FANTASY AMERICA: THE UNITED STATES AS SEEN THROUGH FRENCH AND ITALIAN EYES

by

MARK HARRIS

M.A., The University of British Columbia, 1992

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Programme in Comparative Literature)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

April 1998

© Mark Robert Harris, 1998
The author has granted a non-exclusive licence allowing the National Library of Canada to reproduce, loan, distribute or sell copies of this thesis in microform, paper or electronic formats.

The author retains ownership of the copyright in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author’s permission.

0-612-27156-0
Abstract

For the past two decades, scholars have been reassessing the ways in which Western writers and intellectuals have traditionally misrepresented the non-white world for their own ideological purposes. Orientalism, Edward Said's ground-breaking study of the ways in which Europeans projected their own social problems onto the nations of the Near East in an attempt to take their minds off the same phenomena as they occurred closer to home, was largely responsible for this shift in emphasis. Fantasy America: The United States as Seen Through French and Italian Eyes is an exploration of a parallel occurrence that could easily be dubbed "Occidentalism." More specifically, it is a study of the ways in which French and Italian writers and filmmakers have sought to situate the New World within an Old World context.

"Among the (More Advanced) Barbarians" (a.k.a. Chapter One) examines the continuities and discontinuities of French travel writing in America from the days of the Jesuits to the heyday of the existentialists. Certain motifs and idées fixes—the uniqueness of American racism; the "magic" of New York—are first identified and then examined. "A Meeting of the Mafias" (Chapter Two) is more cosmopolitan in scope, tracing the ways in which French, American, and Italian crime fiction have historically influenced each other, as well as the relationship of the policier to differing notions of the nation-state. "The Ruins of Rome" (Chapter Three) demonstrates how Italian intellectuals have looked to the United States for new World Solutions to Old World problems. This chapter encompasses two major sub-themes: the positive possibilities for Italy of "Fordismo" (the American industrial model) and American literature (which was believed to promote political, as well as cultural, liberty). "Lurching Towards the Millennium" picks up the threads of the first three chapters and places them in the contemporary context of globalization, a process which threatens to replace the hegemony of the nation state with the omnipresence of corporate power. The cultural model of Quebec is introduced at this point as a New World/Old World paradigm that embodies the chimerical contradictions of a globe on the brink of a new millennium.
Table of Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................ii

Acknowledgements.................................................................................iv

Introduction..............................................................................................1

CHAPTER I Among the (More Advanced) Barbarians.................................11

CHAPTER II Mid-Atlantic Melodrama; or, A Meeting of the Mafias...........91

CHAPTER III The Ruins of Rome.............................................................194

CHAPTER IV Slouching Towards the Millennium.................................243

Conclusion...............................................................................................344

Bibliography.............................................................................................362

Appendix I Who's Afraid of Jerry Lewis?.............................................384

Appendix II Pity for John Wayne..........................................................389

Appendix III Hypocrisy American Style.............................................392
Acknowledgements

As John Donne *almost* said, no graduate student is an island—which is to say, this Ph.D. dissertation could not have been completed without the aid of a great many people. First of all, I would like to thank the Killam Foundation, the federal government, and the UBC funding agencies for the generous financial help they provided during the writing of this thesis. Secondly, I would like to thank my doctoral committee for the unique and varied insights with which they broadened and enriched my work. Dr. Marguerite Chiarenza, the committee's chair, served as a cool and calming voice of reason when things seemed most hopeless, as well as an eagle-eyed proofreader. Dr. Steven Taubeneck proved equally knowledgeable about university procedure, and made sure that I didn't wander too far afield from my central point. Dr. Patricia Merivale's vast erudition, meanwhile, provided me with an endless supply of pertinent literary leads. I would also like to thank Professor George McWhirter and the students in his translation class for their helpful suggestions in regard to the English-language renderings of the dissertation's appendices. Dr. Eva-Marie Kroeller's contribution should likewise not be under-valued, since she initiated me into the mysteries of Comparative Literature and introduced me to two committee members. Dr. Thomas Salumets, her worthy successor as program head, proved to be no less helpful. I would also like to thank the library staffs of the Pacific Cinémathèque and the Italian Cultural Institute for granting me access to out-of-print texts which would otherwise have been extremely difficult to obtain. Similarly, my appreciation extends to the helpful folks at Manhattan Books who kept me regularly supplied with the latest French and Italian tomes. Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Carola Ackery, who stood by me during the months following my nearly fatal automotive accident in April, 1997. If not for her selfless care, it would have taken much longer than it did for this dissertation to get back on track. Consequently, it is to her that this project is gratefully dedicated.
INTRODUCTION

In the 73 volumes of The Jesuit Relations, there is one passage that stands out from all the others. Amid endless accounts of pagan souls lost and won, of the hardships and torments endured by Christian missionaries in the land of the heathen, of the endless perfidies committed by French drunks and English Protestants, there is a single description that owes more to the fantastic tradition of Herodotus and John Mandeville than it does to the dispassionate, hardheaded journals of itinerant monks, merchants, soldiers and sea captains. "[Les] deux monstres," spotted by Father Pierre Marquette, SJ, during the course of a seventeenth-century river journey in the American Southwest, "ont des Cornes en teste Comme des cheveils; un regard affreux, des yeux rouges, une Barbe comme d'un tygre, le corps couuert d'écailles, et le queuë si Longue qu'elle fait tout le tour du corps passant par dessus la teste et retournant entre les jambes elle se termine en queue de Poisson" (The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents, Vol. 59 140).

As we shall see in Chapter One, many of the Jesuits' letters to their religious superiors were written in a style that seems to anticipate the anthropological tone of Claude Lévi-Strauss's Tristes tropiques. Even so, while reading these texts it is important to bear in mind that even the clearest-eyed observations leave room for monsters. Proto-ethnology, zoology, and botany are never far removed from the realm of magic and wonder.

Fantasy America: The United States as Seen Through French and Italian Eyes is predicated on this peculiar split in human consciousness.
It takes as its starting point the idea that there is an element of magical thinking in the national perception of other societies. If French and Italian artists and intellectuals did not impose upon the economic colossus of the New World the same humiliating prejudices and misrepresentations which—as Edward Said so eloquently complains in *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*—expansionist Europe projected onto its non-white colonies, the object of their observation was nonetheless characterized by otherness rather than by any "genetic" points of cultural similarity. In other words, America was always seen as something larger than Europe or as something smaller; it could be "inferior" or "superior". What it could not be was the same.

National history, local customs, and frustrated wishes always impinge on collective distortions rooted in psychological projection. Probably the only peoples immune to this cultural debility are those whose extreme geographical isolation blinds them to the existence of other nations and other mores. The three countries covered by this study obviously do not fall into this exceedingly rare category, although they do enjoy differing degrees of otherness and affinity. French and Italian, for instance, are both Latin-based languages, while the structure of English owes most to the ancient Germanic tongues. On the other hand, both French and English are, in Gilles Deleuze's sense of the term, "imperialist" languages, while Italian is not. Even so, it should not be forgotten that Latin, the language of ancient Italy, was once the universal tongue of the Pax Romana, and must therefore be ranked as the Western World's first imperialist system of discourse (if—on the basis that it was spoken mainly in Asia Minor—one does not count Hellenic Greek).
As it is with language, so is it with most things. While Franco-American sociocultural affiliations can more often be perceived than their Italo-American counterparts, these comparisons are often contradictory and ambiguous. For every conclusion reached, one could have arrived at a counter-conclusion which was almost as sound. What’s more, the ties of influence and observation do not always flow in a bilateral direction. In societies that every day grow more global and less tribal—a description which currently encompasses all but a few isolated communities in Africa and Asia—increasingly complex ideograms are needed to properly explain the flow of progression/regression. In many cases, definitive pontification exceeds even the most generous boundaries of academic speculation. To speak on such matters is to commit the intellectual sin of hubris.

In order to avoid the worst of these excesses, I have decided to limit my study of French and Italian perceptions of America to models which at least two of the concerned parties—one of which must always be the USA—have shared to a significant degree. For this reason, the reader will find little or no comment on such subjects as opera, science fiction, Renaissance painting, Impressionism, rock ‘n’ roll, collections of aphorisms, Broadway musicals, book length philosophical essays, *peplumi*, rhythm and blues, epic poetry, *commedia dell'arte*, or a thousand other locally popular manifestations of national creativity. Instead, I have decided to focus on three primary areas of artistic production. Respectively, these are the travel book, the *polar/policier*, and—for want of a better term—the cultural survival essay. In this relation, American commentators are more or less silent partners.
Though constantly spoken of, they almost never speak of those who so confidently define them.

"Among the (More Advanced) Barbarians," the first of _Fantasy America_’s four chapters, deals with French intellectual attitudes towards the United States, from the Counter-Reformation era (when the Jesuit Fathers first set an enduringly Gallic cultural stamp on the New World) to the late 1960s (when aging existentialists and more youthful poststructuralists took this newly-imperial republic to task for its foreign and domestic policies). This was the period when virtually all Gallic observers saw the United States as "other," regardless of the political convictions or personal predilections of individual literary travellers. Some of these accounts appear in the form of travel journalism, others in the guise of fiction. All are, to a greater or lesser extent, realistic. Readers in search of a "fantastic" New World akin to the one depicted in J.G. Ballard’s science-fiction novel, _Hello America_, will surely be disappointed. For my purposes, the words "Fantasy America" refer to certain carefully defined outsiders’ "takes" on their country of study—nothing more. By adhering to this policy, I hope to underscore the fantastic elements which underlie the surface naturalism of the texts and films under discussion. For reasons of topicality and source availability, the lion’s share of critical attention will be focused on post-war works of film and literature.

For historical reasons, early Italian impressions of the New World are not included here. _La Nouvelle France_, after all, was once part and parcel of the _ancien régime_. Because the _Risorgimento_ was not complete until 1870, the Italian government was never in a position to acquire North American colonies (even if the newly "discovered"—to its long-
term inhabitants, it was never truly "lost"—continent was named after the Italian mariner, Amerigo Vespucci). Whatever expansionist impulses the brainchild of Cavour and Garibaldi might have felt during the last decades of the nineteenth century were, of necessity, directed towards the last few acres of Africa which were not already under European control. In other words, French voyagers to the United States were imbued with a vestigial proprietary interest which was to be denied to their Italian counterparts. No matter how "other" the New World might appear to Parisian travellers, the ubiquity of French place names could not help but remind them of a very distant familial relation. Conversely, the very size and success of America had to appear on some level as a symbol of cultural defeat, an emblem of "Anglo-Saxon" hegemony, the economic consummation of anglophone self-aggrandizement that began with the Hundred Years' War (if the words "Englishman" and "American" seem mutually exclusive in the White House and Whitehall, they sound far more convergent in the Elysée Palace).

The French intellectual elite's deep-seated suspicion of perfidious Albion reborn as the crude but vital USA did not, however, entirely preclude feelings of love, admiration, and curiosity. Quite the contrary. America's vast spaces, mechanical ingenuity, democratic practices, limitless wealth, industrial capacity, motion pictures, music, automobiles and literature were at least as much adored as they were derided. Above all, the new nation was a paradox. "Barbaric" though it was, this upstart colony in some ways seemed superior to the Old World at a time when the natural superiority of Europeans over all other peoples was almost universally held—at least by Europeans. America was not,
therefore, the kind of exotic Middle Eastern backwater that Victor Hugo and Gérard de Nerval explored in their more flamboyant nineteenth-century fictions. It was, rather, more like the admirable but entirely ersatz Asian lands which Voltaire conjured up a century earlier in parables designed to underscore the social, religious and political shortcomings of continental Europe. In some ways, French writing about America can be seen as a sort of convergence of these two styles of “Occidentalism”.

Italy’s interest in the USA was far more selective and pragmatic. As we shall see in “The Ruins of Rome”, my argument’s third chapter, for Italian intellectuals America was primarily seen as a storehouse of possible solutions for endemic Italian problems. While statistically the most open of all European nations to outside influences, Italian specificity was implicitly assumed to be too strong to suffer significant alteration. Regardless of whether one read Georges Simenon or Renato Oliveri, John Steinbeck or Carlo Levi, Calabria would still be Calabria, Tuscany Tuscany, and so on. In the foreward to his bestselling popular history, The Italians, Luigi Barzini wrote that, for Italians “the most fascinating subject of all [is] why are we the way we are” (Barzini xv). To write about Italy was notoriously hard, he claimed, because of “the absurd discrepancy between the quantity and dazzling array of the inhabitants’ achievements through many centuries and the mediocre quality of their national history....” (Barzini x). In this endless self-searching, the presence of America can only appear as a distant echo, shadow or beacon, despite the fact that, post-1945, the United States has meddled more directly in Italian internal affairs than it has in the political ambitions of the French. Ironically, the nature of this paradox
can more profitably be explained in Chapter Two than it can in Chapter Three.

As its title suggests, "A Meeting of the Mafias: or, Mid-Atlantic Melodrama" is primarily concerned with "cops and robbers"; more specifically, it deals with the fictional representation of same in the novels and feature films of French, Italian and American cinéastes and authors. It is no accident that it is also the chapter most marked by sociological bias, since its author will attempt to prove that many, if not all, of a given society's underlying social structures are reflected or revealed by its attitudes towards social deviance. According to this logic, Inspector Javert, Philip Marlowe, and Vittorio de Sica's anonymous bicycle thief say more about deep French, American and Italian societal assumptions than would a similar array of Rolands, Leatherstockings, and Infernal poets. The fine points of a nation's imagination are at least as revelatory of hidden assumptions, fears and yearnings as are its economic infrastructure and political mythology. This belief is, of course, very widely shared by genre critics. For the duration of Chapter Two, I must count myself among them.

"A Meeting of the Mafias" is the one section of this study where French, American and Italian influences enjoy almost equal status. To achieve this effect, I have eliminated from consideration what Gilles Deleuze would call "le roman à énigme," that is the genteel detective story whose guiding geniuses were, are, and probably always will be, Agatha Christie and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Since the roman à énigme is a quintessentially English style, it has been dispensed with here. On the other hand, because what I do describe is so beholden to the stylistics of film noir, I am obliged to mention some of the Germanic influences on
the American and French crime story (Expressionist influence on *i gialli* being weak to non-existent). Essentially, "Mid-Atlantic Melodrama" deals with three sorts of *policier*: the underworld saga, the *film noir*, and the sociological crime drama (the latter an almost exclusively Italian—and in some ways anti-generic—phenomenon). These styles are among the most widely scattered in the domain of international cinema, so Chapter Two's conclusions are correspondingly broader than those made on behalf of *Fantasy America's* less cosmopolitan quarters.

"Slouching Towards the Millennium", the dissertation's concluding chapter, is also the most contemporary. It deals with the present historical moment wherein American cultural influence has assumed a position so commanding it threatens to occlude all rival visions. In the once culturally secure, closed circuit of France, U.S. sounds and images are no longer just arrogantly seductive exotica, but an integral part of a no longer national mass media. Italian cinema, for many years the most vital and commercially successful in Western Europe, is now so desperate for international exposure it must package new films like venerable classics and peddle them to film societies around the globe in the probably vain hope that such tactics will attract the attention of local distributors. Under the implacably expansionist aegis of Jack Valenti, the big studios represented by the Motion Picture Producers of America conglomerate have effectively banished all but a token number of subtitled features from U.S. and Anglo-Canadian screens. Meanwhile, in post-GATT Europe, François Mitterand's former minister of cultural affairs, Jack Lang, still struggles to put meaningful films together by the desperate expedient of yoking together backers from five or six different countries. As the possibility of presenting an authentically
French or Italian cinematic face to the world diminishes in the presence of the Hollywood juggernaut, it is becoming increasingly difficult to add even a vaguely European visage to the cultural mix. If Jean Baudrillard is to be believed, the barbarians are no longer simply at the gates, but actually in the living room, mixing drinks and flicking the channel converter. What’s more, they’re inter-marrying with the locals to the point where the genealogy of certain works is difficult to determine. Luc Besson’s *Le Cinquième élément* (1997), for example, is reputedly the most expensive European feature ever released, yet everywhere it is known almost exclusively by its U.S. release title, *The Fifth Element*. Like a Freudian parent, American influence is now so deeply embedded in the European subconscious it might well prove impossible to ferret out.

While Chapter Four will include a number of recent literary sources, including Julia Kristeva and Philippe Labro, it will focus more particularly on the changed perspectives and survival problems of European mass media in general, and film in particular (please see attached appendices for related documents). The now dated Gallic enthusiasm for be-bop, Alfred Hitchcock, Jerry Lewis, and *le roman noir* will be reconsidered in the light of post-modern affectlessness. In a similar vein, the subtle downgrading and redefining of Italy’s unique, seemingly insuperable problems will be reassessed.

Following what might, at first glance, appear to be a somewhat dubious distribution of analytical emphasis, fully half of Chapter Four is taken up with the ways in which Québécois poets, novelists, and cinéastes have tried to make sense of their uncomfortable closeness to the United States and their painful separation from the *ancien régime*. 
By maintaining their Zeitgeist mid-way between the dominant myths of the Old and New Worlds, the postmodern inheritors of la nouvelle France, I would argue, shed invaluable light on the problems we have discussed thus far. At the present time, political power is being relentlessly bled away from nation states and ruthlessly transfused into the “veins” of large corporations. The governments of France, Italy, and other industrialized countries are all signatories to a new generation of free trade agreements which read like documents of absolute surrender, treaties in which the rights of nations to protect their own medicare programs, cultural industries, and social welfare benefits from outside interference are declared secondary to the rights of deracinated corporations to make unrestricted profits. Increasingly, nationalist sentiment is moving away from the larger political structures and settling into the smaller but more welcoming territory of “regions”. For all these reasons, I have granted Québécois perceptions of the USA/France conundrum a great deal of space in my summary chapter.

True “Italianness”, Luigi Barzini believed, lay in what he called cose all’italiana. These were the relatively few national characteristics that distinguished his countrymen from their European neighbours. But “What exactly are these cose all’italiana?” he asked rhetorically (Barzini xv). To answer this question he wrote an entire book devoted to the attitudes and trends, the strengths and weaknesses, the strokes of good and bad historical luck which resulted in this unique psychopolitical situation. While the queries posed by Fantasy America are nowhere near so straightforward, in some respects they are quite similar. Before discovering how the three subject cultures shape and define one another, one must first understand what makes France French, America
American, and Italy Italian. In the process, hopefully, one will learn something about both the nature of cultural production and the notoriously elusive trail of international cultural influence. Practically speaking, this study will probably raise more questions than it answers. On the other hand, I have tried to make these queries as stimulating as possible so that they might serve as springboards to further investigation in the future.
CHAPTER ONE: AMONG THE (MORE ADVANCED) BARBARIANS

Politically, France never poured much will into the preservation of its North American colonies. In *La Naissance d'une race*, Abbé Lionel Groulx, the influential Québécois nationalist, ruefully noted this fact: "Dix mille immigrants! Voilà tout ce que la France a jeté sur les rives de Saint-Laurent pour y fonder une race et créer un pays" (Groulx 22). The figure of 10,000 colonists, it should be noted, was the total achieved after more than two centuries of nominal colonization. At times, the total juddered around zero. During one particularly low point at the beginning of the seventeenth century, a Jesuit observer describes the plucky Héberts as "...l’unique famille de François habituée en Canada" (*The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents, Volume 5* 42). French intellectuals of the time did not discourage the crown’s lack of imperialist resolve in this corner of the globe. As the Abbé Groulx sadly noted in his nationalist lamentations, Voltaire—the man who coined the famously dismissive phrase “quelques arpents de neige” in relation to *la Nouvelle France*—“...appellera un jour le Canada ‘le plus détestable pays du nord....’” (Groulx 81)

To some extent this disdain was shared by Europe’s other colonial powers. South American silver and Caribbean sugar were the overseas commodities which were in particular demand between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Even England, in temporary control of most American possessions north of the Rio Grande following its victory in the Seven Years War, was somewhat dubious about the value of its conquests. In *Le Temps du monde*, Fernand Braudel points out that, at
the time of the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, "L'Angleterre aurait préféré au Canada (enlevé à la France) et la Floride (qui lui cède l'Espagne) la possession de Saint-Domingue" (Braudel 354). On the other side of the treaty table, such a trade, however, was totally unacceptable to a "France désirieux de conserver Saint-Domingue, la reine des îles sucrières, firent que les 'arpents de neige' du Canada revinrent à l'Angleterre" (Braudel 354).

Ironically, as J.M. Gautier notes in his introduction to René de Chateaubriand's immensely popular late eighteenth/early nineteenth century "American" novel Atala, the French public's interest in actually reading about America dramatically waxed even as the country's ability to influence events on that continent precipitately waned. Early travellers' books, such as Moeurs des Sauvages Américains and Histoire et Description générale de la Nouvelle France, avec le journal d'un voyage fait dans l'Amérique septentrionale, were notable Age of Enlightenment bestsellers. Much of this success can be attributed to the "sensational" elements contained in these accounts penned by explorers and—especially—missionaries. Jesuit militants never tired of telling their superiors about the "nakedness" and "savagery" of the "lost souls" whom they were attempting to save. Even clothed Indians seemed shamefully bare to these Catholic zealots. As one Jesuit disapprovingly sniffed, even the natives' winter furs "...n'empêche pas qu'on ne voye la plupart de leurs corps" (The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents, Volume 5 24). If their descriptions of Indian "licentiousness" were cloaked in terms calculated not to provoke too many explicitly concupiscent thoughts, these missionary wanderers felt no such compunction in regard to scenes of physical torture. With a cold-blooded detachment that would
have done credit to Claude Lévi-Strauss, one observer described the following sadistic procedure in almost surgical terms: "...ils leurs percent les bras au poignet avec des batons pointus, & leurs arrachent les nerfs par ces trous" (The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents, Volume 5 30).

French fascination with the "horrific" novelty of America can be found with equal facility in this revealing but anachronistic (the speaker, after all, is a Florentine nobleman speaking in 1535) speech fragment from Alfred de Musset’s historical play, Lorenzaccio (1835): “Ceux qui tournent autour de moi avec des yeux louches, comme autour d’une curiosité monstreuse apportée d’Amérique....” (de Musset 153).

“Monstrous curiosities”: for a long time that phrase defined the nature of the French reading public’s fascination with America. It was precisely the kind of semi-legendary land that John Mandeville might have visited a century or two earlier. In any event, it was altogether different—which is to say, both weaker and coarser—than Marco Polo’s China. In Tzvetan Todorov’s words, the early American “Other” appertained to the class of “...inconnus, des étrangers dont je ne comprends ni langue ni les coutumes, si étrangers que j’hésite, à la limite, à reconnaître notre appartenance comme à une même espèce” (La Conquête de l’Amérique 11).

Despite these initial impressions and motivations, French attitudes towards the new World began to change towards the end of the eighteenth century. In the wake of Napoleon’s economically motivated dumping of France’s last major American possessions, “les Français,” J.M. Gautier reminds us, “pouvaient regretter ‘d’avoir perdu ce nouvel Eden auquel ils avaient laissé le doux nom de Louisiane....’” (Chateaubriand 4). Around the same time, “...au XIXe siècle, l’exotisme américain laisse la
place aux mirages de l'Orient” (Chateaubriand 4). [This change was not absolute, however. According to biographer Henri Troyat, even Honoré de Balzac—arguably the major French writer of the early 1800s who was least demonstrably impressed by the American mirage—was inspired by the sylvan romances of James Fenimore Cooper to turn the peasant insurrectionaries in his historical novel Les Chouans into “Peaux-Rouges” in the “Bocage normand” (Troyat 126).

On one level, Gautier's contention is absolutely true; on another, it is somewhat misleading. If the romance of America was in the process of giving way to the Romance of Orientalism, the New World was simultaneously metamorphosing into a new and only slightly less monstrous shape in Gallic imaginations. America the horrible and magical was about to be replaced by America the modern and implicitly dangerous. As Fernand Braudel observed in Le temps du monde, “Accarian de Séronne voyait, dès 1766, se lever un ‘Empire américain’: ‘La Nouvelle-Angleterre, écrivait-il, est plus à redouter que l’ancienne...’ Oui, un Empire indépendant de l’Europe, ‘un Empire, dit-il quelques années plus tard (1771) qui menace dans un avenir très prochain la prospérité sur-tout de l'Angleterre, de l'Espagne, de la France, du Portugal et de la Hollande.’ C'est-à-dire que s'apprécéraient déjà les premiers signes de la candidature à venir des États-Unis à la domination de l'économie-monde européen” (Braudel 354).

This change, however, occurred gradually, and in a decidedly non-linear fashion. The immense popularity of Atala was in large measure responsible for this. A relatively small part of Chateaubriand’s magnum opus La Génie du christianisme, a polemic in favour of an ultra-conservative interpretation of Roman Catholicism, Atala relied heavily
on the Jesuit Relations for descriptive passages and background colour. While opinions differ as to whether Chateaubriand ever actually set foot in America—the late nineteenth-century French literary critic Joseph Bédier remained firmly convinced that he did not—the author’s decision to rely on missionary chronicles was not entirely conditioned by his religious convictions. As already mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, that massive work was almost entirely free of “fantastic” descriptions. Father Marquette’s contributions were particularly appealing to Chateaubriand. In 1675, this Jesuit wrote “La Riuire sur laquelle nous nous embarquâmes s’appelle MesKousing, elle est fort large, son fond est du sable...elle est pleine d’Isles Couuertes de Vignês; sur les bords parroissent de bonnes terres, entremeslées de bois de prairies et de Costeaux, on y voit les chesnes de Noiers, des bois blancs, et une autre espèce d’arbres dontz les branches armées de longues espines” (The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents, Volume 59 106).

Such reports mingle the same seductive mixture of ethnological exactitude and Eurocentric romance that one finds first in Atala, and then—a century and a half later—in Tristes tropiques. Regardless of Chateaubriand’s own familiarity with the Mississippi river, Marquette’s description would be repeated almost verbatim in Atala because its narrative power was far more evocative than anything the author’s own imagination could conceive. Not until very late in the twentieth century would this Jesuitical ethnology be largely expunged from French literary consciousness.

Equally appealing to Chateaubriand and his successors were the already cited Jesuit accounts of the Indian science of torture. These gory tableaux were an absolute godsend to the interlocking genres of
melodrama and grand guignol. This interest would doubtless have turned the first Americans into one-dimensional villains if the Indians' "innate" propensity for physical cruelty had not been counterbalanced by the great tenderness which, the Jesuit fathers disapprovingly noted, all "savages" displayed towards their undeserving young: "Toutes les nations Sauuages de ces quartiers. & du Brazil, à ce qu'on nous témoigne ne fauroient chaftier ny voir chaftier vn enfant: que cela nous donnera de peine dans le deffein que nous avons d'inftruire le ieuneffe" (The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents, Volume 5 220). Chateaubriand's integration of these sentimental opposites in Native protagonists contributed greatly to the invention of the "noble savage," a type much beloved by Rousseau and other eighteenth century progressives. The Indian was not a demon, after all; he was a sort of capricious child or innocently murderous kitten.

Ultimately, neither the Jesuits nor Chateaubriand were fated to mark out the boundaries of French discourse vis-à-vis the United States. For one thing, their ultra-Catholic religious views made them questionable judges of Native character and Protestant intention. Missionary emphasis on moral uplift and Classical fascination with sylvan romance were culturally-determined blinders that successfully filtered out such key historical events as the decisive French naval intervention on behalf of the thirteen revolted colonies during the American Revolutionary War, and Britain's earlier expulsion of the Acadians. Being the first European to see the New World in its true colours was an honour historically reserved for Alexis de Tocqueville, a literary traveller who is as much esteemed for his nineteenth-century observations by contemporary American scholars as Stendhal's writings.
of the same period are by modern Italian academics. Around the time when Romanticism was gradually effacing Classicism in Europe, de Tocqueville reinvigorated the still virgin field of Franco-American studies with some much-needed scientific detachment.

The author's most famous book, De la démocratie en Amérique, was predicated on four interlocking ideas. The first of these concepts related to democracy as a political institution; the second addressed the nature of revolution; the third concerned the relationship of individuals to institutions within the binding framework of social style and national character; the fourth—and to modern readers, the least convincing—was the thesis that God worked on the doings of men within the confines of a fatal circle of freedom and necessity.

Unlike many later French travellers, de Tocqueville was favourably impressed by the things that he saw in America. He wrote admiringly of the checks and balances that were essential to the American system of government, of the intelligence and worthiness of the average citizen, of the innovative genius of U.S. engineers and manufacturers, of the relative freedom of American women, and of the unparalleled skill of Yankee clipper ship captains, the astronauts of their day. With great foresight, he saw the future parcelled out between American and Russian spheres of influence, and accurately predicted America's coming war with Mexico. If he was not quite so prescient in regard to the War Between the States, he nonetheless pointed out many of the less obvious evils of Southern slavery, and the friction that these ills caused within the body politic. De Tocqueville has never put American backs up; indeed, he tends to make U.S. readers preen with gratified pride.
As a starting point for French travellers in America, however, de Tocqueville's occasional criticisms of the new republic seem to have struck a deeper chord among his fellow countrymen than did his more numerous praises. This was at least partly because a faint current of disdain frequently flowed beneath the onrush of his diegetic enthusiasms. Comparisons such as the following are ubiquitous: "Dans les aristocraties, les lecteurs sont difficiles et peu nombreux; dans les démocraties, il est moins malaisé de leur plaire, et leur nombre est prodigieux" (De la démocratie en Amérique, Tome II 264). Not for the first—and certainly not for the last—time, de Tocqueville contrasts Europe's quality with the New World's quantity. Although generally in favour of an expanded franchise in his native France, and a theoretical advocate of democracy, this articulated republican is clearly troubled by the cultural cost such a transition might entail; in this regard, his views eerily prefigure the twentieth-century forebodings of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Developing on their own on the fringes of civilization, "Les Américains n'ont point d'école philosophique qui leur soit propre, et ils s'inquiètent fort peu toutes celles qui visisent l'Europe, ils en savent à peine les noms" (De la démocratie en Amérique, Tome II 13). De Tocqueville grimly noted the absence of elegant public buildings and heroic statuary in U.S. town squares: "Les seuls monuments des États-Unis sont les journaux" (De la démocratie en Amérique, Tome I 159). Although abundant everywhere, American newspapers were not, it seems, of particularly high quality. For every admission of political inferiority in this book, there is a qualifying expression of cultural superiority. The statement below is a good example of the former: "Les Américains forment un peuple démocratique qui a toujours dirigé par
lui-même les affaires publiques, et nous sommes un peuple démocratique qui, pendant longtemps, n'a pu que songer à la meilleure manière de les conduire" (De la démocratie en Amérique, Tome II 31). A prime sample of the latter runs as follows: "L'aristocratie est infiniment plus habile dans la science du législation que ne saurait l'être la démocratie" (De la démocratie en Amérique, Tome I 181).

De Tocqueville's views on American racial problems were fated to make the most lasting impression on French literary travellers. Because of his non-dogmatic Christian beliefs and aristocratic background, de Tocqueville's appreciation of American religious toleration and economic egalitarianism is greatly exaggerated. It is, for instance, hard to imagine period American Catholics, for the most part impressed into the worst-paying jobs and largely shut out of the liberal professions, agreeing with the following statement: "Aux Etats-Unis, point de haine religieuse, parce que la religion est universellement respectée et qu'aucune secte n'est dominante...." (De la démocratie en Amérique, Tome I 138). It is equally difficult to conceive of cellar-dwelling industrial workers accepting the ensuing formula as fact: "En Amérique, cependant, ce sont les pauvres qui font la loi, et ils réservent habituellement pour eux-mêmes les plus grands avantages de la société" (De la démocratie en Amérique, Tome I 30). So clear-sighted in so many ways, de Tocqueville was strangely blind to the existence of an American class system. The religiously outcast and the working poor could only react to those cheerful over-assessments with mocking scorn. Contemporary Black and Native readers, on the other hand (assuming literate communities of same then existed), could only reject the Frenchman's summation of their plight as part of a psychological survival mechanism. To
acknowledge that things were truly as bad as this foreigner claimed was to run the risk of slipping into suicidal despair.

There was a strong "noble savage" element in de Tocqueville's writings about America's original inhabitants. Indeed, it seems highly likely that they contributed to the nineteenth century annealing of an eighteenth century myth: "Les plus fameuses républiques antiques n'avaient jamais admiré de courage plus ferme, d'âmes plus orgueilleuses, de plus intraitable amour de l'indépendance, que n'en cachaient alors les bois sauvages du nouveau monde" (De la démocratie en Amérique, Tome I 22). Indians, de Tocqueville sadly noted, were steadily being pushed westward by America's small but genocidal army. Steadily, they were losing their land: "Les Indiens l'occupaient, mais ne le possédaient" (De la démocratie en Amérique, Tome I 24.) In possession of vast territories and lacking major enemies in their immediate vicinity, America was a land of few soldiers but an almost infinite number of militiamen. No one would intervene on the Indians' behalf; their ancient world was doomed.

If American slaves were in no danger of being immediately exterminated, in all other respects their social situation was even less enviable: "Le nègre est placé aux dernières bornes de la servitude; l'Indien aux limites extrêmes de la liberté" (De la démocratie en Amérique, Tome I 248). For Black Americans, there was literally no place to run: "Les Indiens mourront dans l'isolement comme ils ont vécus; mais la destinée des nègres est en quelque sort en lacée dans celle des Européens" (De la démocratie en Amérique, Tome I 262). The fates of Blacks and Indians, though diametrically opposed, were inextricably interlinked: "Ces deux races infortunés, n'ont de commun ni
la naissance, ni la figure, ni le langage, ni les moeurs; leurs malheurs seuls se ressemblent" (De la démocratie en Amérique, Tome I 246 - 247). A cloud of dark irony surrounds their respective dooms: "Le nègre voudrait se confondre avec l'Européen, et il ne le peut. L'Indian pourrait jusqu'à un certain point y réussir, mais il dédaigne de le tenter" (De la démocratie en Amérique, Tome I 248). More than thirty years before the Emancipation Proclamation was enforced, de Tocqueville wrote of the anti-Black racism found in the so-called abolitionist states—a racism more intense and bitter than any to found in the slave-owning Southern states—and of the nascent inner city ghettos, which he believed to be already more dangerous than the meanest urban environment in continental Europe.

Despite his unavoidable Eurocentric bias, de Tocqueville’s gifts of observation were nothing short of extraordinary. In conjunction with his almost untrammelled admiration for the governmental apparatus of American democracy, this republican aristocrat was totally appalled by the enforced conformity which the myth of universal freedom engendered: "Je ne connais pas de pays où il règne en général moins d'indépendance et de véritable liberté de discussion qu'en Amérique" (De la démocratie en Amérique, Tome I 199 - 200). In his eyes, the spirit of 1776 had already ossified into a rigid catechism which no-longer revolutionary citizens could, like well-trained parrots, only repeat by rote. This perhaps explains why "...en Amérique le suicide est rare, mais on assure que la démence est plus commune que partout ailleurs" (De la démocratie en Amérique, Tome II 125). In the same vein, de Tocqueville noted with amusement, Americans would not gladly suffer the slightest word of criticism about their country to
emerge from even a well-intentioned foreigner's lips. American cultural insularity, he felt, was at least equal to the nation's geographical isolation.

A number of the French traveller's ideas would assume their full importance only after the passage of a century or more. As U.S. judicial practice becomes increasingly savage and repressive at the end of the second millennium, an era when penological practice is becoming more enlightened in most of the other nations in the developed world, it might well be because of this underlying belief: "En Europe, le criminel est un infortuné qui combat pour déroler sa tête aux agents du pouvoir... En Amérique, c'est un ennemi du genre humain, et il a contre lui l'humanité tout entière" (De la démocratie en Amérique. Tome I 78). The history of the U.S. TV "cop show," both fictional and reality-based, amply bears out this statement.

Still, despite his atypical willingness to see others as others saw themselves (what other privileged Frenchman was as unreservedly appreciative of the American myth of the self-made man?). de Tocqueville's Old World origins occasionally shone through. When he wrote, for instance, "J'aimerais mieux qu'on hérissât la langue de mots chinois, tartares ou hurons, que de rendre incertain des mots français," he was speaking from the pulpit of linguistic purity epitomized by the Académie Française. At bottom open-minded, de Tocqueville’s cultural inheritance did not allow him to feel fully at ease in a semi-barbaric land that he otherwise very much admired: "...ce qui me répugne le plus en Amérique, ce n'est plus l'extrême liberté qui y règne, c'est la peu de garantie qu'on y trouve contre la tyrannie" (De la démocratie en Amérique. Tome I 198). If America was the hope of the future, it was
also a threat to the glories of the past; as a land of universal liberty, it was paradoxically a threat to the higher form of individualism that Europe's collapsing class system had once bestowed on its appointed thinkers and artists. That the United States could fill this cultural void with the same dexterity with which it expanded the gains of the industrial revolution was something the author obviously doubted.

By the late 1840s, at least half of French pre-conceptions about America had already been formed. For the armchair Parisian traveller of 1848, America was a republic that France had helped to colonize and liberate from the yoke of the British crown; if Québec—"quelques arpents de neige"—was not much missed, Louisiana—"ce nouvel Eden"—certainly was, thanks to the popular mythologizing of René de Chateaubriand; literary images of the place were indelibly coloured by the published journals of the early French explorers and missionaries; a situation which the borrowings of later writers actively encouraged; except for the poems and stories of Edgar Allan Poe, the United States was seen as a land of little literature and even less philosophy; material wealth, both natural and manufactured, was ubiquitous, it seemed, and engineering skills both abundant and ingenious; the wilderness was filled with doomed noble savages, and the Southern plantations with slaves who were made to seem far more oppressed than their fellow indentured Africans dancing to the whip of French colonial masters. In his private journals Victor Hugo wrote, "L'Américain républicain est libre, vend, achète, revend et marchande et brocante des vieillards, des femmes, des vierges, et des enfants. Il punit de prison qui apprend, à lire aux petits nègres, il tire, au beau milieu d'une ville dite libre, des coups de fusil au nègre fugitif; il dresse des chiens à chasser aux
hommes; il trouve cela tout simple. Il est marchand d'esclaves et citoyen. Il est démocrate et négrier” (Choses vues Tome II 333). Contemporary U.S. mores, if they were known at all, were invariably seen through de Tocqueville’s prism. American women were in some ways freer than their continental counterparts, but also colder and more sexually inhibited. American democratic theory seemed as much a menace to be feared as it did a model to be followed by well-educated French deputies. For the most part, this image would remain fixed until shortly after the First World War. In Extrême Occident, a history of French literary attitudes towards the United States, Franco-American scholar Jean Philippe Mathy wrote, “The main assumption of this study is that many French intellectuals’ perceptions of America, from Tocqueville to Beauvoir, are rooted in a humanistic and aristocratic ethos derived from the models of intellectual excellence and critical practice born in the Renaissance and refined in the age of French classicism” (Mathy 7). One finds this point of view expressed in its most extreme form in the following description of Chactas, the “good” Indian hero of Atala, a classical Frenchman in all but name. “[Chactas] avait conversé avec les grands hommes de ce siècle et assisté aux fêtes de Versailles, aux tragédies de Racine, aux oraisons funèbres de Bossuet, en un mot, le Sauvage avait contemplé la société à son plus haut point de splendeur” (Chateaubriand 31). A national as well as a religious chauvinist, for Chateaubriand the qualities of culture and human worth were clearly determined by each individual’s proximity to the apogee of human civilization, an apex which was unequivocally, univocally French. His position could not be further removed from the more tolerant prejudices of cultural relativism.
Chateaubriand, it must be admitted, was a not entirely typical case. Nevertheless, it is probably fair to claim that, at least in a watered-down version, his attitudes remained in place until the beginning of the twentieth century.

During this literary interregnum, the two French writers who most radically expanded Gallic perceptions of the U.S. were Jules Verne and Charles Baudelaire. According to one American critic, the author of *Les Fleurs du mal* added the word "américaniser" to the French lexicon in 1855 (Mathy 274). Since Baudelaire was such a pivotal figure in the evolution of the crime story, his role as a cultural cross-pollinator can more fruitfully be discussed in Chapter Two than it can here. Jules Verne's contributions, on the other hand, deserve to be considered post-haste.

What most strikes contemporary readers about the proto-science fiction stories that Verne situated in the United States is their alternately banal and prophetic realism. *Les Forceurs de blocus*, for instance, a work largely unknown in the English-speaking world, describes the efforts of a hard-headed Scottish capitalist to steer a high speed steamship (17 knots-per-hour) past the Union gunboats blockading Charleston harbour. The ironically named Playfairs have nothing but scorn for abolitionists, dismissing them as "...ces hommes qui, sous le vain prétexte d'abolir l'esclavage, ont couvert leur pays de sang et de ruines" (*Les Forceurs de blocus* 38). With their eyes set on the main prize of profits, the Playfairs are notably reluctant to admit "...que la question de la servitude fût prédominante dans la guerre civile des Etas-Unis..." (*Les Forceurs de blocus* 38). Although Captain Playfair *does* eventually rescue a heroic abolitionist from a Confederate prison—
an action primarily motivated by the mariner's love for the prisoner's daughter—he returns to England with a cargo of cotton that earns his father's firm a handsome 365% profit. Even today, it is hard to find fictional writings that discuss the U.S. Civil War in less romantic, more pragmatic terms.

The War Between the States is also one of the narrative engines propelling one of Verne's more famous speculative fictions, *De la Terre à la Lune*. Even more than *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*, this novel is replete with Verne's eerie powers of pre-cognition. The decision to send a vessel to the moon is determined by a group of retired Civil War artillerymen and industrialists, the nineteenth century forebears of what Dwight D. Eisenhower was to dub “the military-industrial complex,” the matrix out of which NASA emerged. That Americans should be the first to invent space travel seemed perfectly logical to Verne: “Les Yankees, ces premiers mécaniciens du monde, sont ingénieurs, comme les Italiens sont musiciens et les Allemands métaphysiciens--de naissance” (*De la Terre à la Lune* 12). One of the more formidable of these ex-Union Army gunners is “...l'homme par excellence de la Nouvelle-Angleterre, le Nordiste colonisateur, le descendant de ces Têtes Rondes si funestes aux Stuarts, et l'implacable ennemi des gentlemen du Sud, les anciens Cavaliers de la mère patrie” (*De la Terre à la Lune* 24). In those passages, the author makes enormous leaps of historical fabulation. At a time when the steam-driven power of England's industrial revolution still gave the United Kingdom pride of place as the workship of the world, Jules Verne was already passing on the world-controlling economic torch to the still-wet-behind-the-ears United States. What's more, he attributed that
triumph to America’s inheritance of the most aggressive, puritan streak in British culture, the Round Head ferocity that led to the rise of Cromwell and the fall of the Stuarts. Here, in embryo, we see the origins of the modern French usage of the phrase “les anglo-saxonnnes,” a description that implicitly fuses England and the United States into one seamless socio-historical entity, a body politic implicitly hostile to the interests of France, and one which is seemingly entirely detached from Canada, Australia, and the many other small nations comprising anglophonia. In this phrase we see admiration and realism locked in an eternal battle with paranoia, fear and hate.

Despite this theoretical projection, however, Verne’s account reflects immense familiarity with the quotidian realities of contemporary American life. The trip to the moon is facilitated by the calculations of the observatory in Cambridge, Massachusetts, “Cette ville où fut fondée la première Université des États-Unis, est justement célèbre par son bureau astronomique” (De la Terre à la Lune 38). Hans Pfaal, Edgar Allan Poe’s fictional visitor to the Moon, is wittily treated as an historical personage (much of this book was conceived as satire). Most presciently of all, Verne describes the struggle between the states of Florida and Texas for the honour of being the lunar-directed launch site. Less than a hundred years later, when Apollo IX did indeed speed to the Moon, the rocket was of course fired from Cape Canaveral, Florida, while its pilots listened to commands from Mission Control in Houston, Texas! What’s more, the journey was completed in only slightly less time than the 11 days stipulated by Verne.

The American passages in Le tour du monde en 80 jours (1873) might have been less imbued with prophecy, but they were no less
keen on logistical accuracy: "New York et San Francisco sont donc présentement réunis par un ruban de métal non interrompu qui ne mesure pas moins de trois mille sept cent quarante-vingt-six milles" (Le Tour du monde en 80 jours 194.) Within Verne's broad, "trunklike" descriptions lurk many lesser, "rootlike" details: "Ce wagon était un 'sleeping car', qui, en quelques minutes, fut transformé en dortoir" (Le Tour du monde en 80 jours 196). What Phileas Fogg and his fellow passengers see from moving train windows is a country in the process of creating itself. They "...passent par des villes aux noms antiques, dont quelques-unes avaient des rues et des tramways, mais pas de maisons encore" (Le Tour du monde en 80 jours 244). Only when describing encounters with Mormons and skirmishes with Sioux does Verne depart from the generally realistic tone of his text. This unique mixture—fantastic plot coupled to extremely plausible detail—would lay the groundwork for the infant genre of science fiction, a genre that the French would shortly abandon, a popular form that would subsequently be perfected by les anglo-saxonnnes in general and les Américains in particular. It is one of the abiding ironies of Franco-American relations that certain Gallic cultural innovations are subsequently regarded as quintessentially American—especially by the French. Where would the so-called Hollywood musical be, for instance, if not for the early sound films of René Clair? For a variety of reasons, not all of them modest (high culture est fait chez nous; popular culture est importé d'outre-mer), this situation appeals to Parisian intellectuals. In a strange sort of way, it draws another seductive veil over cultivated French eyes whenever they focus on the alternately brash and admirable United States.
Needless to say, the event that would most radically transform existing Franco-American cultural relations was the First World War. On a per capita basis, the French Army suffered heavier casualties than any other major participant in that sanguinary conflict. What's more, most of the battles were fought on French soil, a circumstance which resulted in as much damage to the nation's environment and physical plant as it did to its reserves of able-bodied cannon fodder. The factor that eventually tilted the balance in favour of the Allied Cause was the commitment of ever greater numbers of American troops to the trenches following Washington's declaration of war in 1917. While America's actual military role in the defeat of the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires was relatively minor, its logistical contribution proved to be decisive. Thus, America emerged from the Great War with the prestige of a major military power, the certainty that it had replaced Great Britain as the workshop of the world, and a foreign policy that had finally emerged from the carapace of isolation. These advantages had been won at very little cost to themselves. American casualties were relatively minor, and its landscape was completely undamaged. With the possible exception of Canada and the other dominions, the United States was the only nation to emerge from the First World War in better shape than it went in.

Inevitably, this historical turn-around produced conflicting emotions in France. For the first time, Americans in Paris were counted not by the hundred, but by the hundred thousand. Gone were the days when the few brash New Worlders lucky enough to worm their way into the pages of French literature generally fell into the category of rich potential marriage partners, such as the "richissime Américain" to
whom Albertine was briefly betrothed in a suppressed passage of A la recherche du temps perdu (Albertine disparue 292). In the immediate post-war period, following demobilization, American writers and artists congregated in the City of Light because the views were pretty, the costs were low, sex was easy and Prohibition non-existent. Around the same time, American movies started to inundate French screens. Prior to 1914, the giant French film combines of Gaumont and Pathé controlled approximately 60% of the world motion picture market. Since the same chemicals that went into the manufacture of celluloid were also used in the production of high explosives. French cinema lost its commercial edge to Hollywood during the Great War, an advantage it would never regain. Less grudgingly, the French also began to listen to American popular music, particularly jazz. Black U.S. musicians were often treated better on the Champs Elysées than they were on Broadway. In a French context, the cult of négritude served a double purpose. France’s acceptance of Black American artists and of Antillean and African writers such as Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor was a way of affirming moral superiority over the New World giant that so aggressively challenged France’s post-1789 claim to be acknowledged as the homeland of secular freedom. How could America truly be the land of liberty if that liberty only extended to whites? At the same time, it allowed French intellectuals to put the harsher realities of the nation’s “off-stage” colonial practice on the back burner. Only in very recent years have Gallic authors belatedly acknowledged the skin colour of most Parisian street sweepers. To admit that racisme ordinaire was as prevalent in Marseille as it was in Memphis was to subtly undermine
France's claim to being regarded as the only true, the only legitimate, the only universal republic.

Thanks to these circumstances, French reaction to American advances on all fronts could not help but be mixed. Gallic gratitude for U.S. military assistance was undercut by that country's seeming blindness to France's decisive but Pyrrhic contributions to Germany's defeat. The thought that la Belle France might now owe more to General Pershing and his "doughboys" than American patriots once did to the eighteenth-century assistance of Admiral de Suffren's warships and Lafayette's volunteers was totally unacceptable to the national amour propre. Love of American popular culture could not entirely disguise the fact that its progress was often made at French culture's expense. Even worse, expatriate American authors in love with Paris were singularly indifferent to Parisians, eschewing personal contact even when they knew the local language well. British journalist Tony Allan made much of this fact in his nostalgic history, The Glamour Years: Paris, 1919 - 1940, quoting art critic Clive Bell to the effect that "Some of [these expatriates] had French mistresses—kept mistresses; but very few of them had French friends" (Allan 9).

In this context, one of the most anomalous Gallic books about Franco-American contact is Joseph Kessel's Dames de Californie. A coming-of-age memoir, this brief narrative describes the author's journey across America as he left the battlefields of World War One to participate in the Allied Powers' ill-fated attempt to overthrow the newly-founded Bolshevik regime in 1918. Kessel and his comrades were cheered by American crowds as their train puffed its way across the U.S. mainland. For once the reader is not faced with "doughboys" being
fêted by adoring Frenchmen, but by "poilus" being hailed by grateful groups of Yanks. With undisguised pride, Kessel wrote. "L'Amérique alors était amoureuse de la France" (Kessel 31). Being young and military, Kessel's communication skills were obviously not aided by the presence of large numbers of bilingual academics, the balm bestowed on most later French writers of substance. "Il est temps de dire," he ruefully admits at one point, "que pour tout anglais je connaissais celui que l'on apprend à lycée" (Kessel 37). Although he had by this time forgotten most of his high school English, his linguistic facility was still considerably greater than that of his fellow volunteers: "Il me restait bien peu de ces notions lorsque je débarquai en Amérique. Mais je crois que j'en savais encore plus donc de la majorité de mes camarades. Je devais donc, bon gré mal gré, leur servir d'interprète" (Kessel 37). Although Kessel was much cheered by the reception he received from the women of America, the omnipresence of puritan strictures continuously rankled: "La prohibition, si elle n'était pas encore en vigueur en Amérique, régnait impitoyablement ces bâtiments de guerre. On nous offrait du café au lait comme boisson de table" (Kessel 21). Later, in San Francisco, he would frustratedly discover that "On sait qu'il est interdit par la loi...d'amener une femme chez soi dans un hôtel américain" (Kessel 42). Like most period French tourists, the author was impressed by everything from skyscrapers to New Year's Eve parties, by the things that were quintessentially non-French. On the other hand, he is delighted when one of his women friends from Saint Louis (a town he seems to assume is as francophone as New Orleans) "...parlait un français adorable de grâce.
Je retrouvais la langue de la Bruyère et de Fénélon....” (Kessel 84). For Kessel, America was clearly a land as wonderful as it was incomprehensible, as pleasurable as it was irritating; it was a paradise whose perfection was spoiled by the buzzing of bluenosed flies. Behind this mixture of envy and admiration lurks a single unspoken assumption: Americans might have produced this opulence, but they don’t know how to enjoy it. Just as youth is proverbially wasted upon the young, so, it would seem, is America upon the Americans.

In any event, Joseph Kessel did not see the United States as being in any way inimical to the health and well-being of his own country. Ahead of his time in this as in so many other things, the early nineteenth-century novelist and travel writer Stendhal was perhaps the first prominent literary Frenchman to worry about U.S. cultural domination of the globe. Shortly after the Napoleonic Wars, he wrote. “En 1900, l’Europe n’aura qu’un moyen de résister à l’énorme population et à la raison profonde de l’Amérique: ce sera de donner à l’Asie Minore, à la Gréce, et a la Dalmatie, la même civilisation; c’est-à-dire le même degré de liberté dont on jouit dans la Pennsylvanie” (Stendhal 277). To survive America, in other words, Europe would have to become more like its de facto enemy, to incorporate more of the interloper’s good points into its own modus vivendi. For French authors after Joseph Kessel, hélas, the political pre-emptive strike option had already passed. European autocracy did not end until 1918, and then as the feather-that-broke-the-Triple-Entente’s-back hands of the U.S. military. America was now the dominant socio-political force on the planet, an unavoidable current that pulled all others in its wake. The only nations to resist this pull successfully were those that slipped into some form of
totalitarian structure. Of these new political styles, Soviet-style Leninism could uniquely afford to pose as a true polar opposite to U.S.-style capitalism. Europe's fascist states appeared more like metastatizing capitalist growths, while the democratic/colonialist nations—of which France was one of the most important—were equally hybrid products of "free enterprise" economics. For all practical purposes, Europe no longer controlled the world, as it had since about 1800. In true Hegelian fashion, power had travelled westwards once again.

If this changed reality could be felt on some level everywhere in non-Soviet Europe, it was still possible to soften its impact in a number of tactical ways. Most schools of European thought between the wars were singularly free of U.S. influence. Outside of literature and jazz, American culture did not command a dominant place in the international avant garde. On the level of high culture in particular, European intellectuals continued to feel like top planetary dogs. Theodor W. Adorno was famously dismissive of both Hollywood and syncopated music; André Gide wrote as if U.S. culture were as marginal to the European mainstream as Tagalog poetry. In A la recherche du temps perdu, unquestionably the greatest triumph of twentieth century French fiction, the most significant mention of the U.S.A.—if one excludes the repressed manuscript claim that Albertine, at the time of her death, was engaged to "un richissme Américain" (Albertine disparu 292)—occurs in the following disquisition on the generally humble provenance of American family names: "...beaucoup d'Américains qui s'appellent Montgommery, Berry, Chandos ou Capel n'ont de rapport avec les familles de Pembroke, de Buckingham, d'Essex, ou avec le Duc de Berry"
America might have been mighty, but in most matters it seemed both far away and of much less important than Germany, Russia, or England, the nation’s traditional rivals in political brinkmanship. In retrospect, this attitude seems very much like wishful thinking; at the time, however, it was entirely sincere.

These factors should be borne in mind when considering between-war French literary impressions of the United States. That this cultural scene was largely dominated by Catholic conservatives is a defining constraint largely lost on non-French literary scholars. While French, like English and German, is one of the world’s privileged “international” languages, it is its left-wing, experimental and secular literature which has been most successfully exported. The vast quantity of non-fiction produced by the likes of Paul Claudel, Paul Valéry, François Mauriac, Georges Bernanos, and a hundred lesser figures—many of whom were both viciously anti-Semitic and rabidly fascist—has passed largely unnoticed by the outside world. This unfortunate imbalance inevitably skews virtually all outside attempts to obtain an objective image of the time, a portrait in which foreground and background were judiciously balanced. It is a limitation which must constantly be borne in mind when dealing with the literature’s better-known but less representative texts.

In Extrême Occident, Jean-Philippe Mathy plausibly contends that French criticism of the U.S. in the 1920s was largely conservative and humanist, while that of the 1950s and ’60s was either left-wing (negative) or right-wing (the so-called liberal Atlanticists). Following the events of 1968, meanwhile, the Gallic tone generally changed to one of postmodernist praise. These generalities are useful tools so long as
one bears in mind the perennial tendency of French intellectuals to change steeds in mid-stream. At various times in his career, André Gide, for instance, was an anti-Semitic reactionary, a Protestant polemicist, a Catholic semi-convert, a pagan philosopher, a thorough-going atheist, a homosexual apologist, a militant Communist, a much-reviled anti-Communist, an anti-colonialist, a Vichy accommodator, and a vocal critic of France’s Second World War collaboration with the occupying Third Reich. To define Gide by any one of those labels would be misleading; he was all of them and then some.

Georges Duhamel was probably the most lucid and articulate of between-war French commentators on the American scene. A now largely forgotten member of the Académie Française, Duhamel was once an important literary personage. Even today, Scènes de la vie future can stand as one of the least sympathetic studies of the United States ever written. Duhamel crossed the Atlantic with a chip on his shoulder, and he missed no opportunity to coax his hosts into knocking it off. Even his port of arrival reflects this unfailingly antagonistic attitude. Unlike most French writers, who disembarked from plane or ship in New York, Duhamel decided to start his journey in New Orleans, la plus française des villes américaines In this way he could acclimatize himself to the local customs, just as Borgia princes once accustomed themselves to poison by consuming ever larger quantities of arsenic at dinner. Before jumping into the American melting pot, Duhamel pointedly held his nose.

The author’s suspicions were deeply rooted in his circular mistrust of both technicians and machines: “Comme les poisons employés en thérapeutique pour l’allégement de nos misères, la plupart des
inventions humaines propres à nous donner du bonheur ou du plaisir, même du plus noble, sont encore susceptibles, entre les mains scélérates ou malhabiles, de se transformer en instruments de souffrance et de mort” (Duhamel 12.) Following this line of reasoning, America, being ineptly run, must be considered as some sort of giant torture chamber. It is also a supremely dangerous dystopia-in-embryon: “Le passé nous déconcerte moins que le futur: un occidental adulte, normal et cultivé se trouve moins dépaysé chez les troglodytes de Matmata que dans certaines rues de Chicago” (Duhamel 16). Without the slightest hint of irony, Duhamel turns “the normal, cultivated Western adult” into “the normal, cultivated Frenchman.” In this comparison of New World and Old, Duhamel doesn’t even pretend to be impartial. Kipling gave the Indians more benefit of the doubt than Duhamel would give the Americans. Everything about the country seems to irritate him. He bridles when his ship is fumigated in Havana; he smoulders when alcohol is removed from the ship’s stores the moment its prow passes Prohibition’s nautical limit. Americans love to guzzle, he sneers, yet hypocritically ban alcohol. They seriously consider diverting the Gulf Stream for their own uses even though such a far-fetched procedure would surely freeze Europe. Even worse, these technocratic barbarians might actually pull off such a demented coup. What a country!

Ironically, many of Duhamel’s period complaints now sound like the on-air whining of conservative U.S. talk show hosts. He is appalled, for example, by America’s obsession with calories. Universal medical coverage leaves him equally cold: “Le jour que nous possédons, contre chacun de ces fléaux, un vaccin efficace dont l’application sera rigoureusement obligatoire, nous ne souffrirons plus des maladies, nous
souffrirons des contraintes exigés par les lois, nous souffrirons de la santé” (Duhamel 34 - 35). America in the 1920s was already an over-regulated society so far as this Frenchman was concerned.

Unlike most of his fellow countrymen, Duhamel did not even derive cultural comfort from Hollywood movies. Movie music, for instance, “...sort de l’abattoir à musique comme les saucisses du déjeuner sortaient de l’abattoir à cochons” (Duhamel 44). Motion pictures, newsreels and vaudeville collectively comprised “...un divertissement d’ilotes, un passe-temps des illettrés, de créatures misérables, ahuries par leur besogne et leurs soucis” (Duhamel 49).

As for America’s indigenous music, it was beyond the pale. “O jazz!” he groaned, “Strychnine suprême” (Duhamel 129).

Americans, Duhamel complained, were hard to find: “L’Amérique me cache les Américains” (Duhamel 56.) This was because, apparently, most Americans were rendered formless by Americanism: “Plutôt qu’un peuple, je vois un système” (Duhamel 57). The immensity of the land, something that has impressed virtually all French travellers from Jacques Cartier’s first visit to the present, left this toughest of all critics suspicious as well as unmoved: “Un building s’élève de deux ou trois étages par semaine. Il a fallu vingt ans à Wagner pour construire la Tétralogie, une vie à Littré pour édifier son dictionnaire” (Duhamel 50).

In turn, he attacked the rationales behind organized sports, credit buying, and luxurious washrooms. For Duhamel, nothing could disguise the fact that Americans were not free men but slaves--slaves of

---

1 Ironically, one could easily imagine Karl Marx denouncing movies in much the same terms—albeit with a little more compassion—if that strain of opium had existed in his day. When condemning America, French jeremiads from the right are often indistinguishable from left-wing jabs.
moralists, doctors, jurists, “et même [des] électriciens” (Duhamel 59). He was offended by the fact that the face of an Indian and a buffalo were printed on coins in this unfree land that never wearied of touting its illusory liberties: “O ironie! Deux races vivantes et libres que vous avez anéanties, en moins de trois siècles” (Duhamel 62).

For his own purposes, he re-packaged many of de Tocqueville’s criticisms of America without paying even nominal lip service to the more numerous points of admiration that his illustrious predecessor had emphasized. Root beer, needless to say, was risible: “C’est de la bière des racines, de la bière pour rire, bien entendu” (Duhamel 65). Women were somewhat better appreciated—especially below the waist: “Comment font-elles, les dames américaines, pour ce procurer, toutes, ces mêmes jambes délicieuses qu’elles montrent si généreusement” (Duhamel 76-77). Like Céline, Georges Simenon, and so many francophones after him, the American “gam” could strike a favourable chord in this flinty Frenchman’s heart long after the appeal of the Empire State building had started to fade. Unsurprisingly, this form of fetishism was not much indulged in by literary Frenchwomen, but even they felt compelled to draw attention to this particular part of the American female’s anatomy.

In addition to the cult of the Yankee leg, Duhamel added the demonization of Chicago to the canon of American commonplaces in the French literary imagination. “Chicago!” he railed. “La ville tumeur! La ville cancer!” The author’s description of the Chicago stockyards emphasized the system’s cruelty and inhumanity without expressing the slightest sympathy for the animals being sacrificed on the altars of the food industry.
In the same vein, racism is mentioned in a way that manages to make the Americans look doubly bad, since it links modern refinements of the time-honoured technique of lynching to the new mechanics of highway mayhem. Mrs. Lytton tells her bad-tempered French guest that American highways rack up "...deux cent cinquante mille accidents par an, dont cinquante mille mortels," coyly adding "J'en ai pris ma petite part. Mais rien que des nègres...." (Duhamel 79). Once again Duhamel mounts a left-leaning horse to more effectively drive home his ideological lance. No more inflammatory statement can be found in Jean-Paul Sartre's La Putain respecteuse or Boris Vian's J'irai cracher sur vos tombes.

Ultimately, though, what America represented for Duhamel was the final triumph of the ants: "...la civilisation des fourmis du depuis des siècles de siècles. Pas de révolutions chez les insectes" (Duhamel 216). While the author still has some hope for Europe's future, they are clearly short-term: "L'Amérique peut tomber. La civilisation américaine ne périra pas: elle est déjà maîtresse du monde" (Duhamel 217).

Louis-Ferdinand Celine was also a man of the right, but no one has ever deigned to dub him either a Catholic, a humanist, or a conservative. A right-wing anarchist with strong fascist tendencies and a Tourette's Syndrome gift for abuse, Celine's legendary distastes were as volatile and tumultuous as Duhamel's were patrician and restrained. He approached America the same way he approached everything else...with a passionate loathing that owed nothing to received wisdom or common sense.

The American passages in Celine's semi-autobiographical first novel, Voyage au bout de la nuit, amount to scarcely more than a tenth
of that sprawling, peripatetic text’s free-wheeling bulk. The rest of the book unfolds on the “opening round” battlefields of the First World War, in the depressing jungles of colonial Africa, and in the even more squalid suburbs of industrialized France. Even so, Céline’s acidic quick sketches of New York City and the automobile factories of Detroit would make an impression on the minds of French literary travellers in America no less indelible than the ones already bequeathed to posterity by de Tocqueville and Chateaubriand. You can despise Celine, but you cannot forget him.

As contemptuous of the U.S. obsession with health and safety as was Georges Duhamel, Bardamu, the author’s alter ego, disdainfully sneers, “Il s’appelait le ‘Surgeon général’ ce qui serait un bon nom pour un poisson” (Celine 190). Nevertheless, thanks to his obsession with the legs of American women—another passion shared with Duhamel—the United States must always in some sense be seen as a land of desire in the eyes of Céline/Bardamu: “En fait de jambes j’ai rarement vu mieux, encore un peu masculines et cependant déjà plus delicatés, une beauté de chair en éclosion” (Céline 192). Emblematic of this sometimes concrete, sometimes formless erotic yearning is New York City itself, a polis where every building is a symbolic erection: “New York c’est un ville debout” (Céline 186). Unlike French cities, which are modestly situated and often quietly beautiful, Gotham “ne se pâmaît pas, elles attendent le voyageur, tandis que celle-là-là pas baisante du tout, raide à faire peur” (Céline 186). If, in contrast to the phallic skyscrapers between which they walk, American women are unusually beautiful—albeit in a not entirely acceptable “masculine” way—they nonetheless exist in a very uncontinental sort of purdah. Bardamu is frankly
appalled by this curiously puritanical state of affairs. From the perspective of his private bench, he observes that “Elles les femmes ne regardaient guère que les devantures des magasins, tout accaparées par l’attrait des sacs, des écharpes, des petites choses de soie, exposées, très peu à la fois dans chaque vitrine... On ne trouvait pas beaucoup de vieux dans cette foule” (Céline 196). In a young land, it seems, there are only young people. Women are set apart from men, and youth from age. What’s more, it is strongly suggested that the unsublimated physical appetites of American men are far less vital than those of their continental counterparts. At one point, Bardamu relies largely on the largesse of a prostitute who has taken a shine to him: “Elle possédait d’amples ressources, cette amie, puis-qu’elle se faisait dans les cent dollars par jour en maison, tandis que moi, chez Ford, j’en gagnais à peine six. L’amour qu’elle exécutait pour vivre ne la fatiguait guère. Les Américains font ça comme des oiseaux” (Céline 230).

Despite his impoverished status and total lack of patrician airs, Bardamu/Céline is only slightly more keen on that supreme sexual substitute, the Hollywood movie: “Le cinéma ne me suffisait plus, antidote bénin, sans effet réelle contre l’atrocité matérielle de l’usine” (Céline 229). Unlike Georges Duhamel’s old-fashioned dismissal of Hollywood from the hoary heights of Mount Parnassus, Céline’s rejection is as up-to-date as the street-level disdain of a William S. Burroughs literary junkie: movies are an inadequate drug that fail to provide the consumer with sufficient release. Like Duhamel the wealthy, Bardamu the poor is appalled by the ubiquity of U.S. beggars: “C’étaient des pauvres de partout” (Céline 193). When poverty obliges this French sojourner to seek employment in a Ford factory, he finds himself
surrounded by fellow-foreigners: “Dans cette foule presque personne ne parlait l’anglais” (Céline 225).

Since the operative word in the novel’s title is “voyage”, it seems only proper that Bardamu’s U.S. journey should have an Odyssey-like quality to it. Céline’s alter ego tries to track down his war-time American mistress solely for the purpose of borrowing money: “Ce fut bien uniquement pour des raisons d’argent, mais combien urgentes et impérieuses, que je me mis à la recherche de Lola” (Céline 212). A rich society woman who tended to wounded Allied soldiers during the Great War, Lola takes great pride in the radical pedigree of one of her servants: “‘Il faisait partie alors d’un société secrète très redoutable pour l’émancipation des noirs... C’était, a ce qu’on m’a raconté, des gens affreux... La bande fut dissoute par les autorités...’” (Céline 220). Although suppressed by the powers that be, Lola’s domestic continues to manufacture bombs in his spare time, without ever making them lethal by the addition of powder: “‘Il n’en finira jamais de faire la révolution. Mais je le garde c’est un excellent domestique! Et à tout prendre, il est peut-être plus honnête que les autres qui ne font pas la révolution...’” (Céline 220). Céline’s symbolic representation of Lola as a castrating racist is far more subtly modulated than Duhamel’s poisoned pen portrait of Mrs. Lytton, the homicidal society woman whose only worry about running down Blacks on the street is related to the damage their dismembered bodies might do to her automobile’s beautiful chassis. In the first instance, economic oppression is combined with benevolence, a combination which Herbert Marcuse would later define as the dominant mode of repressive tolerance.
In the 1940s, Boris Vian and Jean-Paul Sartre would also conflate negative American sexual and racial characteristics in disagreeable white female protagonists, generally in a form much cruder than Céline’s. Still, if the female anti-heroes in La Putain respecteuse and J’irai cracher sur vos tombes seem, on a superficial level, to owe more to Duhamel’s criminally blasé Mrs. Lytton, their primary influence is unquestionably Lola.²

Bardamu’s insensitive attempts to cadge money from his reluctant benefactor would also bear long-range fruit. At the time of his request, Lola is preoccupied with saving her mother from galloping liver cancer. Although it would clearly be in his best interest to humour his ex-girlfriend’s pet fantasy, this hardheaded doctor-in-embryo refuses to play along. When asked if he doesn’t believe the disease is curable, Bardamu replies “—Non, répondis-je très nettement, très catégorique, les cancers du foie sont absolument inguérissables” (Céline 222). Although Lola now despises him and wants him to leave post-haste, Bardamu continues to press his outrageous suit: “Lola, prêtez-moi je vous prie l’argent que vous m’avez promis ou bien je coucherai ici et vous m’entendez vous répéter tout ce que je sais sur le cancer, ces complications, ses hérédités, car il est héréditaire, Lola, le cancer. Ne l’oublions pas” (Céline 223). As Henry Miller pointed out in The Books in My Life and elsewhere, Céline was the greatest influence on the development of his own literary ethos, the key that opened the wellsprings of his own sulphurous creativity. One can’t help but be reminded of the many occasions in Sexus, Black Spring, and Tropic of

² Lola, it might be worth mentioning here, is the most popular literary derivation of the name Lilith, according to Jewish folklore, Adam’s disobedient first wife. For a more detailed consideration of her fascinating persona, please see Chapter Two.
Capricorn where the cheerful narrator tries to cadge funds from the obviously grief-stricken without the slightest concern for the "mark's" feelings. Céline's misanthropic narcissism, his gift for torrential, irrational literary utterance, would be adopted by Miller to suit his own New World needs. Since Boris Vian would subsequently bend Miller to his will in J'irai cracher sur vos tombes, Vian's one out-and-out "bestseller", this Americanized Céline would return to his place of cultural birth, just as Bardamu would return to France.3

Immediately after the Second World War, the "problem" of the United States seemed more insoluble ever. In 1918, the French nation could console itself with the thought that its army had made the largest single contribution to the defeat of the Triple Entente; in 1944, on the other hand, France had to be forcibly liberated by Allied troops, spearheaded by American tanks, following four years of defeat and Nazi occupation. The upstart New World giant of 1918 was now the cocky super-power of 1945, the world's foundry, bank, armoury, and sole nuclear repository. Against complete U.S. hegemony, there stood only the battered but still unbowed hulk of the Soviet Union, the Stalinist juggernaut which had destroyed the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front

---

3 In addition to the Miller connection, one should probably here make note of a much more indirect, difficult to determine case of cultural cross-pollination. After Bardamu himself, the most important character is unquestionably Robinson, the improbably-named Frenchman whom the narrator first meets on a murky battlefield. Like a bad penny, Robinson keeps turning up, in France, Africa and the United States. A character of exactly the same name also appears in Franz Kafka's Amerika, a character who plays precisely the same role. Even his name is suspect. A suspicious American in that book declares that "'I don't even believe that his name is Robinson, for no Irishman has ever been called that since Ireland was Ireland...'" (Kafka 173). In Frédéric Vitoux's definitive La Vie de Céline, Amerika is not cited as a source of inspiration forVoyage au bout de la nuit. On the other hand, that could be because of the popular belief that Céline was a self-taught idiot savant, an ignorant loser who extracted poetry solely from personal experience and paranoia. In any event, the Amerika/Voyage connection is clearly worth further study.
at a cost to the Russian people of 10 - 15% of their pre-war population and 50% of their physical plant. Russia the Heroic, however, was counterbalanced by the gloomy spectre of Russia the Horrific, the prison camp country that was presided over by a brutal, paranoid, and self-intoxicated dictator. Already either exhausted or in physical ruins, Europe’s former imperialist powers were being put under increased pressure from both Eastern and Western power blocs to divest themselves of their former colonial possessions. In order to rebuild their shattered economies, it was necessary for these countries to participate in Washington’s Marshall Plan; to protect themselves from Stalin’s T-34s, they were obliged to ally themselves with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, an umbrella group entirely dependent on American military machinery, manpower and—for all practical purposes—foreign policy. After five years of Nazi embargoes, American films, books and records poured into France and other European countries in an unchecked flood. Never before had the New World’s absolute strength in relation to the old continent of Europe seemed as daunting or as absolute. Never before had the threat of cultural absorption seemed quite as great.

