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Paris, city of shadows: French crime cinema before the New Wave

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Scholarly attention to the French New Wave has obscured 1950s French film, a dynamic popular cinema derived in part from the crime thriller, or *policier*, genre. This article provides a revisionist historical approach to the 1950s, analyzing the neglected significance both of the policier and commercial French cinema itself. It considers the policier's history and re-emergence in the mid-1950s, its generic constitution, and its depiction of underworld Paris as a transitional site of urban modernity. The essay also explores the policier as a catalyst within 1950s Franco-American popular culture, situating crime film as an overlooked source for the criticism and filmmaking of the *Cahiers du cinéma* collective.

Keywords: policier; crime film; French New Wave; commercial cinema; Paris on-screen; 1950s France

From film textbooks to film classrooms, the French New Wave is a beloved moment in cinema history. It is a truism now that Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, and their colleagues 'taught an entire generation to experiment with the rules of storytelling [and] rethink conventional film budgets and production norms' (Neupert 2002, xv). But what of the pre-New Wave generation? As this article will argue, the intensive scrutiny of the New Wave has led to an almost complete neglect of 1950s French film, a vibrant popular cinema linked closely to the crime thriller, or *policier* genre. By the mid-1950s, in fact, the policier was in rapid ascendancy, attractive to filmmakers and film-goers alike. This was a crime cinema with rich historical roots; its plots and aesthetic designs were stark yet oftentimes lyrical; it dialogued with Hollywood and Americana; it showcased France's leading performers; and its settings, most cinematic of all, captured the urban underworlds of 1950s Paris, a city in the throes of modernization. But besides re-evaluating the actual films, and the forgotten commercial cinema they represent, this essay will also suggest that the policier informed much of the transnational film culture of France in the 1950s and beyond. So seminal was the format, moreover, that it would also influence – in a history largely effaced by the high art rhetoric of the 1960s vanguard – the theories and practices of the New Wave directors themselves.

Emphatically, this is not the orthodox view. Consensus has the 1950s as a decade of stagnation, a graveyard for creative ambition. Long considered the ominous lull before the New Wave storm, the decade is by some distance the least studied, least revived period in French film history. Traced to its source, this

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historical and contemporary disregard clearly derives from the work of François Truffaut. A self-styled 'young thug of journalism',[1] Truffaut was merely the most visible, and persistent, of a new generation of cinéphiles who came of age in the 1950s, intent on razing the industry to reinvent French cinema for a younger, ciné-literate audience, and pave the way for their own work as filmmakers. Initially in print, subsequently on-screen, Truffaut was, quite simply, 'set on confronting the establishment' (Corless and Darke 2007, 99). More specifically, Truffaut targeted the commercial mainstream, or heart of 1950s French film, which he notoriously labeled 'le cinéma du papa' – daddy's cinema. As became evident, Truffaut had patricide on his mind.

Truffaut's approach hinged on a strident, near-constant assault of what he took to be the cinematic status quo. Increasingly confident in his tactics, Truffaut became a prolific member of France's burgeoning 1950s film criticism scene, notably in the pages of *Arts* and *Cahiers du cinéma*. Truffaut's agenda was set from his first major publication, 'A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema', which appeared in the January 1954 issue of *Cahiers* after more than 18 months' preparation, and several enforced revisions by André Bazin, Truffaut's mentor. In this deeply patronizing essay, still Truffaut's best known, he diagnosed a 'Tradition of Quality' within 1950s French cinema, which conveyed to the masses their 'habitual dose of smut, non-conformity and facile audacity' (Truffaut 1976, 230). These 'Quality' films, Truffaut sneered, were overly reliant on uncinematic scriptwriters, especially Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost, whose input overshadowed the director's, and did so, moreover, by substituting literary fidelity with tawdry content. Although his manifesto drew upon only 'ten or twelve' films among France's annual output – a scandalously low sample – Truffaut offered this Tendency as a deep-seated contaminant or industrial epidemic. From this skewed summary, Truffaut opined that there was a crisis of ambition in French cinema.[2]

Although Truffaut's was just one of many critical voices alternately agitated and excited about the state of 1950s French film, it is his which has endured. While the actual films have languished in obscurity, most unavailable and unwatched for decades, Truffaut's Tendency has acquired the status of unmediated truth. Today, over 50 years since the model gained currency – a triumph of rhetorical bombast over objective analysis – its findings are ubiquitous. The pejorative Quality label, now an unthinking historical shorthand, is still applied indiscriminately to 1950s French cinema: to films with major stars, to successful films, to films based upon popular genres, to films with showy production design or high budgets. Roy Armes's *French Cinema*, for example, calls its whole chapter on 1951–57 'The Tradition of Quality' and relies exclusively on Truffaut's dismissive claims (Armes 1985, 146–68). Similarly, Peter Lehman argues that French cinema is important historically, 'With the exception of the years from World War II until the appearance of the New Wave' (1981, 2). In France, Philippe d'Hugues's tone is also scathing; he litters his 1950s survey with adjectives borrowed from Truffaut – 'outmoded', 'ancient', 'stifling' – and describes the whole pre-New Wave period (a very biased historiographical category) as one of terminal decline (2000, 89–99). More recently still, the same model re-emerges, unchallenged, in a monograph

whose opening paragraph accepts but does not interrogate 'the categories that have long been considered representative of the [1950s] era, the "tradition of quality" and "*auteur* cinema"' (Mayne 2007, 1). Aside from footnotes reserved for isolated mavericks – Jean-Pierre Melville, Henri-Georges Clouzot, Jacques Tati, and Robert Bresson[3] – there is agreement, it seems, about the so-called Quality of the 1950s.[4]

Revision is long overdue for this enduring Truffaut model. Firstly, the notion of French film quality – which, contrary to accepted wisdom, did *not* originate with Truffaut – is more complex than traditional histories report. Although the *qualité* concept had been in regular use since the late 1930s as a legal and industrial criterion (Andrew 2006, 45, 49), it re-emerged in the 1950s within polarized critical discourse. In 1951, André Bazin set things in motion by analyzing the *fonds de soutien*, a government fund which since 1948 had levied a 10.9% tax on ticket sales, then distributed revenues according to the receipts of any applicant producer's last venture. Bazin saw this process as an obstacle to 'film quality ... [as] the way in which the system of aid is currently implemented means that the least risky projects get funded, in other words, mediocrity' (1951, 6). In 1953, however, a year before Truffaut's account, Jean-Pierre Barrot characterized the tradition of quality in broader yet entirely favorable terms. Barrot actually celebrated the profession – and 1950s filmmakers like Jacques Becker, Henri Calef, Jean Delannoy, and Jacques Feyder – for 'upholding a style, of a tradition of quality in French production – they contribute generously, eminent and conscientious artists, all impeccable artisans' (1953, 37).

