambiguity must have exerted a strong appeal to anyone who was wary of collective politics and inclined to treat social issues in terms of personal ethics.

During this period, younger critics at *Cahiers* began to project Bazin's ideas onto films noirs, which became existential, depoliticized allegories of the white male condition. The favored existential hero, however, was not Bogart but Nicholas Ray, who directed *They Live by Night*, *In a Lonely Place*, and *On Dangerous Ground*. François Truffaut wrote that the essential theme of Ray's films was "moral solitude" (Hillier, 107), and Jacques Rivette argued that Ray was concerned with "the interior demon of violence, which seems linked to man and his solitude" (Hillier, 105). At this juncture, "film noir" and "auteur" began to work in tandem, expressing the same values from different angles. (It is no accident that the two terms would enter the English language at the same moment.) Film noir was a collective style operating within and against the Hollywood system; and the auteur was an individual stylist who achieved freedom over the studio through existential choice. But the auteur was more important than the genre. Unlike Borde and Chaumeton, who used the names of directors only as a convention of French scholarship, the *Cahiers* group always subordinated general forms to personal visions. In other words, France was not far from the *nouvelle vague*.

To see what the future had in store, we need only consult Claude Chabrol's 1955 *Cahiers* review of *Kiss Me Deadly*. Like Borde and Chaumeton, Chabrol regarded this picture as a watershed, although he believed its significance had less to do with the end of a genre than with the creation of a cinema of authors. By the mid 1950s, Chabrol argued, the literary sources of film noir had "dried up," and the plots and mises-en-scène were clichéd. There was no question of renew-

ing the form, but it had become a "wonderful pretext" (Hillier, 160):

[*Kiss Me Deadly*] has chosen to create itself out of the worst material to be found, the most deplorable, the most nauseous product of a genre in a state of putrefaction: a Mickey Spillane story. Robert Aldrich and A. I. Besserides have taken this threadbare and lackluster fabric and woven it into rich patterns of the most enigmatic arabesques (Hillier, 163).

Clearly, an art cinema based on transformation of "the worst material" was about to appear. In 1959, Godard's *Breathless* was released, and Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player* soon followed. Both films were fusions of Bazinian neorealism and surrealist disjunctions; both were littered with references to Bogart, *Gun Crazy*, *On Dangerous Ground*, etc.;³⁴ and both made film noir available as a "pretext" for directors who wanted to assert their personalities. Also in 1959, Boris Viah died in a Paris movie theater. The first age of film noir had come to an end.

Darkness Everywhere

The discourse on noir was initiated by two generations of Parisian intellectuals who announced the death of the form soon after they discovered it. But crime in the city, which has always been one of America's favorite themes, continued to be exploited by politicians, journalists, and artists of every kind. Eventually, French critical terminology migrated to Britain and America, where it exerted considerable influence and acquired new interpreters. By the 1990s, it had become what Dennis Hopper describes as "every director's favorite genre."³⁵

A complete history of noir in America would take into account such things as New York film culture in the East Village during the late 1950s, or the Bogart cult that developed at the Brattle Theater in Cambridge, Mass., in the early 1960s. It would look closely at the role of alternative criticism and college film societies in the late 1960s and early 1970s. On a more general level, it would consider the Vietnam war (a structuring absence in Paul Schrader's "Notes on *Film Noir*"); the rise of academic film theory; the vast changes in the economics and censorship of Hollywood; and the increasing dissolution of discursive boundaries between high and commercial art.

Today, the "original" films noirs still circulate alongside new ones. The noir mediascape in the late twentieth century spreads across virtually every national boundary and every form of communication, including museum retrospectives, college courses, parodies, remakes, summertime blockbusters, mass-market paperbacks, experimental literature and painting, made-for-TV films (there is a significant B-movie industry known in the trade as "cable noir"), and soft-core "erotic thrillers" that go directly to video stores. Why has noir become so important? The answer is beyond the scope of an essay, but it seems obvious that the idea of film noir has been useful to the movie industry, providing artistic cachet and spectacular opportunities for both the "New Hollywood" auteurs of the 1970s and the sex-and-violence specialists of the 1980s. The more interesting question is whether a category developed by critics to influence what Borde and Chaumeton called "the occidental and American public of the 1950s" (5) can function in the same way for us.

