

MORE THAN NIGHT

FILM NOIR IN ITS CONTEXTS

James Naremore

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attention to the racial theme, I offer a brief history of the ways in which films noirs have depicted Asian Americans, Latin Americans, and African Americans. Much of the chapter consists of little more than a survey, but it ends by giving special attention to recent pictures directed by African Americans, on the grounds that black social-protest literature has always had an important connection with noir.

My seventh and final chapter is also a survey, but it has an even broader scope and a more loosely discursive organization. Here I discuss noir in the largest possible context, showing how our conception of the term is shaped not only by films and critical writing, but also by all the media that constitute the information age. This chapter concludes by offering a map of the contemporary theatrical marketplace and calling attention to the different market niches that film noir tends to fill. Its major purpose, however, is to indicate how pervasive and adaptable the idea of noir has become and to provide examples of how noir affects things other than movies.

Perhaps an alternate subtitle for the project might have been "Seven Ways of Looking at American Film Noir," because each of my chapters takes up a slightly different viewpoint. In each case, I try to achieve comprehensiveness; yet the individual chapters could have been elaborated into separate books, and I have no illusions that they are the last word on the issues they discuss. At least I have been able to include historical data that cannot be found elsewhere, and I offer new interpretations of several familiar films. I hope that my indebtedness to other writers will be evident and that I have opened paths for subsequent critics to explore. Certainly there will be more writing on the topic. As we shall discover almost immediately, film noir is both a thing of the past, extending to a time before I came in, and a symptom of the media-obsessed present. It began in Europe, but it has now become a persistent feature of American culture and will remain so into the future.



THE HISTORY OF AN IDEA

Only that which has no history is definable.
FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 1887

The past is not dead. It isn't even past.
WILLIAM FAULKNER, *The Sound and the Fury*, 1929

It has always been easier to recognize a film noir than to define the term. One can 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 extreme *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 despite scores of books and essays that have been written about it, 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 that 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, including low-key photography, images of wet city streets, pop-Freudian characterizations, and romantic fascination with femmes fatales. Some commentators localize these traits in the period between 1941 and 1958, whereas 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 Reference to the American Style* (revised edition, 1992) begins in 1927

and ends in the present, listing over five hundred motion pictures of various stylistic and generic descriptions.³

Encyclopedic surveys of the Silver and Ward type are 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; and so on. Unfortunately, nothing links together all the things described 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 supposedly coined the term, writing separate essays in 1946, were referring to an international style.) More intriguingly, if the heyday of noir was 1941–1958, 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 filmmakers, and then recycled on television.

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 of monographs on famous movies. 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 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 filmmakers, 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; in other words, it has less to do with a group of artifacts than with a discourse—a loose, evolving system of arguments and readings that helps 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. In a well-known essay, French philosopher Michel Foucault argues 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 relations of "homogeneity, filiation, authentication of some texts by the use of others" (147). At bottom, these relations are "projections," governed by belief in "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 categories in film history, these questions seem particularly apt. To answer them, this chapter examines the historical context of seminal writings about noir. Throughout, instead of looking for the essential features of a group of films, I 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, 1946–1959

The end of World War II in Paris gave rise to what might be called 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 filmmaker. Instead I would pick the somewhat Rimbaud-like personality Boris Vian, who was a friend of the ex-surrealist Raymond Queneau and the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. Vian wrote witty avant-garde novels, protoabsurdist plays, satiric columns for *Les temps modernes*, music criticism for *Jazz Hot*, and over five hundred Dylanesque protest songs (including "Le déserteur," which remains an an-

them of French antiwar movements); meanwhile, he played trumpet and sang in Le Tabou and other Saint-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."⁵ An ultra-violent mixture of 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 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-trompettiste*" (ex-writer, ex-trumpet player). 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.⁶

The themes and motifs of Vian's life and work—indigo moods, smoky jazz clubs, American fiction, and romantic isolation—resemble those in movies of his day, and his scandalous novel foregrounds two issues that seem 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.⁷ In regard to the second issue, we need to examine the metaphor of darkness. The discourse on noir grew out of a European male fascination with the instinctive (a fascination that was evi-

dent 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."⁸

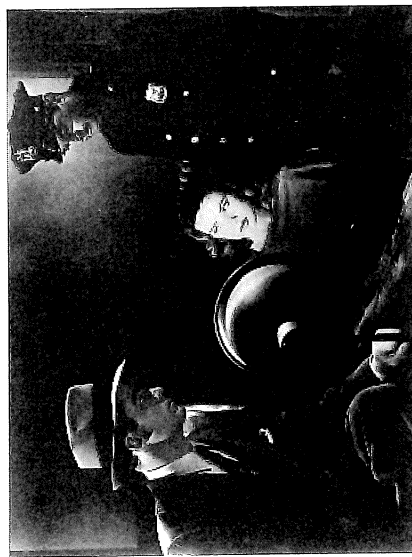
I say more about such matters in subsequent chapters; for now, however, the publication and eventual adaptation of *J'irai cracher* interest me for historical reasons, because they coincide with what I shall call the first (or historical) age of American film noir: the period between the postwar arrival of Hollywood movies in Paris and the beginnings of the French New Wave. We can never know when the first film noir was made (examples have been claimed as far back as D. W. Griffith's *Muscatiers of Pig Alley* [1912] and Louis Feuillade's *Fantomas* [1913]), but everyone agrees that the first *writings* on Hollywood noir appeared in French film journals in August 1946—at exactly the moment when "Vernon Sullivan" was composing his novel. The term was used by analogy with the *Série noire*, and it surfaced in discussions of five features made before, during, and after 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, *The Woman in the Window*, described by one French reviewer as a "bourgeois tragedy," was later to become a noir classic.⁹ The forthcoming Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer 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 the American film noir, and they did so because local conditions predisposed them to view Hollywood in certain ways. As R. Barton Palmer observes, postwar France possessed a sophisticated film culture, consisting of theaters, journals, and "cinema clubs" where movies were treated as art rather than as commercial entertainment.¹⁰ Equally important, the decade after the liberation was