French intellectual reaction to the postwar U.S. must obviously take these historical factors into consideration. The long French intellectual romance with Stalinist politics can only be understood in the context of a once great, now humbled nation that felt itself to be trapped between a rock and a hard place. Cultural extinction could be accomplished as easily with soft drinks and TV sets, many French writers felt, as it could with socialist realism and mandatory Russian lessons. Being schooled in the French tradition of *realpolitik*, which is to
say, the guiltlessly amoral consideration of international events in terms of national self-interest without recourse to the obfuscatory rhetoric routinely employed by Anglo-Saxon governments whenever they feel the need to disguise their international events in terms of national self-interest without recourse to the obfuscatory rhetoric routinely employed by Anglo-Saxon governments whenever they feel the need to disguise their less admirable actions—Gallic writers, philosophers, and journalists soon realized that America, by virtue of its nuclear arsenal and peerless arms industry, was likely to keep Russian troops off the Champs Élysées in the foreseeable future. Thus, with the effective blocking of one particuar foreign peril, they felt free to deal with the nearer, more immediate threat represented by American neo-colonialism. These basic facts had as much to do with the conduct of the French intelligentsia as did sympathy for the country’s industrial working class, a mainly Bolshevik proletariat that gave the French Communist Party 30% of the vote during every national election. The heroic conduct of the Soviet Red Army and of French Communist partisans during the Second World War likewise gave the PCF a longer-lasting allure than its Anglo-American counterparts; unlike the Americans and the British, the French felt no need to disguise the fact that the Russians had destroyed 58 - 75% of the Third Reich’s military machine (the figures vary); they could not delude themselves into believing that France had in any significant way contributed to the recent Allied victory. In many ways, Russia’s over-the-horizon existence was immensely reassuring. As long as Bolshevism existed as a viable alternative, U.S. cultural control would never reach 100%. To maintain this comforting illusion, intellectual acceptance of the growing evidence
that pointed to Stalin's great mistakes and murderous paranoia, to crowded prison camps and organized famines, to purge trials and mass legal murder was accepted at a much slower pace in France than it was in any other Western European country, with the probable exception of Italy. For the French, the "workers' paradise" represented more than economic salvation; it was also an effective shield against the prospect of U.S. cultural absorption.

One sees all these forces at work in the early editorials of Les Temps modernes, the intellectual journal founded by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in the mid-1940s. The magazine's suspicions of the motivations behind America's Marshall Plan became more pronounced as events in Italy and Greece increasingly suggested that U.S. economic assistance only came with garrotting political strings attached, strings which invariably settled around the necks of left-wing groups. Though opposed to French colonialism on principle, Les Temps modernes' editorial board was no less sensitive to perceived French perquisites than were their Gaullist and republican opponents. Whether monarchist or socialist by conviction, virtually all French thinkers believed in the universal culture inaugurated by either the French Revolution or the sun kings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Inevitably, this Universal Culture spoke with a French accent.

In January of 1945, Sartre was one of the very first French intellectuals to visit the seemingly invincible United States. At that time, the existentialist philosopher was a moderate supporter of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal policies, and an unaligned socialist. Four years earlier, he had somewhat controversially published an essay on Herman Melville in the first wartime issue of Comoedia, an arts-
oriented newspaper which had been financed and backed by the occupying German forces (Lottman 252). Like most Frenchmen of his generation, he saw America first and foremost as a land of material plenty, a place where the economic privations of occupied France did not pertain. Sartre enjoyed the nation’s opulence and hospitality, entering into sexual liaisons with a number of American women, including “Dolorès,” the lover who came closest to supplanting Simone de Beauvoir as his principal “long-term companion”. As de Beauvoir put it in the third volume of her autobiography, “Sartre était étourdi par tout ce qu’il vu. Outre le régime économique, la ségrégation, le racisme, bien de choses dans la civilisation d’outre-Atlantique le heurtaient: le conformisme des Américains, leur échelle de valeurs, leur mythes, leur faux optimisme, leur fuite devant la tragique; mais il avait eu beaucoup de sympathie pour la plupart de ceux qu’il avait approchés; il trouvait émouvantes les foules de New York, et il pensait que les hommes valaient mieux que le système” (La Force des choses 45.) Even this brief “honeymoon period”, though, was shot through with visceral revulsion at the pandemic conformism which first Sartre, and later de Beauvoir, professed to find everywhere in the U.S. In this regard, they clearly echoed Alexis de Tocqueville, that earlier champion of liberty whose mind was always above the fray. Perhaps because they were used to it by now, this quintessentially French reservation does not seem to have unduly disturbed Sartre’s American hosts. His criticism of the U.S. State Department, on the other hand, came close to getting him deported. Twenty years later, Sartre would refuse to lecture in the United States on the grounds that this once insurrectionary republic had become the homeland of international imperialism. Strangely, despite the
completeness of his ideological disaffection, the philosopher did not devote any of his major writings to the problem of the U.S., with the notable exception of *La Putain respecteuse*. The few Sartrean references to America which do in fact exist must be sought in the speeches, interviews and minor journalism, not in the important essays collected in *Situations*. Many nations were of interest to this tireless literary traveller, including Germany (the land where he completed his philosophical training before the war), Spain, Portugal, Italy, Brazil and Israel. The United States was not one of them.

Even Sartre's attraction to American artistic techniques appears to have waned after the late 1940s. Although Kate and Edward Fullbrook claim in *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth Century Legend*, their revisionist re-evaluation of the most important literary couple of the twentieth-century, that Sartre's breakthrough novel *La Nausée* was strongly influenced by Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, the validity of their contention is more or less irrelevant to our concerns, since it seems highly likely that this alleged admiration would have been cast aside at roughly the same time that Sartre abandoned narrative fiction as a legitimate twentieth century literary technique—which is to say, around 1949 (Fullbrook and Fullbrook 84). Indeed, his very praise of U.S.-flavoured writing carried with it a certain condescending dismissal. For him, the value of American literature "lay precisely in its pragmatic, action-oriented nature, in its depthlessness and one-dimensionality" (Mathy 130).

---

4 A title which French bureaucratic prudery once insisted on printing as *La p..... respecteuse*. 
Albert Camus also visited the United States in the late 1940s. Like Céline and Duhamel, he subsequently “expressed astonishment at the beauty of American women, but also experienced what he called their terrifying inaccessibility, and [one of his friends] knew of cases where Frenchmen had become impotent with American women, for they confessed to him afterwards” (Lottman 385 - 386). Almost contemporaneously with Simone de Beauvoir, he fell in love with “Chinatown, the Bowery, popular dance halls, garish and gawdy nightclubs with floor shows” (Lottman 388). At one of his New York lectures, a thief stole the cashier’s receipts, after which the audience generously made up this loss to their guest out of their own pockets: “Camus himself was enthralled by this event, seeing it as the embodiment of American crime” (Lottman 383). Although Sartre’s sometime political ally was soon to become his bitter intellectual fœ, Camus expressed almost identical views on the advantages and limitations of U.S. writing. The Algerian-born author believed that “American techniques were useful when one was describing a man without apparent interior life, and Camus admitted to having used these techniques. But to generalize such use would be an impoverishment, for nine tenths of what makes the richness of art and of life would thereby be lost” (Lottman 418). Thus, “‘The American literature we read, with the exception of Faulkner and of one or two others who like Faulkner have no success in the United States, is useful as documentation but has little to do with art’” (Lottman 418).

Camus’s preference for American artists who were disdained on the home front was a sentiment to be dutifully repeated by countless French critics, writers, philosophers and filmmakers during the past half
century. To “discover” a despised American is in some way to make him less American and more French. This transmutational process probably began with Baudelaire’s appropriation of Edgar Poe; it continues even now.

To return for a moment to *La Putain respectueuse*, the first thing that strikes the contemporary North American reader about this mid-'40s drama is its strangely deracinated quality. Although Sartre had indeed visited the United States before composing this play, he seems every bit as indifferent to place as was the young Brecht before he fled Germany. Passages such as the following do not inspire confidence in the author’s understanding of U.S. cultural mores: “Ils venaient de gagner un match de rugby” (Sartre 35). To have football-mad Americans from the Deep South getting worked up over a quintessentially British game is clearly pushing the myth of the corporate *pays des anglo-saxonnnes* a little too far. An agitprop melodrama on the subject of lynching, *La Putain respectueuse* describes the shameful path by which Lizzie, a prostitute from New York, eventually manages to win the respect of her adopted Southern town by falsely claiming that a local black man attempted to rape her. While she is initially reluctant to participate in this subterfuge, so many arguments are brought to bear that she is eventually forced to submit to a murderous, socially-sanctioned lie. She is reminded repeatedly that she is not in New York any more, and that Black folks aren’t much liked in her new home. As one well-heeled redneck puts it, “J’ai cinq domestiques de couleur. Quand on m’appelle au téléphone et que l’un d’eux décroche l’appareil, il l’essuie avant de me le tendre” (Sartre 33). In a place where racism apparently burns as brightly as a Klan cross,
the second most Satanic of the Southerners is the Senator, a silver-tongued devil who plays "good cop" during the course of Lizzie's prolonged brainwashing. I say "second most", because the letter of entreaty that breaks through the Northerner's resistance was reputedly written by his wife. In part, it reads "...il a tué un noir, c'est très mal. Mais j'ai besoin de lui. C'est un Américain cent pour cent, le descendant d'une de nos plus vieilles familles, il a fait ses études à Harvard, il est officier—il me faut des officiers—il emploie deux mille ouvriers dans son usine—deux mille chômeurs s'il venait à mourir—c'est un chef, un solide rempart contre le communisme, le syndicalisme et les Juifs" (Sartre 55).

Again we see the ghost of Duhamel's Mrs. Lytton. She is, however, only slightly worse than everyone else in this particular corner of hell. Sartre's critique of America is painted in the broadest, crudest strokes imaginable. It is a polemic that allows only the most reprehensible, disagreeable aspects of American life, each one magnified to maximum power, to appear upon the stage. Aside from its political signification, *La putain respectueuse* is as geographically and sociologically vague as a play by Beckett or Ionesco.

*J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* seems to have been inspired by one of the more controversial moments in this extremely controversial "melo". After playing Judas by signing her name to the document that falsely condemns him, Lizzie attempts to assuage her guilt and appease her conscience by offering the innocent fugitive her revolver, a means by which he might legitimately defend himself. Despite the whore's half-decent intentions, though, the Black victim refuses to accept this existentially meaningful gift:
LE NEGRE

Je ne peux pas, madame.

LIZZIE

Quoi?

LE NEGRE

Je ne peux tirer sur des blancs.

LIZZIE

Vraiment! Ils vont se gêner, eux.

LE NEGRE

Ce sont des blancs, madame (Sartre 71).

Frantz Fanon and other radical theorists would later condemn this “Uncle Tom” passivity as objectively reactionary, even if it did reflect the “Jim Crow” mentality of Southern Blacks prior to the birth of the U.S. Civil Rights movement. The playwright obviously agreed with them; in her memoirs, Simone de Beauvoir explained why the drama was revised for the cinema in a way that allowed the oppressed Black man to take up arms for himself and—by extension—tous les damnés de la terre: “Sartre, d’ailleurs, comprenait le point de vue des communistes: au niveau des masses, l’espoir est un élément d’action; la lutte est trop sévère pour qu’elles s’y risquent si elles ne croient pas à la victoire” (La Force des choses 129 - 130).

A fellow Saint-Germain-des-Prés habitué with strong feelings against U.S.-style racial prejudice was Boris Vian, a bohemian polymath who belonged for a time to the existentialist philosopher’s inner circle, eventually losing his first wife to that legendary womanizer, following
Michelle's decision to "defect" to Jean-Paul's unofficial harem. A man of many talents, Vian was simultaneously France's premier jazz critic, a noted experimental writer, a talented trumpeter, a good Samaritan to visiting bebop musicians, a film enthusiast (please see attached appendix), a cabaret artist, and a punster and word game master who was almost as handy in English as he was in French. Of all the French writers of his day, he was unquestionably the one most sympathetic to American popular culture, as well as the one with the best sense of humour. In his capacity as France's number one jazz interpreter, it was Vian's enviable duty to squire the major Black musical celebrities who visited Paris around the City of Light. According to Noël Arnaud, "...tous les grands musiciens noirs, de passage à Paris, seront, comme le Duke, les hôtes du Club Saint-Germain-des-Prés et de Boris Vian: Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Max Roach, Kenny Clarke, etc" (Arnaud 148). Because of this, his personal familiarity with Black American viewpoints was almost certainly greater than those of his French literary peers, since their knowledge came almost exclusively from the mouth of expatriate novelist Richard Wright. Like virtually all white jazz musicians, he willingly acknowledged that the masters of his art were darker-hued than he. At that time, this was one of the few angles by which non-biased European observers could properly appreciate the depth of Black talent even as it was submerged and blocked at every turn by the organs and ideology of institutional racism. Vian clearly took these lessons to heart.

_J'irai cracher sur vos tombes_, like Vian's later mock-potboilers, professed to be a French translation of a novel penned by the light-
skinned mulatto, "Vernon Sullivan". Since Boris and Michelle Vian did in fact translate Raymond Chandler's novel *The Lady in the Lake* into French in 1948, the Sullivan mask was fairly easy to maintain, even if Vian did write his instant bestseller in ten quick days. Because of his position in the jazz community, the fantasy of being a light-skinned "Negro" who could "pass" was a fantasy that obviously appealed to him. He was also apparently inspired by an article that he'd read in an American monthly: "Tous les ans 20 000 Noirs transforment en Blancs. C'est ce qui ressort d'un récent article d'Herbert Asbury du 'Colliers'" (Arnaud 152).

In his bogus preface, Vian asserted that Sullivan's preference for the Black half of his heritage filled him with "une espèce de mépris pour les 'bons Noirs'..." and his admiration for "des noirs aussi 'durs' que les Blancs" (*J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* 9). More pertinently, Vian admitted the book's indebtedness to the writings of James M. Cain, as well as to the novels of Henry Miller, a then obscure American author whose more erotic books were sold only in France during the 1940s and '50s. In addition to those cited sources, the last lines of the novel's penultimate chapter are strongly reminiscent of the the dénouement of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, while the book's thematics were largely borrowed from the pages of Richard Wright's most famous fiction, *Native Son*.

Except for its last nine pages, *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* is written in the first person singular. Lee Anderson, the novel's narrator, is, like "Vernon Sullivan", a light-skinned Black who can pass for white; because of the novel's origins, he is also a mask behind a mask. Imbued with a virility equal to his thirst for vengeance—Lee's family has
suffered severely from the ravages of Southern racism—the book’s extremely hardboiled hero buys a bookstore in the small town of Buckton, then proceeds to check out the local scene. His musical, as well as his sexual, gifts soon win him the favours of the local “good-time girls”: “J’aurais toutes les filles les unes après les autres, mais c’était trop simple....” (J’irai cracher sur vos tombes 41.) Instead he focuses his attentions on the upper class Asquith sisters, Jean and Lou, the belles of Prixville (considering the author’s familiarity with Anglo-American slang, this might well be a pun in the vein of Dashiell Hammett’s Poisonville). Every bit as promiscuous as Buckton’s uncultured females, they are even more obnoxiously racist. When Lee—whom Lou erroneously assumes to be white—insists that Duke Ellington is a greater composer than George Gershwin, the Asquith sister typically responds, “—Vous êtes bizarre... Je déteste les Noirs” (J’irai cracher sur vos tombes 118.) To keep his spirit mean and hard, Lee rejects the pacific Christianity which he believes has crippled the will of his “good” brother, Tom: “...je crois qu’on ne peut pas rester lucide et croire en Dieu, et il fallait que je sois lucide” (J’irai cracher sur vos tombes 43). The vengeance which Lee subsequently wreaks on Jean and Lou (a noxious mixture of impregnation, betrayal, rape, torture, sexual mutilation and murder) would seem excessive even by Mickey Spillane’s standards, never mind James M. Cain’s. Such graphic misogyny does as much to keep the book’s (translated) pages off the American bookshelves of the 1990s as did its graphic depictions of Black rage and explicit sexuality in the 1940s. In some ways, the book’s power to shock is greater than that of the more extreme fictions of Georges Bataille and the Marquis de Sade. Seeing the book as a two-
pronged attack on Jean-Paul Sartre and Michelle Vian— in the first instance, by creating a text far more incendiary than *La Putain respectueuse*, in the second by symbolically slaughtering an “unfaithful” woman—in no way softens the reader’s double reaction of indignant outrage and horrified admiration. If there is such a thing as a *roman maudit*, this is definitely it.

To read subsequent Vernon Sullivan volumes is to be struck by the vast gulfs that separates their muted impact from the sulphurous heat of *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*. *Elles ne rendent pas compte*, for instance, is almost as misogynistic in tone, but in this case the text’s anti-female comments are more ironically phrased, reflecting as badly on the (male) heroes “all-American”—and comically ambivalent—sexual attitudes as on the “bad” behaviour of the women in their lives. Even when dressed in drag, these braggarts obliviously assert their macho outlook: “Je risque rien, je dis. Moi je suis hétérosexuel” (*Elles ne rendent pas compte* 79). The book’s hardboiled elements are equally lightly handled, although the novel’s climactic castration scene is strongly reminiscent of Jim Thompson’s more ghoulish endings. As for *Et on tuera tous les affreux*, the *roman noir* elements are now shot through with pulp science fiction and espionage elements: “Prendre un coup sur la tête, ce n’est rien. Etre drogué deux fois de suite dans la même soirée, ce n’est pas trop penible... Mais sortir prendre l’air et se retrouver dans un chambre inconnue, avec une femme, tous les deux dans le costume d’Adam and Eve, ça commence à être un peu fort” (*Et on tuera tous les affreux* 7). It is interesting to note that virtually all white American males in the Vernon Sullivan books are treated as

5 A good colloquial English title for this bagatelle would be *Chicks Don’t Count*. 
sexual incompetents, latent homosexuals, confused puritans, and absurd virgins. Most French writers, at one time or another, have played this ego-building card; even Simone de Beauvoir, surprisingly, once played it in *L'Amérique au jour le jour*. In any event, the Vernon Sullivan series declined rapidly after its explosive debut.

Lynching seemed to be something of a magnet to French writers of the late 1940s. Even Jacques Prévert, that light-hearted poet and doom-laden scenarist, took a few potshots at the phenomenon in his second collection of poems, *Histoires*. “Le Lunch”, for instance, describes the extra-judicial execution of a black “maitre d’hôtel” who was hanged from a bridge for having the effrontery to gaze down “le décolleté/ de la maitresse de maison” (Prévert 53). Although the widespread French mistrust of American females is less pronounced here, it is still implicit. How strange that in the land of Claude Lévi-Strauss—the man who popularized the notion that females were essentially exchange commodities within the framework of male civilization—American women should be made to appear so often as active agents of racism-in-practice, rather than as just a tendentious excuse trumped up by bloody-minded Klansmen with a marked taste for New World pogroms and *ratissages*.. Without arguing that white American women were less racist than their male counterparts at mid-century—an argument for which there is absolutely no evidence—it still seems most unlikely that they were *more* virulent in their expressions of racial autocracy. In any case, their still-binding social limitations generally prevented the translation of anti-Black sentiments into violent action. The “demonization” of white Southern women must therefore be explained in psychological, rather than sociological, terms. Just as the New Yorker
represented the "good" American, so did the Southerner stand in his for his evil doppelganger. This division of American men into two separate types seems to have been doubly applicable in the case of American women.

From the late '40s texts of Sartre, Vian, and Prévert, it would be virtually impossible for the uninformed reader to determine how much pleasure the authors had derived from their encounters in and with the New World. If the land they visited was the land of Cockaigne, the land they described was the land of Mordor. To find a more "binocular" vision of mid-century America, one must turn to the writings of Simone de Beauvoir, the first important Frenchwoman to write about the United States. Describing her New World adventures in three separate books, de Beauvoir was as generous with her praise as she was scathing in her criticism. Collectively, L'Amérique au jour le jour, Les Mandarins, and La Force des choses comprise the richest French chronicle of American life since de Tocqueville's De la démocratie en Amérique. This achievement is recognized even in the United States—always a good sign. In a recent New York Times Book Review article, "The Existential Tourist." Douglas Brinkley was fulsome in his praise of the first and least celebrated of these volumes: "For women and men, who want to experience vicariously Jack Kerouac's open road with less macho romanticism and more existential savvy, 'America Day by Day', hidden from us for nearly 50 years, comes to the reader like a bottle of vintage cognac, asking only to be uncorked" (Brinkley 27). Even de Beauvoir's periodic left-wing polemics fail to faze this unabashed American admirer: "Although she regularly mounts her soapbox to denounce everything from atomic weapons to bad food, she exudes maternal kindness to everyone she
meets, regardless of his or her narrow politics or jingoistic world view” (Brinkley 27). Indeed, it would probably not be pushing the comparison too far to say that de Beauvoir’s books about America are almost as warmly embraced by Americans as Stendhal’s pen portraits of Italy were by Milanese, Romans, and Neapolitans. In postwar terms, she sets the standard by which all other French interpreters of America must be judged.

Ironically, *L'Amérique au jour le jour* was never intended to be a book at all. *Les Temps modernes* printed de Beauvoir’s travel diary of her first trip to the United States, and that was supposed to be that. As she confessed in her autobiography, “Je ne me préméditais pas d’écrire un livre sur l’Amérique, mais je voulais la voir bien; je connaissais sa littérature et, malgré mon accent consternant, je parlais anglais couramment” (*La Force des choses* 137). Her linguistic fluency would give her an advantage that most of her contemporaries lacked; André Breton, for instance, spent the war years in New York without learning to conduct the simplest English conversation. Although stylistically *L'Amérique au jour le jour* is the roughest of de Beauvoir’s three major American travel narratives, it is also the most detailed, exhaustive, and interesting. The author’s American adventures, after all, were only one thread in the broader tapestries of *Les Mandarins* and *La Force des choses*. What’s more, de Beauvoir’s journalistic impressions of the land were often subservient to the “main story,” her intense and emotionally fulfilling affair with American author and radical, Nelson Algren. *L'Amérique au jour le jour* effectively disguises the U.S. writer’s importance. Thus, nothing gets in the way of de Beauvoir’s contemplation of America, circa 1945-1947. As she recalled in her
memoirs, "J'étais prête à aimer l'Amérique; c'était la patrie de capitalisme, oui; mais elle avait contribué à sauver l'Europe du fascisme; la bombe atomique lui assurait le leadership du monde et la dispensait de rien craindre; les livres de certains libéraux américains m'avaient persuadée qu'une grande partie de la nation avait une sereine et claire conscience de ses responsabilités" (La Force des choses 138). Many of those hopes would be dispelled by her first U.S. journey, but de Beauvoir would describe even her growing disillusionment with great gusto and skill.

Characteristically, de Beauvoir clearly felt more than a little guilty about the pleasure she derived from her first U.S. safari. At the very beginning of her first "American" book, she writes, "...j'ai traversé ce grand pays industriel sans visiter ses usines, sans voir ses réalisations techniques, sans entrer en contact avec la classe ouvrière. Je n'ai pas pénétré non plus dans les hautes sphères où s'élaborent la politique et l'économie des U.S.A" (l'Amérique au jour le jour 7). This tone of appeasement does not last long. Soon she is rhapsodizing about Broadway, the Great White Way where "...la lumière en a lavé toutes les souillures; c'est une lumière surnaturelle qui transfigure l'asphalte...." (L'Amérique au jour le jour 13). After years of privation in occupied Paris, de Beauvoir is struck dumb by the giddy opulence of American drug stores and soda fountains. Though slightly more reserved about the value of the U.S. fashion industry (not without justice, she felt that "independent" American women slavishly dressed to please their men), de Beauvoir gorges herself on Hollywood movies and milkshakes, marvelling all the while at the fat luxuriance of the Sunday edition of The New York Times. She visits New York's Spanish library; she smokes
marijuana with Greenwich Village bohemians; she listens to Billy Holliday. Above all, she is impressed by the warmth of the people: “Ce qui rend si agréable la vie quotidienne en Amérique c'est la bonne humeur et cordialité des Américains” (L'Amérique au jour le jour 30.) In these early pages, American “minuses” can seem almost like “pluses”: “L'arrogance des Américains n'est pas volonté de puissance, c'est volonté d'imposer le Bien....” (L'Amérique au jour le jour 71). Again and again she contrasts American ways of behaviour with their French counterparts: “Peut-être les amitiés sont-elles en France plus solides et plus profondes: je n'en sais rien; mais en tous cas chez nous le premier accueil n'a jamais cette chaleur” (L'Amérique au jour le jour 53).

As the preceding statement makes clear, there is a certain defensive element in de Beauvoir's relativistic pronouncements. America might be big and grand, but in some essential way it is and must be spiritually inferior to Europe. Though de Beauvoir dedicated L'Amérique au jour le jour to “Ellen and Richard Wright,” and visited many places in their company, she felt no qualms about writing the following passage: “Hemingway ou Wright, si on les compare à un James Joyce, par example, n'apportent rien--ils racontent des histoires, c'est tout. Si nous aimons ces livres, c'est par une sorte de condescendance....” (L'Amérique au jour le jour 58). American literature, in other words, is useful to European authors in the same way that Benin sculpture was to Pablo Picasso; in each case, a “sophisticated” European derived inspiration from talented but primitive “idiots savants”. This feeling of ownership extends even to that most American of arts, syncopated music: “Le public américain a plus ou moins assassiné le jazz, mais il l'aime encore” (L'Amérique au jour le jour 54.) U.S. intellectuals, de
Beauvoir complained, were totally uninterested in any living writer (such as Sartre or herself): "Ils détestent tous les écrivains vivants parce qu'eux-mêmes ne sont ni écrivains ni vivants...." (L'Amérique au jour le jour 59.) This bias in favour of the intellectually deceased was, apparently, directed inward as well as outward. Much later in her journey, de Beauvoir would meet "...un professeur de l'université qui me parle de Dewey, le seul philosophe connu et reconnu en Amérique" (L'Amérique au jour le jour 280.) Culturally speaking, America is still Europe's junior partner, but has the perversity to refuse to admit it. For dramatic effect, the author sometimes puts such sentiments into American mouths: "Il existe, me disent-ils, une authentique culture américaine, héritière de la culture européenne à laquelle elle se rattache directement...." (L'Amérique au jour le jour 58.) Like so many French cultural critics before and since, she comments on America's indifference to its greatest artists (which is to say, the American artists who are regarded as such by French observers). According to de Beauvoir, one cocktail party intellectual stammers, "'Edgar Poe...je crois bien que c'est un auteur français...."6

Fortunately, not all her comparisons are either invidious or judgmental: many are made in a spirit of genuine inquiry: "Ce n'est pas la coutume ici de travailler dans les endroits où l'on boit: c'est le pays de spécialisation" (L'Amérique au jour le jour 23). Much of the material she transmits is both recondite and chilling. Her passages on drug abuse and youth violence fairly echo with sad prophecy. If anything, she seems even more prescient on the origins of Black anti-Semitism. Even in

---

6 A North American reader cannot help wondering how the academic "rube" in question might have responded if de Beauvoir had mentioned 'Edgar Allan Poe.' This usually shrewd literary tourist seems totally oblivious to that possibility.
1945, she reminds us, Washington, D.C. was America’s most crime-ridden city. In Chicago, a fifteen-year-old boy was convicted of strangling his eleven-year-old friend. De Beauvoir visits the electric chair waiting at the end of the Windy City’s Death Row, emotionlessly explaining, “Quand on exécute un condamné, il y a quatre gardiens qui sont désignés pour presser quatre de ces boutons: un seul donne la mort et personne ne sait lequel” (L’Amérique au jour le jour 368). Petrified by the Black Dahlia murder, the women of Los Angeles “ont peur de se promener après minuit” (L’Amérique au jour le jour 123). This now all too familiar apprehension was apparently then unprecedented. When introduced to the rich and famous, de Beauvoir is anything but overawed by their celebrity. At a Hollywood party, she shakes hands with “la femme de Chaplin qui est, comme d’habitude, enceinte” (L’Amérique au jour le jour 300). Such dry wit is quite common in this book by a writer who is often accused of being totally humourless. By the same token, de Beauvoir’s impatience with bien pensant thinking is as sharp as it is merciless: “Chez les blancs ‘éclairé’ il y a à New York un snobisme de la musique et de la litterature noire” (L’Amérique au jour le jour 320). The author’s artistic reactions are generally insightful: “Ce que j’ai senti souvent en écoutant leur jazz, en parlant avec eux, c’est que le temps même dans lequel ils vivent est abstrait” (L’Amérique au jour le jour 385). In the same way, her brief film reviews are generally sound. After viewing Mr. Verdoux, for instance, de Beauvoir said of its director “...on a l’impression qu’il a été intimidé malgré lui par son audace” (L’Amérique au jour le jour 271)

---

7 De Beauvoir’s substitution of “Mr” for “M” in the title of Charlie Chaplin’s film is symptomatic of what has always been the most unintentionally funny aspect of
As she toured America, de Beauvoir brought with her the intellectual baggage of previous French tourists. Following in Georges Duhamel’s footsteps, she visited the stinking stockyards of Chicago, even as she dismissed as bogus the haughty académician’s claim that one couldn’t see the landscapes of America on account of all the billboards. De Beauvoir’s fascination with drugstores, soda fountains, and other prototypical “fast food” outlets had almost certainly been primed by Céline’s earlier celebration of New York’s automat.8 In New Orleans, like so many Parisian pilgrims before her, de Beauvoir listened to a local who spoke “...la français que la Louisiane a hérité du XVIIIe siècle” (L’Amérique au jour le jour 223). A trip to Niagara Falls invokes the shade of Atala’s creator: “Assurément, au temps de Chateaubriand, avant que fussent bâties les usines et les pavillons touristiques, ce paysage devait être saissant” (L’Amérique au jour le jour 93). Nearby, she found a body of water that was “fantastic” in beauty: “Le lac est

---

8 At the time she was writing, Celine was in exile, facing a death sentence in his native France for intellectual collaboration with the enemy. Of all living French writers, Celine was unquestionably the one she could least afford to cite favourably.
beau comme un paysage de Jules Verne....” (L'Amérique au jour le jour 93).9

When not following in the footsteps of her illustrious predecessors, de Beauvoir preferred to go where Americans feared to tread. In this way, she visited Harlem, entirely on her own, despite her friends' entreaties not to. Here, she clearly felt, was the New World's New World. Of white America's ghetto fears, she wrote: "Qu'un bourgeois trop riche ait peur s'il aventure dans les faubourgs ou l'on à faim, c'est naturel [d'avoir peur]. Il se promène dans un univers qui refuse le sien et qui un jour en triomphera. Mais Harlem est une société complète, avec ses bourgeois et ses prolétaires, ses riches et ses pauvres qui ne sont pas ligués dans un action révolutionnaire, qui souhaitent s'intégrer à l'Amérique et non le détruire" (L'Amérique au jour le jour 40). De Beauvoir's Harlem is remarkably similarly to the urban playground of "Gravedigger" Jones and "Coffin Ed" Johnson, the fictional policemen created by Black expatriate (he lived in France for many years, before permanently settling in Spain) author Chester Himes. The Harlem that both of them described now exists no more than does the following swatch of prosperity-altered America: "Le Nevada est le pays le plus désert, le moins peuplé et le plus pauvre des U.S.A." (L'Amérique au jour le jour 153).

L'Amérique au jour le jour is exceedingly rich in such observations. De Beauvoir provides a penetrating account of the contemporary plight of U.S. screenwriters—a plight which was subsequently replaced by even worse perils. She makes veiled allusions

---

9 By the last decades of the 20th century, America will seem increasingly "science fictional" to French intellectuals such as Jean Baudrillard. More about this anon.
to cultural figures who might well be Gore Vidal, Dwight Macdonald and George Stevens. She explains why Jewish neighbourhoods can flourish in New York but not in Chicago, the Illinois city where competing Irish and Polish proletarian clans attack each other with an imperishable hate. She mentions the quotidian horrors of Jim Crow laws, without dwelling unduly on lynching, this detestable social system’s most extreme expression. She charts the first steps taken by American politicians during the early stages of the Cold War, and feels the cold breath of McCarthyism breathing down her neck. She speaks of Philip Wylie and the cult of “Momism,” of an up-and-coming Black preachers named “le rev. A. Clayton Powell” (L’Amérique le jour le jour 62), and of a notably non-monolithic culture: “Il y a un régionalisme intellectuel, en Amérique; Henri [sic] Miller n’a pas beaucoup d’importance à New York, mais sur cette côte ouest où il habite on le tient pour un génie” (L’Amérique le jour le jour 147). When de Beauvoir loves a place, she’s not afraid to let you know it: “Nulle part la poésie du passé américain que dans les rues du vieux Boston....” Even her occasional “bloopers” are more amusing than annoying. It seems most unlikely, for instance, that she saw “une église de XIe siècle” in Texas since the European colonization of the United States did not begin until le seizième siècle. (L’Amérique au jour le jour 212).

Still, despite her guiding sympathy for America, and regardless of the new intellectual territory which she staked out, Simone de Beauvoir fits seamlessly into the tradition of French literary tourism. Like de Tocqueville, de Beauvoir lamented the lack of true individuality in the United States: “En Amérique, l’individu n’est rien. Il fait l’objet d’un culte abstrait....” (L’Amérique au jour le jour 100.) Her feminist views in
no way incline her towards a sympathetic view of American womanhood. She scorned what she saw as the coed’s cult of frivolity, and clearly disapproved of the fact that 50% of female university students were still virgins: “Les college-girls extérieurement si faciles ont évidemment de fortes défenses intérieures” (L'Amérique au jour le jour 334.) Putting her own unique spin on the standard French male critique of Yankee puritanism, de Beauvoir attributed this unfortunate state of affairs to non-stop war between the sexes: “Un des faits qui m’a été tout de suite sensible en Amérique, c’est qu’hommes et femmes ne s’aiment pas” (L’Amérique au jour le jour 333). She attributed the ubiquity of alcohol in America—a criticism exactly opposite to the one made by Georges Duhamel 20 years earlier—to America’s need to break through the puritan straightjacket of anti-sexuality and hatred of the body. Like Claude Lévi-Strauss, de Beauvoir’s European sensibility was overwhelmed by the very size of New World towns: “Les villes d’Amérique sont trop grandes; à la nuit leur dimensions se multiplient, elles deviennent les jungle où il est facile de s’égarer” (L’Amérique au jour le jour 144). It would be all too easy to imagine Duhamel or Céline sneering at “les toilettes [qui] m’ont étonné par leur caractère violemment féminin, presque sexuel” (L’Amérique au jour le jour 330).

Like both her predecessors and her successors, the author initially “hung out” mainly with fellow French people in America. She was no way clannish, though. In particular, she despised the vulgar anti-Americanism of the local Pétainists, disgraced political exiles who

---

10 Perhaps the strangest plank in the French cultural superiority package is the rather peculiar notion that primitive sanitation in some way bestows seriousness of purpose on a non-flushing nation.
insisted that "cette attitude est la seule possible pour un Français installé dans ce pays" (L'Amérique au jour le jour 24). Shortly after expressing this sentiment, however, de Beauvoir comes up with a disdainful statement that must have made her Pétainist "opponents" turn green with envy: "Si même les intellectuels dits de gauche sont si fiers des boîtes de lait condensé que leur gouvernement nous dispense, comment s'étonner de l'arrogance de la presse capitaliste... à l'égard de la France..." (L'Amérique le jour le jour 48). She is as appalled by Uncle Sam's lack of interest in France's universal culture as was that staunch conservative humanist, Georges Duhamel: "Le pire est que beaucoup de Français sont complices de cette attitude; nos capitalistes font une active propagande anti-française en Amérique; peut-être est-ce leur servilité qui autorise certains Américains à parler de la France à une Française avec ce ton accusateur: le ton des officiers allemands quand ils disaient en occupant un village: 'Voilà où nous ont conduits vos politiciens et vos Juifs" (L'Amérique au jour le jour 281.)

Here as elsewhere, she expresses the underlying belief common to so many French intellectuals that the idea of France is somehow separate from its political misdemeanors, while the idea of America is not. Though de Beauvoir would later play a major role in the French intellectual resistance to the War in Algeria, in America she feels no obligation to justify France's postwar crimes in Indochina and Madagascar, never mind the still-festering wound of Vichy. In the City of Light, she can think of no analogous emblematic simile for U.S. ghettos: "Fiché au coeur de New York, Harlem pèse sur la bonne conscience des blancs comme le péché original sur celle d'un chrétien" (L'Amérique au jour le jour 40). When de Beauvoir learns that the U.S. 
State Department has forbidden the overseas distribution of The Oxbow Incident because said western dealt with the subject of lynching, de Beauvoir, like any one of her noose-haunted contemporaries, eagerly reports this fact as if contained some almost cabbalistic secret. If de Beauvoir understands why so many American leftists abandoned Stalin in 1936, she clearly still regards this defection as a form of naivete at best, and possibly of mauvais foi. Like an American tourist in Asia, she is quite happy to compare an unfamiliar place to a familiar one: “[Rockport est] St. Tropez moins coloré....” (L’Amérique au jour le jour 304.) Rapidly wearying of her trans-Atlantic playground, de Beauvoir goes to see Roberto Rossellini’s neorealist film, Roma: città aperta primarily “[pour] le plaisir de voir un film qui ne fût pas américain” (L’Amérique au jour le jour 335). Her disaffection is not total, but it will prove to be permanent: “Aimer l’Amérique, ne pas l’aimer: ces mots n’ont pas de sens. Elle est un champ de bataille....” (L’Amérique au jour le jour 389). De Beauvoir decides to return to her patrie: “Il va falloir réapprendre la France et rentrer dans ma peau” (L’Amérique au jour le jour 389.) If America is France’s “Other”, it is an Other that can make Insiders seem Other to themselves, it would seem. According to de Beauvoir, only in France can a French citizen fully occupy his or her mental skin.

With the exception of her affair with Nelson Algren, virtually everything de Beauvoir had to say about America was said in L’Amérique au jour le jour. Some of her subsequent re-imaginings of the aforesaid incidents did sometimes, however, provide a certain balance to the more lopsided aspects of her original text. In Les Mandarins, for instance, de Beauvoir’s grasp of American politics—or,
rather, of the perception of American politics shared by most Americans—had grown by leaps and bounds. While she is still disappointed by the capitalist super-power's world view, she is no longer surprised by it, as one can tell from the following speech by one of the novel's few major American characters: "—Je ne comprends pas ce préjugé contre l'Amérique, dit Bennet.... Il faut être communiste pour ne voir en elle que le bastion du capitalisme: c'est aussi un grand pays ouvrier; et c'est le pays du progrès, de la prosperité, de l'avenir" (Les Mandarins 383). Bennet's defensiveness, of course, is almost identical to de Beauvoir's own in L'Amérique au jour le jour, albeit with the political polarities reversed. It seems highly unlikely that the author could have written this speech without coming to terms with her immediate post-war insecurities. This softening of attitude should not, however, be confused with a weakening of ideological rigour, as the following complaint makes clear: "—Tous les intellectuels américains plaident l'impuissance, dis-je; c'est ça qui paraît un curieux complexe. Vous n'aurez pas le droit de vous indigner le jour où l'Amérique sera complètement fascisée et ou elle déclenchera la guerre" (Les Mandarins 534). As the author pointed out in her memoirs, the Korean war had in fact increased her hostility to U.S. foreign policy, and possibly to the United States tout court: "Depuis la guerre de Corée, mon aversion pour l'Amérique n'avait pas diminuée" (La Force des choses 395).

Towards the end of her first travel book, the author somewhat belatedly conceded, "Nous avons d'autres façons que les Américains d'être malheureux, d'être inauthentiques, voilà tout: les jugements que j'ai portés sur eux au cours de ce voyage ne s'accompagnaient d'aucun sentiment de supériorité" (L'Amérique au jour le jour 389). As we have
just seen, this claim is more than a little questionable. Its good faith, though, is not. After the Second World War, French intellectuals would try to extend their imaginations to the point where they could apprehend America the way it really was, instead of just re-confirming inherited hopes and fears. Much of the impetus for this came from Claude Lévi-Strauss and the new science of structuralism. For this reason, it probably behooves us to say a few words about the great anthropologist’s first impressions of America.

Before “discovering” America in the early 1940s, Lévi-Strauss had “discovered” Brazil six years before. Thanks to the exigencies of the Second World War, his first U.S. port of call was not New York but Puerto Rico. Thus, his second American encounter, like his first, took place in a “Latin” corner of the New World. This chance circumstance was to permanently colour his perception of cultural difference, distance and similarity: “Le hasard des voyages offre souvent de telles ambiguïtés. D’avoir passé à Porto-Rico mes premières semaines sur le sol des Etats-Unis me fera, dorénavant, retrouver l’Amérique en Espagne. Comme aussi pas mal d’années plus tard, d’avoir visité ma première université anglaise sur le campus aux édifices néogothiques de Dacca, dans le Bengale oriental, m’incite maintenant à considerer Oxford comme une Inde qui a réussi à controler la boue, la moisson et les débordements de la végétation” (Lévi-Strauss 36). This extremely perceptive tourist was singularly impressed by the artificial “antiquity” of America: “En visitant New York ou Chicago en 1941, en arrivant à Sao Paulo en 1935, ce n’est donc pas la nouveauté qui m’a d’abord étonné.
mais la précocité des ravages des temps”¹¹ (Lévi-Strauss 107). What most overwhelmed the anthropologist about the New World, however, was the very un-European vastness of the place. As he wrote in his most famous book, *Tristes tropiques*, “...je l’ai ressentie devant la côte et sur les plateaux du Brésil central dans les Andes boliviennes et dans les Rocheuses du Colorado, dans les faubourgs de Rio, la banlieue de Chicago et les rues de New York” (Lévi-Strauss 86). To feel at home in this new environment, the exiled Frenchmen felt the need to re-calibrate his sense of scale and space: “...sans doute, objectivement, New York est une ville, mais le spectacle qu’elle propose à la sensibilité européenne est d’un autre ordre de grandeur: celui de nos propres paysages; alors que les paysages américaines nous entraîneraient eux-mêmes dans un système encore plus vaste et pour quoi nous ne possédons pas d’équivalent” (Lévi-Strauss 86.)

By trying to explain French discomfort in the Americas in geographical, rather than sociological, terms, Lévi-Strauss hopes to demystify the problem. His matter-of-fact attitude is far removed from Jean-Philippe Mathy’s more sociological approach to the phenomenon. For him, the dilemma is indisolubly linked to the fall of the *ancien régime*: “The advent of a market society was the undoing of the traditional intelligentsia” (Mathy 7). Since America is the market society *par excellence*, by extension it became the devil incarnate. Old Europe’s new Carthage, its demonized “Other”. In this new vacuum, the French felt threatened “in their role as the self-proclaimed leaders of a universal republic of letters...,” a position to which the Gauls first

¹¹ Obviously, Lévi-Strauss is speaking exclusively here of post-European construction: the ruins of pre-Colombian America are amongst the oldest on the planet.
appointed themselves, Mathy believes, in 1558 (Mathy 35). Even now, this is a role which has not been entirely abandoned. In *La défaite de la pensée*—"new philosopher" Alain Finkielkraut's 1987 *cri de coeur* on behalf of this long-vanished "universal" culture—the ideological villains of the piece might be Herder and de Maistre, and their political inheritors ignorant cultural relativists and undemocratic Third World regimes, but "born again" barbarism's principal *economic* beneficiaries—working almost entirely offstage, it must be admitted—would appear to speak with an American accent. A propos of Lévi-Strauss's cultural relativism, Finkielkraut complains, "Le roi est nu: nous autres, Européens de la seconde moitié du XXe siècle, nous ne somme pas la civilisation mais une culture particulière, une variété de l'humain fugitive et périssable" (Finkielkraut 87). Any temptation to take the preceding statement at face value is immediately dispelled by the following: "Dans le procès intenté à la barbarie, les Lumières siègent désormais au banc des accusés, et non plus à la place que leur réservaient tout naturellement Léon Blum ou Clement Atlee: celle du procureur" (Finkielkraut 81). To invert Yeats's famous words, the best lack all conviction, while the worst are filled with passionate intensity. Finkielkraut's fear of New World/Third World barbarism will, by now, sound remarkably familiar to readers of this chapter: "L'identité culturelle a deux bêtes noires: l'individualisme et le cosmopolitanisme" (Finkielkraut 105). The indignant philosopher never condemns America by name; by the same token, he never invites it to share the dock with the "individualistic, cosmopolitan" nations of Europe, the intellectual confederacy over which France still apparently presides. This moral supremacy, it would seem, resides in that nation's unique refusal to
indulge in cultural chauvinism of any kind: “Au siècle des nationalismes, la France—ce fut son mérite et son originalité—refusa l’enracinement de l’esprit” (Finkielkraut 138). The thought that French “universalism” is in fact a particularly strident and arrogant form of cultural nationalism does not seem to have occurred to him. Only in America, and possibly, at times, in England, does one find equivalent intellectual hubris.

A number of French writers, of course, “absorbed” America in a much quieter, more matter-of-fact manner. Marguerite Yourcenar spent much of her life in the state of Maine, but the experience of her adoptive homeland was not reflected in her writing. While one finds much material about Japan and ancient Greece in the Pléiade edition of her complete works, Yourcenar’s U.S. references are more or less restricted to two appreciations of Anne Lindbergh’s undervalued talent and the announcement that “un petit groupe d’amateurs éclairés” had mounted the first-ever Poussin exhibition in New York (Yourcenar 468). Maine was to her what the Greek islands are to so many literary expatriates: a place to digest the events of the past and write about things that have little to do with the immediate present. Of important French writers, only André Breton—who occupied war-time New York as if it were a quarter of Paris filled with an unusually large number of anglophone tourists—and Paul Claudel—the conservative Catholic playwright who was France’s ambassador to Washington in the 1920s—were less preoccupied with the meaning of the New World than she.12

12 While it is true that she was somewhat more garrulous on the subject of America in her letters to her friends, even there Yourcenar’s attitudes towards the New World were more than a little ambivalent, both before and after she accepted U.S. citizenship in 1947. Her first description of the U.S. in her published correspondence is typically Eurocentric: “J’aurais aimé vous parler de l’Amérique...il faut pourtant vous dire que l’été indien est admirable, et que le paysage, en automne, arbore la livrée de Peau-Rouge, l’épiderme cuivre d’Atala”
Yourcenar's overwhelming interest in times past and places distant most likely accounts for the veil of silence she drew across her U.S. sojourn. She was, in any case, something of a recluse. No such charge could be levelled against Saint-John Perse, however. A high ranking French diplomat and Free French hero who was stripped of his citizenship by the Vichy government in 1940, Marie-René Alexis Saint-Leger Leger (the poet/ambassador's real name) corresponded regularly with Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt, worked for Archibald MacLeish at the U.S. Library of Congress, was best friends...
with the attorney-general of the United States, lived in various parts of the country between 1940 and 1950, was inspired to write much of his best poetry during this long period of exile, and was inducted into the National Institute of Arts and Letters at the very end of his protracted and highly productive stay. The deliberate obscurity of his work—rhythmic, repetitive prose poetry loaded with oblique invocations to amorphous deities and even vaguer natural forces—more-or-less precluded the presence of specific place names and characters in *Exil*, *Neiges*, and *Vents*. There is nothing unusual in that. What is textually far more surprising is the lack of concrete detail that one finds in his correspondence, speeches and short articles. In communication with an American critic, he wrote, "...J'aime et j'admire la littérature américaine dans son évolution proprement américaine...."—and then neglects to provide a single example of a work or writer of whom he approves (Oeuvres complètes 555.) In homage to T.S. Eliot—the Anglo-American poet who had assured Leger's warm U.S. reception with the aid of an exquisitely rendered translation of his best-known work, *Anabase*—Saint-John Perse translated the first few lines of *The Hollow Men* into French, but readers will look in vain for a concrete appreciation of this or any other Eliot poem. To be fair, in one letter the author/diplomat did come close to praising a 1944 Allen Tate collection of verse for specific reasons, but his letter to e.e. cummings is mainly polite hot air. Its opening phrase is typical: "De vous, poète né et très princier...." (Oeuvres complètes 1041). Leger was always willing to encrust his prose with bombastic "antiquity". His "Hommage à Jacqueline Kennedy" began as follows: "Quand les Furies du drame antique font irruption sur la scène moderne, cherchant encore la mesure de l'être humain à la
limite de l’humain, il semble qu’elles veuillent épargner, pour la mieux supplicier, une victime d’élite entres toutes choisie, et comme prise en témoignage, pour répondre de la force humaine du plus atroce de l’épreuve” (Oeuvres complètes 535 - 536). Seemingly, this poet-diplomat liked everything about the United States except its unfortunate adhesion to the real world.

Belgian-born novelist Georges Simenon lived in the U.S. for a decade, and did indeed situate a number of his books in his new place of residence. Inspector Maigret’s first impressions of the “Big Apple” were somewhat depressing, as befits a noirish text: “Il pleuvait. On roulait dans un quartier sale où les maisons étaient laides à en donner la nausée. Etait-ce cela, New York” (Tout Simenon 545). Maigret is annoyed by America’s irritating lack of apartment house concierges and telephones with double ear-pieces. Conversely, he is delighted by the capacity of American bars and the miracle of room service. Rather intriguingly, at this time (circa 1947) the inspector’s U.S. hosts believe that his French nationality means the visiting flic must hate whiskey, an assumption which leads one to suspect that this particular beverage had not yet caught on in Paris. As always, Simenon’s alter ego is very observant. He enters New York neighbourhoods that are cities unto themselves, “...avec [des] maisons pas plus haut qu’à Bordeaux ou à Dijon....” (Tout Simenon 597). Like Céline, Maigret’s creator would discover “...la Cinquiéme Avenue et ses magasins de luxe aux vitrines desquels il s’arrêta” (Tout Simenon 570.) Like Simone de Beauvoir, François Combe, the displaced French actor hero of another Simenon novel, Trois chambres à Manhattan, would be struck by “...les lumières de Broadway, avec de la foule noire qui coulait sur les trottoirs” (Tout
Simenon 203). Simenon was as susceptible to the exotic charm of the American Southwest as anyone: “Tucson est la plus charmante caricature de l’image que tous les Européens se font de la ‘conquête de l’Ouest’: le désert, les villages fantôme, l’influence mexique si proche, le spectre des missions espagnoles et celui de Geronimo... Tout y est. Dans la vieille ville reconstituée on ne serait pas étonné d’assister à l’attaque d’une diligence” (Assouline 549 - 550). Although a man of the right who had fled France to escape the taint of being considered one of the Nazis’ intellectual collaborators, even Simenon was eventually driven from the shores of his once adored America by the rise of McCarthyism. As his principal biographer put it, “Ce torrent de boue, de haine et d’injustice achève de dissiper ses dernières illusions sur une démocratie qu’il avait quelque peu idéalisée” (Assouline 579).

In the early 1940s, of course, the moral question seemed much simpler: it was quite possible for anti-Nazi French refugees to distractedly approve of the United States without in any way being interested in the country itself. This state of mind certainly applied to André Breton’s Surrealist circle, which tended to treat New York like a Gallic outpost on Mars. It was also true of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the aviator/novelist who was, at that time, one of the most admired authors in the world. Virtually all of Saint-Exupéry’s polemical writings during the years 1941 - 1944 were devoted to the evils of Nazism, the need for occupied Frenchmen to overcome their political differences, the moral necessity of fighting for Free France without psychologically succumbing to General de Gaulle’s self-aggrandizing caudillismo, and—a very distant fourth priority—America’s moral responsibility to rescue the world from an evil political system that was inherently inimical to its own. While
living in disagreeable safety in America, the author repeatedly expressed his solidarity with those of his fellow countrymen who, regardless of their political loyalties, had actually fought for France in 1940, as opposed to those who—biens pensants all, of whom his particular bête noire was the dictatorial "pope" of Surrealism—merely whinged from comfortable armchairs. Even while travelling on a troopship to North Africa with the Allied invasion fleet, Saint-Exupéry tended to see America as a means, not an end: "Les cinquante mille soldats de mon convoi partaient en guerre pour sauver, non le citoyen des Etats-Unis, mais l'Homme lui-même, le respect de l'Homme, la liberté de l'Homme, la grandeur de l'Homme" (Saint-Exupéry 398).

These "universal" virtues were not, of course, universal at all; they were, rather, the humanistic patrimony of 1789.

Within the overall framework of Franco-American intellectual relations, Jacques Maritain is one of the more difficult individuals to situate. An orthodox Catholic philospher, Maritain was neither a backward-looking reactionary like Paul Claudel, a machine-hating anti-modernist like Georges Bernanos, a Christian/Marxist hybrid like Simone Weill, nor a left-leaning believer like François Mauriac. A regular visitor to the United States, in the mid-1950s Maritain wrote a book on his impressions of the country in his hosts' language, English. Prior to this, however, he had often participated in cultural exchanges between his two favourite countries, using radio broadcasts and interviews as his preferred forum. During the Second World War, he was a propagandist for the Free French cause, a propagandist who never tired of reminding his fellow Frenchmen of the ties of amity that bound them to America: "Dans ce message je vous dire que le peuple de France
tient toujours une place privilégiée dans le coeur du peuple américain....” (Oeuvres complètes, Vol. VIII 387). Of all French interpreters of America, he was perhaps the one most loath to over-generalize. In a pre-war interview, he explained, “Je ne suis pas de l’école de M. Claude Farrière, auquel les Etudes reprochaient récemment d’avoir jugé des choses de Chine, après avoir passé quelques jours seulement dans le pays” (Oeuvres complètes, Vol. VII 1083). In Réflexions sur l’Amérique, Maritain began the book by assuring his readers that in this study “...on ne trouvera...aucune allusion à la politique...si je devais jamais écrire sur ce sujet, et plus particulièrement sur la politique internationale, j’aurais bien des choses à dire, et pas toujours flatteuse même pour les pays que j’aime le plus” (Oeuvres complètes, Vol. X 768). As you have no doubt already guessed, those two countries were America and France. Most of what Maritain has to say about the U.S. is extremely flattering to the national amour propre; Southern American racism being somewhat soft-pedaled, even though it’s not entirely ignored. In general, Maritain approves of American materialism and the country’s preference for the future over the past. His few criticisms sound more like gently chiding Jansenism than blistering jeremiads; basically, he accuses Americans of being too good to be true. The following statement is fairly typical of this line of thought: “Au premier coup d’oeil il semblerait même que l’Amérique croit à la manière de Jean-Jacques Rousseau en la bonté de la Nature, en la bonté naturelle de l’Homme” (Oeuvres complètes, Vol. X 867). Clearly, such a put-down carries about as much sting as one of Sophie Portnoy’s autocritiques. While generally avoiding trans-cultural specifics, Maritain professed to believe in “...une mystérieuse affinité, une singuliè
In this respect, at least, Maritain's socio-cultural allegiances seem less anomalous. Politically, he is an Atlanticist, one of those right-of-centre French intellectuals who opposed both the French Communist Party and the existentialists in their undisguised preference for the American side of the Cold War. Both Gaullist and non-Gaullist, occasionally even socialist, the Atlanticists were a not insignificant factor in the intellectual life of post-war France.

The most prominent member of this faction was unquestionably Raymond Aron. In U.S. journals of the 1970s and '80s, it was quite common to see Aron portrayed as the “positive” (pro-American) champion of democracy whose presence effectively blocked the negative (pro-Communist) policies of Jean-Paul Sartre. While this Manichean duality theoretically imbued the hard French left with a political power it never in fact enjoyed, on the mythological level it did fill a certain void. Sartre could be dismissed as all theory and no sense; Aron, on the other hand, was as unimaginatively pragmatic as Benjamin Franklin himself. No State Department official could read the following passage and not preen: “La Révolution américaine fonda la République et les libertés, la Révolution française déchaîna un quart de siècle de guerres et laissa en héritage une nation déchirée. Les Jacobins donnèrent des leçons aux Bolcheviks” (Plaidoyer pour l'Europe décadente 354.) The rationale for Plaidoyer can found in the introduction to Aron's study of post-war U.S. foreign policy: “Je déteste la tyrannie stalinienne imposé à cent millions d'Européens au lendemain de la guerre menée au nom de la libération des peuples” (République
When one reads both statements together, the gist of Aron's pro-Americanism becomes clear. The author wants to live in a prosperous, non-Communist Europe; in order to do so, the United States must appear strong and its moral authority more valid than that of its opponent. In the post-war world, no Frenchmen, with the possible exception of hardcore Gaullists, seriously believed that France was still a great power that could independently determine its own political destiny. To survive, one had to choose between champions. Sartre chose Russia, Aron the United States. In both cases these alliances were made primarily out of interest in the future of Europe and the cultural survival of France. Within this mindset, the Soviet Union was no more real than the U.S.A.; both were powerful abstractions that provided the background for the more serious business of foreground life. Each one was neither entirely real nor entirely fictitious.

One of the last traditional French travellers to the New World was Michel Butor. Like Saint-John Perse, Butor wrote about the U.S. mainly in verse, although his verse was as concrete as the older poet's was amorphous. Mobile, for instance, is a sprawling 500-page prose poem that describes a day in the life of 50 states. Catalogues of ethnic publications printed in small rural towns lie cheek-by-jowl beside historical vignettes of doomed Indian messiahs and runaway slaves. As in Leger's work, repetition is important, but in this case it is used to represent the homogenization of America, a homogenization that uneasily co-exists with the nation's heterogeneity. Dedicated to the memory of Jackson Pollock, abstract impressionism's best-known action painter, Mobile can be read as a kind of splintered prism, a drunken, kaleidoscopic image of a nation in perpetual motion. In structure, the
work bears some resemblance to Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, even though its high-speed, sometimes deliberately superficial lines are light-years removed from Pound's reference-rich verse. Announcements of the author's own presence in America are few and often funny, as when, in a catalogue section devoted to local birds, he refers to "Butors américains...." (*Mobile* 373). Only rarely does the verse turn lyrical: "La mer, les flammes des raffineries derrière nous, les damiers lumineux des grands hôtels, les signaux des avions dans le ciel, le bruit du vent dans les derricks, oublie ta blancheur dans la nuit" (*Mobile* 468). More commonly, it involves details chasing details chasing details. The historical passages relating to Native and African-Americans, unsurprisingly, are replete with de Tocqueville's doomed, fatalistic romanticism.

In the same "traditional" vein, Butor opened *6 810 000 litres d'eau par seconde* with quotes from Chateaubriand to explain the eight tones of voice which would be employed in this "étude stéréophonique" of Niagara Falls. Various pairs of newlyweds say their piece as the honeymoon town passes through the four seasons of the year. "Quentin," a visiting professor of French at the University of Buffalo and almost certainly the author's alter ego, laments his sexual solitude in such a place: "Et moi qui suis loin de ma femme vivante, séparé d'elle par toute l'épaisseur de l'Atlantique" (*6 810 000 litres d'eau par seconde* 273). Various pairs of Black gardeners function as a kind of Greek chorus throughout the work. Butor gives Chateaubriand the book's last word, reproducing the title and sub-title of the early nineteenth-century author's best-known work: "Atala, ou les amours de deux sauvages dans le désert" (*6 810 000 litres d'eau par seconde* 281).
l'épaisseur de l'Atlantique" (6 810 000 litres d'eau par seconde 273).

Various pairs of Black gardeners function as a kind of Greek chorus throughout the work. Butor gives Chateaubriand the book's last word, reproducing the title and sub-title of the early nineteenth-century author's best-known work: "Atala, ou les amours de deux sauvages dans le désert" (6 810 000 litres d'eau par seconde 281).

Butor is a transitional figure in the history of French travellers in America. While Philippe Djian, Philippe Labro, Philippe Sollers, Julia Kristeva, Pascal Quignard, Jean Baudrillard, and many other French writers will continue to regale French readers with their adventures, either in America or among Americans, their grounding will be somewhat different. For the "children of Marx and Coca Cola," France and America will no longer be the mutually exclusive entities they once seemed to be. With Euro Disney encroaching on the Eiffel Tower, McDonalds fast-food outlets putting centuries-old bistrots out of business virtually by the minute, and airwaves and movie screens completely dominated by U.S. (sub) cultural product, France is no longer the reassuring fortress to which Georges Duhamel and Simone de Beauvoir so gratefully retreated. By the same token, America, now fighting for economic supremacy against Japan, Southeast Asia's "young tigers," and an economically bullish European Economic Community, is no longer the island of isolation it once was.

In Chapter Four we will continue this discussion within a radically changed historical context, a time when the largest corporations are in many ways more powerful than long-established nation states. It is now painfully obvious that William Gibson's dystopian near-future of powerful companies "in cahoots" with organized crime while ordinary
citizens struggle to survive in continental power blocs with no obvious political authority no longer belongs to the realm of science fiction. Like cyberspace and cybercrime, these are quotidian realities which will have an incalculable impact on the first half of the twenty-first century.

For our descendants, the notion of national travellers visiting foreign places in search of exotic experience might well seem as impossibly quaint as a visit to the beach without recourse to powerful sunblocks. To find anything unique might appear as improbable as discovering Dr. Livingstone in the jungle. By, say, the year 2050, no twist of the Amazon river might be more than fifty miles away from the nearest home entertainment centre, while the doors of even the most austere temples, churches, pagodas, and minarets might well be overshadowed by the ubiquitous golden arch.

At some point within the next hundred years, presumably, the foreseeable future which I have described will be radically changed by any number of unforeseen natural catastrophes, economic upsets, and social revolutions. How this metamorphosis will occur, however, and whether it will be for the better or the worse, is still, at the time of this writing, anyone's guess.

Thus far, we have restricted our investigation primarily to the upper end of Franco-American travel literature; in Chapter Two, we will both broaden and lower our sights, zeroing in on the history of crime fiction in France, America, and—for the first time—Italy. Within the context of this study, France and the U.S. should be thought of as past and present phases of global cultural power. Italy, for a variety of reasons, provides an interesting contrast to these poles. As "creative" as America and France, Italy has failed to exercise cultural hegemony over
the world since the Fall of the Roman Empire, even though it has probably contributed more to the arts than any other nation. Open to, according to some critics, an alarming degree of outside influence, it is also intensely insular, cosmopolitan and provincial at the same time. Because its "greatness" and "weakness" are so hopelessly intertwined, Italy makes the ideal sounding board for two more resilient powers who, nonetheless, fear that they, too, might "break".

The relationship ship of social history to the creation of distinct crime genres will also be considered in some detail. The detective stories of an economically conservative, socially egalitarian society founded on the strength of a loosely-commanded, arms-beari ng militia are sure to differ from those of an equally revolutionary, but more established polity founded on the bones of an ancient monarchy, while the police fictions of both are sure to seem alien to the lives of a people whose immersion in local culture is immense, but whose experience of a viable, universally-recognized political authority is extremely limited.

If the comparisons between these contrasting cultures are not always simple, obvious or linear, this is all to the good. Cultural cross-pollination has become the defining mode of late twentieth century life, after all, and, like every "biological" process, it is somewhat messy. For this reason, the shapes of chapters two and four (the latter section expanding the parameters of this sociocultural dialogue still further, with its analysis of Québécois self-perceptions in regard to the province's unhappy role as an outpost of both Old and New World empires in a troubled present where micro-nationalisms wax wildly while macro-nationalisms wilt and wane) must be "romantic", while chapters one and three can afford to be "classical". Only in this way can
we hope to achieve a three-dimensional view of what goes, is going, or has already gone.
Determining dates of cinematic origin is almost as difficult as pinpointing precise moments of evolutionary change in the history of the world. As Tag Gallagher wrote of the cowboy movie in his truculent essay, "Shoot-Out at the Genre Corral: Problems in the 'Evolution' of the Western", the linear progression of form championed by Thomas Schatz and other genre critics is largely illusory. Between 1909 and 1915, Gallagher sneered, "there were probably more westerns released each month than during the entire decade of the 1930s" (Grant 205). Most of these movies are now lost, and film historians are generally unfamiliar with the few that remain. Thus, they are ignorant of the period fact that, by the time of the First World War, "clichés [were] already an issue" (Grant 206).

As it was with the western, so it is with the detective story. While D.W. Griffith's The Musketeers of Pig Alley (1912) is sometimes described as the world's first true gangster movie, it almost certainly benefitted from the innovations previously pioneered by numerous now-forgotten genre pieces. Motion picture "firsts" generally refer to the successful launch dates of subsequently imitated conventions and ideas, concepts which would typically have been worked out long before their formal induction by the film industry as a whole. While one can, with some assurance, enumerate the inventors of technological cinema, it is far more difficult to identify the medium's ideological and aesthetic milestones. What
this means, essentially, is that cinematic history, like all history, is written not just by but for the “victors” (a word which, in early filmmaking idiom, is often synonymous with “survivors”).

This is something readers should keep in mind while processing these reflections on the relationship between the American crime story and its French and Italian equivalents. Attempts to nail down precise turning points in the history of film noir and poetic realism, of the polar and the mid-Atlantic gangster movie, are foredoomed to failure by the incomplete archives and commercially-driven memory of the motion picture industry itself. Boxoffice successes are almost always remembered; boxoffice failures are often forgotten.

This disclaimer means that the widescreen policier probably did not begin with The Musketeers of Pig Alley, or, more obscurely, with The Italian, a 1915 vintage potboiler which Michel Ciment described as “une première version miniature du Parrain II de Coppola....” (Ciment 21). Indeed, that honour might not even belong to a French short released in 1901. According to Jean-Pierre Jeancolas,

On considère généralement L’Histoire du crime, attribué à Ferdinand Zecca, comme le premier ‘polar’ de l’histoire du cinéma français, ‘drame en six vues,” du la catalogue Pathé de 1901, long de 115 mètres, qui évoque successivement l’assassinat d’un banquier, l’arrestation du meurtrier dans un café (mauvais lieu), la confrontation du meurtrier et de sa victime à la morgue, le meurtrier dans sa cellule (cette scène est fameuse aussi par les incrustations dans le haut de l’écran qui illustrent les rêves, ou les souvenirs, du prisonnier), l’arrivée du bourreau et la toilette du condamné, enfin l’exécution sur la bascule à Charlot—ce dernier tableau aurait choqué par son réalisme, au point que les exploitants l’auraient souvent supprimé pour éviter des ennuis avec avec les polices municipales en un temps où il n’existait pas encore de censure ministérielle (Jeancolas 90).
Five years later, Georges Méliès, the father of fantasy filmmaking, lensed *Les Incendiaires*, an atypically realistic look at an arsonist whose mania leads him to the scaffold. Two years after that, Victorin Jasset shot *Nick Carter*, a 9-part serial that was inspired by American detective stories then being published in French translation—a tradition which would assume major importance after the Second World War. One of Carter's principal foes was Zigomar, a criminal mastermind who preceded Fritz Lang's Dr. Mabuse by almost two decades. Advanced intellectual circles were particularly keen on *Fantômas* (1913), "The Surrealists [being] struck by Feuillade's vision of a 'defamiliarized reality'" (Abel 75). For early twentieth-century poet Michel Bouzat, the masked master criminal was "Mon frère en Sade/mon assassin/superbe et malfaisant/mon bouquet tragique/ma grande ombre/ma tache pourpre/indélébile" (*Fantômas* 1201). That Fantômas, Zigomar and their affiliated friends and enemies were the natural by-products of France’s commercially-driven entertainment industry, owing nothing at all to the dictates of "high" art, made them seem all the more appealing to members of an artistic avant-garde with deep cultural reservations about both the classic and romantic canons. They rejoiced in the fact that Feuillade’s name "commence comme feuilleton" (Dufreigne 15).

Such Gallic precocity is anything but surprising. Until the outbreak of the Great War, French studios controlled more than 60% of the world motion picture market. In their heyday, studio heads Louis Gaumont and Charles Pathé were far more powerful than the American moguls who would succeed them as captains of (celluloid) industry in
the 1920s and '30s. For twenty years Paris established leads which Hollywood and New York could only hope to follow.

At the turn of the century, the City of Light was, like Berlin and Vienna, one of the principal germinators of new cultural ideas. As T.J. Clark emphasized in *The Painting of Modern Life*, Paris was the place where the creation of *les grands magasins* and the classes needed to service these innovations opened the floodgates to a rash of new diversions. "It began," he suggested, "with the feuilleton, the chromolithograph, and the democratization of sport, and soon proceeded to a tropical diversity of forms: drugstores, news agents and tobacconists, football, museums, movies, cheap romantic fiction, lantern-slide lectures on popular science, records, bicycles, the funny pages, condensed books, sweepstakes, swimming pools, *Action Française*" (Clark 235).

