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A Panorama of American Film Noir 1941-1953

Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton

Introduction by James Naremore

Translated from the French by Paul Hammond



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A Season in Hell or the Snows of Yesteryear?

James Naremore

In the long history of French commentary on American culture, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton's *A Panorama of American Film Noir* occupies a special place. The first book ever written about a type of film for which Hollywood itself had no name, *Panorama* influenced cineastes of the late twentieth century in almost the same way as Charles Baudelaire's essays on Edgar Allan Poe influenced the literary world of the late nineteenth century. It gave identity and cachet to scores of pictures that might otherwise have been forgotten and in the process helped to establish what today's movie industry regards as a fully fledged genre. None of the many writers on film noir after Borde and Chaumeton has not been indebted to their book in some fashion (even if she or he hasn't read *Panorama*, which until now has never been completely translated into English), and few works of criticism in any field have had such a seminal effect on both scholars and artists.

Not the least of the reasons why *Panorama* remains an important book is the fact that it was written by a pair of intelligent, discerning viewers who were contemporary with the films under discussion. The first two editions were published in the 1950s, in direct response to a series of hard-boiled thrillers and bloody melodramas—beginning with John Huston's somewhat campy but sinister *The Maltese Falcon* (1941) and culminating with Robert Aldrich's jagged, apocalyptic *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955)—that Hollywood had been producing with some regularity for about fifteen years. Although many of these the films were redolent of pre-Second World War European cinema, Borde and

Chaumeton regarded them almost entirely as products of their country of origin, shaped by the Hollywood system of production and expressive of the quotidian violence and criminality of American life. A handful of commentators in America had already agreed with this idea, at least to a degree. In 1946, the German cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer, who had moved to the United States because of the war, wrote a think piece for *Commentary* magazine on the question of "Hollywood's Terror Films: Do They Reflect a State of Mind?" Having recently completed *From Caligari to Hitler*, a celebrated book about Weimar cinema, Kracauer argued that recent Hollywood pictures such as *Shadow of a Doubt* (1942), *The Lost Weekend* (1945), *The Stranger* (1946), and *The Spiral Staircase* (1946) were similar to certain German films of the 1920s and were symptomatic of a growing, American-style decadence.¹ Not long afterward, John Houseman offered his own version of the same argument in *Vogue*, implicitly criticizing one of his former collaborators, Raymond Chandler (*The Blue Dahlia* [1946]), for pandering to the American zeitgeist by means of "tough" movies about "a land of enervated, frightened people with spasms of vitality but a low moral sense."² What made Borde and Chaumeton different from Kracauer and Houseman was that, in common with most of their French colleagues, they didn't react in a tone of moral panic. On the contrary, they were fascinated by the perverse eroticism of postwar Hollywood thrillers. In their view, such pictures functioned as a critique of savage capitalism and a realistic, or at any rate fairly truthful, antidote to the social uplift in the average studio-manufactured daydream.

Because they were French, Borde and Chaumeton also had a good term to apply to the films they admired. The adjective "noir" had long been used in France to describe the Gothic novel, and in the 1930s it was sometimes employed in descriptions of French "poetic realist" films such as *Pépé le Moko* (1937) and *Le Jour se lève* (1939). It was best known in relation to the "Série noire," a series of crime novels that Gallimard (from 1945 until now) issued in paperback editions as *littérature de la gare*, or "train-station literature." The black-and-yellow-covered

Gallimard books appealed to a wide range of readers, and under the astute editorship of Marcel Duhamel they offered lively French translations of the new wave of crime writers who had emerged in America and England in the wake of Dashiell Hammett. ("I get all the latest *romans policiers* sent to me from Paris," Colonel Haki says in Eric Ambler's classic thriller *A Coffin for Dimitrios* [1937], "All the best of them are translated into French.") Thus in 1946, with the war ended and Hollywood movies once again appearing on Paris movie screens, several French critics were immediately attracted to *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), and *Laura* (1944), and they knew what to name them. According to Nino Frank, who was writing that year in the socialist-film journal *L'Ecran français*, something new had developed during the war: here were excellent American productions dealing with "criminal adventure," all of them grounded in "the social fantastic" and the "dynamism of violent death," which could truly be called *film noir*.³

In an important sense, the French invented the American film noir, and they did so because local conditions predisposed them to view movies in a certain way. Unlike America, France had a thriving film culture made up of journals and ciné clubs that treated film as art rather than commercial entertainment. France was also emerging from what it called *les années noires*—the dark years of the Occupation—and its younger generation was especially attracted to American jazz clubs and the smoky, world-weary ambience of the average Bogart thriller. Among literary intellectuals, this was of course the period of existentialism, when American crime writers like Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and James M. Cain, along with prewar American novelists such as Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, and Richard Wright, who had also written about crime and violence, were regarded as existentialists *avant la lettre*. No wonder the French admired the 1946 production of *The Killers*, which was elaborated from a Hemingway short story of the 1920s. The opening of that film, in which a couple of hired gunmen walk into a small-town diner on the road to nowhere

and complain about the menu, seems to prefigure the dark absurdism of existentialist playwrights like Samuel Beckett and the early Harold Pinter.

It was not the existentialists, however, who wrote the most interesting commentaries on film noir. That honor belongs to the Surrealists, who were a residual force in French intellectual life, especially where movies were concerned. Many art historians have claimed Surrealism ended with the 1930s, but its influence on the general culture persisted a good deal longer, affecting the way certain films were viewed in the period between 1945 and 1970, and in some ways inflecting the style of theorists such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and Jacques Derrida. Notice as well that Surrealism provided a model for avant-garde provocateur Guy Debord, who named one of the Situationist International's most famous manifestations of the 1960s after a volume of Weegee photographs and a Hollywood film noir: *The Naked City*. Surrealism, in fact, had always been crucial to the reception of any art described as "noir." In 1940, for instance, André Breton had published his *Anthologie de l'humour noir*, a collection of subversively dark humor that celebrated what Breton called a "superior revolt of the mind" against bourgeois sentimentality.⁴ Marcel Duhamel, the editor of the "Série noire," was himself a member of the original French Surrealist group, and in the brief introduction he provided for a French edition of Borde and Chaumeton's *Panorama* (included in this volume), he reminisces about the period 1923–26, when he and his fellow Surrealists watched American crime films that were "curious, nonconformist, and as noir as you could wish."