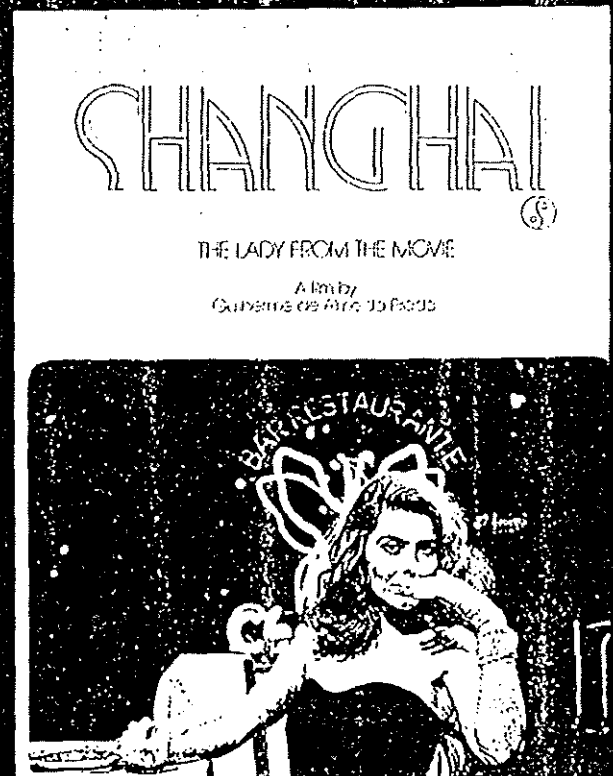
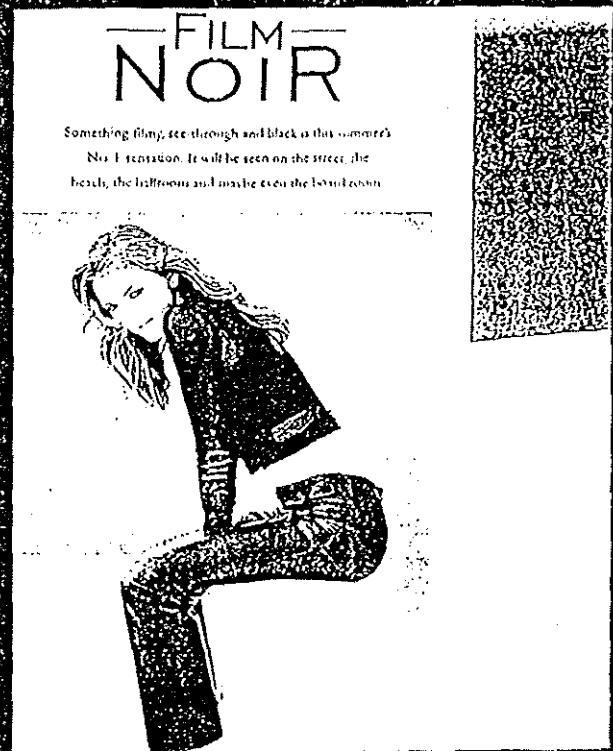
If we could ask the original French commentators what film noir represented, they might agree that, for all its romanticism, it was a challenge to Hollywood conventions: it used unorthodox narration; it resisted sentiment and censorship; it reveled in the "social fantastic"; it demonstrated the ambiguity of human motives; and it made commodity culture seem like a wasteland. Later European art directors (including not only Godard and Truffaut but also Resnais in *Last Year at Marienbad*, Wenders in *The American Friend*, and Fassbinder in *The American Soldier*) saw noir as a dying form that could be deconstructed or transmogrified; it could retain its psychological and social edge, but it needed to be treated at a self-reflexive distance.

In the 1990s, when the media are pervasive and the counterculture hardly exists, film noir represents something far more complicated. Good and bad examples are created in every mode of production, but Hollywood usually reconstructs its old pictures, borrowing the allusive technique of 1960s and 70s art films to make audiences feel sophisticated.³⁶ This strategy also extends beyond Hollywood, as two exhibits will serve to illustrate. First is the cover of a press kit for *A Dama do Cine Shanghai* (*The Lady from the Shanghai Cinema*, 1987) by Brazilian director Guilherme de Almeida Prado, in which the star image of Rita Hayworth is used in a nostalgic, somewhat campy way to suggest a movie about movies. Second is a page from the fashion section of the *New York Times Magazine* of May 23, 1993, showing a

model dressed in a "film noir." The caption tells us that "Something filmy, see-through and black is this summer's No. 1 sensation. It will be seen on the street, the beach, the ballroom and maybe even the board room."