So why did Truffaut's contempt, rather than Barrot's approval, eventually define the tradition of quality? One reason is that the relentless devaluation of 1950s French film was so integral to the *Cahiers* collective, whose subsequent works as filmmakers augmented this critical agenda. While *Cahiers* outlasted and out-maneuvered its more cautious rivals in print form, it also confirmed its own dire critical prognoses with its spate of New Wave successes, on-screen, in the early 1960s. In both capacities, moreover, attacks on traditional cinema were an efficient means for self-promotion and, as Antoine de Baeque notes, 'a way of consolidating the *Cahiers* family ... In this way *Cahiers* was part of a vogue at a time when polemics were the crux of intellectual debate' (qtd. in Gimello-Mesplomb 2006, 146). History, after all, is written by the winning side.

Doubts have only very recently been cast on the dominance of the Truffaut model. Robert Sklar's 2002 *A World History of Film* rather ruefully concedes its lack of knowledge about 1950s French cinema, 'which certainly requires some correction' (2002, 334). Jean-Loup Passek's collection, *D'un cinéma l'autre: notes sur le cinéma français des années cinquante*, provides a neutral, modestly progressive, compilation of industrial analyses (1988). Richard Neupert, stronger still, warns openly against Truffaut's 'often subjective perspective [that] should never be accepted on face value ... many of the movies condemned rather shamelessly by Truffaut are among the most interesting titles of the late 1940s and early 1950s' (2002, 32). And Neupert echoes Pierre Billard, who argues that, 'What we should object to is the untested reprise of [Truffaut's and *Cahiers*'] dated and polemical arguments thirty and forty years later, as if they represented valuable historical

facts' (qtd. in Neupert 2002, 32). Textual evidence for a less subjective counter-appraisal of the 1950s has not, however, been readily forthcoming. As Phil Powrie and Keith Reader summarize succinctly, 'Such neglect, while comprehensible, is scarcely justifiable' (2002, 16).

Undeniably, divisive issues surfaced in postwar French cinema, noted in journals as disparate as the leftist *Positif*, and *Cinéma*, the official publication of the Fédération français des ciné-clubs. There was alarm that once-illustrious classical directors – Marcel Carné, Jean Renoir, Réné Clair, Jean Grémillon, among others – were decreasingly acclaimed in France and abroad. Controversial also was the statistic that yearly only about 10% of French films were made by first-timers (Gimello-Mesplomb 2006, 147). Compounding this unease were economic factors, especially changes to 1950s film-going, as younger audiences, in particular, abandoned movie theaters. The actual data, however, mark this drop in viewers as a gradual slide rather than a collapse. (The rise of a leisure, consumer culture in France – including increased ownership of televisions and cars by 1960[5] – was a decisive cultural context here [Neupert 2002, 3–44].) And the sense of a decline in French film-going actually belies a solid recovery made between 1952 and 1957, when 52.1 million viewers *returned* to cinemas, a 14.5% boost. The real fall-off began later than is generally proclaimed: in 1963, as the New Wave's popularity waned, when annual cinema attendance fell below 300 million for the first time, a level France has never regained (Table 1).

Industrial critiques have also – often disproportionately – underpinned hostility about 1950s French cinema. Certainly, the period saw extensive re-organizations of the profession, and new recruitment regulations linked to the Institut des hautes études cinématographiques (IDHEC), the national film school, whose pedagogical statutes enforced trade protocols and limited the prospects of would-be innovators (Palmer 2007). A more protracted course of entry to the industry, and limits to creative control during this indoctrination, were typical as filmmaking became more state-monitored by the mid-1950s. As Neupert points out, this sense of institutional wrangling was exacerbated by internal disputes about how government

Table 1. Film audiences in France, 1950–58.

Year	Number of admissions (in millions)
1950	370.7
1951	372.8
1952	359.6
1953	370.6
1954	382.8
1955	394.9
1956	398.9
1957	411.7
1958	371.0

Source: Centre national de la cinématographie, rapport annuel 1995.

sponsorships should be implemented. Half of the Centre national de la cinématographie's (CNC) Film Aid program, for example, initially went to remodeling movie theaters and studios, rather than actual productions (Neupert 2002, 37–8). Only in 1959, under André Malraux, minister of culture, were Aid rules revised so as to boost debutant filmmaking, and even then arguments continued about how banal these subsidized productions would be (Gimello-Mesplomb 2003).

But there is more to 1950s French cinema than upheaval and backlash. We must abandon, in particular, the enduring rationale of most 1950s histories, that the decade is notable only for a decline in France's filmmaking élite and its production of intellectual, high art cinema; the corollary, of course, being dismissal of France's commercial mainstream. Broad methodologies yield broad tendencies, and citing the Truffaut model should no longer carry the day. The pre-New Wave period was not solely the preserve of dull costume dramas – the work of those singled out by Truffaut's *ad hominem* attacks – and neither was it synonymous with creative regression. The policier provides us with a fascinating instance of a transitional cinema, but also a popular format that warrants attention in its own right.

Reconceiving 1950s French cinema: the policier

A crime baron, pursued, flees the Paris police. Scuttling through cobbled nighttime streets, flinching at shadows, he is surprised finally by the headlights of a police car. Gendarmes disembark, but the gangster quickly makes his escape, his retreating silhouette glimpsed in extreme long shot. Seconds later, though, the crook is cornered behind the walls of a ruined building, pinned down by bursts of gunfire. The end looks nigh, yet now we see him pausing to light a cigarette, luxuriating in a surreptitious drag. A sudden off-screen noise makes him turn – but it is only a small black dog, snapping angrily at his heels. Taken aback, guard down, the gangster breathes a sigh of relief and allows himself a rueful smile. However, he is distracted from an outline in the gloom behind him, a figure who emerges with cocked pistol in hand...