The best account of the Surrealist fascination with cinema as a whole can be found in Paul Hammond's witty, perceptive introduction to *The Shadow and Its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, a revised edition of which was published by City Lights Books in 2000.⁵ Hammond, who is also the translator of this edition of *Panorama*, reminds us that during the years immediately after the First World War, the original Surrealists used movies as an instrument for the overthrow of bourgeois taste and the desublimation of everyday life. Engaging in what

Hammond describes as "an extremely Romantic project" and an "inspired salvage operation," Breton and his associates would randomly pop in and out of fleapit theaters for brief periods of time, sampling the imagery and writing lyrical essays about their experiences. Like everyone in the historical avant-garde, they were captivated by modernity, but they particularly relished the cinema because it was so productive of the "marvelous" and so like a waking dream. Willfully disrupting narrative continuities, they savored the cinematic *mise-en-scène*, which functioned as a springboard for their poetic imagination; and out of the practice they developed what Louis Aragon called a "synthetic" criticism designed to emphasize the latent, often libidinal implications of individual shots or short scenes. Even when cinema became too expensive for Breton's style of serial viewing, it remained the fetishistic medium par excellence. At certain moments, even in ordinary genre films or grade-B productions, it could involuntarily throw off bizarre images, strange juxtapositions, and erotic plays of light and shadow on human bodies, thus providing an opportunity for the audience to break free of repressive plot conventions and indulge in private fantasies.

Some films were especially conducive to such uses: Buster Keaton's crazy comedies, horror films like *King Kong*, and, in the years after the Second World War, Chanderlesque detective pictures, which sometimes lost control of their plots and became a series of hallucinatory adventures in the criminal underworld. Then again, the Surrealists had always loved crime movies, beginning with Louis Feuillade's *Fantômas* and *Les Vampires* (1913–16), which jumped from one fantastic adventure to another and seemed to transform the wartime streets of Paris into a playground of anarchic rebellion and erotic imagination. Early crime pictures from America were equally satisfying, in part because they depicted violent, antisocial behavior, and in part because they made ordinary modern decor seem marvelous. In 1918, Aragon had written that Hollywood gangster movies "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."⁶ He might as well have been describing crime films of the 1940s and 50s, many of which were confined to interiors and photographed in a deep-focus style that seemed to reveal the secret life of things. To anyone with a Surrealist's temperament, these films had still other attractions: they often told stories about doomed erotic love, they sometimes had Sadean titles like *Murder, My Sweet* and *Kiss Me Deadly*, and they tended to be derived from the literature of drugs and alcohol. A film such as Huston's *The Maltese Falcon* is perfect on all counts. Filled with hints of sexual perversity, spiced by touches of sadistic violence, driven by seduction, *Falcon* offers a field day for fetishistic pleasure. Throughout, Arthur Edeson's photography draws attention to small but fascinating details, such as the texture of Bogart's suit, the little gizmo on his desk with which he lights his cigarettes, or the blinking neon signs on the buildings outside his window ("KLVW," "DRINK"). The most important object in the mise-en-scène is of course the falcon itself—a sexual and commodity fetish, a fake, and what Bogart calls "the stuff that dreams are made of."

Although *Panorama* grew out of the cultural atmosphere and aesthetic taste I've been describing, its two authors were based not in Paris but in Toulouse. Raymond Borde, born in 1920, is the founder of the Cinémathèque de Toulouse, a major film archive that houses over 22,000 titles. In addition to his extensive writings about film, he has authored a critique of consumer society, *L'Extricable* (1964), and a novel, *Le 24 août 1939: suivi de 41–42* (1995). Borde was involved in the Surrealist Exhibition of 1965 ("L'Ecart absolu") and has also directed several films—among them a short study of Surrealist artist Pierre Molinier (1964) and, with Robert Benayoun and Jacques Brunius, an incomplete documentary about the Surrealist Group, *Le Surréalisme* (1964). Regarding Etienne Chaumeton I know less, except that until his death a few years ago he was the film critic for the Toulouse newspaper *La Dépêche*.⁷ The major point to emphasize is that between them, Borde and Chaumeton not only synthesized a decade of French commentary on American film noir,

but also constructed a full-scale history of the form. In succinct and pungent fashion, *Panorama* offers a definition of film noir, speculates about its immediate sources, charts its rise and fall during the 1940s and 50s, describes its influence on both French cinema and other types of Hollywood film, and constructs a "balance sheet" of its relative strengths and weaknesses. One could hardly ask for more.

At the beginning of *Panorama*, Borde and Chaumeton propose that the history of cinema can be written in terms of cycles or series—that is, in terms of successful films that produce a string of imitations. (In recent years, for example, *Pulp Fiction* [1994] and *There's Something About Mary* [1998] have each created a distinct film cycle.) The American film noir, they argue, is best understood as a series, a term they favor because they want to remind us of Duhamel's "Série noire," but also because they are speaking about a relatively short-lived phenomenon belonging to a specific period in the larger history of crime fiction. In order to distinguish the noir series from ordinary detective stories or other film cycles, Borde and Chaumeton take a different approach from subsequent writers on the topic, placing less emphasis on narrative structure or visual style than on the emotional or affective qualities of the films, which they describe with five adjectives typical of Surrealism: "oneiric, strange, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel." The second adjective—*insolite* in the original French—is especially important, but difficult to render in English. "Kafkaesque" might be one translation, but Paul Hammond wisely chooses "strange," in part because the word has something in common with Freud's "uncanny" and in part because it has a distant relationship to other modernist concepts that Borde and Chaumeton probably weren't much concerned with, such as the Russian Formalists' "defamiliarization" and Brecht's "estrangement" or "alienation effect."

How many of the five attributes does a film need, and in what proportion, in order to be called noir? Borde and Chaumeton don't say, and at the end of their book they make a somewhat unconvincing attempt to avoid difficulties by cata-

logging titles according to a variety of subcategories. (*The Maltese Falcon* is placed under "film noir," *Double Indemnity* under "criminal psychology," *The Big Heat* [1952] under "gangsters," etc.) In their introduction, they try to solve the problem of definition by announcing that their book refers to "productions the critics have most often deemed to be 'film noirs.'" This is probably as good a solution as any. (Film theorist Peter Wollen once remarked to me in conversation, not altogether facetiously, that the best way to define a film noir is to say that it is any movie described as noir by Borde and Chaumeton.) In fact, people never form complex categories in positivist fashion, by rounding up objects with identical characteristics and putting them in boxes. Categories are formed discursively, through a process of metaphoric association that creates networks of relationship; the result is nearly always what Mark Johnson describes as a "radial structure," with "prototypical members clustered in the center" and "less prototypical members at various distances from the central members."⁸ Thus for Borde and Chaumeton, film noir is made up of a central core of influential crime films that have been dubbed noir by other critics and an array of other types (period films, psychological melodramas, Westerns, even cartoons) that can be more or less related to the central core by virtue of a certain noirishness. In the last analysis, therefore, *Panorama* defines noir with a *list* (a favorite tactic of the avant-garde, later adopted by the New Wave critics at *Cahiers du cinéma* and by American auteurs such as Andrew Sarris). In this way, they are able to establish a table of priorities and allow for open-ended revision or supplement. A great many later writers have followed a similar procedure, so that noir has become what French critic Mark Vernet calls a "collector's cinema," one of the charms of which is that "there is always an unknown film to be added to the list."⁹

