

FRENCH FILM NOIR

Although *noir* is usually credited as an American phenomenon, its distinct style can be discerned in French film from the early 1930s. Tapping into a French literary tradition that had long been infatuated with those living on the margins, and absorbing contemporary trends in visual arts, the emerging *noir* cinema internalised the traumas and anxieties of French society – from the rise of fascism to the Nazi occupation to the American-inflected modernity of the 1950s – and offers a fascinating window on to the shifting power dynamics in French society. By **Ginette Vincendeau**

Any discussion of French *film noir* must begin by challenging a few myths. Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton's seminal *A Panorama of American Film Noir*, first published in 1955, sees *film noir* – despite the French name – as an American phenomenon. French attempts are dismissed as imitation and confined to the post-war period. In a remarkable case of cultural amnesia that overlooks France's contribution to the genre, the French critic Nino Frank is credited with coining the phrase in 1946, in the excitement of discovering a batch of Hollywood *noir* movies banned during the war. Another legend sees the expression '*film noir*' originating in the Gallimard Série noire imprint of crime novels, founded by Marcel Duhamel in 1945. Yet, as the film critic and theorist André Bazin noted, "In French pre-war cinema, even if there wasn't exactly a genre, there was a style, the realist *film noir*," referring to films that critics such as Frank had named as such before the war. For instance, a review of Pierre Chenal's *Le Dernier Tournant* (*The Last Turn*, 1939) – the first adaptation of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* – states: "Here is another *film noir*, which belongs to the sinister series which starts with *Les Bas-fonds* and *Crime et châtiment* and continues with *Pépé le Moko* and *Le Quai des brumes*, *La Bête humaine* and *Hôtel du Nord*. No doubt this series has produced the most significant French films of the last few years."

The importance and impact of American *film noir* are of course not in question. Nevertheless, as the above suggests, and scholarship now amply demonstrates, a powerful current that merits the adjective '*noir*' runs through French cinema. Many of the films are famous in their own right. Some are regarded as part of a movement known as poetic realism: dark, melodramatic films that fuse two apparent opposites – a 'realistic' description of working-class lives with a poetic, or lyrical, style. (Pierre Chenal's 1934 *La Rue sans*

nom is the first film to be called as such, and the movement's greatest classics are probably Marcel Carné's *Le Quai des brumes* in 1938 and *Le Jour se lève* in 1939.) Other titles are famous as the work of filmmakers known for their proclivity for dark subjects and style (Henri-Georges Clouzot, Jean-Pierre Melville). But longer and deeper continuities sustain the persistence of *noir* in French film, which will be examined here in its heyday, from the early 1930s to the late 1960s.

Although the phenomenon was not confined to France, French writers showed a strong attraction to the underbelly of society, the '*bas-fonds*' ('lower depths'), from the early modern period onwards and in particular in the 18th-century *roman noir*, examining those living on the margins of the big cities, the poor and the criminals. This first culminated in the 19th century in the aftermath of the French Revolution and against the background of urbanisation and capitalism, with a particular focus on Paris. A supreme early expression was Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831), soon followed by many novelists (Honoré de Balzac, Eugène Sue), journalists and campaigners, and even a criminal turned chief of police, Eugène François Vidocq. It is no accident that Edgar Allan Poe located his short story 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841, credited as the first detective story) in Paris; in turn, it gave rise to a long tradition of international crime literature to which all *film noir* is directly or indirectly indebted.

Meanwhile, the late 19th century saw a fundamental shift in attitudes to the *bas-fonds* from revulsion to fascination. This was in part