While searching for material to adapt to the screen, early French filmmakers proved particularly susceptible to the charms of the serialized newspaper novel. *Les Mystères de New York* (1915) was quite shamelessly inspired by Eugène Sue's feuilleton, *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842). In *Le Cinéma français*, film historian Georges Sadoul said of Louis Feuillade, the unchallenged king of the cinematic chapter play, that his thrillers had adopted "avec une verve facile, les méthodes utilisées par Emile Zola dans ses Rougon Macquart...." (Sadoul 16). More modestly, contemporary French film critic Thierry Jousse expressed his enthusiasm for Feuillade's 1915 serial *Les Vampires* (in which the anagrammatical Irma Vep made her onscreen début) in the following terms: "La force, encore présente, de cette série est de nous plonger directement dans l'atmosphère de la Belle Epoque, d'un temps où le
During the early years of the 20th century, onscreen crime in American movies typically occurred in comedies (where kidnappings were popular) or westerns (where shoot-outs and punch-ups were preferred). Although organized crime was already well-established in American cities, it was seldom at the centre of movie plots, being used primarily as a temptation with which to lure poor-but-honest country boys off the straight-and-narrow-path. In 1910, memories of the “wild West” were not only still vibrant, but virtually current. No one could be sure the last Indian war had been fought; train robberies were still occasionally committed, while nothing, technically, stopped Western outlaws from holding up banks on horseback. The chronological proximity of the cowboy’s heyday contributed greatly to his cinematic allure. Despite occasional sorties in the direction of the mob—Josef von Sternberg’s 1927 silent feature, *Underworld*, being the most distinguished of these—the Hollywood studios would not constitute the gangster movie as a separate genre until the early 1930s, at a time when the novelty of sound recording equipment allowed directors to reproduce the chatter of machinegun fire and the squeal of getaway tires. In the words of Italian film historian Giuseppe De Santis, during the early days of the Great Depression “L’America...era preoccupata...di creare una nuova formula destinata, insieme all’altra che portava alla rabata la vita dei gangsters, a sostitute con successo il glorioso ‘Western’...” (De Santis). Michel Ciment, on the other hand, taking a
longer (1992) view of U.S. cinema, sees the genres as complementary, rather than successive: "Le cowboy et le gangster sont les deux grands figures légendaires de l'Amérique. Ils incarnent une nation, jeune et puritaine, qui naît dans la violence et réduit volontiers les problèmes à des contrastes simples: blanc et noir, bien et mal" (Le crime à l'écran 15). Such a view is, of course, entirely compatible with D.H. Lawrence's definition of "the essential American soul [as] hard, isolate, stoic and a killer" (Lawrence 68). It is also, as we saw in the last chapter, entirely in keeping with the standard French view of the United States, a sometimes paranoid, sometimes prescient, sometimes deadly accurate perspective in which the fatally effete refinement of aristocratic European culture is at the mercy of the harsh but vital barbarism of the New World.

In France, meanwhile, criminal demographics differed greatly from the American norm. In the early 1900s, délits flagrants were as urban as they were rural—which is to say, "Sicilian"—in Italy. At the turn of the century, Joseph Bonnot’s gang of anarchists pioneered the motorized bank robbery in the streets of Paris. It was his near contemporary exploits that fascinated the French public, not the fading memories of Jesse James and Billy the Kid.

While crime-hinged plots might have played a limited role in early Italian melodramas (particularly in the so-called "arcaide movies," which flourished in Naples during the late 1890s and early 1900s), the industry as a whole generally preferred to define itself in terms of such epic celebrations of Roman antiquity as Cabiria (1913) and Quo Vadis (1912). While these early features might have acted as a catalyst on the cinematic sensibilities of D. W. Griffith, the American
man of the theatre who almost singlehandedly defined the parameters of commercial narrative moviemaking, they did not—indeed, they could not—endow Italy with a healthy, multifaceted film industry. As in other areas of popular culture, the nation found itself obliged to import “escapist trash”.

In his Quaderni dal carcere, one of the topics imprisoned Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci returned to again and again was the absence of an indigenous, home-grown popular literature. “Perché la letteratura italiana non è popolare?” he asked rhetorically (Gramsci 2108). The absence of indigenous crime novels was a subject which seemed to particularly vex him, despite his elaborate and frequently ingenious attempts to explain the situation in terms of the specifics of Italy’s recent past. “Una certa fortuna ha avuto in Italia la letteratura popolare sulla vita dei briganti,” he complained, “ma la produzione è di valore bassissimo” (Gramsci 2121). Crime novels, Gramsci continued, were usually written by conservative foreigners. Even Hungarian and Australian novelists, he complained, fared better in his country than did local authors. By relying so heavily on French popular literature, he worried, Italians might pick up certain ideas which were alien to their cultural tradition—such as the time-hardened Gallic prejudice against all things English. Of crime novel aesthetics, he wrote, “In questa letteratura poliziesca ci sono queste due corrente: una mecanica--d'intrigo--l'altra artistica....” (Gramsci 2129). On the one hand, he endowed the polizier with impressive antecedents, seeking its origins in the works of Balzac, Hugo and Poe. On the other hand, he was clearly attracted to its lack of high art “respectability”: “Il romanzo
poliziesco è nato ai margini delle letteratura sulle ‘cause celebri’" (Gramsci 2128).

Of course, having access to books and periodicals, within the claustrophobic universe of Mussolini’s prison system, but not to films, Gramsci had very little to say about the state of Italian cinema. Nevertheless, many of the notebook charges he makes against Italian popular literature could just as easily have been advanced against Italian popular film.

Thinly-veiled envy is often present when Gramsci writes about French popular culture. Why this should be so is more or less self-evident. Of all continental powers, France was unquestionably the most successful when it came to entertaining its citizens with home-made divertissements. While the Third Republic was certainly not immune to the seductive blandishments of Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley, it was anything but a cap-in-hand cultural dependent. What’s more, France was an exporter of popular culture as well as an importer. Jean Gabin could hold his own on the home—and, to a much lesser extent, global—front against Clark Gable, just as Edith Piaf could sing Billy Holliday to a European draw, while France’s achievements in the “higher” arts were literally non-pareil (even if, as in Hollywood, many of the nation’s most distinguished cultural workers were actually foreign-born). Despite the undeniable artistic accomplishments of Weimar Germany and Soviet Russia, on the multi-laned highway of cultural imperialism, France was the one continental nation with the generic versatility to give at least as good as it got. In a pinch, it could satisfy most, if not all, of its cultural needs—a form of national self-sufficiency which American entertainment conglomerates have been attempting to erode with ever
greater missionary zeal for the past half century. (This is a subject we shall return to, at greater length, in Chapter Four).

The Third Republic was able to maintain this enviable position because of its versatility. Its publishing houses produced pulp as well as belles lettres, just as its recording studios were equally receptive to the airs of Edith Piaf and Claude Debussy. Like the Americans, their principal rivals and de facto antagonists, the French successfully bridged the gap between “high” art and “low”. For every Marcel Proust and Jean Cocteau there was a Georges Simenon or Francis Carco. By mid-century, there would also be Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Boris Vian, authors who deliberately obscured the boundaries between popular literature and “art”, even if their works were read almost exclusively by aficionados of the latter.

Why this should be so is a subject we shall return to later.

According to Gerald Mast, “The French film in the first decade of sound may have been the most imaginative, the most stimulating of its generation: a subtle blend of effective, often poetic, dialogue; evocative visual imagery; perceptive social analysis; complex fictional structures; rich philosophical implication; wit and charm” (Mast 199). This favourable assessment, it seems, was visible to more than just posterity. In Mists of Regret, his book-length study of French poetic realism, Dudley Andrew writes, “A survey of the New York Times reviews for the whole decade [of the 1930s] shows not only the large number of films that played in the city (170 are reviewed) but also how highly they were valued: a great majority are praised, often for outscoring Hollywood in artistry, taste, and maturity of content and execution” (Andrew 13). These reviews “repeatedly [gave] the
impression that something about French mores, tradition, education, or language [destined] its better films to be serious, candid, atmospheric, and strangely dark” (Andrews 13).

This strange darkness, born at the anxious intersection where the brave new hopes of Léon Blum's National Front government encountered fatalistic premonitions of the coming war with Nazi Germany, was what poetic realism was all about. Making its precocious début in the early 1930s in the form of Jean Grémillon's early masterpiece, *La Petite Lise*, the movement coalesced out of a number of unlikely antecedents. Perhaps the most Gallic of these is the belief, shared by Alain Resnais and many others, that “Emile Zola is the father of French cinema....” (Andrew 27). “Curiously,” Dudley Andrew notes, “Zola's impact in this era stems not from his status as novelist (storyteller in prose) but from the presence in his novels of two extremes: 'photographic naturalism' on the one side, and the visionary, heavily metaphoric imagery that, on the other side, he uses to paint his melodramas” (Andrew 162).

While Andrew's emphasis on the great naturalist's importance to French cinema cannot be disputed, this influence was far more complicated than the previous statements suggest. In *The French Through Their Films*, Robin Buss points out that the ubiquity of Zola adaptations resulted in a chronological anomaly known as “*le contemporain vague,*” a Never Never Land Paris where Fords could co-exist with hansom cabs, and gas jets with electric lights (Buss 31). For a similar—albeit aesthetically inferior—parallel to this trend, one must look to the “B” westerns of the 1930s and '40s, low budget genre pictures where Roy Rogers and Gene Autry would alternate between
horses and station wagons when it came time to pursue decidedly anachronistic villains.

Besides conflating historical epochs when cinematically adapting the great naturalist's novels, French filmmakers shared an equally uncertain attitude in regard to Zola's political positions. If the author of "J'accuse" was the fearless champion of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, the dauntless opponent of obscurantist oppression who might well have been murdered for his public stance, his "entomological" literary eye did not win him many friends on the left. Marxist critics, such as Georg Lukacs, repeatedly compared the author of Germinal unfavourably to Honoré de Balzac, the great expositor of early capitalism. No matter how far he stuck out his neck on behalf of the downtrodden, the fact that he had written "...il y a une détermination absolue pour tous les phénomènes humains" could be neither forgotten nor forgiven (Zola 23). In La Roman expérimentale, Zola stated his position as follows: "Sans me risquer à formuler des lois, j'estime que la question d'hérédité a une grande influence dans les manifestations intellectuelles et passionelles de l'homme" (Zola 24). What he wanted to do was "substitue à l'étude de l'homme abstrait, de l'homme métaphysique, l'étude de l'homme naturel, soumis aux lois physico-chimiques et déterminé par les influences du milieu...." (Zola 24). By reducing mankind to little more than a natural outgrowth of interlocking social and biological forces, Zola offered little hope to those who saw in humanity a less deterministic blank slate which, under the right circumstances, was quite capable of "re-writing" itself for the common good. On a certain level, social pessimism must always be seen as a form of conservatism.
In any event, it is hard to imagine a more perfect way to simultaneously alienate both wings of the French intelligentsia. By denying the metaphysical individuality of men and women, Zola distanced himself from the Catholic right. At the same time, his belief in social laws more rigid and absolute than those promulgated by Charles Darwin and Emile Durkheim made a mockery of collective struggle. Biology, it seemed, would always get the better of the proletarian will-to-power. Even the delayed announcement that “Je suis un républicain de la veille” could not undo the damage he had already done to his progressive image (Zola 299).

Fortunately, as Jean Mitry reminds us in *Esthetique et psychologie du cinéma*, the seventh art “est forme structurante autant que forme structurée” (Mitry 27). Taking Mitry at his word, for almost eighty years French filmmakers have re-cast Emile Zola in their own, usually less forbidding, image. We have already seen how Louis Feuillade managed to superimpose the aesthetics of the *Rougon Macquart* novels on a subject as unlikely as Fantômas. On the other hand, in his version of *la Bête humaine* (1938), Jean Renoir cut out the book’s middle class characters entirely, focusing exclusively on its diegetic proletarians.

Nevertheless, having said all this, one is still hard pressed to explain away the fatalism endemic to films pitched in the key of poetic realism without recourse to Zola. With very few exceptions, poetic realist cinema was made by left-wingers: anarchists, socialists and members of the French Communist Party. How could they accept a metaphysics which seemed to assume the permanent nature of the current hierarchical order? Even after consciously rejecting Zola’s
social determinism, poetic realist cinéastes seem to have absorbed it subliminally. How else can one explain the snug sanctuary of friendship, marriage, and community aboard the Seine river barge in Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante* (1933), or the fleeting independence of the worker-owned publishing house in Jean Renoir's *Le Crime de M. Lange* (1936)? Cinematic attempts to establish a new and more equitable social order were tentative, and usually doomed to failure. The Zola which progressive filmmakers rejected with their heads held almost unlimited sway over their hearts.

With the coming of sound, screenplays assumed new importance in the making of movies. Before the invention of the boom mike and the camera blimp, snappy dialogue was expected to galvanize all scenes where the viewers could actually see the actors' mouths move. No longer could scenarios be roughed out on the back of place settings during lunch hour. Synchronous sound required professional writers, not amateurs. Consequently, Hollywood's major studios recruited literary talent from the major New York publishing houses, as well as from the Broadway stage. William Faulkner, Lillian Hellman, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Dorothy Parker, and John Steinbeck were all employed from time to time as contract screenwriters. As a rule, these literary imports looked down upon this sort of work, travelling to Hollywood only when impending bankruptcy made $500 weekly paycheques seem irresistible. It was the time of the Great Depression, and movies were where the money was. This disdain was fully returned by the studios. Only rarely were literary writers permitted to produce screenplays of their own choosing. More commonly, they would be used to embellish the dialogue of dull contract writers, to add sparkle to lacklustre scenes. To
producers, screenwriters were universally known as "schmucks with Underwoods."

For French writers, things were very different. In the snidely superior *Scènes de la vie future*, French Academician Georges Duhamel might have scornfully asserted that "Je donne toute la bibliothèque cinématographique du monde, y compris ce que les gens de métier appellent pompeusement leurs 'classiques', pour une pièce de Molière, pour un tableau de Rembrandt, pour une fugue de Bach," but he was in the minority (Duhamel 51). More typically, Nobel Prize winner André Gide resented the fact that Roger Martin du Gard, another Gallic winner of the world's most celebrated literary prize, got to write the first draft script of *La Bête humaine* in place of his own august self. While French writers would regularly whine about the ways in which literature was deformed by the seventh art, it seldom inveighed against the idea itself. From their vantage point, the cinema seemed to be so far behind the book and the play in terms of cultural importance, it usually failed to arouse their fears, even if it occasionally incurred their displeasure. (For somewhat different reasons, Hollywood producers felt much the same way about TV until the late 1940s, when the new medium began to dangerously encroach upon their economic turf).

Unsurprisingly, a distinguished caste of professional screenwriters grew up under this regime. The most accomplished of these were Jacques Prévert, Marcel Pagnol, and Charles Spaak. Of the three, Prévert—with the possible exception of Cesare Zavattini, the only scenarist in film history whose contributions to films were generally more highly praised by critics than were those of the
directors for whom he worked—unquestionably exercised the greatest influence on the development of poetic realism. This is a subject to which we shall return at the proper time.

This said, one should not allow these differences in cultural attitude to obscure the fact that the relative aesthetic success of French and American cinema in the 1930s was in large part due to the high quality of their scenarios. Thanks to the awkwardness of early sound equipment, Depression-era movies were seldom distinguished by their visuals. Consequently, actors had to shoulder the burden dropped by the cinematographers, and this was only possible when the words they were given were up to cinematic snuff. Whether admired or despised by themselves or their employers, screenwriters now made the difference between success and failure. In the particular case of the crime film, this verity was even truer than usual.

As Paul Schrader pointed out in his famous essay "Notes on Film Noir", one of the principal pre-requisites behind this enduring '40s style was the "influence...of the 'hard-boiled' school of writers. In the thirties, authors such as Ernest Hemingway, Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Horace McCoy and John O'Hara created the 'tough,' a cynical way of acting and talking that separated one from the world of everyday emotions—romanticism with a protective shell" (Grant 174). According to Dudley Andrew, a similar school of French tough guy writing fecundated the French film industry around the same time: "Between the wars a publishing boom at Gallimard, Grasset, Plon, Flammarion, and smaller houses sanctioned serious popular fiction coming from the pens of a new brand of professional writer... None of these could be called intellectual, nor did any of them aspire to be
intellectual in their lives and work, writing of workers, peasants, sailors, and criminals on the run" (Andrew 155).

So far as the history of the French crime film was concerned, by far the most important of these were Pierre Mac Orlan—whom critic/screenwriter André Lang once famously described as "un bourgeois sauvage" (Lang 233)—the slang-friendly Francis Carco, and the prolific Belgian author, Georges Simenon. Mac Orlan's penchant for underworld heroes with poetic souls eventually resulted in the publication of a screenplay and several articles devoted to and inspired by the life and works of François Villon, the 16th century dean of Gallic artist/thugs (a taste he shared with the aforesaid Carco, a fellow Montmartre flâneur). Le Quai des brumes (1927) and La Bandera (1931), his two most influential novels, would serve as blueprints for two of the best widescreen examples of French poetic realism. In place of "réalisme poétique", Mac Orlan preferred the term "le fantastique social" to describe his tales which engendered "‘disquiet and mistrust’...in the manner of nocturnal street photography rather than eldritch lore" (Andrew 15). His plots also linked desperate acts to desperate financial straits in a way that was at least as Balzacian as it was Zolaesque.

Francis Carco was Mac Orlan’s almost exact contemporary, and dealt in very similar material set in the same milieu. Stylistically, however, his books were much more experimental. The author’s "deft handling of slang immediately created for Carco an authority as well as fixed his popular image--expedient, yet restrictive" (Weiner 82). Jésus-la-Caille (1919), Carco's most important book, is generally regarded as French literature's first successful experiment with
underworld *argot*. Idiomatically translated, the title could be read as *A Certain Sort of Fag*, since *jésus* was a turn-of-the-century term meaning invert, and *caille* was a 19th century mercantile word referring to style or flavour. While nowhere near as slangily dense as Albert Simonin's 1953 masterpiece, *Touchez pas au grisbi*, *Jésus-la-Caille* is nonetheless written in decidedly non-standard French. A typical passage runs as follows: "L'coup des bourriques. Ménard et le gros Dupied empoignaient le môme. Je ne les ai pas vus entrer, et v'la bien la preuve que c'était une combine: ils devaient être planqués dans le placard" (Carco 15). Certain recurring motifs in French crime fiction—the importance of female loyalty, and its presumed scarcity; the emotional emphasis on male bonding, whether explicitly homosexual or not; the debased sociology and exchange economy of *fille* and *mec* within the *apache* sub-culture—were codified in *Jésus*, even if Carco could not take credit for inventing them.

More or less contemporaneously, in 1930 Georges Simenon gave birth to his most enduring creation, Inspector Jules Maigret, a decidedly un-American detective who was "plébéien, stable, instinctif, apolitique, méfiant, routinier, chaste, neutre, sécurisant, mangeur, buveur, fumeur de pipe, bourru, discret, sédentaire, peu liant..." (Assouline 208). Maigret would glide through *la France profonde* of the 'tween-war years in the same way that Mac Orlan and Carco would nostalgically recreate the *apache*-haunted Montmartre of *la belle époque*. Between them, they would create an indigenous French universe of crime, a universe which could accommodate any number of imported American underworld constellations. Foreign traditions would be welcomed precisely because local traditions were so strong.
For political reasons, French filmmakers of the 1930s could not be too specific about the relationship between poverty and crime. In 1937, for instance, Jean Renoir was obliged to hide his enthusiasm for the Popular Front behind a historical tableau set in the French Revolution at a time when the Popular Front government it implicitly praised was still in power. Nevertheless, French filmmakers did manage to side, in most cases, with economically oppressed whites (oppressed North Africans, of course, were still relegated to villainous/comic extra status in the many adventure films set in France's Saharan and Magrebhi colonies). To a certain extent, this was as true of right-wingers as it was of militants on the left. This attitude actually preceded the early books of Pierre Mac Orlan, and the other mecs durs authors of the 1920s and '30s. As Georges Sadoul reminds us, it truly begins in 1901 with "les premiers grands succès de Ferdinand Zecca. Ils introduisaient à l'écran la vie des 'basses classes': prolétariat et criminels" (Sadoul 11).

Like the American film industry during the 1920s, '30s and '40s, French cinema was profoundly affected by the legacy of Middle European Expressionism imported by émigré German cinéastes. Though Lotte H. Eisner, in L'Ecran démoniaque, sought to demonstrate how inescapably "German" this movement really was, the post-war proliferation of "film noir" techniques and thematics—most of which were derived from Ufa-style Expressionism—tends to dilute this claim. No matter how imbued with Sturm und Drang ideology, certain "Teutonic" ideas proved to be eminently exportable. "Dans les films allemands," she wrote, "l'ombre devient l'image du destin"—an alchemical process which would later be reproduced on the sound
stages of Paris and southern California. (Eisner 95). They would be equally influenced by G.W. Pabst's *Joyless Street*, "la quintessence des visions germaniques de la rue, des escaliers et des corridors, plongé dans une demi-obscurité; c'est aussi la consécration définitive de l'architecture 'Ersatz' de studio, dérivant de l'expressionisme" (Eisner 174).

While Expressionist echoes would ring with equal effect through the cinemas of France and the United States, the two countries' methods of appropriating this technique were very different. In the 1920s, Hollywood was already systematically attempting to co-opt successfully competing national film cultures. The Swedish film industry was its first target of opportunity, Scandinavia's once-thriving movie business being effectively gutted by the loss of Victor Sjostrom, Mauritz Stiller, Greta Garbo, and other luminaries. Basically, the American studios did not care—as, indeed, most of them still do not—how these cultural immigrants fared in their new surroundings. If they learned to accommodate themselves to the American factory system, well and good; if they did not, Hollywood producers had the satisfaction of knowing they had at least removed potentially dangerous economic competitors from the world market. For Hollywood, it was a win-win situation. Thanks to the rise of Hitler, the steady trickle of German émigrés soon became a flood. Many of the masters of *film noir*, the most Expressionist of all American film styles, got their start in Ufa's giant enclosure. Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944) and *Sunset Boulevard*, Fritz Lang's *Scarlet Street* (1945) and *The Big Heat* (1954); Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1944): without these seminal features, the movement would never have gotten off the ground.
In France, things were a little different. On the trail to Hollywood, it was traditional for anti-fascist and/or Jewish-German filmmakers to make pit-stops in Paris, interrupting their journey long enough to shoot a film or two, their salaries being used to finance the fateful move to the United States. By doing this, these exiled filmmakers absorbed the legacy of poetic realism, even as they deepened the already pronounced strain of Expressionism running through French cinema, a strain left by the many Franco-German co-productions undertaken in the 1920s and early 1930s. As Georges Sadoul reminds us, “La [première] guerre [mondiale] entraîne un renversement totale de la situation [économique], au profit des Etats-Unis, et en second lieu, de l’Allemagne” (Sadoul 144). To survive this new world order, “French producers were forced to take a slightly partisan position, aligning themselves with the Germans in a ‘European’ effort to stave off Hollywood domination” (Andrew 172). If German and Central European directors did not make the same “splash” in France that they made in America, Middle European film technicians did. Marcel Carné’s moody masterpieces did not succeed solely on the strength of his directorial eye and Jacques Prévert’s brilliant scripts; they were equally beholden to Alexandre Trauner’s brooding sets and Joseph Kosma’s haunting scores. These two irreplaceable collaborators were both born in the Austro-Hungarian city of Budapest.

At the same time, the French cinema received an influx of Russian immigrants that was considerably greater than the one absorbed by Hollywood. In Dudley Andrew’s words, “Numerically the Russian presence in the [French] cinema went far beyond the German” (Andrew 177). Director Dmitri Kirsanoff and cinematographer Boris Kaufman
both carved enviable positions for themselves within the infrastructure of the French film industry. What’s more, “A certain vogue for Dostoevsky had infiltrated Paris with the well-educated Russian and German émigrés” (Andrew 162).

For “Dostoevsky”, one should probably read “Crime and Punishment.” That book, it should be recalled, enriched the realm of fictional archetypes with Inspector Porfiry, perhaps the most malignant police agent in world literature. French culture, having already produced Hugo’s mercilessly “just” Inspector Javert, as well as Vautrin, Balzac’s arch-Nietzschean criminal turned police-commissioner, was obviously in an ideal position to insinuate the sly sleuth from St. Petersburg into its imaginative universe. Georges Simenon was one period writer who fell completely under the great Russian’s sway. In a recent article, Manuel Vasquez Montalban writes, “Dans le cycle Maigret, presque tous les criminels ont quelque chose de Raskolnikov et le commissaire apparaît comme le juge que tout criminel souhaiterait avoir pour avouer son délit” (Montalban 105). In 1935, André Lang scripted and Pierre Chenal directed what is generally considered to be the best screen version of Crime and Punishment—not least because it was shot in an Expressionist style. In the process, the parameters of the French crime movie were further refined. The “high” art of Zola and Dostoevsky could now happily co-exist with the “popular” writing of Simenon and Mac Orlan; Ufa-style Expressionism, with its emphasis on striking cinematography and entirely artificial sets, could be re-cast in a Franco-Russian mold. This rich gumbo of influences and motifs could, as we shall soon see, only be enriched by the addition of American ingredients. Almost from the beginning, its
style was as much international as it was national. Such forms can only benefit from the widening of the cultural gene pool.

Across the Atlantic, German Expressionism came to America in a slower, more gradual manner—a manner inseparable from the steady consolidation of Nazi power. The gangster films of the early 1930s had as much to do with the teething problems of sound film as they did with any native or imported aesthetic. Screeching tyres and yammering tommyguns provided sounds that did not need to be lip-synched. Inspired by the urban gangster wars engendered by Prohibition, they allowed Hollywood filmmakers to make movies whose central figures were amoral villains. Howard Hawks's *Scarface* (1930) and Mervyn Leroy's *Little Caesar* (1931) were both thinly disguised biographies of Chicago's most notorious citizen, Alphonse Capone. The vast majority of these onscreen mobsters were of Sicilian origin, a fact that had more to do with the Italian mob's victory over rival Irish, Jewish and Polish gangs than it did with any nativist bias. William Wellman's *The Public Enemy* (1931) was somewhat unusual insofar as it depicted an American veteran's entry into crime as the result of his inability to find remunerative work in the wake of the First World War. In general, though, American mobsters were "foreign".

They were also rich, and—as the Great Depression deepened—this wealth became a cause for concern among motion picture moralists. Tuxedoed banquets in the company of beautifully dressed showgirls came to seem increasingly alluring to unemployed Americans as the bread lines lengthened. Thus, gangster films per se were no longer made, having been replaced with the more acceptable "G-man" pictures, underworld dramas where the heroes were not "foreign" gangsters but
native agents of the FBI. Along with Mae West's double entendres, Maureen O'Sullivan's nude swim in *Tarzan and His Mate* (1934), and the eponymous giant ape's violent and sexual indiscretions in *King Kong* (1933), gangster movies were one of the prime reasons why Hollywood chose to shackle itself artistically with the set of self-imposed restrictions which would be known to posterity as the Hays Code.

While French cinema was certainly no stranger to censorship, it never suffered from such chafing constraints—ironically, not even under German occupation. Still, as we read in French Film, "[Louis] Feuillade began by celebrating master criminals who stop at nothing, but the pressures of censorship made him turn later to the figure of the avenger" (Armes 23). This would appear to be a close approximation of the anti-crime strictures of the Hays Code, until we recall that Feuillade was wont to have his masked villains slaughter entire roomsful of social luminaries, an anarchistic excess which Hollywood gangsters, even in their heyday, would never have been permitted to contemplate, never mind enact. Extremely strict in regard to politics and national "honour", French censorship was much more *laissez-faire* in matters of crime—particularly when the *crimes* in question happened to be *passionels*. Marcel Carné, curiously, was the French director who suffered most from film censorship's obscure whims. A nude shot of Arletty was excised from all prints of *le Jour se lève* (1939) by the bluenoses of Vichy, and it still cries out to be re-inserted. This is perhaps the least "French" of Carné's run-ins with the authorities. More typical is the filmmaker's run-in with "Commandant Calvet", a military officer who, after seeing a workprint of *Le Quai des brumes*, a bleakly poetic portrait of a deserter on the lam from the colonial
infantry, "demandait seulement que le mot [déserteur] ne soit jamais prononcé et que, lorsque le soldat se débarrasse de ses vêtements, il les pile soigneusement et les pose sur une chaise, au lui de la jeter pêle-mêle dans un coin de la pièce...." (La Vie à belles dents 90). Prior to the contemporary American hysteria over the issue of flag-burning, such fussy concern with the miniutiae of national honour would have seemed vaguely absurd, even to a Hays Code censor. Since Gabin was doomed to die for his "sins", anyway, a little sloppiness with his uniform, one might have thought, could easily have been forgiven.

In the early 1930s, most of the major "German" directors —technically, most of them were Austrians—working in Hollywood (Erich von Stroheim; Josef von Sternberg) had been established in Hollywood for many years. Expressionist influence on von Stroheim was correspondingly weak—he was, after all, a disciple of Zola—while von Sternberg's was strong but indirect, stemming largely from his 1929 visit to Berlin, the trip that saw him accomplish the double coup of directing Der Blaue Engel, the first first-rate talking picture, and "discovering" its star, Marlene Dietrich. Of Hollywood's early Germans, he alone can be considered a true progenitor of film noir.

Because there was never any question about who did what, where, and why, the gangster movie was generically cut off from the mystery story and detective thriller; it was a howdunnit not a whodunnit, having more in common with the war movie and western than with its more obvious generic relations. Gangster fiction, as epitomized by the writing of Rowland Brown—an author reputed to have "underworld connections"—followed its own set of ruthlessly simple laws (Peary 30). Poverty was of dramatic use only insofar as it
provided a motivation for criminals to climb socially; onscreen, the pleasures of being criminally on top of the world vastly outnumbered the inevitably violent wages of sin climactically meted out to mob anti-heroes by the Puritan strictures of the Hays Code.

In other words, gangster films in their early '30s American guise were separated from their European roots to the point where they could pass as nativist phenomena, even if—according to the rules of heartland amour propre, as well as period criminal demographics—most of its underworld anti-heroes were not. The genre would become truly international only after it had been cross-fertilized by film noir, a crime story/Expressionist hybrid which was brought to fruition by the window of cinematic opportunity perceived by German refugees—deracinated, embittered, frustrated and on the run from Hitler—in the years immediately preceding and following the Second World War. Fury (1936), and You Only Live Once (1937), Fritz Lang's first two American features, are now often described as the ur-films of the noir stylistic. In the process of directing them, Lang furthered the postwar internationalization of crime movies in a way that could not then have been easily imagined.

Before embarking on a more specific study of the French and American policier, however, it would probably be best to consider more fully the importance of German Expressionism to both cinematic genres. While Edvard Munch and a number of other late 19th and early 20th century painters and playwrights have been described as proto-Expressionists, the movement was imbued with new power by the empire-wrecking carnage of 1914-1918. If Dadaism and Surrealism were expressions of French disaffection with the conduct and
aftermath of the First World War, post-war Expressionism was—in this respect at least—their spiritual sister. As Lotte H. Eisner wrote in *L'Ecran démoniaque*, “Mysticisme et magie, forces obscurs auxquelles de tout temps les Allemands se sont abandonnés avec complaisance avaient fleuri devant la mort sur les champs de bataille” (Eisner 15). Neither playful nor outward-looking, Expressionism was implicitly hostile to contemporary Gallic schools of artistic expression: “L'expressionisme, déclare Edschmid, réagit contre le 'dépécement atomique' de l'impressionisme qui reflète les chatoyantes équivoques de la nature, sa diversité inquiétante, ses nuances éphémères; il lutte en même temps contre la décalcomanie bourgeoise du naturalisme et contre le but mesquin ...de photographe la nature ou la vie quotidienne” (Eisner 97). For physically and emotionally scarred veterans such as artist Oskar Kokoschka and filmmaker Fritz Lang, “il serait absurde de...reproduire [le monde] tel que[il]....” (Eisner 97). For them, external objects and events were useful only insofar as they helped to reveal their protagonists “fantaisie secrète” (Eisner 97). Since it was the ideal method for exploring the more obscure corners—not to mention plumbing the more sinister depths—of the soul, psychoanalysis was, of course, all the rage. In film after film, “[les] ombres manifeste une inspiration freudienne....” (Eisner 97). Expressionists were likewise strongly drawn to the Talmudic myth of Lilith, Adam’s disobedient first wife, the metaphysical symbol of conflict and strife, of war within the very heart of the patriarchal family, a great beauty armed with the talons of a bird of prey, a female fury who “[at] times...is an angel who rules over the procreation of mankind, at times a demon who assaults those who sleep alone or those who travel lonely roads” (Borges 149).
Appearing first in the plays of Frank Wedekind—which were later brilliantly adapted for the screen by G.W. Pabst in the late 1920s, their seductive protagonist being physically embodied by American screen idol, Louise Brooks—the figure of the evil temptress or femme fatale would eventually become one of the emblematic figures of film noir. It is surely not coincidental that so many "bad girl" names (Lulu; Lili; Lolita; Lola Lola) begin with a capital "L," a circumstance which turns them all into de facto homonyms of Lilith, the seductive beauty with claws that rend.

Of course, in practice this separation from all things French was not as absolute as it was in theory. Fritz Lang, for example, was immensely fond of "les figures à cagoules qui viennent tout droit des VAMPIRES de Feuillade...." (Eisner 162). In German films, "...comme chez Feuillade, comme dans tous les serials, les kidnappers emportent ficelée leur victimes" (Eisner 162 - 163). If the ubiquity of postwar Franco-German co-productions exposed French filmmakers to the tics as well as the abilities of their German confrères, they returned the favour four-fold.

Even so, the Gauls learned a lot. Inspired by the post-1917 German practice of shooting every scene on an artificial stage, French set designers began to build trompe l'oeil street scenes and interiors that rivalled the most lavish accomplishments of Ufa, then the best-equipped studio in Europe, if not the world (an advantage which—unfortunately for the Weimar republic's notoriously dismal import/export balance—did not translate into a commanding German position in the international movie mart). Alexandre Trauner and Lazare Meerson shone in this métier, while the sets of Jacques Feyder's 1934
historical comedy *La Kermesse héroïque* were so sumptuous they attracted for a time the sort of tourist who is irresistibly drawn to “mad” King Ludwig’s castles in Bavaria. Imagination, intelligently employed, more than made up for the modest budgets with which most Gallic filmmakers were obliged to work. French cinematographers studied the psychologically revealing camera angles pioneered by Karl Freund, and came up with their own counterparts. Carl Mayer’s brilliantly crafted scripts established high literary standards which French screenwriters, with growing success, struggled to surpass. The knowledge that “shadows can become the image of Destiny” subtly inflected the ubiquitous nocturnal sequences that were as much a part of poetic realism as they were of film noir. Indeed, in the aftermath of World War Two, the fatalistic scripts and dark camera angles of such gloomy features as *Le Jour se lève* and *Le Quai des brumes* were widely regarded as nothing less than cinematic fifth columnists, defeatist movies that fatally sapped French morale on the battlefield, creating the mood which allowed morose *poilus* to be ground to powder by the optimistic storm-troopers of the Third Reich during the shameful summer of 1940.

Neither neorealist studies of poverty nor sentimental romances—the motion picture genres which one would ordinarily expect to provide the most universally convertible forms of cinematic currency, given the ubiquity of global misery and the probably genetic human need for love—have proven to have the wide-spread appeal of the crime film. As Claire Vassé put it in her essay, “L’énigme ‘cinéma’: *La Nouvelle Vague et le polar*”, “Le genre policier est certainement la chose du monde cinématographique la mieux partagée” (Vassé 105.) French crime films
were visibly affected by foreign influences even in the 1930s, and—more surprisingly still, even in the works of Jean Renoir, that most “typically French” of French directors. As Charles Tesson would have it, “Autant Toni, construit sur une symétrie de même nature, est un film dont la forme narrative doit beaucoup à l’Amérique du mélodrame, celle de Griffith et surtout de Chaplin...autant La Bête humaine est un film placé sous la signe croisé de Lang et de Murnau. Lantier est le frère de M (le ‘ich kann nicht’ de la pulsion criminelle) et la séquence de barque de l’Aurore, celle où le mari tente d’étrangler sa femme puis renonce, est la séquence cachée dont La Bête humaine sera la traversée du miroir en deux temps” (Tesson 67).

Like most fictional genres, the crime story precedes the invention of the motion picture camera by many centuries. If Gilles Deleuze was right when he claimed that “l’Ancien Testament n’est pas un épopée ni une tragédie, c’est le premier roman...,” then the killing of Abel is literature’s first murder mystery, and Cain fiction’s first “traître...le personnage essentiel du roman, le héros” (Dialogues 53). If one broadens the definition of crime to include transgression, then humanity’s first délit flagrant must fall on the shoulders of Adam and Eve—on the symbolic level, the Ur parents of hairless apes. What this means, basically, is that most Western narratives deal with characters who have breached divine or secular laws or both.

Even so, the invention of the policier proper is generally credited to Edgar Allan Poe. In his short stories “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Purloined Letter”, the American author introduced world literature to its first private detective, the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin: “This young gentleman was of an excellent—indeed of an illustrious
family, but, by a variety of untoward events, had been reduced to such poverty that the energy of his character succumbed beneath it, and he ceased to bestir himself in the world or to care for the retrieval of his fortunes" (Tales of Mystery and Imagination 180). A bibliophile, Dupin is flatteringly French: "Books, indeed, were his sole luxuries, and in Paris these are easily obtained" (Tales of Mystery and Imagination 180).

If one excludes Benjamin Franklin and the political "superstars" of the American Revolution, Edgar Allan Poe was probably the first American to be lionized by the Gauls. After excising the author's middle name—endearing him forever to French readers as "Edgar Poe"—Baudelaire proceeded to translate the American's texts with a verve that most critics now regard as superior to the narratives which inspired them. Thus, Poe came to be regarded in Parisian literary circles as one of the first and greatest of the Symbolists, while in his native Baltimore the poet is thought of primarily as the author of various obscure 19th century horror stories. In translating him, Baudelaire was at least half conscious of casting his American "idol" in his idolator's image. In "Edgar Poe: Sa vie et ses oeuvres", the French poet was pleased to introduce his public to "un homme qui me ressemblait un peu, par quelques points, c'est-à-dire une partie de moi-même...." (Baudelaire 348). In reality, it would probably be fairer to say that Poe shared certain similarities with Baudelaire, rather than the other way around. The French Poe is pre-eminently an urban writer, whereas the American original grew up in a largely agrarian society. It was only after he was thoroughly "Gallicized" that global readers were free to mistake the streets of Baltimore for the streets of Paris. Out of
place in his homeland, the author of “The Raven” was turned into a de facto European by the author of “The Albatross”. The “fake” Poe of the French is now, ironically, of immeasurably more cultural importance than the “real” Poe of his unappreciative and uncomprehending fellow countrymen. Those who continue to be perplexed by the French “canonization” of Clint Eastwood, Blake Edwards and Jerry Lewis would be well-advised to bear in mind that the U.S. citizens in question were all treated to a “Baudelairean” make-over—that is to say, they were first situated in a pre-existing Gallic Zeitgeist—before receiving their official laurels. If their path to the podium had not been paved with influential essays by André Bazin, Georges Benyaoun, and other acknowledged cultural authorities they would never have been so honoured. Even so, the “outsider” quality of French perceptions often provides insights which an “inside” American perspective precludes. Thus Tzvetan Todorov writes, “On sait...que Poe a donné naissance au roman policier contemporain, et ce voisinage n’est pas un effet de hasard; on écrit d’ailleurs souvent que les histoires policières ont remplacé les histoires de fantômes” (Introduction à la fantastique 54).

When seen in this light, Poe’s double importance as precursor of the “new” and perfector of the “old” seems perfectly self-evident. This insight would, in the 20th century, effectively obscure the line between horror and detective stories in popular French literature. Thus, Jacques van Herp could claim in “Le monde de Harry Dickson”, an appreciation of the texts Belgian fantasy author Jean Ray wrote about “le Sherlock Holmes Américain,” that the imaginative universe invoked by these tales was in many respects identical to that of Belgium’s best-known realistic mystery master: “On pense irrésistiblement à
Simenon. Chez tous deux apparaît le même goût des heures indéfinies, de la pluie, au pavé gras, des maisons lépreuses, et une identique puissance d'évocation. Ainsi qu'un même refus à jouer le jeu au policier classique" (La Herne 278). Boileau and Narcejac, the most popular French mystery writers of the post-war period, composed the original stories for Vertigo, Alfred Hitchcock's 1958 psychological thriller, and Les Yeux sans visage, Georges Franju's 1960 surgical horror movie. From the vantage point of a "properly" educated French film critic, the co-authors did not change genres, just as—for an American critic—they obviously did.

Ironically, despite their respect for Poe in general and Auguste Dupin in particular, the French have not made much use of the tradition he represents. According to Tzvetan Todorov's "Typologie du roman policier", Dupin and his descendants belong primarily to the genre "que nous pouvons appeler 'roman à énigme'" (Poétique de la prose 57). To a greater or lesser degree, Miss Marple, Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot all belong to this genteel—and quintessentially English—subcategory of amateur detecting. Although it is arguably the most popular crime format in the world, it has very little to do with the American and Italian literary traditions, and even less to do with the French. American private detection, it should be emphasized, is a métier and not an avocation. Consequently, the "English" style to which an American gave birth and which a Frenchman subsequently valorized will play the smallest possible role in the following pages.

Dostoevsky's Inspector Porfiry, with his subtle, insinuating, almost priestly methods of imbuing criminals with the need to confess, was, as we have already seen, the "éminence bleue" behind (Jules)
Maigret. In equal and opposite measure, Raskolnikov became the model for countless criminals who must struggle with their conscience as well as the law. In the policier, the high-ranking plainclothesman and the tormented outlaw are by far the most important characters. Private detectives of the Sam Spade/Philip Marlowe variety are generally as alien to the French fictive tradition as they are to the Italian (except, of course, for retired police officers, who continue to exercise their office in an unofficial capacity long after they have been pensioned off; obviously, Maigret is the most important manifestation of this phenomenon). On the very rare occasions when private detectives do show up in French crime films and novels, they generally lack glamour and existential purpose. The detective agency that Antoine Doinel (Jean-Pierre Leaud), director François Truffaut's onscreen alter ego, works for in Baisers volés does nothing but poke its nose into the mundane affairs of the adulterous and the mildly dishonest—just as real detectives do. Of the 40 films cited as the all time best French policiers by a select panel of French film critics, only one, Claude Miller's Mortelle randonnée (1983), employed a private eye as its principal protagonist. The real polar action would always take place in Sûreté squadrooms and underworld caves.

For indigenous archetypes, the French have recourse to two "home-grown" models. Respectively, these are Victor Hugo's Inspector Javert—Jean Valjean's implacable nemesis, a government functionary who pushes justice to the frontiers of inhumanity and sin—and Vautrin, Balzac's master-criminal-turned-master-flic.

In his prison diaries, Antonio Gramsci reflected on both of these fictional creations. "Il tipo di Javert dei Miserabili è interessante," he
wrote, “dal punto di vista della psicologia popolare: Javert ha torto dal punto di vista della ‘vera giustizia’, ma Hugo lo rappresenta in modo simpatico, come ‘uomo di carattere....” (Gramsci 2129). Javert, the diarist felt, would eventually mutate into superior judicial beings—such as Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes and G.K. Chesterton’s Father Brown. Although a prisoner himself—albeit a political one—Gramsci appreciated the fact that French and English detective story writers did not, as a rule, romanticize crime. Conversely, he felt that Vautrin was a little off the beaten path of fictional criminal development: “Balzac con Vautrin, si occupa del delinquente, ma non è ‘tecnicamente’ scrittore di romanzi polizieschi” (Gramsci 2129).

Far from being a son of privilege, Hugo’s incorruptible punisher of the weak was born behind bars himself: “Javert était né dans une prison d’une tireuse de cartes dont le mari était aux galères. Engrandissant il pensa qu’il était en dehors de la société et désespéra d’y rentrer jamais. Il remarqua que la société maintient irrémédiablement en dehors d’elle deux classes d’hommes, ceux qui l’attaquent et ceux qui la gardaient; il n’avait le choix qu’entre ces deux classes: en même temps il se sentait je ne sais quel fond de rigidité, du regularité et de probité, compliqué d’une inexprimable haine pour cette race du bohèmes dont il était. Il entra dans la police. Il y réussit. A quarante ans il était inspector” (Hugo 169).

This description of a man who was forcibly shaped by society is probably the closest Hugo ever came to exploring what would subsequently be described as Zolaesque determinism. It is interesting to note that Javert shares his fictional universe with Jean Valjean, the convict-turned-capitalist-turned philanthropist-turned-fugitive-
turned hero, a Romantic self-creator who is redeemed by the charity of a saintly bishop and who incarnates in his person the absolute antithesis of the naturalistic robot. The tension between these two extremes has provided the locus for many a successful policier, dramas in which the principle of freedom is embodied by the criminal, while the dead hand of sociological fatality hangs heavily over his legal nemesis. By juxtaposing Javert and Valjean, Hugo unwittingly created a paradigm which underscores the difference between French and Italian attitudes towards crime. Unfairly, almost obscenely, persecuted on account of his poverty-driven misdemeanors, Valjean is the last word in guiltless criminals, an Italian neorealist hero avant la lettre. Caught between his robotic devotion to the state and his tragically human background, Javert, on the other hand, seems quintessentially French, a polar commissaire par excellence, a mixture of surface ruthlessness and concealed understanding who is at least a century ahead of his time. Later authors have continued to refine the dramatic polarities of these archetypal antagonists till the present day.

That policemen come from humble, often “criminal” backgrounds, and align themselves with the very classes and values that made their early lives a living hell is an idea that would be further developed in 20th century French and American popular fiction—just as it would on the actual streets of New York and Paris. In book after book, Inspector Maigret wonders what his future might have been like if only his family could have afforded to keep him in medical school. Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, different in so many ways, are united in their detestation of “the rich”. Javert infused some much-needed ambiguity into a genre
which, at its worst, reduces important moral issues to crude black and white dualities.

Although of earlier provenance than Javert, Balzac’s protean Vautrin is clearly cut from the same narrative cloth, even though his limitless ambition would seem to owe more to the author’s social-climbing businessmen. While making his “Human Comedy” debut in _Le Père Goriot_ (1830), Vautrin explained his nature in the following terms: “Voulez-vous connaître mon caractère? Je suis bon avec ceux qui me font bien ou dont le coeur parle au mien. A ceux-là tout est permis, ils peuvent me donner des coups de pieds dans les os des jambes sans que je leur dise: _Prends garde!_ Mais, nom d’une pipe, je suis méchant comme le diable avec ceux qui me fracassent, ou qui ne me reviennent pas. Et il est bon de vous apprendre que je me soucie de tuer un homme comme ça dit-il en lançant un jet de salive” (_Le Père Goriot_ 106 - 107).

A reader and admirer of the murderous, bisexual Renaissance artist Benvenuto Cellini, Vautrin thinks of himself as a poet of crime. A practically-minded believer in the will-to-power, he dreams of becoming a wealthy slave-owner in America—an ambition which Hugo’s cockroach-like Thénardier will eventually accomplish in _Les Misérables_. When angered, his physiognomy changes like the features of Cuchulainn in Celtic myth: “Horrible et majestueux spectacle! sa physionomie présenta un phénomène qui ne peut être comparé qu’a celui de la chaudière pleine de cette vapeur fumeuse qui soulèverait des montagnes, et que dissout en un clin d’oeil une goutte d’eau froide” (_Le Père Goriot_ 185). Ready and able to commit murder when it suits his purposes, Vautrin is also modern fiction’s first uncloseted homosexual. Behind prison walls, he consummates his desires with younger
convicts. In the outside world, he sublimates them in his attempts to push seemingly heterosexual young men of promise into the forefront of post-Napoleonic French society.

By frankly acknowledging his underworld protagonist's sexual orientation at a time when even heterosexual liaisons had to be described with a great deal of circumspection, Balzac unwittingly endowed French crime fiction with a unique and precocious advantage. *Le Père Goriot* and its two sequels created a generic precedent which prioritized male/male relations within *le milieu criminel*. While explicitly gay mobster connections remained comparatively rare, what was once described as "feudal homosexuality" would play an important role in the *polars* of artists as diverse as Francis Carco and Jean-Pierre Melville. Unlike so many of the artistic developments mentioned in this work, this one seems somewhat "flukey," a wild card that could not have been predicted by any deterministic philosophy. This anomaly should be kept in mind when reading passages where events seem to unfold with the inescapable finality of Calvinist theology. In the midst of even the most ordered universe, it seems, predestination will always play a role.

Be that as it may, we must now return to the main thread of our story. Known by a variety of names, Vautrin/Jacques Collin is a master of aliases. When his Lucien de Rubempré project collapses, the arch-criminal is coerced into joining the police force in lieu of returning to the penitentiary or the galleys. As we learn in "La dernière incarnation de Vautrin", "Après avoir exercé ses fonctions pendant environ quinze ans, Jacques Collin s'est retiré vers 1845" (*Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* 641). Unsurprisingly, Marcel Carné, by universal consent
the most "poetic" director of policiers, "Depuis...un certain nombre d'années...[a songé] à porter à l'écran la vie extraordinaire d'un des personnages les plus étonnants qu'ait compris Balzac dans sa Comédie Humaine: Vautrin" (La vie à belles dents 378).

Remarkably, the supremely fictional character of Vautrin (and—as literary scholarship might eventually prove—of Javert as well), was modelled after one of history's more improbable figures. In A Criminal History of Mankind, we learn that a certain Eugène-François Vidocq was turned into a police spy by an officer known as M. Henry. A veteran of many crimes and escapes, the captured felon was, like Vautrin, forced to choose between prison and "betrayal". Vidocq practiced his turncoat métier with unprecedented skill: "[he] was allowed helpers, all chosen by himself—naturally, he chose criminals. There was fierce opposition from all the local police departments, who objected to strangers on their 'patches', but Henry refused to be moved. Vidocq's little band was called the Security—Sûreté—and it became the foundation of the French national police force of today" (Wilson 471). After being forced into retirement in 1833 "because a new chief of police objected to a Sûreté made up entirely of criminals and ex-criminals. [Vidocq] immediately became a private detective—the first in the world—and wrote his Memoirs. He became a close friend of writers, including Balzac, who modelled his character Vautrin on Vidocq" (Wilson 471).

If one were to compile a detective genealogy, one could say with some surety that Vidocq begat Vautrin who begat Javert who begat Porfiry who begat Maigret. On a parallel line of development, Auguste Dupin begat Sherlock Holmes who begat Father Brown who begat Hercule Poirot who begat Miss Marple. These are not, however, Western
narrative’s only criminal family trees. To seek out the third major line of descent one must travel to the United States.

Hardboiled detective fiction à la américaine is generally said to have originated in Black Mask magazine, a pulp fiction periodical which, shortly after its launching in 1920, ceased to be an imitator of Argosy and other “all story” magazines of that period, preferring to focus exclusively on tales of crime. Dashiell Hammett’s “Continental Op” entertainments first appeared in Black Mask, as would Raymond Chandler’s early fictional efforts a decade later.

Intriguingly enough, neither author had picked fiction as his first career choice. If the economy had been better, they would probably never have submitted manuscripts to magazines. Hammett was a veteran of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, the questionable company—since the 19th century, Pinkerton men had been hired out to large corporations as ultra-violent strike-breakers—which served as the model for the Continental, the organization that employed the author’s anonymous “alter ego”.

Red Harvest, the early “Op” novel which Bernardo Bertolucci has been trying to adapt cinematically for more than two decades—no doubt on account of its fictional setting’s “Italianate” style of governance—depicts a small town which is controlled by corruption from top to bottom. Employed by a rich old man in Personville—known to the locals as Poisonville—the Continental Op proceeds to play one tainted faction against another, choreographing a dance of death eerily similar to the one that would be orchestrated 34 years later by Toshiro Mifune’s rootless samurai in Yojimbo (1961), writer/director Akira Kurosawa’s epic black comedy about the harrowing of a bandit-ridden 19th century Japanese village whose
leaders make the fatal mistake of assuming that the *ronin* they have hired is really on their side. If anything, the Continental Op's approach to "house cleaning" is even more cynical. As he sneeringly promises his employer, "you'll have your city back, all nice and clean and ready to go to the dogs again" (Hammett 134). In *Yojimbo*, one of the earliest shots is of a dog running through the streets with a severed arm in its mouth. No wonder Bertrand Tavernier referred to Hammett as "[un des] auteurs de romans policiers explicitement marxistes...." (Montalban 107).

Parenthetically, Woody Haut suggested that "It is no coincidence that Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest* was published on the eve of the Wall Street Crash" (Haut 1). In *Red Harvest*, even the crooked find it hard to survive. The following exchange is fairly typical:

"...What do you think of that? I pick up six hundred berries like shooting fish, and have to bum four bits for breakfast.'

"I said it was a tough break but that was the kind of world we lived in" (Hammett 63).

As the above passage clearly denotes, Dashiell Hammett knew how to express himself in period slang with an economy and a clarity which were much emulated. Over and above his political engagement was the instinctive knowledge that less is sometimes more. Aside from the dated argot and occasional concessions to pulp magazine sensibilities, Hammett today can be comfortably compared to such contemporary connoisseurs of "cool" crime as Barry Gifford and James Ellroy. Although his disaffection with the modern world preceded "Popular Front" politics, it could also outlive them. Dialectical materialist though he was, Hammett did not deny his readers a certain
metaphysical dimension. Thus, in a manner seductively reminiscent of the Catholic legitimist Balzac's take on Vautrin, in *The Maltese Falcon* Hammett describes Sam Spade, his most famous protagonist, in the following quasi-Miltonic terms: "He looked rather pleasantly like a blond Satan" (Hammett 225).

Although equally suspicious of the motives of the rich, Raymond Chandler's wary heroes were more traditionally cast in the role of disaffected knights errant. Even the names of his detectives remind one of the author's proper British public school education. The author's first private eye protagonist, was called "Mallory", sharing the moniker—give or take an "l"—of the author of *La Morte d'Arthur*, while his second would be named after the most famous Elizabethan playwright after Shakespeare. Marlowe's sense of the ubiquity of evil is as vast as Sam Spade's or the Continental Op's, but his apprehension of it is more cosmic than socio-economic. Typically, Chandler—an embittered alcoholic who had failed as an oil executive—writes, "Out there in the night of a thousand crimes people were dying, being maimed, cut by flying glass, crushed against steering wheels or under heavy car tyres. People were being beaten, robbed, strangled, raped, and murdered... A city...rich and vigorous and full of pride, a city lost and beaten and full of emptiness" (*The Long Goodbye* 232 - 233). Stylistically, Chandler was as romantically florid as Hammett was icily precise. In novels and movies, Philip Marlowe would complete the composite figure which Sam Spade began. Between them, these two fictional archetypes would come to define what readers/viewers now expect from hard-bitten private eyes. To a "t", they fit Lawerence's "hard, isolate, stoic and a killer" prescription. As Michel Ciment
pointed out in his book-length study of the American crime film, “Coincé entre la police et la truand, le privé est un être seul qui ne peut compter sur personne” (Le Crime à l'écran 58). Of himself, Philip Marlowe said, with a seductive mixture of pride and self-pity, “I'm a lone wolf, unmarried, getting middle-aged, and not rich. I've been to jail more than once and I don't do divorce business... The cops don’t like me too well, but I know a couple I get along with....” (The Long Goodbye 79). Often ex-cops themselves, with an instinctive affinity for those outside the law, “hardboiled dicks” are uniquely privileged catalysts who travel without obstruction between the social classes, moving up and down the social ladder according to the dictates of each case.

Though, as we have seen, Vidocq invented the profession of private detective, there has never been much space for such an individual in the French fictional firmament, and still less in the Italian. In “L’americano, pistolero disincantato Il mio Ambrosio colto, con la cervicale”, an article published recently in the cultural pages of the Milanese daily Il Corriere della Sera, Renato Oliveri—creator of Commissario Ambrosio, the closest thing Italy has to a successful author of i gialli—contrasted the characteristics of his flagship hero to those of Raymond Chandler’s most famous creation. At first glance, the Milanese municipal employee would seem to suffer invidiously from the comparison. Thus, we learn that “Marlowe beve regolarmente liquori, perché non siano dolci, e caffè nero senza zucchero. In questo, sul caffè, Ambrosio gli somiglia.” (“L’Americano, pistolero disincantato. Il mio Ambrosio colto, con la cervicale” 26.) On the level of ballistics, “Marlowe usa pistole automatiche Colt di vari calibri. Si ricorda in particolare una Smith & Wesson speciale cal. 38, probabilmente con una
canna di quattro pollici. Ambrosio ha invece una Beretta calibro 9 d'ordinanza, e non è un buon tiratore” (“L'Americano, pistolero disincantato” 26). On the field of sex, “L'atteggiamento di Marlowe verso le donne è considerato dal suo ideatore 'normale', da uomo vigoroso e sano. Non è sposato, tutti lo sanno. Invece Ambrosio è stato lasciato da sua moglie Francesca e ha da anni un rapporto soddisfacente con Emanuela, infirmiera al Policlinico di Milano” (“L'Americano, pistolero disincantato” 26). Both men suffer from melancholia, but Ambrosio's is said to stem from his physical separation from his girlfriend. The Italian's loneliness, in other words, is both explicable and curable. He is not happy with his slightly isolated position in a very social society. The very sanity of his surroundings precludes the elevation of individual alienation to the level of heroic status that is the measure and reward of America's hardboiled heroes.

Although the most famous practitioners of their craft, Chandler and Hammett did not single-handedly define the sub-genre in which they worked. Indeed, from a contemporary perspective it seems most unlikely that hardboiled fiction would have developed in the way that it did if not for the hugely influential “failure” of an unsuccessful “art” novel. With the exception of some of his posthumously published works, To Have and Have Not is unquestionably the most critically despised of Ernest Hemingway's novels (even Across the River and Into the Trees enjoys a better press). First published in 1937 out of the author's need for money, the book seems rushed, disjointed, and abominably constructed. From the perspective of hardboiled fiction, on the other hand, it is a formative masterpiece on the level of The Maltese Falcon (1930), The Big Sleep (1939) and The Postman Always Rings Twice
(1935). Its central figure, Harry Morgan, although imbued with the fatalistic stoicism common to all Hemingway heroes, is also ruthless, paranoid, bitter, a murderer, untrustworthy to his friends, and a cripple. He mutters contemptuous comments out of the corner of his mouth like one of Humphrey Bogart's big screen heroes (it was not for nothing that the cinematic interpreter of Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe was chosen to play a far-less-dirty Harry in Howard Hawks's 1944 screen version of *To Have and Have Not*). He is also very much a man of the "Dirty Thirties". After losing everything in the Depression to a string of "bad luck", boat captain Harry Morgan explains things to a prospective crew mate:

"...What they're trying to do is starve you Conchs out of here so they can burn down the shacks and put up apartments and make this a tourist town... I hear they're buying up lots, and then after the poor people are starved out and gone somewhere else to starve some more they're going to come in and make it a beauty spot for tourists.'

"'You talk like a radical,' I said.

"'I ain't no radical,' he said. 'I'm sore. I been sore a long time'" (Hemingway 97).

*To Have and Have Not* describes scenes of violence with the cold-blooded objectivity that would later be perfected by Jim Thompson and—on a more debased level—by Mickey Spillane: "He was trying to come up, still holding onto the Luger, only he couldn't get his head up, when the nigger took the shotgun against the wheel of the car by the chauffeur and blew the side of his head off. Some nigger" (Hemingway 7 - 8).
Riddled with prejudice and free with racial epithets—"Cubans are bad luck for Conchs. Cubans are bad luck for anybody. They got too many niggers there too"—Harry Morgan is nonetheless willing to give credit where credit is due (Hemingway 258). People constantly surprise him, for better or worse. If he stereotypes co-workers on the basis of skin colour, he fully expects them to return the favour when it comes to him. He is also almost clinically paranoid. He breaks the neck of an illegal Chinese labour importer whom he thought "was the easiest man to do business with I ever met" primarily because he also "thought there must be something wrong all the time" (Hemingway 55). Harry’s former friend Eddy, now a pathetic “rummy” and hanger-on, escapes a similar fate by sheer dumb luck. In 260 pages, Harry manages to lose everything: his boat, his arm, his life. His philosophy can be summed up by the bitter words, “No matter how a man alone ain’t got no bloody fucking chance”’ (Hemingway 225). Harry Morgan set the mold years before “dans le film noir, apparu dans les années 1940...l’on rencontre la préfiguration du personnage contemporain de loser” (Garbarz 95).

Although obviously written primarily for profit, To Have and Have Not is not without its modernist literary techniques. Narrators, some of whom are only peripheral to the plot, change from chapter to chapter. An “unnatural act” involving Harry’s “flipper” reminds one strongly of Popeye’s “corncob rape” in Sanctuary, the William Faulkner novel that appeared around the same time and for much the same reasons. Marie, Harry’s ex-hooker wife, rhapsodizes about her husband’s unique manliness in a couple of medium-length monologues that are essentially pocket-sized distillations of Molly Bloom’s soliloquy. For
all its coarseness, the major thematic strains and motifs of "lost generation" literature are very much present in *To Have and Have Not*.

The fourth major founder of hardboiled literature was James M. Cain. Typically, when *The Postman Always Rings Twice* first appeared in 1935, it was appreciated more by the French and Italians than it was by the Americans. Pierre Chenal adapted the book for the screen in 1939, while Luchino Visconti used it as the source of *Ossessione*, his first feature, in 1942, four years before Tay Garnett directed the first American version. Albert Camus claimed to have used *The Postman* as a blueprint for his existentialist masterpiece, *L’Etranger* (1942). Elio Vittorini, meanwhile, was particularly impressed by the book's utter lack of introspection: "Cain non dà che facce e fatti da vedere, e non permette di vedere o intravedere altro. I fatti interiori dà impliciti negli esteriori..." ([Diario in pubblico](#) 93). For the first time, Cain shifted the reader's locus of interest not to compromised heroes, but to villains *tout court*. Although convention still required them to somehow pay for their sordid deeds, Cain's novels managed to turn their readers into conceptual accessories after the fact. The antisocial fun of *Fantômas* could now be made explicit in a more quotidian fashion.

This "breakthrough" would shortly be exploited by Jim Thompson, David Goodis, Cornell Woolrich, and the other inheritors of the Hammett-Chandler-Hemingway-Cain tradition. As we shall see shortly, it was these "adepts" rather than their more famous "gurus" who would capture the imagination of French filmmakers in the postwar world. To understand how this could have occurred, one must first return to the France of the 1930s.
As in the United States, the *policier* was a film genre that was well adapted to the new and still unperfected technology of the "talkie". Jean Renoir enjoyed his first commercial success with *La Chienne* (1931), a black comedy about an unequal romantic triangle that leads to murder and the execution of a pimp who is guilty of everything except the crime for which he is guillotined. A year later, Renoir made *La Nuit du carrefour*, the first of dozens of movies to feature the intuitive detective methods of France's most popular detective, Inspector Maigret. Even though this project was seemingly damaged by the personal problems the director was experiencing at that time—"Selon [Georges Simenon], Renoir qui était en train de se séparer de sa femme...était déprimé. Il buvait plus que de raison. C'est ainsi qu'un jour complètement ivre, il a oublié de tourner un certain nombre de séquences"—the end result was still impressive enough for Jean-Luc Godard to declare it "le plus grand film policier français, que dis je, le plus grand film français d'aventure." (Assouline 241 - 242; Païni 54).

Renoir made a number of other crime movies during the 1930s, but their sociological emphases can more profitably be discussed in the paragraphs devoted to Neorealism.

The parameters of the French crime film were further expanded in 1937 with the release of Julien Duvivier's nostalgic chef-d'oeuvre, *Pépé le Moko*. Although the film is said to have been "inspired by the non-romantic *Scarface*" (Peary 320), Duvivier's tale of the last days of a doomed Parisian gangster in exile is a high-water mark in the history of screen romanticism. Jean Gabin, the greatest French actor of 1930s vintage French cinema, plays *Pépé* like a *poète maudit* with
strong fashion sense. Secure in his refuge in the Casbah, this European criminal faces immediate capture or summary execution the moment he sets foot in the more respectable quarters of Algiers. His sense of nostalgia is heightened when he becomes fond of the Parisian-born mistress (Mireille Balin) of an older, wealthy tourist (Charles Granval). Pépé’s best friend/arch-enemy Inspector Slimane (Lucas Gridoux), an Arab officer in an otherwise all-white police department, welcomes this development since it increases the chances of Pépé falling into his devious clutches. While bewitched by infatuation—as much by memories of his own past as by the new woman in his life—the Casbah-trapped gangster behaves shoddily towards his greatest underworld ally (Gabriel Gabrio) and loyal gypsy mistress (Line Noro). His legendary reputation and de facto invulnerability seem less and less important when set beside the passage of irrecoverable time.

Pépé le Moko is distinguished by many background shots of the real Algiers and its equally real Casbah. Duvivier’s camera zeroes in on the town’s diverse inhabitants—his emphasis on racial mixing verges on visceral disgust vis-à-vis miscegenation—and records the names of some of its stranger byways, such as “La Rue de l’Impuissance”. Initially Pépé is so sure of his Casbah refuge, he gallantly shoots invading policemen in the legs in lieu of killing them. Ultimately, the only thing that can kill him is his love for Paris.

Duvivier’s gangsters are all imbued with the apache-flavoured misogyny that we first found in Jésus-la-Caille. “Je n’écoute jamais aux femmes,” is a typical put-down. Inter-male loyalty is of paramount importance, while Slimane’s interest in his French nemesis is at least latently homosexual, a fact underscored by Pépé’s “butch” teasing of
the policeman whenever he's in this rather effete Arab's presence. Pépé and Gaby's talk about Paris foreshadows the Bogart/Bacall doubles entendres in *The Big Sleep* (1946). While not as common as in many French crime films, underworld slang is still judiciously used. As one older reprobate explains, "Je n'ai jamais employé les mots d'argots sauf aux gens pour qui la langue française est morte."

Duvivier's innovations would be carried still further by the greatest screenwriter/director team of the late 1930s, Marcel Carné and Jacques Prévert. Today best known for *Les Enfants du paradis* (1945), a large-scale historical romance which was recently voted the best French sound picture of all time by a panel of practicing French film critics, Carné and Prévert jointly created the most acclaimed examples of poetic realism in 1938 and 1939.

Like *Pépé le Moko*, both *Le Quai des brumes* (1938) and *Le Jour se lève* (1939) starred Jean Gabin in the leading role. Although extremely charismatic, in all three films Gabin's fictional personae stem from humble origins. In each feature he kills at least one person, and in all of them he dies. As Jacques Prévert wrote in his bittersweet "Poème de Jacques Prévert à Jean Gabin", "On ne meurt qu'une fois/dit un dit-on/on meurt souvent,/on meurt tout le temps,/répond Jean Gabin sur l'écran..." (Jean Gabin 258).

Marcel Carné enjoys the unenviable distinction of being the only major filmmaker in the world who is suspected of being creatively inferior to his favourite scenarist. More equitably, Edward Barton Turk argues that the success of their joint efforts was the result of a "clash of two strong creative forces, from the interaction of two incompatible visions" (Turk 45). One thing the two men did have in
common was an understanding of poverty: both were mainly self-educated, having emerged from humble circumstances. Although a strong fatalistic streak ran through Prévert’s scenarios, this first-generation Surrealist’s public persona was very different. A populist poet, chain-smoking bon vivant, and flâneur with a gift for maintaining prolonged heterosexual relationships as well as countless easy-going friendships, Jacques Prévert seemed in many ways to be the exact opposite of the withdrawn, crabbed, homosexual Carné. Prévert’s infectious sensuality, it was said again and again, was relentlessly leached out of the frame by Carné’s dour mise-en-scène. This could perhaps be explained by “the premature death of [Carné’s] mother [which] influenced [his] dark conception of love and women” (Turk 11). On the other hand, these unlikely collaborators loved “les mêmes comédiens. Ils ont la même sensibilité, le même amour du péniches dans la brume, de la pluie sur les pavés de ce Paris où ils ont connu les même années difficiles” (Andry 96). What’s more, if Prévert was the one with the “ear” (for marvellously evocative dialogue), Carné was the one with the eye (for splendidly visual effects). Like so many French directors, Carné was a retired film critic whose most famous article was “Comment descend le cinéma français dans la rue?”, a brief on behalf of realistic urban set design and location shooting. He was a great admirer of German cinema in general, and of F.W. Murnau’s work in particular. At the risk of over-simplifying the procedure, one might say that he cut Prévert’s breezy Surrealism with some much-needed Expressionist rigour, finding the proper balance between romance and tragedy, poetry and grit, in stories that could all too easily have grown lopsided in the cinematic telling. Without this input, it seems most
unlikely that the ingredients needed for réalisme poétique would ever have properly gelled.

Poetic realism is said to create “a fantastic, stylized world in which myth and reality merge in one....” (Garbicz and Klinowski 288). Although usually regarded as the quintessentially French film style, it was not immune to foreign influences, American as well as German. “Pictorially,” one American critic claims, “Le Quai des Brumes shows the influence of Josef von Sternberg’s silent film The Docks of New York (1928)” (Turk 104).

In recent years, French film scholars have become increasingly intrigued by the sway exercised by Edward Hopper’s realistic urban paintings on American popular culture in general, and on hardboiled Hollywood cinema in particular. In “Cinéma, cinéma: Regard sur Edward Hopper”, Jean-Pierre Naugrette observed that, “A regarder de près les tableaux d’Edward Hopper (1882 - 1967), on a très vite l’impression que les liens entre peinture, littérature et cinéma sont si étroitement, si finement tissés qu’il est pratiquement impossible de dire qui a commencé le premier, qui a influencé qui, où est la cause, où est l’effet” (Naugrette 55). As an example of this confused line of descent, Naugrette noted, “On sait par exemple que Hopper admirait beaucoup Hemingway... Hemingway a inspiré Hopper, qui a inspiré les cinéastes....” (Naugrette 55).

From the perspective of 1997, one could probably say much the same about Robert Brassai’s snapshots of nocturnal Paris in regard to French popular culture. Although nowhere near as well known in the 1930s as his American comrade-in-arts, the Hungarian-born Brassai’s richly evocative, intensely “narrative” black and white portraits of
prostitutes and pimps, night clubs and bordellos, abandoned streets and dark canals, were soon absorbed by the commercial French film industry, and brought to the peak of formal perfection by the cinema of Carné and Prévert. The fictional world of Pierre Mac Orlan and Francis Carco had finally been turned into cinematic flesh.

Le Quai des brumes was not the first crime film the Prévert/Carné team turned its hand to, but this moody thriller was fated to be the most influential. More than 20 years after that landmark was released, Pierre Leprohon would observe that even the film version of Pasolini’s Una vita violenta would seek “le décor sordide de la zone périphérique, le ‘miserabilisme’ déviation faussée du néo-réalisme, le sens du social cher au film italien, deviennent alors le prétexte d’affabulations purement romantiques toutes proches—et souvent poésie en moins—du romantisme prévertien de Quai des brumes et des Portes de la nuit” (Leprohon 200).