At other junctures in *Panorama*, however, Borde and Chaumeton treat film noir as if it could be defined as an artistic style or a sociological phenomenon. Sometimes they make it seem less like a loosely connected series than like an antipode representing the flip side of the average Hollywood feature. They

point out, for example, that unlike the typical police procedural, noir is usually told from the point of view of the criminal, who sometimes elicits our sympathy. Even when the central character is on the right side of the law, he's often a corrupt cop, a morally ambiguous private eye, or a "wrong man" accused of a crime. (Alfred Hitchcock specialized in the last of these devices, until his more overtly noir-like television show of the 1950s paved the way for *Psycho* [1960].) At almost every level, as Borde and Chaumeton demonstrate, film noir inverts Hollywood formulas: in place of straightforward narratives with clearly motivated characters, it gives us convoluted actions populated by ambiguous figures whose psychology can be enigmatic; in place of stalwart heroes, it offers middle-aged and "not particularly handsome" protagonists who undergo, before the obligatory happy ending, "appalling beatings"; and in place of virginal or domesticated heroines, it presents an array of femmes fatales, modern-day descendants of Sade's Juliette, who contribute to an overwhelming "eroticization of violence."

Borde and Chaumeton are especially intrigued by the quality of violence in the noir series. The films in question replace Hollywood's chivalric sword fights and melodramatic shoot-outs with a richly elaborated "ceremony of killing" that has sado-masochistic overtones. Noir director Anthony Mann was adept at such effects (Borde and Chaumeton mention two of his films, *T-Men* [1947] and *Border Incident* [1949]), but there are plenty of examples to be found in films by other directors of the same period. In *The Killers*, gas-station attendant Burt Lancaster dies under a fusillade of bullets as he lies in bed mourning Ava Gardner, who has used and deserted him. In *Brute Force* (1947), fascistic prison guard Hume Cronyn ritually tortures inmates to the sound of classical music. In *The Set-Up* (1949), small-time boxer Robert Ryan is cornered in an alley by gangsters who beat him to death for failing to throw a fight. In *The Glass Key* (1942), William Bendix pounds Alan Ladd's face into hamburger while calling him "sweetheart." In *The Dark Corner* (1946), Bendix (again) steps on the unconscious Mark Stevens's thumb and crushes it. And in *Kiss of Death* (1947), Richard Widmark laughs

gleefully as he pushes a little old lady in a wheelchair down a flight of stairs. When the sadism isn't physical, it's psychological, as in *Rebecca* (1940), *Gilda* (1946), and *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948).

For Borde and Chaumeton, all this "incoherent brutality" creates something "dreamlike." Indeed, the films tend to be devoted to dreams, nowhere more so than in *The Woman in the Window* (1944), or situated at the margins of dreams, in a liminal area of darkness, memory, and desire often rendered through flashbacks and first-person narration. A classic instance of the latter technique is *Laura*, a crucial scene in which Borde and Chaumeton nicely describe: "A musical theme, which will accompany us everywhere, evokes the shadowy figure of a doubtless delightful young woman, and we submit to the most compelling of spells. The detective wanders like a sleepwalker through the deserted apartment, he opens and closes drawers, moves ornaments and underclothes around, sniffs at bottles of perfume. And while, dead beat, he slumbers in an armchair, the door opens. . . ."

According to Borde and Chaumeton, *Laura* and other examples of American film noir were shaped by a new realism about violence, a rise in the American crime rate, and the widespread institution and popularization of psychoanalysis after the Second World War. Among the artistic predecessors of the noir series were the hard-boiled novel, certain European films of the 1930s, plus horror films at Universal, gangster pictures at Warner, and detective movies at Fox. During the 1940s, Hollywood's Breen Office still exercised strong control over the sexual and social content of movies, but Borde and Chaumeton argue that censorship actually heightened the effectiveness of certain films by forcing directors to rely on the power of suggestion; sexuality was displaced onto a shadowy and seductive *mise-en-scène*, which drew attention to the curve of Veronica Lake's hair or the silken glitter of Rita Hayworth's glove. Few subsequent historians would quarrel with these assertions. In listing the productions that were crucial to the formation of noir, however, Borde and Chaumeton are sometimes unorthodox. For

example, when they name the movies that inaugurated a noir "style" during the war years (1941–45), they emphasize not only *The Maltese Falcon* and *This Gun for Hire* (1942), but also Josef von Sternberg's *The Shanghai Gesture* (1941), which for most critics today seems like a throwback to the Dietrich films of the 1930s. (Significantly, *The Shanghai Gesture* was a special favorite of the Surrealists, who in 1951 had submitted it to an experiment in the "irrational enlargement" of a film.¹⁰) Elsewhere, Borde and Chaumeton place *Double Indemnity* outside the central core of the form, and they have relatively little to say about *Out of the Past* (1947), which has often been treated as the quintessential example of film noir. They are especially fond of two masterpieces of noir eroticism, *Gilda* and *The Lady from Shanghai*, both starring Hayworth, but they give almost as much praise to *Chicago Deadline* (1948), a largely forgotten Alan Ladd vehicle, and to *The Enforcer* (1951), a Bogart picture attributed to the virtually unknown Bretna Windust (historians later discovered that the actual director was Raoul Walsh). They are quite good at discussing marginal pictures, showing how a variety of Hollywood formulas became "noirified" during the 1940s and 50s, including "costume" films (*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* [1941], *Gaslight* [1944], *The Spiral Staircase*), Shakespeare adaptations (Welles's *Macbeth* [1948]), and Westerns (*Ramrod* [1947]). They also write briefly but effectively about numerous low-budget movies, at the same time leaving many titles for aficionados of noir to discover and nominate.