As this scene from near the climax of Pierre Billon's *Jusqu'au dernier* (1956) confirms, this is not a cinema of high art pretensions but rather an unabashedly popular cycle based upon a forceful visual style, thematic fatalism, deft narrative reversals, and wry touches of gallows humor. In this context our scene is emblematic of the films' appeal as well as key characteristics of the policier genre. For, contrary to Truffaut's fundamental disdain for tendencies in French cinema, the policier and its practitioners lent creative and commercial energy to the 1950s. No longer, either, should the notion of mass French cinema derived from a mainstream genre itself be thought of in pejorative terms. David Bordwell, working from a different historical case study (Hong Kong action cinema) offers a salient point of departure here. He argues:

> In entertainment film, the artisan's imagination goes to work upon well-defined norms. 'Polishing the jade', the Chinese call it. Seeking originality at all costs can lead to chaos, but quietly refining the tradition enriches the art and refines the perceiver's sensibility ... Setting oneself a craft problem and solving it in a fresh, virtuosic, but ultimately comprehensible way may be one equivalent in popular cinema for the experimental daring we find in the avant-garde. (Bordwell 2000, 13)

To Bordwell, the popular format is a craft in flux, within which individuals can fruitfully instill novelty. Barry Keith Grant similarly conceives of genre as a 'flexible tradition in which filmmakers can explore their own ideas' (2003, 27). The 1950s French policier would certainly confirm a mass cinema's capacity for constant textual reinvention, hence perennial appeal.

In French mainstream culture, moreover, 1950s crime film was informed by a long and distinguished history. Canonical texts such as Louis Feuillade's *Fantômas* (1913–14), Jean Renoir's *La Chienne* (1931), and Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques* (1955) proved the policier's credentials as a critical and box office attraction, second only to comedy in French cinema (Beylie 2000, 260). In this context, a document published by the Cinémathèque Française in 1992, during a two-month celebration of 'The History of the French Policier Film' situates the crime film genre as it re-emerged in the 1950s. The booklet declares:

> [These policier] films belong to a genre nourished by a French tradition of popular and adventurous literature. It's also a cinema of scriptwriters and dialogue artists who have examined France and recorded an account of everyday life in the Twentieth Century.[6]

Echoing this, François Guérif's *Le film policier* (1989) outlines a taxonomy of 1950s French crime film via two major sources. First, there are poetic realism and thrillers from the classical era, defined by 'muted décor, the slow pace of the enquiry, the ordinariness of the protagonists' (Guérif 1989, 48)[7] as well as doomed, usually fatal romances, and bleak yet lyrical portraits of the urban margins. Major examples are Julien Duvivier's *Pépé le moko* (1936), Jean Grémillon's *Gueule d'amour* (1937), Renoir's *La Bête humaine* (1938), and Clouzot's *L'Assassin habite au 21* (1941). Embodying this category, of course, is the iconic working class star Jean Gabin, to Guérif nothing less than 'the hero of the 1930s' (1989, 52). Seminal off-screen is the Belgian-born Georges Simenon, who as atmospheric crime novelist and prolific screenwriter created this period's most influential source texts, notably the script for Renoir's *La Nuit au carrefour* (1932), in which Pierre Renoir gave the inaugural portrayal of Maigret, Simenon's famous detective (Assouline 1997). After this wave of crime cinema, suggests Guérif, came Occupation mystery films, off-shoots of the poetic realism formula. These Guérif calls 'policier intrigues' featuring cynical and enigmatically resolved plots in which crime features as a deep-seated fault line of social dysfunction (1989, 51–2). Infamous in this frame is Clouzot's *Le Corbeau* (1943), a caustic story of blackmail in small-town France that led to its director and screenwriter, Louis Chavance, being blacklisted after the Occupation.[8] Guérif also highlights other, lesser-known 1940s policier intrigues, such as Jean Delannoy's *L'Assassin a peur de la nuit* (1942) and Jacques Becker's *Goupi mains rouges* (1943).

From such points of origin, the policier re-emerged decisively in the 1950s. The breakthrough film was Becker's *Touchez pas au grisbi* (1954), featuring Max, an aging but well-loved hoodlum played by Gabin, who frequents with a younger retinue the nightlife of the Montmartre district in Paris. Max contemplates retirement, funded by 96 kilograms of stolen gold ingots from a past robbery. Disaster ensues, though, when Josy (Jeanne Moreau), the girlfriend of Max's accomplice Riton (René Dary), reveals information about the haul to Angelo (Lino Ventura), whose rival gang tracks down the cache with spectacular consequences.

Becker was a director whose early career had showed no particular affinity for genre,[9] and his policier was a commercial surprise. In fact, *Touchez pas au grisbi* was the third biggest hit of 1954, grossing 96 million francs, with over 265,000 admissions in Paris and 4.7 million in France overall.

The policier then began a renaissance, a popular wave of stylistic and thematic tendency. Ginette Vincendeau characterizes this 1950s policier as 'a rich network of intertextual relations, ranging from imitations, reworkings and parodies, to mere allusions and, autonomously parallel forms ... The Americans may have cornered the market in gangsters, [but] they do not have a monopoly on crime and mystery' (1992a, 69). After *Touchez pas au grisbi* came Jules Dassin's *Du Rififi chez les hommes/Rififi* (1954) – which won its émigré filmmaker the Best Director Prize at Cannes in 1955, while Gabin, its star, earned Best Actor at Venice the same year – and Henri Decoin's drug thriller *Razzia sur le chnouf* (1955). So well received was this policier trio that filmmakers both within and without the industry took heed. Mainstream director Gilles Grangier, a much neglected figure in 1950s French film,[10] made a series of darker and more graphically violent policiers, such as *Le Rouge est mis* (1957) and *Échec au porteur* (1957). Contrasting with Grangier in both professional status and mode of production was Jean-Pierre Melville, industrial renegade, who rushed *Bob le flambeur/Bob the Gambler* into independent production in time for release in August 1956, capitalizing on this new policier vogue. The influence of Melville's policier,[11] today a cult film and perhaps the best known of the cycle, came as the genre diversified after 1956, occasionally using more comedic narratives. In Sacha Guitry's *Les trois font la paire* (1957), for example, Michel Simon – another senior classical performer for whom 1950s policiers provided star vehicles – portrays a whimsical detective whose antics are linked self-consciously to the idiosyncratic habits of Simenon's venerable Inspector Maigret.