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due to the Romantics and their love of bohemia. They continued to be fascinated by the poverty, vice and crime that defined representations of the urban lower depths, but they observed it with a greater poetic – and increasingly, nostalgic – sensibility. Such attitudes are in evidence in the work of a number of 20th-century French-language writers who produced key texts for French *film noir*, among them Pierre Mac Orlan, the author of *Le Quai des brumes*, who coined the phrase 'social fantastic', a precursor of 'poetic realism'. Mac Orlan and others, such as Francis Carco and Eugène Dabit, were close to the so-called populist literature of the 1920s that focused on the working classes, but which were not untouched by crime. Concurrently, crime literature thrived; particularly influential were two Belgian writers, Stanislas-André Steeman and, especially, Georges Simenon. Their novels explored all backgrounds, with a predilection for the teeming *faubourgs* of Paris and low dives in the port towns of Le Havre or Marseille. For decades to come, Simenon would prove one of the richest single sources of *noir* stories, both for his 'hard novels' in which crime is located in the everyday, and for his *policiers* featuring the solid, pipe-smoking Inspector Maigret. Two early Maigret adaptations, Jean Renoir's *La Nuit du carrefour* (*Night at the Crossroads*, 1932) and Julien Duvivier's *La Tête d'un homme* (1933) set the tone for a certain social voyeurism and the ambiguous intermingling of criminals and law-abiding citizens against picturesque mean streets.

From different corners of high and low literature, this interest in the dark corners of French society proved highly successful (extending also to popular song) and provides part of the cultural background that eventually led to French *film noir*. But the migration of these motifs to French cinema only came about through developments in photography and cinematography that





Gentleman thief: Jean Servais in Jules Dassin's *Rififi* (1955), which elegantly merged the traditions of American and French film noir

converged in the French capital between the two world wars. Although dark melodramas and crime cinema existed in the silent period, French *film noir* proper began with the coming of sound around 1930.

The review of *Le Dernier Tournant* quoted above laments the "special atmosphere" of "characters led to destitution and death by an implacable destiny", concluding, "It seems unfortunate that the French film 'school' is represented by films which... are long poems to discouragement." While this atmosphere was indeed predicated on narratives of doom and despair, it also owed a lot to trends in visual arts that were not confined to the 'French film school'.

Paris in the 1930s was a magnet for photographers, particularly Central and Eastern European émigrés, and the attraction of the city was reinforced by the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany: André Kertész, Brassaï, Germaine Krull and François Kollar, to name the most famous, documented French society, often relishing the city's less salubrious corners. Particularly famous is Brassaï's collection *The Secret Paris of the 30s*, with its nocturnal sewage workers, barmaids, pimps and prostitutes, in a dense, inky idiom. His combination of glamorous chiaroscuro, louche subjects and poetic tone was extreme. Yet its shadowy iconography and mingling of working and criminal classes found echoes in the flourishing sensationalist press of the time (eg, *Détective*, a popular weekly magazine published by Gallimard from 1928, which specialised in sensational murder enquiries and mysteries), and had clear parallels in film, notably Renoir's *La Chienne* (1931), *La Nuit du carrefour* and *La Bête humaine* (1938); Anatole Litvak's *Cœur de Lilas* (1932); Jacques Feyder's *Le Grand Jeu* (1934); Duvivier's *La Tête d'un homme*, *La Bandera* (1935) and *Pépé le Moko* (1937); Jean Grémillon's *Gueule d'amour* (1937); Carné's *Le Quai des brumes* and *Le Jour se lève*; and Chenal's *La Rue sans nom* and indeed *Le Dernier Tournant*.

It is a cliché to point to the impact of German expressionism on *film noir*, yet like all clichés it contains some truth. Many German émigrés transited via France en route to Hollywood and left an indelible mark. Some filmmakers (Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, G.W. Pabst) stayed only briefly, but others, such as Robert Siodmak, had a greater impact (*Mister Flow*, 1936; *Mollenard*, 1938; and *Pièges*, 1939, all contain *noir* thriller elements). German directors of photography such as Curt Courant and Eugen Schüfftan worked extensively on French films, importing expressionist imagery. They also directly trained, or indirectly influenced, French colleagues such as Jules Kruger, Marc Fossard, Claude Renoir and Nicolas Hayer. Some of the most memorable *noir* images in the 1930s and beyond can be traced to German-inspired cinematography: Courant's glittering work on the murder scene in *La Bête humaine*, Schüfftan's dramatic lighting effects in *Le Quai des brumes*, and Hayer's brooding shadows from Clouzot's *Le Corbeau* (1943) to Melville's *Le Doulous* (1962). As critic Emile Vuillermoz put it in 1939, "*Noir* is currently the colour of fashion in our studios."