Pierre Mac Orlan’s original novel was largely set in the years immediately preceding the First World War, being capped by a brief post-war epilogue. A group of disparate individuals seek refuge in Montmartre’s famous “Lapin Agile” on a cold winter night, and gunfire is briefly exchanged with a gang of shadowy underworld types who want to kill one of the inn’s besieged habitués. With the coming of the dawn, these chance acquaintances drift off to their various fates—most of them tragic. The mood of the novel is expressed by the following aphorism: “...le cafard n’a pas de patrie, il ne connaît qu’une direction: Le Sud” (Mac Orlan 51). In 1960 François Truffaut would, at the end of his second feature, Tirez sur le pianiste, choreograph a snowy death similar to the one suffered by Jean Rabe on page 142 of Mac Orlan’s
Edward Barton Turk described the author as “France's Liam O'Flaherty”, and believed that Mac Orlan’s “two major themes—escape and destiny—[were] a response to the gruesome forces unleashed by World War I” (Turk 97 - 98). In the case of Carné and Prévert, Gilles Deleuze's assertion that “[l]a ligne de fuite est une déterritorialization [et les] Français ne savent bien ce que c'est” most definitely does not apply (Dialogues 47). For the Prévertian hero, as embodied by Jean Gabin in Carné’s films as well as Pépé le Moko, life was always elsewhere.

Nevertheless, despite the trench-flavoured nostalgia of Mac Orlan’s prose, the film version of Le Quai enjoyed only a passing connection to its source novel. As Carné recalled in his autobiography:

L'action du Quai des Brumes se passait à Montmartre du siècle, plus particulièrement au Lapin Agile. Comment reconstituer le vieux Montmartre, celui de la rue des Saules et du cimetière Saint-Vincent, à Neubelsberg, où le film devait être tourné? (La Vie à belles 93).

Originally conceived as a Franco-German co-production, the film was eventually moved to the port city of Brest. Iconic movie star Jean Gabin played Jean, the military deserter who, as we have already seen, was required to refrain from specifying the precise nature of his contravention of military justice, and to stack his uniform neatly on a chair prior to assuming civilian garb. Prévert’s biographer Marc Andry described Le Quai as “le film clé d'une époque inquiète. Les brumes. La pluie. Un amour impossible. L'étrangété d'un implacable destin dans un enfer pavé d'intonations surréalistes” (Andry 118). Co-star Michèle Morgan helped to establish the norms of noirish fashion five years
before the stars of *Casablanca* slipped into matching white trenchcoats. She was helped in this endeavour by Coco Chanel, the famed fashion designer who insouciantly insisted that "Un film comme celui-là n'a pas besoin de robe: un imperméable, un béret, voilà tout" (Andry 118). Cinematographer Eugen Schüfftan was happily able to fuse Carné's Expressionist taste with Prévert's Surrealist sensibilities. Although *Le Quai*’s plot is very similar to that of *Pépé le Moko*, it is the latter film which stands as the signature example of poetic realism.

Ironically, *Le Quai des brumes*’ romantic fatalism would eventually be condemned as a contributing factor to the 1940 collapse of French battlefield morale. To both Vichy and *maquisard* judges, the film’s “defeatist” dialogue and unsavoury characters were more than a little suspect. Even when the film first came out, Jean Renoir—then at the height of his alignment with the French Communist Party—condemned *Le Quai* as “fascist,” avoiding a bloody nose from the outraged Jacques Prévert only by lamely explaining, “—Jacques, tu me connais!... Jamais je ne dirai qu'un film auquel tu as travaillé est un film fasciste... Non, j'ai voulu dire que certains personnages appelaient la trique fasciste....” (La Vie à belles dents 110).

When first introduced onscreen, Jean Gabin is shown clambering into the cab of a truck while hitchhiking in the fog; this opening would re-appear four years later in Luchino Visconti’s first feature, *Ossessione*. Its look also reminds the late 20th century cinéphile of Raoul Walsh’s monochromatic nocturnes in the 1940 melodrama, *They Drive by Night*, just as Walsh’s film in turn makes one think of Edward Hopper. When Gabin is gunned down from a moving car at the end of *Le Quai*, the origins of this scene clearly belong to *Scarface, Little Caesar,*
and the other early gangster epics, but the shadowy décor and full shot *mise-en-scène* flash forward to *Casablanca*, *To Have and Have Not*, and other mid-'40s *films noirs*. "The French *film noir,*" Raymond Durgnat reminds us, "precedes the American genre. French specialists include Feuillade, Duvivier, Carné, Cloizot, Yves Allegret...." (Palmer 84) In Hollywood, he whimsically points out, *Pépé le Moko* became not only "*Algiers* ("Come with me to the Casbah") [but] also *Pepe-le Pew* [the amorous French skunk featured in numerous Warner Brothers cartoons]." (Palmer 84) *Algiers* was not the only Hollywood re-make of a French *policier*, either. In Fritz Lang's Hays Code-hobbled hands, Renoir's *La Chienne* was re-cast as *Scarlet Street* (1945). Hollywood's need to re-make French films in American garb was established long before the end of the Second World War.

Even so, the discovery of *American film noir* had a profound effect on the French film industry. In Michel Ciment's words, "Si la figure du gangster domine les années trente, l'avènement du détective privé caracterize le début de la décennie suivante" (*Le crime à l'écran* 53). Although John Huston's 1941 version was technically the third cinematic adaptation of Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, this seminal work did not make a smooth, sequential transition to the French screen, despite its subsequent status as "le paragon d'un nouveau genre, le 'film noir'"(*Le crime à l'écran* 53). Thanks to the cultural blockade imposed on France by the triumph of German arms, Hollywood movies were not screened in either Vichy or the Occupied Zone between 1940 and 1944, and very few were seen in 1945. Thus, between mid-July and August of 1946, *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Laura* (1944), *Farewell, My Lovely* (1944) and several
less important noirish works were projected for the first time onto Parisian screens. Despite the artistic quality and commercial success of wartime *polars*—some of which made *Positif*'s previously mentioned “Top Forty List”—these American imports had a huge effect on French intellectual life.

Italy was equally impressed by these tough new works, although from a somewhat different perspective. Giuseppe De Santis, for instance, an Italian film critic who would later carve out a respectable career for himself in his homeland’s postwar film industry, believed that “Il realismo del cinema americano assunse le tinte nette e crude che quella società agitata, sconvolta e ancora in crisi di crescenza suggeriva: inoltre erano gli anni solenni e tragici della crisi mondiale....” (De Santis 47). For most Italian observers, Hollywood’s depiction of onscreen violence had more to do with bleak social conditions than it did with changing popular aesthetics and/or morbid metaphysics. During the floodtide of Neorealism, things could hardly have appeared otherwise.

Up until 1945, the crime genre belonged primarily to the English, the Americans, and the French, with strong stylistic contributions being provided by the Germans and, in a far more indirect way, the Russians. Since three of these nationalities do not thematically concern us, we have been restricted thus far to talking about French and American generic contributions. From here on out, however, our theoretical diptych becomes a triptych. Italian cinema—although not Italian literature—will become a major part of our cross-referential evolutionary pattern. The reason why can be expressed in one word: Neorealism (the gritty inheritor of poetic realism, the movement which
fizzled in 1946 following the disastrous public and critical reception of Carné and Prévert’s *Les Portes de la nuit*).

For most of Western Europe, *film noir* and Neorealism were synchronous phenomena. In the cinema of Milan and Marseilles, one could scan *Paisà* (1946) and *The Maltese Falcon* on the same afternoon. Despite the vast stylistic and ideological differences between these two forms, for a variety of reasons they appeared to be complementary. If not for the sociological input of the Second World War, they would never have symbiotically evolved in the way that they did.

Of course, behind Neorealism and *film noir* lay several other movements, such as poetic realism—which was itself indebted to German Expressionism and the Russian novel. Both before and after the war, aspiring Italian directors worked with prominent French filmmakers. Michelangelo Antonioni, for instance, was “imposed” as an assistant director on Marcel Carné, who was then shooting *Les Visiteurs du soir* (1942), an experience which the coercive cultural climate of the Axis occupation doomed neither man to enjoy. Luchino Visconti’s experience with French cinema, on the other hand, was both more extensive and purely voluntary: “Visconti prende conoscenza dei film di Vigo, che lasceranno in lui qualche traccia, ed ‘aiuta’ Renoir per *Les basfonds [sic], Une partie de campagne, Tosca*. Le conseguenze di questa scelta vediamo in *Ossessione*, dove non è difficile ritrovare anche un passaggio visto con l’occhio del regista della *Bête humaine*” (Verdone 75).

Many Italian filmmakers considered poetic realism to be Neorealism’s direct progenitor. It should be emphasized, however, that their conception of poetic realism owed very little to the films of
Carné and Prévert, despite that filmmaking team's penchant for the proletariat and impeccable working class credentials. For Italian intellectuals Toni, the 1934 feature about poor immigrant workers in Marseilles that Renoir made at Marcel Pagnol's Mediterranean film studio, was the key proto-Neorealist work, not Le Quai des brumes.

According to Peter Bondanella, the very "term 'neorealism' was...first applied not to postwar Italian cinema but, instead, to the French films of the thirties in an article written by Umberto Barbaro in 1943," a full year after the release of Ossessione, the film which most critics now regard as the first true brick in the Neorealist edifice (Bondanella 24). Although Italy had been under Fascist control since 1922, very few Italian cinéastes were ideologically committed to either Il Duce or his party. Within the ultra-modern confines of Cinecittà and the Centro Sperimentale, they made inconsequential movies of the "white telephone" variety while writing enthusiastic articles about foreign motion pictures in the pages of Cinema and Bianco e Nero, dreaming all the while of better times at home. Occasionally, they were required to make patriotic propaganda movies, but even these commissioned efforts were notably light on nationalist fervor. What's more, Roberto Rossellini—the only major postwar Italian filmmaker to have worked regularly on jingoistic morale builders—was first off the mark with Roma, città aperta (1945), the flag-bearer of Neorealism to the world and the first openly anti-fascist Italian film.

Ironically, when the critics of Cahiers du cinéma and other French film journals took the rough-and-ready aesthetics of Rossellini's ecumenical Resistance movie to heart, they didn't realize that many of his decisions were based on necessity and not artistic choice. Because
all the studios in Rome had been damaged by Allied bombers, the Italian director was obliged to take his camera into the streets. A shortage of funds resulted in the employment of many non-actors, and the "raw" quality of the lighting in Roma, città aperta was the result not only of shooting outdoors with insufficient artificial illumination, but also of the different grades of black and white film stock which Rossellini was forced to purchase on the black market. Even the "elliptical editing", which so much impressed the young Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut, was more the result of want than narrative innovation.

In Open City and Paisà, the "enemy" was openly identified with the Nazi troops who had occupied Italy since the fall of 1943. Nevertheless, Manichean-style dualism was exceedingly rare in Neorealism. The movement's main thrust began with Vittorio De Sica's I Bambini ci guardano (1943) and peaked with the director's 1948 masterpiece, Ladri di biciclette, both works being scripted by Cesare Zavattini, Neorealism's most influential ideologue. In Strapparole, the indomitable screenwriter/theorist wrote, "Ogni cinema che mira a un rapporto stretto con i gravi problemi dell' uomo moderno, del neorealismo, partecipa a questo movimento coi modi propri. Il neorealismo è ormai la coscienza del cinema" (Zavattini 474). Because of its emphasis on the problems of ordinary people—of the poor and underprivileged classes—Neorealism's politics were invariably left-wing. At times, this sensibility transcended personal ideological conditioning. Roberto Rossellini, for instance, came from a wealthy bourgeois family, made films on demand for the ruling fascists, and was subsequently a vocal apologist for the Christian Democratic party.
While these biographical details did earn the director a number of critical brickbats in his native Italy, no one—not even Guido Aristarco, the doyen of PCI film critics—could deny his claim to being the true father of Neorealism.

Although many neorealist films dealt with crime—the aforementioned Bicycle Thieves, for instance, as well as Sciuscia (1946) and Germania Anno Zero (1947)—few if any could be called policiers. It is perhaps not entirely accidental that Anglo-American distributors habitually mistranslate the words Ladri di biciclette. The whole point of the film may be culled from its title, since Zavattini and De Sica are adamant in their insistence that poverty can make bicycle thieves out any of us; contextually, the romantic individualism of bicycle thief just won't wash.

If America, France and England are the crime fiction capitals of the world, this is at least in part because of the relative stability of these three countries. For Englishmen, Frenchmen and Americans, the state enjoys a solidity and a legitimacy that is alien to younger, more fragile polities. While Italy, as a recognizable national entity, has existed longer than any other European state with the exception of Greece, as a modern country its existence is much less assured. As of this writing, the Risorgimento is only 127 years old. In 1870, citizens of the new Italy had to make sense out of a state that had once been known as the Roman Empire prior to fragmenting into an archipelago of wealthy city-states which were constantly being occupied and attacked by Turks, Austrians, Spaniards, Frenchmen, Normans, Moors and anyone else with a strong national image and sense of national purpose. While Tuscan was the official language of this strangely artificial new
country, most people spoke dialects that were as different from the recognized tongue as Catalan is from Spanish. Northern, central and southern regions were more different from each other than Norway is from Denmark. Attempts to strengthen the sense of national purpose by means of colonial adventures usually ended in disaster, whether on the plains of Adowa (1896) or in the desert sands of El Alamein (1942).

Above all, there was the problem of Sicily. After 99.5% of Sicilian voters cast their lot in favour of union with Italy in 1860, the government in Rome proceeded to treat the most occupied and invaded of all Italian provinces like a sort of colony. The Mafia, once a secret society of 13th century Sicilian knights whose anti-Norman battlecry, "Morte Ai Francesi, Italia Anela," allegedly provided the acronym for this most famous of all illegal organizations, began to evolve into its present form as the result of a "series of exploitative administrations [which] helped to create a general mistrust of strangers among Sicilians" (Schneider and Zarate 10). Land was increasingly in the hands of gabelotti, the Sicilian version of Ireland's "gombeen men", cynical agents who made profits for absentee landlords at the expense of the peasantry. Mafiosi, therefore, however brutal and self-interested they might appear to outside eyes, could sometimes assume the shape of a viable alternative to the status quo.

Mafia elements, then known to yellow journalists as "the Black Hand", began emigrating to the United States in the last decades of the nineteenth-century. After New Orleans Police Chief Dave Hennessy was assassinated by Mafia gunmen in 1890—because he believed his brother to have been murdered by Black Handers in Houston, this Southern policeman was presumed by his pre-emptive killers to be thirsting for
revenge—an outraged mob lynched eleven suspects of Italian origin while they languished in jail, awaiting trial.

This ferocious example of American vigilante justice convinced period Mafiosi that they would be well-advised to confine their criminal activities to their own neighbourhoods. Thus, “Italo-American gangs remained secondary to Irish—and later Polish and Jewish—gangs in the first two decades of the [20th] century” (Schneider and Zarate 73). It was the 1920s and the implementation of Prohibition that provided Italian gangsters with their “edge”. By the early 1930s, the Irish, Jewish and Polish mobs of America had been decisively defeated in a long series of vicious, long-term turf wars. “Bugs” Moran, Dion O'Bannion, Dutch Schultz, “Mad Dog” Vincent Coll, and most of the other headline-grabbing mobsters of the Prohibition era were either killed or put out of business. The few that remained (Bugsy Siegel; Meyer Lansky) made common cause with the new streamlined syndicate perfected by Charles “Lucky” Luciano, Louis “Lepke” Buchalter, and Vito Genovese during the decade preceding the Second World War. When they died, they were generally not replaced (Nash 538).

From the 1880s onward, the Mafia was at least a bi-national corporation. In 1908, Joseph Petrosino of the New York Police Department was sent to Sicily to explore U.S./Italian underworld links, and was subsequently assassinated in the streets of Palermo for his pains (Nash 57 - 59). Only in the 1920s and '30s did the criminal organization suffer real discomfort at the hands of Mussolini’s security forces (Schneider and Zarate 58 - 61).
Nevertheless, even the Fascist secret police were unable to eliminate this problem entirely. Today, rumours persist that the American Army was given a much easier time than the British during the 1943 Allied invasion of Sicily thanks to a “sweetheart deal” worked out between the State Department and exiled Cosa Nostra kingpin, Lucky Luciano. After the war, the devastation wrought on Palermo provided an excuse to put money in Mafia pockets. “Of the 4025 construction licenses granted between 1957 and 1963, 80% had been issued to only five persons.” (Schneider and Zarate 92). Padded construction bills provided the funds required to take the lucrative North American heroin trade out of the hands of France’s Union Corse. Tax fraud was near universal, since “Four Mafia families [controlled] the 334 tax offices in Sicily leased to them by the state” (Schneider and Zarate 103). Because Sicily is an autonomous region within Italy’s body politic, local banks are not accountable to the country’s central bank—an ideal circumstance for money-laundering (although Italy’s tough-new anti-mafia laws will hopefully close this loophole in the near future).

For all these reasons, the Sicilian Mafia, as Arnd Schneider and Oscar Zarate convincingly argue in Mafia for Beginners, has always been stronger and more powerful than its better-known U.S. counterpart. What’s more, the Sicilian Cosa Nostra is outnumbered by the Neapolitan Camorra and the Calabrian ‘Ndrangheta (Usher 22). Collectively, the united Southern crime syndicate is truly a force to be reckoned with, especially since, until very recently, it was supported to the hilt by Italy’s long-serving Christian Democratic Party and their State
Department/CIA allies. It is now generally acknowledged that post-war Italy was kept under “A one-party system [which] had ruled for nearly 40 years by large-scale political and corporate racketeering, with the shady connivance of American and Italian secret agencies, and by a coalition with the Mafia” (Schneider and Zarate 119). Only in very recent years have these once unbreakable cabals begun to unravel.

If I have tried to explore Italy’s criminal history at some length, it is only because understanding the country’s cultural reaction to crime is incomprehensible without it. Criminal counter-governments have been a part of local life since the Medieval/Renaissance days of the condottiere and briganti. In many ways, they were seen to be both more indigenous and more stable than the various unrepresentative regimes that came and went with dismaying regularity.

In I Promessi sposi, the greatest and most influential of 19th century Italian novels, we do not encounter any Vautrins or Raskolnikovs. Indeed, armed villains are described in a manner that borders on melodrama: “Avevano entrambi intorno al capo una reticella verde, che cadeva sull’ omero sinistro, terminata in una gran nappa e dalla quale usciva sulla fronte un enorme ciuffo: due lunghe mustacchi arricciati in punta; una cintura lucida di cuoio a quella attacate due pistole...” and so on and so on, for another 50 hair-raising words (Manzoni 10). The author’s stock villains are as colourful and impersonal as a flamboyant natural disaster. Manzoni’s real interest lies with Renzo and Lucia—the young lovers harassed and pursued by the godless Don Rodrigo—the heroic priest Padre Cristoforo, and the legendary bandit prince, l’Innominato, who “turned from his wicked
ways and lived.” When Renzo runs afoul of the law he is no more volitionally responsible than he was when he contracted the plague. Even in a work as conservative as this, the Protestant/Jansenist notion of prideful sin—the basis of so much detective fiction—is notably absent, just as the polarities between “normalcy,” as embodied by society and the state, and “deviance”, as made manifest by rebellion and crime, are singularly weak. As Cesare Pavese bitterly noted in his private journal, “L’origine di tutte le violenze tra uomo e uomo, e for all that tra uomo e donna, sta in questo che rarissimamente ci si trova d’accordo sul valore di un fatto, di un pensiero, di uno stato d’animo ciò che per uno è tragedia per l’altro è gioco” (Il Mestiere della vita 97).

Despite the centrality of Roman Catholicism to its culture, and despite the lingering memory of the Roman Empire’s power and patriotism, Italy is a country where—thanks to the population’s (historically well-merited) lack of trust in the temporal and ecclesiastical authorities—moral relativism has long been part and parcel of popular thought. The artistic, scientific, and economic advances of the Renaissance did not result in an equally progressive political system. Frenchmen might regard 1789 as the dawn of the modern age, just as Americans are wont to connect the events of 1776 to the global triumph of democracy, but for Italians the slow progress of the Risorgimento provides no such self-aggrandizing dates. The ability to prove that the world was spherical and revolved around the sun did not result in the unification of even two city states. The end result of relentless foreign occupation was a cynicism that in some ways resembles the political disaffection of some of the more beleaguered Central European nations. In such an atmosphere, belief in
abstract virtues is hard to come by. Thus, when Italian director Tinto Brass, was asked what he thought about *Giustizia*, the filmmaker's response was jarringly blunt:

B- Non esiste.
I-Dovere?
B- Non esiste neppure questo (Pisaro 156)

On the other hand, as Cesare Pavese put it, "La politica è l'arte del possibile. Tutta la vita è politica" (Pavese 161). By extension, the problem of crime in general, and of the Mafia in particular, is the ultimate political problem, a headache of perhaps insuperable dimensions. In *Cinema Italiani degli anni '70*, film historian Uno Micciché phrased the Mafia film problematic in the following fashion: "Questa complessa e dolorosa materia—su cui la Commissione parlamentare antimafia dovrebbe fare definitivamente luce tra qualche mese e che affligge la Sicilia da decenni—non è certamente 'filmabile'" (Micciché 81).

Paradoxically, if the Mafia was "unfilmable," its home ground was all too lens-worthy. In the previous century, "Giovanni Verga non ha solamente creato una grande opera di poesia, ma ha creato un paese, un tempo, una società...." (De Santis 49). What this meant, essentially, was that Verga had turned Sicily into a sort of picturesque outpost of "Orientalism". Most of those who either wrote about Sicily or set movies in its territory, were Northern tourists or, at best, immigrants. Sicilian dialect was very seldom used in these works, but local characteristics and customs were very broadly—some might say sterotypically—reproduced. Thus, Pietro Germi, a filmmaker fated to
make his reputation with satirical comedies predicated on the absurdities of Sicilian social customs, felt compelled to explain to a French interviewer how he believed that “mes films, on pourrait les imaginer réalisés en Amérique ou en Russie ou en Angleterre—à part certains, liés des situations strictement locales, comme les films siciliens” (Germi 65). Rome, in other words, might be like everywhere else but Palermo was not. In Roy Armes's words, “In many ways...Sicilian films are best regarded not as works in a pure realistic tradition but as stylized Italian equivalents to the American Western” (Armes 140). Since the Italian “Wild West” had never been entirely pacified, it could not, of course, be treated as a purely mythological phenomenon. Since Sicilian culture was even more venerable than mainland Italian culture, there was also the problem of age. A whiff of impropriety clings to the notion of younger countries colonizing older frontiers. A specifically political approach was also out of the question, as Pierre Leprohon acknowledges in Le Cinéma italien: “La problème du banditisme sicilien donnera matière à de nombreux films qui ne pourront toujours l'aborder avec la franchise nécessaire” (Leprohon 129).

Even when, in the late 1940s, Italian filmmakers did deal more directly with crime than was customary in the better-known works of Neorealism, the diegetic material never quite gelled into a full-scale policier. Late ‘40s films such as Alberto Lattuada's Il Bandito and Carlo Lizzani’s Il Gatto might have been set in underworld milieus, but the connections made between the prevalence of crime and the devastation wrought by the Second World War and more than twenty years of Fascist misrule rendered these narratives incapable of
transporting the viewer to the semi-abstract cinematic plane inhabited by Scarface, Maigret and Sam Spade. On the other hand, as Ray Armes points out in *Patterns of Realism*, in the first of the two films, a bleak picaresque about a returning war veteran whom bad luck steers into a life of crime, "There are certain similarities with the defeatist atmosphere of prewar French works, like Carné's *Quai des brumes*, but the Prévert poetry is missing" (Armes 103). Armes, like many foreign and domestic film critics, cites Giuseppe De Santis's *Riso amaro* (1950) as the prime example of compromised Neorealism. "There is," he writes, "an epic sweep and plenty of violent action in *Bitter Rice*; quarrels among the girls in the rice fields, a seduction in a thunderstorm, a gun battle amid rotting carcasses in the refrigeration plant and a spectacular suicide" (Armes 130). Despite the film's serious subject matter, "someone in the course of the production saw the commercial possibilities of a film featuring several hundred naked-thighed young women" (Armes 129). Many of the more "commercial" Neorealist film plots sound suspiciously like opera. *Senza pietà*, for instance, a 1948 work directed by Alberto Lattuada, follows the doomed romance of Jerry, a black American military deserter who commits suicide after his Italian lover Angela dies as an unfortunate consequence of his criminal activities. In early postwar Italian crime films, *Le Quai des brumes* often seems to run head-on into *Carmen*. Later in this chapter we will see how operatic motifs would eventually "solve" the problem of filming the "unfilmable" Mafia. They also helped to make poverty seem more palatable, the sordid hotel room of the outlaw on the run being far less discomfiting to motion picture
audiences of modest means than the squalid apartments of unemployed bricklayers.

Before pursuing this argument, however, we must return to the intellectual milieu of postwar France. As we saw in the last chapter, French feelings towards American culture were now exceedingly mixed. On the one hand, there were positive memories of the Liberation and limitless enthusiasm for new Hollywood movies, experimental fiction and jazz. Contrapuntally, there was much worry about the long-term implications of the Marshall Plan, strong working class loyalty to the victors at Stalingrad, and a violent intellectual reaction against the first stirrings of McCarthyism. Despite his admiration for Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos and Duke Ellington, Jean-Paul Sartre produced *Le Putain respecteuse* in the mid-1940s, a depiction of a Klan-dominated Deep South that was even grimmer than the "Jim Crow" reality that invoked it. Even Boris Vian, the St.-Germain-des-Prés cultural barometer who, in Jean Cau's words, "aimait le jazz, l'Amérique...les 'Séries noires' de Marcel Duhamel'" (Croquis de mémoire 47) achieved his greatest commercial success in these years with *J'Irai crachez sur vos tombes*, a temporarily banned novel allegedly written by the lightskinned American mulatto "Vernon Sullivan". With tongue pressed firmly in cheek, Vian disingenuously professed to be merely the translator of this book about a Southern American Black man who can "pass" for white and who exacts a terrible revenge on two racist Southern belles (Croquis de mémoire 47). Mixing the styles of Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1939) and Henry Miller's phallus-driven erotic fantasies, Vian said of the fictitious Sullivan and his equally fictive motives "...sa préférence pour les Noirs inspirait à [lui] une espèce de
mépris des 'bons durs'," since he temperamentally sides with "des Noirs aussi 'durs' que les Blancs" (Vian 9). While *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* scontinues to be a contentious text on account of its ferocious misogyny, the book is also an eerie foreshadowing of certain Black militant fictions of the 1960s and '70s, notably Melvin Van Peebles's genre-bending "blaxploitation" epic, *Sweet Sweetback's Baad Ass Song* (1971). In France, more even than in the United States, it was realized that "With its reputation for corruption, racism, poverty, backward and primitive sexuality, the South [was] an ideal setting for pulp culture crime fiction" (Haut 149).

*J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* was far more sexually explicit than any American crime movie or novel could then have hoped to be, but the book's dark sexual undercurrents were very much in the American vein. Of course, since Vian's unique take on the hardboiled novel was set in the United States rather than France, it was initially seen as less threatening by Gallic censors, just as the erotically decadent *Salammbô* had once been considered less injurious to public morals than was the relatively chaste *Madame Bovary*, primarily because the action of the first Flaubert text was situated in ancient Carthage while the events of the second unfolded in contemporary—which is to say, mid-1nineteenth-century—France.

In "Chronique d'une imposture: L'érótic thriller'", Michel Cieutat noted that "les films noirs des années quarantes et cinquantes, par respect pour les romans de Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler ou James M. Cain dont ils étaient les adaptations...ont été les premiers des thrillers à mettre en relief la force matrice du sexe dans le comportement de leur personnages, être profondément imprégnés de
l'état d'esprit propre autant à l'air de la Depression (époque où furent écrits les romans) qu'à celui qui annonçait puis succédait au second conflit mondial (période où furent produits ces films)” (Garbarz 97). During the war years, lone wolf detectives achieved new onscreen status because “Coincé entre la police et la truands, le privé est un être seul qui ne peut compter sur personne” (Le crime à l'écran 58). Because American soldiers overseas were said to be almost universally anxious that their wives and girlfriends—liberated from the home for the first time, and working in the high-paying defence industry jobs that were once exclusively reserved for men—would betray them at their earliest possible opportunity, the image of the femme fatale arose from the miasma of turn-of-the-century coffeehouse chatter and became a dominant figure on American screens. Perhaps for related reasons, the latent homosexuality which Leslie Fiedler believes to be at the heart of 19th century American fiction began to integrate itself in precisely those films that favoured demonic female protagonists. In his biography of the Austrian-born American filmmaker, Kevin Lally writes, “[Billy] Wilder has called Double Indemnity a love story, but he’s not talking about the relationship between Walter and Phyllis—rather, it’s the bond between Walter and his mentor” (Lally 137). When female “praying mantises” are present, it would seem that their male counterparts can do little but huddle together for comfort—just as they would do in foxholes and trenches when under hostile fire. Once again we are reminded of Lilith, the Talmudic demon/angel who preys on men who are young, lonely, and far from home.

When French cinéphiles “discovered” film noir in 1946, virtually all of the ingredients that went into it were already well known to
them. One can find all of the seven noirish characteristics cited by Paul Schrader in his essay "Notes on Film Noir"—a majority of scenes lit for night; a visual preference for oblique and vertical lines; equal lighting emphasis on actors and settings; a tendency to promote compositional tension at the expense of physical action; "an almost Freudian attachment to water"; a love of romantic narration; a complex chronological order—in *Le Quai des brumes* and *Le Jour se lève*. Even so, these darkly-textured American films appeared to reflect something new.

In the 1930s, it should be recalled, Jean Gabin usually came to a sorry end on account of his love for a woman—but his death was almost never the woman's fault. The notion of the *femme fatale* was therefore alien to Popular Front cinema. When dark forces took human shape, they were most likely to do so in the form of Jules Berry, the actor who played this trick in Jean Renoir's *Le Crime de M. Lange* in 1936, *Le Jour se lève* in 1939, and Carné's *Les Visiteurs du soir* in 1942. French governments might have been more reluctant than their American counterparts to grant political rights to their female constituents, but French society as a whole was far less prone to all-male social gatherings. Underworld society, conversely, was virtually all male, with the exception of background wives, mob molls and affiliated whores. Male/male relationships were therefore paramount in such dramas, but the more overtly homosexual formulas devised by Francis Carco in *Jésus-la-caille* would obviously be unacceptable to mid-century French viewers and censors alike. An American compromise was therefore required.
If anything, the French craze for Americans romans noirs was even stronger than its penchant for the filmed variety. In his introduction to the new, now-famous Gallimard book line known as la "Séries noir", Marcel Duhamel warned his readers that "L'amateur d'énigmes à la Sherlock Holmes n'y trouvera pas souvent son compte. L'optimiste systématique non plus." (Le crime à l'écran 158)

Just as, by a weird stroke of synchronicity, Albert Camus physically resembled Humphrey Bogart, so did the Existentialist novel resemble its hardboiled predecessor. Horace McCoy's and James M. Cain's fictions have both been claimed as key influences on the composition of L'Etranger (1942). These two narrative streams were more than merely compatible; they actively fed and augmented each other.

"En presque trente ans (1952 - 1981), 61 auteurs ont été adaptés, et cela 117 fois...." (Bertés 90). Ironically, "Le champion absolu est James Hadley Chase (au moins 15 titres adaptés)...." (Bertés 90). Chase, of course, was an English author whose knowledge of American mores was limited to what he had learned from American movies. Nevertheless, Lemmy Caution, his most popular creation, would thrice be put to good use by Jean-Luc Godard.

As a rule, French cinéastes—very likely la "Séries noire's" staunchest fans—preferred to tackle the less illustrious of America's hardboiled talents. According to Catherine Berthé, "Les adaptations de Hammett, Chandler ou Cain avaient donné lieu à des chefs-d'oeuvres difficile à égaler...." (Bertés 91). Consequently, "La Série noire française semble être tiraillée entre la parodie et le réalisme...." (Bertés 93). In the case of Cain, an Italian, rather than an American,
definitively explored what Joyce Carol Oates once described as “a world immense with freedom, women hellish and infantile...money, power, the tantalizing promise of adventure” (Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties 110). Instead, French filmmakers enjoyed their greatest successes with William Irish, David Goodis, Charles Williams, Jim Thompson, and other hardboiled authors whom the American mainstream more or less forgot. Lionel White and Charles Williams would continue to inspire French filmmakers long after they had ceased to exercise the imaginations of their fellow countrymen. As the subject of the next few paragraphs once said,

Il est difficile aux Français de mesurer la solitude dans laquelle vivent aux Etats-Unis les écrivains qui ont choisi la littérature populaire. Les amateurs français de Série noire, sans lire forcément tout ce qui est traduit dans notre langue, parviennent vite à reconnaître le talent de tel ou tel romancier et à le faire savoir. Le téléphone arabe fait le reste, et c'est ainsi que les noms de David Goodis, Dolores Hitchens, William Irish, Dorothy B. Hughes, Henry Farrell, Jim Thompson, Joseph Harrington, Harry Whittington...circulent de bouche à oreille et se font une réputation parmi les spécialistes (Le Cinéma selon François Truffaut (419 -420).

François Truffaut—the critic-turned-cinéaste whose visceral distaste for the gangster genre is reflected by his observation that, in Scarface, director Howard Hawks “a dirigé Paul Muni de manière à le faire ressembler à un singe, les bras en demi-cercles, le visage grimaçant”—was as sympathetic to noirish losers as he was hostile to criminal social climbers (Les Films de ma vie 96). While the director’s 1966 feature, La Mariée était en noir, might have been a visual homage to the techniques of Alfred Hitchcock, his source material was provided
by William Irish (the pen name of Cornell Woolrich). Truffaut appreciated the fact that, in Irish’s dyspeptic universe, “Au lieu d’avoir des gangsters dans un milieu social bien défini, on avait des histoires qui ressemblent à des cauchemars. Irish c’est presque toujours des histoires d’amour empêchés, histoires effrayantes, qui reposent sur une idée de fatalité” (Le Cinéma selon François Truffaut 183 - 184). Sounding like a latterday Baudelaire in the presence of his personal Poe—in 1969, he would turn a second “Irish” novel into La Sirène de la Missisippi—Truffaut once described Woolrich as “un poète, tout comme [David] Goodis,” another of the filmmaker’s favourite hardboiled American authors (Le Cinéma selon François Truffaut 184.) He appreciated the fact that neither Irish nor the author of Down There (1956), the dour novel that would eventually be transformed into Truffaut’s darkly comic second feature, Tirez sur le pianiste, were very specific about locale. “Parce qu’on voit ces livres-là—les romans d’Irish, de Goodis, que j’aime beaucoup également—comme des contes de fées pour adultes,” the director explained. “Et je les adapte dans le même esprit que Cocteau tournant La Belle et la Bête, enfin en jouant un jeu moins ouvertement féerique” (Le Cinéma selon François Truffaut 185). Truffaut prided himself on his ability not only to find visual means of reproducing English language “tough guy” prose, but also to insure that those methods were truly French as well: “Ainsi, quand je devais affronter un ‘problème Irish’, j’avais des chances de trouver la ‘solution Irish’” (Le Cinéma selon François Truffaut 244). As a critic in the 1950s, the director had questioned the existence of “unfilmable” scenes, and his crime movies provided him with the perfect opportunity to put his theories to the test.
Each of Truffaut’s five true polars—because they’re more about adultery than murder, one should exclude from consideration La Peau douce and La Femme d’à côté—is a re-imagining of an American hardboiled novel. Une belle fille comme moi was inspired by Henry Farrell’s Such a Gorgeous Kid Like Me, while Vivement Dimanche was hived off a Charles Williams story.

Of this quintet of cinematic adaptations, Tirez sur le pianiste is unquestionably the most successful. While book and movie both deal with a talented concert pianist who believes his momentary insensitivity triggered the suicide of his self-sacrificing wife, the moods of these works could not be more different. Eddie Lynn, Goodis’s variation, is a wounded veteran of Merrill’s Marauders who won medals for killing Japanese soldiers in Burma; Charlie, meanwhile, François Truffaut’s much milder model, is a French pianist of Armenian descent who reads self-help books in order to overcome his timidity. The American pianist’s Philadelphia is a joyless urban backwater; Charlie’s Paris, on the other hand, though imbued with melancholy, is a city where complete strangers josh with each other, a place dripping with Prévertian romanticism. To make ends meet, Charlie and Eddie both tickle the ivories in out-of-the-way neighbourhood bars, and both parties will unwittingly cause the death of barmaids thanks to their unsavoury family connections. The barmaid whose love temporarily pulls Charlie out of his snail’s shell of emotional isolation is a romantic conflation of Ingrid Bergman in Casablanca and a feminized version of Gavroche, Victor Hugo’s immortal street urchin; Eddie’s doomed muse is neither romantic nor soft in any way, being the sort of embittered, street-savvy woman who’d stab “roosters where it really
hurts” with a hatpin whenever it came time to fend off a pass. (Shoot the Piano Player 13) If, as Woody Haut claims in Pulp Fiction: Hardboiled Fiction and the Cold War, Goodis’s women are either wives or waifs, in Down There the waif is a wife and the wife is a waif. Still, despite its utter lack of alcoholic self-pity, and despite the presence of Groucho Marxist gangsters, funny songs and a decidedly non-Neorealist appropriation of elliptical editing, Tirez sur le pianiste is somehow even sadder than Down There. Although he was only 29 when he directed the film, Truffaut repeatedly told interviewers that the movie was really about the onset of middle-age. Truffaut, haunted by memories of his own unhappy childhood, clearly related to Charlie as a fellow sufferer who was trapped by his own genetic heritage. It seems likely he related most strongly to the fictional passage where Eddie Lynn’s violent anger over the suicide of his wife finally sputters out, a rage which will soon be replaced by passive, nostalgic despair: “The wild man was gone, annihilated by two old hulks who didn’t know they were still in there pitching, the dull-eyed shrugging mother and the easy-smiling, booze-guzzling father.” (Shoot the Piano Player 87)

Noir’s obsession with the past, unsurprisingly, was one of the factors that most attracted French writers and directors to it. In the homeland of Proust and Bergson, it could hardly have been otherwise. French intellectuals were equally partial to policiers that shied away from simplistic moral judgements. Georges Simenon, for instance, the one francophone crime writer who was as revered by French detective story aficionados as were any of his anglophone peers, would “présente le plus souvent le coupable comme un irresponsable de naissance, une victime de la société” (Assouline 812). By means of judicious
borrowing, popular French cinema and literature was able to fuse the otherwise incompatible myths of Hugo and Zola. Since many American crime novels were also obsessed by the idea of escape, the formula could be still further broadened to accommodate the sympatico visions of Pierre Mac Orlan and Jacques Prévert.

While he might not be most adapted, Jim Thompson would seem to be the hardboiled American author who is most accessible to non-American directors. Alain Corneau, whose 1979 feature Série noire was taken from Thompson's very different novel A Hell of a Woman, explained this situation in the following terms: "A part Kubrick ou Stephen Frears, Hollywood continue à ne pas être très excité par l'adaptation des livres de Thompson, contrairement aux Européens. D'ailleurs Thompson est beaucoup plus connu en Europe, et en France principalement, à cause de ce phénomène. Avec Thompson, on est un peu comme avec le jazz à une certaine époque, quand les Américains ne suivent plus ou ont de mal à s'y intéresser, alors que les Européens aiment beaucoup ça et ont une vision différente. Or ce n'est pas du tout parce que Thompson devient européen, mais parce qu'il fait une analyse spectrale de l'Amérique qui correspond à la manière dont les Européens ont tendance à regarder l'Amérique." (Singer 97). In practice, this usually means that the bleaker the vision of an American crime writer, the more likely he or she is to be taken seriously by French artists and critics. In their eyes, to be disparaged, dismissed and ignored at home is to become a sort of pulp fiction Alexander Solzhenitsyn living on the fringes of some problem-plagued U.S. town. For Parisian intellectuals, le roman noir is pre-eminently a literature of alienation written by exiles, both internal and external. The lack of recognition which
hardboiled novelists receive in the United States is seen as further proof of the prophetic authenticity of their literary statements. To be despised is to be Edgar Poe; to be Edgar Poe is to be Charles Baudelaire; to be Charles Baudelaire is to be the father of modern literature.

No wonder the French admire them.

Like so many hardboiled American writers, Jim Thompson was not "destined" to be a popular artist. Raised in the American Southwest, Thompson's easy-going father won and lost fortunes at poker and oil speculation. As a teenager, the future noir novelist and screenwriter worked as a bootlegging bellhop when Prohibition was in full flower, as well as a reporter and wildcat oil rigger. For a time, he was a left wing organizer, and his years in Hollywood were not happy. From earliest youth, he was the observer—and sometimes the victim—of cons and scams. His obsession with physical mutilation—the heroes of at least three of his many novels are literally castrated—was perhaps motivated by memories of his unhappy Uncle Ned, a farmer "who had to submit to the gradual trimming away of his leg." (Bad Boy 31) Thompson got into the bottle early, and was only fully pulled out of it when his body was laid in the grave.

As a stylist, Thompson tended to mix the laconic exactitude of Dashiell Hammett with the poetic wisecracks of Raymond Chandler. In The Grifters, for instance, a conman is said to be "so crooked he could eat soup with a corkscrew"—in terms of utter admiration. Memorable terms of phrase are ubiquitous in Thompson's novels: "I was sweating like a chippie in church;" "The way she hung over the table you would have thought she was the cloth" (A Hell of a Woman 92; A Hell of a Woman 31.) Of all American crime novelists, Thompson was also the
one most smitten by modernism. Like Ernest Hemingway in To Have and Have Not, he was wont to change narrators from paragraph to paragraph, and even when he didn’t the dominant voice’s reliability was constantly compromised by the unstable flux of the speaker’s sanity.

In A Hell of a Woman, Frank, the book’s first-person narrator, is a self-pitying “loser” who periodically commits impulsive murders—although he will usually pretend that he was doing something else. Every second sentence refers to the bad luck he’s faced all his life, or else to his inability to escape from equally bad women: “Three goddamned tramps in a row...or maybe it was four or five, but it doesn’t matter. It was like they were the same person” (A Hell of a Woman 99). Before doing away with a bipedal obstacle, Thompson’s anti-hero feels compelled to pre-demonize the soon-to-be-victim: “I think maybe he was a Nazi or maybe a Communist—one of ‘em that slipped over here during the war” (A Hell of a Woman 101). Even after committing murder, this clinical paranoid feels more like the victim than the aggressor: “It had to be true. Something had to be true besides what—what was true.” (A Hell of a Woman 167). Of course, Frank will eventually get his comeuppance when, at long last, he finally meets a woman who really is as “bad” as he believes her entire sex to be.

In his 1979-vintage feature Série noire, Alain Corneau transferred Thompson’s small town Hell of a setting to the suburbs of Paris. He also, as befits the French crime tradition, made the narrative slightly more Dostoevskyan. In Positif’s oft-cited polar poll, the film would be deservedly voted the third best French crime movie of all time.
Thompson also provided Bertrand Tavernier with a means of exploring some of the darker aspects of the French colonial experience. As we saw in the last chapter, the French intellectuals who were so solicitous of America’s exploited Blacks were often strangely blind to the African and Arab street sweepers who eked out a miserable existence closer to home. *Coup de torchon* (1983) pivoted on the direct transposition of the eponymous Florida hamlet in Thompson’s *Pop. 1280* to an outpost of French colonial Africa. In Thompson’s text, “Un agent de la loi raconte au lecteur ces crimes avec parcimonie, et un sens du non-sens qui inscrit presque dans la littérature de l’absurde; au cours de ce voyage, il démolit les valeurs morales comme la famille, l’État, la religion, les rapport de dépendance, la société capital” (Montalban 107). Pushing the chronological clock back to 1938, “Tavernier francise le shérif en le transformant en policier des colonies, plongé dans une ambiance coloniale plein d’hommages au cinéma des années trente” (Montalban 109). *Coup de torchon* unfolds against the backdrop of the Munich accords, and the lazy, smalltown policeman portrayed by Philippe Noiret, his adulterous wife, his battered mistress, his racist colleagues, and the various *canaille* whom he shoots out of hand are all representative of a dying world that *deserves* to slip into the grave. Most of the film was shot in Steadicam, the hand-held shots being used “en partie comme une référence à la façon de filmer dans le cinéma colonialiste des années trente, en partie comme la représentation du monde de Jim Thompson où l’on n’a jamais l’impression d’être sur la terre ferme, sur un champ miné” (Montalban 109). In Stanley Kubrick’s * Paths of Glory* (1958), an anti-war movie co-scripted by Jim Thompson, the filmmakers were obliged to substitute
French characters for American; in *Coup de torchon* an equal and opposite alchemy occurs.

Much of the attraction of hardboiled fiction for French filmmakers lay in the genre’s extremely imaginative *argot*. To find a suitable French equivalent for Jim Thompson’s unique speech rhythms, Georges Perec, the experimental novelist who composed the script for *Série noire*, found himself obliged to construct it “almost entirely...from clichés, quotations and set phrases....” (Bellos 653). What’s more, “…every phrase uttered [would be] repeated elsewhere in the film” (Bellos 653). Georges Simenon, who, in the late 1940s, won the top mystery writer prize from *Ellery Queen’s Magazine*—an event which marked “la première fois qu’un auteur de langue français l’emporte aux Etats-Unis sur un terrain où les Anglo-Saxons passent pour des maîtres incontestés”—tended to compose his *policiers* in a fairly standard French, give or take the odd Belgicism (Assouline 564). As a stylist, he was far removed from the half-Rabelaisian, half-Tourette’s Syndrome-driven verbal explosions of a Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Nevertheless, thanks to earlier writers such as Francis Carco, French crime fiction was endowed with an authentic underworld idiom. In the post-war years, it would be adapted and embellished by *policier* specialists such as Albert Simonin, whose 1953 novel *Touchez pas au grisbi!* included a sixteen page glossary of the specifically criminal slang that he worked into a text which contained few standard French words apart from pronouns and articles. While such works would never replace the American models, they were hugely influential. Jacques Becker’s 1954 film version of *Touchez pas au grisbi*, starring the iconic Jean Gabin, was recently voted the best French *polar* of all time. More
commonly, though, _argot_ heavy crime movies fall into the popular Henri Verneuil "B movie" category—such as _Le Clan des Siciliens_ (1971)—or, more recently, the angry-ethnic-youth-in-the-suburbs exposé, such as Mathieu Kassowitz's César-winning second feature, _La haine_ (1995).

This submission to American mores, though carried out with seeming enthusiasm, was inevitably accompanied by certain misgivings. For one thing, it meant that France was drifting ever further away from the central place in world culture and politics which post-Enlightenment intellectuals had accorded it. It also rubbed abrasively against the French concern for the "purity" of the national language, a purity made manifest in the form of the Académie Française. In his meditation "De la supériorité de la littérature anglaise/américaine", Gilles Deleuze explained, with a mixture of admiration and horror, how the English tongue was "une langue hégémonique, impérialiste. Mais elle est d'autant plus vulnérable au travail souterrain des langues ou des dialectes qui le minent de toutes parts, et lui imposent un jeu de corruptions et variations très vastes" (_Dialogues_ 72). Once again, Anglo-American culture is paid the backhanded Gallic compliment of being more vibrant thanks to its New World crudity, barbarity and linguistic promiscuity. The interlopers' "undeserved" victory can therefore be attributed largely to their non-Gallic refusal to "play fair."

In French _policiers_, characters are constantly making metaphors that relate to American crime movies. In Boris Vian's _Elles ne rendent pas compte_, a car chase is "[c]omme dans les films de gangsters... Ecoute les pneus" (_Elles ne rendent pas compte_ 152). In a provincial police station visited by Georges Simenon's most famous hero,
meanwhile, a detective wannabe “avait son chapeau en arrière comme dans les films américains” (Les Vacances de Maigret 28). Indeed, even Commissario Ambrosio, the best known of Italian literary detectives, is constantly likening aspects of his cases to Woody Allen or Jane Fonda movies, even if his ultimate cultural loyalty, as Raffaele Croni believes, is to “un understatement inglese” (Maledetto Ferragosto 10).

Renato Olivieri, Ambrosio’s creator, is likewise clearly familiar with Georges Simenon’s sympathetic approach to crimes passionels. On the other hand, the ubiquity of African women in Olivieri’s fiction—the Somalian model in Maledetto Ferragosto ; “[la] ragazza...orginaria della isole Seychelles” in Dunque Marranno—are almost certainly Italian echoes of French attempts to re-capture echoes of their respective colonial pasts by re-casting the motifs and dramatis personae of Southern American melodrama (Dunque Maranno 20). Oliveiri’s plots often sound like elaborate riffs on the single paragraph, black-type descriptions of murder that so often appear in the pages of his favourite newspaper, Corriere della sera. Nevertheless, despite his valiant attempts to Italianize a distinctly non-Italian genre, Oliveri’s limited success reminds us irresistibly of Gramsci’s frustration with his homeland’s lack of popular literature. “Ogni popolo,” he wrote in his prison notebooks, “ha la sua letteratura, ma essa può venirgli da un altro popolo, cioè il popolo in parola può essere subordinato all’ egemonia intellettuale e morale di altri popoli” (Gramsci 2253).

Happily, this state of affairs would not apply to crime movies in the 1950s and ‘60s. During that decade, the film noir would burn itself out in Hollywood—Orson Welles’ Touch of Evil (1958) is generally regarded as the last true descendant of this distinguished ‘40s style—
while the outlaw anti-hero movies of the late 1960s—pre-eminently, Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) and Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969)—were gradually taking shape as the moralistic strictures of the Hays Code fell one by one. In France, after Marcel Carné and Jacques Prévert's attempt to resuscitate poetic realism failed when audiences rejected their first post-war effort, *Les Portes de la nuit* (1946), a wave of underworld nostalgia quickly replaced it. Jacques Becker's *Casque d'or* (1952) highlighted a meticulously reconstructed *apache* Montmartre even more venerable than Francis Carco's, while his 1954 adaptation of *Touchez pas au grisbi!* re-made star Jean Gabin in the image of an ageing underworld kingpin who must come to terms with his own mortality and declining physical powers, as well as battle opposing mobs and the police. Except for the "B movie" bottom of the market, *polars* did not generally concern themselves with the doings of the *Union Corse*, France's indigenous Mediterranean mob, a gang of international criminals who controlled the flow of heroin into the Americas until they were edged out by the Sicilian Mafia in the mid-1950s. Like its wars in Algeria and Indochina, France's real crime problems were left largely untouched by French filmmakers until long after they had ceased to stick in the national craw.

The man who really steered the French crime film into new waters, though, was Jean-Pierre Melville. An eccentric known for sleeping by day and making movies by night, this sometime collaborator of Jean Cocteau seemed ideally situated to create a noirish world of his own. *Bob le flambeur* (1955), a "heist movie" about a degenerate gambler whose plans to rob a luxurious casino are spoiled when he finally gets lucky at cards, was Melville's first genre entry, even if he
refused “le label policier à ce film qu’il préfère définir comme une comédie des moeurs” (Rouyer 100). At bottom, Bob was a nostalgic love poem to the vanishing Montmartre of Jacques Prévert, Francis Carco and Pierre Mac Orlan. His later films, however, would all be predicated upon the assumption that “la trahison est le moteur de l’action” (Rouyer 102). What’s more, following in the latently homosexual footsteps of hardboiled American fictions, Melville’s signature movies were all “‘films d’hommes’ où les femmes n’ont qu’un rôle épisodique et secondaire, sans que pour autant apparaissant nécessairement comme des femmes fatales, ce qui les différenciait des grands films noirs Hollywoodien qui en sont la modèle” (Martin 73).

Melville’s Americanophilia is perhaps best exemplified by the following anecdote. In 1958 he planned to make a political thriller that was inextricably linked to the constitutional structure of the Fourth Republic. When that regime fell, to be replaced by the Fifth Republic with General De Gaulle at its head, the film no longer made sense. Then the filmmaker noticed that the set he had built for “un President de conseil français” was more-or-less identical to Louis Calhern’s flat in John Huston’s 1950 underworld drama, The Asphalt Jungle ( "Jean-Pierre Melville décide de partir pour New York" 80). Pierre Grasset, the director’s set designer, suggested they transport their production across the Atlantic, and Melville eagerly agreed. The experience was to have a profound experience on the filmmaker, providing him with insight into the relative strengths of his bi-national cultural inheritance. As Thierry Jousse would have it,, “en passant de l’autre côté de l’Atlantique, il règle une bonne fois pour toute la question de sa relation à l’Amérique. Il existe une Amérique réelle, celle de Deux
hommes dans Manhattan, et une Amérique fantasmée, celle des policiers des années 60-70 et on ne peut absolument pas les confondre. Autrement dit, cette décision d'aller tourner à New York permettra à Melville de se libérer de toute idée saugrenue d'aller s'installer à Hollywood et, par la même occasion, de réinventer, tranquillement dans les rues de Paris...." ("Jean-Pierre Melville décide de partir pour New York" 80).

This knowledge would bear rich fruit. If Le Samourai, Melville's 1967 masterpiece about a trenchcoated hitman who pushes stoicism to the edge of catatonia, was consciously modelled after Frank Tuttle's 1942 noir, This Gun for Hire, its originality would later allow John Woo, the greatest living Hong Kong director of policiers, "introdui[re] les constantes de son style avec des personnages qui doivent tout à Melville, que Woo considère comme son maître" (Saada 69). In the same fashion, Thierry Jousse, when watching Melville's 1963 tough guy epic Le Doulos on TV a few years ago, "eu la nette impression qu'il anticipait très largement un film récent parmi les plus importants, en l'occurrence Miller's Crossing des frères Coen" ("Le Doulos" 46).

A particularly direct gift to tough guy French cinema arrived in the form of Jules Dassin. Chased out of McCarthyite Hollywood on account of his left-wing politics, Dassin became a cinematic gypsy who benefitted the film industries of each of the nations in which he temporarily resided. Rififi chez les hommes (1955) was the definitive French heist movie of the 1950s, a film that counterpointed prolonged, carefully choreographed scenes of a complicated burglary's planning and execution with shorter, more jagged shots of its bloody aftermath. Its influence continues to be felt on both sides of the Atlantic. As
François Truffaut wrote in his book *The Films in My Life*—this text does not appear in *Les Films de ma vie*, a source work whose diegetic material sometimes differs from that of its “translation”—"Dassin shot the film on the street during high winds and rain, and he reveals Paris to us Frenchmen just as he revealed London to the English (*Night and the City*) and New York to the Americans (*Naked City*)" (*The Films in My Life* 209). Truffaut might well have added “and would eventually reveal Athens to the Greeks (*Never on Sunday*).” We have already seen how Hollywood furthered—and continues to further—its fortunes by enriching its human assets with the more talented members of competing national film industries. In a small way, Jules Dassin reversed this entropic process.

One of the major influences on the harder '50s in crime films, both French and American, was Mike Hammer. Mickey Spillane's sociopathic alter ego: “Ce détective peu sympathique n'a pas de valeur morale ni sociale, et n'est pas un justicier...quand il tue, c'est pour se défendre....” (Garsault 82). In *Kiss Me Deadly* (1953) we learn that “‘There's no such thing as innocence,' says Hammer. ‘Innocence touched with guilt is as good as you get’” (*Kiss Me Deadly* 221). While nobody seems to have much liked him, Hammer's brutal self-interest would, in one way or another, come to mark the more sophisticated creations of Jean-Pierre Melville, Jean-Luc Godard and Arthur Penn. Like the atomic bomb, he was a sign of the times that could not be ignored.

In the early 1960s, the filmmakers of the Nouvelle Vague would take to the *policier* in a big way. Before directing *Tirez sur le pianiste*, Truffaut wrote the screen treatment for Jean-Luc Godard's first feature *A bout de souffle* (1959), an intellectual picaresque about
a likable cop killer, his lust for American women and cars, and his narcissistic identification with Humphrey Bogart’s hardboiled persona. Unsurprisingly, the film was dedicated “à Monogram Pictures”. In “La Paresse” (1961), Alphaville (1965), and Germany Nine Zero (1992), Godard would resurrect that most overexposed of borrowed “American” tough guys, James Hadley Chase’s two-fisted, hard-drinking Lemmy Caution (played in all instances by expatriate American actor, Eddie Constantine) and use him for everything from a paragon of laziness to a futuristic James Bond, from a defender of humanism to a psychopathic killer, from a mythic hero to a mute observer of the post-Communist world. With typical Godardian insouciance, Made in USA (1966) was based on a Donald Westlake crime novel which the director did not even deign to read. Although set in “Atlantic City” and loaded with American names and cultural archetypes, the film has nothing to do with New Jersey’s underworld milieu. In Annie Goldmann’s words, “En réalité c’est un film politique: les U.S.A., c’est la France....” (Goldmann 169). In Pierrot le fou (1965), the film that directly inspired Arthur Penn’s Bonnie and Clyde, voice-over narrators constantly remind us that the proceedings are “comme dans un roman de...William Faulkner ou...Raymond Chandler.” In his book on the director, Richard Roud reminds us that “Hardly any of his characters seem to have families” (Roud 20). What’s more, if Godard’s protagonists are “les enfants de Marx et Coca Cola”, his women seem to be “more the daughters of Coca-Cola than of Marx”—a view which partially explains the filmmaker’s abiding misogyny.

Claude Chabrol, the third wheel in the Truffaut-Godard-Chabrol Nouvelle Vague troika, soon became a specialist in policiers. Three of
his murder mysteries would make Positif's polar "Top 40", while Godard and Truffaut could lay claim to only one film apiece. Chabrol is one of the masters of the psychological French crime story, as embodied by Georges Simenon's romans durs, such as Le Chat, a novel—made into film in 1971 by Pierre Granier-Defertre—into which the only "crime" is the murder of her husband's pet by an aggrieved, aging housewife. An expert on the provincial bourgeoisie, Chabrol's oeuvre owes little to any American influence except for one: Alfred Hitchcock.¹ Whether re-making Fritz Lang's M in late '80s Berlin, or adapting Ruth Rendell (La Cérémonie) or Georges Simenon (L'Enfer), Chabrol approaches the material with the shrewd eye of a smalltown apothecary who lets down his guard only in the presence of such simple, peasant pleasures as good food and good wine.

Italian cinema, meanwhile, has yet to transform the policier into an indigenous Italian style. A film industry that is famously rich in genres—the peplum; the sex comedy; the "spaghetti western"; the fake documentary; the slasher movie—"Hollywood on the Tiber" has seldom managed to abstract onscreen criminal activities to the point where they constitute a distinct sub-category in the entertainment industry.

¹ Readers of this chapter will doubtless be surprised to discover that I was able to progress so far without once mentioning the English-born "Master of Suspense", the generic giant whose greatness is now acknowledged on both sides of the Atlantic. I have refrained from reflecting on his overwhelming influence on the Franco/American crime film for two reasons. In the first place, as Michel Ciment pointed out in Le crime à l'écran, Hitchcock's "oeuvre s'était constituée à part, marquée d'un sceau si personnel qu'elle s'intègre difficilement à un genre." (Le crime à l'écran 94) In keeping with this proud isolation, the lessons of Hitchcock were not only studied in the articles and then incorporated into the films of the critic/cinéastes of Cahiers du cinéma, but were subsequently applied in a wide variety of ways--some of which had nothing to do with the dynamics of the thriller. The seemingly polarphobic Eric Rohmer was as infatuated by Hitchcock as were the polarphilic François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard. To describe this class of Hollywood-friendly auteurist critic, Cahiers founder André Bazin went so far as to coin the word "Hawks-Hitchcockian." "Alfred the Great" will therefore be considered in this dissertation’s final chapter, "Luc Moullet; or, The Last of the Hawkso-Hitchcockians."
If the *gialli* have to struggle for respect in the world of Italian publishing, they can barely cast a shadow at Cinécittà.²

Nevertheless, despite the absence of a distinct narrative construct to determine its norms, Italian cinema was able to incorporate criminal motifs in new and intriguing ways throughout the 1950s, '60s, and, '70s. In 1958, for instance, Mario Monicelli used noirish parody to great comedic effect: “The super-efficient jewel thieves of Jules Dasin’s *Rififi* become the hopelessly incompetent gang in Monicelli’s *I ignoti soliti*...” (*Italian Films* IX). In addition to its mockery of a “serious” Franco/American model, *I soliti ignoti* was simultaneously poking precocious fun at the virtuous victims of classic Neorealism, the deprived individuals whose desperate poverty rendered even the concept of crime more-or-less irrelevant to the cruelty of their circumstances. As Peter Bondanella describes it, this “hilarious parody of the typical American gangster film...concludes not with the traditional gun battle...but with a bittersweet conversation among the would-be robbers over plates of pasta and beans” (*Italian Cinema* 145). If the film was refreshingly anti-sanctimonious, in the context of 1950s-vintage Italian Marxism, it could also be perceived—and thus condemned—as “objectively reactionary.”

Ettore Scola’s eponymous *Il Commissario Pepe* (1969), one of the very few Italian features to employ a police detective as its hero, enjoys a pedigree that makes even Commissario Ambrosio, an amateur

---

² Obviously, this claim can only be justified if one thinks of Dario Argento-style “murder mysteries” as horror movies rather than *policiers*. Since the whole point of this rather disgusting sub-genre seems to revolve around the “aesthetic” depiction of the gory murders of young women, and since the “whodunnit” elements of such works are minor to nonexistent, I feel no compunctions about doing so. In terms of Hollywood, Argento and his disciples have more to do with *Friday the 13th* than they do with *Silence of the Lambs*. 
of modernist German literature, sound a little crude. This anomaly was not wasted on critic Lino Micciché: “Al Commissario Pepe—un uomo buono e gentile, non privo di cultura e anzi frequenti aperture umanistiche (una eccezione in somma rispetto alla imagine non precisamente umanistica del polizotto italiano)....” (Micciché 41). More typically, Marco Bellochio’s I pugni in Tasca (1965) integrated murder so deeply within the Oedipal subtext of the story, that the film played more like Greek tragedy than giallo.

All of which is not surprising, considering Italy’s unique political circumstances. If the economy continued to improve as the twentieth century progressed, the legitimacy and solidity of the state remained very much in doubt. Christian Democratic hegemony, everybody knew, rested on the twin pillars of Mafia and CIA/U.S. State Department support. It is difficult to feel guilty about smuggling cigarettes when the biggest contrabbandiere of them all are the Prime Minister and his confederates. Progressive and centrist Italians also had to contend with the shadowy forces of Operation Gladio, the secret anti-communist army whose “members were armed and paid by the USA” to “continue internal resistance” within the country “after a Soviet occupation, if such a situation arose.” (Hobsbawn 165) This unit “originally consisted of last-ditch fascists...who subsequently acquired a new value as fanatical anti-communists” (Hobsbawm 165). In such conditions the concept of crime as social deviance cannot possibly make headway against the shared idea that crime means business as usual.

Of this daunting edifice of corruption from which Italians are currently struggling to free themselves, the Sicilian Mafia was
unquestionably its most famous and invasive arm. Movies about this lethal organization, and the need for its suppression, became more frequent as the 1960s wore on. One of the earliest was *Un uomo da bruciare* (1962), a film made the same year as Alberto Lattuada's *Mafioso*, a drama co-directed by the Taviani brothers and Valentino Orsini about "l'assassinat du Sicilien Savatore Carnevale par le mafia en 1955...." (Leprohon 202). This would establish the custom of having heroic judges and prosecutors doing the work in Italian anti-Mafia movies that French and American filmmakers would usually assign to "maverick" detectives. Even before the Sicilian underworld took to eliminating troublesome authority figures in large numbers—between 1979 and 1992, they assassinated three judges, four police commissioners and three high-ranking politicians, as well as ancillary wives and bodyguards—they were depicted as being quite capable of doing so. No one explored this idea more thoroughly than Francesco Rosi, the Neapolitan filmmaker whose entire career was devoted to detecting and dissecting the fatal flaws in his homeland's superstructure. France's André Cayette and Filipino filmmaker Lino Brocka attempted similar assessments of their own societies, but—despite the nobility of their intentions—their analyses were nowhere near as sharp as Rosi's. A keen observer and sharp dialectician, even Rosi's guesses were "lucky".

Collectively, Rosi's films touch on virtually every aspect of Southern Italy's social dysfunction. *La sfida*, his debut feature, dealt with the rise and fall of an ambitious Neapolitan black marketeer in the employ of the Camorra. *I magliori* (1959) and *Le momento della vérita* (1964) focussed on the specifically Mediterranean mechanics of
employment-driven emigration. *Salvatore Giuliano* (1961)—the breakthrough “investigative” feature that would profoundly influence the “Gillo Pontecorvo di *La battaglia di Algeri* (1966), al miglior Costa-Gavras, e...di altro....”—was an attempt to demystify the specifically Sicilian circumstances which gave rise to the island’s legendary separatist bandit (*Francesco Rosi* 108). *Le mani sulla città* (1963) was a portrait of a corrupt developer/politician in Naples, a courtroom drama in which the realms of commerce, control and crime are closely related. *Il caso Mattei* (1972) is, as Pauline Kael pointed out, a sort of super-*Citizen Kane* in which the postwar giant of Italy’s natural gas industry finds his body, as well as his life, in pieces at the film’s beginning, a circumstance which prompts a formal investigation of the magnate’s past. In 1973, Rosi made a typically non-linear “biopic” about the most powerful of all Italian-American mobsters. “Pourquoi Lucky Luciano?” he pondered rhetorically. “Parce que je pense que c’est une bonne clé pour comprendre les rapports entre le pouvoir légal et le pouvoir illégal, et plus encore que leurs rapports, leurs interdépendance” (*Dossier Rosi* 140). *Cadaveri eccellenti* (1976), the first Rosi feature to be based on a novel—and a French one at that—follows in the melancholy footsteps of Inspector Rogas (*Lino Venturi), “un policier qui doit retrouver l’assassin d’u certain nombre de juges....” after unknown assassins start taking aim at an unnamed—but obviously Italian—judicial system (*Dossier Rosi* 173). Terrorism would be on the agenda in *Tre fratelle* (1981), and the subject of Italo-American criminal collusion would be returned to more realistically in *Dimenticare Palermo* (1990), a work that was co-written by American
novelist Gore Vidal. Drug trafficking in his native Naples would be the principal motif in the director's 1991 documentary, *Diario napoletano*.

Michel Ciment has rightly observed that Rosi's interlocking features can be perceived as “l'histoire sociale, économique et politique de l'Italie sous la République” (Dossier Rosi 162). The French critic locates the Neapolitan director's neorealist heritage in “[son] désir de rompre avec le cinéma mensonger du fascisme, de combattre des clichés et les mythes, appartient sa démarche à celle de Rossellini et de De Sica et Zavattini” (Dossier Rosi 30). Unlike more traditional Neorealists, however, Rosi is fascinated by the past, finding in its Byzantine miasmas the roots of his country's contemporary troubles. Starting with Salvatore Giuliano—the Sicilian “Robin Hood” who waged a Jesse James-like guerilla war against the authorities for seven years, championing a politically separate Sicily and entering island folklore as a hero until his reputation was permanently tarnished by the massacre of a group of Communist Party supporters in 1947—Rosi would structure his films like open-ended inquests. Francis Ford Coppola was impressed by the fact that “you hardly ever see Giuliano!” in this film about his life. (Cowie 222) In 1987 Michael Cimino would direct a more traditional Giuliano screen biography—one which does exploit the outlaw's “cowboy” elements—but *The Sicilian* was neither a critical nor a commercial success. In Rosi's portrait, on the other hand, “l'urgenza dell' interrogativo precede...l'infuzione narrativa” (Francesco Rosi 14).

What's more, “Nei film di Rosi, al contrario delle tipiche storie poliziesche hollywoodiane, manca intanto la soluzione del caso proposto....” (Francesco Rosi 20).
As we have already seen, Salvatore Giuliano's narrative innovations had a profound effect on filmmakers—not least upon Francis Ford Coppola, the Italo-American director of The Godfather trilogy. Nevertheless, when it came time to make Lucky Luciano, the influence—as Rosi himself freely conceded—was not all one-way: "Quant à mon rapport avec les films de gangsters américains, j'en ai tellement vu, surtout dans ma jeunesse, qu'il m'en reste sûrement quelque chose dans ma façon de regarder" (Dossier Rosi 145). Even when being influenced, however, Rosi's cinematic vision is rigorously self-aware. At the core of Lucky Luciano, for instance, "La polemica di Rosi è rivolta indirettamente contro alcuni esempi contemporanei di film sulla mafia: sicuramente Il padrino di Francis Ford Coppola, con il suo messaggio superoministico e il fascino escercitato dalle menti criminali, ma anche il più commerciale Joe Valachi - I segreti di Cosa Nostra di Terence Young, provvisto di un ritualità morbosamente dettagliata nella messa in scena del codice d'onore mafioso" (Francesco Rosi 137 - 139). Gaetana Marrone believes that this critical distance is not always recognized by Rosi's American supporters, an outside clique that collectively tends to exaggerate "la componente eroica, essenziale alla mitologia del genre gangster Hollywoodiano" (Francesco Rosi 79).

In the early 1970s, this was a particularly easy mistake to make. Thanks to the explosion of specifically Italo-American film talent during the early years of that decade, the similarities between Hollywood crime films and their Cinecittà equivalents appeared to be particularly marked. The paranoid universe imagined by Francis Ford Coppola in The Conversation (1974) seemed contiguous to the Kafkaesque corruption of Elio Petri's Indagine su un cittadino al di
sopra di ogni sospetto (1970). Coppola's lonely, sax-blowing wire-tapper would have fit right into the world of Petri's murderously kinky "capo della 'squadri omicidi'...." (Micciché 55). If Cadaveri eccellenti "[ha visto] la Sicilia in chiave metaforica," Martin Scorsese's Taxi Driver (1976) attempted to deal with the analogous American problem of "irrational" violence in a somewhat similar fashion (Francesco Rosi 104).