Despite this proliferation, defining traits of the 1950s policier manifested as visual motifs, recalling the ancestry of French crime film while adopting features that attracted new audiences. A policier style emerged, with a *mise-en-scène* of 1950s Paris as a city of shadows, an urban milieu poised between decay and modernization. Dominant in this policier aesthetic are chiaroscuro settings and nighttime set pieces, typically created from nocturnal exteriors or day-for-night matches – a pattern in both Georges Lacombe's *Leur dernière nuit* (1953) and Edmond-T. Gréville's *Le Port du désir* (1954). More specifically, Grangier's *Gas-Oil* (1955) offers striking, representative features of policier design. The film's protagonist, Gabin again, is a truck driver hounded by the police and an underworld gang after finding a murdered thug during a midnight downpour. For the crucial discovery sequence, like Anthony Mann's *T-Men* (1947), *Raw Deal* (1948), and other John Alton-photographed B-film noirs (a key transatlantic influence), Grangier's cinematographer Pierre Montazel pares down the lighting to minimal extremes, obscuring crucial details of the image, foregrounding the purely graphic qualities of driving rain and nocturnal gloom. Outside the Paris city limits, Gabin steps from his truck and approaches the corpse, illumination given only by the vehicle's feeble headlights and Gabin's small flashlight, the beam from which

reflects off the truck's bodywork. Similar, brutally stark compositions – generically mandated but best thought of as bravura formal flourishes – punctuate the films of Jules Dassin, whose director of photography Philippe Agostini uses such set-ups to lugubrious effect, especially in the low key barroom exchanges in *Rififi*.[12]

Paris, dramatic backdrop of the 1950s policier, depicts a crumbling past but the prospect of a dynamic future. Nostalgia for the bygone counterbalances the energies of the changing present. The films showcase abrupt shifts between garishly modern, over-lit interiors and exteriors decades past their prime. In John Berry's *Ça va barder* (1954), one sequence cross-cuts from a fight scene in the gaudy lounge of the trendy Club Paradise, to a turn-of-the-century wine cellar beneath the bar, to surrounding nighttime streets lined by old-fashioned tenements. In the same way, Grangier's *Le Désordre et la nuit* (1958) juxtaposes shots of older *banlieue* with more central urban hotspots, alternating decrepit, old-fashioned street tableaux with dazzling new bars and teeming nightlife. Framing such contrasting views of urban renewal, the policier reflects pictorially the construction wave that re-shaped Paris in the mid-1950s. The catalyst for this came in 1953, when Claudius-Petit, postwar Minister for Reconstruction whose decrees had favored regeneration outside the city center, left office. A series of new planning policies subsequently took effect, encouraged by the use of faster, more efficient building equipment. Thus began an ambitious wave of high-rise *grand ensemble* housing projects and business developments, commissioned for the first time in the central 20 Paris arrondissements, which transformed the cityscape over the next decade (Jones 2004, 438–40).

Evocative location shooting – long thought of as a hallmark of the New Wave revolution – was less ubiquitous but still crucial to the 1950s policiers, amplifying this trajectory of Paris in transition. The cliché of Paris as a glamorous picture postcard dominates the New Wave critical literature, but in the policier the city was used more ambivalently, often as a site of urban corrosion, with old and new situated in unsettling proximity. The opening establishing shots of Henri Calef's *Les Violents* (1957) move along the northern banks of the Seine, a romantic *mise-en-scène* in the 1960s that here conveys dreary waterfronts, deserted pavements, and a pervasive gloom. Indeed, the abiding impression left by Paris in the 1950s policiers is of grim weather and relentless chill. When Bob (Roger Duchesne) emerges into a damp dawn at the start of *Bob le flambeur*, he does so in the manner typical of 1950s policier actors, with hunched posture, collars raised and hat brim lowered against drizzling rain and gusting wind. Not coincidentally, in the mid-1950s northern France suffered some of its coldest temperatures since World War II, which in January 1956 froze a quarter of all Paris traffic lights (Horne 2002, 387). Noting these effects when describing the 1950s policier, Claude Chabrol observed in *Cahiers du cinéma* this powerful, compelling, but not quite appealing use of Paris by night (Chabrol 1956).

So while there are few sunny snapshots of Paris landmarks – one reason why the genre neither exported nor lasted as well as the New Wave – the more disreputable, less obviously picturesque city districts still play a charismatic role in 1950s policier geography. Amidst location shots often taken from the northwest of Paris, in and around the 8th, 9th, 17th, and 18th arrondissements, the Montmartre and Pigalle

regions frequently take center stage. These are neighborhoods of brash crowds, cheap bars, criminals, and vice, yet also areas recalling historical associations with artists' studios, writers' garrets, and vibrant popular culture. Visited today, Montmartre remains a peculiar blend of romanticized tourist spots and sleazy red-light attractions – the same intermingling of the sordid and the glamorous exploited so effectively in the 1950s policier. Indeed, the iconic role of Montmartre and Pigalle was reflected by their use as trademark policier titles: in Pierre Franchi's *Les Nuits de Montmartre* (1955), Grangier's *Meutre à Montmartre* (1956) and *125 rue Montmartre* (1959), Alfred Rode's *La Môme Pigalle* (1955), and Léo Joannon's *Le Désert de Pigalle* (1957), among others. Emblematic again here is the quirky opening of *Bob le flambeur*. Its opening shots – filmed mere streets away from the first scenes of *Touchez pas au grisbi* and accompanied by Melville's deadpan voice-over – descend the viewer from the slopes of the Sacré-Coeur church to the 'hell' of the Boulevard de Clichy in Pigalle. In contrast to traditionally flattering views of Paris – the city of lights marketed by travel brochures – these policiers reveal an insider's eye for the dark, often unsafe streets of an underworld receptive to locals but not visitors. As Colin Jones observes, films like *Bob le flambeur* 'further expand[ed] the photogenic potential of the city ... present[ing] a Montmartre *noir* unsuspected by those used to postcard images of the Sacré-Coeur' (2004, 405).