"Film noir is noir for us," Borde and Chaumeton declare at the opening of their first chapter; "that's to say, for Western and American audiences of the 1950s." But times were changing even as they wrote that sentence. The private-detective myth was already growing stale, the strange was becoming familiar, and a season in hell was beginning to look like the snows of yesteryear. At a revival of *Murder, My Sweet* at the cine club of Toulouse in 1953, people laughed whenever Philip Marlowe lost consciousness and disappeared into a black pool. (Exceptions to the rule included the films of Orson Welles, which have remained "strange" by any standard.) In response to television

and the growing leisure industry, Hollywood was turning to wide-screen epics and biblical pictures. Although Borde and Chaumeton don't say so, this was also the McCarthy era, when several of the key writers and directors associated with film noir were blacklisted or imprisoned. At the beginning of the 1950s, important examples of film noir continued to appear, including John Huston's *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), which influenced Jules Dassin's French production of *Rififi* (1954) and gave renewed life to the theme of organized criminal gangs; Alfred Hitchcock's *Strangers on a Train* (1951), which they describe as a "cocktail" of black humor and suspense; and above all Joseph H. Lewis's *Gun Crazy* (1950), which Borde and Chaumeton view as the "L'Âge d'or of American film noir." Even so, noir seemed to be entering a predictable and decadent phase, leading up to its demise.

An apparent coup de grace was administered by two films that were made in response to Mickey Spillane, a right-wing author of pulp fiction who, in the early 1950s, had become the most popular writer in America and a lightning rod for cultural commentary on the dangers of mass culture. In the MGM musical *The Band Wagon* (1953), director Vincente Minnelli ("the most refined man in Hollywood") staged a balletic Technicolor parody of both Spillane and the classic film noir, transforming the clichés of dark thrillers into "a final concession to our past." "Sure," Borde and Chaumeton admit, "Fred Astaire doesn't have the weighty presence of a tough guy. Sure, Minnelli has been inspired by a facile and banalized Surrealism." For all that, they regard the climactic number in *The Band Wagon* as a brilliantly poetic success: "Never," they write, "had the noir series been grasped 'in its very essence' with such a lucid complicity." Not long afterward came Robert Aldrich's ideologically incoherent but in many ways subversive adaptation of Spillane's *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955), which Borde and Chaumeton describe in the Postface to the 1979 edition of *Panorama* as the despairing opposite of *The Maltese Falcon*: "between 1941 and 1955, between the eve of war and the advent of consumer society, the tone has changed. A savage lyricism hurls us into a world in manifest

decomposition . . . to these intrigues of wild men and weaklings, Aldrich offers the most radical of solutions: nuclear apocalypse."

At its best, classic or historical film noir had represented for Borde and Chaumeton an intermingling of social realism and oneirism, an erotic treatment of violence, and a feeling of psychological disorientation, as if capitalist and puritan values were being systematically inverted. Despite its contradictions and compromises (and despite the fact that it was almost exclusively a white male phenomenon), film noir seemed to offer a romantic and approximately Surrealist "morality," which was expressed through a marked propensity for *amour fou*, a sort of left-wing anarchy, and a sympathy with loners, outcasts, and criminals. Borde and Chaumeton were probably correct to say that the "glory days" of this phenomenon were the late 1940s; and yet, when they revisited the cinematic landscape in the Postface to the 1979 edition of *Panorama*, they found that noir was enjoying a "renaissance." In commenting on the years that had passed since 1955, they fail to mention the fact that the French New Wave had emerged out of a kind of dialogue with the American film noir, most notably in Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1959) and François Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player* (1960). They also say little about the parodies and pastiches of classic noir during the 1970s, and nothing about the best of the retro-styled films in that period, Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974). On the other hand, they list a broad range of new films about crime and violence in a modern setting, including *Point Blank* (1967), *Dirty Harry* (1972), *The Godfather* (1972), *Badlands* (1973), and *The Conversation* (1974). They even have good things to say about *Dr. No* (1962), the first of the James Bond films, in which "[v]iolence and sadism were rehabilitated." The old censorship restrictions have now been modified, so that "a spade is called a spade," and although Borde and Chaumeton miss the charms of black-and-white photography, they praise certain uses of color, which is able to create "a new kind of morbid toughness" and a "standardized world in which people already have the look of the condemned."

The 1970s were in fact an important period for America's dark cinema. During those years, the British critic Raymond Durnat and the American Paul Schrader each wrote important essays in English on film noir, and each drew heavily on Borde and Chaumeton.¹¹ An American version of the New Wave soon emerged in Hollywood, fueled by Schrader, Martin Scorsese, Brian DePalma, and Peter Bogdanovich, who grounded their earliest work in a noir tradition and a neo-expressionist use of color. By the middle of the decade the word "noir" (along with "auteur") had fully entered the English language. Meanwhile, the social revolutions and antiwar movements of the 1960s had given way to the Nixon era, and a mood of despair and apocalypse was infiltrating the work of younger directors. As Paul Schrader wrote in 1972, "The Forties may be to the Seventies what the Thirties were to the Sixties." The result was a series of films such as *The French Connection* (1971) and *Taxi Driver* (1976), in which the urban environment seemed increasingly anarchistic and bombed out, as if modernity had come to the end of its tether. Viewers today will probably not agree with Borde and Chaumeton that Richard Fleischer's dystopian sci-fi thriller *Soylent Green* (1973) is "the most terrifying film in the history of cinema," but that picture could serve as well as any to represent the mood of certain filmmakers in the period.

It would take another book to chronicle all the social and industrial changes since the 1970s and to connect them with all the films since then about burned-out detectives, crooked cops, charming con men, bands of thieves, duplicitous lovers, and violent death in urban settings. Far from dying out, film noir has become a standard feature of popular memory in the postmodern age, and it continues to produce new cycles. As I write this introduction, I'm reminded that during the years 2001–02 American audiences could see Hollywood pictures such as *Shaft* and *Training Day*, which are distantly related to classic film noirs about rogue cops, alongside several "independent" or quasi-art films such as *Memento*, *Mulholland Drive*, *The Deep End*, and *The Man Who Wasn't There*, which were clearly made with the idea of film noir in mind. Borde and Chaumeton helped

to create that idea. What they wrote still resonates in the contemporary imagination and is still the best place to begin reading about the intriguing, always recurring manifestations of Hollywood's dark side.

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- 6 Louis Aragon, "On Decor," in Hammond, 51.
- 7 I am grateful to Paul Hammond for supplying me with biographical information about Borde and Chaumeton.
- 8 Mark Johnson, *The Body and the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
- 9 Marc Vernet, "Film Noir on the Edge of Doom," in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), 26.
- 10 The Surrealist Group, "Data Toward the Irrational Enlargement of a Film: *The Shanghai Gesture*," in Hammond, 121–29.
- 11 See Raymond Durnat, "Paint It Black: The Family Tree of Film Noir," in *Film Noir Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 1996), 37–52; and Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," also in Silver and Ursini, 53–64.