The precision and beauty of this type of lighting, both contrasted and diffuse, in



The mackintosh man: Alain Delon in Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samouraï* (1967)

conjunction with the remarkable sets of Lazare Meerson and Alexandre Trauner (and their disciples) defined French *film noir* by marrying an international visual style to minutely observed French decors. In the process, they imbued sordid lower-depths locations, such as the bars in *Le Grand Jeu* and *Le Quai des brumes* or the workhouse in Renoir's *Les Bas-fonds* (1936), with a poetic grandeur. In respect of this visual style, as well as in terms of subject matter and literary origins, French *film noir* in the 1930s overlaps more or less with poetic realism, even though a few poetic realist films are less easily identified as *noir*, largely because of the absence of a criminal element within them – such as Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* (1934) – or because of their comic slant, such as Carné's *Hôtel du Nord* (1938).

The *noir* visual aesthetic continued, often in even darker mood, in post-war classical French cinema that looked back towards the pre-war

Regret for the passing of the pre-war 'good old days' is pervasive, as seen in Melville's anachronistic gangster in 'Le Samouraï'

films, such as Carné's *Les Portes de la nuit* (1946), Clouzot's *Quai des orfèvres* (1947) and Yves Allégret's *Une si jolie petite plage* (Such a Pretty Little Beach, 1948). But *noir* left poetic realism behind in gangster films, such as Jacques Becker's *Touchez pas au grisbi* (1954), and the resistance drama *Marie-Octobre* (Duvivier, 1959) and many others. The arrival of the New Wave and its taste for location shooting inevitably had an impact, yet it did not banish the glamour of night-time urban scenes – far from it, as we can see in precursors such as Melville's *Bob le flambeur* (1956) and Louis Malle's *Lift to the Scaffold* (1958), but also in the New Wave's own *noir* pastiches, such as François Truffaut's *Shoot the Pianist* (*Tirez sur le pianiste*, 1960) and Jean-Luc Godard's *Alphaville* (1965). Made just before colour became the norm, these *noir* tributes may be seen as the last outposts of stylish black-and-white cinematography.

French *film noir* thus has long antecedents in written and visual representations of the *bas-fonds*, and visual characteristics informed by contemporary professional practice and geopolitical developments. Equally significant was the immediate French social background, including the rise of fascism in the 1930s, the left-wing Popular Front alliance of 1936-38, the

war and German occupation of 1940–44, and the post-war advent of American-inflected modernity. As products of popular culture, French *films noirs* neither adopt an explicitly political stance nor simply 'reflect' contemporary events. But they undoubtedly bear the traces of their respective traumatic social contexts. In the late 1930s, for instance, some can be read as meditations on Popular Front hopes and then disillusionment, and in the post-war period, they explicitly engage with American culture, providing a cultural framework for shifting definitions of national identity. But the area in which they most visibly echo changing social parameters is in their delineation of gender relations.

Just like its American counterpart, French *film noir* is the genre *par excellence* of masculinity in crisis, brimming with vulnerable men drawn to crime, 'victims' of alluring females, or preys to a cruel fate. Building on the charisma of glamorous stars, the films side with these maladjusted figures. In the 1930s Jean Gabin epitomised the tragic proletarian hero haunted by the past, lured by a scheming – or even innocent – woman, defeated by evil patriarchs or just circumstances (*Pépé le Moko*, *Gueule d'amour*, *La Bête humaine*, *Le Quai des brumes*, *Le Jour se lève*). As we have seen, these overtly pessimistic scenarios drew critical disapproval in some quarters, yet their murderous and/or suicidal heroes did not trouble the censors (unlike in Hollywood, where various remakes saw their endings modified) and they continued to draw audiences. During and immediately after the war, the more weary masculinity of central male figures, in *Le Corbeau*, *Les Portes de la nuit*, *Quai des orfèvres*, *Une si jolie petite plage* and *Manon* (Clouzot, 1949) can easily be mapped against the traumatic defeat of France, the humiliations of the German occupation and the retributions that followed.