Sordid settings frame sordid narratives, but thematically the 1950s policiers treat criminality in neutral or evasive ways. Ignoring social contexts – concerned citizens, wronged families, and children are notably absent – the films instead dramatize the clashes of police and gangs as professional duels, tests for group loyalty and composure on the job. Rarely do we see domestic spaces except as sites of exclusion for the policier leads, and when cafés, bars, or other communal areas appear, it is merely to situate meetings about crimes past or planned (their proprietors are likely co-conspirators or police informants). Unlike poetic realist films, which usually feature outsiders or characters unwittingly drawn into criminality, in the 1950s policier the underworld is the *whole* world. These crooks and policemen are lifers, at times interchangeably so, a fact compounded, as Vincendeau notes, by policier stars and supporting regulars – Jean Gabin, Guy Decomble, Charles Vanel, Daniel Cauchy, Lino Ventura, Paul Meurisse, and others – constantly switching sides between films (1992a, 70).

Graeme Hayes has characterized *Rififi*'s long-term policier influence as 'its portrayal of the criminal underworld as a concrete set of masculine values' (2006, 76). This male logic, however, invariably fails or as a code is terminally compromised. While women, notably a young Jeanne Moreau, are portrayed as occasionally chauvinistic, although sometimes engagingly independent catalysts for this unraveling process, the 1950s policier tends to dwell, and reflect, on purely masculine failings. Men are hindered by their petty compulsions (like Bob the Gambler obsessively playing cards while his casino heist backfires), limited by pride, hooked by their greed, isolated by their need for control. Fascinating variations on this vein of stunted masculinity underpin the 1950s policier, from *Grisbi* to more obscure films, especially those directed by Gilles Grangier. Grangier's *Le Rouge est mis*, for example, written by staple policier artisans Michel Audiard, Grangier, and

Auguste Le Breton, depicts the deteriorating bond of trust between Louis le Blond (Gabin) and his comrade Le Gitan (Lino Ventura). Following their gang's perfectly executed street hold-up, relations – inevitably – disintegrate under pressure from the police and the inherent flaws of male community. The film's finale, shot inventively (and symbolically) in a claustrophobic tenement stairwell, sums things up neatly. It hinges upon an unnecessarily violent and futile response to a failure of communication: Le Gitan's misguided, fixated belief that he has been cynically betrayed by Louis and his brother.

As *Le Rouge est mis* also shows, the narrative design of the 1950s policier hinges upon pairings or antitheses: (1) a rivalry between competing gang leaders or arch criminals; (2) a nominal relationship between a crook and a pursuing investigator; (3) a woman who leaves one flawed gangster for another (and a strain of quite frank on-screen sexuality flavors the cycle); (4) an older, senior male character mentoring an untried young apprentice. Fall-out from a heist, murder, or robbery causally motivates the action. (Melville cited *The Asphalt Jungle* [1950] as a forerunner to *Bob le flambeur*, but it was a widely influential film in France for others as well.) The pivotal crime is either depicted at length on-screen (such as the famous 23-minute jewelry store burglary in *Rififi*) or else undercut by focusing on its aftermath, memorably in *Jusqu'au dernier*, in which a villain going straight (Raymond Pellegrin) hides out in a circus while his ex-colleagues inexorably track down his stolen money. Policier dialogue decisively favors the contemporary, usually through vulgar, profane, slang-laden dialects. This scripted policier patois heightens the naturalism of the underworld; it also prefigures the less refined dialogues of the New Wave that followed. Also ingrained as a policier convention – inherited from 1930s Warner Bros. gangster films (although in France these were fatalistic plot points rather than Hays Code interventions) as well as poetic realism – is the abrupt, predestined demise of the protagonist, just one part of the wholesale violence at the narrative climax. Pellegrin in *Jusqu'au dernier* survives catastrophe repeatedly until seconds before the final fade-out, when in a bizarre reversal stray shrapnel from a distant explosion brings him down, and the film to its conclusion.

Underpinned by these features, the 1950s policier adapted apace, blending forms old and new. A reinvention of the crime serial took place, for example, a format made famous in the teens by Feuillade's *Fantômas* and *Les Vampires* (1915–16). The 1950s serial policier explored international options, however, by casting foreign leading men, as in the Lemmy Caution/Eddie Constantine cycle, begun with Bernard Borderie's *La Môme vert-de-gris* (1952) and concluded in Godard's New Wave deconstruction, *Alphaville* (1965).[13] Constantine, an émigré American who growled French with a slurred accent, portrayed Caution as a supercilious womanizer in episodic, interchangeable sequels spread over more than a decade. These included the enormously popular *Les Femmes s'en balancent* (1954) – France's fifth highest-grossing film that year, with 4.3 million admissions – as well as *Je suis un sentimental* (1955), *Vous pigez?* (1955), and *À toi de faire, Mignone* (1963). Echoing the Caution template were the fast-paced 'Slim' Callaghan films, starring Tony Wright (an English actor born in London) as a wily private detective

in Willy Rozier's *A toi de jouer, Callaghan* (1954), *Plus de whisky pour Callaghan* (1955), and *Callaghan remet ça* (1960).