The most commonly bracketed Italian/American cinematic "complements", though, were Coppola's The Godfather and Rosi's Lucky Luciano, movies released within a year of each other. Although Peter Cowie thought that "The Godfather gives a romantic picture of gangster life" (Cowie 74), Pauline Kael took a contrary position, insisting that the film provided "A wide, startlingly vivid view of a Mafia dynasty, in which organized crime becomes an obscene nightmare image of American free enterprise" (5001 Nights at the Movies 220). Far from simply going over the same well-trodden ground with less verve and originality, The Godfather, Part Two (1974) covers a much broader canvas, both chronologically and thematically, than did its predecessor. Its distanced, quasi-Marxist perspective seems to spring from the same source that prompted Rosi to make Lucky Luciano. The Italian social critic explained his interest in the deported Sicilian mobster in the following terms: "Il a liquidé la vieille conception de la Mafia et a commencé à chercher les alliances avec les Juifs et les Irlandais, deux groupes criminels importants dans l'Amérique de cette époque, alors qu'auparavant le problème de ces alliances n'avait même pas été posé. Il avait même convaincu les différents groupes mafiosi italiani de s'allier au lieu de ce faire concurrente, comme c'était le cas dans la
lutte ouverte qui opposait Napolitains et Siciliens" (Dossier Rosi 140 - 141). Jewish mobsters, American politicians and Cuban officials would play prominent roles in the second half of The Godfather, Part Two. Ten years later, Sergio Leone would pivot Once Upon a Time in America (1984), his only gangster movie, on the life-long friendship/enmity of two Jewish mobsters. Ethnicity and crime would become a major theme of American crime movies in the 1980s and ‘90s, with Chinese Triads, Japanese Yakuza, the Jamaican Posse, Colombian drug lords, the Russo-Georgian “mafia” and other groups all vying for attention. Long-gone were the days when Italo-American pressure groups—some of which were Mafia controlled—forced The Untouchables, a popular 1950s' TV show set in the Prohibition-era Chicago of Al Capone, into premature retirement on account of the “harmful” anti-Italian stereotypes it presented on a weekly basis. With the exception of Year of the Dragón, Michael Cimino’s 1985 potboiler about a tough white policeman at war with the Triads in New York, few of these neo-gangster movies have aroused the ire of the groups concerned. Indeed, many second and third-generation Americans—now safely ensconced within the matrix of middle class respectability—seem to revel in them. The reasons for this are various, but most are in some way involved with America’s semi-paranoid obsession with crime and race. Black music, sports heroes and fashion sense are all highly prized by white American teenagers, even as their parents flee to the suburbs, elect candidates sworn to reduce social programs, complain bitterly about the “inequities” of affirmative action, and sign petitions in favour of capital punishment, more prisons and longer terms of incarceration. To imagine a criminal past is to reduce guilt over black/white inequities. We were poor and
criminal once, this questionable logic runs, but somehow managed to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. What's the matter with them?

The underlying logic of a Rosi film, in other words, is light years removed from contemporary American views of crime and punishment. What looked like a joining in 1974 is now exposed as what it always was: an Atlantic-sized rift.

If ethnic crime has been a factor in French polars since before the release of Pépé le Moko— with reservations, of course since Jean Gabin's displaced Parisian gangster marooned in Morocco was made to seem at least as "all French" as Jimmy Cagney's whitebread mobster was made appear "all-American" in William Wellman's Public Enemy—it has recently become an almost indispensable additive to the standard generic formula. The Algerian underworld of Bob Swaim's La Balance (1981)—like Jules Dassin's Riffifi, a policier with an American at its helm—has now become as fixed in French popular culture as Mafia myths are in America. In flic movies such as Bertrand Blier's Police (1985), Claire Denis's J'ai pas sommeil (1993), and Bertrand Tavernier's L. 627 (1994), the onscreen proceedings would be unthinkable without the presence of "minority" pressures. The current crop of so-called banlieue pictures, such as Mathieu Kassowitz's La haine (1995), are also indebted to this trend—even if they do tend to take the decidedly Italian approach of siding with the underdog.

Of course, in France the polar remains multi-faceted. It still includes heist films, gangster movies, poetic realism, films noirs, néo-noirs, psychological studies, chamber mysteries, police dramas, detective stories, street exposés, nostalgic turns down Montmartre's fin-de-siècle apache alleys, black comedies, road movies, erotic
thrillers and what North Americans would probably define as horror. Gilles Deleuze once promised to compose a new form of philosophical discourse which would be situated “entre le roman policier et la science-fiction” (Narboni 23).³

Aided in this instance by language itself—before they were recast in the hardboiled mold, the words “roman noir” originally referred to the Gothic romances of the early 19th century—the polar has managed to insert itself in that precise, theoretical situation. The inheritor of all that has preceded it—including Hollywood’s enormously rich generic dowry—like DNA, it continues to mutate in new recombinant ways, employing “foreign” means for local ends. In the mid-1990s, Hollywood re-made La femme Nikita and Les Diaboliques, attempting to refresh an “exhausted” genre with fresh, exogamous blood (it began doing the same with French screen farces in the late 1970s). The binational release of Luc Besson’s latest feature (known in France as Léon, and in the U.S. as The Professional) probably represents some sort of breakthrough in multinational filmmaking. That the French crime movie can maintain its own identity in this trans-Atlantic style is a testament to its generic resilience.

³ It would seem that Deleuze’s prediction has been confirmed more completely than he could possibly have imagined. Since the late 1970s, futuristic thrillers, such as Bladerunner, routinely plunder the film noir canon when searching for visual ideas, while an even greater number of faux-space operas thematically strip-mine the Hollywood western. In Star Wars, for instance, Luke Skywalker’s family is massacred in a manner virtually identical to the one employed against Ethan Edwards’ relatives in John Ford’s 1956 masterpiece, The Searchers. Four years later, in 1981, Peter Hyams would enter Hollywood history thanks to his famously brief pitch for Outland. “It’s High Noon in outer space,” the director explained. This terse summation—reputedly then the shortest ever made—was enough to get the project greenlighted.
Troublingly, serial murder sagas seem to have struck a particularly resilient chord with the global public. As Camille Nevers accurately pointed out,


Nevers could easily have added “d’un Aki Kaurismaki ou d’un Denys Arcand, d’un Shohei Immamura ou d’un Kathryn Bigelow, d’un Dario Argento ou d’un Ulli Lommel.” The serial killer/slasher movie is now an almost universal style.

Even more popular and widely-dispersed is the neo-gangster movie. Beat Takeshi and other young Japanese directors of “Neo-Yakuza” sagas have, in the last five or six years, broadened the vocabulary and widened the popularity of a genre that was once little more than a modern dress variation of the more violent sort of jidai-geki [costume film]. Contemporaneous with this upgrading were Hong Kong director John Woo’s affectionately nostalgic, latently homosexual, blatantly cinéphilic, joyously violent re-mixings of traditional French and American formulae. In Hardboiled (1991), The Killer (1989), and other dazzlingly well-crafted thrillers, the man “qui doit tout à Melville” created a style that was so competitively compelling,
Hollywood felt constrained to remove him from Hong Kong and set him to work making American movies.

By the last decade of the 20th century, directing *policiers* was anything but an all-white profession. Generic influences could now travel as freely across the Pacific as they could across the Atlantic. Pierre Leprohon’s adage that “Chaque pays écrit l’histoire à sa manière” was now as much a practical reality as it was a theoretical construct.

In America, meanwhile, the home of the detective story, the genre is continuing to evolve. While *policiers* might not be as consciously critical or socially engaged as they were in the 1970s, *néos-noirs*—once again, the French coined the defining term first—continue to tap aspects of the national psyche that regular watchers of *LAPD* and other pro-police “reality” shows would prefer to forget. Contemporary crime novelists such as Barry Gifford and James Ellroy describe anti-heroes whose cynical amorality might give pause to Mike Hammer at his most ornery. On the screen, David Lynch’s *Blue Velvet*, with its Id-level take on the fictitious small town America of Ronald Reagan’s propaganda-fuelled dreams, is perhaps the most accurate Rorschach blot portrait we have of the psychological underpinnings of the so-called “Greed decade”. More recently, fear of AIDS and other (hetero)sexually transmitted diseases has resulted in a slew of erotic thrillers in which the *femme fatale* of the 1890s/1940s returns with a vengeance to an imaginative universe that was only briefly freed from its perennial dread of the “great pox”.

No doubt because of their very different attitudes towards the nature of society, the police, the state, the judiciary and the causes,
meaning and consequences of crime, French, American and Italian policiers have managed to maintain distinct national identities despite the post-GATT escalation of mid-Atlantic levelling and normalization. In general, this process has benefitted only the culture industry of the United States, but polars have somehow managed to survive under the shadow of Hollywood hegemony.

It is interesting to note that the French crime film has followed an opposite policy to that of the French language. Where the Academie Française ceaselessly sought to keep the contaminating influence of "franglais" out of Racine's pure tongue, polar directors have tried to discover new ways to work them in. Far from being subservient, this policy is actually "imperialist" in the way that Deleuze described the English language. By being open to outside influences, the polar and policier manage to re-charge their batteries constantly; by absorbing, they escape being absorbed. American influence is therefore everywhere present within their generic structures, but this influence is nowhere dominant. What's more, such input is filtered through a selective—if not exactly distorting—mirror. In other words, les policiers et les polars are only as American as they want to be. Unquestionably, this is the single greatest secret of their longevity.

Italian crime films, meanwhile, despite all that has happened during the last forty years of social upheaval, remain inseparably tied to Neorealism's apron strings. Organized crime and government are probably close allies in most countries, but only in Italy is the average citizen so painfully aware of this collusion. The state as idealized whole or secular God substitute is an idea that simply
CHAPTER THREE: THE RUINS OF ROME

As we saw in the last two chapters, America has long constituted both a challenge and a threat, an affront and a seduction, to French intellectuals of all political persuasions. It was seen as a double-edged sword with a dangerous tendency to “cut” even those who admired it for its strength and beauty. With the possible exceptions of Great Britain and Germany, it was probably the country that the French could least afford to ignore.

In Italy, things were very different. Even when the United States was the favoured land of emigration, it always seemed to be a very distant utopia, a paradise on the far side of the horizon. On some level, Italians might derive a certain muted satisfaction from the knowledge that they discovered America, but this emotion has never been particularly meaningful or profound. The quasi-indifference of which I speak owes nothing to the currently popular belief that the New World could not, in fact, have been “found” since it was never lost in the first place, having long been settled by the original Asian pioneers who, in the very distant past, poured over the legendary land bridge that once linked Alaska to Siberia; still less does it relate to the belated discovery that Vikings and Basques had set silent foot on North American soil hundreds of years before Christopher Columbus of Genoa received his charter of exploration from Queen Isabella of Spain. What it does refer to, rather, is the inescapable fact that Italy never derived much benefit from Cristoforo Colombo’s exertions. Typically, in his prison diaries, Antonio Gramsci laments the fact that most of his
countrymen cannot appreciate the larger consequences of the Genoese mariner’s endeavor: “Che Cristoforo Colombo si proponesse di andare 'ala bucal del Gran Khan,' non sminuisce il valore del suo viaggio reale e delle sue reali scoperte per la civilità europea” (Gramsci 2192).

During the age of exploration and conquest, Italy was, for the most part, conquered and colonized itself. The maritime republics of Venice and Genoa might have held a Mediterranean island or two in fortress fief, but their empires were always essentially mercantile. Marco Polo, the most famous Italian trailblazer prior to Columbus, was less the emissary of the Great Khan of China than he was a city-to-city travelling salesman. Adding insult to injury, his Asian memoirs were written not in Italian but in French, the language of one of his homeland’s principal occupiers. As an Imperialist power, Italy didn’t get started until well after the late 19th century completion of the Risorgimento. Even then, this latterday empire consisted primarily of Eritrea and Libya. Still worse, its reputation as a major European colonial player was darkened by the “disaster” at Adowa, the worst military defeat ever to be suffered by an imperialist power at the hands of a non-European people during the 19th century.

Colombus, therefore, was something like Guglielmo Marconi, a magnificent innovator whose discoveries would ultimately be exploited by non-Italians. One senses the marginality of Cristoforo’s accomplishments in the Italian period by a quick scan of the epic poets of the 16th and 17th century. The Italian genre masters Ludovico Ariosto and Torquato Tasso sang of the ancient Carolingian hero Roland and of the “liberation” of Jerusalem. Portugal’s Luis de Camoens, on the other hand, composed The Lusiads, his heroic glorification of his sea-
fering countrymen and the vast overseas empire their courage and skill were bringing into being.\(^1\) It should come as no surprise, therefore, to discover that neither John Glen’s *Christopher Columbus: The Discovery* nor Ridley Scott’s *The Conquest of Paradise*—the two mega-movies with which the world filmmaking community celebrated the quinticentennial of the great Genoan’s nautical achievement—was even partially financed by Italian sources. There were as many francs and pesos as dollars in these co-productions, but absolutely no lire.

Italy’s rather reserved reaction to the nation’s most famous explorer is perhaps best expressed by Cesare Pascarella’s *La Scoperta de l’America*. Written in Roman dialect in the late nineteenth century, this mock-epic poem seldom rises above the level of doggerel. Its tone is thoroughly anti-heroic, shot through with criticisms of the Catholic Church, and strongly sympathetic to the New World’s original inhabitants. Even so, the author is anything but indifferent to his hero’s heritage: “Eh, la storia, percristo, è sempre storia/Cristoforo Colombo era italiano” (Pascarella 94). Foreigners, the author believes, have always envied Italians because of their innate genius: “L’italiano t’inventa er lettricismo” (Pascarella 98).

In most countries, such assumptions about the national spirit would lead directly to pugnacious arrogance, but not in Italy. In *The Italians*, Luigi Barzini argued that his countrymen are infused with a seemingly ineradicable self-contempt historically derived from the

\(^{1}\) Being a man of his time, Camoens naturally said nothing about the underhanded politics, military brutality and psychological intimidation that were then seen as equally essential to the successful establishment of overseas dominions. This almost universal code of silence was particularly pronounced in Portugal, a seafaring power which soon found that rule by terror could compensate in large part for a small nation’s limited manpower.
peninsula's repeated failures to fuse into a unified nation state during the early Renaissance and late Middle Ages. That this failure of will occurred in a land filled with great minds and studded with the richest and most culturally privileged cities in Europe only made things worse. In Italy, there seems to be an almost universal desire to snatch failure from the jaws of success. Barzini particularly regretted this wolf-mother's desire to devour her own cubs: "It is true that in other countries great men have also occasionally been persecuted and put to death. Nowhere else, however, has it happened with the same discrimination, regularity, and determination" (Barzini xii).

Italy's almost universal popularity with outsiders does nothing to dispell this air of almost cosmic gloom. Quite the contrary: "The Italy of...foreigners, both rich and poor, is mainly an imaginary country, not entirely corresponding to the Italy of the Italians. The expatriates often do not really pay attention to, see clearly, or like the Italy of the Italians" (Barzini 11).

This land—which one should say lands—has always exercised an irresistible attraction to writers. Shakespeare situated most of his comedies in Italian towns, though the Bard of Avon almost certainly never set foot in Verona. Italianate verse forms structured Chaucer's cantos, while Spenser and Milton, though patriotically opposed to these continental conventions, were always mindful of them. Goethe re-discovered classicism in Rome, while Byron, Keats, Shelley, and the other English Romantic poets sailed to Italy to either live or die, as the pre-Christian gods willed. Alfred de Musset wrote Lorenzaccio, his greatest play, as the result of an unhappy research trip to Florence in the company of his unfaithful mistress, George Sand. For more than a
century, writers like Henry James, Edith Wharton, Thomas Mann, E. M. Forster, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, Richard Aldington, D.H. Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, Frank O'Connor, Julia O'Faolain, and countless other writers, both great and small, flocked to the country in search of an ambience that was totally in keeping with the artistic temperament. The marbles and cities of Italy were more perfect than anywhere else; the ruins of Rome were crowned with the glories of the Renaissance. This extraordinary nostalgia inevitably exacerbated the gulf between reality and dream. In Barzini's words, "The eighteenth-century Italy of foreigners' desires, the country of dead languages, dead Italians, and mute stones, was never so dissimilar from the Italians' Italy" (Barzini 30).

Ironically, there is one outside observer whom virtually all Italian intellectuals have long acknowledged as the ultimate authority on the national character. Like Alexis de Tocqueville, the official foreign expert on early American mores, Marie Henri Beyle (Stendhal's real name) was a Frenchman travelling abroad. Indeed, in many respects, Stendhal's pronouncements upon the Milanese, Neapolitans and Romans are now regarded as even more acute and prophetic than de Tocqueville's period reflections on New Englanders, Southerners, Indians and African slaves. This Napoleonic official was that rarest of cultural phenomena, the foreign-born travel writer who sees the locals more clearly than the locals see themselves.

Stendhal's precocious perspectives continue to fascinate. As an officer in Napoleon's army, and a long-time resident of Italy, he can be seen as a citizen of the United States of Europe 150 years avant la lettre. His sense of French nationalism was counterbalanced by an
equally strong sense of European internationalism. This double vision endows his travel writing with enduring value.


As usual, Stendhal thought he knew the reason for this curious state of affairs in the land of Dante, Petrarch and Virgil: “[l’italien] est essentiellement obscure, d’abord parce que depuis trois siècles personne n’a d’intérêt à écrire sur des sujets difficiles....” (Stendhal 72). This unfortunately resulted in the indirect, serpentine sentence structure that continues to be the bane of so much formal Italian writing, a shortcoming which seem to be totally at odds with the people behind the pens: “On voit pourquoi la froideur académique glace les livres du peuple le plus passioné de l’univers” (Stendhal 72). In the Frenchman’s day, Tuscan was far from being established as the national tongue, and this resulted in a localized babel which, to a certain—admittedly much reduced—degree, persists to the present day: “En
As a privileged foreigner, Stendhal could afford to be more tolerant of Italian foibles than, say, an imprisoned Communist intellectual scribbling away in secret in the obscurity of Mussolini’s penal system. Typically, he mixed rigour and fondness in the same phrase. Thus, “Rossini écrit un opéra comme une lettre. Quel génie s’il se fût donné la peine d’apprendre sa langue” (Stendhal 16). Even Italy’s more notorious cruelties Stendhal observed with an unjaundiced eye: “Je sors de la fameuse chapelle Sixtine... j’ai entendu ces fameux castrats de la Sixtine” (Stendhal 18). Shortly after Waterloo, this ex-Napoleonic officer observed that Italy was already in the process of being occupied by its most tenacious tourist/invaders: “Je fais, en Italie, un voyage en Angleterre” (Stendhal 20). Hardheaded Frenchman that he was, Stendhal nonetheless freely conceded that his countrymen were no match for the Italians when it came to cynicism: “La naïveté est une chose inconnue en Italie, et cependant personne n’y peut souffrir La Nouvelle Héloïse” (Stendhal 54.) Implicit in this statement is the author’s unspoken belief that a complete absence of self-delusion might well constitute an impediment to greatness. Beyle attributed most of the faults of Italy to the strength of the church and the weakness of the press. In the first instance, “À Rome et à Naples, la seule loi en vigueur c’est la religion” (Stendhal 62). As for the latter, “Le dix-neuf vingtièmes de la civilisation de la France, de l’Angleterre et de la Prusse, sont dus à la liberté de la presse, et ici elle ne dit que des mensonges” (Stendhal 62).
In discussing Italian characteristics, only rarely did Stendhal stoop to sentimental platitudes. The following is one of the more egregious examples of these extremely atypical lapses: “La caractère italien, comme les feux d’un volcan, n’a pu se faire jour que par la musique et la volupté” (Stendhal 140). Even a clear-eyed materialist, it seems, can occasionally get carried away.

As already mentioned in Chapter One, Stendhal was one of the very first French intellectuals to worry about the future power and coming greatness of the United States. He was not in the least mollified by the young republic’s well-established democratic institutions. New York and Philadelphia, for instance, are described as “pays rebelles aux arts” (Stendhal 57). Elsewhere he complains that the United States “ne produisent que des dollars” (Stendhal 145).

As we saw in the previous chapter, anti-American sentiments were never as strong in Italy as they were in France, despite the presence of much greater objective cause. American policemen pursued the Mafia on the Italian mainland with a persistence that was never to be applied to France’s Union Corse. During the last three years of the Second World War, it was the United States Army Air Force that caused the most damage to Italian cities and towns, both before and after the establishment of the Salo Republic. In the late 1940s, internal Italian politics were interfered with by the U.S. State Department on a level that had previously been reserved almost exclusively for those unfortunate Latin American and Caribbean countries whose destinies were compromised by Washington’s self-serving imposition of the Monroe Doctrine. To all intents and purposes, Washington treated Italy
like an overgrown "banana republic". Logically speaking, Italians should not have liked Americans. Nevertheless, they did.

One of the principal reasons for this attitude was emigration. In *Letters from an American Farmer*, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's generally sunny account of the late 18th century years he spent in the New World, the author observed that the American people "are a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans and Swedes. From this promiscuous breed that race now called Americans have arisen" (Crèvecoeur 37). Crèvecoeur himself, however, after composing his popular paean to the new republic in a borrowed English idiom, and despite his oft-professed admiration for his second homeland and the emotional entanglements of an American-born family, decided to spend his declining years in his native France. This retreat was typical. In one way or another, the French pillar holding up America was destined to rot away. Like their Dutch, Scottish, Scotch-Irish, and German peers, the well-born Frenchmen who remained in America tended to disappear willingly into their host country's emerging ruling class. By the early 20th century, the Roosevelts and the Du Ponts, the Carnegies and the Morgans, the Rockefellers and the Gettys, all belonged to the same seamless upper-class milieu commonly—if not always accurately—described as WASP. In this context, French names were as often Norman as Gallic, while the French language and Roman Catholic religion were abstract properties of little importance and less emotional resonance to people who didn't even see themselves as Huguenots. The self-identified French of America were almost exclusively New French: the expelled Acadians who created Creole culture in New Orleans; the dispossessed Québécois peasants who flocked to the mill towns of New
England in the late 19th century in search of work. While their ethnic absorption was nowhere near as complete as the one that overtook their upper class brethren, inter-marriage with Irish, Polish, and Italian Catholics eroded “Canuck” numbers to a significant degree. As we saw in Chapter One, 20th century French travellers to the New World saw very few Americans as “French”. In their travel diaries, the Québécois usually appear offstage like some modestly interesting tribe of Indians whom they never quite found the time to visit. Whatever nostalgia these modern Europeans might have felt for the brave Jesuits and intendants who discovered so much of North America, and whatever feelings of pride might have suffused their breasts when thinking about France’s invaluable contribution to American victory during its hard-fought War of Independence, these emotions seldom spilled over into fascination with the habitants’ descendants. For Parisian intellectuals writing before the 1960s, the Québécois masses were not just country cousins, but cousins too many times removed to be worth the most half-hearted succour. Indeed, America could hardly have appeared to be so fascinating if it had not also seemed so completely un-French.

With Italians, things were very different. Between 1492 and 1892, the citizens of Italy’s disparate regimes had precious little to do with the land that Columbus discovered. As occupation followed occupation, and even the once fiercely independent city states fell under foreign domination, Italians became preoccupied with their incohesive uniqueness. Even after the Risorgimento was complete, Italy still did not feel like a “normal” country, like France or the United States. Above all, there was the problem of the South, particularly Sicily, an island that seemed to have nothing in common with the
northern and central parts of the peninsula, an utterly alien state-within-a-state over which Rome could exercise an all-too-limited influence.²

Poverty, Italy's other major problem, was indissolubly linked to the intractable heel of the nation's boot. What made the creation of Italy impossible was the same thing that made it essential. As Giuseppe Calzerato wrote in his introduction to Antonio Margariti's America! America!, "Per quanto paradossale potrà apparire, il triste e doloroso fenomeno emigrato ha una delle sue cause principali nell'unificazione dell' Italia" (Margariti 8). Italy's outpouring of paupers was nothing short of phenomenal: "Dal 1876 al 1901 in tutto il 'regio' ci furono 5.792.546 emigrati, e nella sola Calabria 310.363...." (Margariti 11). The land to which they went was not the place which gladdened de Tocqueville's heart: "L'America non è l'eldorado felice e incantato ma una nazione vorace che inghiotte lavoro ed uomini in cambio di un insignificante pugno di dollari" (Margariti 10).

In the particular case of Antonio Margariti, prosperity would always elude him: "A Philadelphia ho lavorato quasi sempre in fabbrica...." (Margariti 76). As in Céline's nightmare vision of the Ford factory, English was seldom spoken. Unlike Bardamu, however, the French doctor's alter ego, Margariti knew he had no alternate future as a surgeon or a writer. Consequently, he poured a great deal of his

² Sicilian parallels are, of course, not entirely unknown in other countries—including France and the United States. Corsicans, for instance, are even more alienated from Paris than Sicilians are from Rome; they also play a commanding role in the French underworld, even if they are nowhere near as violent as their peers in the Mafia and Camorra. In The Nine Nations of North America, Joel Garreau suggested that the state of Florida—thanks largely to the region's ubiquitous Latin American drug dealers—might be similarly disaffected from the USA, although his claims in this regard are too complicated to explore in any depth here.
limited leisure into the struggle for workers' rights: "Presi anche parte attiva alle lotte per il progresso sociale, per il lavoro e per il miglioramento dei lavoratori" (Margariti 76). During the course of a trip back to the old country to visit his dying mother, this still-militant worker discovered that he no longer fit in easily in either place: "In America mi chiamo italiano, qui in Italia mi chiamano americano...." (Margariti 82).

Just as memories of the potato famine continue to haunt Irish authors a century and a half after the event, the spectre of emigration continues to be a factor in Italy's artistic imagination. Alessandro Blasetti, an important film critic of the 1930s and the one "established" director from the fascist period whose reputation did not suffer in the light of postwar reassessment, made a documentary in 1972 entitled Storie dell' emigrazione. When asked why he felt compelled to turn his hand to this topic, the filmmaker replied that he wanted to understand il fenomeno emigrazione, partendo da una analisi delle condizioni sociali e politiche al momento dell' unità d'Italia, quando cioè, da una prima emigrazione interna, si passò alle massicce emigrazioni verso l'America di cui hanno fatto le spese soprattutto le popolazioni meridionali, allettate con argomentazioni spesso menzognere o fraudolenti e che erano destinate a prendere il posto degli schiavi neri che la politica abolizionista aveva tolto dal mercato, di quegli stessi schiavi che in una prima fase si era pensato di sostituire con gli irlandesi i quali erano poi passati a compiti meno ingrati (Blasetti 370).

This rather shocking and unfamiliar explanation certainly goes a long way towards explaining why Italian/Black and Irish/Black
relations have been and continue to be so poor in the United States, seemingly sub-standard even by the grim statistical averages of *racisme ordinaire*. Having been considered no better than black slaves in white skin by America's Protestant ruling class, Roman Catholic Irish and Italian immigrants felt compelled to trumpet their European credentials at all times and in all places, rejecting every form of identification with the former slaves with whom they had more in common than they cared to admit. The very weakness of their claims to being considered part of the American mainstream aggravated their hostility towards the only people in the melting-pot whose ambitions in this regard were regarded, by members of the Protestant ruling class, to be even more ridiculous than theirs. In this case, familiarity bred horrified, even violent contempt.

America, however, does not entirely dominate Italian emigration literature. Argentina, after all, and not the U.S.A., is the second most Italian nation on earth. A large percentage of Italian emigration was inter-European, and the largest shifts of all continue to be inter-Italian. *Pane e ciocolata* (1973), arguably Franco Brusati's most memorable film, dealt with the plight of a Southern Italian immigrant trying to get his finances together in disdainful, German-speaking Switzerland, a rich country where the so-called guest workers do all the menial tasks. Closer to home, the move from Palermo to Milano remains one of the wellsprings of Italian narrative art. Outside of the country's small, short-lived empire (Ethiopia; Eritrea; Libya; Albania), Italian rags-to-riches stories were in exceedingly short supply. Unsurprisingly under the circumstances, Horatio Alger was not one of
the American authors cultivated by Italian intellectuals in search of social and cultural renewal.

For various reasons, the emigration phenomenon provided much more fodder to Italian cinema than it did to Italian literature. Memoirs such as America! America! Altre memorie del popolo were usually written by uneducated workers, often with outside editorial assistance and, as a consequence, they resemble the currently fashionable genre of taperecorded and transcribed oral history more than they do literature per se. Those few literary works devoted to the Italo-American experience which do not focus on underworld rituals and initiations, tend to be cast in the form of family sagas about clans of construction workers. Even here, however, the pedigree is anything but pristine. Jewish-American novelist/screenwriter Richard Price’s Bloodbrothers covers much the same ground as Italo-American author Pietro Di Donato’s Christ in Concrete, and is at least as well known. One looks in vain for a school of Italo-American writing that could profitably be compared to their African-American, Irish-American, and Jewish-American counterparts. Even crime novelist Salvatore Lambino hides behind the disingenuously “WASP” pseudonyms “Evan Hunter” and “Ed McBain”.

This should not be taken to mean that the Italian presence was entirely invisible in America in non-criminal format. Popular entertainers such as Frank Sinatra and Jimmy Durante, sports heroes such as Rocky Marciano and Joe DiMaggio, were very much in the public eye. Two of the most highly-esteemed American film directors of the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s were Frank Capra and Vincente Minnelli, but the Italo-American social experience was never central to their work.
Onscreen, recognizable Italian types were scarcely less stereotyped than Black maids and butlers, while their presence was almost always tangential to the plot. In Hays Code Hollywood, a place where the presumed prejudices of small-town Protestant Americans were never underestimated, Irish Catholicism was about as much “ethnicity” as an A-list movie hero could stand.

To a certain extent, this situation changed radically in the 1970s. During that decade, most of the “hot” new American directors were of Italian descent. Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Brian de Palma, and Michael Cimino brought a new consciousness to American cinema that was often described as “operatic”. Critics found connections between their work and the more baroque productions of Luchino Visconti, Michelangelo Antonioni, Bernardo Bertolucci, Francesco Rosi, and Sergio Leone. Even here, however, the change was more apparent than real. Neither Cimino nor De Palma poured much artistic energy into Italian subjects, and when they did it emerged in the hoary old form of Mafia melodrama. While the first two of Francis Ford Coppola’s Godfather films are almost universally recognized as masterpieces, they, too, are Mafia epics, even if they do display an unprecedented understanding of underworld sociology.3

The mob likewise casts a shadow over Scorsese’s work, but at least here we are given a chance to see the larger society that produced this criminal phenomenon. In Mean Streets, the director’s breakthrough

---

3 As Pauline Kael and other American critics correctly pointed out at the time, The Godfather movies were the first Hollywood features to suggest that the line between big-time crime and big business was often thin to the point of non-existent. In one of her reviews, Kael described the interlocking epics as “A wide, startlingly vivid view of a Mafia dynasty, in which organized crime becomes an obscene nightmare image of American free enterprise” (5001 Nights at the Movies 220).
1973 feature, the Mafia itself is broken down into big-shots and small operators in a little Italy full of priests, machismo, sexual guilt, Hollywood movies, instinctual patriotism, neighbourhood bars, coffeehouses, restaurants and apartment buildings where families stay together until marriage doth them part. This is essentially the same milieu that Scorsese would reproduce seven years later in Raging Bull, his acclaimed "biopic" of Italian-American boxer Jake La Motta. Scorsese’s Mafia is both a presence and a temptation; it functions on the same level as entering the priesthood, sleeping with non-Italian girls—the female perspective is seldom considered in these movies—and leaving the neighbourhood for the frightening, half-understood "melting pot" outside. More often than not, Scorsese’s heroes are emotional êmigrés who nonetheless think of themselves as all-American.

The êmigré experience is particularly germane to Italian cinema proper. The aesthetic ancestor of neorealismo, it should be remembered, was Toni, Jean Renoir’s 1934 study of multi-lingual Mediterranean emigrants trying to survive in the bidonvilles around Marseilles. Even in films situated in villages and towns where the local families have lived for countless generations, there is the feeling in Neorealist cinema that poverty can at any moment send these people wandering from place to place. This is as true of the impoverished fishermen in Visconti’s La Terra trema (1947) as it is of the Roman sub-proletariat depicted in De Sica’s Ladri di biciclette (1948). Rocco and His Brothers (1960), Visconti’s last black and white masterpiece, dealt with an impoverished Southern family that sought security in industrialized Milan; with the exception of the tragic family dynamics,
Lina Wertmuller's *Mimi metallurgico ferito nell'onore* (1972) and *Tutto a posto e niente in ordine* (1974) cover much the same ground. In many ways, Franco Brusati's already mentioned *Pane e cioccolata* is structured like a lighter, cooler version of *Toni*.

One of the more interesting Italian cinematic approaches to the ongoing problem of emigration is Gianni Amelio's 1994 feature *Lamerica*. This time the story is not about poor Italians trying to make good in some more fortunate quarter of the industrialized world, but about Italian conmen trying to exploit the starving inhabitants of a country which Italy itself has helped to impoverish. *Lamerica* begins with documentary footage describing Mussolini's invasion/occupation of Albania in 1939. The scene then shifts to the Albania of the 1990s, a country only recently emerged from the nightmare years of the Enver Hoxha regime and currently crippled by an economic stagnation even greater than that of Italy in 1945. Gino (Enrico Lo Verso), one of the two Italian confidence men intent on bilking these poor people out of their limited funds and even more limited supplies of hope, gets drawn into the vortex of Albanian misery, and eventually finds himself aboard a refugee-crowded ship that plans to beach itself on Italian sands, to seek refuge in a country that unceremoniously sends most illegal emigrants home. For Gino's victims, Italy itself looks like America.

In a moving interview he gave to *Positif* magazine, the director explained his motivations: "J'appartiens à une famille d'émigrants: mon grand-père a émigré et n'est jamais revenu, il a laissé ma grand-mère enceinte (elle avait trois enfants et était enceinte du quatrième), il a disparu en Amérique du Sud. Mon père—j'avais un an et demi et lui dix-huit—est parti à la recherche de son père, il l'a retrouvé et a disparu lui
aussi" (Viviani 25). By making *Lamerica*, the director continued, "Je voulais faire un film sur l'Italie, vue cette fois d'une distance géographique assez particulière" (Viviani 25).

This ubiquitous need to solve Italy's multitudinous problems should, however, not be taken as a sign of self-contempt. Even the ill-educated Antonio Margariti, certainly no friend of the status quo, described his homeland as "Nella 'terra italica, madre della civilità del mondo'...." (Margariti 19). Behind the massive chaos and chronic disorder of pre- and post-Risorgimento Italy lay the memory of Rome, the world's first centralized mega-state, brutal perhaps, but still the most efficiently run empire the world had ever known.4 If, on the one hand, Italy's problems seemed incurable, on the other they seemed to be of a cyclical, transitory nature. The problem was: how to solve them?

Benito Mussolini had one answer; Antonio Gramsci had another. Mussolini looked backwards to Imperial Rome for inspiration, and northwards for military support from Germany. Gramsci, on the other hand, despite his dyed-in-the-wool Marxist principles, preferred to look to the United States for particular answers to specific Italian problems. In America, he wrote, "La non esistenza di queste sedimentazioni vischiosamente parassitarie lasciate dalle fasi storiche passate, ha permesso una base sana all'industria e specialmente al commercio e permette sempre più la riduzione della funzione economica rappresentata dai transporti e dal commercio a una reale attività subalterna della produzione, anzi il tentativo di assorbire questa attività nell'attività produttiva stessa...." (*Quaderni dal carcere* 2145). Gramsci's pro-American enthusiasms were all predicated on the

4 With the possible exception of the British, of course.
very Marxist need to advance Italy to the level of industrial/democratic perfection then believed necessary for the successful translation into a truly socialist state. Anything that advanced this cause was promoted by Gramsci; anything that hindered it, he opposed. Thus, we read the following sadly disapproving comparison: L'America ha il Rotary e l'Y.M.C.A., l'Europa ha la Massoneria e i Gesuiti” (Quaderni dal carcere 246.) Towards this end, the prison philosopher speculated that a generous dose of sexual puritanism and Protestant Christianity might well be beneficial to Italy, although he obviously would not have defended these principles as independent virtues in themselves. The trick was to get Italy industrialized, and anything that furthered that purpose was worth pursuing. Thus, he wrote, “L'anti americanismo è comico prima ancora di essere stupido” (Quaderni dal carcere 635). Gramsci was as pragmatic here as he was everywhere else. Perhaps, too, he was haunted by another one of Stendhal's disturbing Italian observations, and sought some way to circumvent its stubborn truth. In Promenades dans Rome, the great French literary journalist contended that “Le matérialisme déplait aux Italiens. L'abstraction est pénible pour leur esprit. Il leur faut une philosophie toute remplie de terreur et d'amour, c'est-à-dire un Dieu pour premier moteur” (Stendhal 645).

The Futurists, curiously enough, had very little to say about America. While Filippo-Tommaso Marinetti was quite happy to tell modern Europe that “L'idea di patria annulla l'idea di famiglia” (Marinetti 389), and to extoll the magnificently non-human glories of airplanes, movies, machineguns and every other product of modern industry, he seemed completely indifferent to the very fountainhead of the machine world he extolled, the United States of America. One would
have expected a condemnation of American democracy, perhaps, but what about its factory system? Perhaps in the first two decades of the 20th century it was still possible for an aesthetic and political radical to be completely Eurocentric.

By the early 1930s, however, that option had begun to erode—as much by choice as necessity. As Italo Calvino pointed out in his introduction to Cesare Pavese’s seminal study, *Letteratura Americana*, there was more than simple enthusiasm for U.S. writing behind intellectual Italy’s mid-1930s passion for New World authors. For writers on the left, such as Pavese and Elio Vittorini, American poetry and fiction could be wielded, “...come uno strumento di polemica politica e letteraria-italiana.” (Letteratura Americana xv). Pro-American sentiments went against the official fascist line which decreed that the United States should be presented as “una società in cui l’alfa e l’omega della vita era il denaro e protagonista autentico della vita sociale era divenuta la macchina....” (Zunino 329).

U.S. literary criticism created a surprisingly fertile avenue for disguised criticism of the state. According to Lino Pertile, “American literature provided young Italian intellectuals with all that seemed to be missing from Italian letters and life” (Fourgues 181).

Let us consider Vittorini’s case first. When commenting on the author of *Moby Dick*, for instance, the editor/translator wrote, “Melville non sa credere in una conquista totale della purezza. Melville diffida. Crede tuttavia nella lotta” (Diario in pubblico 116). Just as Mikhail Bakhtin implicitly criticized Stalin, with his condemnation of fifth century Athenian aristocrats who preferred Oriental-style autocracy to Greek democratic institutions, so did Vittorini challenge
Mussolini's delusions of Italian political solidarity. In this context, even some of his more lighthearted comments can be read as slightly mischievous propaganda. In William Saroyan's fictional universe, for example, "L'America appare come una reincarnazione moderna dell'Asia di Harun-al-Rascid, San Francisco suona come Bagdad..." (Diario in pubblico 90). It goes without saying that no fascist Italian city of this period inspired the author with such pleasing, whimsical comparisons. One can also see how praising a novel in which all the events are external could seem slightly subversive within the confines of a police state where private opinions were not above the law: "Cain non dà che facce e fatti da vedere, e non permette di vedere o intravedere altro. I fatti interiori dà impliciti negli esterni..." (Diario in pubblico 93). Nazi readers of Vittorini's anthologies and translations must have been put off by the Italian's suggestions that "Negro" spirituals had positively influenced the works of Gertrude Stein and Ezra Pound. Vittorini's most unforgivable political sin, though, was unquestionably his championship of John Steinbeck, Jack London, and Erskine Caldwell, the American writers whose social critiques could most easily be translated to an Italian context. Thus, the author's anthology Americana was banned "...not on account of the American text, but because of Vittorini's Italian commentary" (Fourgues 182).

In the early days of their professional association, Cesare Pavese was, if anything, an even stauncher defender of American literature than his principal comrade-in-arts, Elio Vittorini. Pavese wrote his doctoral dissertation on Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass, and translated Moby Dick at the tender age of 26. In a letter written to his American friend Antonio Chiuminatto, Pavese gushed, "You are the
peach of the world! Not only in wealth and material life but really in
liveliness and strength of art which means thought and politics and
religion and everything. You’ve got to predominate in this century all
over the civilized world as before did Greece, and Italy, and France”
(Lettere 1926 - 1950 117). 5 Sadly, Pavese was quick to remind his
American correspondent that he had nothing in common with Chicago’s
most famous period citizen, Al Capone: “...you must not forget that we
Italians are two distinct nations, the North and the South, and that we
are the Northern and that the Chicago gunmen are the Southern and
there is a deeper difference of race and history between us and them
that nothing could repair” (Lettere 1926 - 1950 152).

In practice, Pavese was as enthusiastic about American movies
as he was about American books. In his own slightly ungrammatical
English words, “What in their little sphere have American movies done
in old Europe—and I’ve always abused those who maintained it was their
financial organization and advertisements which brought them up: I say
it is not even their artistic value, but their surpassing strength of vital
energy don’t mind whether pessimistic or joyful—what I say have done
movies will do for the whole of your art and thought” (Lettere 1926 -
1950 117).

What Pavese particularly wanted to do was visit America—but the
circumstances were never propitious. He sighed, “I dream, hope, long,
die after America. I must come” (Lettere 1926 - 1950 208). The young

5 Pavese used his letters to this increasingly distant acquaintance as a primary means of
perfecting his English. He was particularly interested in wading his way through U.S.
argot: “[American books] are full of slang, idioms, I don’t know what, and so for an half
incomprehensible. I want [a book on modern slang usage] as the air I am breathing”
(Lettere 1926 - 1950 90).
Pavese seemed to believe that the New World was superior in almost every way to the Old: "Surely Americans are kinder than we" (Lettere 1926 - 1950 205). Thus, the more "American" a book was, the more this Italian reader was likely to endorse it. One of his earliest enthusiasms was Edgar Lee Masters' The Spoon River Anthology, "...un bellissimo libro che non è poi di liriche, ma di personaggi; un libro che, a detta degli Americani stessi, contiene tutta l'America attuale...." (Lettere 1926 - 1950 220).

As early as 1932, Pavese's early passion for America was already wearing the stigmata of second thoughts. The author's final published letters to Antonio Chiuminatto are critical—indeed barbed—in the way that the early screeds were not. In one epistle, Pavese argued vis-à-vis the Old World's unpaid munitions bills, "I must say that I don't think Europe will pay: after all Europe already paid in the World War with all its dead, wounded, and maim'd [sic], and it's only right you also pay with money" (Lettere 1926 - 1950 221). Things went from bad to worse: "As for politics: here's to you, hoping to encounter you at my machine-gun's end and have you cry mercy... Perhaps only in the next World-war, we'll find out our true calling" (Lettere 1926 - 1950 223).

In Pavese's diaries, the author wrote that "Hemingway è lo Stendhal del nostro tempo" (Il mestiere di vivere 334). Comments on American culture, had, however, ceased to exercise his artistic conscience. Instead, he was preoccupied with the problems of realism, "women", and suicide. As his faith in the restorative powers of love declined, Pavese grew increasingly misogynistic: "Sono un popolo nemico, le donne come il popolo tedesco" (Il mestiere di vivere 327).
The author’s Americanophilia peaked when he was still in his 20s. Everything about the U.S. seemed to fascinate him: “Il Nordamerica è sempre stato un paese di bevitori eccezionali” (Letteratura Americana 5). Pavese believed that literary American slang constituted “...la vera creazione di un linguaggio-il volgare americano....” (Letteratura Americana 28). He believed that U.S. authors had built their own indigenous tradition, even if “Un greco veramente è Melville” (Letteratura Americana 79.) Moby Dick, he felt, made (obviously all male) readers feel “più vivo e più uomo” (Letteratura Americana 79.) What Pavese most wanted his countrymen to absorb from these overseas authors was a popular language of their own versatile enough to express the total reality of post-Risogimento Italy, “un linguaggio ricco di tutto il sangue della provincia e di tutta la dignità di un vita rinnovata.” (Letteratura Americana 34.) Pavese believed that writers like O. Henry, in Theodore Roosevelt’s time, had helped to make America one nation from Atlantic to Pacific, an alchemical process that supplied the collateral benefit of de-puritanizing the country.

Eventually, Pavese would concentrate on his own literary works, rather than those written by foreigners; in place of foreign models, his aesthetic grew increasingly wedded to the home-grown constructs of neorealism and regional authenticity. Even so, in a radio broadcast delivered shortly before his suicide in 1950, Pavese indicated that this rupture was not as complete as some critics believed: “...quando mi si descrive come uno che sarebbe passato dall’americanismo al neorealismo polemico e poi addiritura al regionalismo nostrano io confesso di non capire” (Letteratura Americana 292).
Although Southern Italians made up the vast majority of emigrants to America, most of the major Sicilian writers seemed completely uninterested in New World literature. Luigi Pirandello, for instance, was almost completely regionalist. Thirty years later, in Giuseppe Tomaso di Lampedusa’s masterpiece Il Gattopardo, the only reference to the United States is a wistful aside related to a 1943 bomb fated to destroy a once beautiful palazzo. This indifference, it should be emphasized, was not exclusively limited to Naples, Calabria and Sicily. Italo Svevo, Ignazio Silone, and Elsa Morante, to mention just three stellar talents, addressed themselves firstly to their fellow countrymen, secondly to Europeans, and thirdly if at all to readers in the New and Neo-colonial Worlds. In some cases, Communist sympathies led to a deliberate cold-shouldering of literature from the fountainhead of capitalism. Obviously, this tendency would grow once the New Deal era was replaced by the Cold War regime of McCarthyism.6

Even so, throughout the 1930s, most writers in Northern and Central Italy shared, to a greater or lesser degree, the pro-American literary tastes of Vittorini and Pavese. Nevertheless, Alberto Moravia was one of the few who actually spent some time in the U.S.: “Nel’ 1935 sono andato a New York, ospite su invito di Giuseppe Prezzolini della Casa italiana della Columbia University” (Diario Europeo 138). Moravia was more clear-eyed about the promised land than were most of his

6This tendency seems particularly pronounced in regard to Morante’s great 1964 novel, Historia. Although the book’s structure owes a great deal to John Dos Passos’s 49th Parallel, references to America are extremely sparse. A typical exception reads as follows: “Sul fronte di Corea, incursione USA a Pyong Yang con la morte di sei mila civili” (Morante 1026).
contemporaries, although he did not seem to be particularly aware of it: "Agli occhi di un europeo, l'America è un paese schizofrenico: tecnologicamente è più avanzato dell'Europa, politicamente più arretrato, nel senso che non ha partiti di sinistra che contestino la struttura. E un po' come, diciamo, la Francia prima del 1848. Dal punto di vista tecnologico è più vecchio di noi, da quello sociologico è più giovane. Un pasticcio" (Intervista sullo scrittore scomodo 95). Even so, he believed that "Il neorealismo nasce in Italia da un libro solo, e per giunta non di un italiano. Addio alle armi di Hemingway" (Intervista sullo scrittore scomodo 22).

Even a poet as otherworldly as Eugenio Montale was capable of responding to Hemingway's tough-guy charms: "Tuttavia l'uomo Hemingway non deludeva, confermava anzi quel senso di un'umanità schietta, quasi infantile—ma respinta furiosamente e compressa nel fondo della coscienza come indegna d'un uomo 'del nostro tempo'—che i suoi libri migliori lasciavano indovinare" (Montale 236).

Under fascism, fondness for American culture sometimes assumed semi-comic forms. Thus, one of the young Federico Fellini's first creative tasks was to write an alternative Italian text for a banned American science fiction comic strip: "Le futur cinéaste Federico Fellini, alors jeune journaliste, devint auteur de bande dessinée, se substituant, sur la demande de l'éditeur, à un Alex Raymond mis à l'index par le fascisme en Italie, afin de terminer un histoire de Flash Gordon" (Le Monde Diplomatique, Dec. 1996 29).

---

7 This somewhat surprising claim seems more comprehensible after reading Moravia's personal definition of the movement: "Il neorealismo è autobiografismo e documentarismo a livello lirico" (Intervista sullo scrittore scomodo 23).
One of Italy's few prominent literary intellectuals to be associated with the anti-American camp in 1930s Italy was Emilio Cecchi. With the aid of Messico, America amara, and Messico rivisitata, three travel books first published in the 1930s and later fused into the omnibus volume Nuovo continente, this literary aesthete, virtually by default, assumed the position of ideological opponent to Pavese and Vittorini. America amara, in particular, ensconced him in this role, although he subsequently took considerable pains to deny it. In his introduction to the post-war trilogy's re-publication, Cecchi explained, "Apparsa infatti durante la seconda guerra mondiale, a fascisti e comunisti, per opposte ragioni America amara sembrò un libro decisamente antiamericano, mentre cercava soltanto la verità...." (Nuovo continente vii).

In retrospect, Cecchi's writings on America read less like pro-fascist polemics than the sort of tracts we have come to expect from the travel journals of French intellectuals visiting America in the years immediately preceding and immediately following the Second World War. In particular, the author resembles a sort of Italianate Georges Duhamel. As Di Biase would have it, "Si veda il problema del razzismo, quello dei negri, dei lavoratori legati alle catene di

---

8 The very title of the middle volume in this trilogy plagued its author unmercifully. As Carmine Di Biase noted in his book length study of Cecchi, the accused insisted that he was primarily attracted by the alliterative magic of the letter "a": "Per il titolo America amara (1930 - 1943) Cecchi stesso dichiara, nell' Avertimento al libro, di essere attratto da un' allitterazione come Amica America di J. Giraudoux, Amusante America di A. de Meeüs, America primo amore di M. Soldati e con nell' orecchio 'maremma amara' d' una vecchia canzone toscana" (Di Biase 89). That his alliterative title was the only negative one of the four he cited was a detail which Cecchi chose not to dwell on unduly. The fact that Harlem, a Second World War vintage anti-American propaganda feature commissioned by the fascists was largely derived from Cecchi's travel writing, was likewise something he preferred to downplay.
Montaggio, del cinema, della delinquenza minorile, dei gangsters, della scuola, della religione, della donna” (Di Biase 89). Long-legged American women; skyscrapers; movie houses; Henry Ford’s factories: for readers of Chapter One, Cecchi’s itinerary will seem very familiar. Far from being racist, Cecchi was as fond of “Negro spirituals” as any writer on the antifascist left. What’s more, when he described ugliness, it usually was ugly: “Vi sono luoghi che l’indigenza, la vergogna, l’infamia hanno talmente impregnati e saturati, da renderli, a così dire, eloquenti come una storia trasfusasi in sostanza visiva. Sinistre epoche mummificate. Vie e piazze devastate e deserte; lugubramente solenni come cimiteri. La Bowery, a Nuova York, è uno di questi luoghi” (America amara 319).

He was, of course, not immune to the feelings of cultural superiority that permeated so many French and German intellectuals of his time. At the Museum of Natural History, for instance, he was prompted to make the following observation, “Ecco America...grace e puerile; sempre con quegli occhiali da nonna e con quell’ incarnato di latte e rose; credula, eppoi pedante fino all’ inverosimile” (America amara 20). U.S. museums seem to have often driven this seasoned art lover to cultivated despair: “É difficile credere che museo significhi ‘dimora delle Muse,’ si giudica da una quantità di musei americani” (Messico 48). Like Duhamel and his French compatriots, Cecchi thought of America as a strange mixture of matriarchy and enforced sexlessness, a circumstance occasioned by “il fenomeno della separazione dei sessi; effetto dei pregiudizi instillati dal puritanesimo....” (Jodi 304).
Cecchi did, however, differ from Duhamel in his attitude towards movies. With great pleasure, he describes his meetings with Adolphe Menjou, Gloria Swanson, and George Arliss. Since his first visit to America came in the form of a visiting professorship at the University of California at Berkeley in the early 1930s, the author could observe the death of the silent movie and the birth of its talking successor at first hand. Somewhat surprisingly for a conservative Italian cinephile, he preferred Buster Keaton's materialist comedies to the more ethereal movies of "the little tramp", lauding the stonefaced silent master "Senza le sentimentali finezze e le trascendenti ironie di Chaplin...." (Messico 29).

Italian film theorists, conversely, generally preferred Chaplin to Keaton.9 From an antifascist point of view, the cop-hating, millionaire-kicking "little tramp" obviously made a more effective cultural weapon than did Keaton's stone-faced loner. For the critics who wrote for Bianco e Nero and the other serious Italian film journals of the 1930s and '40s, American culture was appropriated more selectively than it was in the literary magazines. "Hardboiled" American novels were useful, because they could so easily be translated into Italian terms of reference.10

Hollywood, on the other hand, was regarded with more suspicion than love. Chaplin aside, it was generally seen as the bastion of the

---

9 In the 1960s, Pier Paolo Pasolini went so far as to argue that the release of Chaplin's Modern Times constituted an important turning point in human history.
10 A theory which Luchino Visconti proved conclusively when he turned James M. Cain's Depression Era pulp novel The Postman Always Rings Twice into the first great Italian neorealist film in 1941. At first banned by the authorities, it was later released at Il Duce's request in 1942 despite a decidedly unpatriotic subtext that celebrated bohemian homosexuality over both bourgeois marriage and heterosexual adultery.
world's most commercially successful "white telephone movies." Jean Renoir's *Toni* was their model of cinematic excellence, not Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind*. And, so far as literary sources were concerned, the fathers of neorealism did not look to Ernest Hemingway for inspiration, as Alberto Moravia contentiously claimed, but to Giovanni Verga. For them, Verga's standard of "verismo" set the narrative norm.\(^\)\(^1\)\(^2\)

As Callisto Cosulich wrote in his introduction to *Verso il neorealismo*, a collection of the hugely influential early writings of Giuseppe De Santis, "l'episodio saliente restano i due articoli che De Santis scrisse in collaborazione con Mario Alicata per richiamare l'attenzione del cinema italiano sull' opera di Verga, lo scrittore siciliano cioè in quegli anni era diventato il punto di riferimento di tutti i focolai di dissidenza culturale...." (De Santis 18). Future cinéastes were advised that, "Giovanni Verga non ha solamente creato una grande opera di poesia, ma ha creato un paese, un tempo, una società...." (De Santis 49).\(^\)\(^1\)\(^3\) While De Santis admired many things about American realism, the principal critic of the journal *Cinema* believed that European culture was essentially classical, while its American counterpart, lacking sufficient historical reference points, "esiste e continua a esistere mediante schemi e convenzioni instabilmente 'romantici'" (De Santis 60). Romanticism, De Santis primly noted, had

\(^{11}\) The contemptuous term by which the light, fluffy, romantic comedies mass produced by Mussolini's film studios were generally known.

\(^{12}\) Visconti would take this advice to heart in the immediate post-war period when he shot *La Terra trema*, a film based on a Verga text, in Sicilian dialect with Sicilian non-actors in an authentic Sicilian fishing village. On the mainland, this picture was shown with Tuscan subtitles.
exercised little influence on Italy. Consequently, "L'America, invece, era preoccupata soltanto di creare una nuova formula destinata insieme alla altra che portava alla ribalta la vita dei gangsters, a sostituire con successo il glorioso 'western'...." (De Santis 60). In matters of realism, De Santis believed that American cinema followed rather than led: "Fu il cinema americano a continuare la esperienza realistica del cinema europeo...." (De Santis 47). While he admired King Vidor, John Ford, Frank Capra, and several other American directors, De Santis claimed that "il mio 'credo' partiva dall' esempio del cinema francese di quegli anni scaturito dal clima del Fronte Popolare, e che aveva in Jean Renoir il suo più attento e profondo poeta cinematografico...." (De Santis 38).

French critics were among the first international viewers to recognize the unique genius of this new film style, but they did not feel inclined to bask in the reflected glory of their alleged tutelage. André Bazin and his disciples might have admired Renoir and Roberto Rossellini more or less equally, but to them they were entirely separate geniuses, discrete national personae.13 Rossellini, of course, was the director who made a virtue out of poverty of means, who shot in the street under variable lighting conditions because the roof of Cinecittà and Rome's other studios had all been blown off by Allied bombers, who worked with amateur actors because he couldn’t afford a fully professional cast, who—during the shooting of Open City—mixed

13 Nevertheless, the Franco-Italian cultural exchange was so extensive on the cinematic plane throughout the 1930s and early '40s, the phenomenon deserves some comment. Luchino Visconti worked as a designer and assistant director for Jean Renoir during those years, while Michelangelo Antonioni apprenticed with Marcel Carné. In Pierre Leprohon’s words, "L’axe Rome-Berlin facilitait les échanges avec l’Allemagne, mais de Paris également, plusieurs réalisateurs vinrent travailler avec les équipes italiennes. Après Max Ophuls, Jean de Limeur, Jeff Musso et Pierre Chenal, Macel l’Herbier...et Jean Renoir (La Tosca) s’y trouvaient en 1940" (Leprohon 80).
and matched bootleg film strips he bought on the black market, *pour faute de mieux*, after all the usual outlets had shut down. Rough, edgy, verging on documentary: neorealism seemed to be just what the postwar world needed. While films such as *Roma città aperta* (1945) and *Ladri di biciclette* all focussed on extremely local social problems, the international possibilities of the form became almost immediately apparent. As neorealism’s foremost ideologue and exponent, screenwriter Cesare Zavattini wrote in his autobiography: “Ogni cinema che mira a un rapporto stretto con i gravi problemi dell’uomo moderno, fa del neorealismo, partecipa a questo movimento che è ormai la coscienza del cinema” (Zavattini 474).

Perhaps the first neorealist film to deal with the wartime relationships of Americans and Italians was Roberto Rossellini’s 1946 omnibus film, *Paisà*. Beginning with the Allied landings in Sicily and 1943, and concluding with joint U.S./partisan actions against the Wehrmacht in northern Italy two years later, the mood of the film evolves from mutual hostility and suspicion to total trust and understanding, between these linguistically separated protagonists, as time passes and the troops march north. Not all of these early takes on U.S./Italian relations were quite so upbeat, however. Alberto Lattuada’s *Senza pietà*, for example, deals with a doomed romance between a black American military policeman and an Italian prostitute. As in *La putain respectueuse*, most of the blame for this unfortunate state of affairs is directly attributed to ingrained, institutionalized American racism.

Ironically, quite a few neorealist films assumed some of the escapist attributes of the American cinema whose norms they
ostensibly sought to escape. As Roy Armes wrote of *Il Cammino della speranza*, "The gunfight at the railway station in Rome is constructed in true gangster film fashion, while the ritualistic element is stressed in the knife fight to the death that takes place in the show between Saro and Vanni for the possession of Barbara" (*Patterns of Realism* 140). In the same volume, Armes added, "In many ways [the] Sicilian films of Germi are best regarded not as works in a pure realistic tradition but as stylised Italian equivalents to the American western" (Armes 140).

Between the late 1940s and late 1950s, Italian cinema evolved in a number of significant ways. Neorealism proper soon degenerated into the corrupt sub-genre known as *neorealismo rosa*, a format in which the tragedy of Italian poverty was largely supplanted by low comedy and local colour.¹⁴ So far as the mass audience was concerned, broad farce was the preferred bill of fare, though few of these comedies were ever exported outside Italy's borders.¹⁵ Other viable commercial formulae included the "peplum" (or neo-mythological film, muscleman historical epics whose roots reached back to Maciste, the strongman hero of *Cabinet*), the Italian social comedy (in which Sicilian settings were ubiquitous), omnibus movies (collections of short films, often thematically linked by author or human foible), the operatic film (often of very high quality), and the musical (usually wretched). In the 1960s

---

¹⁴ Even in their heyday, it should be noted, neorealist productions never amounted to more than a modest percentage of overall Italian film output. According to Peter Bondanella, of the 822 Italian feature films produced between 1945 and 1954, "only about 90 (or slightly over 10%) could ever be called neorealist films..." (Bondanella 35).

¹⁵ A number of these films nonetheless concerned themselves with Italo-American subject matter. Raffaello Matarazzo's *Come scopersi l'America* (1949) is a case in point.
and '70s, these staples would be augmented by *Mondo cane*-style documentaries (questionably non-fictional records of sensational events from around the world), the "spaghetti western" (more about this later), the erotic horror movie, and "*la luce rossa*" (pornography, both hard-and soft-core).

Hollywood studios, meanwhile, often availed themselves of Cinecittà's services, when they wanted to make epics on the cheap. American actors frequently starred in Italian movies of both the first and second rank. For many years, Rome was affectionately known as "Hollywood on the Tiber." Surprisingly, this U.S. invasion did not have an inimical effect on local production. As Peter Bondanella pointed out in *Italian Cinema: From Neorealism to the Present*, in 1972 "Italian products gained 62.5% of the box-office receipts as compared to a mere 15.1% earned by Hollywood films" (*Italian Cinema*143).

Artistic changes ran parallel to these economic gains. Most of the masters of neorealism gradually drifted away from the orthodox path. For Visconti, this "heresy" took the form of period films suffused with elegant nostalgia for the Marxist director's own aristocratic past. Antonioni, on the other hand, abandoned proletarian and petit-bourgeois concerns almost entirely in favour of his intimate, exhaustive explorations of upper class anomie. Finding it increasingly difficult to find backers for the neorealist projects he still wanted to complete, Rossellini gradually switched media, specializing in unadorned telefilms about famous people which were made in France as well as Italy. De Sica floundered for many years, until the world and the

---

16 A tactic made much easier by the almost universal Italian practice of post-dubbing.

With his highly personal iconography, surrealist imagery, childlike innocence, playful anti-clericalism, pre-pubertal sensuality and circus aesthetics, of all the major Italian directors, Federico Fellini would appear to have travelled the furthest from the neorealist point of origin. He might also seem the furthest removed from American cultural influence. And yet, as I shall shortly argue, this is far from being the case.

As already mentioned, one of Fellini’s earliest jobs was writing the Italian text for the American science fiction comic strip, *Flash Gordon*. He was also one of the co-writers of *Paisà*, still the most rigorous study of U.S./Italian social relations, a fact which suggests he was then as comfortable with naturalistic conventions as he was with comedic and fantastic formulae. In *Testaments transis*, we learn that “Depuis longtemps il [Fellini] rêve de faire de *L’Amérique* [the novel by Kafka] un film, et dans *Intervista* il nous a fait voir la scène du casting pour ce film rêvé….” (Kundera 61) All this is fairly well-known. What I am about to suggest now, however, is much more unorthodox. After having read Curzio Malaparte’s autobiographical novel *La Pelle*, I can only conclude that the novelist’s stygian imagination exercised a powerful influence over the younger filmmaker’s elysian psyche. If this connection has not been made earlier, I suspect it is primarily because radical differences in emotional tone have obscured the imagistic similarities.

Malaparte dedicated his greatest book as follows: “All’ affetuosa memoria del Colonnello Henry H. Cummings, dell’Università di Virginia,
e di tutti i bravi, i buoni, gli onesti soldati americani, miei compagni d'arme dal 1943 al 1945, morti inutilmente per la libertà dell'Europa” (Malaparte 4). Again and again, the author identifies himself with the spirit of the Old Europe which the war has destroyed. Despite his sympathy for the American soldiers who fought their way up the “boot”, his book shares none of the optimism of the similarly-themed film *Paisà*. Having been both a fascist and an antifascist, Malaparte was seemingly trusted by few of his fellow Italians, and he returned this favour with (literary) interest. He both blames his homeland for World War Two and extracts almost masochistic satisfaction from the bitterness of defeat: “E certo assai più difficile perdere una guerra che vincercìa” (Malaparte 12). He and the other Italian soldiers now enlisted in the Allied cause wear the haunting stigmata of bloodstained uniforms which were taken from “ai soldati britannici caduti a El Alamein e a Tobruk” (Malaparte 12).

The latest occupiers of Naples are simultaneously contemptuous and friendly. An American officer says, “’I like italian (sic) people. I like this bastard, dirty, wonderful people’” (Malaparte 17). On account of the great sufferings of the Neapolitans, “Cristo era napoletano” (Malaparte 17). Malaparte’s liking for Americans is the exact opposite of that of his U.S. superiors: “’I like Americans. I like the pure, the clean, the wonderful american (sic) people’” (Malaparte 17).

In a scene that could not help but stir the imagination of a Fellini, we are told that Neapolitan whores favour not only blonde wigs but also blonde merkins, because for black Americans G.I.s, their preferred prey, “non piacciono le donne bianche troppo nere” (Malaparte 21). Like Céline, Malaparte was an anti-rationalist: “'Per capire l'Europa...la
ragione cartesiana non serve a nulla. L'Europa è un paese misterioso pieno di segreti inviolabili’’ (Malaparte 27). Among the indigent families of Naples, black soldiers are traded like slaves by local street arabs; they are not perceived as field hands, however, but as husbands. Even more important than his colour, though, in the context of this starving city, is a G.I.'s access to Allied supplies: ‘‘...un bianco del P.X. costa quanto un driver di colore’’ (Malaparte 34). On a particularly bizarre Neapolitan staircase, Malaparte described a vision that could not help but inflame the young Fellini’s imagination, an urban hell inhabited solely by grotesque female dwarves: ‘‘Sono cosi piccole, che giungono a stento al ginocchio di un uomo di media statura’’ (Malaparte 37). While American soldiers will sometimes cohabit with these creatures as prostitutes, even the most hardened Italian whore-monger will have nothing to do with them. Of Naples’ recent struggle to free itself from Nazi occupation, the author is equally proud and horrified: ‘‘I ragazzi e le donne furono i piu terribili, in quelle quattro giornate di lotta senza quartiere’’ (Malaparte 63). A visit to the ‘‘Virgin of Naples’’ (allegedly, the only girl of the city to have not thus far prostituted herself, although she makes her living exclusively from publicly proving that she is still ‘‘virgo intacta’’) fills Malaparte with the most

17 Such exploited black characters were also featured in Paisà, Senza pietà, and—eventually—Liliana Cavani's 1981 screen version of La Pelle. A related figure can also be found in Federico Fellini’s 1957 masterpiece, I Notte di Cabiria.
18 Images of distorted female sexuality are one of the abiding characteristics of Fellini’s cinema. One is reminded of the pillbox ogress from Otto e demi, the giantess attended by two periwigged dwarves in Fellini Casanova, the hermaphrodite/”freak show” attraction from Fellini Satyricon, and dozens of others of striking examples that might, under slightly different circumstances, have been etched by Malaparte’s pen. One might also point out that, according to Milan Kundera, what most attracted Fellini to Kafka’s America was the figure of Brunelda, a giant-sized diva-turned-prostitute whom the Czech novelist describes as ‘‘un monstre de sexualité à la frontière du repugnant et de l’excitant....’’ (Kundera 62).
profound shame; it makes him feel conquered in the presence of foreigners who are no longer friends but victors. In the same vein, he is less than pleased by the transformation of Italy’s largest city into what he describes as the homosexual capital of the world: “Linternazionale degli invertiti, tragicamente spezzata della guerra, si ricomponeva in quel primo limbo d’Europa liberata da soldati alleati” (Malaparte 123). Malaparte associates these gay immigrants with Communism, the new generation of writers, and the artistic avant-garde; he sets them up in opposition to both himself and Italy’s tainted but still glorious past. At one point, the author goes so far as to suggest that General Donovan actively recruited homosexuals for the OSS as a means of spreading subversion and bad morale behind German lines.

On a very few occasions, Malaparte’s literary voice assumes the supercilious tones of a superior French visitor to the New World: “Come tutti i Generali dell’ U.S. Army, il Generale Cork [Clark?] aveva un sacro terrore dei Senatori e dei Clubs femminili d’America” (Malaparte 279). Once or twice, he even satirizes French attitudes towards Italy. A friend in the French Army, for instance, is not entirely satisfied with Stendhal’s 19th-century reportage from the City of the Caesars: “Si j’ai un reproche à lui faire—disse Pierre Lyautey—c’est d’aimer mieux Rome que Paris” (Malaparte 390). Malaparte’s pessimistic view of

---

19 Need one add that bizarre brothel scenes are yet another fixture of Fellinesque cinema?
20 While the Fellini who shot Satyricon was clearly quite sympathetic to the notion of sexual ambiguity, the director who made La Dolce vita a decade earlier used gay characters as a means of underlying contemporary decadence in a manner not unlike Malaparte’s.
21 Interestingly enough, Donovan’s name was purged from the earliest American translation of La Pelle, as were many of the book’s more graphic sexual descriptions.
Europe's imminent doom—and America's naive attempt to prevent it—is perhaps best epitomized when a volcano erupts and U.S. fighters impotently pour machinegun bullets into the lava in a vain attempt to stop it. Once a civilization had been reduced to a primitive survival level, Malaparte apparently believed, there was nothing anyone could do to restore it to its former state.22

Although Neorealism was abandoned by virtually everyone23 in its pure form, its moral authority continued to hold sway over the consciences of most serious Italian directors. Guido Aristarco, the self-appointed guardian of Marxist purity in Italian film criticism, had famously thundered, "I soli oppositori del neorealismo furono dunque i fascisti, i reazionari di qualsiasi specie" (Aristarco 28).

Since America meddled in so many other aspects of Italian life during the early years of postwar political and economic recovery, it should come as no surprise to discover that Hollywood representatives were simultaneously doing everything in their power to undermine the commercial health of neorealism. As Aristarco astutely warned:

"'Il Manifesto del Circolo romano del cinema dice anche della concorrenza americ,'" sottolinea nel 1955 'Cinema Nuova' che così commenta: 'Quando, tempo fa, venne in Italia Mr. Johnson per conto della MPAA e ci invitò chiaramente ad abbandonare la strada del neorealismo con la promessa di aprici, in cambio, i grandi circuiti americani, non fu difficile scorgere il fine della manovra, la quale tendeva a eliminare un ipo di concorrenza pericolosa perché costituiva un genere basato su bassi costi, per invitare i nostri industriali a scendere in campo sul terreno degli americani, dove alla fine saremmo stati facilmente battuti (come già accadde

22 This message, happily, was not absorbed by Italy's greatest life-affirming director.
23 Accatone, Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1961 directorial debut, was rather perversely shot in a pure neorealist style.
trent' anni fa; come è accaduto di recente ad Arthur Rank)''
(Neorealismo e nouvelle critique 140).

As things turned out, many Italian movies of less than Augustinian moral rigour did indeed penetrate the American market in the early 1960s, despite Aristarco's deep reservations. Many of these features were serious works with a sexual content that U.S. censors were prepared to tolerate in overseas imports, but not in homegrown motion picture productions. A decade later, when Hollywood functioned under fewer "blue nose" constraints, the serious dramas of Fellini, Visconti and Antonioni had been largely replaced by light sex farces, many starring Laura Antonelli. By and large, these later works were inferior not only to Italian cinema's major postwar masterpieces but also to such skillfully made satirical farces as Vittorio de Sica's _ieri oggi domani_ (1963) and Pietro Germi's _Divorzio all' Italiana_ (1961). Francesco Rosi and the Taviani brothers were probably the last major Italian cinéastes to be more or less guaranteed U.S. distribution. Bernardo Bertulucci still is, primarily on account of the fact that, for the last fifteen years, most of his movies have been made with Anglo-American money and shot in English. In retrospect, it now seems clear that Italian cinema never achieved more than a succès d'estime among American audiences, even during its "art house" heyday. Native insularity and studio manipulation of advertising, theatre chains, and popular taste—MPAA spokesman Jack Valenti has been telling the world

---

24 According to film historian Peter Bondanella, even _Last Tango in Paris_ (1972), the director's famous study of a grief-stricken middleaged American expatriate seeking sexual solace in the City of Light, was originally conceived, at least in part, as an inverted, entirely negative image of Vincente Minnelli's irrepressibly cheerful _An American in Paris_ (1951).
that “Americans don’t like movies with subtitles” for the past thirty years—Hollywood on the Tiber never stood much chance of turning into a New World succès de scandale.