characterized by a strong resurgence of Americanism among French directors and critics, many of whom sought to refashion their art cinema along the more “authentic” lines of Hollywood genre movies.¹¹ 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 American noir because it evoked a golden age of their own cinema. They were quick to observe that the new Hollywood thrillers resembled such Popular Front films as *Pépé le Moko* (1936), *Hôtel du Nord* (1938), and *Le jour se lève* (1939)—a group of shadowy melodramas, set in an urban criminal milieu and featuring doomed protagonists who behaved with sangfroid under pressure.¹² The term *film noir* had in fact been employed by French writers of the late 1930s in discussions of these films. Film historian Charles O’Brien points out that in the years immediately before the war, the word *noir* often had pejorative connotations and was frequently used by the right-wing French press in their attacks on the “immorality and scandal” of left-wing culture.¹³ *Noir* was nevertheless embraced as a descriptive adjective by several writers on the Left (particularly after the war), and the style favored by the Popular Front, whether it was called “noir” or not, constituted a respectable and quite recognizable type of filmmaking for most critics throughout the world. Thus, 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’” [24 August 1944].)

French writers after the war might have recognized the equally significant contributions of other European nations to the evolution of the crime or espionage film. For example, they could have alluded to Alfred 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 with 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.”¹⁴ In 1946, however, the French not only ignored the British but also conspicuously avoided the Germans.¹⁵ Instead, the two earliest essays on Hollywood 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



FIGURES 1–3. Which of these films was not described as an American film noir by French writers in the summer of 1946: *Laura* (1944), *The Woman in the Window* (1944), or *The Lost Weekend* (1945)? Answer on p. 13. (Museum of Modern Art Stills Archive.)

'noirs,' published three months later in the more conservative *Revue du cinéma* (an ancestor of *Cahiers*)—treated the American pictures as if they were a new phenomenon with only a few Gallic predecessors.

For Nino Frank, it seemed that a young generation of Hollywood auteurs, led by John Huston, Billy Wilder, and Raymond Chandler, had rejected the sentimental humanism of "museum objects" like John Ford, Frank Capra, and William Wyler.¹⁶ The new filmmakers specialized in the *policier* (police story), which, according to Frank, always deals with the "social fantastic" and the "dynamism of violent death" (8); unlike earlier practitioners, however, the Americans were more 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, the French would need to make "somber" films in which there was "more dynamism in an unmoving shot than in a majestic panorama" (14).

Jean-Pierre Chartier also treated the American films as a group, but he disliked their "pessimism and disgust toward humanity" and suggested that the puritanical Breen Office had deflected the characters' sexual motives into an "obsessive criminal fatality."¹⁷ In some respects, his remarks were reminiscent of the conservative reactions to French noir during the *avant guerre*, except that the Americans seemed to him far more decadent than the French Popular Front had been. Although he admired the first-person narration in *Murder, My Sweet* (which reminded him of "the old avant-garde"), Chartier was troubled by the moral effect of the Hollywood series as a whole:

One may speak of a French school of film noir, but *Le Quai des brumes* or *Hôtel 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)

In the United States, most of these films had been nominated for Academy Awards and had attracted a good deal of public and critical attention. Reviewers had seen a vague connection between them, but no one

tried to invent a new term.¹⁸ *The New Yorker* described *Double Indemnity* as a "murder melodrama" (16 September 1944), and *The Los Angeles Times* called it an "intellectual exercise in crime" (10 October 1944). (*Times* critic Philip K. Scheuer, who admired the Wilder film, added a qualification: "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" (26 February 1945), and *The Hollywood Reporter* noted that Paramount was investing heavily in the "hard-boiled, kick-em-in-the-teeth murder cycle" (28 January 1946). The Americans also grouped the films in ways that now seem unusual: *The Los Angeles Times* compared *Double Indemnity* with the MGM adaptation of William Saroyan's *Human Comedy* (6 August 1944), and Manny Farber, writing in *The New Republic*, compared it with Preston Sturges's *Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (24 August 1944).

French writers, in contrast, were fascinated with the noir metaphor, and in subsequent discussions they elaborated the tensions between the two essays by Frank and Chartier. Over the next decade, as the category expanded and became the subject of retrospectives and catalogues raisonnés, French critics often followed Frank's line, praising noir for its dynamism, its cruelty, and its irrationality; but they also searched the dark Hollywood streets for what Chartier had called "accents of rebellion" against the "fatality of evil." Some of the reasons behind this potentially contradictory response were evident during a round-table discussion at *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1957, 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.¹⁹

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 existentialism was intertwined with a residual surrealism, and surrealism 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 *researches* into sexuality during the early 1930s;²⁰ the Popular Front film noir, especially in such instances as *Quai*

des brumes, was strongly associated with the surrealism of Jacques Prévert; the *Anthologie d'humour noir* (1940) was edited by André Breton himself; and critical discussion of American 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 used cinema as an instrument 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, which was designed to extract latent, chiefly libidinal meanings from single 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 Chandleresque detective film, which often lost control of its plot and became a series of hallucinatory adventures in the criminal underworld.²¹