Domestic lead actors also revived their stardom by inhabiting policier archetypes. In the wake of *Grisbi*, Jean Gabin's late-phase career was wholly reinvigorated, most prestigiously through his world-weary portrayal of Simenon's Jules Maigret, in *Maigret tend un piège* (1957), *Maigret et L'Affaire Saint-Fiacre* (1959), and *Maigret voit rouge* (1963). Obviously well into his 50s, Gabin cast off the stigma of his unsuccessful wartime stint in Hollywood, reinvented his star persona, and in the process became intimately associated with the policier. Stouter and apt to waddle, newly white-haired, less graceful a romantic lead, but still prone to extremes of charismatic temper on-screen, Gabin re-established himself as a virile, aggressive screen performer, even performing some of his own stunts in the action scenes of *Le Rouge est mis*. Gabin's most productive director was Gilles Grangier throughout this late career phase, with whom Gabin collaborated on no fewer than eleven films between 1953 and 1964, including notable policiers *Le Désordre et la nuit* and *Le Cave se rebiffe* (1961). This largely forgotten work with Grangier warrants the status of the better known Gabin–Julien Duvivier films of the early 1930s, such as *La Bandera* (1935) and *La Belle équipe* (1936).

In general terms, the re-popularized policier – characterized by robust stylistic and narrative nuances, alive to the flexibility of generic norms – shaped French cinema and its filmmaking community during the 1950s. A tiny minority of those involved, notably Melville, is familiar today. But the careers of an entire 'lost generation' of 1950s French filmmakers, accomplished and respected talents within the profession eventually dismissed by elitist historians and critics outside it, were defined by crime cinema. The policier provided opportunities for figures new to the trade (Borderie, Pierre Chevalier, Edouard Molinaro); it rejuvenated senior filmmakers associated with fading genres (Delannoy, Decoin, Guitry, Henri Verneuil); it gave coherence and momentum to the work of uneven younger industrial prospects (Raoul André, Grangier, Henri Lepage). Today, based on archival research, untranslated trade reference volumes, as well as the advent of more obscure policiers on DVD, a better statistical appraisal of the 1950s policier is now possible.[14]

As we can see from Table 2, the policier had a sizeable impact on 1950s French production. After *Touchez pas au grisbi* in 1954, it accounted for about a fifth of all films made in France between 1954 (when Truffaut's 'A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema' appeared) and 1957 (the year preceding the New Wave). As such, a crucial gap in traditional histories of 1950s French cinema is belatedly accounted for. And while policier production nearly tripled between 1952 and 1957, in the same period French cinema attendance overall rose by more than 52 million.

The international French culture of crime

As the policier proved seminal on-screen, so too were crime and the underworld vital points of convergence in 1950s French culture. The significance of literary sources and crime fiction, in particular, cannot be overstated. In 1947, Marcel

Table 2. Policiers produced in France, 1952–59.

Year	Total policiers produced	Total French film output	Percentage of policiers (%)
1952	7	100	7
1953	7	93	7.5
1954	12	77	15.6
1955	17	91	18.7
1956	16	107	15
1957	20	108	18.5
1958	9	95	9.5
1959	13	109	11.9

Primary source: Bessy, Chirat, and Bernard (1995, 1996).

Duhamel founded the staggeringly successful Série Noire series at the Gallimard press, a collection that reprinted, in translation, well-regarded novels such as James Hadley Chase's *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*. Série Noire was also responsible for releasing, to widespread acclaim, a number of detective stories by Chandler, Hammett, and others, which had appeared originally in American pulp magazines like *Black Mask*. More directly instrumental, as editor and mentor, Duhamel was later a key figure in commissioning the first printed works of Chester Himes, who at that time lived and worked in Paris (Becker 1975, 157; Vincendeau 1992a, 74). Under Duhamel's editorial supervision, Série Noire went on to publish many French crime writers, all of whom initially produced copy under American pseudonyms – Serge Laforest became Terry Stewart in print, for example.

There were clear cross-overs among the hard-boiled school of writing, as it was imported to France, crime fiction generally, and the French film industry of the 1950s. Duhamel, in the first instance, was a film buff and ex-professional: he had acted for directors such as Carné and Renoir,[15] and worked as a recording and dubbing artist. He would later supply an enthusiastic preface to Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton's seminal volume, *Panorama of the American Film Noir* (1955). Indigenous authors also directly influenced French filmmaking; two figures who consolidated their literary fame through the 1950s policier were Georges Simenon and Auguste LeBreton. Simenon not only created the Maigret detective series – still a leading international brand name in print and on-screen – but also wrote the novel and adapted screenplay for *Touchez pas au grisbi*, *Le Cave se rebiffe*, and many other policier hits of this period. LeBreton, in turn, wrote acclaimed source novels and screenplays for both *Razzia sur le chnouf* and *Du Rififi chez les hommes*. So successful was the latter that it went on to spawn three sequels: *Du Rififi chez les femmes* (1959; for which LeBreton wrote the source novel and script), *Du Rififi à Tokyo* (1962; script) and *Du Rififi à Paname* (1966; source novel).[16] Alert to crime author Auguste LeBreton's defining role as scriptwriter for this franchise, as well as *Razzia sur le chnouf*, Melville presciently signed him to a short-term contract to add a colloquial texture to his *Bob le flambeur* script.

The postwar influx of American popular culture into the mainstream of France also affected the policier genre. Many critics, in this light, have noted the referential nature and trans-Atlantic cross-overs within the plots, characters, music, and *mise-en-scène* motifs of many 1950s crime thrillers. Eddie Constantine, cited above, looms large here as star and archetype. Born in 1917 in Los Angeles, Constantine began as an MGM extra in the 1930s, but his Hollywood work amounted to a string of uncredited bit parts, a dubious highlight of which was his walk-on in the James Stewart musical *Born to Dance* (1936). In Hollywood Constantine was unremarkable, but in France he was an attractive commodity, allowing producers to typecast his 'American' mannerisms and sensibility. *La Môme vert-de-gris* established Constantine as Lemmy Caution, an FBI operative investigating an unsolved murder in North Africa. Exploiting his resemblance to Jack Palance, whose tics he mimics, Constantine plays his alter ego as a swaggering policier alpha male. On-screen at virtually always, Caution's antics stretch the limits of credulity to approach self-parody. His aggression is clearly fueled by alcohol: he drinks constantly on the job, downing no fewer than seventeen glasses of whiskey and cognac in the course of *La Môme vert-de-gris*, even pausing for shots of liquor during a fight with two garage mechanics. To underline his exoticism, at moments of stress Caution makes asides in guttural English, as if addressing an intended foreign audience: in *La Môme vert-de-gris* he snarls, 'They'll pay good an' plenty for that!' after discovering the body of a slain fellow agent. As Vincendeau points out, casting Constantine also exaggerated indigenous stereotypes, with the spectacle of inevitably heavier, shorter French policier stars – especially the quintessential sex symbol-turned-epicure, Jean Gabin – struggling alongside this leaner, more physically assertive rogue American (1992a, 75).