Nevertheless, in spite of everything, the spirit of neorealism continued to live on. Sometimes it cropped up in the most unlikely places. Who, for instance, would have expected to find it in what later became derisively known as the “spaghetti western,” the immensely popular Italo-American sub-genre which director Sergio Leone first cross-bred in 1964? In Per un pugno di dollari (1964) and Per qualche dollaro in più (1965), Leone established many of the conventions which hundreds of imitators would soon follow. Usually fronted by American stars (most famously Clint Eastwood), filmed in the plains of Andalusia (Europe’s closest equivalent to America’s Old West), and helmed by Italian directors who sometimes affected Anglo-Saxon names, spaghetti westerns were both more cynical and bloodier than their U.S. counterparts. Occasionally, they were also more pointedly political. According to U.S. critic Danny Peary, Per qualche dollaro in più contains “the key political scene in all of Leone’s work: at the end Eastwood piles up the dead bodies of Volonté’s gang, counting them not by number but by the bounties each corpse will earn him. Socialist Leone’s point is clear: in capitalist America, dead men equate with money” (Peary 156). It might also be noted that, in his heroic loner roles with Leone, Eastwood’s nameless heroes were invariably treated to savage beatings whose iconography could easily be compared to that of the Crucifixion. Once again we are reminded of the deeply buried, almost subliminal Italian conflation of the briganti of modern Sicily with the outlaws of the Old West.
Marxism and Christian humanism aside, however, the neorealist element in spaghetti westerns was extremely slight. Super-heroes gunned down armies of villains with little regard for the laws of either probability or ballistics. In Leone’s films in particular, women were even scarcer than they were in the real Old West, while his cold-eyed super-heroes poured most of their erotic energy into highly ritualized, circular duels that emphasized flinty-eyed close-ups. In a word, they were strange. Of Il Buono il brutto il cattivo (1966), the last panel in the Man With No Name triptych, Pauline Kael wrote, “This Italian Western set in our Civil War period, looks more foreign to us than an ordinary Italian film—which gives rise to speculation about how we alter the scale, and hence the meaning, in our movie versions of foreign stories” (Going Steady 53). Or, as American critic Bill Krohn put it in a French film journal, “Leone n’était pas américain, et le cinéma dont il tire son inspiration le plus profonde n’était le nôtre. Il commença comme assistant de Vittorio de Sica, et son premier western fut un ‘remake’ presque scène à scène, de Yojimbo, le film de Kurosawa” (“La planète Leone” 12). As the Italian’s films grew more ambitious, Clint Eastwood began to feel as if this Italian auteur were “trying to be more David Lean than Sergio Leone” (Schickel 169). Even the filmmaker’s generally sympathetic fellow countryman Lino Micchiché felt that the director was more on Planeta Sergio than in the Old West: “‘Leone attesta con grande evidenza al carattere fondamentalmente astratto del proprio cinema: il suo referente esclusivo, infatti, risulta essere non già la storia del West, sia pure filtrata attraverso l’epopea che ne ha fatto il cinema americano, ma l’epopea cinematografica stessa; non
la storia, cioè, e neppure il mito, ma la storia del cinema e la rappresentazione del mito....” (Storia e film 64).

Leone himself, however, was strongly insistent on the absolute importance of Hollywood cinema to his life and work. In a tribute to John Ford, he wrote, “Je n’aurais jamais pu tourner Il était un fois dans l’ouest, et même Le Bon, la brute et le truand, si l’enfant que j’étais n’avait vu les déserts de l’Arizona, les villes de bois en feu que John Ford montait dans une lumière pure et étonnante” (Leone 15). For Leone, Ford was anything but a realist: “La véritable force de ses films on la trouve dans la puissante nostalgie d’un monde aux frontières irrémédiablement perdues et surtout dans son idée visionnaire de l’Amérique qui transpirait de chaque photogramme” (Leone 15).

It should, perhaps, be emphasized here that the late nineteenth century—the historical period in which most spaghetti westerns were set—was a time when Italian intellectual interest in the New World was negligible to non-existent. The literary treasures of Herman Melville and Mark Twain were not to be officially acknowledged for another half century. Literary Parisians might have kept one unquiet eye permanently fastened on the brash political and economic giant growing by leaps and bounds on the other side of the Atlantic for two centuries or more, but Italy’s self-involvement with its own seemingly insuperable problems did not allow Neapolitan writers and Florentine philosophers the same leisure. This early indifference has often had the unintentional but unavoidable effect of making Italian portraits of the American past seem even more fabulous (i.e. Zabriskie Point) than those of the French. American economic attitudes, political ambitions, and
ethnic hierarchies were already fully formed by the time outside Italian observers finally took a belated—if generally admiring—look.

Even so, it would be wrong to suggest that distant Italian observers were entirely blind to U.S. faults. Even Sergio Leone, despite his self-evident love for all things American, was quite capable of implicitly criticizing anti-Italian stereotypes within the iconography of Hollywood cinema. It is for this reason, I assume, that he made the underworld protagonists of *Once Upon a Time in America*, his only gangster film, Jewish rather than Sicilian.25

Aside from Leone’s popular riffs on American genres, few Italian productions of the 1960s and ’70s featured significant American motifs. Marco Ferreri’s *Dillinger è morto* (1969), for instance, restricted its explicit U.S. content to a single *Chicago Sun-Times* headline. Since we have already discussed the American connection running through Francesco Rosi’s criminal autopsies in Chapter Two, there is no need to re-consider them here beyond the basic act of remembrance. The major exception one should make to this rule would be the single flashback sequence in *Tre fratelli* (1981) wherein Second World War era Italians make joyful contact with Italo-American G.I.s. This filmed memory is clearly a nostalgic homage to Rossellini’s *Paisà*.

In the “Age of Marx and Coca Cola”, Vittorio de Sica made several features with partial U.S. financing, but none of these throw-away efforts (*After the Fox; Woman Times Seven*) can be counted among his

---

25 Historically speaking, of course, he was quite within his rights to do so. Until they emerged triumphant from the inter-ethnic Prohibition gang wars of the late 1920s and early 1930s, La Cosa Nostra had to share urban power with a large number of Irish and Jewish American gangs. If they had not, popular stereotyping in the U.S. would doubtless have followed a somewhat different course.
major works. "Toby Dammit," Federico Fellini's short contribution to the 1968 horror-themed omnibus film *Spirits of the Dead*, dealt with a self-loathing American actor in Rome, and the eponymous anti-hero of *Casanova* (1976) was played by Donald Sutherland.\(^{26}\) Aside from these relatively minor details and one singularly evocative film title (*Ginger e Fred*), the director's post 1960-*oeuvre* was more Italian and less American than were his more naturalistic works of the 1950s (which were often fronted by such minor Hollywood stars as Richard Basehart and Broderick Crawford). As has already been mentioned, during the last decade of his life (1966 - 1977), Roberto Rossellini's creative energies were almost entirely consumed by the production of semi-documentary telefilms about the lives of culturally significant Europeans. In similar fashion, the lavish historical dramas which characterized the latter third of Luchino Visconti's directorial career more or less limited U.S. influence to occasional casting choices.\(^{27}\)

Pier Paolo Pasolini's American enthusiasms, meanwhile, were seemingly limited to the director/poet's oft-stated liking for the films and persona of Charlie Chaplin. Thanks to her mass circulation fans in New York's journalistic community, Lina Wertmüller was invited to make a single U.S. feature (*The End of the World in Our Usual Beds on a Night Full of Rain*) in 1976, an entirely unsatisfactory venture which not only damaged the director's reputation, but which also drove her back to the burlesque

---

\(^{26}\) Although technically a Canadian, Sutherland is still thought of as American by most Europeans.

\(^{27}\) Burt Lancaster's starring role in *Il Gattopardo* (1962) being by far the most notable. Recognizing this fact, Bernardo Bertolucci, unquestionably the most Americanized of the major Italian directors, would subsequently use the aging Hollywood actor in almost identical iconographic fashion in *Novecento* (1976). Perhaps not so coincidentally, Bertolucci likewise chose Donald Sutherland, the disagreeable lecher of Fellini's *Casanova*, for the part of Attila, the controversial epic's fascist villain.
portraits of Italian culture which had made her famous in the first place. Ermanno Olmi's oeuvre was intensely national, as was Pietro Germi's (even if he did cast Dustin Hoffman in his 1973 satire of Italian sexual mores, *Alfredo Alfredo*). On the other hand, Bernardo Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* dealt with the last days of an existentially tormented U.S. émigré (brilliantly played by Marlon Brando), while *La Luna* (1979) dealt with the incestuous travails of Americans in Italy.28

Indeed, aside from Bertolucci and Francesco Rosi, only Michelangelo Antonioni evinced strong U.S. interests in the 1960s and '70s. *Professione: Reporter* (1975) dealt with the odyssey of a doomed overseas correspondent (played by that quintessentially American actor, Jack Nicholson) who fatally assumes the identity of an international arms dealer. While this feature was favourably received by most American critics, Antonioni's earlier effort, *Zabriskie Point* (1970), most definitely was not. Primarily concerned with the radical student movement in California, circa 1969, the film was denounced by most American critics as the most vicious piece of anti-American propaganda ever to be unleashed by a non-Eastern Bloc filmmaker.29

The passage of almost thirty years has, alas, done very little to change

---

28 Ironically, virtually all of the movies which Bertolucci actually made in the United States were concerned with matters Near and Far Eastern. This is true of *The Last Emperor* (1987), *The Sheltering Sky* (1990), and *Little Buddha* (1994). On the other hand, *Stealing Beauty* (1995), the director's first Italian feature since *La Tragedia di un uomo ridiculo* (1981), returned to his favourite theme of Americans abroad. What's more, it was simultaneously released in mainly English and mainly Italian language versions. Thus, despite a certain thematic repetitiousness, Bernardo Bertolucci remains the most ethnically unclassifiable of all major Italian filmmakers.

29 Perhaps because he was then largely unknown to all but connoisseurs of alternative theatre, U.S. playwright Sam Shepard's contribution to Antonioni's shooting script did nothing to assuage the critics' xenophobic fury.
this national consensus. Period Italian critics, on the other hand, tended to see the film very differently. In the words of one of them, "Alla maggior parte dei recensori statunitensi di Zabriskie Point sembra, infatti, totalmente sfuggito che l'ultimo film di Michelangelo Antonioni non è un 'pamphlet' contro l'America, ma un poema sull'America" (Micciché 65).

This difference of opinion reminds us once again of Pierre Leprohon's infinitely wise axiom from Le Cinéma italien: "Chaque pays écrit l'histoire à sa manière" (Leprohon 32). For Italy, this meant that the long, periodically prosperous, political chaos that followed the collapse of the Roman Empire—a situation which did not entirely change with the theoretical completion of the Risorgimento process—cast a long shadow over that country's inheritors, just as Americans were indelibly marked by the revolutionary events of 1776, and Frenchmen were permanently changed by 1789, the year when Bourbon absolutism was dealt its death blow. These radically different political inheritances in large part explain the divergence of French and Italian attitudes towards the United States as cultural symbol and political entity. If France has cause to see the United States as a global competitor which threatens its own claims to being considered the universal republic, one would expect Italians to experience a certain degree of envy in regard to a nation whose unity can be read as an implicit reproach to their traditional fractiousness. Even so, it must be admitted that Americanophobia has thus far never reached the same levels among Italian leftists that it did among their French-speaking counterparts, despite the former group's greater objective grievances. In politically militant Roman circles, sympathy for Third World causes
and suspicion of mass culture did not automatically translate into explicit condemnation of U.S. foreign policy in Southeast Asia the way that it did among radical Parisians and Berliners. Gramsci himself, after all, had argued that the ideology of anti-Americanism was inherently stupid. Until the nation had solved its most pressing problem of incomplete national cohesion, Italian intellectuals were not about to pre-emptively slam any socioeconomic doors that might be made to swing in a progressive fashion within the context of Italian culture and social conditioning. Perhaps for related reasons, Italian writers and thinkers have generally been remarkably tolerant of foreigners’ misconceptions of their homeland. Unlike their French peers, they almost never wax paranoid, while their outbursts of testiness are few and far between.

During the past quarter century, Italian interest in American life has not so much waned as become more peripheral to national self-interest. Contemporary and near-contemporary writers such as Umberto Eco and Italo Calvino have written frequently on American themes and subjects, but generally in a tone of cool detachment that stands in

30 Theodor W. Adorno’s influence was at its peak during the 1960s, the same decade in which Antonio Gramsci’s prison diaries were finally published in their entirety.
31 Since both nations attained unitary statehood more or less contemporaneously during the 1870s, after having existed for many centuries as geographical abstractions of related republics and principalities, it would make for an interesting study to compare and contrast the very different attitudes towards national identity which have been held by the citizens of Italy and Germany. Such speculation is, of course, outside the parameters of the present discussion.
32 Stefano Montefiore provided us with one of these rare examples of ill-humour in the November 14, 1996 edition of Corriere della Sera: “E mafia la parola italiana più citata nella stampa straniera,” (Montefiore 14) this linguistic patriot complains. The world press, it seems, will go to any lengths to add insult to injury: “Un regolamente di conti a Tokio? È stata la Japanese mafia. Non la yakuza” (Montefiore 14.) Such disenchantment with mainly Anglo-Saxon media is, of course, pretty mild stuff when compared to the angrier jeremiads of Georges Duhamel and Louis-Ferdinand Céline.
stark contrast to the hot-blooded, almost desperate enthusiasms of Cesare Pavese and Elio Vittorini. While it is still a land of marvels, for these later authors it has long since ceased to be a Holy Land of potential Italian salvation. Commissario Ambrosio might walk through the streets of Milan thinking about the latest Woody Allen movie, and the terrorist-haunted family of Gianni Amelio’s _Colpire al cuore_ might watch dubbed episodes of _Kojak_ on TV, but these cultural comestibles are only imported luxuries, not the staples of their lives. If Italy has become somewhat marginalized in relation to the modern world, so has America in relation to Italy.

Since this situation is in many ways inseparable from postmodern existence as a whole, we will not elaborate on it here. Instead, we shall continue the argument at the appropriate place in Chapter Four, our study of the dissolution of national identity within the acid bath of a multinational world.
CHAPTER FOUR: SLOUCHING TOWARDS THE MILLENNIUM

As the twentieth century fades into the 21st, French intellectuals tend to view the United States from two radically different, mutually incompatible perspectives. On the one hand, there is a calm acceptance of the centrality of U.S. cultural hegemony; on the other, there is the horrified realization that the worst fears of the most extreme anti-American Jeremians of the past have been confirmed with interest.

As Jack Ralite wrote in a recent edition of *Le Monde Diplomatique*, "Les entreprises géantes—Time Warner-Turner, Disney-ABC, Westinghouse-CBS—sont, de plus en plus présentes en Europe, où elles achètent des studios, construisent des salles multiplexes, interviennent dans les réseaux câblés, passent des accords avec les entreprises locales" (Ralite 32). This centralization of cultural capital has resulted in a situation where "Aux quelque 140 monopoles nationaux de l'audiovisuel s'est substitué un oligopole mondial composé de 5 ou 6 groupes avec un chef de file américain" (Ralite 32). Against

---

1 Canadian readers, steeped in their own subjection to the all-devouring U.S. media machine, will undoubtedly warm to the legitimacy of Ralite's claims when they peruse the following passage: "Le gouvernement français, représenté par le ministère des finances et soumis à la vigilance des milieux de la création, s'efforce d'obtenir une clause d'exception culturelle dans le AML, semblable à celle qui, à la demande du Canada, figure dans l'Accord de libre-échange nord-américain...." (Ralite 32) Canadian cultural nationalism has long been fuelled by the notion that the nation north of the 49th Parallel is the one most in thrall to U.S. entertainment conglomerates. To discover that the Canadian predicament seems enviable to a representive of France, the most culturally independent of Western European states, is to realize just how complete American control of the press and the air waves has become.
this unrivalled colossus, there is no longer a Communist “Other” to keep it in check; ying no longer knows yang, nor anima animus.

Indeed, in even the most “positive” French accounts of American triumphalism, one can hear a certain note of melancholy, the fatalistic sigh of defeated realists who know they must bow to unwanted necessity. This is true not only of Realpolitik-minded Atlanticists of the Raymond Aron school, but of leftist “heretics” as well. It applies with particular force to the most influential member of this second group, Jean Baudrillard.

While, as we shall soon see, many French writers and filmmakers set the stage for Baudrillard’s post-European perspective, this world-weary iconoclast remains the most striking example of the anti-classical Gallic intellectual. In 1985, he wrote, “L’Amérique est puissante et originale, l’Amérique est violente et abominable—il ne faut chercher ni à effacer l’un ou l’autre, ni à réconcilier les deux” (Amérique 87.) In love with American freeways and deserts, Baudrillard revels in the mindless speed of New World life: “La vitesse est le triomphe de l’effet sur la cause, la triomphe de l’instanté sur le temps comme profondeur, le triomphe de la surface et de l’objectalité pure sur la profondeur du désir” (Amérique 12). At one point, he even flirts with the unthinkable by suggesting that the homeland of lynching is, in practical terms, less racist than the nation that gave the world’s huddled masses liberté, égalité, fraternité: “…quand on revient en France, on a surtout l’impression visqueuse de petit racisme, de situation fausse et honteuse pour tout le monde. Alors qu’en Amérique, chaque ethnie, chaque race développe une langue, une culture
compétitive, parfois supérieure à celle des ‘autochtones’…” (Amérique 82).

To be sure, some of the author’s comments do appear to be fairly traditional. When he writes, for instance, that “Les Américains croient aux faits, mais pas à la facticité” (Amérique 84), one could easily imagine almost identical words flowing from the pen of Alexis de Tocqueville. In similar fashion, his claim that “…l’Amérique entière est pour nous un désert. La culture est sauvage: elle y fait le sacrifice de l’intellect et de toute esthétique, par transcription littérale dans le réel” (Amérique 97) inevitably raises the Eurocentric spectre of Georges Duhamel. In a particularly enthusiastic moment, one could imagine Simone de Beauvoir triggering the following explosion of ecstatic gush: “Beauté des Noires, des Portoricaines à New York. En dehors de l’excitation sexuelle que donne la promiscuité raciale, il faut dire que le noir, le pigment des races sombres, est comme un fard naturel qui s’exalte du fard artificiel pour composer une beauté-non sexuelle: animale et sublime—qui manque désespérément aux visages blêmes” (Amérique 21).

Still, if Baudrillard sees America as a successful utopia, a paradise regained, the ensuing garden of delights is more worm than apple. “Le paradis,” he writes, “est ce qu’il est, éventuellement funèbre, monotone et superficiel” (Amérique 96). Under Ronald’s Reagan’s happy-faced regime, he argues, the United States became a giant California sandbox, and, despite its oft-demonstrated potency, a “menopausal” culture. Under Republican rule, war itself has become a sort of audiovisual game. The invasion of Grenada, for example, enjoyed
the luxury of "[Un] Scénario sans risque, mise en scène calculée, événement artificiel, succès assuré" (Amérique 107).

Needless to say, the previous construct was brought to the peak of perfection by George Bush during the Gulf War. As Baudrillard would have it, "Après la guerre chaude (la violence du conflit), après la guerre froide morte—décongélation de la guerre froide—qui nous laisse aux prises avec le cadavre de la guerre, et la nécessité de générer ce cadavre en décomposition, que personne aux confins du Golfe ne parvient à ressuciter. Ce que l'Amérique, Saddam Hussein et les puissances du Golfe se disputent là-bas, c'est le cadavre de la guerre" (La Guerre du Golfe n'y a pas eu lieu 9). In 1991, America's "virtual" energy wound up serving the interests of the White House, the West, Israel and the Arab masses: "Tout se passe comme s'il avait un agent de la CIA déguisé en Saladin" (La Guerre du Golfe n'y a pas eu lieu 71). General Schwartzkopf's prediction of a costly campaign ended in victory tinged with farce: "Parfois un trait d'humour noir: les douze mille cercueils acheminés en même temps que les munitions et les armes. Là aussi, les Américains avons fait preuve de présomption: leurs pertes sont sans commune mesure avec leurs prévisions" (La Guerre du Golfe n'y a pas eu lieu 53). Indeed, "Un simple calcul fait apparaître que sur 500 000 soldats impliqués dans les opérations du Golfe, il en serait mort trois fois plus si on les avait laissés dans la vie civile, uniquement en accidents de la route" (La Guerre du Golfe n'y a pas eu lieu 74).

When comparing Europe to America, Baudrillard does so in a manner that devastatingly deflates the pretentions of both: "Quand je vois des Américains, surtout intellectuels, loucher avec nostalgie sur l'Europe son histoire, sa métaphysique, sa cuisine, son passé, je me dis
qu’il s’agit là d’un transfert malheureux. L’histoire et le marxisme sont comme les vins fins et la cuisine; ils ne franchissent pas vraiment l’océan, malgré les tentatives émouvantes pour les acclimater. C’est la revanche justifiée du fait que nous, Européens, n’avons jamais pu apprivoiser vraiment la modernité, qui se refuse aussi à franchir l’océan, mais dans l’autre sens” (Amérique 79). For all his modernity, on this level at least, Baudrillard approaches the United States in a manner indistinguishable from that of his illustrious nineteenth-century forebear, Alexis de Tocqueville. Once again, Old Worlds are old, and New Worlds are new, and never the twain shall meet.

In any event, neither Europe nor America have any real hope of triumphing over the other in the affectless void of postmodern quotidian realities: “Mais que les US ne soient plus le centre monopolistique de la puissance mondiale, ce n’est pas qu’ils l’aient perdue, c’est tout simplement que le centre n’existe plus” (Amérique 105). This problem is intimately related to the 20th century commodity which is in shortest supply: “Aujourd’hui, tout est libéré, les jeux sont faits, et nous nous retrouvons collectivement devant la question cruciale: QUE FAIRE APRES L’ORGIE?” (La Transparence du mal 11).

In the late 20th century, American influence is by no means the only threat to French amour-propre: “Les cultures fortes (Mexique, Japon, Islam) nous renvoient le miroir de notre culture dégradée, et l’image de notre culpabilité profonde” (Amérique 121).

If we jump forward a decade in time, we will discover that Baudrillard’s once unusual perspectives have become coin of the realm in contemporary French discourse. If this is not always immediately apparent, it is probably because not everyone accepts the new world
order with the same sanguine, shoulder-shrugging indifference repeatedly demonstrated by the author of *Amérique*. While hope for France's future is now exceedingly rare, the will to resist is far from dead.

*Le Monde Diplomatique*, for instance, continues to rail against the dying of the (European) light in front page article/editorials. In one such think piece, Ignacio Ramonet complained that "l'empire américain est le seul au monde, c'est une hégémonie exclusive, et c'est la première fois que ce phénomène étrange survient dans l'histoire de l'humanité" (Ramonet 10). Ramonet seems particularly disturbed by U.S. dominance of European media: "...sur les 50 chaînes européennes de télévision à diffusion national...les films américains représentaient, en 1993, 53% de la programmation" (Ramonet 1).

In all such articles, the editorialists typically focus on a culturally threatened Europe rather than a culturally threatened France. In the late 1990s, only a united Europe seems strong enough to resist extra-continental socio-economic incursions, a changed state of affairs from the Cold War days when European entrepreneurs defended virtually any American connection on the grounds that it could only strengthen the Old World's first line of defence against Communism, both foreign and domestic. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, the old playing field was changed beyond recognition.

Interestingly enough, in *Le Monde*'s pan-European polemics, America is no longer presented as the only capitalist barbarian at the gates. Increasingly, Japanese economic successes are ringing alarm bells as well. In his recent study of the growing power of the world's largest multinationals, Frédéric F. Clairmont pointed out that, at the
present time, Japan controls 62 of these economic juggernauts while America is in charge of only 53. The Land of the Rising Sun, the author contends, is even more of a challenger than these figures suggest. He writes, “Il existe cinq entreprises Mitsubishi parmi les ‘deux cents premières’, dont le chiffre d’affaires agrégé dépasse les 320 milliards de dollars” (Clairmont 16). In other words, Mitsubishi by itself is economically more powerful than the 11 multinationals controlled by Holland, Venezuela, Sweden, Belgium, Mexico, China, Brazil and Canada. Under the circumstances, the need for an economically united Europe—an area which, after all, still controls 37% of the top 200 global corporations—seems more urgent than ever.

*Le Monde*, intriguingly enough, seems as petrified of Japanese cultural influence as it is of the island nation’s economic strength. Perhaps because they have apparently seized a “frightening” 50% of the French bandes dessinées market—by expanding it, it should be emphasized, not by decimating it—Pascal Lardellier’s rather paranoid article on the Japanese manga emphasized the alleged crudity, cruelty, and inhumanity of this immensely popular comic book form, while saying very little about its crowd-pleasing visual style (Lardellier 29).

Nowadays, it would seem, the barbarians attack from both east and west.

For those who associate French culture with the early espousal of Black jazz, négritude, Benin sculpture, japonaiserie, Mesoamerican mysticism, and a host of other non-white or non-Western influences, the thinly-veiled xenophobia of such articles must come as something of a surprise. Could Régis Debray, Ché’s campaign companion in Bolivia and the most admired intellectual man-of-action since André Malraux,
really fear that France is becoming “un pays sans Jules, sans Hippolyte, sans Ernest, un plein pays de Boris et d’Ursule, de Djamila et de Rachel, Milan et Julio…” (Debray 186). Indeed, prior to the refreshing resurgence of French left-wing activism à propos the country’s reactionary new anti-immigration laws, it seemed for a time that most of the nation’s leading intellectuals accepted at least some of the planks of Jean-Marie Le Pen’s neo-fascist program.

In reality, of course, modern France falls somewhere in between the extremes of activism and reaction. Much Parisian intellectual discontent is not so much a rejection of the outside world as it is a desperate, almost ecological, attempt to prevent the destruction of the environment they know best. It also constitutes a rear-guard attempt to preserve France’s role as the “Athens” of the modern world long after it stopped attempting to be its “Rome”. Since the authority for this role rests solely with the French Revolution and the sociopolitical Enlightenment which it spawned, any challenge to this increasingly fragile legitimacy is deeply resented. One finds this attitude cropping up in a dizzying variety of forms. Even Libération’s recent “Livres Tokyo 1997” supplement seemed far more preoccupied with France’s declining influence on Japanese thought than it was with the reality of Japanese literature today. “[Même] si les noms de Delon et de Bardot disent encore vaguement quelque chose, l’Italie semble avoir remplacée la France dans la petite place que les Japonais laissent aux modes occidentales,” one critic complains (Haraig XIII), while another is obviously delighted when a Japanese author asserts that the highest praise one can proffer a book is to liken it to Jean Genet’s Journal du voleur (Ludon 111). In this context, it would seem, the United States
does not truly count as the "West". For Haraig and his associates, the word accidientale obviously refers to Europe, and not the New World, which is almost as dominant in Japan as it is everywhere else.

This understated but very common attitude puts the sting into Alain Finkielkraut's La Défaite de la pensée, the new philosopher's anguished account of the defeat of French-centred "universal" values at the hands of a vast number of multi-cultural villains who justify their reversion to barbarism with cynical adaptations of the particularist ideas of Johann Gottfried von Herder and Aimé Césaire. "Dieu est mort," the author sneers, "mais le Volksgeist est fort" (Finkielkraut 143.) Against the claims of the Third World nationalists, mindless young people, and pop cultural philistines who have seemingly inherited the earth, the philosopher advances the warning that, "La liberté est impossible à l'ignorant" (Finkielkraut 168) Most exasperating of all, "Les intellectuels ne se sentent plus concernés par la survie de la culture" (Finkielkraut 163).

What is perhaps most fascinating for non-French readers of this book is the inescapable fact that its author, a "universal" champion who attacks petty nationalisms on every front, is seemingly oblivious to the obvious objection that what he's really doing is defending one form of regionalism—that of his homeland, France, the cradle of the French Revolution and its avatar Napoleon—against all the others. He thinks like a second century B.C. Athenian cowed by the competing shadows of Rome, Sparta, and Macedon. He literally can't see that the "tree" he defends is just another part of the "forest" he condemns.

If this seems self-evident to Anglo-Canadian-American readers, we should perhaps bear in mind that, as a group, we are equally prone to
making universalist claims of equivalent self-centeredness. For monolingual anglophones, the world speaks English and English only. To be multilingual, in such circles, is to stand out, to be elitist, to deny the unifying primacy of the world's latest lingua franca—in effect, to speak one of the socially divisive tongues devised by Satan after the fall of the Tower of Babel. Although it is currently the loudest proponent of European unity, of the Old World's need for a new and powerful polyglot state, France in many ways mirrors these Anglo-American sentiments. The memory of French as the educated world's lingua franca is still very much a living memory in Paris, and the national tongue's subsequent replacement by Johnny-Come-Lately English is both remembered and resented. Indeed, if France, England, and the United States did not contain such tetchy, easily-bruised egos, the age-old dance of Anglo/French and Franco-American love/hate reactions could never have taken place. As La Rochefoucauld so aptly put it, "Nos ennemis approchent plus de la vérité dans les jugements qu'ils font que nous n'en approchons nous-mêmes" (La Rochefoucauld 18).

Before travelling any further in this direction, it would probably be best to return to the precise point where we decamped at the end of Chapter One. As the reader may recall, we ended that segment with a brief consideration of Mobile and 6 810 000 litres d'eau par seconde, two of Michel Butor's earlier études stéréophoniques, the first devoted to a day in the life of each of America's constituent states, and the second to a year in the life of Niagara Falls. Despite their experimental literary format, many of the ideas contained in those texts were inherited from previous generations of French literary travellers
exploring the mysteries of the New World. The ghostly voices of martyred, mystical Indians and oppressed, marginally-employed Blacks owed as much to age-old Parisian presuppositions about America as they did to the New World's indisputably ugly racial history. Butor's celebration of American opulence and variety, of a material plenitude that was as depressingly repetitious as it was sensually exhilarating, was chronologically far more specific, harking back to the French travellers of the late 1940s, the starved pilgrims who fled defeated, ration-ridden France to feed off the fleshpots of New York. Despite his connection to the nouveaux romanciers, Butor's books fit perfectly into the time-honoured chain of Franco-American travel journals.

La Brume à Santa Barbara was somewhat different. For one thing, the author appears not as an enlightened visitor but as a guest worker. For another, the story unfolds entirely in Southern California, far from the traditional tourist centres of Chicago and New York. While the author is teaching at the University of California's Santa Barbara campus, a bomb goes off, mortally wounding a night watchman: "Le gardien est mort deux jours plus tard sans avoir repris connaissance... L'affaire devenant meurtre, le FBI vint enquêter" (Où: La génie du lieu 295.) Needless to say, J. Edgar Hoover's agents "fit peser des soupçons sur les organisations de gauche, celles des Noirs en particulier" (Où: La génie du lieu 295). Thus, the snake slithered into paradise, "et nous comprenions qu'on eût pu nommer Pacifique cet Océan fameux aujourd'hui par les fureurs. Les vagues, les oiseaux, les branches" (Où: La génie du lieu 299).

This brief work is essential for a number of historical reasons. For one thing, it is among the very first French texts to be set in
Southern California, to use the “flaky” state as a paradigm for America tout court. For another it separates itself from the slightly patronizing attitude towards American Black people that even Jean-Paul Sartre fell prey to in _La Putain respectueuse_. Although they cannot “pass” for white like the vindictive mulatto hero of Boris Vian’s _J’irai cracher sur vos tombes_, dark-skinned rebels still manage to revolt against the system, using their off-centre stage obscurity as a deadly weapon instead of a sentimental play for foreigners’ pity. _La Brume à Santa Barbara_ laps against none of the traditional landscapes cherished by Chateaubriand and de Tocqueville. Butor’s Americans are totally immanent, existing in a rapidly changing present, completely different from Europeans and yet still somehow caught up in the same convulsions that gripped France, Italy, and Germany in May of 1968. After Butor, the United States will never be seen through French eyes in quite the same way again.

Jean François Lyotard’s _Le Mur du Pacifique_, appeared at roughly the same time as _La Brume à Santa Barbara_, and went over much the same ground. This text is allegedly written by either Merlin Vaclay or Michel Vaclay, a would-be instructor at yet another of the University of California’s ubiquitous campuses: “Les Visiting Professeurs européens sur les campus sont les précepteurs grecs...” (Le Mur du Pacifique 20). For him, the Franco-American parallels between Rome and Greece are now complete: “Les présidents américains sont des empereurs, Washington est Rome, les Etats-Unis d’Amérique sont l’Italie, l’Europe est leur Grèce” (Le Mur du Pacifique 19). If California is now emblematic of the entire U.S.A., this is because that formerly Spanish-speaking region is—Hawaii being summarily excluded from
consideration on the grounds that the history of this former Polynesian kingdom can be better understood within a North/South context—the most westerly U.S. state: "C'était l'Ouest absolu: Les moyens du capitalisme américain, c'est-à-dire le pouvoir romain; la beauté des corps courant sur les plages.... (Le Mur du Pacifique 41.) Lyotard's vision of American imperial splendour reads like a cross between a David Hockney painting and an episode of Baywatch: "L'Ouest absolu n'est que villes, jardins irrigués, plages et déserts, en cela tout conforme au Proche-Orient" (Le Mur du Pacifique 18).

This notion of California as the new seat of the Pax Americana would be echoed, in diverse ways, by Italian as well as French writers, for the rest of the 20th century. For, despite their increased interest in the quotidian realities of the U.S.A., Butor and Lyotard were ultimately more interested in re-routing the Myth of America than in destroying it altogether. This was in part a reflection of reality. Since the early 1960s, American wealth and industry have travelled in a Southwesterly direction, leaving the Northern industrial states somewhat bereft. Even New York, still unchallenged as the hub and axis of American high art, had been rendered an economic basketcase by radical shifts in economics as well as demographics. If Washington was Rome, then Los Angeles was Constantinople, the capital of a second Roman Empire that would long outlive the first.

Much of Le Mur du Pacifique was taken up with meditations on the nature of the Black male psyche, the angry libido that incessantly suffered in the socio-psychological maze of White capitalism. A great many of these pronouncements seem to have been inspired by primarily Black literary sources, in particular Richard Wright's Black Boy,
Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. If “Votre verge est noire, donc vous n’existez pas, le blanc seul existe” (*Le Mur du Pacifique* 32). In this situation, “La peau blanche soulève le désir métèque comme l’intérieur appelle l’extérieur....” (*Le Mur du Pacifique* 19). The nature of this hunger is unavoidably ugly: “Comment situons-nous le désir de violer qui naît dans la verge métèque?” (*Le Mur du Pacifique* 34). From African-American angst, it’s a short journey to Frantz Fanon’s model of the colonized mind: “C’est Rome qui le rend ainsi: La Césare blanche suscite les masques à sa périphérie, elle fait lever des épaisseurs, elle s’entoure de signes, de singes, de fous, de nègres, de grecs, de juifs, d’arabes, de chinois, de ritals, tout basanés” (*Le Mur du Pacifique* 35). Since the narrator has already linked visiting European professors to the concept of Greek tutors under Roman rule, Lyotard has essentially placed Frenchmen on the same level as Blacks in the American scheme of things. This results in an identical ire: “Le métèque est critique évidemment par constitution, puisqu’il n’est pas citoyen américain-romain” (*Le Mur du Pacifique* 39).

While Jean Genet did not concern himself unduly with the reality of “Roman” America—that idea would not become *une idée fixe* until the 1980s—he was very much attracted to the popular image of the American Black as sociosexual outsider. Initially his interest in (male) Africans was twigged by his early fascination with dark-skinned convicts, an erotic obsession which acquired a political dimension when placed in the context of European colonialism. This was the impetus behind *Les Nègres*, one of his greatest plays. This experimental drama dealt with “[L’] Afrique aux millions d’esclaves royaux, Afrique déportée, continent à la dérive....” (*Oeuvres complètes* 125). In other
words, America's historical contribution to the history of slavery was implied rather than explicit, an unnamed choral part for a choir of pale-skinned exploiters.

It was only after the author developed an active interest in the Black Panther movement during the late 1960s, that the continental emphasis started to shift. He began to break bread with African-American militants, just as he would later establish social contacts with armed members of the PLO. In both instances, he was asked to participate: “J'ai été invité par deux mouvements révolutionnaires, par le mouvement des Blacks Panthers, des Panthères Noires, et des Palestiniens” (Dialogues 25). When asked if he felt at home with the first of these two groups, the author responded, “Immédiatement...pendant deux mois j'étais tous seul au milieu d'eux” (Dialogues 17). Like the PLO, the Panthers held for Genet “une charge érotique très forte” (Dialogues 26). The homosexuality that separated him from these mainly heterosexual radicals clearly only increased his desire. He delighted in the fact that his reputation could daunt even armed revolutionaries brandishing guns: “J'ai revu Angela Davis, elle me dit: ‘Mais, nous aussi, on a peur de vous’” (Dialogues 17).

Michel Foucault’s interest in the United States was more actively gay then Genet’s. Many of his notions of freedom were revised by his experience of San Francisco bathhouses and sadomasochistic bars: “Je crois qu'il est politiquement important que la sexualité puisse fonctionner comme elle fonctionne dans les saunas, où, sans que l'on soit emprisonné dans sa propre identité, l'on rencontre des gens qui sont pour vous comme on est pour eux: rien d'autre que des corps avec lesquels des combinaisons, des fabrications de plaisir vont être
possible” (La Volonté de savoir 94). Still, delighted though he was by the sexual experience of America—even though it was through these anonymous pleasures that he contracted the AIDS virus which eventually killed him—Foucault’s specific references to America and American culture are as rare in his books as they are in those of his contemporaries Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Derrida. If his libido ceaselessly sought to escape from the social and sexual restraints of Old Europa, his super-ego constructed ideas with an almost exclusively European audience in mind. Unlike Genet, he could never say, “La politique française, je m’en fous, ça ne m’intéresse pas” (Dialogues 56).

Of course, for some French writers and intellectuals, perceptions of the U.S. didn’t change much over the years. Jacques Prévert’s scathing jeremiad—“Dérisoire erreur judiciaire/Officiellement préméditée/Tout est faux dans ce procès/Pas l’ombre d’un doute/Simplement la lumière de l’innocence...” (Oeuvres complètes, Tome II 812)—lines written in the early 1950s on behalf of the accused American spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, do not differ greatly from “Sa tête, sa jolie tête était mise à pris aux enchères du malheur, du grand malheur déo-légal, dei dollar, haineux, raciste....” (Oeuvres complètes, Tome II 348), words composed almost twenty years later in support of another American political prisoner, the Black Marxist college instructor and comrade-in-arms of Bobby Seale and Jean Genet, Angela Davis. Jean Cau, meanwhile, seemed determined to put a 1970s-style slant on the disdainful observations of the arch-Americanophobe, Georges Duhamel: “Les USA...ont leur seuil de décadence: les arsenaux atomiques avec lesquels, j’en jure, on ne construira pas des salles de
concerts" (Cau 51). With Olympian aplomb, he sneers at teenagers, Blacks, and everyone else without a vested interest in the Old Europe which no longer exists. Like his 1930s predecessor, Cau is adept at beating the left with the arms of the left for the benefit of conservative traditionalists. Thus, we hear that American student activists are cowardly as well stupid and primitive: "Nouveau barbares, des jeunes peuvent saccager des bancs et des pupitres d'universités, mais ils n'approcheront pas des silos de fusées, et les aristocrates de la terreur ne laisseront pas les babbares de la contre-culture casser les ordinateurs" (Cau 51 - 52). Attempting to fell two ideological foes with a single blow, Cau contends that the Red bourgeoisie resembles "la bourgeoisie noire américaine dont les fils, un jour aculturés, reprochent aux pères leur trahison et veulent revenir aux sources noires d'une âme commune et d'un destin collectif" (Cau 163). In a particularly nasty bit of would-be re-valorization, the author argues that the struggle between American slaves and American slave owners appreciably worsened on the day when "le Blanc est devenu hontueux. Alors, en un premier temps, les Noirs ont réclamé l'égalité, mais au fur et à mesure que celle-ci leur était accordée, ils ont tout naturellement-le processus est toujours totalement le même-méprisé ceux qui leur ouvraient les portes de leur monde et en un deuxième temps, ils ne veulent pas être les égaux de ceux à l'égard desquels ils n'éprouvent que mépris...." (Cau 133). In Cau's neo-feudal universe, "Une société sans espérance et sans foi devient fatalement une société de tolérance" (Cau 73). Unsurprisingly, the only "Roman" comparison the author makes in connection with the United States concerns the new
empire's inevitable fall; about its heyday and rise he has very little to say.

As mentioned in Chapter One, most of the pro-American propaganda to flow from French pens during the 1970s was dipped in the Atlanticist inkwell. Raymond Aron and other "objective" pro-Gaullist intellectuals defended the United States on the grounds that it was the one dependable bastion against totalitarian incursions from the Soviet Union. To outsiders, such voices seemed to be few and far between, shouted down and drowned out by the much louder rhetoric of the left. Of course, to outside eyes, things looked quite similar in the 1920s. To a New York academic scribbling in his Cambridge study, Paris was the home of Surrealists and Dadaists, of Communists and anarchists, of hard drinkers, drug addicts, and sex fiends. The overweening Catholic influence on inter-war French intellectual life, of which André Gide complained so often in his journals, was largely lost on the overseas observer. Outsiders might be aware of the works of Georges Bernanos, François Mauriac, and Simone Weil, but the vast galaxy of minor poets, novelists, and journalists who supported these stars of the French Catholic intelligentsia went largely unnoticed. The overall effect was not dissimilar to judging an ocean solely on the basis of its whales and sharks. While it is by no means certain that the Atlanticists of the early 1970s dominated their Mao-inspired left-wing peers in the same way that Charles Maurras's disciples overwhelmed the Bolshevik opposition forty years earlier, they were unquestionably stronger than most social histories suggest. Nevertheless, since this intellectual dispute was more of an internal cultural struggle than it
was a reflection of concrete Franco-American relations, its further consideration clearly falls outside the parameters of this study.

France's late '60s, early '70s flirtation with Maoism ended almost as suddenly as it began. The result of the same historical forces which gave birth to Situationism a decade earlier, the movement reflected intellectual disenchantment with the established Communist parties of the Soviet variety. The heroes of the October Revolution, Gallic thinkers believed, had degenerated into mere social imperialists. Chinese socialism was seen as the more authentic path to follow, one that had not been co-opted by too many years of self-interested finagling and bad faith. Even so, the Soviet Union never achieved the Evil Empire status in France which it enjoyed in the United States almost from the day when the Romanovs were secretly shot and buried in a basement (this stigma only really lifted in the years 1942 - 1945, when Moscow was Washington's indispensable ally in the war against the Third Reich).

As Frederic Jameson put it in his review of the history of the cutting edge French journal *Tel Quel*, "...there came an enthusiastic special issue on the United States; an apparently mind-blowing experience of Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* (published in French in 1974), leading to the discovery of 'totalitarianism' and the revelation of the dissident...." (Jameson 6). From this radical shift in political emphasis sprang the class of disaffected former Maoists soon dubbed *les nouvelles philosophes*. Their best known text, Bernard-Henri Lévy's *La Barbarie à visage humaine*, was a systematic repudiation of France's long-term romance with Marxist-Leninism. Lévy rejected Bolshevism with a dismissive completeness that was far more dogmatic than the
more modest separation which Albert Camus had advocated a quarter
century earlier in *L'Homme révolté*. Unlike Camus, however, Lévy was
not reviled for his “defection” because the mood of French thinkers
was then moving in an increasingly pro-American direction. Statements
that would once have been condemned as reactionary now received all-
but unanimous nods of approval. Tzvetan Todorov was merely
expressing the *Zeitgeist* when he wrote, “Car la dignité est toujours et
seulement celle d’un individu, non celle d’un groupe ou d’une nation” (*Face à l’extrême* 35).

Plentiful evidence of this altered perspective may be found in
Philippe Sollers’s *Femmes* and Julia Kristeva’s *Les Samouraïs*, two
*romans à clefs* by the married “successors” to Jean-Paul Sartre and
Simone de Beauvoir. Of these two works, Kristeva’s novel, with its
metaphorical association with a proverbial Asian elite, was obviously
the most beholden to *Les Mandarins*, de Beauvoir’s Prix Goncourt-
winning, semi-autobiographical presentation of the lords and ladies of
St. Germain-des-prés’s postwar Enlightenment. In Kristeva’s fictional
universe, the leading lights of post-structuralism have supplanted the
stars of existentialism. While Sollers’s book covered much the same
territory, its stylistic indebtedness to Céline, as well as its sexual
bravado and teasing *corrida* with feminist orthodoxy, turned *Femmes*
into a somewhat oblique homage to de Beauvoir’s book.

At one point during the novel, Jerry Saltzman, an American friend
of Hervé Sinteuil and Olga Morena, the newly-crowned king and queen
of intellectual Paris, rhetorically asks, “Ça vient d’Anne Dubreuil?” (*Les
Samouraïs* 354). Since Anne Dubreuil, give or take a letter (*h*, to be
precise), is the name of de Beauvoir’s alter ego in *Les Mandarins*, this
bit of literary larceny leaves the reader in no doubt as to the author’s real intentions. Kristeva is insinuating her rival/predecessor’s fictional persona into the text. This jest is rendered even richer, even more complex by Saltzman’s next sentence: “De l’Académie française?” (Les Samouraïs 354). In the 1980s, the first and only woman to have been elected to the French Academy was, of course, not Simone de Beauvoir, but Marguerite Yourcenar, the “hermit” of Maine. In Les Samouraïs, one will discover thinly veiled pen portraits of Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, and the rest of the Tel Quel crew, just as one finds, in de Beauvoir’s source text, fictional riffs on Albert Camus, Arthur Koestler, and the other literary satellites who once orbited Les Temps Modernes, Sartre and de Beauvoir’s influential monthly magazine, during the late 1940s.

Like Anne Dubreuihl, Olga Morena acquires an American intellectual lover while in the United States. This individual, like so many of the characters in this mock-roman à clef, bears a name heavily freighted with modernist resonance. Just as Olga’s husband carries the Proustian moniker Hervé Sinteuil, her lover is saddled with the Woolfian family name, Dalloway. Olga’s affair with Edward is clearly meant to parallel Anne Dubreuihl’s trans-Atlantic dalliance with “Lewis Brogan,” de Beauvoir’s fictionalized portrait of Nelson Algren (at this point in time, I would not care to hazard a guess as to whether Edward Dalloway was, in fact, modelled after an equally concrete historical personage). Adding reference to reference, and century to century, Olga/Julia occasionally refers to her amorous American as “le pasteur Bovary,” a fact which perhaps explains why Edward—yoked to the memory of nineteenth-century literature’s most famous cuckold—is
less central to the plot of *Les Samouraïs* than Lewis was to the storyline of *Les Mandarins* (*Les Samouraïs* 306). It is hardly coincidental that the novel begins with the words, "*Il n’y a plus d’histoires d’amour*" (*Les Samouraïs* 9).

Kristeva’s tone is cooler than de Beauvoir’s: less passionate; more elegant. Her Bulgarian connections more or less guarantee that she will have difficulty functioning as a leftist militant, even at the best of times: ‘‘*C’est la lutte finale,*’ entonne Olga, car elle connaît tous les couplets de ce chant depuis l’âge de six ans, quand les dominicaines françaises qui dirigaient la maternelle furent expulsées et que des maîtresses nommé par le gouvernement remplacèrent ‘Minuit, chrétiens, c’est l’heure solennelle...’ par ‘Debout les damnés de la terre....’” (*Les Samouraïs* 118). While she is as solicitous of Sollers’s reputation as de Beauvoir was of Sartre’s, she celebrates it in a particularly Sollersian way, putting words of almost Mephistophelean iconoclasm into Hervé’s sarcastic mouth. Indeed, when mocking France’s intellectual stars of the 1980s, Hervé/Philippe sounds more than a little like Camille Paglia: “–*Des imposteurs! Produits frelatés bons pour l’exportation! On les vend, et très cher, en Amérique, au Japon, en Afrique, bientôt en Russie*” (Kristeva 352). In this desaturated, affectless time period, cultural monuments are as rare as love stories. Olga travels to America and China, just as she originally journeyed to France. Epiphanic surprises, it seems, can be found nowhere: “*A l’hôtel Algonquin descendaient des Français prétentieux à la recherche des Indiens d’origine, ou simplement nostalgiques des New-Yorkais spirituels des années vingt. Hélas! La Table Ronde...n’avaient survécu*” (*Les Samouraïs* 300).
Life is not only elsewhere in this narrative; it is literally nowhere.

In *Femmes*, most of the narrator's journeys are motivated by his peripatetic phallus. His girlfriends include Chinese, American, Spanish, and Italian women, and this gives him ample opportunity to travel to their respective homelands on quests that are as much erotic as they are cultural. To muddy the waters, Philippe Sollers symbolically inscribes himself into two separate literary personae: the American journalist around whom the action revolves, and S, the French writer with whom he collaborates. Above all there are women: seductive, beautiful, omnipresent, but always a pain. If the author is a misogynist, his hatred of women is alternately passive and manipulative, making the best of bad situations while cynically bowing to historical necessity. The following passage is prototypical: "Le monde appartient aux femmes. C'est-à-dire à la mort" (Sollers 12). Written in a pseudo-Célinean style, top-heavy with ellipses, the narrator does everything in his power to draw the reader's attention to his meta-fictional techniques: "Le mot 'roman' est magique. Et un roman comment? Américain? Fitzgerald? Bellow? Roth? Mailer? Ou plutôt atmosphère policière, mafia, drogue, dollars?" (Sollers 78). His reasons for relating his stories through the medium of an experimental Gallic author are equally artificial: "J'ai demandé simplement à l'écrivain qui signera ce livre, de discuter avec moi certains points... Pourquoi je l'ai choisi, lui? Parce qu'il était haï" (Soller 12). The same applies to his choice of the French language: "Pourquoi en français? Question de tradition... Les Français, certains Français, en savent davantage,
finalement, sur le théâtre que j’ai intention de décrire...” (Sollers 12 - 13).

The narrator, like Sollers himself, changes political, religious and ideological affiliations the way most people change shirts. An agent provocateur, he outdoes even Henri Sinteuil in intellectual insolence. S (for sexe, perhaps, or sophiste, as well as Sollers?) stands in perpetual awe of novelty and change. Thus, the New York he celebrates is the New York that arose after the great age of French literary pilgrimage: “La nuit de New York, verticale, empilée, postgothique, perçante, cubique... Le World Trade Center comme un computer lumineux, avec ses deux tours comme de longs micros visuels... Et, au bout de la rue ou j’habite, le mouvement du port...les entrepôts, les camions... Le magasin de Delikatessen ouvert jusqu’à deux heures les matins... Le bar des Portoricains... New York est aussi une ville espagnol...” (Sollers 161). The narrator’s American enthusiasms—which range from Melville’s Moby Dick to the paintings of “Bill” de Kooning, from William Styron’s bestsellers to John McEnroe’s backhand—are seldom reciprocated by the many women in his life, most of whom he slyly mocks as unwitting philistines and parlor radicals. Of one mistress, he complains: “Elle n’aime pas l’Amérique... Elle trouve que New York est une ville néogothique sans intérêt... Elles comme les progressistes du monde entier; comme tous ceux qui sont viscéralement et provincialement attachés aux grandes idées simples du XIXe siècle, incapables d’apprécier la nouvelle beauté de là-bas...sa souplesse, son énergie....” (Sollers 199 - 200). The narrator’s sudden interest in the Bible, Israel, and religious conversion sits no more comfortably with his former peers than do his views on women, America, and
homosexuals. Perhaps this is why he feels the need to divide the guilt, inventing an American self for the superficially self-effacing S:

–Je ne suis pas réellement écrivain, dis-je, C’est vous qui êtes mon double au pays des doubles!
–Je me demande qui est l’écrivain de nous, dit-il, songeur (Sollers 659).

Of course, despite the narrator’s elaborate literary disguise, he is still surrounded by veiled portraits of Tel Quel’s intellectual stars. Being male, however, and much more promiscuous than either Olga Morena or Anne Dubreuihl, he devises a more picaresque career for himself, a randier journey. Despite its Celinean style, Femmes can even be read as Les Mandarins updated not by Simone de Beauvoir’s spiritual heir, but by Jean-Paul Sartre’s—or is it Nelson Algren’s? The absurd hubris of this approach adds considerably to the novel’s sardonic, mean-spirited charm. At times it’s difficult to tell where the preening self-flagellation stops and the self-incriminating boasting begins. In any case, it is not the sort of strategy one is accustomed to find in American novels.

Being the beneficiaries of relatively cheap jet travel, both Kristeva and Sollers take American life much more matter-of-factly than did their predecessors. Voyaging to America does not make them feel like Christopher Columbus or Vasco da Gama. They are treading well-charted turf and they know it. Some of their slightly younger contemporaries know it even better. Indeed, their relationship to that of the New World, being more complete and longer-lasting, more closely approximates the perspective of a John Crevecourt than an
Alexis de Tocqueville. For them, America is more than just a half-threatening, half-seductive, fantastically rich, quasi-barbaric place to visit. It is, rather, the locus of all modern living, a mindscape that young Europeans couldn’t escape even if they wanted to.

This changed reality is at the core of Pascal Quignard’s memoiristic novel, *L’Occupation américaine*. Initially the narrator is quite sanguine about this turn of events: “L’Orléanais fut occupé par les Celtes, par les Germains, par les Romains et leur douze dieux durant cinq siècles, par les Francs, par les Normands, par les Anglais, par les Allemands, par les Américains” (Quignard 9). Although the last of these occupations is the most pleasant, it is also the most insidious. Patrick Carrion and his friends are fascinated by these foreigners in their midst, high-living GIs in 1950s France, all blithely unaware that General Charles de Gaulle would shortly re-interpret the nation’s NATO commitments to the point where the Yanks and their tanks would be obliged to withdraw. Even the young Communists in Orléans, disdainful though they are of American culture in general, are frankly enamoured of the sepia-toned underbelly of the imperialist beast. TV, they can resist, but jazz, rock ‘n’ roll, and rhythm and blues leaves them totally defenceless. François-Marie Ridelsky, the most militant of the local Bolsheviks, is re-born as “Rydell.” Although his anti-American rants are both passionate and prolonged—“Je chie sur la conquête de l’Ouest... sur la bombe Little Boy, sur les Fords et les Chevrolets, sur le racisme, sur le Wall Street, sur les buildings” (Quignard 106)—nothing can change the fact that “Son dieu était Monk. Ses apôtres avaient nom Charlie Parker et Miles Davis” (Quignard 62). The U.S. occupation casts a shadow on everything, including love, the previous romance between
the narrator and Marie-José being seriously disrupted by the arrival of overseas objects of desire. Of all the lines in Quignard’s text, the following is the most ironically untrue: “Le 27 avril 1967, le territoire fut entièrement libéré” (Quignard 209). The Americans might be gone, but they are certainly not forgotten.

Many of Quignard’s themes would be incorporated in Claire Denis’s 1994 feature, U.S. Go Home. Co-scripted by Anne Wiazemsky, Jean-Luc Godard’s second wife and one of the legendary divas of more than one European New Wave movement, this sharply observed, chronologically sensitive, and surprisingly gentle coming-of-age comedy centres on a 1965 vintage party after which teenaged Martine (Alice Houri), her popular friend Marlene (Jessica Tharaud), and Martine’s older brother Alain (Gregoire Colin) first dance to American music, then get picked up by an American Army officer (Vincent Gallo) in a jeep. As ideology battles desire, and consumerism successfully co-opts ideology, the “battle honours” ultimately go to the American, who is as willingly kind as he is attractively naive.

Philippe Labro’s L’Étudiant étranger is even more definitively cast in the Crevecourtian mold of autobiographical observation. Unlike Pascal Quignard, Labro actually lived in the United States for a number of years, studying at a conservative Southern university during the McCarthyite 1950s. The author describes a conformism among his fellow classmates that one ordinarily associates only with Red Guards during China’s Cultural Revolution: “De toute la rangée, Buck est le seul à n’avoir pas les cheveux en brosse, la crewcut....” (Labro 18). Their garments are as unindividuated as their hair: “Ils sont tout habillés de la même façon, on croirait presque en uniforme: col de chemise à
pointes boutonnées, cravates à rayures, *tweed jackets* à chevrons ou blazer sombre" (Labro 18). All this provincial brown-nosing fails to solicit the sophisticated sneer of contempt which one would expect from a Jean-Paul Sartre or a Simone de Beauvoir: "Je veux me conformer. Je veux être américain comme eux...." (Labro 27). The young Labro is less intrigued by the inhabitants of Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County than he is by the characters in Charles Schultz’s then-new comic strip, *Peanuts*. With little complaint, he accepts the puritan restraints of Deep South dating rituals: "...il n’y a pas de putain dans la vallée de Virginie" (Labro 34). For a while, the callow narrator dates a black school teacher, until “Big Jim McLain”–a Southern sheriff whose name quite fittingly, is identical to that of an eponymous John Wayne role in a period anti-Communist Cold War agitprop drama–warns him off. After this thinly veiled threat, our nominal hero pursues a Southern belle in a more conventional manner. He’s attracted to Black culture, ferreting out R & B records on the forbidden “dark side” of town, but he is still a stranger, and not a particularly courageous one at that. As he himself admits, "Je ne sais rien des Noirs. A cette époque, la Virginie telle que je l’ai découverte, est totalement ségrégationiste... Ici, c’est le sud“ (Labro 86).

The contemporary French writer who is most strongly associated with pro-American positions, though, is unquestionably Philippe Djian. Aside from Louis-Ferdinand Céline, virtually all of Djian’s cultural influences are U.S. in origin. As one of his biographers wrote, “A vingt ans...à cette époque...il hait la culture... Dylan et Cohen sont les dieux
Djian worked for six months at the Rockefeller Centre in 1968, travelled throughout Latin America with an avant-garde theatre troupe shortly thereafter, and settled his family in Martha's Vineyard after turning 40. While the author does not forget to pay the obligatory Gallic homage to Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner, he has been far more profoundly affected by the more marginal writings of Henry Miller and Richard Brautigan. "Henri," as Mohamed Boudjedra points out, is the most recurrent given name among Djian's fictional protagonists. Above all, though, there is Brautigan, the U.S. hippie movement's closest equivalent to a literary figure of major "beat" status: "Brautigan, l'instinctif, l'ambivalent Richard Brautigan est la première figure, figure récurrente puisqu'il revient dans plusieurs romans, qu'il est à lui seul le sujet de la nouvelle Une raison d'aimer la vie...." (Boudjedra 89). In Maudit manège, the narrator/alter ego records that "C'est le jour où j'ai tapé la dernière page qu'on a appris la mort de Richard Brautigan, et le soir je me suis saoule comme je l'avais encore jamais fait de ma vie et je suis resté un long moment couché en travers du tapis à écouter les gens chialer dans la rue" (Maudit manège 51). Within the parameters of the author's tragically hip universe, this kind of mourning is as heart-felt and profound as a full-scale Viking funeral. Djian is equally taken with Anglo-American nineteenth-century authors and late twentieth-century rock 'n' rollers: "A première vue, une constatation s'impose: peu d'écrivains français dans cette écurie" (Boudjedra 88). Only in one respect is he truly traditional: "Il y a chez cet auteur un rapport singulier au territoire,

---

2 Leonard Cohen, the most critically revered of all Canadian troubadours, is often described as "American" in French periodicals.
une connivence secrète, pour le romanticisme façon Chateaubriand, époque Natchez....” (Boudjedra 91).

American influence on the author can be felt even in those novels and tales where New World geography is notably absent. In his review of Jean-Jacques Beineix's screen version of 3702 le matin, a French film critic complained that “Philippe Djian, [le compère du réalisateur], qui a écrit le livre, est trop envoûté par l'Amérique pour être sincère, et confond avec une certaine délectation de solitude et égotisme” (“Les oripeaux du look” 79).

If Parisian critics have long railed against the relatively mild "liberties” which Djian takes with the French language, it is almost certainly because they suspect this freedom stems from Nexus, and not Voyage au bout de la nuit. This defensive hostility is at least partly motivated by the uncertainty generated by France’s declining cultural role on the global scale. As Djian himself would have it, “'A Paris, on croit que la littérature française est encore en train d’illuminer le monde, en fait les gens rigolent. Les éditeurs américains n’achètent jamais un roman français, les Espagnols et les Italiens un par-ci par-là....” (Robitaille 202).

Even so, Djian is not as seamlessly welded to the American mainframe as his detractors contend. As he himself admits, “'Bref, je parle l’anglais...comme un Français....” (Robitaille 204). He has, it seems, no interest in hobnobbing with his American peers: “Il y’a quelques années quand il habitait Cape Cod, William Styron, qu’il l’admire, n’habitait pas très loin: ‘J’étalais content qu’il soit là, mais je ne lui ai jamais parlé. En lisant ses oeuvres, j’avais eu le meilleur de lui même’” (Robitaille 201).
Henri-John (again that Milleresque given name!), the narrator/hero of *Lent dehors*, is a French professor who mopes around Cape Cod after his writer wife leaves him. New England is less a place for him to live than it is the ideal location to broodingly reflect on his (Gallic) past. Not for this melancholic the solace of political engagement: “Je pensais que les Russes et les Américains mettraient bientôt un point finale à nos problèmes, aussi ne voyais-je pas d’utilité à me mêler de ses choses” (Djian 382). Significantly, Henri-John’s Americanophilia pre-dates his hands-on American experience. In the mid-1960s, his friend Meryl looked after his overseas education: “Elle me fit découvrir—certains paquets arrivaient exprès pour moi des USA—quelques jeunes auteurs comme Carver ou Harrison alors que j’en étais encore à Kerouac ou Saroyan, et je fumais des Winstons d’importation, j’en recevais des cartouches entières” (Djian 418). When reading the previous passage, one should bear in mind that blond tobacco was once as hard a sell in France as were whisky and bourbon; the subsequent economic success of these stimulants in France should therefore be recognized as circumstantial evidence of a fundamental change in national tastes, not as a mere expansion.

Starting with his 1994 novel *Assassins*, Djian has begun to explore an America that is even more amorphous than it was before. One assumes that the actions described take place in the New World, but one can never be entirely sure. At times, it seems as if the author’s vision of Hénochville—a name which in and of itself suggests some sort of union between New England and Old France—occupies an imaginary half-world where French and American landscapes and mores have become hopelessly intertwined. To quote one outside observer, this New
World belongs to an "Amérique jamais identifiée... un territoire imaginaire... crée de toutes pièces" (Robitaille). The end result is unprecedented: as sharply observed as de Tocqueville’s America, as romanticized as de Beauvoir’s, and as deracinated as Kafka’s.

In France, as in the rest of Europe, the widespread adaptation of American technology and practices has led to a de facto Americanization of the populace. Crowds flock to McDonald’s in Paris, the city of haute cuisine. The modernization of the City of Light that inspired Jean-Luc Godard’s Alphaville can now be found in remote provincial cities. Without irony, the Paris-based Julio Cortazar, a left-wing magic realist, can enthuse, "Pour nous, Parkingland est une terme de liberté" (Cortazar and Dunlop 96). In 1997, a Situationist conducting a dérive through even the oldest, most indigenous streets of the French capital would find no quarter untouched by changing psychogeography; the oleaginous strains of Michael Jackson boomboxing from a Sony Walkman is now more than enough to scatter the cringing shades of Voltaire, Verlaine, and Villon. Claude Miller’s expressed desire to construct “un univers qui renvoie à mes rêves de cinéma, des souvenirs magnifiés de films américains vus les samedis soirs dans mon enfance” (Curcol 107) now seems quaintly anachronistic. More than 70 years ago, D.H. Lawrence wrote that “all that is visible to the naked European eye, in America, is a sort of recreant European” (Lawrence 3). Nowadays one could say the same thing today in reverse about contemporary Europeans. What once seemed most eccentric about

---

3 Although, of course, the most famous Russian Communist paper, and the leading French conservative paper, have not yet fused into Figaro-Pravda, as Godard predicted. Still, when you consider the other media mergers that have taken place, one can hardly accuse the Franco-Swiss filmmaker of shoddy prescience.
Lawrence's literary study of the United States now appears most prescient: "The furthest frenzies of French modernism...have not yet reached the pitch of extreme consciousness that Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, Whitman reached. The European moderns are all trying to be extreme. The great Americans I mention just were it" (Lawrence 4). The previous statement rings even truer when you place the word "post" before the word "modern".

Still, if the French often seem angry at, and unhappy with, U.S. cultural invasions of the uncontrolled variety, they still derive a measure of pride from their championship of undervalued American artistic assets, a pride that is surely not unconnected to their still unvanquished belief in superior Gallic sensibility. Cinematic interest in American hardboiled novels continued unabated, inspiring such disparate filmmakers as Claude Miller (Dites-lui que je l'aime), Bertrand Tavernier (Coup du torchon), and Alain Corneau (Série noire). Despite the altered national circumstances of these wide-screen adaptations, they were scripted in a spirit very close to reverence. François Truffaut was fairly typical when he explained that, à propos the works of William Irish, "quand je devais affronter un 'problème Irish', j’avais des chances de trouver la 'solution Irish’" (Gillain 244). In 1996, Claude Mesplède and Jean-Jacques Schleret published a massive biographical dictionary/bibliography/biography of the mainly American authors who supply the raw material for La Série noire. To date, no publisher in America has seen fit to treat native crime writers with the same scrupulous respect.

In the United States, by far the most contentious Franco-American enthusiasm is the one connected to Jerry Lewis. In her
February 1989 "lettre de New York," Bérénice Reynaud published an extremely funny and prescient article entitled "Qui a Peur de Jerry Lewis? Pas Nous, pas nous." To the hackneyed question "Why do the French love Jerry Lewis," Reynaud posed a counter-question "Pourquoi les Américains pensent-ils que les Français aiment Jerry Lewis?" (Reynaud VIII). The ensuing answers to the last question produced a sort of Rorschach blot portrait of the alternately admiring and contemptuous attitudes underlying cultural relations between these two nations who are simultaneously wary friends and friendly enemies.4

Litmus test psychology aside, however, Jerry Lewis does have his critical champions in France, film theorists who would seriously claim that their idol is as worthy of serious respect as were the once-underappreciated Alfred Hitchcock and Howard Hawks. Of these defenders, by far the most effusive was the recently deceased Robert Benayoun. A fluent anglophone, last generation Surrealist, and translator of Edward Lear's limericks, this stalwart of Positif magazine revelled in "ce 'tour d'esprit' très anglo-saxon que les Français ont toujours tant de difficulté à saisir" (Joubert 66). In the words of long-time colleague Michel Ciment, "il était...un sorcier car, non content de nous transporter d'une rive à l'autre, il fut le plus souvent en amant du fleuve, découvrir aussi bien le Cinema Novo et Glauber Rocha, les indépendents new-yorkais, les courts métrages de Resnais, Jerry Lewis ou les comiques juifs du Borscht Belt, de Mel Brooks à Woody Allen" (Benayoun le dandy littéraire 63). Benayoun, though not as high profile on the international circuit as the

4 For a complete transcript of this article, please see Appendix 3.
cinéaste/critics of Cahiers du cinéma, was at least as responsible as they for re-setting the parameters of French taste. His early and extravagant enthusiasm for Night of the Hunter, Charles Laughton’s only motion picture in the capacity of director, unquestionably contributed to the fact that Studio magazine awarded that 1955 production “la première place de classement” in its ranking of “les 50 meilleurs films-cultes” (77). Benayoun’s magazine writing owed little to the ideologically-driven criticism of the 1970s and ’80s. As he himself put it, “J’ai toujours pensé que la critique devait être poétique, même si elle s’applique à un film imparfait, ce à l’inverse de certains de mes amis qui croyaient à la possibilité d’une poétique délibérée on ne décide pas, par exemple, qu’on fera un film surréaliste, on est surréaliste ou on ne l’est pas” (“Le cinéma et nous” 48).

Benayoun’s dedication to Bonjour, Mr. Lewis, the author’s best known—some would say his most notorious book—begins with a curious dedication: “À ANDREW SARRIS, le Spiro Agnew de la critique américaine.” (Bonjour, Mr. Lewis 6) Sarris, it should be recalled, was the American reviewer who first introduced French-style auteurist criticism into the United States, adapting it in a way that exalted Cahiers du Cinéma’s pro-Hollywood enthusiasms while simultaneously downplaying the magazine’s equally strong advocacy of Italian neorealism and French réalisme poétique. Positif, it should also be pointed out, was at critical and ideological odds with the Cahiers crowd, so Andrew Sarris’ approach could not help but be scrutinized with double suspicion. This partially explains the critics insulting bracketing with Richard Nixon’s disgraced, philistine Vice President, but not entirely. Benayoun was a Surrealist poet, after all; conceivably,
his *Bonjour* dedication could, if one insists, be read as an extremely obscure compliment.

Originally, Benayoun wanted to write a book called *Les Jokers*, a work that would have encompassed the careers of W.C. Fields, Buster Keaton, Groucho Marx, Toto, Alberto Sordi, and The Beatles, as well as Jerry Lewis. For the author, these artists "étaient à la fois les bouffons, les dandys, les excentriques de leur temps" (*Bonjour, Mr. Lewis* 11). If Benayoun's book can be read as a panegyric or hagiography, it is at times curiously unflattering to its subject. When considering the nature of Lewis's partnership with the handsome Dean Martin, for instance, the author writes, "D'autre part se présent Jerry Lewis, un avorton simiesque et juvénile, coiffé comme sa brosse à dents, qui ne sait ni chanter ni danser mais s'obstine à le faire, et qui, refusant tout puberté, se laisse câliner par des dames opulentes au sein plein de lait, ou préférablement par son idole masculine, Dean Martin" (*Bonjour, Mr. Lewis* 21). Benayoun describes Jerry as both "l'anti-James Dean" (*Bonjour, Mr. Lewis* 19) and as an adult who adores all children because "[ils ont] de son âge" (*Bonjour, Mr. Lewis* 41). Again and again, Benayoun refers to his subject's onscreen weakness, effeminacy, immaturity, ineptitude with women. For the author, Lewis's willingness to explore emotions and modes of being which most people would be ashamed to admit is what makes him a great artist. It is on the strength of this volition that he makes high-flown claims such as the following: "Comme celle de Bunuel (et la rassemblance arrête là), l'œuvre de Jerry Lewis est basée sur des souvenirs d'enfance" (*Bonjour, Mr. Lewis* 339). This, in Benayoun's eyes, makes his subject a cultural incendiary: "Pourtant il reste un personnage subversif. Il est le satiriste le plus
féroce, le plus disent des régimes johnsoniens et nixoniens. Son pacifisme est militant. Il ne craint pas d’attaquer la guerre du Vietnam, de donner le part belle aux noirs” (Bonjour, Mr. Lewis 147).