The surrealists were "dreaming" cathected details from the cinematic mise-en-scène, but not just any detail caught their eye. They were profoundly attracted to the cinema of the "social fantastic," to stories of doomed erotic love, and to thrillers with Sadeian titles. Among their particular favorites were movies about gangsterism and murder, in part because such pictures depicted violent, antisocial behavior, and in part because they bestowed an aura of the marvelous upon urban decor. As Aragon wrote 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."²²

Aragon might well have been describing thrillers of the 1940s, 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 of desire, enervation, euphoria, confusion, and nightmare. Not surprisingly, such films were admired and discussed in *L'Age du cinéma*, a surrealist publication of 1951, and in *Positif*, an influential journal that maintained strong connections with surrealism throughout the 1950s and the early 1960s. They were also given important study in a book that was profoundly surrealist in its ideological aims: Raymond Borde and Éti-

enne Chaumeton's *Panorama du film noir américain* (1955), which has been described as a "benchmark" for all later work on the topic.²³

Raymond Borde was a frequent contributor to *Positif* and the director of *Pierre Molinier* (1964), a surrealist film with offscreen commentary by André Breton. 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 1923–1926, when he and other members of the surrealist group, including Breton, Raymond Queneau, Benjamin Peret, Jacques Prévert, and Yves Tanguy, watched American gangster films that were "curious, nonconformist, and as noir as one could desire."²⁴ As if this were not enough, Borde and Chaumeton choose a phrase from Lautréamont, the surrealist's favorite poet, as an epigraph: "The bloody channels through which one pushes logic to the breaking point."

Despite their obvious ideological purpose, Borde and Chaumeton often seem unclear or inconsistent. They initially describe film noir as a series, but at later points they also discuss it as 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 the early 1950s. (A postscript to the 1988 paperback edition moves the end of noir forward to 1955 and then notes its "fascinating renaissance" in *Point Blank*, *Dirty Harry*, and *Badlands*.)²⁵ Throughout, an "objective" tone serves as a mask for the indulgence of a desire. Borde and Chaumeton have surprisingly little to say about visual style (the French were generally unimpressed by what Bazin later 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). Instead, they place great emphasis on the theme of death, and on "essential" affective qualities, which at one point they list in the form of five adjectives typical of surrealism: "oneiric, bizarre, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel" (3).²⁶ 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 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 police, 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, but the character they describe resembles her in every respect save the fact that she is "fatal even to herself" (10).²⁷ 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).²⁸ Her best representative on the screen, Borde and Chaumeton argue, is Gloria Grahame, who, even though she was seldom 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 "renovated 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, and so on) with a richly elaborated "ceremony of killing." Death in such films usually takes the form of a professional execution (a locus classicus is *The Killers*, a 1946 adaptation of Ernest Hemingway) 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 and a field plow 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, ambiguity, or disequilibrium that Borde and Chaumeton regard as the basis of noir. "All the components of noir style," they write, are designed to "disorient the spectator" by attacking 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 these norms and thereby create a specific tension that 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, the implicit social criticism in thrillers was smothered by banal plot devices, and the "exploitation of incoherence" was becoming predictable (180). Even the original pictures were beginning to look dated: at a revival of *Murder, My Sweet* presented by the Cine-Club of Toulouse in 1953, 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 neorealism social-problem pictures. To these factors, we might add several economic and political determinants: in response to television and the growing leisure industry, Hollywood was turning to Cinemascope, color, and biblical epics; at the same time, many 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 produced for the lower end of the market. Hence, the two pictures of the 1950s that the *Panorama* singles out as truly disorienting were both filmed on relatively low budgets, without stars. The first is Joseph H. Lewis's *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 *Gun Crazy* as a profound and unselfconscious 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 1988 postscript. 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 specters, 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 identify scores of interesting movies that might have been forgotten, and they create an entire category that functions normatively. Here as in many later writings, *noir* is not merely a descriptive term, but a name for a critical tendency within the popular cinema—an antigenre that reveals the dark side of savage capitalism. For Borde and Chaumeton, the essence of noirness lies in a feeling of discontinuity, an intermingling of social realism and oneiricism, an anarcho-leftist critique of bourgeois ideology, and an eroticized treatment of violence. Above all, noir produces a psychological and moral disorientation, an inversion of capitalist and puritan values, as if it were pushing the American system toward revolutionary destruction. We might debate about whether such 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 similar writings, surrealism might be said to have provided an organizing metaphor and an aesthetic rationale for the film noir. Perhaps it also fostered the tendency of later critics to read individual pictures slightly against the grain, emphasizing tone or mood rather than narrative closure—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; thus if the surrealists saw the postwar American thriller as a theater of cruelty, the existentialists saw it as a protoabsurdist novel. For critics who were influenced by existentialism, film noir was attractive because it depicted a world of obsessive return, dark corners, or *huis-clos*. It often employed settings like the foggy

seaside diner on the road between San Francisco and Los Angeles 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 Fay. "Nothing's going to happen," she responds.) Or it was like the dark highway in *Detour*, where Tom Neal keeps thumbing a ride, trying to avoid his brutal destiny.