Preface

Marcel Duhamel

*Dearly beloved brethren,
I will die,
You will die,
We will all die. . . .*

The country priest who voiced these revelations from his pulpit on high in the church I strayed into one day at the age of six is perhaps the real person responsible for the "Série noire" and the inspiration for these lines. What is certain is that the phrases "noir novel" and "film noir" always sound like pleonasms to me and that the latent presence of the idea of death in a person's mind, far from appearing symptomatic of a morbid condition, seems, on the contrary, to be eminently healthy and suited to engendering skepticism, therefore humor, therefore a certain optimism. The moral of the story is that noir is, at base, pink or at least yellow and vice versa. And as, in any event and whatever you do, it's always the good that's exalted, nothing could be more edifying and decidedly moral than *Un aller simple* (Série noire) or, at the cinema, *Night Must Fall*, for example.¹

Reading *A Panorama of American Film Noir* (and I take my hat off, in passing, to the enormous work of compilation and close study accomplished by its authors) has stirred many a memory in me. And particularly of the 1923–26 period when, like faithful followers celebrating some magic rite, we spent our nights, Jacques Prévert, Yves Tanguy, and I, in the basement of the Erka-Prodisko Company. Pierre Prévert, already a cameraman at the time, used to secretly show us mile upon mile of movie film. Solely the noir kind. Loads of William Wellman, notably. I could be wrong, but his *Chinatown Nights* has stayed in my memory

as the masterpiece of silent noir gangster film. Along with *Club 73* (I don't know who by anymore), years before *Underworld*. . . .² At daybreak, we emerged onto the pavement of Avenue de la République, replete, satiated, besotted, and happy. . . .

And two or three times a week we were back again in Rue de la Gaîté at the Thousand Columns cinema, of odoriferous memory, where a George O'Brien movie was billed. This astonishing actor suddenly disappeared from the screen one day, only to make his comeback twenty years later as a lead in Westerns. During the period I'm referring to, he appeared in a series of features about which I unfortunately remember little, except that they were curious, nonconformist, and as noir as you could wish. And neither André Breton, nor Raymond Queneau, nor Benjamin Péret will contradict me here.

Let's shed a tear in passing for the silent period, the blissful era of the double bill. . . . Almost every day, after having seen a first feature in Montparnasse, we crossed Paris by taxi during the intermission to see a second film on Boulevard de Clichy. . . . I reckon that if we'd had to suffer, then, the first halves you have to put up with now—an insipid documentary, ice cream, a newsreel (already seen three times during the week), intermission, ice cream, ads, second intermission—we'd have set the damn place on fire. At present, I foam gently at the mouth and chew my nails. They've ended up putting one over on us. . . .

That said, and since the problem is posed about film noir's origins, let's observe that it goes back in fact to the birth of the cinema. From *L'Assassinat du Duc de Guise* to *Night Must Fall* and taking in *Les Vampires*, cinema has always mirrored literature, which (may I be forgiven this truism) draws its inspiration from life and from the news event. The German Expressionist noir cinema of 1924 depicted the extraordinary atmosphere reigning in that country after the 1914–18 war. The debut of the gangster film around 1923 exactly coincides with the voting-in of Prohibition, and ever since then American cinema has merely expressed a point of fact: the persistence of racketeering in a more or less disguised form. And we won't see the end of this as long as society isn't considerably changed. All of which

promises us quite a few eventful evenings.

For ten years now, they've been predicting the end of the thriller in the USA. Well, record attendances have been announced for last year. Every now and then the "Série noire" is interred, but this is wishful thinking. And as 75 percent of the 250 or so published volumes have been filmed; and since the latter represent only a small part of noir movie output, one sees how wide of the mark such lists and statistics are. Ought this to be deplored? Surely not, since, taken together, good books and good film noirs keep very close to current events and constitute an excellent testimony of our times. And to those who have no interest in history, I advise them to meditate on this Chinese proverb: "It is better to dream of fish than to have one's wife dipped in boiling oil."

In conclusion, read masses of noir novels and see film noirs in abundance. As long as you only do your killing in your imagination, we'll be able to sleep in peace. It's the blessing I wish for us all.

References

1 *Un aller simple*, published in 1950 in Duhamel's "Série noire" collection for Gallimard, is the French version of Henry Edward Helseth's noir novel, *The Chair for Martin Rome* (1948). —Trans.

2 *Club 73* is untraceable. Perhaps Duhamel is thinking of Tod Browning's *The Unholy Three* (1925), released in France as *Le Club des trois*. The three memorable villains of the title are a ventriloquist, a dwarf, and a giant. . . . —Trans.

Introduction¹

It was during the summer of 1946 that the French public experienced the revelation of a new kind of American film. In the course of a few weeks, from mid-July to the end of August, five films followed one another on the cinema screens of Paris, films which had an unusual and cruel atmosphere in common, one tinted by a very particular eroticism: John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*, Otto Preminger's *Laura*, Edward Dmytryk's *Murder, My Sweet*, Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*, and Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window*.

Long cut off from America, ill-informed about Hollywood's output during the war, living in thrall to Wyler, Ford, and Capra, not even knowing who the new big names in directing were, French critics didn't register the true extent of this revelation. Nino Frank, one of the first to speak of "film noir," and who subsequently managed to diagnose some of the basic traits of the series, nevertheless wrote, apropos of *The Maltese Falcon* and *Murder, My Sweet*: "[these movies] belong to what used to be known as the detective genre, and that from now on we'd do better to call 'crime adventure stories' or, better still, 'criminal psychology.'"² This was also the opinion of a certain specialized criticism, one that lacked, it has to be said, the necessary distance.

A few months later, however, Frank Tuttle's *This Gun for Hire*, Robert Siodmak's *The Killers*, Robert Montgomery's *The Lady in the Lake*, Charles Vidor's *Gilda*, and Howard Hawks's *The Big Sleep* obliged the public to accept the idea of film noir. A new "series" was emerging in the history of the cinema.

A series could be defined as a group of nationally identifiable films sharing certain common features (style, atmosphere, subject), features sufficiently strong to mark them unequivocally and to give them, with time, an inimitable quality. Such

series have a variable life: now two years, now ten. Up to a point it's the viewer who decides this. From the "filmological" point of view, series have their origins in a few old movies, a few scattered titles. Afterward, they reach a climax; that's to say, a moment of exceptional purity. Following that, they fade and die, their aftereffects being felt in other genres.