Pacifist; pro-Black; anti-establishment: these three qualities could not help but endear themselves to left-wing European critics. In Europe, the commercial or critical failure of major American movies is often attributed to political factors. By implication, Heaven’s Gate died at the box-office not because it was a structural mess but because its underlying message about the closing of the West was uncongenial to Middle American viewers. There is more than a little truth to these charges.

Much of Bonjour, Mr. Lewis is taken up with the actor/director’s feelings of gratitude for his continental acceptance. At a press conference, he says, “—En France, on reçoit les films différemment, de même en Italie, en Angleterre, en Allemagne ou en Espagne. Le cinéphilie européen examine les films, et se préoccupe moins de l’angle comique que de sa motivation. Il se soucie de l’écriture, du montage, de la photo, de la mise en scène, et il est intrigué par l’homme... Aux U.S.A. les intellectuels n’ont pas le temps pour ces choses-là, ils sont trop occupés à quitter la salle avant même de s’asseoir” (Bonjour, Mr. Lewis 161). Most gratifying of all, “Nous avons là-bas une catégorie d’individus que nous appelons (par dérision) critiques. En France vous avez des analystes” (Bonjour, Mr. Lewis 161).

More recently, Woody Allen has been getting the Jerry Lewis treatment in France. As the actor/director told Cahiers du Cinéma, “C’est une histoire qui a commencé avec Edgar Poe, puis a continué avec Faulkner et tant d’autres. Tout le monde sait aux Etats-Unis que la
France a la réputation de découvrir et de célébrer les artistes américains qui sont ignorés dans leur pays. Il y a quelques années, le New Yorker a publié un dessin où l'on voyait un roi sur son trône qui disait du bouffon assis à ses pieds: 'Ici, il n'est pas être drôle, mais en France on considère que c'est un génie!' C'est un attitude typiquement américain" (Ciment and Tobin 14). Just as, some might add, rolling out the red carpet to ostentatiously honour neglected American artists is typically French. As Mia Farrow pointed out in her memoirs, “Parisians are a lot nicer if you’re with Woody Allen” (Farrow 242).

The list of similarly privileged American cultural celebrities is very long indeed. Currently, they include Clint Eastwood, Michael Cimino, Sam Fuller, Tim Burton, John Carpenter, and Monte Hellman. These New World heroes are more or less evenly divided between talented money-makers qui sont méprisés par leurs concitoyens, and marginal figures whose careers have been drowned in the Hollywood factory system. At present, most U.S. lions in France are connected in some way with the cinema; forty years ago, the majority were affiliated with jazz. With the notable exceptions of Edgar Allan Poe (a writer who is often perceived as more French than American, anyway), Herman Melville (French critics adore him almost as much as do their Italian counterparts), William Faulkner (now an almost universal cultural commodity), Ernest Hemingway (highly prized for his lean, spare style), and virtually all U.S. masters, major or minor, of le roman noir, authors are seldom so privileged.

The short roster above was recently expanded to include another literary celebrity: William Styron. Philippe Djian, as we have already
seen, regards this man as an idol (albeit one he'd prefer not to worship in the flesh). Michel Butor, another Gallic admirer, wrote the preface to the French language edition of *Set This House on Fire*. In Melvin J. Friedman's opinion, this phenomenon can be explained primarily as an extension of the long-established French love of William Faulkner: "He was taken up vigorously and creatively by the French—even before he was properly appreciated in his native country—and, on occasion, was deemed to be the inheritor of the French symbolists" (Kolb and Noakes 123). Friedman reminds us that "Almost two decades ago the Sorbonne professor Roger Asselineau edited an influential essay on *The Long March* by speaking of its author as ‘un écrivain plus français qu’américain’" (Kolb and Noakes 123). In the same vein, he proposes that "Styron seems to be following in a line of memoirists of decidedly French temperament which began with Montaigne and carried through Saint-Simon and Rousseau down to Sartre and Malraux" (Kolb and Noakes 123). In the process, "Styron seems to have joined Poe and Faulkner in the enviable process of being Gallicized" (Kolb and Noakes 124).

One aspect of this phenomenon which Friedman does not deal with at sufficient length is the graceful ease with which Styron's prose takes to French translation. To cite just one example, the French language rendering of *Sophie's Choice* endows that text with an elegaic melancholy that is in some ways richer and more resonant than the sadness to be found in the English original. Like Poe, Faulkner, Jim Thompson, William Irish, and Patricia Highsmith, Styron flourishes when planted in French soil. The same cannot be said for Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, e.e. cummings, or a hundred other writers of greater
or equal worth. For an American "graft" to take, in other words, it must be joined to a plant of similar species that has long been indigenous to French soil. While there are obviously some major exceptions to this rule (rock 'n' roll is probably the most egregious example), in most instances it holds true. What's more, as one ascends from popular culture to high art (pace, deconstructionists), this theory becomes very close to a law.

As the old chestnut would have it, however, imitation is still the sincerest form of flattery. Jacques Demy tried to build an entire career on the basis of his love for 1950s'-vintage Hollywood musicals, only occasionally referring to the stylistics of René Clair's early musical comedies and the much older native tradition of light-hearted operetta. Interestingly, enough, The Model Shop, the one film he made in the promised land of Southern California, was not only non-musical but decidedly downbeat. By getting too close to the timeless fantasy, he succeeded only in turning it into harsh quotidian reality.

Multiple disillusions are also at the root of Alain Resnais's little-seen 1989 feature, I Want to Go Home. Scripted in English by playwright/cartoonist Jules Feiffer (although most francophone audiences saw it in a version which, with the exception of one key and rather perplexing sequence, had been dubbed into French), the film described the return of one particular American to Paris. Joey Wellman (Adolph Green, the co-author in real life of a dozen MGM musicals) is a former GI-turned-successful-cartoonist who flies to France to receive a prize for his work and patch up his relationship with his expatriate daughter. Wellman's comic strip "Hep Cat" is all the rage in bandes dessinées circles, and the artist/author is initially gratified by his
reception in a country which he first saw through the sights of his M-1 carbine. Most of the Americans he meets are extraordinarily boorish and annoying. One lunk-headed director grunts, “L’Amérique est fait pour le viol, peut-être, mais pas pour l’amour”—a sentiment one could more easily imagine a Frenchman expressing than an American. During the movie, Wellman/Green finds himself caught in the sort of predicament that one would expect to befall Gene Kelly in An American in Paris. More specifically, he stumbles into a French bistro and mysteriously loses his ability to speak the local language (the peculiar linguistic allusion I referred to earlier vis-à-vis the dubbed version), and must use pad and pencil to make himself understood—like every good cartoonist, one might add. In her review of this film, Colette Mazabrard wrote, “L’Américain, caricatural, représente un fantasme de l’Amérique on n’ose plus en faire. Tout comme les lieux de France sont la caricature des fantasmes américains. La France est réduite à Paris (et Paris à la Sorbonne, un hôtel, une galerie d’art, un bureau de la Sorbonne), et la Normandie (débarquement obligé)” (Mazabrard 54). Referring to the film’s original release print, she adds, “Cette France pour nous devient terre étrangère (toute le film est en anglais, sous-titré en français)” (Mazabrard 55). I Want to Go Home leaves us hanging “Entre deux pays, égaré, entre deux époques, avec sa triste figure, il incarne l’errance du héros de la modernité, un peu mort-vivant, un peu relique...et ‘si triste, si triste’” (Mazabrard 56).

For our purposes, “La modernité d’être vieillot” cross-references a number of interesting characters and motifs. Directed by an aging member of la Nouvelle Vague (some critics might dispute this designation, but to me it seems sound), and starring one of the grand
old men of the Hollywood musical, *I Want to Go Home* describes a cultural conflict that appears prepared to mutate if not, strictly speaking, to die out. Resnais, Feiffer and Green, though still creatively productive, knew all too well that they were in fact representatives of a cultural *ancien régime* that was fated to die with them. For the cultural consumers of the 21st Century, the Great War, the Roaring Twenties, the Liberation, the Postwar Existential Boom, and the Radical Sixties will just be phrases as innocent of emotional resonance as the treaty of Nantes or the Rise of the Jansenists. If the old war were to go on at all, it will inevitably be fought with different weapons, and for different ends.

To a large degree, one already sees this happening in the French movie industry. For several years now, governmental funding agencies have made a point of distinguishing between French productions that are shot in their native tongue and those that are shot in English, rewarding the former economically, and punishing the latter. While most Gallic features are still shot in French, the nation’s tiny handful of “mega-productions” are, with increasing regularity, written and released in English. To date, Luc Besson’s *The Fifth Element* (1997), is the most egregious example of this trend. The most expensive movie ever to be made outside the state-subsidized Soviet or corporately-controlled American studio systems, *Le Cinquième élément* (its dubbed title!) follows hard on the heels of *The Professional/Léon* and *Le Grand bleu/The Big Blue*, two of the director’s earlier features, the first of which was shot in New York with mainly Anglo-American actors, while the second was lensed in English with a U.S. female lead. Even *La Femme Nikita*, the one French language, French-themed Luc Besson
picture of the past decade—stylistically it owed more to Jean-Pierre Melville than to any Hollywood filmmaker—was later re-made first as an American feature, then as an American TV series.

If Besson's is still a somewhat extreme case, it is nonetheless true that Hollywood increasingly looks at the French film industry as a source of raw cultural DNA. Ignoring all but a few of the hundreds of admirable French dramas that have been made over the years, the U.S. motion picture industry generally prefers to zero in on the light-weight French comedies, awkwardly re-draping them in Anglo Saxon "drag". Things have progressed so far down this sad road that the more commercially-minded—some might say culturally-colonized—film critics now actually seem to welcome this state of affairs. For instance, in a recent article, Studio critic Alain Kruger was delighted by the fact that two French producers would have a hand in the re-make of the Gallic farce, Un indien dans la ville, enthusiastically declaring, "Il faut espérer que les talents et l'énergie des producteurs Thierry Lhermitte et Louis Becker suffiront à convaincre Disney de sortir le film avec les vrais moyens" (Kruger 11). Perhaps the most frightening element in this equation is the implicit belief that budget is the only thing that makes commercial movies different, not national temperament. Once upon a time, such an attitude would have prompted demonstrators to march through the streets.

It would be reassuring to think that this attitude is only held by the mass market French film critics and directors, but such is not the case. Even Barbet Schroeder, one of the unsung "saints" of independent French film production, is anything but deaf to the siren song of Southern California. As we read in a 1991 edition of Cahiers du cinéma,
"Dirigeant là son troisième film américain, Barbet Schroeder est ravi du travail des acteurs américains—'ils se donnent vraiment à fond'—et des luxueuses conditions de production à Hollywood, qui lui ont permis d'auditioner 'cinquante acteurs pour chaque rôle du film.'" (Krohn 7).

Positif-backed writers and critics are no more immune to this temptation than are their Cahiers-based rivals. Consider the following assessment of Atlantic City: "L'un des meilleurs films étrangers de la rentrée touche de près le cinéma français, il est de Louis Malle. Tourné en anglais aux USA et à Montréal avec de l'argent canadien (il représente même le Canada au Festival de Venise) pendant le boom des tax-shelters, qu'il a su contourner avec maestria, Atlantic City est en fait un thriller Américain digne de la grande époque, aux abords de W.R. Burnett et de Nelson Algren, mais vu d'un oeil unanimiste, par moment altmanien" ("Atlantic City" 69).

For late twentieth-century French intellectuals, this dilution of French cinema with American themes, models, and production methods is perceived as part of a larger problem. As we saw in the Le Monde articles cited earlier, European unity is being urged as a positive antidote to economic and cultural submission to U.S./Japanese hegemony. Even the titles of some of these think pieces are reflective of old Gallic thinking being poured into new unionist molds. Consider the following headline for instance: "Les deux cents sociétés qui contrôlent le monde" (16). Clearly, in this context "les deux cents sociétés" (multinational corporations) have effectively replaced "les deux cents familles"—the wealthy aristocratic and haut bourgeois clans who were once said to control 19th century France—as effectively as the 200 families supplanted the shadowy union of Freemasons,
Protestants, and Jews who comprised the "unholy" controlling trinity most dreaded by conservative French Catholics from the rise of Martin Luther to the fall of Marshal Philippe Pétain. From the accompanying charts we learn that 62 of these globe-spanning companies are controlled by the Japanese and 55 by the Americans. If we look more closely, however, we discover that 65 of the world's wealthiest corporations are owned and operated by EEC members, while another nine are owned by non-aligned Western Europeans. In other words, a unified Europe would represent a more potent economic force than either the United States or the Land of the Rising Sun. If Europe is ever to regain its (dominant) place in world affairs, the new Atlanticists believe, it can only be as a continent, not as an assemblage of middle-ranking powers. France, therefore, can reasonably expect to attain greatness only as an integral part of a larger collective in which it hopes to play the most important cultural and the second most important economic role. Towards this end, certain signs of national distinctness (the franc; agricultural policies) must be modified or done away with altogether. French thinkers are painfully aware of the damage done to European culture as a result of the lack of governmental protection accorded its constituent parts. As Jean-Paul Bourget wrote in a special issue of Cahiers de Cinéma devoted to European cinema, "A quelques nuances près, il y a raccord sur le constat: Hollywood a toujours su 'cannabaliser' non seulement les talents, mais aussi les innovations européen" (Bourget 81). What Bourget says of the Americans is precisely what the Americans say of the Japanese—although the latter charge is made with far less justice. Such hardheaded thinking would do credit to a Metternich or a Talleyrand.
As we have seen from our earlier readings of Baudrillard and Butor, however, this Realpolitik response is anything but universal. French writers, intellectuals, and filmmakers approach the Americanization of the world with everything from acceptance to hatred, from excitement to fear. Of course, with the post-war rise of Asian economic giants, it could fairly be said that globalization and Americanization have ceased to be reasonably specific synonyms. Japan, after all, boasts seven more Top 200 multinationals than does the United States, corporations that are even more tightly controlled than their American counterparts, as we previously saw in Frédéric Clairmont’s Old Testament warning of the growing power of that five-fingered corporate giant, Mitsubishi.

In literature, this blurring of national distinctions can sometimes create some odd effects. When reading Le Vieil homme et le loup, for example, Julia Kristeva’s second novel, the reader is apt to assume at first that the fictitious nation of Santa Barbara is a Californian republic in an alternate universe where the Roman Empire’s power stretched to the New World; a little later on, he or she is likely to guess that the action is set in some imaginary “banana republic” in Central America. In fact, one has to plunge quite deeply into the book before discovering that Santa Barbara’s real life model is actually Bulgaria, the people’s republic from which the author permanently emigrated in the mid-1960s. As the narrator very properly complains, “Santa Barbara ne m’a pas livré ses secrets” (Le Vieil homme et le loup 268). And, even more aptly, “Santa Barbara est partout” (Le Vieil homme et le loup 268).
Ironically, it is in the field of cultural criticism and philosophy, one of the few areas of modern life in which the French still hold the upper hand, that the Gallic response is more emotional than logical, more paranoid than practical. For North Americans, these disputes often make for comical reading. A case in point is the epistolary dispute that broke out between "Derridiens" and "anti-Derridiens" in the pages of The New York Review of Books several years ago. Deconstructionists defended their beliefs with a protective fervor that suggested dogma rather than ideology; their opponents (if such they can be properly called) responded with a sort of amazed bemusement. Despite its double-sided secular nature, this intellectual dispute strongly resembled an argument between acolytes and freethinkers, between believers in the truth and confused followers of Baal. The unintentional comedy of the situation stemmed directly from the participants' inability to recognize a tempest in a teacup while sailing through one.

Didier Eribon's defense of Michel Foucault from his Anglo-Saxon critics was, if anything, even more passionate. Eribon, Foucault's French biographer, complained equally of the salacious attempts of James Miller, Foucault's American biographer, to drum up interest in his book by drawing undue attention to his subject's "perverse" sexuality, and of his subsequent failure to deliver on this tawdry promise because not enough hard information was available. For the French scholar, his American counterpart was nothing but a shameful reductionist, a lazy, sex-maddened puritan who, through ignorance or neglect, failed to explore the more relevant sources of Foucault's philosophical inspiration. To Eribon, Miller is a comrade-in-arms of
both Camille Paglia and Tony Judt, the author of the fiercely anti-Communist polemic, Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944 - 1956. He writes: “D'autres phénomènes attestent la profondeur de ce mouvement de réaction anti-française. On pouvait voir dans les librairies, il n'y a pas si longtemps, des piles du livres de Camille Paglia, qui s'en prend avec une violence inouïe à Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, etc” (Eribon 70). For him, the “attacks” against Jacques Derrida in the pages of The New York Review of Books are no joke, since they were launched by a cabal which includes “à la fois des néo-conservateurs et de la droite reaganienne, mais aussi de la gauche traditionelle” (Eribon 71 - 72). This New World hostility, it seems, is not unmixed with contempt: “Même si elle n'est pas toujours formulée en termes aussi extrémistes que ceux de Camille Paglia ou de James Miller, on rencontre fréquemment l'idée qu'au fond les Français sont des gens un peu bizarre” (Eribon 72).

To be sure there is much anti-French sentiment in contemporary American life, but it is the lack of context which makes Eribon's complaints sound somewhat silly and even fantastic. France’s stubborn refusal to submit completely to American tastes in the cultural matters of popular music and movies—about a third of those markets are still “home-grown”—has aroused the ire of Washington, Hollywood, and Wall Street; it remains a perennial bone of contention in all GATT talks. There is also, on a less elevated level, a know-nothing, knee-jerk response against a nation that is seen as pompous, over-intellectual, and militarily ineffective. The “bottom line” film teacher in Joe Queenan’s The Unkindest Cut: How a Hatchet Man Critic Made His Own $7,000 Movie and Put it All on His Credit Card is fairly typical when he
reassures a Eurocentric student with the words, "Right now, everyone in this room is better than 80 percent of those French froggy filmmakers... Our crap is twenty times better than their crap" (Queenan 45). What is "typical" about this chauvinist reply is its self-evident assumptions: "Of course, we're better. Who needs proof? Or comparative data? Don't bother me with the facts; my mind's made up." It is precisely this sort of uncritical complacency that has allowed American social services to sink unimpeded to the bottom rungs of the advanced democracies; the unwillingness to compare, the certainty of perfection, acts decisively against the possibility of cross-referential improvement. What Eribon seemingly fails to understand is that this attitude encompasses not just Franco-American cultural relations, but every aspect of material life; it is not an exception or aberration, but a universal American given—like gravity.

One should also bear in mind that Americans, like Englishmen and Canadians, are still vaguely irked by the fact that French citizens seem to feel no gratitude for their liberation from German occupation during the Second World War. Even a writer as Europeanized as Gore Vidal is capable of writing in his memoirs "we had—all of us—won the great imperial war, and thanks to us, the whole world was briefly American" (Vidal 101).

Hypocrisy is a vice often attributed by Americans to the French. Their ability to rail against the "mote" of American racism while remaining smugly blind to the "beam" in their own social attitudes is often remarked upon by scholars and travellers: "The French are entirely frank in expressing their racism. I wondered whether this lack of delicacy, indeed stupidity, was an absence or inhibition or simply
arrogance. Their public offensiveness ranged from smoking in restaurants to testing nuclear bombs in the Pacific. Perhaps they did not know that the world had moved on, or perhaps they did not care; or, more likely, they delighted in being obnoxious” (Theroux 91).

It was not Paul Theroux who was the principal object of Didier Eribon’s wrath, however, but Camille Paglia. “French theory” has been described by that would-be iconoclast as an “epidemic” (Paglia 101), while Jacques Lacan has been written off as “boring, pompous, imprecise, and ahistorical” (Paglia 232). Of all perfidious French thinkers, though, her bête noire is unquestionably “Foucault, a glib game-player who took very little research a very long way, [and] was especially attractive to literary academics in search of a short cut to understanding world history, anthropology and political economy” (Paglia 99). Instead of following these false foreign sages, “Our guide should be not the frigid, head-tripping nerd Michel Foucault, but prophetic Allen Ginsberg, who fused Hinduism with Walt Whitman to give us a radical vision of energy, passion and sensuality—of homosexuality grounded in the amoral rhythms of nature” (Paglia 105).

In American terms, therefore, Camille Paglia can be seen as someone who wants to return to the forest, someone who wants to escape from the (excessively Europeanized) problems of the city. She is a nativist in early 19th century terms, not a cultural imperialist of the Jack Valenti variety. She, too, is afflicted with perceptual problems of scale, failing to see how little impact the French acolytes she detests have had on any part of her country outside the academy. This difficulty has been exacerbated both by the general lack of success and recognition which the author has been accorded within the
confines of the university, and by the open-armed embrace she has received from the mass media which, for a time, could not get enough of her byte-sized pronouncements on the frivolity, mendacity, and impotence of the intellectual world.

Although it lacked the erudition of Eribon's jeremiad, the open letter sent by the descendants of Victor Hugo to the Parisian daily *Libération* dealt with a far more serious cultural problem. Written in response to *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the animated travesty of their ancestor's novel which Disney Studios had culled from *Notre Dame de Paris*, these latter day Hugos protested against the expropriation of art by mass media and advertising, making a case for Ravel's *Bolero* and Vermeer's *La Laitière* as well as the Saga of Quasimodo, Claude Frollo, Pierre Gringoire, and Esmeralda. Rhetorically they asked, "Les autorités culturelles de notre pays ne devraient-elles pas réagir devant ce pillage commercial de patrimoine et rappeler que l'universalité d'une génie est d'une autre nature que cette 'mondialisation' vulgaire des marchands sans scrupules?" ("Halt du pillage Disney" 8).

The fact that the preceding editorial's headline included an anglicism ("Halt") adds to the poignancy of the situation. As we have already seen, Hollywood has stripmined French cinema in search of (re-make) inspiration, even as it systematically shut out the original product from its home shores. The Hugos' "universalism" is far less chauvinistically French than is Alain Finkielkraut's 1789-dependent appropriation of the term. It is a *cri de coeur* which enjoys equal resonance in all but a few culturally privileged enclaves in Asia (China; India; Hong Kong) where the mass media has not yet been fatally infected by American cultural biases nor dominated by American
economic interests. If not for the as-yet undetermined final impact of Japan's massive contribution to the process, the neo-liberal catchword "globalization" would be a virtual synonym for the far more ominous "Americanization".

Italy, needless to say, is not among the happy global exceptions to cultural domination cited above. As we saw in Chapter Three, the nation's unique contributions to the history of art—no other country has contributed so much for so long in so many different ways—have paradoxically not resulted in a self-sufficient popular culture. The inheritors of Rome and the Renaissance continue to be net importers of Top 40 music, murder mysteries, TV serials, and motion pictures. Even the "damage control" that rehabilitated the commercial film industry in the 1950s, '60s, and early '70s has been largely undone by market and other forces. Culturally speaking, Italy has, in many ways, reverted to the ground zero wasteland of which Gramsci so bitterly complained. Once again, Italian cohesion has seemingly been reduced to the unique nature of its insoluble problems.

Still, despite this return to what would seem to be a particularly depressing form of "normality", Italian attitudes towards the United States have not regained their fascist-era rosy glow. While one still does not encounter the unified, well-reasoned resentment of the French intelligentsia, criticisms of the United States are frequent, even if they lack ideological fervor.

Ever since Michelangelo set the tone 27 years ago with Zabriskie Point, Italian movies made in the United States are anything but admiring portraits of (Henry) Fordian utopias. For one thing, most of them deal with crime—not all of it of the Italo-American variety (a
criticism often levelled against *Once Upon a Time in America*, Sergio Leone’s epic study of Jewish mobsters during the Prohibition era. In addition to Francesco Rosi’s *A proposito Lucky Luciano* and *To Forget Palermo* (which was shot from an English language script by Gore Vidal), this unflattering list includes Marco Ferreri’s *Tales of Ordinary Madness* and *Ciao Monkey*, as well as Giuliano Montaldo’s *Sacco e Vanzetti*.

The social criticism implicit in Paolo and Vittorio Taviani’s *Good Morning, Babylon* is more subtle than most. This 1987 mock epic follows the adventures of two stonemason brothers who travel to Southern California from their native Italy in search of fame and fortune immediately before the outbreak of World War One. Scions of a very traditional family—their ancestors earned their daily bread by building and restoring churches for as long as anyone could remember—these Old World immigrants find their new “maestro”—their former master having been an exceptionally domineering father—in the form of D.W. Griffith, the immensely talented American filmmaker who singlehandedly invented or revised most of the “laws” of the commercial motion picture. At the time, Griffith was bankrupting himself by making *Intolerance* (1916), his most grandiose project, and his new Italian collaborators are consequently asked to contribute to this artistic excess/economic folly by sculpting a brace of dancing elephants which will be used to decorate Belshazaar’s palace during the film’s ruinously exact Fall of Babylon sequence. Eventually, they succeed, in the process adding to the grandeur not only of the doomed Babylonian emperor, but to his equally vulnerable re-animator as well.
Early on in the film, we catch Griffith scoping excerpts from the early Italian epics *Quo Vadis* and *Cabiria*, deriving inspiration from the world's first feature films. His discovery, in other words, is really an Italian discovery, just as the hushed, shared sense of awe produced by the motion-picture viewing experience is a direct echo of silent prayer in vast continental cathedrals. When speaking to the Italian boys' suspicious patriarch, Griffith comes perilously close to saying so in as many words. Movies are a mutation of Roman Catholicism, just as American popular culture is built with European—or perhaps we should say Italian—bricks.

Federico Fellini attempted an even more oblique critique of the U.S. in *Intervista* (1989). In his penultimate feature, Hollywood's favourite foreign filmmaker, the European director who won more Oscars than any other, resorted to a trick he first tried in *8 1/2* (1963). In this, his second attempt at making a feature on the subject of his chronic inability to bring such a project to completion, the ambience of the never to be started film-with-a-film is not science fictional but Kafkaesque. As Frank Burke put it in *Fellini's Films*, "Through *Intervista's* citation of *Amerika*, the postmodern/postcolonial permutations become elaborate and quite comical: a Czech Jew writes about America in German and has his work adapted by an Italian who stages it as part of an interview for the Japanese" (Burke 281).

Perhaps because he was treated so well in America—his films sometimes accomplished the rare miracle of making money in the New World, even as they garnered the usual critical honours—Fellini's satire was more than a little short on ferocity. Marco Ferreri, a first rate Italian filmmaker who was not so fêted, did not suffer from the same
restraints. While his movies tend not to deal with America directly, they are ever watchful of the all-but-invisible social subversions ushered in by the ongoing process of globalization. In interviews, he is far more explicit than he is onscreen, complaining that "En Italie, les intellectuels sont presque tous liés à une vision fascinée de l'Amérique" ("Entretien avec Marco Ferreri" 35). Even worse, "Les intellectuels européens n'aiment pas le cinéma européen, il ne considérait pas leur cinéma. Ils sont voir les films américains parce que c'est l'Amérique, l'idée du voyage...." ("Entretien avec Marco Ferreri" 35). Hollywood’s "no-brainer" policies have resulted in fiscal success all over the globe: "A part le cinéma américain, tous les autres cinémas sont élitaires, comme l'était le théâtre" ("Entretien avec Marco Ferreri" 35). The tone of cinematic debate, he continues, has been relentlessly debased by managerial pressure: "C'est ce que je dis à certains critiques italiens: vous parlez de nos films, mais vos patrons, les directeurs des journaux, vous imposent d'écrire sur Sharon Stone" ("Entretien avec Marco Ferreri" 36). Saddest of all, "Il faut dire aussi que le public qui va voir les films américains déteste le cinéma" ("Entretien avec Marco Ferreri" 36).

From the late 1970s onwards, the Italian film industry has come to occupy an increasingly marginalized position in the cinematic food chain. The death of a generation of genius (Roberto Rossellini; Luchino Visconti; Pier Paolo Pasolini; Vittorio de Sica; Federico Fellini) has not been easily replaced, despite the best efforts of Nanni Moretti and Gianni Amelio. Similarly, the only recent actor to rival the international popularity of Sophia Loren, Marcello Mastroianni, Gina Lollobrigida, and Anna Magnani is the madcap comic Roberto Benigni.
What's more, the colonization of Italy by cable TV had a deleterious effect on the quality of the national film industry. Even more than in most parts of the world, it tended to dumb things down.

Even so, increasingly there are signs that Italians will no longer suffer these indignities in silence. A recent article in Corriere della Sera, for example, fulminated against American critic Richard Corliss's conclusion that a meaningful Italian cinema no longer existed: "Il fatto è che da un po' di tempo circola a livello internazionale, sostenuta da una quinta colonna di autolesionisti nostrami, un insistente campagna denigratoria contro il cinema italiano, accusato d'esser caduto da grande altezze a grado zero. Tale valutazione non ha fondamento nella realtà. Sappiamo bene che in tutti i campi della creatività (cinema, letteratura, pittura e musica) non stiamo vivendo un momento magico come il ventennio seguito alla fine della guerra, ma cose buone ed ottime continuano ad esserci ed anche artisti veterani o giovani di tutto rispetto. Chi afferma il contrario è sciocamente prevenuto, o come il critico di Time, poco informato" (Kezich 20). One finds similar disenchantment in a February 12, 1997 article which was first published in La Repubblica. In this case, the villain of the piece is not know-nothing American critics at Cannes, but know-nothing American voters charged with the responsibility of choosing 1997's Academy Awards. Silvia Bizio seems to take it as a personal affront that Madonna, of self-consciously Italo-American descent, was not even nominated in the Best Actress category. In similar vein, she attributes Mina Sorvino's nomination as Best Supporting Actress to the fact that the performer was then engaged to Academy president, Arthur Hiller. Most galling of all, "Infine, una sola presenza italiana, il corto
metraggio *Senza Parole* di Antonella de Leo, prodotto della Film Trust Italia e già uscito sugli schermi italiani; del resto, era parso chiaro a tutti che la scelta italiana della *Mia Generazione* come miglior film straniero era fallita in partenza" ("L'Oscar verso Londra" 39).

Remarkably, despite its seemingly endless series of setbacks, no major Italian director has yet set up permanent shop in the United States of America. To be sure, Bernardo Bertolucci worked almost exclusively for New World companies between 1981 and 1995, but even he has moved back to Italy. What’s more, the movies that he did make in English for Anglo-American studios (*The Last Emperor; The Sheltering Sky; Little Buddha*) were respectively set in China, North Africa, and (ancient and modern) India. The one American project he had really set his heart on (a screen version of *Red Harvest*, the most explicitly anti-capitalist of Dashiell Hammett’s hardboiled novels) was never greenlighted by any Hollywood studio. Bertolucci might have “flirted” with America, but artistic nuptials were never finalized.

Interestingly enough, the Hollywood incursion which Italians seem to resent the least is the made-in-USA Mafia movie. As we read in *The Godfather Legacy*, the official production diary which was published to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the release of the first part of Francis Ford Coppola’s Cosa Nostra trilogy, “While some Americans of Italian descent may have held grudges against *The Godfather*, Italians in Italy did not. In July 1973, Al Ruddy was named recipient of the 1973 David Donatello award as the best foreign producer of the year... Pacino also won the Donatello award for his performance” (Lebo 29).
In Italian newspapers, much of the commentary on the doings of Americans—more specifically, on the doings of American celebrities—is neither sycophantic nor malicious, but playfully lubricious. Corriere della Sera was cheerfully charting the course of Mia Farrow’s alleged affair with Vaclav Havel at a time when most American gossip sheets were unaware that the actress had gotten involved with, never mind separated from, Philip Roth. Perceived American puritanism is journalistically pursued with special enthusiasm. Thus, Alessandra Farkas solemnly informs her readers that U.S. porno users on the Internet might soon be in for a rude come-uppance: “Con la nuova legge, invece, chiunque traffichi via Internet con immagini o parole ‘indecenti’ rischia 2 anni di prigione e 250 mila dollari di multa” (“Censura su Internet, Usa in guerra” 10). Scarcely a month earlier, in an almost identical tone of voice, Silvia Bizio had explained the censorship problems of the latest screen version of Lolita, pointing out that “Molto probabilmente saranno gli europei, e forse proprio gli italiani, i primi a vedere il controverso quanto atteso film di Adrian Lyne, Lolita” (Bizio 39). Not to be outdone in the America-the-straitlaced department, Ennio Carette, in his coverage of Robert Hughes’s new book/film series on the evolution of American art, played up its “bluenosed” aspects to the hilt: “La tesi è provocante: per colpa delle sue profonde radici puritane, l’America non ha mai espresso un grande pittore del nudo” (Carette 20). This is because sexual repression is at the heart of American evil: “Questa sarebbe anche la matrice della violenza nella società USA” (Carette 20).

More rarely, Italian journalists poke fun at American politics and politicians. This tendency is particularly pronounced in articles such as
"'Vogliamo John Wayne presidente'", a Corriere della Sera suite of think-pieces that first appeared on August 21, 1996. Alessandra Farkas's approach was the most tongue-in-cheek, describing the "Duke" as the "musa di Richard Nixon, eroe di Ronald Reagan e inspiratore di Newt Gingrich e Bob Dole" ("'Vogliamo John Wayne presidente'") 9). For Marcello Veneziano, on the other hand, the rugged-looking cowboy actor is a more serious phenomenon, radiating strength and reaction in almost equal measure: "'Il mito di John Wayne? 'La destra Usa lo alimenta perché è il coagulo di tutte le culture conservatrici americane. Si contrappone al mito progressista dell' emancipazione rappresentato da Martin Luther King'" ("Intervista a Marcello Veneziani" 9). On the other hand, reactionary though it is, this right-wing myth might actually be of some use to Italy: "'Non abbiamo nulla del genere. La morte della patria, prima di diventare materia di dibattito culturale e politico, era già nell' immaginario collettivo. Non a caso il nostro cinema non ha prodotto grandi eroi positivi alla John Wayne'" ("Intervista a Marcello Veneziani" 9). In place of the multi-faceted American myth of the opening of the frontier, of the taming of the West, Italian readers and viewers must content themselves with the less conclusive, more divisive myth of the Risorgimento: "'La nostra fondazione ha avuto una sola grande rappresentazione letteraria e cinematografica, Il Gattopardo, che però è l'esatto contrario di un' epica, perché è l'esaltazione del disincanto nei confronti del neonato stato unitario'" ("Intervista a Marcello Veneziani" 9).

What the previous quotations suggest is a very slight shift in emphasis. While Italy still feels in some ways inferior to the United States in its capacity as an integral nation-state, its sociology in some
ways now appears superior. To take just one example, respect for culture is clearly greater in Milan than it is in Chicago. In racial matters, Italians likewise see themselves as more tolerant than their U.S. counterparts.

While the previous statement is only partially true, it is, in any event, far truer than the nearly identical claims made by French cultural commentators. Despite the artistically liberating spirit of négritude, and despite the prominent positions of power attained by a tiny handful of non-white francophone colonials, the situation of the average dark-skinned French citizen is now probably worse than that of the average African-American. As we saw in Chapter Three, even most fascist Italians did everything in their power to save their Jewish fellow citizens from the death-camps of the Nazis; we also saw how the people voted enthusiastically for “Miss Nera,” the Dominican-born Miss Italy, even if a number of prominent journalists were displeased by the fact that a non-Tuscan, non-Sicilian, was symbolically representing the country in international beauty pageants. Journalistic amends, happily, were soon made: “Il concetto che i cittadini di uno stato debbano essere necessariamente membri di uno stato stirpe, di un etnia, non è applicabile ad uno stato moderno.” (“La miss di colore” 12).

Nevertheless, despite the “happy ending” to the Denny Mendez story, official Italy’s initial reaction to her beauty queen clearly left a scar in the national consciousness. It is a virtual article of faith in Italy that indigenous hatreds are regional, not international (hence the desire of La Lega del Nord to replace Tuscan Italian with a bewildering variety of local dialects—including bresciano, udinese, etc.—employing
foreign tongues such as English for internal communications between provinces and cities). Attempts to salve the popular conscience have come in a number of ways, most commonly in the phrasing of interview questions. If not for the "Miss Nera" incident, for example, it seems most unlikely that the African supermodel Iman would have been coaxed to provide the following answers. When Alessandra Farkas asked the world-famous mannequin if she experienced racism in the United States, she promptly replied "Quotidianamente," prior to providing a long list of everyday examples ("Iman: 'Io e Bowie pronti a cambiare vita per un figlio'" 22). When, however, she was asked about modelling opportunities for non-whites in Italy, Iman enthused: "'Gli italiani sono sempre stati all'avanguardia nell'apprezzare le donne nere. In nessun altro Paese occidentale così tante modelle di colore finiscono sulla copertina delle riviste. Per i vostri uomini la bellezza non ha colore'" ("Iman: 'Io e Bowie pronti a cambiare vita per un figlio'" 22).

All this should not, of course, delude the reader into thinking that Italy is an entirely classless, colour-blind society. As we saw in Chapter Three, the social strictures keeping people in their place are firmly fixed, even if the same strictures are rarely imposed on foreigners. Their freedom from the pressure to conform, however, is accompanied by an unavoidable social price tag. Paul Theroux made this discovery in Italy, his favourite country in Europe, after visiting the village where Carlo Levi had been imprisoned under Mussolini. Theroux was shocked to discover that many villagers did not consider the author of Cristo si è fermato a Eboli to be Italian: "The man who had suffered exile and made Aliano famous in this wonderful book was not an Italian, after all, but just a Jew... These two men were not anti-semites. They
were villagers. Everyone who visited was measured by the standards of the village, and when it came to nationality the standards had strict limits" (Theroux 199). Miss Nera might be Miss Italy, in other words, but at some level she is still Miss Nera.

In film and journalism, therefore, we can clearly see new Italian trends developing in regard to America, trends that are much closer to contemporary French parabolas than were their predecessors. In literature, however, the perspective is quite different. In the books and essays of Umberto Eco and Italo Calvino one no longer encounters, in symbolic form, representatives of a chaotic younger republic paying tribute to a larger, more successful democracy, in the hopes of discovering something locally useful, but, rather, a school of wise and worldly “Greeks” attempting to explain the world to a rising race of young “Romans” whose surfeit of brawn is matched only by their lack of tact and sophistication. If this description sounds a tad condescending, the reader should bear in mind that, 2,000 years ago, Italy was itself the rude superpower in need of instruction from a more cultivated but less potent civilization. Thus, contemporary Italian intellectuals are particularly sensitive to the nuances of power, to the ways in which a country can shift from one role to the other. That these latterday “Greeks” are writing at the end of a millennium inevitably adds extra fuel to their prognostications. The course of Western history (the rise and fall of Greece and Rome; the ascension of Christianity) endows their texts with a certain authority that is as much circumstantial as it is diegetic.

Umberto Eco’s *Dalla periferia dell’Impero* was one of the first of these rather mournful, world-weary meditations. This mock Roman
“history” includes the Latin dedication, “Ad Geraldum Fordum Balbulum Foederaterum Indiagram ad Occasum Vergentium Civitatem Principem” (Dalla perifera dell’Impero 107). The empire the author surveys is already in a severe state of decline, sliding from imperial grandeur to medieval decay: “D’altra parte la grande città, che oggi non è invasa da barbari belligeranti e devastata da incendi, soffre di scarsità di acqua, crisi dell’ energia elettrica disponibile, paralisi del traffico” (Dalla perifera dell’Impero 199). For Eco, America is no longer the nuts and bolts, no-nonsense land of Henry Ford, but a rather effete refuge of languorous fantasy: “Gli europei colti e gli americani europeizzati pensano a gli Stati Uniti come alla patria dei grattacieli di vestri e acclavio, e dell’espressionismo astratto. Ma gli Stati Uniti sono anche la patria di Superman....” (Dalla perifera dell’Impero 14). Eco thinks of America primarily as a land of museums, of which Superman’s imaginary Fortress of Solitude—which includes, among other things, relics and models of his lost home world, Krypton—as the most perfect example of this phenomenon. Eco’s tone is light, funny, thoughtful, and detached throughout. He is a complete stranger to the self-conscious brilliance and complacent despair of, say, Jean Baudrillard. He speaks with the voice of a people that lost control of the rudder of the world so long ago, it now exists solely as a vague, vestigial memory. He thinks like a Third-Century Athenian in the Rome of Constantine.

When writing about America, Eco, good postmodernist that he is, makes a point of treating everything with the same degree of mirth and seriousness. Thus, the emotional interdynamics of the comic strip Peanuts are treated with the same clear-eyed sobriety with which international politics are dissected: “La tragedia è che Charlie Brown
non è inferiore. Peggio: è assolutamente normale. E come tutti” (Apocalittici e integrati 269).

Like Eco, his near-contemporary, Italo Calvino tended to look at the United States not so much as a new, but as a prematurely aged, world. In the published text of the six Norton lectures he delivered in the United States, one finds precious few references to American writers and literature. Although he was technically born in Cuba, Calvino’s education and thought processes were intensely Eurocentric. What he likes most in Anglo-Saxon writing is what reminds him—thoroughgoing avant-gardist that he is—most of his continent’s classical past: “Com’è provato proprio dai due grandi autori del nostro secolo che più si richiamano al Medioevo, T.S. Eliot e James Joyce, entrambi con una forte consapevolezza teologica (sia pur con diverse intenzioni)” (Lezione Americane 113).

Unlike Cesare Pavese and Antonio Gramsci, Eco and Calvino actually got to visit the United States. Their desire and need to do so, however, were nowhere near as great. Their attitudes towards the New World were inspired not by hopes and dreams, but by direct observation. Even so, the vanished America of Pavese, Cecchi, and Vittorini is still sometimes invoked for ironic effect. For example, this tongue-in-cheek nostalgia is the narrative engine propelling “Henry Ford,” a fictitious interview with the great American automobile manufacturer, which appeared in a posthumously-published collection of Calvino’s short stories and novellas. When the Yankee pragmatist’s unnamed interlocutor asks, “Chi più di Henry Ford ha dato forma al nostro modo di vivere?” (Romanzi e racconti 198), Ford rudely announces that he would prefer to speak about nothing but birds. Even after the inventor
finally gets the better of his own perversity, he continues to speak to his Italian visitor as if the gulf between Old World and New were of inter-planetary dimensions—which, in a sense, they are. One could hardly imagine an Italian framing the following sentence: “La moda è una delle forme di spreco che io detesto” (Romanzi e racconti 201). Elsewhere, Ford trumpets the dated clichés which once struck a responsive cord in Tuscans and Sicilians of all political persuasions: “La gente che faceva la coda al nostro ufficio delle assunzioni era una folla di italiani, di greci, di polacchi, di ucraini, emigranti da tutte le province dell’ impero russo e dell’ impero austro-ungarico, che parlavano lingue e dialetti incomprensibili” (Romanzi e racconti 203).

To each of these wretched and homeless wanderers, a slice of “America pie” was served: “Ho fatto imparare loro l’inglese e i valori della nostra morale... Sono diventati cittadini americani, loro e loro famiglie....” (Romanzi e racconti 203). Some of the “crackerbarrel philosopher’s” homespun homilies are translated literally for comic effect: “Il tempo è denaro” (Romanzi e racconti 207). Indeed, what makes this satirical piece so wickedly funny is its brilliant conflation of Ford’s self-evaluation with the envious Italian appraisals of the 1930s. Calvino’s imaginary transcript wittily spans at least six decades of mutating ideas.

Younger Italian writers, conversely, tend to treat America more matter-of-factly. The narrator of Treno di panna, for instance, does not fly to America to pay homage at the gravesides of Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and William Faulkner. Like young people on both sides of the Atlantic nowadays, he is somewhat deracinated, a bit of a drifter. He observes the quotidian minutiae of Californian life with the
affectless calm of a surveillance camera: Guardavo Tracy nella luce di
neon: la sua faccia marcata di ragazza californiana, i tratti così
espliciti delle sopracciglia e del naso; gli occhi rapidi" (De Carlo 5).
Initially, his friends are mainly Italian, and then they are not. The
narrator seemingly has very little tolerance for émigré Europeans who
fail to adapt to changed surroundings: "Parlava inglese molto male,
sempre riuscire ad articolare i suoni giusti" (De Carlo 47). So far as
culture is concerned, he is as blank as the most blissed-out surfer boy:
"Un minuto dopo mi ha chiesto 'Come mai sei venuto a Los Angeles?'
Non sapevo cosa rispondere; ero imbarazzato e stanco. Ho detto 'Per il
successo'. Lei mi guardava di lato, con aria perplessa. Mi ha chiesto 'Ma
successo in cosa?' Sembravo in qualche modo ansiosa. Ho detto 'Non lo
so'" (De Carlo 72).
Up until now, we have mainly considered the critical reactions of
French and Italian intellectuals to le défi américain. As the reader has
been forewarned several times already throughout the course of this
debate, we have reached the point in our discourse when a fourth
cultural actor must be permitted to ascend the theoretical stage. For
reasons of balance and perspective, we must now shift our attention to
a geographical "bridge" which was once part of the French Empire and
which is currently one of "Uncle Sam's" closest geographical
neighbours. I am referring, of course, to the province of Québec, the
former French colony which was annexed by the British in 1761. In
terms of late twentieth-century globalization, Canada's most distinct
region tends to reflect most of the stresses and strains that are
common to the struggle for cultural identity at the end of the
millennium. While, as we have seen, a nation such as Italy might no
longer be a global player when it comes to shaping universal attitudes and thoughts, in many ways it remains strong enough to protect its own integral borders. So much cannot be said for most smaller nations and ethnic enclaves. All too often, they find themselves blown to and fro by cultural winds over which they exercise little control. Even more galling to those involved, they are frequently not even noticed by the larger political entities which see little besides their principal opponents in the struggle for global power. To calculate the more far-ranging implications of the long-term struggle of Franco-American intellectuals for cultural hegemony, the history of the Québécois provides an almost perfect paradigm. (What’s more, since Québécois commentators on Franco-American relations have been making cameo appearances since the early pages of “Among the (More Advanced) Barbarians,” this shift in emphasis should not prove unduly disorienting).

As we saw in Chapter One, the Bourbon monarchy accepted the loss of most of New France as a minor setback occurring within the global context of the Seven Years’ War. Perhaps influenced by Voltaire’s famous dismissal of his nation’s northernmost possession, Versailles did very little to protect its arpents de neiges. While Québec was militarily conquered by the armies of the British Empire, years of French neglect were primarily responsible for the colony’s defeat. New France had effectively been abandoned by one European super-power a century before it was absorbed by another.

For our purposes, this has resulted in a very interesting situation. As we saw earlier, French readers of the early 19th century experienced strong pangs of nostalgia when reading about the
territories they had so recently lost. It was no coincidence that Chateaubriand’s popularity peaked around the time of the Louisiana Purchase, the real estate deal that permanently cut the umbilical cord between France and the New World. With the rise of the United States as a major economic player and potential military giant, Gallic attitudes changed once again. By revolting against the British Crown, the new nation of America had become something new and unsettling, an entity made up equally of hope for the future and implicit threat to European hegemony; at one and the same time, it was a welcoming enemy and a disquieting friend.

Because the very existence of the young republic threatened to undermine the foundations of French *amour propre*, it understandably drew the lion’s share of critical attention. From Alexis de Tocqueville to Simone de Beauvoir, the province of Québec figured mainly as a sad footnote to the grandeur of France’s imperial past, as a doomed anomaly within the anglophone vastness of the U.S. Imperium.

In many cases, it functioned primarily as a giant Berlitz school, a place for francophone writers to perfect their English while continuing to order taxi rides and dinners *en français*. Georges Simenon began his ten-year sojourn in North America in precisely this fashion, preparing for his journey south in francophone Montreal. Originally, he had merely been asked to establish contacts with Québécois publishers: “Que diriez-vous d’une mission auprès des éditeurs anglo-saxons et canadiens?... Les Canadiens sont importants, car on parle français au Québec” (Mémoires intimes 125). After a few months in *la belle province*, the Belgian crime novelist set up stakes in the American heartland for a solid decade. Despite the ease of communication, it
would seem that Québec did not really speak to the wellsprings of his creative imagination.

One reason for this was, perhaps, his inability to see beyond the distorting mirror of *Maria Chapdelaine*. That early 20th century novel, by French globe-trotter Louis Hémon, had created Québécois stereotypes as cloyingly indelible as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s African-American slaves. While to some extent Hémon’s narrative reflected period fact—so, for that matter, did *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—it had the unfortunate effect of turning shifting social mores into permanent archetypes. In Hémon’s universe, French Canadians were sons of the soil the way that robins were birds of the trees; they were rural patriarchs who took orders from their wives in private, and lived in terror of the parish priest. Above all, they were keepers of the flame, traditional people who would ignore the English-dominated cities and protect their farms.

At one point in *Maria Chapdelaine*, the eponymous heroine is tempted to move south. While listening to a sweet-talking U.S.-based suitor, Maria’s mind wanders, “en songeant aux grandes cités américaines” (Hémon 191). Then she hears another inner voice “[qui] s’élévaa comme un réponse. Là-bas s’était l’étranger: des gens d’une autre race parlant d’autre chose dans une autre langue, chantant d’autres chansons....” (Hémon 191). This siren song carries great weight with Maria Chapdelaine: “[elle] sortit de son rêve et songea: ‘Alors je vais rester ici...de même’” (Hémon 195). For all their rustic charm, Hémon’s *paisans* are thorough-going xenophobes: “Lorsque les Canadiens français parlent d’eux-mêmes, ils disent toujours Canadien, sans plus; et à toutes les autres races qui ont derrière eux peuplé le pays jusqu’au
Pacifique, ils ont gardé pour parler d'elles leurs appellations d'origine: Anglais, Irlandais, Polonais, ou Russe, sans admettre un seul instant que leurs fils, même nés dans le pays, puissent prétendre aussi au nom de Canadiens” (Hémon 71–72).

Still, even if Louis Hémon’s outside observations did eventually ossify into a collection of clichés, at least he took the trouble to interest himself in the lives of the Québécois. This is something that French intellectuals have traditionally failed to do. On the other hand, the myth of Maria Chapdelaine unquestionably had a paralyzing effect on Québécois culture until well into the 1950s. The rural values of the nineteenth-century continued to be piously preached long after the majority of French Canadians had become urban dwellers. This formula allowed for little beyond heroic battles between the early settlers and les affreux sauvages and stoic tales of simple farmers who remained rooted to the soil and their old ways no matter what. Most of the early Québécois motion pictures—thanks to obdurate opposition from the Roman Catholic Church, Quebec’s first true fiction feature was not released until 1943—and radioromans were firmly rooted in this ethos. While a number of poets, such as the half-Irish Emile Nelligan, did manage to escape from this stultifying religio-cultural embrace, most narrative fiction was inertly immured in it. Up until 1960, things changed more slowly in Quebec than they did in the rest of North America. After that date, they changed with such blinding speed that interested parties are still struggling to catch up. The Quiet and then the Not So Quiet Revolutions earned big dividends in terms of novels, movies, and plays that looked at local life in new and invigorating ways. Unsurprisingly, many of these works were concerned with
situating the Québécois in a larger world where they did not, as a rule, feel at home.

The first and most basic cultural change came with the decision to work in joual. Beginning with Michel Tremblay’s early plays, such as *Les Belles soeurs*, and the unscripted NFB French unit documentaries shot in the early ‘60s style known as *cinéma direct*, the language of the people began to replace formal Parisian French in artistic discourse. *Un joualanais, sa joualanie*, an early Marie-Claire Blais novel, dealt with twin solitudes other than the infamous ones between English- and French-speaking Quebecers. Instead, she chose to focus on the rift between speakers of “educated” and “uneducated” French.

As we saw in Chapter One, this conflict is more complicated than at first it might appear. Quebecers visibly preen whenever Parisians compliment them on their spoken French, nodding their heads eagerly when their distant European relations nostalgically sigh that here at least, a pure, pre-Revolutionary French continues to be employed long after it has died out on the mainland. On the other hand, it is by no means certain that the dialect spoken in, say, a Gilles Carle or André Forcier movie is identical to the French that was spoken on the Plains of Abraham in 1759; neither is it certain that it is the same tongue that moved Alexis de Tocqueville to epistolary admiration 70 years later. Indeed, it would probably be fair to say that the ordinary Franco-Québécois linguistic exchange is the exact opposite of the mutual admiration society which the printed record suggests. As Edmond Wilson put it, “The French Canadians...have something of a grudge against France; and, on their side, the French are imperturbably snobbish in matters of language and speech. Even the scripts of
Canadian documentary films have sometimes been put into Parisian French before they can be shown in France, and a young Canadian told me that on one occasion—though he was working on the Encyclopédie Larousse—a Frenchman he had met in Paris suggested that they might better speak in English, since the Parisian would no doubt not be able to understand the Canadian’s French” (Wilson 172 - 173). Complaints of this variety are very common. Due to its close proximity to both English Canada and the United States, joual inevitably includes a larger number of anglicisms than does français actuel. What’s more, joual developed in virtual isolation from mainland French for several centuries, a circumstance resulting in a large number of local “peculiarities”. To complicate things still further, joual itself is not a homogeneous tongue. While some forms of under-privileged working-class speech can best be described as patois, in la Gaspésie many people still speak a French pure and antique enough to awe even the most demanding Gallic intellectual.

Politically, relations between these linguistic relatives are scarcely less contentious than are their linguistic differences. If modern-day separatists, post-Charles de Gaulle, rely on the French nation to supply the putative nation of Québec with international legitimacy, their parents were educated by teachers who saw Paris as Babylon and France as the font of all evil. Untouched by the social liberalization and internationalism of the French Revolution, inward-looking Quebec maintained the pious traditions of seventeenth century peasants. New France’s ruling class had traditionally come from the mainland, returning home after their tour was through—a major difference between it and the Thirteen Colonies which would later form
the United States—so Québec was left virtually leaderless following their permanent departure in the 1760s. Indigenous political power, such as it was, resided primarily in the priesthood, in the few surviving seigneurial families, and in the small urban class of college-educated professionals. Economic life was left almost exclusively in anglophone hands. Inevitably, the culture ensuing from this state of affairs was revanchist, backward-looking, priest-ridden, and anti-modern in tone and intent. If, on the plus side, these attitudes allowed French culture to survive in North America, on the down side, they guaranteed the impoverishment and powerlessness of most of its members. Despite the radical changes which have overtaken Québec during the past thirty-five years, these problems are by no means resolved.

One of the first things that strikes outside readers of Québécois fiction and viewers of Québécois films is the almost total absence of non-pure laine characters. Still, if the "other" is often physically absent from these works, his off-stage presence most definitely is not. Margaret Atwood's contention that Canadian literature is primarily about survival applies with double, if not triple, force in the case of Quebec.

In the Québécois imagination, the "Rest of Canada" is seemingly an Ontario that never ends. One sees this in popular comedies such as Denis Heroux's J'ai mon voyage (1974), a farce "qui raconte l'odyssée d'un couple...et ses enfants, de Montréal à Vancouver, où ils sont de purs étrangers" (Colombe and Jean 477). The huge sigh of relief these travellers collectively heave upon returning to la belle province after their prolonged sojourn among les têtes carrées was often echoed by
the audience. All the quirks and eccentricities that differentiate Cape Bretoners from Albertans, British Columbian naturopaths from Saskatchewan wheat farmers, were notably lacking in this film. What we saw in essence was Upper Canada writ large, an Orange Ontario that occupied every square inch of land where Quebec was not. In contemporary French Canadian thought, at least in the camp of convinced nationalists, Canada is still a nation of two, not four and certainly not ten nations; the demographic changes of the past 150 years are either ignored or explained away as irrelevant. If to outsiders this looks like willful blindness—the less tolerant might say madness—to patriotic insiders it looks like an indispensable survival tool.

In Québécois fiction, America is also a fairly homogeneous place. Montreal-based intellectuals do not share their Parisian counterparts' mania for seeing as much of the United States as humanly possible. Instead, they tend to focus on the places where the Québécois have traditionally gone in search of work—sometimes voluntarily, more often involuntarily—such as New Hampshire and Louisiana, or the places where they have more recently gone to play, such as Miami Beach or California. Somewhat surprisingly, the United States is seldom treated like the Great Satan. André Forcier's immensely popular TV mini-series Les Tisserands du pouvoir might have dealt with class struggles between Québécois mill workers and Yankee mill owners in 19th century New England, but it was exceptional in this respect. More commonly, Americans are depicted as fairly benign and remarkably sparse in a land that seems to consist of little besides Québécois tourists and émigrés. Anglophone Quebecers are, if anything, even more rare, but they are nowhere near as obliging. Abject villainy is the
attribute most commonly demonstrated during their brief cameo appearances.

All of these presuppositions are present in Victor Lévy-Beaulieu’s postmodernist novel, *Oh Miami Miami Miami* (1973)—with one exception. Beaulieu’s Americans are a tad nastier than usual. He deliberately exoticizes Florida, making it seem like some frightening outcropping of Hollywood jungle, even as he deromanticizes his mainly French Canadian dramatis personae. Thus, “Miami est une accoutumance, un fabuleux voyage dont on ne reviennent jamais” (*Oh Miami Miami Miami* 173). In this favourite Québécois tourist’s port-of-call, “Tous le territoire de la Floride grouille de crocodiles aux dents luisantes, de serpents à sonnettes dont les fines langues empoisonnées sont comme le déroulement de petits tapis rouges...” (*Oh Miami Miami Miami* 132). Although they don’t actually meet many Americans, preferring to spend most of their time in bed with each other or else guzzling beer in Florida bars, Beaulieu’s characters don’t have much good to say about their hosts. The police in particular come in for a severe shellacking: “Dans c’té pays, si tu fais pas attention à tes affaires, t’es un homme mort. La police, sois-tu comment elle est à Miami? Elle te trouve dans une ruelle avec un poignard dans le dos et elle t’accuse de port d’arme illégal” (*Oh Miami Miami Miami* 224). Anglos with the name “Phil” are particularly abhorrent. “Le vieux Phil Flanagan de Shawinigan” (who could, it must be admitted, be francophone, despite his name, although obviously not *pure laine*) takes sexual advantage of a drunken male employee during the book’s first fifty pages, while “le vieux Phil de Chicago” made a not entirely honourable fortune out of an “Invention dûment patentée sur la penicilline” (*Oh Miami Miami Miami* 180).
On the plus side, Florida did serve as the last refuge for the most celebrated of all Québécois writers-in-exile: “Est-ce que tu ne rends pas compte que jamais je ne serais venu ici si je n’avais pas l’idioté idée d’écrire ce livre sur Jack Kerouac....” (Oh Miami Miami Miami 285). The, in this instance at least, implicitly autobiographical narrator (Beaulieu did indeed publish a book about his admiration for the man who wrote On the Road), goes to visit “le joli bungalow des Kérouac ou m’attendaient Mémère, et Nin, et Stella, et les scrapbooks pleine des photos jaunies, de souvenirs et de mauvaises nouvelles” (Oh Miami Miami Miami 286). Beaulieu eventually comes to see the entire New World as a magical Québécois/Native American construct: “L’Amérique n’était qu’une vaste toile d’araignée... Indien sans doute, Indien sûrement, mais si peu Québécois alors qu’ils auraient dû être les deux en même temps et, l’étant, beaucoup plus que Sauvage et Québécois” (Oh Miami Miami Miami 323.) This vision leads to the following conclusion: “Quel grand rêve que celui de cette Amérique française! De cette Amérique métisse!... Momo, Miami ce n’est qu’une banlieue de Montréal” (Oh Miami Miami Miami 325).5

Although less artistically ambitious than Beaulieu’s stylistically complex novel, the Southern U.S. state of George Mihalka’s populist Québécois comedy, La Florida (1993) is no less a dream of French America. Inspired by slurs in the local press about the so-called “snowbirds”—Canadian tourists who polluted Florida beaches with

---

5 This description is less pixilated than it appears. As Joel Garreau pointed out in The Nine Nations of North America, an innovative look at New World regionalism, “At its height...the French Empire in ‘Amérique’ covered almost all the continent with the exception of Florida and Mexico, which were occupied by the Spanish. As for the English, they hugged only the Atlantic coast south of the Gaspé Peninsula.” (Garreau 367 – 368)
their incomprehensible language, obscene swimsuits and brazenly displayed potbellies—*La Florida* describes the adventures of a family of working class Québécois who abandon the snows of Montreal in favour of the sands of the Caribbean. To pay for their endless holiday, they open a resort hotel that caters almost exclusively to fellow French Canadians. Even the two American citizens who try to cause trouble for these ex-Montrealers turn out to have Québécois roots. In Suzette Couture and Pierre Sarrazin’s script, there are even fewer anglophones than in *Oh Miami Miami*.

Things are much the same in Yves Beauchemin’s bestselling novel, *Le Matou* (1983). At one point during the novel, Florent Boissonneault, the book’s Horatio Alger-like hero, vacations in Florida to escape from persecution at the hands of the mysterious—and ineffably foreign—Egon Ratablavasky. As usual the Québécois visitors tend to hang out with long-established “snowbirds”; Florent considers staying there as well. In this text, Americans exist primarily as friendly background noise. They are forever saying cheery things such as, “*Good evening, folks? Looking for something?*” (Beauchemin 262). Inevitably, of course, one finds a darker side to this geniality. At one point, a Black Floridian announces “*I keep away from smart guys like hell and always deal with French Canadians... They’re sweet like corn syrup....*” (Beauchemin 274–275). When Florent responds to this admission with a glacial glare, his American acquaintance immediately tries to make amends: “—*Now don’t get angry for that, protesta le Noir, I was only kidding*” (Beauchemin 275). The problem is he wasn’t, and everybody knows it.

The idea that all anglophones regard all French Canadians as inferior in some way is a notion that runs right through *Le Matou*. 
Populist to the core, the novel works on the assumption that *les autres* et *les étrangers* enjoy unspecified historical advantages over the Québécois hero, Florent Boissonneault. This perception occasionally erupts into outright bigotry—especially against the Jews. At times, it even manages to conflate its prejudices, as it does when the presumably Jewish anglophone villain Leonard Slipskin marries an attractive Québécoise in a Protestant church. Such alignments are suspiciously similar to the Jewish/Protestant/Freemason trinity of evil that has animated ultramontane French Catholicism for the past 200 years. It is also a curiously antique form of racism that pre-dates the modern world. Like so many of the deep structures of Québécois society, both good and bad, to outsiders it seems curiously anachronistic. It is also reminiscent of the attitudes described by Louis Hémon.

A somewhat different mélange of past and present attitudes may be found in *Pélagie-la-Charette*. The winner of the 1979 Prix Goncourt, Antonine Maillet’s novel is notable for a number of reasons. For one thing, strictly speaking Maillet is not a Québécoise but an Acadian, a descendant of the Nova Scotia and New Brunswick-based French community which was forcibly transported to the American South in the middle of the 18th century. Today, that community is divided more-or-less equally between *l’Acadie* in the Maritimes and the Cajun communities of Louisiana. While lip service is sometimes paid to their misfortunes by Québécois intellectuals, Québécois politicians have done, and continue to do, very little on their behalf. Acadia’s survival, therefore, is far more miraculous than Québec’s.
Perhaps for this reason, *Pélagie-la-Charette* often reads like a wonder tale. The book’s eponymous heroine is an Acadian Harriet Tubman who leads her people on a ten-year trek across the United States back to their ancestral homes in Atlantic Canada. Progress is slow and often bitter, but the caravan never fully stops: “L’Acadie avançait au pas des boeufs” (Maillet 201). When they’re noticed at all, the birth pangs of the United States are seen through a distant distorting mirror: “De plus, il fallait compter avec la guerre qui en était à son plus fort en cette fin 1775” (Maillet 204). No matter what happens, attention is always inwardly focussed. The others are, well, other: “...Des Espagnols, des Portugais, des Catalans... Baltimore était le carrefour du monde” (Maillet 168). Morale is maintained with a series of self-re-affirming, enemy-mocking toasts: “‘Pélagie-la-Charrette vivra toujours. Et merde au roi d’Angleterre!’” (Maillet 149). Wherever possible, analogies are made between Black slaves and Acadian exiles. Thus, Pélagie’s companions “[sont] déportés sur le *Black Face*” (Maillet 45), a ship whose name betrays its usual purpose. Upon completing their journey homewards, the new “Israelites” discover that everything has been re-named: “Sur les rives de la baie Française, dites Fundy.....” (Maillet 320).6

Aside from its intrinsic value as first-rate historical literature, Maillet’s writing is of interest for what it has to say about North America’s other French fact. Because of their reverence for the past, Acadians would seem to have an even stronger claim to Quebec’s provincial motto, “*je me souviens*,” than do the Québécois themselves.

---

6 Here Maillet’s novel is reminiscent of Brian Friel’s *Translations*, a play about the anglicization of Gaelic place names in 19th century Ireland.
As chanteuse Edith Butler wrote in *L’Acadie sans frontières*, a collection of mainly traditional songs, "J’appartiens à l’ancienne Acadie et à l’Acadie moderne. Je veux vivre les deux à la fois." (Butler 15) Many of the *chansons* included in this anthology reflect the same events that inspired Antonine Maillet: "Condamnés à vivre,/Comme des juifs errants,/Ils ont marché si longtemps,/Qu’ils ont fini par revenir,/Dans le pays d’avant" (Butler 76). *Les Anglais*, in some of these lyrics, are even more faceless than they were in *Pélagie-la-Charette*: "Réveille réveille c’est les goddams qui viennent,/Bruler la récolte/Réveille réveille hommes acadiens/Pour sauver le village" (Butler 78).

Ironically, despite the fact that the Acadians were treated far more brutally by the British Empire than were their Québécois cousins, the descendants of these oppressed exiles are far more committed to the idea of a unified Canada. Even more surprisingly, there is considerable enmity between these two major branches of French North America. In 1963, Edmund Wilson wrote, "An Acadian, I was told, would not work for a Québécois French family" (Wilson 43). Even if one takes that claim with a grain of salt, ingrained hostilities between these two francophone communities unquestionably exist.

While many of Edmond Wilson’s pronouncements of thirty-four years ago are still very current, one at least has been superseded.7

---

7 In *O Canada! An American's Notes on Canadian Culture* (1963), many of the author’s observations are almost frighteningly up-to-date. One reads, for instance, that "Canadian publishers have the serious grievance that by bringing out special Canadian editions, such periodicals as *Time* and *The Reader’s Digest* divert from the Canadian magazines a good part of the national advertising, without which it is impossible for them to get along...." (Wilson 62) Elsewhere, the American critic reflects, "one even finds Francophile English Canadians who adore the French of France--painting, literature, châteaux, cuisine and all
This dated claim reads as follows: “French Canadians have not yet been able to impose on a wider audience—as the Americans have to some extent done—a literary language of their own.” (Wilson 173) Now that Scots-flavoured translations of Michel Tremblay’s *joual*-drenched dramas play regularly to capacity houses in Glasgow and Edinburgh, it is probably safe to say that Québec has created a literary language which, under optimum conditions, can profitably be adapted to other political situations and argot-heavy mother tongues.8

In Canadian writers, however, it seems that what Edmund Wilson sought was not so much a new language as it was an idiomatic connection to the dominant style of the 20th century. Thus, the two authors he singled out for special praise were Morley Callaghan—a Toronto native whose stripped-down style had developed alongside those of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway in émigré Paris—and Marie-Claire Blais, arguably the least provincial writer this country has ever produced. Considering the critic’s deep, personal ties to so many of the founders of literary modernism, this predilection should surprise nobody. Even so, Wilson showed remarkable prescience in recognizing Blais’s talent so early in her career. When the novelist was barely into her 20s, the doyen of American critics, who was then

---

8 For all his sympathy for and understanding of Canadian culture, it seems most unlikely that the great American critic would have been impressed by the once vibrant, now fading *joual* revolution. His sympathy for Québecois literature was inseparable from his francophilia, a union which his summation of the artistic value of Émile Nelligan tends to underscore: “This poet is at once the Rimbaud and the Gérard de Nerval of French Canada, and he seems to me to be the only really first-rate Canadian poet, French or English, that I have yet read.” (Wilson 97)
notorious for his dislike of new talent, enthused, "Mlle. Blais is a true phenomenon; she may possibly be a genius" (Wilson 148).

Phenomenal Marie-Claire Blais certainly was—and is. Soifs, her most recent novel and the winner of the 1995 Governor-General’s Award for French-language fiction, is unashamedly modernist in style, filled with sentences that run on for twelve pages or more, changing narrators without warning in a stream-of-consciousness cataract of imagined sensibilities. Because she has lived so much of her life abroad, Blais is a consummate literary cosmopolitan. The setting of Soifs, for example, is a Caribbean island where people from all over the world try and fail to shut the modern world—with its Bosnian massacres and sexual epidemics—out of sight and out of mind. Certain motifs keep recurring. The following is probably the most obsessive. While soaking up the sun, a privileged middle-class woman can’t stop herself from thinking about “l’exécution d’un noir inconnu dans une prison du Texas, la mort par injection létale, une mort violée, discrète car elle ne faisait aucun bruit, une mort liquide intraveineuse, d’une efficacité exemplaire puisque le condamné pouvait se l’infliger à lui-même dans les premiers rayons de l’aube....” (Soifs 13 - 14). Historical victims of racial oppression are cited with the same cadenced flatness with which Michel Butor introduced a succession of doomed Indian messiahs in Mobile: “Nina Mae McKinney, première actrice noire dans les théatres du New York, d’Ida Gray, première femme chirugien dentale noire à Cincinnati....” (Soifs 150); “Mary Mcleod Bethune, née après l’abolition de l’esclavage...fondait la première école pour les filles noire en Floride....” (Soifs 248).
In her memoir *Parcours d'un écrivain: Notes américaines* and her novel *Un liaison parisienne*, Blais proves to be equally at home in the literary milieus of New England and France. In the first of these two books (which was not published until 1993, although the first journal entry is dated thirty years earlier), the author describes her apprenticeship years as an author in America. Edmund Wilson himself appears in this text, sitting on a park bench, speaking “avec l’étendue de sa vaste culture, il me trace un portrait détaillé de Virginia Woolf, de sa vie, de son œuvre” (*Notes américaines* 18). Wilson, it would appear, was uncommonly sympathetic to women writers for a man of his generation, but even so Marie-Claire Blais was clearly not content to sit at his feet in the capacity of blissful acolyte: “Et devant tant d’érudition, moi qui ne suis pas un esprit cultivé, dans la vie littéraire n’en qu’a ses débuts, je dois me taire. Mais j’ai déjà éprouvé la même irritation ou la même gêne en lisant des biographes de Simone Weil écrite par des hommes, je n’ai jamais aimé ce ton de propriété rigide et confiné qui est le ton, dans les années soixante, des critique ou des biographies lorsqu’il présentent ou étudient les œuvres écrites par des femmes” (*Notes américaines* 19). Aside from Wilson, Blais made the acquaintance of Robert Lowell, Mary McCarthy, Elizabeth Hardwick, John Hersey, Marguerite Yourcenar, and Vladimir Nabokov during the course of her New England sojourn. She was, however, primarily influenced by the modernism embodied in the novels of Virginia Woolf and the poems of Elizabeth Bishop and Marianne Moore, as well as the African-American writers who were beginning to come into their own: “Pendant cet été-là...je lis James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Ralph
Ellison, et je prends conscience de la plus honteuse répression de l'histoire" (Notes américaines 14-15).