In the years before and after the war, when the French themselves were entrapped by history, several of the most important themes of existential philosophy were elaborated through readings of Dashiell Hammett, Chandler, and James M. Cain, who were often bracketed with Wright, Hemingway, John Dos Passos, and Faulkner. The French actually "discovered" some of these novelists, just as they later discovered the Hollywood auteurs. (In 1946, even Faulkner was a relatively neglected figure in the United States, where much of 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 literature became so intense that the British author Rebecca West teased Cain, "You were a fool not to be born a Frenchman. The high-brows would have put you in with Gide and Mauriac if you had taken this simple precaution."²⁹

There was truth in West's observation. The French liked their Americans exotic, violent, and romantic.³⁰ They wrote a great deal about southern gothicism and tough-guy modernism, and they usually ignored anything that 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";³¹ 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 *Postman Always Rings Twice*.

This passion for literary toughness has an interesting relation to the social and political climate after the war. In the United States, the postwar decade was the period of Korea, the red scare, and the return to a consumer economy; in France, it was the period of colonial rebellion and parliamentary confusion leading up to the Charles de Gaulle government. Authors in both countries 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 Western Left had been in disarray 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 occupation, torture, compromise, and collaboration. 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.”³²

That same year, Sartre claimed that modern life had become “fantastic,” made up of a “labyrinth of hallways, doors, and stairways that lead nowhere, innumerable signposts that dot routes and signify nothing.”³³ Recalling the fear of Nazi torture recently experienced by French citizens, he advocated a literature of “extreme situations” that would be 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 John 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 René Descartes and Henri 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.³⁴

Unlike the surrealists, who made the movies essential to their project,

the existentialists were literary and rather dubious about Hollywood. Nevertheless, given the intellectual fashion Sartre helped to establish, it is not surprising that many of the younger 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 a labyrinthine, enclosed mis-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.”³⁵

Rohmer and several of his colleagues at *Cahiers du cinéma* belonged to a generation that imbibed its existentialism and phenomenology from André Bazin, who was a more conservative and in some ways more consistent writer than Sartre.³⁶ In *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?* Sartre 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?* (1958–1962), were couched in terms of moral dilemmas or the problem of death. Like most of the French, Bazin was interested in modern American fiction, and he often used a Sartrean vocabulary (“freedom,” “fate,” “authenticity,” and so on). In fact, many of the basic tenets of his theoretical writing resemble Sartre’s arguments about literature, minus any traces of Marxism. On the grounds of “realism,” for example, Sartre wanted to do away with both omniscient narration and temporal ellipsis; modern narratives, he argued, should resemble *Ulysses*, employing multiple perspectives and detailed renditions of a day, an hour, or even a minute (158). For his part, Bazin argued that cinema should provide relatively passive observation rather than intrusive commentary and should make greater use of long takes or *temps morts*, such as the coffee-making sequence in De Sica’s *Umberto D.* In place of Sartre’s neutral or ambiguous literary narrators, however, Bazin valorized the camera, which he regarded as a phenomenology machine that could preserve ambiguous reality without the tendentious intervention of a human hand.³⁷

Bazin’s style of existentialism is everywhere apparent in his 1957 eulogy for Humphrey Bogart, written only two years before Bazin’s 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 visible 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 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 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 believed that the "secret harmony" linking Bogart and Orson Welles was a cultural by-product of what French literary critic Claude-Edmonde Magny (in a book heavily influenced by Sartre) called "the age of the American novel."³⁸ 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 du cinéma* began to project Bazin's ideas onto Hollywood, sometimes treating the film noir as if it were an existential allegory of the white male condition. The favored existential hero, however, was not Bogart but Nicholas Ray, who had 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," and Jacques Rivette argued that Ray was concerned with "the interior demon of violence, which seems linked to man and his solitude."³⁹ At this juncture, the terms *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 consider Claude Chabrol's 1955 *Cahiers* essay "The Evolution of the Thriller," which pays special attention to *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 mise-en-scènes were clichéd. There was no question of renewing the form, but it had become a "wonderful pretext": "[*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. Bezzerides have taken this threadbare and lackluster fabric and woven it into rich patterns of the most enigmatic arabesques."⁴⁰

Clearly, an art cinema based on transformation of "the worst material" was about to appear. In 1959, Jean-Luc 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*, and so on; and both made film noir available as a "pretext" for directors who wanted to assert their personalities. Also in 1959, Boris Vian died in a Paris movie theater. The first age of film noir had ended.

DARKNESS EVERYWHERE

The discourse on American film noir was initiated by two generations of Parisian intellectuals, most of whom declared the form extinct soon after they invented it. Many of the films they discussed had been directed by European émigrés (mainly Germans), who used tough, Hemingwayesque dialogue and American production values to bestow a kind of glamour upon the dark emotional moods favored by Continental artists of the postwar decade. For the French especially, an American star like Bogart epitomized these moods. Bogart's persona was tough, introspective, emotionally repressed, and fond of whiskey and cigarettes; within certain limits, he suggested a liberal intellectual, and he was sometimes cast in the role of a writer or director. Hence the Bogart thriller became a mirror in which European cinéastes could see their own faces.