As diegetic intertext, representations of American culture fed into the 1950s policier as a source of lingering appeal and divergence from national norms. Jill Forbes, Michael Kelly, and Tony Jones note the resonance of American cinema within popular postwar cinema, which they trace to the mythic individualism of Hollywood, a 'central [Hollywood] topos, the relationship between man and the environment, [which] was perceived as quintessentially modern' (1995, 173). Amplifying this treatment of American modernity, Kristin Ross argues that American social values, consumer goods, and economic ideology contributed directly to rapid changes in 1950s French culture. Ross asserts: 'A particular fantasy was exported by the United States, along with the gadgets, techniques, and experts of American capitalism, to a Europe devastated by war: the fantasy of timeless, even, and limitless development' (1995, 9–10). Certainly, the 1950s policier is meticulous, obsessively so, about showcasing American imagery, props, and characters, which are inserted into the *mise-en-scène* as a kind of cultural product placement. Melville's *Bob le flambeur*, a leading example, is particularly reverent, but also occasionally ambivalent, in its citation of American modernity. (Melville's Americanophilia, and its eventual influence on the *Cahiers* critics, has been widely noted, but the 1950s policier was shaped first by this tendency.) Bob himself drives (Melville's) huge American sedan around Paris; there are US Armed Forces Service broadcasts of up-tempo jazz heard throughout the film; and our introduction to

Anne (Isabel Corey), the female lead, comes when she is accosted by a group of rowdy American sailors – another 1950s policier stereotype; US navymen typically appear in order to start fights in nightclubs[17] – who yell after her with thick transatlantic accents: 'C'mon! C'mon, Baby! Un promenade sur le moto?'

Crime film as a strand of Franco-American critical discourse was also salient to the cultural revival of the 1950s policier. Notoriously, the import of American cinema was banned during France's Occupation in World War II, and, when these trade restrictions were lifted in 1945, the return of Hollywood product en masse was greeted with keen interest. The 1946 Blum–Byrnes agreement was another decisive factor, paving the way for a massive influx of American movies.[18] The new visibility of Hollywood product in France was as dramatic as it was controversial: from 38 American films distributed in the first half of 1946, the same period of the following year saw 338 screened in France, an increase of nearly 1000% (Neupert 2002, 27). Throughout the postwar period, many Parisien cinemas even adopted Americanized schedules to cater to the transatlantic connoisseur; the MacMahon theater, for example, situated just off the Champs-Élysées, for many years screened nothing but Hollywood films. As the deluge continued, crime film became a focal point of cinéphile attentions. The belated arrival of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *Double Indemnity* (1944), *Murder, My Sweet* (1944), and *Laura* (1944) led critics to redefine the term *film noir*, and grant crime film a new level of cultural seriousness. To the leftist French writer Nino Frank – the first to revisit 'film noir' in print – this new American crime drama offered a fascinating shift away from the sentimentality of pre-war American thrillers towards a bleaker vision of urban spaces. In the essays of Jean-Pierre Chartier, a more conservative critic, film noir was used, conversely, as a cautionary label for films with an objectionable 'pessimism and a disgust for humanity'.[19]

Emerging from this context, critical studies of both American and French crime films routinely figured in French film journals throughout the 1940s and early 1950s. By the mid-1950s, these critiques reached a critical mass. In 1955, the publication of Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton's *Panorama du film noir américain* consolidated the status of American film noir as a defining trend in modern cinema. While the book's textual definitions remained hazy – noir begins as a surrealist motif but also encompasses a changing set of values, from cynical theme and tone to outright cultural apocalypse – Borde and Chaumeton's pivotal step to elevate crime cinema, a point often neglected today, foregrounded an embryonic version of the auteur theory.[20] The duo devised a catch-all methodology: 'We will deem films to be created by their directors … this could explain the persistence of vision in a given director's work' (Borde and Chaumeton 1955, 18–9).

Cahiers du cinéma, meanwhile, also began using crime films to legitimize cinema and champion film authorship as a practical criterion. Although Borde and Chaumeton declared the golden age of noir to be over by 1955, many *Cahiers* writers persisted in analyzing the artistic self-expression apparent in the crime films of their contemporaries. François Truffaut, for example, published a review of the ever-seminal *Touchez pas au grisbi* in April 1954 called 'Les truands sont fatigués', in which he dismissed the film's subject material but nonetheless

acclaimed Becker – whose achievements he likened to Renoir – for his ability to use genre to mine rich thematic subtexts: 'The real subject of *Grisbi* is growing old and friendship ... the plot is no more than a pretext' (in Hillier 1985, 29). Claude Chabrol's 1955 *Cahiers*' essay, 'Evolution du film policier' was another crucial auteurist manifesto. As James Naremore points out, Chabrol accepted that crime films were becoming obsolete, but declared instead that the significance of the policier 'had less to do with the end of a genre than the creation of a cinema of authors' (1998, 27). Chabrol's concluding remarks, effectively a rallying call to arms for what would become the New Wave, prophesized grandly: 'Enter the policier of tomorrow, freed from everything and especially from itself, illuminating with its overpowering sunlights the depths of the unspeakable' (in Hillier 1985, 163).

Out of the past: conclusions

Rather than being consigned to oblivion, or glossed over as an historical footnote, we can begin to understand how the policier actually galvanized 1950s French film culture, at the very least representing an exciting professional opportunity. Traditional film histories have failed to gauge accurately the impact of the genre, but throughout this neglected decade the policier was consistently attracting the interest of mass audiences, supplying vital commercial momentum within the film industry, and facilitating a diverse and dynamic popular cinema. On these terms alone the 1950s policier deserves belated recognition, but we have also seen repeatedly how the genre served as a catalyst for the New Wave. Taking its cue from American-oriented culture and Americanophile observers, the policier offered *Cahiers* critics and others the opportunity to test their emerging ideas about cinema as the means for personal expression. To the ambitious, progressive film critic, the policier provided the means to advance the concept of the film auteur. On-screen, the policier offered the ideal vehicle with which to engage self-consciously the popular cultures of both France and America.