Quite obviously, a concept that was generated ex post facto has become part of a worldwide mass memory; a dream image of bygone glamour, it represses as much history as it recalls, usually in the service of cinephilia and commodification. Not every recent instance of film noir (even Prado's work) can be explained in this way, and it would be naïve to assume that the classic films noirs were ever free of show business and the consumer economy. Nevertheless, the term now plays a central role in the vocabulary of ludic, commercialized postmodernism.¹⁷ Depending on how it is used, it can describe a dead period, a nostalgia for something that never existed, or perhaps even a vital tradition. One thing is clear: the last film noir is no easier to name than the first. A fully historicized account of the category would range across the twentieth-century imagination, and would require a more nimble analysis than anyone has attempted.

James Naremore, the author of *The Films of Vincente Minnelli* and other books, is writing a cultural history of American film noir.



Notes

1. Film noir is described as a genre by, among others, Robin Buss, *French Film Noir* (London: Marion Boyars, 1994); Charles Higham and Joel Greenburg, *Hollywood in the Forties* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1968); Foster Hirsch, *The Dark Side of the Screen* (New York: A. S. Barnes, 1981); Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward, eds., *Film Noir: An Encyclopedia of the American Style* (Woodstock, N.Y.: Overlook Press, rev. ed., 1992); and Jon Tuska, *Dark Cinema: American Film Noir in Cultural Perspective* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984). Noir is a movement or period characterized by "tone and mood" in Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," in *Film Genre Reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 167-82; a set of "patterns of nonconformity" within the classical Hollywood style in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); a series in Raymond Borde and Eugene Chaumeton, *Panorama du film noir américain, 1941-1953* (Paris: Editions du Minuit, 1955); a motif and tone in Raymond Durnat, "Paint It Black: The Family Tree of Film Noir," *Cinema* nos. 6-7 (1970), pp. 49-56; a visual style in J. A. Place and L. S. Peterson, "Some Visual Motifs of Film Noir," *Film Comment*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1974), pp. 13-18; a canon in J. P. Telotte, *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989); a phenomenon in Frank Krutnik, *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity* (London: Rutgers, 1991); and a transgeneric phenomenon in R. Barton Palmer, *Hollywood's Dark Cinema: The American Film Noir* (New York: Twayne, 1994). For an argument similar to Palmer's, see John Belton, "Film Noir's Knights of the Road," *Bright Lights Film Journal* 12 (Spring 1994), pp. 5-15.
2. The dates 1941-1958 seem to have been first proposed by Schrader, who used *The Maltese Falcon* and *Touch of Evil* to mark the beginning and end of the noir period. Schrader's position is accepted by Place and Peterson, and by a few writers in E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Women in Film Noir* (London: BFI, 1980). Several other books on film noir implicitly endorse this periodization, even when they do not set fixed dates; see, for example, Telotte and Krutnik. Most recent discussions treat film noir as a genre that begins somewhere in the late 30s or early 40s and continues to the present day; see Palmer, and many of the essayists in Joan Copjec, ed., *Shades of Noir* (London: Verso, 1993). In the Copjec volume, there are skeptical voices: see especially Marc Vernet, "Film Noir on the Edge of Doom," pp. 1-31, who questions many of the standard historical and stylistic assumptions.
3. The Silver and Ward encyclopedia omits a number of titles that might logically be called film noir, but as Marc Vernet has noted, one of the beauties of the category is that "there is always an unknown film to be added to the list." For a larger filmography, see Spencer Selby, *Dark City: The Film Noir* (Jefferson, N. C.: McFarland, 1984).
4. "What Is an Author?," in V. Harari, ed., *Textual Strategies* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 153. All further references are noted in the text.
5. See Philippe Boggio, *Boris Vian* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993). See also James Campbell, "Sullivan, the Invisible Man," *Times Literary Supplement* (January 28, 1994), p. 7. *J'irai cracher* was later transformed into a low-budget American horror film entitled *I Spit on Your Grave*, which does not acknowledge Vian's novel or the earlier French picture as sources; this film is discussed by Carol Clover in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992). I am grateful to Peter Wollen for calling my attention to Boris Vian and his relevance to the history of noir.
6. Higham and Greenburg use "Black Cinema" as the title for their chapter on noir, but they employ the French term when they discuss films. For an interesting paper on films noirs directed by African Americans, see Manthia Diawara, "Noir by Noirs: Toward a New Realism in Black Cinema," in Copjec, ed., pp. 261-78.
7. Jacques Bourgeois, "La Tragédie policier," *Revue du cinéma* 2 (1946), pp. 70-72.
8. Palmer is almost the only writer on film noir to have recognized that movies have different meanings for different audiences. My survey of French criticism differs from his in substantial ways, but I recommend his excellent survey of writings on noir in *Hollywood's Dark Cinema*, pp. 1-31.
9. For recent discussions of these films in English, see Edward Byron Turk, *Child of Paradise: Marcel Carné and the Golden Age of French Cinema* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Alan Williams, *Republic of Images: A History of French Filmmaking* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); and Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995). In a talk at the 1994 Society for Cinema Studies Conference (scheduled for publication in *Iris*), Charles O'Brien showed that the term "film noir" was widely used by the French in discussions of their own cinema during the 1930s.
10. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote that *The Maltese Falcon* was "worthy to stand with the English-made mysteries of Alfred Hitchcock" (10/25/41), and the *New York Times* described John Huston as "a coming American match for Alfred Hitchcock" (10/12/41). *Time* compared *Falcon* with films by Hitchcock and Carol Reed (10/20/41). Wilder's statement about Hitchcock is quoted from the *Los Angeles Times* (8/6/44).
11. The omission of Germany is not surprising, but the French also failed to mention that the vogue for James M. Cain started outside America. As many subsequent writers have noted, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was adapted by the French themselves in 1939, and by the Italians in 1943. Another British film that might logically have been discussed was *Hotel Reserve* (1944), which was based on a novel by Eric Ambler. Directed by Lance Comfort and starring James Mason and Herbert Lom, this picture now looks quite noirish.
12. Nino Frank, "Un nouveau genre policier: L'aventure