While some scholars see the godfather-like protagonists of the post-war gangster films as a symbolic restoration of patriarchal power, equally striking is these characters' ultimate powerlessness and penchant for nostalgia, despite the films' surface modernity. In *Touchez pas au grisbi* and *Rififi* (Jules Dassin, 1955) and many others, a stint in jail is a coded reference to the war years, and regret for the passing of the pre-war 'good old days' is pervasive. This is also striking in the self-conscious tributes to Hollywood *noir* towards the end of the period, as seen in Melville's anachronistic gangsters in *Le Doulos* and *Le Samouraï* (1967), respectively played by Jean-Paul Belmondo and Alain Delon.

Against this panorama of flawed, yet glamorous and charismatic male figures, the women of French *film noir* are less exalted, presented as marginalised and often degraded figures. Here too historical patterns emerge. Notable women in pre-war *noir* include the hapless prostitute of *La Chienne* (Janie Marèse), the kept women of *Pépé le Moko* and *Gueule d'amour* (Mireille Balin in both cases), the capricious child-woman of *La Bête humaine* (Simone Simon) – charming yet clichéd products of populist literature. One exception is the idealised romantic 'waif' of poetic realism, the archetype being Michèle Morgan in *Le Quai des brumes*. But across the decade, none of these women is endowed with much narrative agency or erotic power. In



Julien Duvivier's *La Tête d'un homme* (1933)



Yves Allégret's *Manèges* (1950)

the 1940s, *Le Corbeau* testifies to stronger female figures emerging in the war years, in *noir* as well as other genres. But with some exceptions, such as *Les Portes de la nuit*, in which the standard poetic realist woman is made to look like a Hollywood icon (initially to be played by Marlene Dietrich, replaced by the inexperienced Nathalie Nattier), post-war *noir* takes a striking misogynist turn. Extreme *noir* melodramas such as *Manon*, *Manèges* (Yves Allégret, 1950) and *Voici le temps des assassins* (Deadlier than the Male, Duvivier, 1956) showcase women as evil or perverse creatures bent on destroying men. Only in the rare instances when the *noir* women are embodied by major stars such as Simone Signoret in *Les Diaboliques* (Clouzot, 1955) and Brigitte Bardot in *La Vérité* (Clouzot, 1960) do they attain real glamour and a degree of complexity. Meanwhile, the *policiers* infantilise gangsters' molls, symbolised by the slaps they frequently receive; Melville's films relegate them further to the role of alibi, whether treated cruelly (*Le Doulos*) or kindly (*Le Deuxième Souffle*, 1966; *Le Samouraï*).

The sense of the popularity of French *noir* being used to mete out a symbolic backlash against the growing post-war emancipation of women in real life is hard to escape. Nor is this trend contradicted by auteur cinema adaptations of US *noir* fiction, such as Truffaut's *Shoot the Pianist*, *The Bride Wore Black* (*La Mariée était en noir*, 1968) and

The Mississippi Mermaid (*La Sirène du Mississippi*, 1969). With very few exceptions, women in French *film noir* are denied both the transgressive power of the *femme fatale* and the affirmative role of the 'good girl' of their American counterparts. The real drama is always that of the young *homme fatal* or of the ageing patriarch.

Throughout the period evoked above, there were other successful genres in French cinema besides *film noir*, including comedy and costume film. Yet, as in Hollywood, it is *noir* that caught the cultural imagination. Like 19th-century readers of Hugo and Balzac and 20th-century fans of Simenon, we are endlessly drawn to the dark universe of crime, failure and melodrama, almost always ending in death. It is indicative that the best filmmakers in the period (Renoir, Duvivier, Clouzot, Melville among them) all worked in this idiom, producing a string of beautiful, sombre films. Like the literature of the *bas-fonds*, *film noir* projects a fantasy that may not be factually accurate but nevertheless gets to the heart of the darkest corners of society and human nature. ☀

i The 12 films discussed overleaf will screen at BFI Southbank, London, in the *Sight & Sound Deep Focus* programme: 'French Noir' from 17 October – 30 November. A complementary season of French *noirs* is screening at London's Ciné Lumière from 26 October – 4 December