These were the contexts not only for 1950s French crime cinema, but also for the New Wave that the *Cahiers* critics would soon embody. Like the 1950s policier's on-screen treatment of Paris in transition, the New Wave was also itself clearly motivated by the old as well as the new. While critics position Godard's debut feature *À bout de souffle*/*Breathless* (1960) at the forefront of the Young Turks vanguard, little mention is ever made about how the film was also – in its narrative, *mise-en-scène*, and iconography – an experimental reworking of policier materials re-popularized in France during the previous decade. Looking backwards as well as forwards, Godard continued to spoof the 1950s policier and its série noire roots in both *Bande à part* (1964) and *Alphaville* two years later. Truffaut's second feature, *Tirez sur la pianiste*/*Shoot the Piano Player* (1960) was similarly inspired as much by the recent cultural past – particularly *Touchez pas au grisbi* and *Bob le flambeur* – as it was shaped by the need for a new, more idiosyncratic cinema. Even Louis Malle, an IDHEC drop-out and filmmaker linked more loosely to the *Cahiers* collective, followed the same trajectory with his popular crime thriller, *L'Ascenseur pour*

l'échafaud/Elevator to the Gallows (1958). While few film historians have noted the appeal and significance of the 1950s policier, we can see that the New Wave filmmakers themselves paid close, productive attention.

Notes

1. This nickname was given Truffaut by one of his (many) arch enemies, the respected and successful senior director Claude Autant-Lara, who apparently embodied all that Truffaut considered wrong with French film.
2. A mantra taken from Truffaut's perhaps second-most cited essay, 'Crise d'ambition du cinéma français', *Arts*, 30 March 1955. At the lowest rung of ambition in Truffaut's 'pantheon' are those 'deliberately commercial' metteurs-en-scène whose only goal is to attract audiences and please producers.
3. Melville is the latest figure to justify increased critical attention in this category. There are references to his 1950s work and the policier in Palmer 2003, 135–45; 2006, 122–31 and Vincendeau 2003, 99–106. The preceding quote from Mayne comes from her otherwise excellent study of Clouzot's *Le Corbeau* (1943).
4. A good example of this 'compromise' model of 1950s French film history, in which a small group of iconoclasts are rescued from obscurity, is the survey offered in Lanzoni 2002, 170–94.
5. In France, only 3000 television sets were privately owned by 1947, with just 20 hours of viewing available nationally per week, on one state-controlled channel, by April 1950. By 1960, 2 million TVs had been bought by the French public; a much less dramatic incursion than in the UK and USA, but enough to curtail movie-going habits (Forbes, Kelly, and Jones 1995).
6. 'Histoire du film policier français', 3. This pamphlet was issued and distributed by the Cinémathèque Française, without individual authorship credits, during its June 1992 policier retrospective.
7. See also Andrew 1983, 115–9.
8. For more details on this enduringly controversial production, see Ehrlich 1981, 12–18 and Mayne 2007.
9. Becker wandered freely among genres before *Touchez pas au grisbi*, but was best known for his youth-oriented comedies *Antoine et Antoinette* (1946) and *Rendez-vous de Juillet* (1949), and the celebrated historical romance *Casque d'or* (1952).
10. One reason for Grangier's lack of critical recognition was his modest self-effacement – in striking contrast with the New Wave filmmakers – on the rare occasions when he gave interviews. Unlike Godard and his colleagues, Grangier settled willingly for the title 'accomplished technician' (Gilles 2000, 117–27).
11. Melville himself, arch independent and self-promoter, was never shy about receiving credit for inspiring others. When asked about the 'newness' of the New Wave, moreover, Melville was routinely dismissive, stating in 1962, for example, that 'what new cinéastes are doing now I wanted to do in 1937'. Melville's seminal 1937 project, moreover, which was reluctantly abandoned for logistical reasons, was to have been a *policier* (Dancourt 1962).
12. See Vincendeau 1992b, 49–59, for fruitful connections between French poetic realist films and the nascent noir cycle in Hollywood.
13. So quintessential was the role of Caution to Constantine that the star's career was later documented by Francine Ravel in a 1999 TV film called *Eddie Constantine: Cet homme est un sentimental.*

14. This survey derives from Bessy, Chirat, and Bernard (1995, 1996), consolidated by my research of publicity and reviews in the Bibliothèque du film, Paris. The Bessy–Chirat–Bernard production figures, it should be noted, tend to be slightly lower than some sources for this period, which generally include more co-productions in which French investment was not dominant.
15. In *Drôle de drame* (1937) and *Le Crime de M. Lange* (1936). More intriguingly, Duhamel also appeared as a featured actor, playing 'Duhamel', in Pierre Chenal's *Le Dernier tournant* (1939), which was, of course, the first screen adaptation of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934).
16. There was another unauthorized incarnation that borrowed LeBreton's brand name: *Rififi in Amsterdam*, which was directed by John Korporaal and financed by NFM, a short-lived Dutch production company, in 1962.
17. A fascinating parallel to this French policier citation of America through its 'occupying' armed forces appears in many *yakuza* crime films produced in Japan in the 1950s and 1960s. See, for example, Seijun Suzuki's *Tokyo Drifter* (1966).
18. Background contexts to this altercation and its aftermath are described in Ulff-Møller 2001.
19. The two essays are reproduced in Palmer 1996; references taken from pages 23 and 26. Note also that Frank's piece first appeared, in August 1946, in the socialist journal *L'Écran français*; whereas Chartier's essay was published, in November of the same year, in the more right-leaning *Revue de cinéma*.
20. Alexandre Astruc's seminal essay, 'Naissance d'une nouvelle avant-garde: La caméra stylo', published in *L'Écran* in 1948, was, in its promotion of the idea of personal expression through an author writing a film, another key reference in this context.

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