- criminelle," *L'Écran Français* 61 (28 August, 1946), p. 14. (My translation.) Hereafter noted in the text. Frank mentions Hitchcock's *Suspicion* in company with other recent crime films, but he regards it as an "absolute failure," unworthy of comparison with *Double Indemnity*.
13. Jean-Pierre Chartier, "Les Américains aussi font des films 'noirs,'" *Revue du cinéma* 2 (1946), p. 67. (My translation.) Hereafter noted in the text.
 14. One exception to this rule was Siegfried Kracauer, writing in the same month that the French coined the term film noir ("Hollywood's Terror Films: Do They Reflect an American State of Mind?," *Commentary* 2 [August 1946], pp. 132–36). Kracauer had recently completed *From Caligari to Hitler*, his book about German expressionist cinema, and he used the same arguments to discuss a recent spate of American "terror films," including *Shadow of a Doubt*, *The Stranger*, *The Dark Corner*, *The Spiral Staircase*, and *The Lost Weekend*. His essay is discussed briefly in Telotte, pp. 4–5, and extensively in Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and Urban Space*, Ph.D. Diss., University of California at Santa Cruz, 1992, pp. 116–63.
 15. Bazin's comments are part of an exchange with Roger Leenhardt in "Six Characters in Search of auteurs," *Cahiers du cinéma: The 1950s*, ed. Jim Hillier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), trans. Liz Heron, p. 37.
 16. For information on Duhamel's involvement with surrealism, see Marcel Jean, ed., *The Autobiography of Surrealism* (New York: Viking Press, 1980). See also José Pierre, ed., *Investigating Sex: Surrealist Discussions 1928–1932*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (London: Verso, 1992).
 17. Both the plots and the dialogue of hard-boiled thrillers created confusion, and this was not always to the liking of American reviewers. In *The New Republic* (8/24/44), Manny Farber claimed that *Double Indemnity* was "the most incomprehensible film in years." He praised it for being "much less repressed than usual," but he disliked the incessant talk: "I think you could get at the Underlying Thread of this film the same as you could in *The Malesse Falcon*—by being allowed to take the dialogue home with you to study at length."
 18. Louis Aragon, "On Decor," in *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on Cinema*, ed. Paul Hammond (London: BFI, 1978), p. 29. I am indebted to Hammond's introduction to this volume, which provides an excellent commentary on surrealist film criticism.
 19. Silver and Ward, p. 372.
 20. Marcel Duhamel, "Preface," in Borde and Chaumeton, p. vii. (My translation.) Subsequent references are cited in the text. Duhamel alludes to several unnamed gangster films starring George O'Brien, and to William Wellman's *Chinatown Nights*. The Wellman film, however, was not released until 1929.
 21. *Onirique, insolite, erotique, ambivalent, et cruel*. I have translated *insolite* as "bizarre," but there is no good English equivalent. It connotes the Gothic, somewhat like the Freudian *unheimlich*, but with a more shocking or horrific effect. Judging from its frequency, *insolite* is the most important adjective in the *Panorama*.
 22. For a brilliant discussion of this character, see Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* (New York: Pantheon, 1979). Carter points out that Juliette is simply the mirror image of Justine, Sade's best-known feminine character. In contrast to Justine, who is derived from the virginal heroines of the sentimental novel, Juliette appropriates the weapons of patriarchy and uses them for her own ends. In one sense she is a radical or revolutionary figure; but she is also a figment of the male imagination and a product of the very system she exploits. Her most obvious representative in the contemporary cinema is the anti-heroine of John Dahl's *The Last Seduction* (1994), who vanquishes all the men in her path and rides off in the back seat of a chauffeur-driven limousine.
 23. Compare Sharon Stone's comments to a reporter about the role she played in *Basic Instinct* (1992): "I never thought the character really cared about sex at all. That's why it was so easy for her to use her sexuality—it had no value." *Parade Magazine* (January 30, 1994), p. 10.
 24. Quoted by Roy Hoopes, *Cain: The Biography of James M. Cain* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), p. xiii.
 25. French admiration for American movies was often condescending, as if Hollywood were filled with charming primitives, unburdened by European sophistication. Godard, for example, argued that "The Americans, who are much more stupid when it comes to analysis, . . . have a gift for the kind of simplicity which brings depth. . . . The Americans are real and natural." (Quoted in Hillier, p. 8.)
 26. Quoted by Diane Johnson, *Dashiell Hammett: A Life* (New York: Random House, 1983), p. 322, n. 7. See also Perry Miller, "Europe's Faith in American Fiction," *Atlantic Monthly* (December 1951), pp. 50–56.
 27. See Hoopes, p. xiv.
 28. For a detailed account of the politics of French intellectuals in the period, see Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944–1956* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992).
 29. Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Situation of the Writer in 1947," in *What Is Literature?*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), p. 156. Hereafter noted in the text.
 30. Quoted by Dana Polan, *Power and Paranoia: History, Narrative, and the American Cinema, 1940–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 252.
 31. For a discussion of Sartre's ideas about Dos Passos, see Robert Denoon Cumming's introduction to *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: The Modern Library, 1966), pp. 3–47.
 32. Rohmer went on to observe that film noir had reached a dead end. For his generation, he remarked, "The charm of these works lies in the delirious romanticism of their heroes and the modernism of their technique. Hollywood, shy of them for so long, suddenly noticed their existence, and a breath of the avant-garde made the studios tremble. What came of it? There is now enough distance for us to judge: the answer is very little, if anything" ("Rediscovering America," in Hillier, ed., p. 91).
 33. Claude-Edmonde Magny, *The Age of the American Novel: The Film Aesthetic of Fiction Between the Two*