Note perfect: François Truffaut's *Shoot the Pianist* (1960)

1 *La Nuit du carrefour* (*Night at the Crossroads*) Jean Renoir, 1932
The first film to feature Georges Simenon's policeman hero Jules Maigret, *La Nuit du carrefour* harnesses Renoir's casual early brilliance to Simenon's trademark atmosphere. The action of this low-budget film – most of it filmed on location and with far from perfect direct sound – takes place at a forlorn crossroads 30km north of Paris, mostly at night. Shots of dark, foggy or rain-soaked exteriors, barely pierced by feeble car lights, match the opacity of the plot.

The almost too elegant Pierre Renoir (the director's brother) introduces viewers to Maigret's famous 'sponge' detection method, silently soaking up the eerie atmosphere. In his sights are the beautiful Else (Danish actress Winna Winfried) and her 'brother' Carl (Georges Koudria). The pair's literal and metaphorical foreignness contrasts with the Frenchness of the neighbours at the local garage – some played by friends of the director, whose innovative shooting method beautifully serves the emerging *noir* cinema. As he remarked, "The actors, both amateur and professional, were so influenced by that sinister crossroads that they became part of the background. They enacted mystery in a way they could never have done in the comfort of a studio." While it disconcerted spectators at the time, *La Nuit du carrefour* has cemented its place as a cornerstone of French *film noir*.

2 Pépé le Moko

Julien Duvivier, 1937

At first sight, *Pépé le Moko*, which takes place in sun-drenched Algiers, belongs to French colonial cinema and is an unlikely candidate for *film noir*. But this tale of gangster-on-the-run Pépé (Jean Gabin), whose downfall is set in train when he falls for beautiful Parisienne Gaby (Mireille Balin) while hiding out in the Casbah, bears the imprint of many *noir* narratives. Also *noir*-tinted is the hold the past has over Pépé and those surrounding him, all steeped in nostalgia and fatalism, including chanteuse Fréhel in her moving song.

More spectacularly, Duvivier's *mise-en-scène* sums up *noir* aesthetics in his use of chiaroscuro. Cinematographers Jules Kruger and Marc Fossard, influenced by their German expressionist peers, imaginatively exploit the Casbah decor to create striking lighting patterns – including over Gabin's face. The spotlights that throw ribbons of light on his hair and eyes signal him as poetically 'other' and elevate him from rough hoodlum to tragic hero. Described as "one of the most exciting and moving films I can remember seeing" by Graham Greene at the time, *Pépé le Moko* anticipates American *film noir*; as seen in the 1938 Hollywood remake *Algiers* by John Cromwell.

3 La Bête humaine

Jean Renoir, 1938

Renoir's adaptation of Emile Zola's 1890 novel about train driver Jacques Lantier, who has inherited a mental illness from his alcoholic forebears that torments him with murderous impulses, owes its existence to Jean Gabin's interest in the project (and desire to play the engine driver). The opening sequence, showing him at the controls of the train speeding



Train wreck: Jean Renoir's Emile Zola adaptation *La Bête humaine* (1938)

The signature noir motif of bands of darkness and light bathes 'La Bête humaine' in a menacing, though poetic, atmosphere

through Normandy and arriving at Le Havre, has become a cult among rail enthusiasts. *La Bête humaine* successfully welds a realistic portrayal of camaraderie among railway workers with dark, claustrophobic scenes of Lantier's fatal attraction to the beautiful Séverine (Simone Simon), leading to murder and suicide.

At the time, many criticised *La Bête humaine's* pessimism, seeing it as evidence of Renoir's estrangement from the left at the end of the Popular Front. Today, it is Renoir and German émigré cinematographer Curt Courant's visual experimentation that catches our attention – the signature *noir* motif of

contrasting bands of darkness and light, the way light reflects off metallic surfaces and mirrors, bathing the film in a menacing, though poetic, atmosphere. Despite its pessimism, this 'three-star film' – Zola, Renoir, Gabin – was a huge success, later remade in Hollywood as *Human Desire*, directed by Fritz Lang in 1954.