Significantly, the French began to lose interest in noir at about the time their own art cinema became internationally successful. But the vogue for realistic, atmospheric novels and films about criminal violence had never been confined to France, and it never disappeared. In Argentina, for example, a craze for hard-boiled fiction lasted from 1946 until 1960, and a large critical literature grew up around Spanish-language translations of Hammett, Chandler, and David Goodis. Many authors in Western Europe and Latin America worked in the tough-guy vein (Argentina's Rodolfo J. Walsh began writing noir political fiction in the 1960s), and filmmakers in several countries made pictures that resembled dark Hollywood thrillers. Meanwhile, crime in the city, which is one of America's favorite themes, continued to be exploited by politicians, journalists, and artists of every kind. Thus when French critical terminology crossed to Britain and America, it exerted considerable influence and acquired new interpreters. Eventually, as old movies became increasingly available on television or in retrospectives, a European image of America was internalized by the Americans themselves. By the 1990s, noir had acquired the aura of art and had evolved into what Dennis Hopper describes as "every director's favorite genre."⁴¹

In the Anglo-Saxon world, the idea of noir was nourished at first by the growth of film cults and college film societies. (I myself saw many of the classic 1940s films for the first time at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1960s.) As J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum have shown, informal institutions similar to the French cine-clubs began to proliferate in New York during the late 1950s—especially in the East Village, where revival theaters featuring noir classics rubbed shoulders with storefront exhibitions of the newly emerging American underground cinema. At the Charles Theater on Avenue B "Edgar G. Ulmer (director of cheap B movies like *The Naked Dawn* and *Murder Is My Beat*) was celebrated along with the Marx Brothers; and Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* was touted as a masterpiece superior to *Citizen Kane*."⁴² In 1964, *Time* magazine drew national attention to the annual Humphrey Bogart Festival at the Brattle Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Not unlike Belmondo in *Breathless*, a generation of Harvard undergraduates were imitating Bogey, quoting lines from his major films and shouting "More! More! More!" in time with the slugs he pumped into Edward G. Robinson at the climax of *Key Largo*. Such behavior, Hoberman and Rosenbaum wryly observe, was perhaps reinforced by those students "who had spent their junior year abroad" (28–30).⁴³

The interest in noir was also stimulated by alternative critics and journalists. In Britain, one of the most influential writers of this kind was Raymond Durnat, who played a key role in adapting surrealist taste to the youth-oriented, pop-art environment of the 1960s. Durnat's many publications of a surrealist bent include books or monographs on Josef von Sternberg, Luis Buñuel, and Hitchcock; on the crazy comics; and on the history of eroticism in the cinema. He is also the author of "Paint It Black: The Family Tree of Film Noir" (1970), published originally in London (the title alludes to a Rolling Stones song of the period) and reprinted in a shorter version in New York four years later. During the 1960s and early 1970s, much of Durnat's writing appeared in *Films and Filming*, a fairly large-circulation review filled with grainy, black-and-white stills of half-clothed movie stars in vaguely lurid, often sadomasochistic poses. (These stills have something in common with the illustrations in Borde and Chaumeton's *Panorama*, but they also feature cheesecake and beefcake material from a more hedonistic, sexually liberated era.) At the same time, Durnat coedited and contributed extensively to *Motion*, a short-lived film journal that published special issues on the French New Wave and on "Violence and Sadism in the Cinema."

Motion's issue number 6 (autumn 1963) provides a good indication of the relatively avant-garde politics of the journal as a whole. Among Durnat's contributions is "Standing Up for Jesus," a satiric invective against the Arnoldian, Leavisite, and "Hoggartite" attitudes of *Sight and Sound*, the nation's most prestigious film magazine. According to Durnat, the typical university-educated Englishman never speaks "a good word for Jerry Lewis, Bugs Bunny, 'Mad,' 'Galaxy,' Humph, The Ionious Monk, Bootsie and Snudge, singers like Eartha Kitt, Edith Piaf, Cleo Lane, songs like 'September in the Rain' or 'Tell Laura I Love Her'" (26). In an attempt to rectify this situation, *Motion* offers a "symposium" on B-movie epics and Italian peplum, featuring Richard Whitehall on Flash Gordon and Durnat himself on Hercules; an eight-page "*cinématique imaginaire*" entitled "The Gentle Art of Trillation," composed entirely of campy, black-and-white pinups suggesting various forms of Hollywood fetishism, transvestitism, and sadism; a brief gloss on the pinups, entitled "La femme est magique!" (a line spoken by Aznavour in *Shoot the Piano Player*); an essay by Ian Johnson on *Night of the Hunter*, describing the film as a "childhood dream"; and a free-associative "ramble" by Barrie Partison, intended to illustrate "the irrationality of films and memories of films." On page 59 are several letters to the editor re-

sponding to an earlier special number on sex and violence. Among the letters is this communication:

Dear Sirs,

Congratulations on your violence issue, the best, most comprehensive treatment of the theme I, for one, have seen. . . . A special bravo for Ian [Johnson's] article on the fascinating *Peeping Tom* . . . and to both of you for having the guts to reprint in English Joubert's piece on the Japanese cathartic cinema.

In the Dassin piece, which seems to me to overrate that gentleman's recent productions, I was amazed to see no mention of *Night and the City*, which besides being his most accomplished film, is the one in which violence is the most successfully integrated into the fabric of the film through an extraordinary animal symbolism. . . .

Then, too, I was surprised to find so little attention paid to the two American directors who seem to me to display the most consistent preoccupation with the erotic implications of violence. I refer to Sam Fuller and Kubrick. The latter, in fact, who is obviously more self-conscious than the former, strikes me as the most kinky director around, with the possible exception of Buñuel. I am thinking especially of the scene in *Killer's Kiss* in which the monstrous dance-hall proprietor tries to get his girl hot by making her watch the handsome boxer-hero get his brains bashed out on TV.