This identification with the Americans of the non-whites has already been commented on in connection with French literary travellers. For a variety of reasons, their Québécois compatriots push this line of thought still further. For them, American racism is not just a convenient cudgel with which to bludgeon the heads of their boorish hosts; it is, rather, emblematic of their own social wounds. In their struggles with what are sometimes seen as omnipotent anglos, Québécois artists identify strongly with the wretched of the earth: with Blacks, Native Americans—sometimes even Palestinians. It is not coincidental that the best known separatist text was entitled Les Nègres blancs de l'Amérique. In the same vein, the most hated Anglo taunt was always “Speak White!”

Needless to say, Blais is too sophisticated and worldly an artist to fall into one of these monochromatic political positions. Also, her experience of the United States includes as many pleasant personal memories as it does ideological reservations. Neither a hagiographer nor a demonologist, her vision is always admirably binocular.

Although it's wittier, drier, and more playful, Blais's skewering of French literary pretensions is actually more deadly than her deflation of American cultural balloons. Une liaison parisienne (1975) describes the adventures of a Québécois who travels to France on a Canada Council grant, hoping to make a name for himself in the City of Light. Once there, he discovers that the literary salons and journalistic politics which Balzac satirized so pitilessly in Illusions perdus are still very much in force. The haughty Madame Argenti delights in
putting Mathieu Lelièvre in his provincial place: "'Qui êtes-vous, dans nos Lettres Françaises? Un simple étranger, un adolescent...." (Une liaison parisienne 135). Parisian critics prove to be equally condescending: "'Qui est ce faux Candide, cette âme proustienne en visite à Paris...." (Une liaison parisienne 143). The Lucien de Rubempré of the twentieth century, it would seem, no longer come just from the French provinces.

The hero of Jean-Pierre Lefebvre's 1977 feature, Le Vieux pays où Rimbaud est mort, had a somewhat different experience: In this film "Abel (who had earlier wistfully wished 'to be able to change the course of events') returns to the land of his ancestors only to discover that the France in which he had been taught to believe no longer exists—that it exists (as Jan Dawson wrote) 'only in museums and in his imagination'...." (Morris 311). Other filmmakers approached the semi-legendary enclave of their fondest hopes and the home of their best-loved betrayers with almost ethnographic objectivity. NFB documentarist Richard Lavoie, for example, went to Brittany, the French province from which most proto-Québécois emigrated, to shoot Voyage en Bretagne intérieure (1978), "où il s'intéresse aux moeurs et coutumes de cette région" (Colombe and Jean 322).

One of the more intriguing recent films on the subject of Quebec's relationship to the outside world is Jacques Godbout's 1996 documentary, Le Sort de l'Amérique. This is material which the writer/director has mined many times before. In his 1989 non-fiction feature Alias Will James, Godbout chronicled the career of the most deracinated Québécois celebrity of them all, a habitant who re-invented himself as a native-born Texas ranch hand prior to carving out a
successful career for himself as a cowboy writer/artist. In Une histoire américaine, a novel published in 1985, the author recounted the adventures of a middle-aged Québécois professor who spends a year in Southern California, encountering many of the same cultural boondoggles described by Michel Butor, Andrea De Carlo, and other writers from Europe’s “latin quarter”. In his most recent cinematic meditation on national identity, however, Godbout decided to go straight to the heart of Quebec’s ongoing dilemma. Le Sort de l’Amérique approaches the trauma of 1759 from a vertiginous variety of angles. Although, strictly speaking, the film must be classified as a documentary, it is not without its fictional elements. Godbout the objective reporter shares screen time with playwright René-Daniel Dubois, a Québécois playwright who has been commissioned to write an imaginative scenario on the events that led up to the climactic battle on the Plains of Abraham. He has been asked to do so by a Hollywood studio: “J’écris un film pour les Américains sur ce que signifie pour nous la journée la plus importante de l’histoire à nous....” As he talks to Godbout, his friend and de facto collaborator, Dubois assumes the period dress of the historical characters he impersonates, at one point conducting a lively conversation with himself in the double guise of Voltaire and Louis XV—a perfect metaphor for the schizophrenic nature of this debate. Elsewhere, the filmmakers visit the descendants of Generals Wolfe and Montcalm, the slain military leaders whose armies decided the fate of French North America in 1759. In London, the filmmakers track down General Wolfe’s descendant, a fluently bilingual, left-leaning BBC journalist who fronts a blues band in his spare time. In the French countryside, meanwhile, the Baron de
Montcalm turns out to be an unreconstructed legitimist whose sole goal in life is to completely rebuild the ruined family castle. Without apology, he explains, “Mon famille a toujours servis les Bourbons.” Returning to Quebec to pursue their researches, Godbout and Dubois discover more threads that lead nowhere. Finding the proper records proves to be a Kafkaesque nightmare as the men wander fruitlessly from archive to archive. Even worse, the historical record is constantly being overshadowed by folk memory. The director recalls his father saying, “N’oublie pas, Jacques, que les Anglais ont brulés nos maisons.” Elsewhere, political pundit Laurier Lapierre opines, “Nous avons deux ennemis aux Plaines d’Abraham. Ils sont les Anglais et les Français.” It is also suggested that the ultimate beneficiaries of this battle were the Americans, the masters of the world who have commissioned Dubois to reconstruct his trauma for their commercial pleasure.

In both his literary and his film work, Jacques Godbout manages to encompass two dichotomous trends in Quebec’s cultural make-up, two centrifugal forces that ceaselessly threaten to upset its fragile equilibrium. In Philippe Gajan’s words, “L’art de Godbout, c’est finalement de reposer les questions tout en évacuant les faux pistes (Qui est le traître?) et les fausses certitudes (Qui est le vainqueur de la bataille? par exemple)” (Gajan 84). On the one hand, the province is possibly the most cosmopolitan place on the continent, evincing tastes that differ markedly from the North American norm. On the other hand, it is one of the most insular, nourishing an almost paranoid fear of national immolation in the surging sea of anglophones that surround it. To a certain extent this reflects the difference between town and
country. If Montreal is North America’s Paris, then rural Quebec is its Galway.

This tension results in an ambivalent attitude towards Québécois who have made good abroad. While overseas recognition is seen as generally good, it is also fraught with peril. Marie-Claire Blais, for example, obviously felt some elusive, ill-defined uneasiness when she met a female professor of French literature who enthused, “à Harvard, nous connaissons Anne Hébert, Antonine Maillet, Michel Tremblay, Rejean Ducharme... que de temps, nous aimerons de plus en plus de vos auteurs ici....” (Notes américaines 24). It should be emphasized here that the uncertainty in question was felt by the most cosmopolitan of Québécois writers, a peripatetic literary pilgrim. For the Yves Beauchemins of Quebec, the situation seems more sinister still. For them, anyone who moves away threatens to become a Will James.

One of the very few exceptions to this rule is Jack Kerouac. Although he was born in the United States and spent precious little time in la belle province, since the early 1970s the Beat novelist has been a Québécois icon, his position canonized by novelist/screenwriter Victor-Lévy Beaulieu who ceaselessly reiterated “cette passion folle pour Kérouac.”9 In 1989, Réginald Martel and Yves Boisvert published a slim volume called Québec Kérouac Blues, a celebration in prose and verse of the man from “Lowell! Ville de mes ancêtres! Canadien-français!” (Martel and Boisvert 21).

---

9 It is interesting to note that Beaulieu, like so many French and Italian writers, both past and present, is also a great admirer of Herman Melville. He wrote, “ce que Melville a été, c’est ce que j’aurais été.” (Monsieur Melville 23) For him, the American novelist is one of Victor Hugo’s spiritual brothers: “L’un avait écrit Moby Dick et l’autre Les Travailleurs de la mer, les deux grands livres du XIXe siècle sur le océan!” (Monsieur Melville 30)
Of course, Jack Kerouac contributed to this tribute by his refusal to disparage his Québécois roots. Paul Theroux’s father, for instance, was of Franco-American stock, but, as we have already seen, the novelist/travel writer’s comments on the nature of his distant ancestors are almost universally hostile. Thanks to his singular indifference to the uniquely “Canuck” aspects of his New England childhood—a sin of omission which must be added to the ideological bonfire of his outspoken francophobia—the odds of Paul Theroux ever being adopted by Montreal’s literary journalists as a long lost fils du pays are virtually nil. In Satori in Paris, conversely, Jack/Jacques audibly rejoiced in his cultural heritage. Far from being defensive in France, he practiced a form of aggressive francophilism, a tactic which emphasized the immemorial Frenchness of le peuple Québécois: “A marvellous man, and Jewish, and we have our conversation in French, and I even tell him that I roll my ‘r’s’ on my tongue and not in my throat because I come from Medieval French Quebec-via-Brittany stock, and he agrees, admitting that modern Parisian French, tho dandy, has really been changed by the influx of Germans, Jews and Arabs for all these two centuries and not to mention the influence of the fops in the court of Louis the Fourteenth which really started it, and I also reminded him that François Villon’s real name was pronounced ‘Ville On’ and not ‘Viyon’ (which is a corruption) and that in those days you said not ‘toi’ or ‘moi’ but like ‘toué’ or ‘moué’ (as we still do in Quebec and in two days I heard it in Brittany)” (Kerouac 45 – 46).

It is instructive to note, in the preceding paragraph, how many of the articles of the Québécois catechism survived Kerouac’s Massachusetts upbringing. One finds both the insistence that joual is
the true French, the authentic French, and the French co-
conversationalist who accepts this view. One also finds clear
distinctions between “us” and “them”, the “real” Frenchmen and the
Jewish, German, and Arab immigrants who have so sadly corrupted the
tongue of Rabelais and Villon. Far from being assimilated by the
American Dream, in the Kerouac—or perhaps I should say Kérôuac—
household, the Québécois Zeitgeist survived virtually intact.

After the “Quiet Revolution” of the 1960s and early 1970s, the
social movement that did so much to dispel the strictrules of Quebec’s
parochial puritanism, French characters were occasionally shown in a
better light. No longer were they simply the sinful and atheistic
inheritors of 1789 or the obliging tourists who praised joual as
effusively in fiction as they disparaged it in real life. Now they could
sometimes function as a counterweight to Anglo-American cultural
domination, as a more congenial source of modernism and savoir faire.
Thus, the Gallic cook in Le Matou is treated far more favourably by
novelist Yves Beauchemin than any of the quasi-Satanic Montreal
sexual coming-of-age story set mainly in the late 1960s, a young
French tourist is presented as a liberating wind which helps to blow
away the lingering clouds of Church-generated sexual repression.

Another change ushered in by the 1990s was a new cinematic
awareness of Montreal’s so-called “allophone” communities. Latin
American political refugees began to figure prominently in films such
as Michel Brault’s Les Noces de papier (1989). Around the same time,
from within the heart of Montreal’s Italian community, a local boy
began to establish his reputation as one of the province’s foremost
filmmakers. Paul Tana’s medium-length *Caffè Italia Montréal* “[raconta] l’itinéraire de trois générations peu habituée au phénomène de l’immigration en masse” (Colombe and Jean 508 - 509) He followed this up with *La Sarrasine* (1991), a study of ethnic conflict between Italian immigrants and Québécois urban dwellers at the turn of this century. Intriguingly, the film’s eponymous Saracen refers to a string-borne figure in an Italian marionette show. This dark-skinned puppet serves the same narrative function as the wooden Moor in Roberto Rossellini’s *Paisà*, a detail which suggests that Italo-Quebecers are as subject to motherland influence as are their French-speaking neighbours.

In the interests of fairness, it should probably be pointed out that French intellectuals no longer look at Québec purely as a cultural backwater. Both Félix Leclerc and Robert Charlebois rejuvenated popular French music in the 1960s, and Parisian critics were properly appreciative. At times, it could fairly be said, they were more than truly appreciative—on behalf of their fellow countrymen, almost conciliatory—attempting to be more Québécois than the Québécois themselves.

---

10 Montrealers of Italian descent are almost certainly the allophone community which is most assiduously courted by Quebec’s federalist and nationalist camps. As non-native English speakers they were, prior to the parti Québécois’s first electoral victory in 1976, largely assimilated into Montreal’s anglophone community, despite their Catholic faith. Following changes to the province’s educational laws, most of their children were subsequently channelled into Montreal’s French language school system, but this seemingly had little effect on their political loyalties. Generally popular in both linguistic camps, they tend to slide between Montreal’s ethnic communities with greater ease than most. The cultural uniqueness which has always prevented much-conquered Italy from being re-made in another country’s image seems to hold true in Québec’s Italian neighbourhoods as well.

11 One of Leclerc’s songs plays a pivotal role in François Truffaut’s 1960 masterpiece, *Tirez sur le pianiste*.
Jacques Bertin's Félix Leclerc: Le Roi heureux is a case in point. To underscore his subject's importance, this rather sycophantic biographer writes, "Il est le seul Canadien—oui, le seul—dont le nom soit connu par tous—tous—les Français" (Bertin 7). Continuing on in the same francocentric vein, Bertin marvels that "Il vient de loin: du Canada. Du vieux Canada français: pas de littérature, pas d'intelligentzia, pas de traditions culturelles, pas de Café de Flore, pas de Montparnasse...pas de revues, pas de théâtre, pas d'érudition, pas des spectateurs éclairés" (Bertin 8 - 9). Behind this deprived lumberjack world, of course, outside forces lurked—all of them speaking English: "'Aux anglais l'argent, les affaires. A nous, les âmes. Et la misère'" (Bertin 29). Then, too, there was the Church. According to Bertin, in 1899, Québec's 200 civil servants had to engage in unequal combat with no fewer than 10,000 parish priests. What's more, the layman/priest ratio of 576 - 1 was the most Vatican-friendly in the world: "Pour un prêtre, le Québec de 1900 peut, en effet, ressembler à un paradis terrestre: tout y est dans la main de l'église" (Bertin 49). As Leclerc himself recalled, "'C'est grâce aux prêtres que nous parlons encore français. Mais hélas! il faut bien dire toute la vérité. Le clergé a contribué à nous maintenir dans une certaine nuit de l'esprit'" (Bertin 53). When he talks about the role of anglophones in Quebec, the author assumes the xenophobic tones of Louis Hémon's habitants. When considering population shifts in Quebec City, for instance, he writes, "En 1861, il y'avait quarante pour cent d'anglophones dans la ville. Et pas tous des riches. Des Irlandais, catholiques comme les canadiens français mais...anglophones avant tout" (Bertin 70). When speaking of Québec's somewhat ambivalent relationship to France, conversely,
Bertin’s emphasis shifts ever so slightly from Pêquiste orthodoxy to Parisian snobbery: “Parler français—et un français ‘ancien’, presque dénaturé—ça fait habitant. Il y’a d’un côté la France, terre des arts, des armes et des lois qui fascine et qui fait peur, le pays de la culture et du péché. Et, de l’autre, les Anglais, les patrons, les gagneurs, les meilleurs” (Bertin 88). According to Bertin, Félix Leclerc suffered abominably when he moved from Quebec City to Montreal: “Le centre-ville de Québec est européen... Montréal est une cité américaine.....” (Bertin 111). Modifying his initial sneer somewhat, Bertin adds—somewhat contradictorily, one might say, under the circumstances—that “Il n’y a que dans le centre, vers la place d’armes et l’Hôtel de Ville que subsistent quelques vestiges du régime français, mêlés aux constructions vaniteuses du capitalisme anglo-américain, point toutes laides d’ailleurs” (Bertin 112). Using Montreal and English Canada as a pretext, Jacques Bertin finds the perfect opportunity to reprise the sixty-year-old slurs of Georges Duhamel in a new context; in this respect, at least, one could say that nothing at all had changed in the French literary traveller’s psyche.

What is different is the determination to cast both France and Quebec in an equally good light. This slight change in journalistic attitude is probably not unconnected to shifts in French foreign policy since the end of the Second World War. With its defeat in 1940

---

12 The non-Québécois word in this Gallic summation of Quebec’s take on France and the Anglo Saxon world is of course “armes”. In the scores of Québécois films which I have seen, and the hundreds of Québécois books and magazines which I have read, I cannot recall a single occasion in which a Québécois poet, novelist, journalist, or filmmaker expressed the slightest awe or admiration for French military prowess. This is one direction, it would seem, in which ethnic self-identification cannot be pushed.

13 I wonder how many other American cities can boast of so much authentic late 17th century and early 18th century French architecture?
compounded by the loss of its African and Asian colonies, France's claim to being considered a great military and political power seemed less credible all the time. To compensate for this lack of global prestige, efforts were made in the Elysée Palace to establish the nation as the centre of a worldwide francophone community which was five or six times as large as France itself. Parallel to this policy ran the government's already discussed attempts to assume one of the key roles in a United Europe strong enough to compete with both the Americans and the Japanese on their own terms. Steeped as always in the tenets of Realpolitik, French politicians saw quite clearly that if la gloire was ever to return to the banks of the Seine it would come in the form of a confederated, not a national, package.

In terms of walking this new double line, Jacques Bertin is a consummate master. When he writes, for instance, "Parlons Joual! Voilà la réponse au fameux 'speak white!'" (Bertin 259) he makes a case for the local dialect without in any way impugning the purity of the Parisian ideal. Joual exists exclusively thanks to the oppressive English. Thus, the Franco-Québécois linguistic confrontation is left entirely out of the loop. Leonard Cohen, on the other hand, Montreal's best-known anglophone poet/songwriter—and one who is extremely popular in Paris, by the way—is not let off so easily: "Il parle en français. Bon, il a un accent qui le trahirait s'il lui faisait confiance et parlait le dos tourné. Mais il parle lentement, sans élever la voix. L'accent ajoute au charme" (Bertin 289). Despite the partial mollification of that final sentence, the French of Montreal's anglophone community is clearly not granted the same immunity which Bertin accords to his pure laine friends. It is no exaggeration to state
that at times the biographer's willingness to curry Québécois favour frequently borders on the ridiculous. Consider the following summary of the first FLQ manifesto: "Le texte présente un mûrère plutôt rare. Il semble avoir été écrit par un vrai littérâtre. Il obtiendra un vrai succès populaire" (Bertin 260). Only once does the author admit what he's really up to: "J'écrirai une sorte de roman historique sur la nation québécoise" (Bertin 313). That what Bertin has written is fiction rather than history is a fairly generous interpretation of this book; those less well-disposed towards the author might argue instead that what he has whipped up is little better than second-hand nationalist propaganda, a borrowed policy position which lacks the emotional validation of personal grievance.

Happily, not all French travellers in Québec are as fatally afflicted with nostalgie des colonies as is Félix Leclerc's French biographer. While filmmaker Michel Moreau, in his autobiographical documentary Le Pays rêvé (1996), does make the occasional Bertinesque aside—"Montréal attrape le virus des États-Unis" being perhaps the most astringent—in general his comments are far more low key. Despite his fondness for Charles Trenet songs and the writings of Colette, who was born, he announces proudly "30 kilomètres de chez nous," he would wind up in la belle province in 1960 at least partially as a result of his disgust over the colonial war which France was then waging in Algeria. Many of the eighty non-fiction films he subsequently made dealt with the problems of immigrants adjusting to a new environment. About Quebec itself he says relatively little, expressing gratitude for the good things which French North America brought to
his life, but without ever resorting to arrogant over-simplifications of the Jacques Bertin variety.

Somewhat surprisingly, at least one American has journalistically bashed the USA from a putative Québécois perspective. A Vietnam War vintage draft-dodger, Robert Dole acquired foreign languages in Europe prior to assuming academic responsibilities at the Université du Québec à Trois Rivières. *Le Cauchemar américain: Essai pamphlétaire sur les vestiges du puritanisme dans la mentalité actuelle* is the author’s response to a national heritage which causes him considerable unease. The book is dedicated to Mark Frechette, an American actor of Québécois descent who starred in *Zabriskie Point*, Michelangelo Antonioni’s late ‘60s ode to radical America, prior to becoming a revolutionary in his own right, and dying in prison under mysterious circumstances. Dole writes, “Voici mon hypothèse: A l’insu des Américains, il existe un caractère américain, une mentalité américaine, un comportement américain qui sont propre au peuple américain et qui le distinguent d’autres nationalités” (Dole 12). Like *Le Monde*’s front-page editorialists, he believes that “Depuis la chute du socialisme en Europe et ailleurs, plus rien n’empêche l’américanisation de la planète” (Dole 13). Seeking to explain his motivations more fully, the author confesses, “La triple perspective américaine-européene-québécoise va donner à mes reflexions des tournures originales, parfois peut-être excentriques” (Dole 16). Like the cultural page writers of *Corriere della Sera*, Dole attributes the ills of American-style political correctness to the lingering effects of deterministic seventeenth-century puritanism: “Si l’individu faisait preuve de faiblesse ou de déprivation dans sa vie personnelle, ses voisins sauraient qu’il
n’appartenait pas au groupe des élus” (Dole 24). As readers of Chapter Three will remember, this is precisely the sort of New World mindset which Antonio Gramsci wished on his fellow Italians as an interim pre-socialist measure. Claims are made in Le Cauchemar américain which one can only hope are exaggerated: “Les Américains construisent actuellement plus de prisons que d’écoles” (Dole 42). The Land of the (Un)free, alas, is seemingly not content with turning its own terrain into a massive prison yard: “C’est précisément la conviction qu’ils sont le peuple élu de Dieu qui procure aux Américains le sentiment de devoir jouer le rôle de gendarme mondiale” (Dole 47). Similarly—although, Dole would contend, with greater justice on its side—“Le mouvement féministe américain a introduit encore une autre vision de la prédestination: élues sont les femmes et les non-élus, les hommes” (Dole 55). Like D.H. Lawrence, Robert Dole sees cruelty as an integral part of the American character: “Le lieutenant Calley devint un héros américain” (Dole 68). Like Simone de Beauvoir, the author believes that Blacks have a much greater understanding of Whites than Whites do of themselves: “Selon Baldwin, la source du pouvoir des Noirs doit être leur connaissance des Blancs, qui est supérieure à cette que les Blancs ont d’eux mêmes” (Dole 111). Being incorrigibly capitalist, the American people are incapable of resorting to the one system that might save them: socialism. In Dole’s words, “Le peuple américain est vraiment malheureux, mais l’idée de blâme le système socioéconomique du pays pour ce malheur est inconcevable” (Dole 101). More bluntly, he writes “L’expérience américain est un échec” (Dole 128). Consequently, the author’s “participation à la lutte pour un Québec indépendant constitue un réaction à la menace d’homogénéisation à l’américaine de
notre petite planète" (Dole 120). Of literary critics of America, Dole somewhat too simplistically claims that "Les auteurs qui analyse la mentalité américaine se divisent facilement en deux groupes: ceux d'avant le XXe siècle et ceux de XXe siècle. Chez ceux du premier groupe, l'optimisme et l'admiration à l'endroit du peuple américain sont presque unanimes. Ceux du deuxième groupe, par contre, expriment à peu près un certain désenchantement (Dole 120).”

Above all else, Le Cauchemar américain is an interesting example of constructed identity. Despite the author’s all-American origins—at the very end of this *cri de coeur*, Dole ruefully admits that he himself is one of those fierce, inward-looking puritans he has been passionately warning his readers against—his social situation—embattled socialist; Québécois nationalist; francophone author; enemy of political correctness; disbeliever in Pentagon/Wall Street myths— makes him rather more than just a comrade-in-arms of *Le Monde*’s global economists, *Corriere della Sera*’s popular culture pundits, and Jacques Bertin-style Québécois wanna-bes. Because his views coincide so exactly with those of his natural allies, his broadsides are of far more value than those of a mere insider. For French, Italian, and Québécois intellectuals afraid of drowning in a vulgar sea of U.S. cultural influence, Dole’s testimony is as ideologically valuable as anti-Zionist pronouncements from Orthodox rabbis would be in radical

---

14 As we saw in Chapter Three, the Italian cultural analysts of the 1930s were far more sympathetic towards the United States of America than were Alexis de Tocqueville and J. Hector St. John de Crévecourt, the two best-intentioned French literary travellers of the 19th century. Dole’s generalization is further hurt by its failure to explain the existence of postwar French Atlanticists, and by its de facto elimination of English travel writers, motherland scribes who were generally kinder to the revolted “13 colonies” in this century than they were in the last.
Palestinian circles. In both cases, universal legitimacy is brought to regional concerns via the testimony of high-profile “apostates”.

Of course, in the final decades of the 20th century, an increasing number of European intellectuals are taking U.S. hegemony more-or-less for granted. We have already seen how Umberto Eco writes not from the perspective of Rome but from that of Athens, seeing in America’s rise both the conquest and transmission of the old “Hellenism” which he represents.

Ironically, one of the most brilliant inheritors of this assumed style is not an Old World master but a New World upstart. Denys Arcand’s 1986 feature Le Déclin de l’Empire amércaain is set on a Roman frontier that includes Montreal and Georgeville, Quebec. Its dramatis personae consist almost exclusively of libidinously-obsessed history professors who decide to spend a weekend together in the country. While most of their conversation is devoted to gastronomy and sex, whenever they do turn their thoughts towards their métier, they speak with a bittersweet resignation that would not have seemed out of place in the age of Julian the Apostate.

Rémy, for instance, believes that history is really a question of numbers: “Ça, ça veut dire par exemple que les Noirs sud-africains finiront certainement un jour par gagner, alors que les Noirs nord-américains n’arriveront jamais à s’en sortir. Ça veut dire aussi que l’histoire n’est pas une science morale. Le bon droit, la compassion, la justice sont des notions étrangères à l’histoire” (Arcand 11). Although her priorities are slightly different, Diane is very much in accord with Rémy: “Voyez-vous on possède plus de documents sur les Egyptiens que sur les Nubiens, beaucoup plus de documents sur les Espagnols que sur
les Mayas, et bien sûr beaucoup plus de documents sur les hommes que sur les femmes. Et d’ailleurs c’est une limite très certaine de l’histoire. Mais il y a peut-être un élément psychologique: c’est qu’au fond on aime beaucoup mieux entendre parler des vainqueurs que des vaincus” (Arcand 111). For Danielle, meanwhile, Europe’s colonization of North America—a colonization from which she has directly benefited—“C’est la deuxième plus grande catastrophe de l’histoire d’humanité, après la peste noire au moyen-âge. Comparé à ça, le vingtième siècle, c’est du bonbon!” (Arcand 138). Pierre agrees: “L’histoire de l’humanité, c’est une histoire d’horreur” (Arcand 139).

For Dominique, the stigmata of decline are everywhere and unavoidable: “Les signes du déclin de l’empire sont partout. La population qui méprise ses propres institutions. La baisse du taux de natalité. Le refus des hommes de servir dans l’armée. La dette nationale devenue incontrôlable... Avec l’écroulement du rêve marxiste-leniniste, on ne peut plus citer aucune modèle de société dont on pourrait dire: voilà comment nous aimierons vivre” (Arcand 143). Still, there are certain advantages to being alive in such an age: “Le déclin d’une civilisation est aussi inévitable que le vieillissement des individus. Au mieux, on peut espérer retarder un peu le processus... Remarquons que nous, ici, nous avons la chance de vivre en bordure de l’empire. Les chocs sont beaucoup moins violents. Il faut dire que la période actuelle peut être très agréable à vivre par certains côtés” (Arcand 173).

Decline is not the same thing as demise, however. Thus, when Pierre opines “Moi, j’ai l’impression qu’on saura jamais vraiment le fond de l’histoire” (Arcand 173), optimism struggles with fatalism. Under ordinary circumstances, things would be changed dramatically by the barbarians at the gate, by
the rude broom from the steppes that sweeps the cultivated but effete dead wood of established cultures into the dustbin of history. This time around, however, the outriders are too weak to accomplish their traditional task. The end result is a strange sort of stasis, the seemingly endless prolongation of a fin d'époch waiting period which in the past would have long since been terminated by entropic social forces. By all the laws of Hegel, Marx, Spengler, and Toynbee, the civilization we live in should have ended years ago, and yet it has not. Instead of changing, it mutates. What the future holds for this old/new hybrid culture, this posthistorical/ahistorical corporate civilization, will probably not be known until the next "mutation" occurs, sometime during the coming millennium.
CONCLUSION

The refrain from one of Gilles Vigneault's most popular songs reads as follows: "Mon pays ce n'est pas un pays c'est l'hiver/Mon jardin ce n'est pas un jardin c'est la plaine/Mon chemin ce n'est pas un chemin c'est la neige/Mon pays ce n'est pas un pays c'est l'hiver" (Vigneault 159). Although to outsiders these lines might sound pleasantly pastoral, to Quebec nationalists they are a rallying cry and the unofficial anthem of the Parti Québécois. The gardens, winters, plains, and snow referred to reside exclusively within the frontiers of la belle province; they have nothing at all to do with the very similar phenomena found in Russia, Scandinavia, the northern half of the United States, or even English-speaking Canada. Those in the know will get the point; as for those outside the loop, their lack of understanding is welcomed, not resented.

In other words, "Mon Pays" is the exclusive property of le peuple québécois in the same way that Thomas Moore's Irish Melodies are part of Erin's national patrimony. In both cases, outsiders might enjoy the surface effects of these poems, but they will never fully grasp the self-absorbed subtexts which speak to one audience and one audience only. This is national literature that stays national literature; it does not really have an international context.

If such works are in some ways at least implicitly xenophobic, they do at least offer a last line of defense in the current struggle against cultural globalization. Though Mickey Mouse and Rambo speak
to every Tom, Dick, and sucker, les Plouffe and Finn McCool do not.¹ There will always be some local tastes which even the most astute and merciless multinational will be unable to satisfy. Unfortunately for pluralism, however, these highly specialized hungers seem fated to occupy an ever smaller proportion of the cultural pie.

France, Italy, and Québec have responded to this challenge—a challenge which, for all practical purposes, might as well be called le défi américain—in a variety of different ways. It is now time to summarize them briefly.

France first became aware of the tremendous potential of the United States at a pivotal point in its history. In the early 16th century, during the time when the thinly populated colonies of la Nouvelle France were first established, Gallic interest in the northern latitudes of the New World was minimal. Aside from its ability to provide the mainland with furs, the economic potential of New France was seriously undervalued. What Versailles really wanted was access to Indian and Caribbean stores of gold and spices, not frost-bitten beaver pelts. Quebec was ultimately lost to England in what was, to imperialist Europeans, little more than a minor theatre of the Seven Years’ War. It was only after the loss of Quebec that French writers and readers began to interest themselves in their long-despised arpents de neiges. Journalistic histories, such as The Jesuit Relations became popular, as did, a little later on, those

¹ Les Plouffe were a popular Québécois TV family of the 1950s, a metamorphosis that followed their first appearance in a novel by Roger Lemelin. Gilles Carle gave them the widescreen treatment in 1981. As for Finn McCool, he is the most parochial of epic Irish heroes, an unglamorous giant totally lacking in the primitive allure of Cuchulainn, Mdbh, and Conchobar.
Catholic-flavoured forest fantasies of René de Chateaubriand. By the early 19th century, when French attitudes towards the rest of the world were starting to change and the nations of the Near and Far East—which until that time had often been employed as historically inaccurate but morally admirable political models with which to chastize the social and intellectual shortcomings of l’ancien régime—were re-invented as a sort of Orientalist theme park, appreciation of the United States began in earnest. While nostalgia for the lost forests of the New World was relatively benign, interest in the Thirteen Colonies was very great. The United States of America, after all, might never have come into existence in its present form if French naval assistance had not turned the military tide in favour of the colonial insurrectionaries. After 1789, America was seen as a fellow republic, still a relative rarity in an age of absolute monarchy. Although it preceded theirs, French democrats generally took pride in the success of the American Revolution. In 1832, the young Victor Hugo wrote in his diary, à propos of the legislators of his day, “Messieurs, parlons un peu moins de Robespierre et un peu plus de Washington” (Choses vues Tome 1 120). In that same decade, Alexis de Tocqueville published De la démocratie en Amérique, a volume which is still regarded, even by Americans, as the most insightful evaluation of the American character ever compiled. The construction of a specifically French “fantasy” America was already well advanced.

Nineteenth-century Gallic views of the United States were not all so charitable, however. Shortly after the battle of Waterloo, Stendhal worried that American economic power might soon dominate the disunited nations of Europe. Protected by its universal militia system—
a form of self-defence which more than made up for America's then negligible army—and its vast spaces, the United States was to all intents and purposes impervious to European intervention in its internal affairs. Yankee whalers and clipper ships made British admirals fear for their continued control of the seven seas. American industry, though still primitive, already showed signs of surpassing the factories of Hamburg and Liverpool. Everything about America suggested the waxing of power, just as everything about Europe implied its wane.

There was also, of course, a wide-spread fear of American vulgarity. Even Alexis de Tocqueville, a philo-American if ever there was one, had a lot to say on this score. American literature and art of the early 19th century were decidedly inferior to their European counterparts. Even more worryingly, the engine of democratic government paradoxically seemed to lead to a consensual thinking that ultimately resulted in a conformity of opinion that was entirely unknown in absolutist Europe. In matters of the mind, it seemed, democracy led to slavery, not freedom. This paradox caused discomfort all across the political spectrum, affecting left- and right-wing writers with equal force. If America had something to teach Europe in terms of economics and practical government, the Old World had best be careful that it did not become infected with American artistic mediocrity and uniformity of opinion. For French intellectuals, America was not only a moveable feast, but a moveable famine as well.

For these reasons, the distinction between 19th and 20th century French literary travellers in America is nowhere near as sharp as Robert Dole would have us believe. Pro and con forces straddled not
only centuries, but individual writers as well. Georges Duhamel’s Twentieth-century complaints, for example, were predicated almost exclusively on nineteenth-century cultural standards. Although—despite her left-wing leanings—she shared some of Duhamel’s views, Simone de Beauvoir’s liking for the United States owed a great deal to the material want and social paralysis she had recently experienced in Paris after living through four years of Nazi occupation. Raymond Aron, meanwhile, praised the United States primarily because it was an irreplaceable bulwark against Bolshevism in the post-1945 world. In more recent decades, one might also take into account both French world-weariness—the belief that the Old World is experiencing at least a Hegelian, if not a Spenglerian, end of time—and French corporatism, the desire to amalgamate the nation into a unified Europe which would once again be able to play a major role on the world stage.\(^2\) Temporary needs; situational hopes and fears; timeless values: all these things have played a part in determining French attitudes towards the United States.

In this study, we have considered these shifts in emphasis from a very limited number of perspectives, the most important of which were French travel writing from the late 18th century to the present day, and the evolution of French crime fiction during more-or-less the same

---

\(^2\) French interest in the doomed civilizations of Mesoamerica has been a constant in this century, from Antonin Artaud on. At times, it seems as if the Mayas, Incas, and Aztecs function as a sort of phoenix image for Gallic thinkers, a promise of resurrection as well as death, a reminder that upstart America is built on very old bones. This sentiment is particularly strong in J.M.G. Le Clézio’s interesting book, _Le rêve Mexicain_ (1988). The author writes, “L’univers est fait de mort” (Le Clézio 92), and “l’origine de la civilisation est dans le barbarie” (Le Clézio 112). Such sentiments are far more relevant to the age of Jean Baudrillard than they are to the between-war heyday of André Gide.
period. This latter category was meant to show the interrelatedness of Franco-American culture, the ways in which the two societies have sequentially played off, irritated, and imitated each other. It also provided opportunities to branch off into such related fields as literary attitudes and the trans-cultural nature of film production.

While occasional references were made to the evolution of the comic strip and the popular song, all such commentary has been deliberately relegated to the status of illustrative asides. If one were to examine all the connections between French and American culture, all the ways in which French intellectuals have reconstructed a fantasy America for their own specific purposes, this book would, of necessity, be several times longer than it is. Though thoroughness is a prime academic virtue, so is brevity. In other words, I have tried to contain my arguments within manageable limits.

Unlike their French contemporaries, Italians of the late 18th century were not predisposed to take a nostalgic view of the United States because, strictly speaking, Italy did not then exist. Like the Germany of those years, Italia was not a nation but a geographical expression. Cobbled together from a collection of petty kingdoms, foreign protectorates, papal fiefdoms, and faded city states, the new country was not fully unified until well into the nineteenth-century. In 1848, Giuseppe Mazzini complained: “L’Italia del Nord, le tre Italie, le cinque Italie sono bestemmie di sofisti” (Belardelli 24). Even after the Risorgimento was realized, regional differences were so extreme they assumed almost international dimensions. Lombardy differed from Sicily about as much as Switzerland differed from Crete. Tuscan Italian, although the most literary of the nation’s many dialects, was
spoken by only a minority of the population. North/South discrepancies in wealth were enormous. In Italy, there was no Junker-style ruling class with the iron discipline needed to impose its will on recalcitrant provinces. Tuscany tried, but its success was always incomplete. Early attempts at social engineering “al modello inglese del self-government” (Bellardelli 24) were replaced, after 1860, with an at times tyrannical centralized state. Sicily was always turbulent, while today La Lega del Nord threatens to secede from the Italian union, a fact which, somewhat surprisingly, has not resulted in “un separatismo uguale e contrario” (Russo 24) in the South, but, rather, “con [un] senso di responsabilità e di dignità alla campagna incivile di denigrazione e persino di razzismo” (Russo 24). Far from being “sophistical blasphemies,” regional differences in Italy are as empirically demonstrable as the laws of thermodynamics. They are as much facts of life as illness or death.

For Italians, therefore, awareness of America was always intimately connected to the nation’s endless search for solutions to its seemingly insoluble problems. Interest in Christopher Columbus, for example, became pronounced only after Italians had begun to migrate to the United States in large numbers. For new immigrants unsure of their English and their new social status, the knowledge that one of their countrymen had “discovered” the New World was immensely reassuring. Queen Isabella’s favourite pilot served as an ideal counterweight to the Black Hand mobsters with whom Italo-Americans were so often identified. He also represented the amorphous Italian genius—embodied in Dante, Guglielmo Marconi, Galileo, the masters of the Renaissance,
etc.—which had contributed so much to world culture without in any way strengthening their homeland’s sense of national identity. Thus, for many Italians, their national legacy was not so much a found treasure as it was an inherited curse.

In the early decades of the twentieth-century, the search for American-style answers grew stronger. If, as the venerable diplomat M. de Norpois contended in *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, the motto of the 19th century Italian nationalists had been ""'L'Italia farà da sé'' (Le Côté de Guermantes 690), this militant self-reliance was not shared by their descendants. Thus, economists sought to solve the nation’s endemic poverty by imposing Henry Ford’s factory system on Italy’s working and managerial classes. Left-wing intellectuals, meanwhile, opposed the brash energy of the new American literature to the studied deadness of neoclassical and frankly fascist texts. Because Italy’s uniqueness was more-or-less guaranteed by the uniqueness of its problems—the nation had, after all, already survived countless centuries of foreign occupation—there was never any real fear that Italy might become hopelessly Americanized. All that Antonio Gramsci and other progressive thinkers really wanted was for Italy to become a little more organized, a little less hedonistic, a little more modern, puritan, and Protestant. After that it would finally be free to follow its own guiding star.

Because of its unique social dysfunctions, Italian crime fiction, as we saw in Chapter Two, differs markedly from both French *polars* and American detective stories. Despite their somewhat different approaches to the archetypal figures of lawman
and outlaw, America and France are both strong, centralized states in which the federal government, even when detested, is a fundamental, inescapable fact of life. In Italy, on the other hand, this oddly comforting illusion has never really taken root. Behind the parliament that sits in Rome are the cabals that really run things, informal alliances made up of high-ranking Mafiosi, clerics, police inspectors, army generals, capitalists, media magnates, CIA agents, judges, and politicians from all political parties with the possible exception of the Communist. Italy has been conquered so many times that even democratically elected parliaments are widely perceived as just the latest occupying power. It has been calculated that if every Italian paid 100% of his or her taxes, the sum surrendered would exceed the nation's gross national product. What this means in practice is that every Italian, in order to survive, must to a greater or lesser degree, break the law. This has resulted in a society where the religious polarities of good and evil, at least insofar as they appertain to the acquisition of property, on the deepest emotional level do not really apply. In Italian crime fiction, the law is generally so nebulous it threatens to disappear altogether, while the outlaw is almost always sympathetic, the victim of forces outside his or her control. No wonder American-style puritanism has never made inroads in Italy.3

Like their French coevals, young Italians currently take American culture much more matter-of-factly than their fathers and

3 It could be argued that puritanism has never taken root in France either, but there the circumstances are slightly different. The lingering aftereffects of Jansenist theology, coupled to the model of Jesuit practicality, has resulted in a sort of de facto "Protestantism," a mercantile mindset where most Catholics think and act like veritable Huguenots.
grandfathers ever did. While postwar Italy never manifested the militantly anti-American sentiments that were common intellectual coin in some quarters of postwar France—a curious state of affairs, really, since the Italians had far more reason to take umbrage—America ceased to be the overriding obsession it had once been. In the 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s, the Italian cinema was economically healthy and far more creative than its Hollywood counterpart. What’s more, new means of industrial production began to spread wealth among the people, particularly in the northern and central regions. Italian clothes, cars, planes, films—even typewriters—set new standards of international style. Clearly, the nation was no longer the sociocultural backwater it had once been. On the other hand, this progress had been achieved without, maddeningly, ameliorating any of the problems which had plagued the peninsula for centuries. Regional disharmony echoed from Milan to Palermo; partial prosperity did nothing to shrink the size of the nation’s black market, a clandestine economy which might well be larger than its official counterpart. Italy, in other words, was still Italy.

For contemporary Italians, the American entertainment industry would seem to be the one area of New World enterprise which is still followed with obsessive interest. The adventures and peccadilloes of Madonna and Woody Allen, of Julia Roberts and Robert De Niro, are seemingly irresistible to everyone from cultural

---

4 As we saw in Chapter Three, the U.S. State Department and the CIA interfered more vigorously in Italian politics than they did in the internal affairs of any other Western nation.
journalists to Commissario Ambrosio, from café idlers to Nanni Moretti. Frequently, inquiries into the lives of these U.S. celebrities are pursued with a lack of decorum which would not be tolerated in North American newspapers. In the same vein, Roman and Milanese newspaper regularly speculate about the motives behind America's bi-coastal "rapper war" with a candour that is utterly unknown in the U.S.\(^5\)

Anything touching on American hypocrisy or sexual repression is discussed with particular relish. Despite Gramsci's arguments to the contrary, in today's Italy the positive uses of puritanism are believed to be few and far between.

As we saw in Chapter Four, Italian intellectual leaders now assume an almost Athenian persona when gently admonishing their stronger, more vital, but less cultivated American "children". This mantle is worn lightly, without arrogance, as befits a culture that was once contemporaneous with that of the Etruscans. An attractive note of self-mockery underscores most of these essays—particularly the ones written by Umberto Eco.

Occasionally, of course, Italian artists still do seek inspiration from their work in American films. When Francesco Rosi was adapting one of Primo Levi's Holocaust memoirs for the screen, for instance, he thought incessantly of Charley Chaplin's silent classic "'Charlot soldato nella guerra '15 - '18, in cui c'era la drammaticità di tutti i film di guerra, ma la levità, la leggerezza, l'ironia, il grottesco di Chaplin finiva per essere una critica preziosa e costante a quanto accadevo interno a lui'" (Fusco 41). For Italians, therefore, America is still a source of inspiration, but for now it is just one of many.

\(^5\) About their own "scandals", however, they are considerably more coy.
Québécois meditations on the nature of late 20th century empire are, conversely, generally fraught with slightly dated fin-de-siècle angst. Nationalist-minded Montreal-based intellectuals have more in common with Giuseppe Mazzini than they do with sleight-of-hand postmodernists of the Italo Calvino variety. Thanks no doubt to the temporal paralysis that typically accompanies the forcible inclusion of a conquered polity into a multi-national empire, la belle province’s political mindset owes more to 1763 and 1837 than it does to 1997. Its apprehension of North America encompasses Lower Canada, Upper Canada, and the United States. So far as the continent’s northern half is concerned, it is more or less evenly divided between two founding “nations”: Catholic, French-speaking Quebec and Protestant, anglophone Ontario. Such later developments as Canada’s Western and Atlantic provinces are either conflated with the province’s increasingly megalithic perception of Ontario or else ignored altogether. When speaking of les Anglais et les autres, Quebec nationalists are referring to either Anglo Quebecers, English Canadians, or citizens of the United States. In contemporary Québécois discourse, these words fulfill a function analogous to that of les Anglo-Saxons in 20th century French commentary. They are laced with

6 From Rwanda to Russia, from Bosnia to Afghanistan, from India to Belgium, this is a process which is currently being repeated all over the world. At a time when international conflicts number nil, internecine feuds are counted by the dozen. Every single separated member of the former Soviet bloc, for instance, seems to be resuming independent political life from the exact point where it left off decades or centuries ago. If the lessons of the late 20th century have taught us anything, it is surely that empires act primarily as freezing agents, entombing their constituent parts like insects in amber until such time as a political thaw permits them to resume their interrupted journey.

7 Of necessity, in years past, these wide-ranging terms also embraced the United Kingdom, although, in the wake of the British Empire’s effective dissolution, the spectre of rule by a foreign crown has long since receded from the forefront of nationalist discontents.
the bitterness that inevitably follows in the wake of nine centuries' worth of overt and covert warfare between two mutually jealous language groups. Sadly, it seems most unlikely that they will be "defanged" in the immediate future.

As we saw in Chapter Four, the so-called Rest of Canada plays a very minor role in the Québécois fictional universe. On the rare occasions when they do appear, the principal dramaturgical function of the country's anglophone provinces is to remind French Canadian viewers/readers of the loss of authenticity that automatically ensues when one is cut off from one's social and ethnic roots. The overall effect is akin to that of examining a seventeenth-century survey map of central Africa. In both cases, most of the terrain would have to be marked "Terra Incognita".

America, on the other hand, is slightly more present and variegated. Florida, being a favourite Québécois vacation spot, appears fairly often, even if native Floridians do not. French Canadian writers and filmmakers are also starting to evince the same half-horrified, half-ecstatic fascination with Southern California that French and Italian intellectuals have been reflecting for the past-quarter century. New England, on the other hand, is the location of the dark, Satanic mills which claimed so many unemployed habitants in the late nineteenth-century; it is also the ancestral home of one of la belle province's very few U.S.-born local heroes, Jack Kerouac.

For obvious reasons, France is somewhat more of a concrete presence in the Québécois imagination than is any member of the Anglo-Saxon "confederation." Despite the feelings of betrayal and abandonment which the Bourbon withdrawal of the 1760s inevitably
engendered, on a deep emotional level Quebec still clearly wants to make a favourable impression on its delinquent “parent”. Obviously, this is what lies behind so much of the never-ending debate over which country speaks the true, the original French. By the same token, overseas success in France is regarded with a somewhat wary eye. While national pride is visibly taken in the acclaim which Félix Leclerc and Robert Charlebois received in _le vieux pays où Rimabaud est mort_ (to quote the title of Jean-Pierre Lefebvre’s memorable movie about a _habitant_ on pilgrimage in the land of his ancestors) the dubbing of _joual_-laced films into “standard” French still raises nationalist hackles.

On the other hand, when talking about France and the French, some Québécois commentators, despite their unhappy historical heritage, are uncommonly able, unbiased and astute. Paris-based _La Presse_ correspondent Louis-Bertrand Robitaille is a prime example of this cosmopolitan type. In _Et Dieu créa les Français_, a collection of his articles published in 1995, the author pronounced fairly and knowingly on everything from Euro-Disney to Philippe Djian’s awkward position in the sometimes stuffy world of Parisian letters. On the subject of Anglo-French relations, he shrewdly wrote, “Il n’est pas impossible que les Français et les Anglais—éternellement et parfois méchamment rivaux—aient en commun ce qu’on pourrait appeler banalement un gros complexe de supériorité, qui se révèle de moins en moins fondé à mesure que s’éloignent les souvenirs glorieux du Grand Siècle ou de l’Empire” (Robitaille). One can see how Robitaille’s Québécois background, with its _joual/_anglais rivalries—a perfect working model of the “900 Years War” writ small—ideally fitted him to make such an
observation. The author seems to approach his ancestral homeland with neither fear nor favour: "Le fait d'être Québécois n'est plus ni un atout ni un obstacle...et les Québécois qui débarquent aujourd'hui sont simplement confrontés, comme tous les autres, venus de province ou de Suisse, à un système commercial qui a étendu son empire sur la totalité des variétés...." (Robitaille 279 - 280). Fond as he is of his new locale, the author in no way thinks of it as “home”: "...la France n'est pas seulement différente du Québec ou de l'Amérique du Nord—c'est une autre planète. Qui, dans les domaines les plus importants de la vie quotidienne...fonctionne sur les critères complètement étrange. Notez que souvent les Français pensent que c'est l'Amérique qui n'est pas normale" (Robitaille 60 - 61). While he might not write as elegantly about foreign lands as do his near-contemporaries Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard, Louis-Bertrand Robitaille is at least as clear-eyed as they. Offhand, it is hard to think of a literary traveller who sees things less “fantastically” than he.

Nevertheless, despite Robitaille's splendid example, it must be admitted that the overwhelming bulk of Québécois fiction and filmmaking is still intensely introspective, its creators intent on exploring local themes in local ways. Far more than the 19th century Italian nationalists who first framed the idea, they are truly intent on doing things themselves.

In many ways, “fantasy America” is becoming a thing of the past. As the world grows ever more colonized by Hollywood, Tin Pan Alley, and Wall Street, the difference between Self and “Other” becomes increasingly tenuous. Marlon Brando highlighted this fact in a recent interview he gave to Studio magazine: "J'adore la France parce que pour
moin c'était un bastion de liberté après la guerre—Tout cela a changé maintenant. C'est amusant parce que les Français ont longtemps taquiné les Américains en disant que nous vivions dans une société de trucs et de gadgets. Aujourd'hui, ce sont les Français qui vivent de trucs et de gadgets...." (D'Yvoire 104).

How true. Of what use is the paradigm of a “fantasy America” in a Europe where the tallest skyscraper in France emerges from the antique architecture of Montparnasse, where young people prefer Michael Jackson to Edith Piaf, where housing estates surround every major city, where American TV dominates every European network and Hollywood mega-productions have first dibs on every European screen, where Asia’s rising economic giants are increasingly seen to be replacing the U.S. conglomerates of yore, where even the size of cars no longer serves to meaningfully differentiate the New World from the Old? It is a deracinated, cosmopolitan world wherein an English-language Polish writer like Jerzy Kosinski can play a practical joke (in the form of a naughty cameo-à-clef in Blind Date) on a francophone poet such as “President Léopold Sédar Senghor” of Senegal, who also happened to be Kosinski’s translator in that country” (Sloan 177).

Thanks to supersonic jet travel, the fax machine, and the Internet, literary travellers can move abroad almost instantly. Of what use are such old-fashioned commodities as national identity in an ahistorical, trans-national universe? Why not give up the fight immediately and accept the fact that no country can realistically expect to be more than a wholly owned subsidiary of Disney/Time/Warner/Mitsubishi? And how can a place or region
be considered real or fantastical when 99% of the things are virtual rather than actual?

There are no easy answers to these questions. As Eric Hobsbawn wrote in the last paragraph of his history of the "short" twentieth-century, "We do not know where we are going" (Hobsbawm 585). The Cold War is over, leaving only one military super-power on the field, but a host of economic competitors. Politically, the world is fracturing, even as humanity's true centres of power devolve from nation states to multinational corporations. Armed conflict is now waged almost exclusively between rival cities, tribes and provinces, primarily because the very concept of country has begun to seem irrelevant on a planet where clan loyalties are burgeoning everywhere.

Nevertheless, as we saw earlier, certain forms of sentiment and humour remain indestructibly national, so they would appear to provide most of the bedrock for de facto local resistance to the curiously interlinked trends of globalization and xenophobia (a bizarre "marriage", it must be admitted, since the combination strongly implies an unholy union between Herder's concept of ancestral culture and Finkielkraut's belief in universal Enlightenment truths; the contradictions of the modern world have resulted in some very strange bedfellows). There are, however, more subtle signs of international non-compliance. In a 1997 article entitled "Dix ans en chiffres", Studio magazine underlined some of these differences: "Cinq contre cinq le box-office depuis 1987, renvoie dos à dos films français et américains. Mais, à y regarder de plus près, les goûts du public français ne s'accordent pas vraiment
avec ceux du public américain. Dans ce Top 10 France, on ne retrouve que deux films présents dans le Top 10 Etats-Unis sur la même période....” (119).

In other words, even Americanized French viewers prefer to construct an imaginary America that is radically different from the one accepted by their U.S. contemporaries. What’s more, it is entirely possible that U.S. cultural influence has already peaked, and will soon be challenged on an increasing number of fronts for cultural supremacy. When all these factors are borne in mind, it seems overwhelmingly likely that the America believed in by the average Frenchman, Italian, and Québécois will remain “fantastical”, no matter how much accurate data is obtained, and no matter how much the traditional paradigms might change. It is, after all, highly likely that most Americans live in a Fantasy America, just as most Frenchmen occupy a Fantasy France, most Italians a Fantasy Italy, and most Québécois a Fantasy Nouvelle France. In spite of everything, Francis Fukuyama is empirically wrong. History will progress, and since the etymology of the world also implies story, it will be imaginative. Fantasy America—like Fantasy Egypt, Fantasy Greece, and Fantasy Rome—will almost certainly survive long after the nation itself has ceased to be.
Works Cited


“Coltellata al cuore. Uccisa albergatrice.” Corriere della Sera 21 May 1996:


Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth...*


Martel, Réginald and Yves Boisvert (Eds.). Québec Kérouac


---. *La Luna e i falò*. Turin: Einaudi, 1951.


---. “Les nouvelles vagues face au monde réel.” *Cahiers*


Appendix One:
Who's Afraid of Jerry Lewis?
Not us! Not us!
By Bérénice Reynaud
Translated by Mark Harris

Backed by the American Museum of the Moving Image (AMMI), New York film professor Scott Bukatman finally found the courage to mount a Jerry Lewis retrospective (November 11 - December 9, 1988) which included not only the films about and by Jerry, but also his TV broadcasts, unseen and unseeable since the 1940s and '50s. This seemed the perfect opportunity to attempt to resolve one of the troubling cultural enigmas of our times. Ever since I moved to the United States, there's always been someone to ask smirkingly, "Why do the French love Jerry Lewis?" I therefore inverted the question, and asked a cross-section of viewers and non-viewers, "What makes Americans think that the French do love Jerry Lewis?" The answers ran from gags to paranoia, with nervous allusions paid to the "shameful secrets" of the American psyche.

"The French must love impotent men. Or else they're attracted by his sense of rhythm, his physicality." (Filmmaker, female)

"The French are crazy about Jerry Lewis because Brigitte Bardot's cat watches his films at breakfast." (Conceptual artist, male)

"Because they love Nana Mouskouri." (Archivist, male)
“On television one night, there was this comic who did Jerry Lewis imitations, saying ‘In France, I am a god.’ That’s the first time I ever heard that.” (Viewer, female)

“In America, you grow up knowing that the French love Jerry Lewis, but why? It’s an enigma.” (Spectator, male)

“It’s because he does these completely loopy things. The French have the same nutty sense of humour.” (Projectionist, female)

“It’s because he represents the little fellow in all of us, the fellow who struggles to survive. His films are all about nice guys, not bastards.” (Aging groupie, female)

“For me, he’s always been the King of Comedy. He does these really strange things, everyone is shocked, but when you look more closely you realize that he’s the one who’s normal.” (Museum guard, male)

“No American over the age of 14 can stand a Jerry Lewis movie. When I was in Paris, everyone I met hated his guts.” (Film student, male)

“I was raised by a father who forbade us to watch Jerry Lewis. Years later I broke up with a pal who wanted to spend Labour Day weekend watching the Jerry Lewis Telethon.” (Anthropology student, female)

“He’s anti-culture, he picks on easy targets (professors, intellectuals, ugly people). His comedy is a perversion of genuine slapstick humour (Chaplin, the Marx Brothers). Why do the French love him? It’s one of those French eccentricities.” (Children’s author, male)
"In France, all Jerry Lewis movies are dubbed. They don't respond to the same films that we see here. Perhaps they're funnier." (Viewer, male)

"I read in a magazine that Frenchmen prefer their actors to be fairly ugly, with crooked mouths (Gabin, Belmondo, Depardieu). Perhaps they like Jerry Lewis's facial elasticity." (Translator, male)

"It's one of those things that make us question the mental health of Europeans. The nation that invented brioche should hold a more sensible opinion of Jerry Lewis." (Video artist, male)

"Americans are convinced that the French love of Jerry Lewis is nothing but a means of affirming their cultural superiority, and of mocking that which is most stupid in American culture." (Spectator, male)

"It allows us not to take the French too seriously. They have Sartre, existentialism, and all that, BUT they also love Jerry Lewis and Clint Eastwood. That brings them down to earth." (Organizer of the retrospective, male)

"Doubtless it has something to do with American sexual repression. We believe the French to be more liberated in that area, and this permits them to see in Jerry what we refuse to see in ourselves. But it's also a joke: 'You see what dumb assholes the French are? They think they're so cultivated, and yet they like Jerry Lewis!' This is more of a reflection of what we think about the French than of what we think about Jerry Lewis." (Publicist for a symphony orchestra, male)

"American tourists are convinced that Europeans detest them. Jerry Lewis is a kind of exaggerated version of the American tourist,
he is genuinely perceived in this manner by Europeans, or at least this is the way we fear he is perceived.” *(Radio producer, female)*

“During the 1950s, Lewis toyed with something that Americans were not ready to recognize in themselves. They did not understand why the French loved Jerry Lewis, this symbol of their weakness, of their immaturity.” *(Film prof, male)*

“I don’t find it particularly strange that the French love Jerry Lewis. He’s our onscreen alter ego, and he manifests certain characteristics which we hesitate to acknowledge in ourselves.” *(Video artist, female)*

“Yes, I find it ridiculous that the French love Jerry Lewis, but that isn’t necessarily a criticism. In an exaggerated fashion, he creates painful, embarrassing situations, which he hammers in harder and harder, to the point where audiences must finally identify with them.” *(Bookseller, female)*

“In the United States, it is the children, not the adults, who like Jerry Lewis. In France, he must seem exotic, and I imagine that the sentimentality in his films appears less self-evident and mortifying than it does here. Thanks to their cinematic culture, the French see Lewis as the legitimate descendant of Keaton and Chaplin. In the U.S., conversely, TV has made Lewis anachronistic.” *(Film critic, male)*

“Lewis and Frank Tashlin represent the survival of slapstick, of physical comedy, which is also a European tradition. There are great similarities between Jerry and Jacques Tati.” *(Film prof, male)*

“His unique manner of opening up a scene in his television programs and films *[The Ladies’ Man]* influenced Godard in *Tout va bien.*” *(Writer, male)*
"Lewis employs elements of popular culture borrowed from commercials and cartoons, which are not recognized as such in America. If, for example, one finds Lewis gags in Godard's movies, it's because they constitute a sort of critique of capitalism, of the department store." (Film prof, female)

"Initially you have a hard time appreciating Jerry Lewis. At first you might say he's OK but strictly for kids, like Pee Wee Herman. What's more, he plays the little boy himself. It's only after we become familiar with his work that we start to understand his art. As for myself, I learned a lot from watching Lewis in Cinderfella: I could understand better what was happening on the screen, grasp the Lewis techniques which had escaped me when I was younger. He comes from a showbiz tradition that's very close to music. He has a very musical sense of improvisation which will brook no constraints; if he can pump a little more magic into the inspiration of the moment, nothing on earth will stop him. I've done a fair amount of TV, and often worked with Sammy Davis, Jr., to whom he was very close. He and Sammy were interested in everything, they wanted to try everything. They'd hire people for a gig, then tell them what to do. Their ideas were always the best. To work with them was a real American education. We were too ready to do things the usual way, which cost us plenty. Why do the French love Jerry Lewis? Beyond the conventions, you can see in his work all these nuances which transcend language, all these wonderful little things..." (Musician, male, member of Count Basie's orchestra from 1951 till 1963)
Appendix Two:

Pity for John Wayne

By Boris Vian

Translated by Mark Harris

The time has come to ask ourselves if certain stars don't deserve statues; in any event, I would like to see one raised to John Wayne, the "Joan of Arc" of Hollywood, that expiatory victim of trans-Atlantic "Bishop Cauchons", a bitter hero predestined to ignominious death by asphyxiation in the holds of disembowelled ships spitted on pointed rocks at the bottom of the sea...

Here are two films: Reap the Wild Wind and The Wake of the Red Witch—the second being better than the first by virtue of its script but—alas!—in black-and-white. Here are two films (there must be thousands of others) where John Wayne, painfully squeezed for various reasons into an unsafe diving suit, succumbs to ruptured air hoses seventy feet below sea level. In The Wild Wind, it must be admitted, his role is somewhat equivocal; he's a nice guy but a bit of a bounder, so you know he's going to die in accordance with the moral imperatives of Tinsel Town. In The Wake, on the other hand, one roots for him from beginning to end, but he dies anyway. It's very suspicious. Let's investigate further.

Bad things always happen to John Wayne. From the moment he appears onscreen, with that thin-lipped gob of his and those docker-sized deltoids, your blood runs cold as you say, "It isn't possible, he's
not going to make it.” One hopes a little, against all the odds, but make it he doesn’t. This is really, really bad....

Absolutely anything can happen to Errol Flynn: Errol Flynn will always wriggle out of it. If he were to play Mayerling, the suicide would be botched sure as shooting, and if MGM assigned him the part of the immortal French Maid—for which he’s every bit as physically qualified as that horse of a Bergman—he would be swept up by a squadron of the King’s musketeers while strolling to the torture chamber. But John Wayne? In the same role, John Wayne would be burned at the stake at Domrémy in front of everybody, during the first reel, on the charge of “buttery”. Or else he would stumble into the moat at Orleans, his diving suit riddled with crossbow bolts. He would be dead, strangled by an octopus in his bath, scalped by his barber, or poisoned by his 11 month old son... One thing is certain: John Wayne is doomed.

And from here on out it seems impossible to imagine a scenario from which John Wayne could ever emerge unscarred; “they” will always get him. It doesn’t matter if John Wayne’s intentions are good or bad. Replace Bing Crosby with John Wayne in Going My Way, and you’ll find the father of one of his flock, a notorious communist, cutting him down with a burst from his typewriter. If John Wayne played Napoleon, the bridge at Arcole would crumble beneath his feet.

The most terrible thing of all is that “they” don’t amount to very much in the tragic destiny of John Wayne. In reality, “they” can’t save him. I’m sure that a gut-bustingly funny script, consigned to John Wayne, would by means of leprous, humid, and altogether suspect auto-alteration, transform itself into a sad, sordid, brutal story where John
Wayne—immaculate apostle, chaste, pure, innocent and sublime—would die in spite of everything.

Does such a thing as the evil eye exist, then, in cinema?

John Wayne has the evil bullseye.
Appendix Three:

Hypocrisy American Style

By Luc Moulet

Translated by Mark Harris

If I like E.T., it is because Steven Spielberg—who, at first glance, appears to be situating himself within the tradition of supernatural cinema—simultaneously, almost surreptitiously, offers us a rare and meticulous glimpse of ordinary American life with the aid of a family that seems average in every respect, closer to Frederick Wiseman or Raymond Depardon than to Issac Asimov or Philip K. Dick. One anticipates judging the film on the basis of its richness of invention, imagination and play. And then, as a bonus, without paying a dime extra, one is provided with an infinitely more precious slice of life which one cannot even criticize, simply because one wasn’t expecting it. One is caught short, disarmed; one is left with the feeling of having discovered something, of being oneself the film’s author or inventor—and of a first class neorealist film to boot! One had expected one thing, and—disinterest in robotics helps here—one got something ten times better. E.T. is nothing but a red herring or clue. American hypocrisy is marvellous.

E.T. is not necessarily the ideal example: an American who lives this cinematic reality on a daily basis might well find it less intriguing than would a Frenchman. It’s also far from certain that Spielberg anticipated this reading from a distant observer.
A film such as Fritz Lang's *Beyond a Reasonable Doubt* is, in this respect, much purer: we believe that we're watching an argument against capital punishment, and then, at the very end, we find out that it's the opposite, or, at the very least, something else again.

The Americans are specialists in this activity.

As early as 1851, *Moby Dick* initially presented itself as a forbidding technical account of the profession of fishing as practiced in various maritime countries—a lousy critique and a dead weight in terms of sales. But this hypocritical anchorage in the most physical form of objectivity laid the foundation for a refined metaphysical architecture. In similar fashion, in Chandler's *Lady in the Lake* and Dashiell Hammett's tough neighbourhoods, the investigation's goal is not primarily to reveal the killer's identity, but, rather, to paint a broad canvas of America, a portrait composed of the various personalities standing behind the doors upon which Spade and Marlowe are obliged to knock.

Here it is a question of insidious changes (invisible for sure) along the dominant line of interest. More aggressive, easier too, is the switch in genre during the course of the film: with *Madam Satan* (DeMille), *History is Made at Night* (Borzage), and *Made for Each Other* (Cromwell), we move from pure indoor comedy—matinée and sometimes vaudeville—to the disaster film with aerial or maritime options, resulting (at least in the first two examples) in an unexpected redoubling of impact, due in large part to the element of surprise. Doubtless it's here that we find a somewhat dubious aesthetic, created by producers who, believing the initial comedy to be too slight, shamelessly added an entirely new ingredient to the formula.
In Howard Hawks's twin flicks, Sergeant York and Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, we participate in an even more perverse doubling up. These two film strips have, at the same time, an entirely conventional meaning, plus (a little like pentimento in painting) a critical significance that is totally contradictory.

I recently saw Scorsese's Color of Money, featuring two superstars who were paid a bundle, Paul Newman and Tom Cruise, their names occupying the greater part of the poster. Okay, so these stars, particularly at the beginning of the picture, do not stand out from the rest of the cast: the editing does not privilege them. At first we see the sum total of situations and actors, most of whom are little-known. We are left with the feeling that we are taking part in a newscast, which increases our belief in the reality of what we are seeing. And the contrary fictional weight which these two sacred cows carry is seemingly rubbed out by their discreet intrusion into an apparently non-fictional universe. That's the same trick employed by John Ford in a number of films (The Long Voyage Home), Raoul Walsh (A Lion in the Streets, Dark Command), and, in general, by Warner Brothers Studios during their heyday. An astonishing double play: the public goes to the films because of their stars; it finds them, but only with difficulty. Thus it participates more directly in the film. And the stars gain a supplementary advantage. In Cimino's Heaven's Gate, not only do we have a hard time picking out the stars, particularly during the final battle, but—even more acutely—we don't clearly comprehend what is going on or what the film's deeper meaning might be—assuming there is one.
One could say much the same about Two-Lane Blacktop (Monte Hellman) or—once again we return to Hawks—The Big Sleep, whose incomprehensible storyline was written in part by William Faulkner. This is the same Faulkner who, during the course of his long career as novelist, never desisted from setting traps in his texts so that his readers would have a hard time figuring out what was going on, at a time when everyone else was doing the contrary. The most famous example of this is the corncob rape in Sanctuary. To be sure one has understood, it is necessary to read over the lines in question several times (something which was not allowed in cinema, at least not until the miracle of video cassettes).

This technique can perhaps be explained by the need to escape from the censor’s thunderbolts; but one finds it again in earlier novels such as The Sound and the Fury and As I Lay Dying, which did not run the same risk.

One can see here, in all these hypocritical techniques, the mark of a puritan civilization. Puritanism created a system so rigid (morally, sexually, aesthetically, economically: scriptural passages, diverse codes, Prohibition, Hollywood, etc.) that it must inevitably be transgressed against, and this transgression, of necessity, must be subterranean. Protestants found this to be the cult most adaptable to artistic matters. Moreover, most screenwriters will tell you that the essential thing is to create a difference: for example, the writer knows more than the viewer who knows more (or less) than the protagonist. The ideal genre thus becomes the crime story, which, throughout the history of the novel, has long remained the private preserve of puritan, Anglo-Saxon countries.
Faulkner's importance is self-explanatory: he was the first to fuse the two profound meanings of this aesthetic of evasion—that is to say, its puritan impregnation (with the usual panoply of sin, remorse, claustrophia and the tomb) and its existential freight—the complex and confusing facts preventing an outpouring of sensuality. It's more ancient than modern. That which is hidden emerges from calculation, while calculation emerges from chaos.

It is this existential element which is dominant in the films of Hellman and Cimino, as it is in Mann's *Man of the West*, without entirely excluding, by the way, that which is wilfully hidden, since these films pretend to belong—quite unsuccessfully, as a matter of fact—to a genre, the western or road movie.

The strength of the American cinema is therefore linked to this omnipresence of the hidden, which makes the French cinema seem misguided. Our filmmakers don't hide behind a system, which doesn't exist here, or behind a genre (with the exception of Gance). They work in the vast morass of psychological drama. Almost all of them eschew burlesque, swashbuckling and adventure movies, porno—everything, in fact, except the crime story. They clearly delineate their subject matter, and do not diverge from it during the course of the film. From the outset, they emphasize the importance of their stars. No double-play. A cinema too square, too obvious....

One does find certain brilliant exceptions, such as Renoir's *La Nuit du carrefour*, or the films of Jean-Luc Godard (himself of Protestant origin), who play with the promise of their titles (*Pierrot le fou, King Lear, Numéro deux*). The latest such exception is called *J'ai pas sommeil*.
This film relies entirely on the hidden. Claire Denis says as little as possible about the tangent of her intrigue, of the relations between cause and effect. Even a little less than the strict minimum: she throws her viewer a baited hook. It’s up to him to bite or not, to deceive himself eventually, to work in any case. Out of twenty examples, I’ll take this one: towards the end of the film, the protagonist, driving in her car, notices a man at the steering wheel of another vehicle. Without apparent reason, when the light turns red, she deliberately slams into him, totally wrecking the machine. The man refuses to lodge a complaint, pretending—against the advice of onlookers—to be the one at fault. Is this a doubly gratuitous act? Not very likely. Revenge against an unknown person whose previous misdeeds were cut out during the editing process? Again not very probable. Or of the man, making propositions and following her down the street, as one of my female friends suggests? Or, as I think when reflecting upon the moments which follow this scene, of an ex-lover interviewed an hour earlier, who promised a job to our heroine then failed to show up? After inquest and re-vision (this is a most rewarding tactic), my intuition seems to have been confirmed.

Any old hack could have avoided uncertainty by decked out the ex-lover in a suit or a memorable accessory, or by making him speak in a highly distinctive accent. But, he would thereby have destroyed our disquieting participation in the rhythms of a wonderfully rich film.