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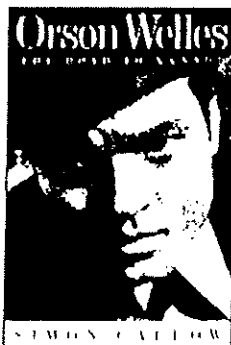
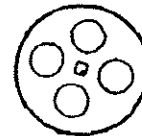
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Wars, trans. Eleanor Hochman (New York: Ungar, 1972). This book, published in France in the 1950s, helped to transmit Sartre's ideas about the novel into French film theory.

34. For a listing of allusions to films noirs in *Breathless*, and for a useful survey of the French intellectual background, see Dudley Andrew, "*Breathless*: Old As New," in *Breathless*, ed. Dudley Andrew (Rutgers, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1987), pp. 3-20.
35. Quoted by Leighton Grist, "Moving Targets and Black Widows: Film Noir in Modern Hollywood," in *The Book of Film Noir*, ed. Ian Cameron (New York: Continuum, 1993), p. 267.
36. For an interesting commentary on this phenomenon, see Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Allusion Profusion," *Chicago Reader* (October 21, 1994), pp. 12, 25-26. I am grateful to Rosenbaum for his helpful suggestions on my own essay.
37. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991). See also Marcia Landy and Lucy Fischer, "Dead Again or A-Live Again: Postmodern or Postmortem?," *Cinema Journal*, vol. 33, no. 4 (Summer 1994), pp. 3-22.



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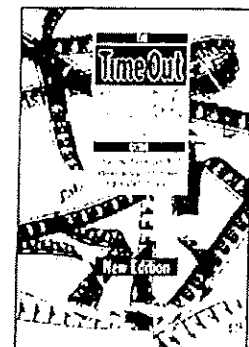
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