4 Le Jour se lève (Daybreak)

Marcel Carné, 1939

Released in June 1939, *Le Jour se lève* marks a high point for director Marcel Carné, dialogue writer Jacques Prévert, set designer Alexandre Trauner and star Jean Gabin. With its dark, atmospheric visuals by cinematographer Curt Courant and pervasive sense of fatalism, balanced by the realistic rendering of mundane details, it also represents the culmination of poetic realism, the best-known shade of pre-war French *noir*.

Through striking use of flashbacks, the film tells the story of François (Gabin), a factory



Jean Renoir's *La Nuit du carrefour* (1932)



Julien Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko* (1937)



Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Le Corbeau* (1943)



Man in the mirror: Marcel Carné's *Le Jour se lève* (1939)



Mark of Cain: Pierre Chenal's *Le Dernier Tournant* (1939)

worker romantically involved with young florist Françoise (Jacqueline Laurent) as well as with Clara (Arletty), assistant to louche entertainer and seducer Valentin (Jules Berry). Françoise kills Valentin out of jealousy over Françoise and despite support from those around him, kills himself when the police close in.

Locked in his room for the duration of the film, Gabin brilliantly inhabits his tragic working-class hero, his minimalist acting style chiming perfectly against the superlative Arletty and flamboyant Berry. Despite its ironically hopeful title, *Le Jour se lève* summed up the anxieties of a country on the brink of war. It also seems to us today, as André Bazin put it, to embody "the ideal qualities of a cinematic paradise lost".

5 *Le Dernier Tournant* (The Last Turn)

Pierre Chenal, 1939

Shot three years before Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione*, and seven years before the Tay Garnett Hollywood version, this surprisingly little-known film was the first screen adaptation of James M. Cain's seminal *noir* novel, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (published in the US in 1934 and translated into French in 1936).

Transposing the Californian setting to the south of France, the film reprises the story of hapless Frank (Fernand Gravey), lured by sexy, sullen Cora (Michel Luchaire), to kill her older husband Nick, a road-side garage owner (Corinne Simon). The film contains the key *noir* narrative elements of doomed love and inability to escape the past, and classic *noir* visual style: Chenal and Christian Matras's virtuoso camerawork and low-key lighting were apparently admired by Orson Welles. While *Le Dernier Tournant* testifies to Chenal's taste for American crime literature, his version marks its Frenchness in two ways: a greater moral ambiguity and a different gender pattern. Where the 1946 American version emphasises the erotic charge of the femme fatale and Visconti's the attraction of the young male hero, Chenal gives most weight and sympathy to the husband, played by Michel Simon, significantly the greater star of the trio.

6 *Le Corbeau* (The Raven)

Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1943

With *Le Corbeau*, French *film noir* turned political. Produced by the Nazi-owned firm Continental during the German occupation of France, Clouzot's film tells the story of a typical small French town ('here or elsewhere') inundated with anonymous

7 poison-pen letters signed 'le corbeau'. Initially, the main target of the letters is Dr Germain (Pierre Fresnay), accused of performing abortions as well as of adulterous liaisons. Indeed, several women in the town are attracted to him, from prim Laura (Micheline Francey) to racy Denise (Ginette Leclerc).

Nicolas Hayer's black-and-white cinematography makes superb use of contrasts and shadows, underlining the film's atmosphere, pervaded by fear, suspicion and paranoia. The search for 'le corbeau' unveils every sin in the book, from jealousy and lust to aggression, betrayal, murder and lynching. The film's extraordinary darkness and the twin themes of the letters and abortion were fundamentally opposed to the values of the Vichy regime, as well as to those of the German occupier. This did not stop Clouzot from being punished at the Liberation for working for Continental. Since then, though, *Le Corbeau* has become the emblematic film of the French war years and a turning point in darkness on screen.

7 Quai des orfèvres

Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1947

Following his ban after the Liberation for making *Le Corbeau*, *Quai des orfèvres* (loosely based on a novel by Belgian crime writer Stanislas-André Steeman) marked Clouzot's triumphant return to filmmaking. This French version of a police procedural follows Inspector Antoine (Louis Jouvet) as he investigates the murder of a rich, corrupt businessman in which are implicated ambitious music-hall singer Jenny Lamour (Suzy Delair), her piano-player husband Maurice (Bernard Blier) and their glamorous neighbour Dora (Simone Renant), a photographer.