To a large extent the history of the cinema is a history of series. Unclassifiable films exist, of course: Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* or Clifford Odets's *None But the Lonely Heart* are two such. But often a great film is unclassifiable only because it's the first in a new series and the necessary time lag is lacking. ✕ *Caligari* was unclassifiable before giving rise to "Caligarism."

Since the advent of sound we would cite, in the USA, for example, the social series, the gangster film, and the so-called "period" film; in Germany, the light comedy of the years 1930 to 1933, an immediate prelude to American comedy; in the USSR, films devoted to the October Revolution; in France, the realism of Carné, Renoir, and Duvivier.

Nearer to our own time: English comedy, the French epic escape film (from *L'Eternel retour* to *Singoalla* and *Juliette ou La Clé des songes*), the social documentary of Daquin, Rouquier, Nicole Védre's. In the USSR, works to the glory of collective work (from *Three Encounters* to *It Happened in the Donbas*) and the kolkhoz cycle. In the USA, the police documentary (Hathaway, Kazan, Dassin), the psychoanalytic film, the new Western school. All series with their own laws, their own traditions, and often their own public.

That for years there might have been a noir series³ within Hollywood production is seemingly beyond question. It's another thing to define its essential traits.

We'd be oversimplifying things in calling film noir oneiric, strange, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel. . . .⁴ All these qualities are present in the series, but sometimes it's the oneiric quality that predominates—and we get *The Shanghai Gesture*; sometimes eroticism—and we get *Gilda*; sometimes the cruelty of a strange act. Often a film's noir side has to do with a single character, a single scene, a single decor. *The Set-Up* is an excellent documen-

tary on boxing: it becomes film noir in the sequence of the final showdown, that terrible beating at the end of a blind alley. The spellbinding sadism of a psychological film like *Rope* links it per se to the noir series. On the other hand, *The Big Sleep*, *This Gun for Hire*, and *The Lady in the Lake* seem to be typical thrillers. This problem of definition will be evoked first, by referring to productions the critics have most often deemed to be "film noirs."

One final comment. We will constantly use a convention; we will hypothetically concede the paternity of films to their directors. It's a convention because one never knows, where American films are concerned, if the director is really the key figure. Sternberg himself recently said: "I work on assignment; namely, to order. And this order is exactly the same as those the cabinetmaker, bookbinder, or shoemaker commissioned to do a particular job receive."⁵ What is the producer's contribution, the scriptwriter's, the editor's? Is it pure chance that the late Mark Hellinger produced three such unmistakable films as *The Killers*, *Brute Force*, and *The Naked City*? Who can say, apart from the people concerned, if Hellinger really put his stamp on these works or if he let Siodmak and Dassin work with a free hand?

Actually, if there's not much genuine freedom for a director in Hollywood, it seems he's occasionally granted something other than a merely subaltern role: his degree of independence varies to a very great extent in relation to his commercial "efficiency." The persistence of a common style in the works of a particular director would thus be explained: the themes of failure and adventure in John Huston, the theme of cruelty in Raoul Walsh, the theme of urban realism in Jules Dassin. And even Sternberg has hardly ever quit the confines of a sensual exoticism. All in all, this prior convention is acceptable, then.

References

1 Our thanks are due to Freddy Buache, General Secretary of the Cinémathèque de Lausanne, who agreed to publish this introduction in the magazine *Carreau*.

2 *L'Ecran français* 61 (28 August 1946).

3 The French here is *série noire*, but since the authors speak of other series—the crime series and the psychoanalytic series, for instance—this phrase has been Englished. It is hoped, however, that when readers comes across “noir series” they will bear the French term in mind, since this resonates with the hard-boiled novels edited by Marcel Duhamel, Gallimard’s famous “*Série noire*,” which popularized such names as W.R. Burnett, James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler, David Goodis, Dashiell Hammett, Horace McCoy, Jim Thompson, and Charles Williams. —*Trans.*

4 The second of these adjectives—*insolite*—is difficult to translate. It can mean strange, unusual, peculiar, unaccustomed, odd; even uncanny, at a pinch. If the word “strange” appears, well, strange to readers, they are asked to recall these other meanings. —*Trans.*

5 *Le Figaro* (8 May 1951).

2

Toward a definition of film noir

The bloody channels through which logic at bay is obliged to pass.

—Lautréamont¹

Film noir is noir *for us*; that’s to say, for Western and American audiences of the 1950s. It responds to a certain kind of emotional resonance as singular in time as it is in space. It’s on the basis of a response to possibly ephemeral reactions that the roots of this “style” must be sought, therefore: this is what forges a link between productions as different as *The Shanghai Gesture* and *The Asphalt Jungle*.

As a result, the method is imposed by and of itself: while remaining on as technical and objective a terrain as possible, it consists in studying the most typical characteristics of films the critics have generally deemed to be noir; then, by comparing these qualities, in seeking a common denominator and defining the single emotional attitude all the works in the series tend to bring into play.

It’s the presence of crime that gives film noir its most distinctive stamp. “The dynamism of violent death,” as Nino Frank put it, and the expression is excellent. Blackmail, informing, theft, or drug trafficking weave the plot of an adventure whose final stake is death. Few series in the history of cinema have, in just seven or eight years, accumulated so many hideous acts of brutality and murder. Sordid or strange, death always emerges at the end of a tortuous journey. Film noir is a film of death, in all senses of the word.

Yet it doesn’t have a monopoly here, and an essential distinction is called for. In principle, a film noir is not a “police

documentary."² We know that since 1946 Hollywood has exported a dozen or so movies to France that have the common characteristic of describing a criminal investigation by following the documents in the police file page by page. Furthermore, at the start of the film a title or commentary advises the public that this is a true story, occurring at such and such a time, in New York or some other place. And the images on the screen faithfully describe the investigation: a call to headquarters, the discovery of the body; from time to time some seemingly minor incident, a local precinct report that will start the ball rolling. Then the "thankless" task of the police department: detailed and futile inquiries, useless leads, abortive roundups. At last a glimmer of light, a bit of cross-checking, a testimony, and then the final chase that unmasks a bunch of killers. This series, which has given us some interesting works—Henry Hathaway's *Call Northside 777* and *The House on 92nd Street*, Elia Kazan's *Boomerang!* and *Panic in the Streets*, László Benedek's *Port of New York*, Jules Dassin's *The Naked City*, and, on the fringes of the genre, Bretonne Windust's *The Enforcer*—has several features in common with film noir: realistic locations, carefully crafted supporting roles, extremely brutal scenes, and bits of bravura in the final chase sequences. On top of that, these police documentaries often have more typically noir features: it will be a long time before we forget the unusual figure of the killers' boss in *The Enforcer* or the impassive gangster in *Panic in the Streets*. It may even be that during his career a director alternates between the two genres. Jules Dassin has put his name to *The Naked City* but also to *Night and the City*. In 1950, Joseph H. Lewis gave us an incontestably noir opus in *Gun Crazy*, yet the year before he'd described the work of some tax officials in *The Undercover Man*.