NOEL BURCH

75 Blvd Montparnasse, Paris 6

At the time, Noel Burch was an avant-garde filmmaker living in Paris. (One of his early pictures was *Noviciat*, an overtly masochistic fantasy that casts Annette Michelson in the role of a dominatrix.) Within a decade, he would become known as the author of *Theory of Film Practice* (1973, originally published in *Cahiers du cinéma* in 1969), one of the most widely discussed books in the history of academic film studies. On the surface, Burch's book is an exercise in structural or "serial" formalism; notice, however, that it contains a chapter entitled "Structures of Aggression," in which he comments on the "dialectic of prohibition and transgression explored by Georges Bataille" and on the "poetic" uses of a "tension that arises when taboos are violated."⁴⁴ Although Burch never uses the term *film noir*, his work provides evidence that a surrealist or noirlike attitude toward "cathartic" violence persisted in vanguard film theory well into the 1970s.

Where film noir in particular is concerned, Durnat was the writer who most forcefully transmitted surrealist values into an English-language context. The American version of his well-known essay on noir's "family tree" is accompanied by a chart that amounts to a sort of irra-

tional expansion of the noir metaphor, exploring its various "branches." The chart is faux-scientific, filled with arbitrary subcategories and word-play (such as "Dept. of Post-Korean Paranoia," "Gay Blades and Straight Razors," "Le Film Blanc," "Gumshoedammerung"); it lists individual films under more than one rubric; and, alongside the usual noir classics, it includes such titles as *Jezabel*, *Monsieur Verdoux*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Portrait of Jennie*, *Cronaca di une Amore*, *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* ("John Huston's Great Film Noir"), *The Blue Angel*, *King Kong*, *Shadows*, *The Man with a Golden Arm*, and 2001.

Like Borde and Chaumeton, Durnat identifies noir with gangsters, cops, criminal adventure, love on the run, bourgeois murder, fatal passion, sexual pathology, and so on. But unlike most of the French, he insists that noir has no historical limits; its essential "motif[s] and tone[s]," he argues, are "perennial, drawing on the unconscious superego's sense of crime and punishment."⁴⁵ Despite the confusions of this terminology (unconscious superego?), Durnat obviously believes that noir has Freudian causes that transcend period, genre, and even politics. He is quite good at showing how noir can be appropriated in Hollywood by both Republican and Democratic directors, and he claims that the narratives associated with the term are as old as *Oedipus Rex*; they can take fascist, Marxist, or liberal forms, and their attitude toward crime "is as often nihilistic, cynical, or stoic as it is reformatory" (6). This argument not only collapses distinctions between high art and Hollywood, but also obliterates every other historical or generic boundary. Ultimately, noir drifts like a fog across the whole of western culture, threatening to dissolve any trace of identity and difference.

In contrast, most of the new generation of writers in the United States treated film noir nostalgically, as a phenomenon linked to classic Hollywood in the 1940s. They were strongly influenced by the auteurist phase of *Cahiers du cinéma*, and in the years before videocassette recorders were invented, they gained much of their viewing experience through New York's underground network of "film buffs." In *Love and Other Infectious Diseases* (1989), Molly Haskell's vivid and moving account of her marriage to Andrew Sarris, we find a useful description of the amateur collectors and archivists of the 1960s, most of whom exhibited movies in offices, apartments, and lecture halls:

These were the sort of people you never see or read about, people the media has passed over because in our high-profile success-oriented world they are invisible, "losers." As a group, they were almost entirely male—probably

because voyeurism is essentially a male activity, as is complete surrender to fantasy. . . .

Yet Andrew, though resembling them in some outward aspects, wasn't quite one of them. For one thing, he was more interested in good movies than in obscure ones. Once there was a choice between seeing Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* and a rural B picture called *The Girl of the Limberlost*, and Andrew's was the only hand raised in favor of the former. . . . Andrew was archival in his attempt to see everything, constantly promoting the cause of film preservation, but he was continually refining his tastes, whereas a good many of the buffs collected information quantitatively.⁴⁶

Sarris was, of course, the most important American exponent of the French *politique des auteurs*. Through his classroom lectures, books, and weekly columns in *The Village Voice*, he challenged prevailing ideas about Hollywood and offered a refreshing alternative to established film criticism. Classical in his tastes but committed to the belief that style is the expression of personality, he seldom wrote directly about genres or collective styles; even so, he helped to establish a canon of great Hollywood directors, several of whom were associated with what was increasingly being described as film noir.

Manny Farber, whose work I discuss in a later chapter, was an equally important writer on Hollywood thrillers and pop auteurs during this period, but Farber's approach was quite different from Sarris's. In *Negative Space* (1971), a brilliant collection of essays from the 1950s and 1960s, Farber never uses the term *film noir*, and his reviews from the 1940s are less enthusiastic about such pictures as *The Maltese Falcon* and *Double Indemnity* than one might expect. His influential essay "Underground Films" is nevertheless a classic example of avant-garde appreciation of lowbrow culture, demonstrating the affinity between the most hip and the least respected domains of art. Here and elsewhere, Farber's attitude toward genre movies is in striking contrast with that of a cold-war liberal like Robert Warshow, and his commentaries on the tough-guy films of Howard Hawks, Anthony Mann, John Farrow, and Samuel Fuller did much to encourage a taste for pulp among American cinéastes.