Clouzot's *policier* twist on post-war *noir* delivers a scathing portrayal of Jenny and Maurice's petit-bourgeois lives as well as corruption in the upper echelons of society. Both the shady world of the music hall and the harsh conditions of post-war Paris are wonderfully rendered in Armand Thirard's sumptuous cinematography. However, Clouzot's usual misanthropic vision is here tempered, allowing characters a degree of humanity: Jouvet's Antoine is kind-hearted, in spite of the cynical one-liners he delivers in his inimitable voice; Blier's timid husband is touching; and Delair's vivacious performance and talent as a singer transcend the misogynist innuendo of her part, even when she delivers her saucy 'Avec son tralala' number. Even more unusually, in Dora, Clouzot offers a sympathetic portrayal of a lesbian.



Henri-Georges Clouzot's Quai des orfèvres (1947)



Heist society: Marie Sabouret and Jean Servais in Jules Dassin's *Rififi* (1955)

8 Une si jolie petite plage (Such a Pretty Little Beach)

Yves Allégret, 1949

The great matinée idol Gérard Philipe plays Pierre, an orphan who revisits a seedy hotel from his youth located on a rain-swept beach in northern France (the ironic 'pretty' beach of the title). To some extent he reprises the young Gabin's pre-war roles, although his sickly, desperate character illustrates the excessively morbid aspect of post-war French 'realist' *noir*. Pierre's despair is not relieved by romantic love or the friendship of co-workers. Around him the charming secondary characters have become ugly caricatures. Like Gabin's characters, the sad Pierre is haunted by the past, but he is powerless rather than tragic; his solitary suicide lacks the epic or social dimension of Gabin's in *La Bête humaine* and *Le Jour se lève*.

For director Yves Allégret and scriptwriter Jacques Sigurd, *Une si jolie petite plage* echoed the difficult climate following the Liberation, marked by political disillusionment and social unrest. The film's dim treatment of female characters also testifies to the backlash against women after their wartime social progress. Nevertheless, the film's eerie universe, which resembles "an indelible

'Une si jolie petite plage' echoed the difficult climate following the Liberation, marked by unrest and political disillusionment



Yves Allégret's Une si jolie petite plage (1949)

image of hell on earth," according to critic David Thomson, is aesthetically redeemed by Henri Alekan's dark, sophisticated lighting, Philipe's glamour and the talent of the cast around him.

9 Touchez pas au grisbi

Jacques Becker, 1954

By toning down the violence and racism (and downright unpleasantness) of Albert Simonin's eponymous *Série noir* novel, Jacques Becker gave French *film noir* a hugely successful new twist, creating the French gangster film in the process. Many others followed, but *Grisbi* encapsulates the genre. Gabin is superlative as Max, a Pigalle underworld godfather to whom even his enemies defer. Max is aiming to use the proceeds of his last heist to retire in style, but finds his plan disrupted by rival Angelo (Lino Ventura in his film debut) and the ineptitude of his friend Riton (René Dary).

In his double-breasted suits, Max embodies both the old French patriarchal order, and the new Americanised modernity, with his well-appointed apartments, large cars and glamorous mistress. *Grisbi* playfully engages with generic motifs: hoodlums, nightclubs, gangsters' girls (one played by Jeanne Moreau in pre-New Wave mode) and the odd gunfight. But Becker, true heir to Jean Renoir, is just as interested in everyday rituals and Max's loyalty to Riton, expressed in the cult wine and pâté scene. Set off by Jean Wiener's memorable harmonica tune, this story of "deluxe fat cats", as François Truffaut put it, is also a tale about ageing and friendship.