There are some differences between the two series, for all that. And first and foremost a different angle of vision. The documentary considers the murder from without, from the official police viewpoint; the film noir from within, from the criminals'. In movies of *The Naked City* type, the action begins after the crime, and the murderers, heavies, and their accomplices

traverse the screen solely in order to be tailed, spied on, interrogated, hunted down, or killed. If a flashback evokes a scene between gangsters, it's to illustrate a confession or a testimony, the transcript of which figures in the report. The police are omnipresent, so as to intervene or to lend an ear. There's none of this in the film noir, which is set in the criminal milieu itself and describes the latter, now through simple touches (*The Big Sleep* or *Dark Passage*), now in depth and with obliging subtlety (*The Asphalt Jungle*). In any event, it proposes a psychology of crime that isn't without its echoes, in another domain, of that worldly psychology so appreciated at the end of the nineteenth century: both shed light on forbidden worlds.

The second difference is of a moral, and maybe even more essential, kind. It's part of the tradition of the police documentary to present the investigators as upright, incorruptible, and courageous men. The ship's doctor in *Panic in the Streets* is a hero. A hero, too, albeit more complex, is the short Irish detective of *The Naked City* who believes in God and consecrates his nights to the triumph of justice. An edifying film, the American police documentary is, in fact, a documentary to the glory of the police and belongs in the same bag as such productions, in France, as *Identité judiciaire* or, in England, *The Blue Lamp*.

None of this exists in the noir series. If there are policemen, they're of dubious character—like the inspector in *The Asphalt Jungle* or that evil-looking, corrupt brute played by Lloyd Nolan in *The Lady in the Lake*—even murderers at times (Otto Preminger's *Fallen Angel* and *Where the Sidewalk Ends*). Or at least they allow themselves to get caught up in the machinery of crime, like the attorney in *The File on Thelma Jordan*. It's no accident, then, if scriptwriters have frequently had recourse to the character of the private detective. Casting too many aspersions on the official U.S. police force was a ticklish problem. The private detective, midway between order and crime, running with the hare and hunting with the hounds, not overly scrupulous and responsible for himself alone, satisfied both the exigencies of morality and those of the criminal adventure story. As if by way of compensation, the lawbreakers themselves are

rather personable. Of course, the old motto of MGM's prewar short films, "Crime Doesn't Pay," remains the order of the day, and the ending witnesses the chastisement of the guilty. But then the action is so adroitly handled that at certain moments the public sympathizes and identifies with the gangsters. Think back to that breathtaking scene in *The Asphalt Jungle*, the raid on the jewelers. What spectator isn't instinctively on the side of the crooks? And *Gun Crazy* depicted a couple of killers of an exemplary beauty, if we may say so.

Few films have shown the instability of the relations between underworld types as well as *The Big Sleep* and, in its noir sequence (Rico's testimony), *The Enforcer*. In this gallery of suspects and criminals one glimpses the complex and shifting patterns of domination based on money, blackmail, vice, and informing. Who'll do the killing, and who'll get killed? Here is all the ambiguity of a criminal milieu in which the power relationships ceaselessly change.

This equivocation extends to the ambivalence of the characters themselves. The rough-hewn hero, the Scarface-type thug, has disappeared from film noir, making way for a whole host of angelic killers, neurotic gangsters, megalomaniac gang bosses, and disturbing or depraved stooges. Here is the solitary, scientific assassin of *He Walked by Night*, here the self-punishing failure of *Night and the City*, here the awesomely mother-fixated fanatic of *White Heat*. Here are the henchmen of *The Enforcer*—vicious, venomous, or spineless.

Ambiguity, too, as to the victims, forever suspect, at least partly. The relationships they maintain with the mob makes them first cousins to their torturers. If they're often victims, it's because they haven't managed to be executioners. Like the dubious partner in *The Lady from Shanghai* who meets his death while simulating his own murder and who will long remain the finest example of an equivocal victim. One also thinks of the terrorized heroine of Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past*, whom one expects to see done in before the film is over and who sees her executioner off in a carefully prepared trap. A lamb to the

slaughter, this heavy secretly marked out for execution.

Contradictions on the hero's side: often he's a man who's already middle-aged, old almost, and not particularly handsome. Humphrey Bogart is the model here. He's also an inglorious victim who undergoes, before the happy end, some appalling beatings. Added to which, he's often the masochistic type, his own executioner, someone hoist by his own petard, someone who gets tangled up in dangerous situations, not so much through a concern for justice or through cupidity as through a sort of morbid curiosity. Sometimes he's a passive hero who is willingly taken to the frontier between lawfulness and crime, like Orson Welles in *The Lady from Shanghai*. We're a long way, then, from the adventure film superman.

Contradictions, finally, on the woman's side: the femme fatale is also fatal unto herself. Frustrated and guilty, half man-eater, half man-eaten, blasé and cornered, she falls victim to her own wiles. While the ambiguous behavior of Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep* doesn't cost her her life, Barbara Stanwyck will not survive her own murderous schemes in *The File on Thelma Jordan*. This new kind of woman, rubbing shoulders with and masterminding crime, tough as the milieu surrounding her, as expert in blackmail and "vice" as in the use of firearms—and probably frigid—has left her mark on a noir eroticism that is at times merely an eroticization of violence. We're a long way from the chaste heroines of the classic Western or the historical film.