Against this intellectual background—which was strengthened by the box-office success of European art films, by changes in censorship and Hollywood production methods, and by teaching at such institutions as New York University and Columbia—a kind of American new wave began to appear. Self-conscious auteurs such as Peter Bogdanovich, Martin Scorsese, and Brian DePalma were influenced by French criticism of the 1950s, and all of their early, low-budget films were somewhat noirish

in tone. The figure who most shaped American ideas about noir, however, was Paul Schrader, a young screenwriter and soon-to-be director whose "Notes on *Film Noir*," written for a Los Angeles museum retrospective and published in 1972 in the New York-based *Film Comment* (a journal that has always been especially interested in noir), became the best-known statement on the topic in the English language.

Near the beginning of the "Notes," Schrader acknowledges his indebtedness to Borde and Chaumeton, and to a great extent the first part of his essay merely outlines their historical argument. Like the authors of the *Panorama*, he thinks of film noir chiefly as a series or cycle (usually he calls it a "period"): *The Maltese Falcon* begins it, *Kiss Me Deadly* provides its definitive or conclusive masterpiece, and *Touch of Evil* serves as its "epitaph."⁴⁷ But to this chronological scheme, Schrader adds Raymond Dugnat's idea that noir is also a collection of transhistorical motifs, tones, or moods; as a result, he oscillates between discussion of a dead period and discussion of a specific noir style that might be revived by contemporary filmmakers.

Unlike the writers he cites, Schrader is not particularly surrealist in his preoccupations. Instead, he is strongly attracted to existentialist themes, and he puts great emphasis on German expressionism. Partly for this reason, he writes skillfully and at length about visual style (from the vantage point of 1972, it was much easier to see that thrillers of the 1940s and 1950s had a style). He also adds certain new-critical arguments that were familiar to readers of Sarris. For example, he repeatedly insists that art is more important than sociology, and he shows how cinematic tradition nourishes individual talents; thus he nominates photographer John Alton to a pantheon, and he claims (correctly) that "film noir was good for practically every director's career" (62).

An even more crucial aspect of "Notes on *Film Noir*" derives from something it never mentions: the Vietnam War, which functions as a structuring absence. In his third paragraph, for instance, Schrader calls attention to *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Medium Cool* (1969), two films that were popularly associated with the counterculture and the antiwar movement. Both pictures, he argues, are "naive and romantic" in comparison with noir classics such as *Kiss Me Deadly* and *Kiss Tomorrow Goodbye*. He also predicts that "as the current political mood hardens, . . . [t]he Forties may be to the Seventies what the Thirties were to the Sixties" (53).

In *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1977), Paul Fussell has observed that writers always struggle to depict a new war by borrowing motifs from the previous one. Something akin to this process can be seen

in Schrader's essay, although in 1972 the Vietnam conflict had been on television for years, its imagery flowing together with the assassinations of the Kennedys and Martin Luther King, the military occupation of college campuses, the shootings at Kent State, the riots at the 1968 Democratic convention, the burning of Watts, and countless other scenes of domestic and international violence. Given such a context, *Kiss Me Deadly* may not seem "naïve and romantic," but neither does it seem especially shocking. By the same token, Schrader's essay is less interested in finding motifs adequate to the present than in withdrawing into a mood of despair and bitter disengagement. His major theme is the "creative funk" that supposedly followed in the wake of victory over economic depression and fascism. He places great emphasis on an atmosphere of Germanic determinism and irony—a pervasive gloom that hints at some irredeemable evil and meanwhile exposes "the underside of the American character" (53). Ultimately, he praises noir less because it constitutes a social protest than because it looks stylish, cynical, and pessimistic; its chief value, he says, lies in the fact that in the period between 1941 and 1958, "Hollywood lighting grew darker, characters more corrupt, themes more fatalistic, and the tone more hopeless" (53). Perhaps nothing is more indicative of his attitude (and that of many Americans in his generation) than his description of what he calls "the overriding noir theme." According to Schrader, noir expresses "a passion for the past and present, but also a fear of the future. Noir heroes dread to look ahead, but instead try to survive by the day, and if unsuccessful at that, they retreat into the past. Thus film noir's techniques emphasize loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, and insecurity, then submerge these doubts into man-nerism and style" (58).

Not surprisingly, Schrader was to explore these themes and tendencies in his films—especially in his script for Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), which did as much as any critical essay to make noir seem relevant to the period. Treating Vietnam and presidential assassination as mere epiphenomena, this film concentrates on violence, perversion, and decay as seen through the eyes of a cabdriver in the midnight streets of New York. The film's antihero, Travis Bickle, is a returning Vietnam vet, analogous to all those returning World War II soldiers in Hollywood thrillers of the 1940s. (Schrader would use the same theme again in his script for *Rolling Thunder* in 1977.) The major irony, however, turns on the fact that Bickle is also a sexually repressed paranoid (in some ways like Hitchcock's Norman Bates) and the only character who possesses a moral vision. For various social and psychological reasons, Bickle is a



FIGURE 4. The psychotic veteran in *Taxi Driver* (1976). (Museum of Modern Art Stills Archive.)

seething cauldron of inarticulate rage; even so, his noirlike offscreen narration is highly poetic, and Robert DeNiro's introspective, ascetic performance makes him seem like a Bressonian saint. This irony is reinforced by the film's extraordinarily bloody climax, because the characters who receive Bickle's "protection" and chaste love—a child prostitute and a WASP princess who works in a political campaign—are little more than projections of his disturbed sexuality.