Jacques Becker's Touchez pas au grisbi (1954)

10 Riffifi

Jules Dassin, 1955

Described by the critic Philip French as "one of the greatest crime movies ever made", *Riffifi* was American director Jules Dassin's return to work after five years of enforced inactivity as a result of being blacklisted in Hollywood during the anti-communist witchhunts. Based on Auguste Le Breton's Série noire novel, the film enabled Dassin to bring to a French topic and setting his considerable experience as the maker of seminal US *noirs* such as *Brute Force* (1947), *The Naked City* (1948) and *Thieves' Highway* (1949).

Dassin embedded his story in familiar Parisian locations and kept Le Breton's picaresque French characters – even featuring the slang typical of the Série noire in the iconic song, 'Le Riffifi' (meaning 'a fight'), sung by Magali Noël's nightclub singer Viviane. Very French too is the world-weary hero Tony (Jean Servais), a characteristic *noir* figure haunted by the past. From the US Dassin brought a faster rhythm and streamlined action, as well as a more moralistic approach to crime. The two national influences seamlessly merge in the elegant *noir* photography by Philippe Agostini. Thanks also to its famous 20-minute heist sequence at the jeweller Mappin & Webb, executed in almost total silence, Dassin's perfect Franco-American hybrid met with huge popular and critical success.

11 Voici le temps des assassins (Deadlier than the Male) Julien Duvivier, 1956

This collaboration between Julien Duvivier and Jean Gabin – their seventh since *Maria Chapdelaine* in 1934 – belongs to the darkest seam of French cinema, fusing Zola-style naturalism with crime and misogyny. Gabin plays Chatelin, a successful restaurateur in Les Halles, who falls for Catherine (Danièle Delorme), the scheming daughter of his former wife. The evil mother-daughter duo will stop at nothing to get his money, and in the process Catherine kills Chatelin's protégé Gérard (Gérard Blain). Her punishment comes with violence so horrendous it is left off screen.

Voici le temps des assassins contrasts Chatelin's integrity, generosity and professionalism with the moral depravity of Catherine and her mother (and in the case of the latter, also the physical degeneracy of drug addiction). Other men are naive or fools while women run the gamut from gold-diggers to cruel martinets, such as Chatelin's chilling mother. It takes Duvivier and Gabin's combined talent to turn this sordid tale into a consummate piece of classical French cinema. Against the baroque cruelty of the denouement, the film includes among its pleasures some wonderful character actors – such as Gabrielle Fontan as Madame Jules – and the evocative restaurant scenes against the backdrop of the now vanished food market of Les Halles.

12 Le Doulos

Jean-Pierre Melville, 1962

Melville considered *Le Doulos* (slang meaning both a 'hat' and a 'police informer') his first real *policier*. The film is based on the 1957 book by Pierre Lesou, a Série noire author noted for his first-hand knowledge of the French underworld, taste for

CARLO PONTI et GEORGES DE BEAUREGARD présentent

un film de
JEAN-PIERRE MELVILLE

JEAN-PAUL
BELMONDO

LE DOULOS

d'après le roman de PIERRE LESOU (Editions Gallimard)

avec

SERGE REGGIANI

et

MICHEL PICCOLI

et

JEAN DESAILLY



Belmont, aux meneurs de meutes de Dieu

Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Doulos* (1962) blends French and American iconography



Voici le temps des assassins (1956)

stories of male friendship, and self-confessed 'feminophobia'. Melville accentuated the novel's sombre side through generic abstraction and virtuoso yet sober *mise-en-scène*. He also made good use of his charismatic stars Jean-Paul Belmondo and Serge Reggiani, helping the film to become a huge success despite its notoriously complex plot, built on an intricate web of deceptions.

Le Doulos's credit sequence stands as one of the most evocative openings of any *noir* thriller: a man in hat and trench coat – Reggiani's Maurice Faugel – walks through a grim underpass, silhouetted by Nicolas Hayer's black-and-white photography and accompanied by Paul Misraki's dramatic jazz score. The next sequence, in which Faugel kills a fence and buries the loot, distils urban alienation and the abstract melancholy universe in which the rest of the story unfolds. *Le Doulos* takes place in a recognisable Paris, yet simultaneously in a hybrid *noir* space that merges French idioms and American icons, not least in the classic gangster outfit that opens and closes the film. **S**

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