In terms of the history of the cinema, film noir has given a new lease of life to the theme of violence. First of all, by abandoning one of the conventions of the adventure film: the combat with equal weapons. The fair fight gives way to the settling of scores, to the working over, to the cold-blooded execution. Bodyguards bounce a powerless victim between them like a ball, a victim they then leave bleeding on a public square (*Ride the Pink Horse*), in a blind alley (*The Set-Up*), or in a yard, among the trash cans (*I Walk Alone*). Crime itself becomes mechanical, professional, and it's the hired killer who now performs this duty "without anger and without hatred." The first sequence of the Robert

Siodmak film, *The Killers*, that famous scene in the diner in which two men in search of their victim terrify the clients with contemptible self-confidence, will abide as one of the most striking moments in American cinema, an unforgettable slice of documentary: a hitherto unknown race looms up before us with its tics, its stigmata. This race has its artistes, exceedingly gentle on the whole (Alan Ladd in *This Gun for Hire*), its unreasoning brutes (William Bendix), and its lucid and fearsome organization men (Everett Sloane in *The Enforcer*). It also has its mental defectives, its overweight killers, oozing cowardice, humiliated by their accomplices, and suddenly let loose (Laird Cregar or Raymond Burr).

As for the ceremony of killing, this remains one of the richest in the entire history of the cinema. Let us cite at random: that un-self-conscious gesture of the wealthy publisher who sends a potentially embarrassing witness, busy washing the tiles, hurtling down the lift shaft; all he need do is nudge the man's stepladder with the knob of his cane while shooting the breeze (*High Wall*); the gruesome razor killing in *The Enforcer*; a tap of the foot given to a hydraulic jack (*Red Light*). Elsewhere, a paralyzed victim is pushed down a flight of stairs after being tied to her wheelchair (*Kiss of Death*); a stool pigeon is locked inside a Turkish bath, then the steam turned up; a prisoner is gradually driven under a power hammer by threatening him with blazing blow torches (*Brute Force*); someone is crushed beneath a tractor, someone else sinks into the quicksand (*Border Incident*). . . . An unprecedented panoply of cruelties and sufferings unfolds in film noir.

But then more than with the violence, the anguish has to do, perhaps, with the strange unfolding of the action. A private detective accepts the vaguest of missions: to find a woman, to halt a blackmail attempt, to deter someone—and straightaway his path is littered with corpses. He's tailed, hit over the head, arrested. Let him ask for information, and he finds himself tied up, bleeding, in some deep cellar. Various men, questioned at night, shoot and then run off. There is, in this incoherent bru-

tal, something dreamlike, and yet this is the atmosphere common to most film noirs: *The Big Sleep*, *Ride the Pink Horse*, *The Lady in the Lake*, *Chicago Deadline*. On this score, Georges Sadoul suggests that "the story remains opaque, like a nightmare, or the ramblings of a drunk."³ This is so manifestly true that one of the rare parodies of the genre, Elliott Nugent's *My Favorite Brunette*, begins in just this way. Bob Hope has elected to play at being a detective, and Dorothy Lamour entrusts him with one of those confused investigations the Americans possess the secret of—like, for instance, "Find my brother" or "Find my sister"—by handing him a check. Instantly, the knives are out, corpses bar his way, and the inexorable wheels of fate lead him to the electric chair via a hospital that's a gangster hideout.

At times, the mystery is more convincing: a man who's lost his memory sets off in search of the past, only for crime to rear its ugly head. This theme has been exploited by Robert Florey in *The Crooked Way* and by Joseph Mankiewicz in *Somewhere in the Night*. But here the stated facts of the problem are such that the public expects a certain amount of confusion in advance. In genuine film noir, strangeness is inseparable from what could be called the *uncertainty of the motives*. What, for instance, are Bannister or his associate seeking through their sinister doings in *The Lady from Shanghai*? The very strangeness of the oeuvre lies in these spineless, mysterious creatures who lay their cards on the table only in death. Elsewhere, will a figure glimpsed in some nondescript nightclub finger an accomplice or an enemy? This enigmatic killer, is he to be executioner or victim? The complexity of criminal relationships, the multifarious intermeshings of blackmail, the mystery as to motives—all this converges in incoherence.

In our opinion, this note of confusion is at the very heart of the oneiric quality specific to the series. A number of titles could readily be found in which the action is deliberately situated at the level of the dream; for example, Fritz Lang's *The Woman in the Window*. There are also works in which the artificial setting relates to symbol and fiction alone; Sternberg's *The Shanghai Gesture* is a case in point. As a general rule, however, the point

of departure is realistic and, taken on its own, each scene could pass for a fragment of documentary. It's the accumulation of these realistic shots on a bizarre theme that creates a nightmarish atmosphere.

One gets the feeling that all the components of noir style lead to the same result: to disorient the spectators, who no longer encounter their customary frames of reference. The cinema public was habituated to certain conventions: a logic to the action, a clear distinction between good and evil, well-defined characters, clear motives, scenes more spectacular than genuinely brutal, an exquisitely feminine heroine, and an upright hero. These at least were the postulates of the American adventure film before the war.

As things stand, though, the public is offered a highly sympathetic image of the criminal milieu, of attractive killers, dubious policemen. Good and evil often rub shoulders to the point of merging into one another. The thieves are average guys; they have kids, love their young wives, and aspire to return to the rural haunts of their childhood (*The Asphalt Jungle*). The victim is as suspect as the executioner, while the latter remains likeable. The first of those frames of reference, moral fictions, is blurred.

The heroine is vicious, deadly, venomous, or alcoholic. The hero lets himself be led astray, gets to "take a lot of punishment," as they say in boxing, during ruthless settlings of scores. And the second frame of reference, the myth of superman and his chaste fiancée, goes by the board.

The action is confused, the motives uncertain. This is a far cry from classical drama or the moral tale of the realist era: many of the hoods have murky relationships with each other (*The Big Sleep*); a policeman arrives unexpectedly, proves to be a crook, and his presence only adds to the tension of the viewer (*The Lady in the Lake*); proceedings in which a man's life is at stake turn into the craziest of stories (*The Lady from Shanghai*). The film takes on the quality of a dream, and the audience searches in vain for the good old logic of yore.

In the end, the violence "oversteps the mark." This gratuitous cruelty and this one-upmanship in murder add to the strangeness. The sense of dread is dissipated only in the very last images.

It is easy to come to a conclusion: the moral ambivalence, criminal violence, and contradictory complexity of the situations and motives all combine to give the public a shared feeling of anguish or insecurity, which is the identifying sign of film noir at this time. All the works in this series exhibit a consistency of an emotional sort; namely, the state of tension created in the spectators by the disappearance of their psychological bearings. The vocation of film noir has been to create a specific sense of malaise.

References

1 Since this citation is not, in fact, from Lautréamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror*, but from *Poésies*, it would be more correct to sign it "Isidore Ducasse." —Trans.

2 What the authors call a "police documentary" we'd now call a "police procedural." —Trans.

3 A review of *The Big Sleep* in *Les Lettres françaises*.