On one level, *Taxi Driver* can be understood as what Robert Ray calls a "left cycle" response to the popular success of *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Billy Jack* (1971), and *Death Wish* (1974)—all of which were melodramatic, right-wing movies about urban vigilantes, clearly inspired by the political turbulence of the Vietnam years. At another level, however, as both Ray and Robin Wood observe, the film is ideologically contradictory or incoherent. The Calvinist Schrader and the Catholic Scorsese have created a deeply conservative picture about original sin and the absolute evil of modernity. Their treatment of sex, for example, has relatively little in common with French surrealism and a good deal in common with such modernist literary works as T. S. Eliot's *Waste Land* and Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*, which I discuss in the next chapter. Like most of the high modernists (as distinct from the political avant-garde), they use images of the nocturnal city to suggest a Dostoyevskian nightmare

A DAMA DO CINE SHANGHAI!

THE LADY FROM THE MOVIE

A film by
Guillermo del Toro

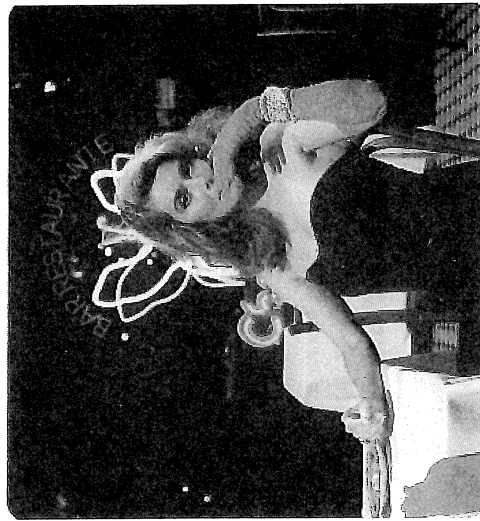


FIGURE 5.
A postmodern image
of film noir.

of the soul. Also like the modernists, they store up what Eliot called “fragments” of artistic tradition to stave off spiritual despair.⁴⁸ Hence *Taxi Driver* is laden with new-wave allusions to other movies or directors, including not only thrillers of the 1940s (strongly evoked in the music score, which was Bernard Herrmann’s last), but also Robert Bresson’s *Pickpocket*, Ford’s *Searchers*, and Godard’s *Two or Three Things I Know about Her*.

Seen in retrospect, *Taxi Driver* belongs in company with several major Hollywood productions of the decade—including *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Chinatown* (1974), and *Body Heat* (1981)—which were made with a nostalgic idea of film noir in mind. However, despite its aliveness and almost scholarly self-awareness, it is neither a period movie nor a pastiche. Instead, chiefly because of Scorsese, it transforms what Schrader regards as the definitive motifs of film noir into a kind of neo-expressionism that is ideally suited to color and wide screens. Perhaps

FILM NOIR

Something filmy, see-through and black is this summer's No. 1 sensation. It will be seen on the sear, the beach, the ballroom and maybe even the board room.



FIGURE 6.
Noir as fashion.

more important, together with Schrader’s own essay, it helps to encourage the notion that film noir is essentially apolitical, characterized by pessimism and existential anguish.⁴⁹

In effect, film noir did not become a true Hollywood genre until the Vietnam years, when productions such as *Taxi Driver* appeared with some regularity. Whether classic noir ever existed, by 1974 a great many people believed in it, and American movie critics were regularly exploring its implications.⁵⁰ Some of the best directors of thrillers from the 1950s returned to such films and adapted them to new styles of production—see, for example, Don Siegel’s *Charley Varrick* (1973) and Robert Aldrich’s *Hustle* (1975). At this point, *noir* had fully entered the English language, and it formed a rich discursive category that the entertainment industry could expand and adapt in countless ways.

Any proper history of noir in America therefore needs to address or at least acknowledge many things besides Hollywood in the 1940s and

1950s—among them, the vast changes in the economics and censorship of movies since the end of World War II; the “New Hollywood” of the 1970s; the rise of academic film theory; and the increasing dissolution of boundaries between high, vernacular, and commercial art. Today, the “original” films noirs still circulate, and the literary forms with which they are associated still flourish. Noir 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 (as we shall see, 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 a chapter, but it seems obvious that the idea has been useful to the movie industry, providing artistic cachet and spectacular opportunities for both the 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” can function in the same way for us. If we could ask the original French commentators what American film noir represented, they might agree that it was a kind of modernism in the popular cinema: it used unorthodox narration; it resisted sentiment and censorship; it revealed 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 Alain Resnais, Michaelangelo Antonioni, Bernardo Bertolucci, Wim Wenders, and Rainer Fassbinder) saw noir as a dying form that could be transmogrified; it could retain its psychological and social edge, but it could also be treated at a distance, in the interests of a critical and self-reflexive analysis of contemporary life.

Today, 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 techniques of 1960s art films to make audiences feel sophisticated.⁵¹ This strategy also extends beyond Hollywood, as two examples illustrate. First is the cover of a presskit 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 (figure 5). Sec-

ond 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” (figure 6). The caption tells us, “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.”

Obviously, a concept that was generated ex post facto has become part of a worldwide mass memory; a dream image of bygone glamour, it presses 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. Nevertheless, as Fredric Jameson and others have argued, the term plays a central role in the vocabulary of ludic, commercialized postmodernism.⁵² Consequently, depending on how it is used, it can describe a dead period, a nostalgia for something that never quite 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 needs to range across the twentieth-century imagination, engaging in an unusually comprehensive analysis.