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## French Poetic Realism and American Noir: “It’s always too late”

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If one’s introduction to the brief life of French Poetic Realism consists of a couple of Jean Renoir films, then one may be excused for being slightly puzzled about why French films of the 1930s are sometimes cited as part of the background of American film noir. In Renoir’s *Le crime de M. Lange* (1936), for instance, one recognizes some discrete signs of noir – confining spaces, the street-level view of life, focus on lives lived on the margins, the depiction of crime and corruption, atmospheric exterior scenes (though clearly studio-based) of damp and fog – but the tone seems all wrong. What can the solidarity of these characters, the unity of their lives lived around a single courtyard, their capacity for mutual caring and for seizing love from poor circumstances have to do with the greedy lowlifes, gun-wielding criminals and double-dealing women who populate much of American noir? Look further at this period in French filmmaking, though, and the associations become more clear. Watch Marcel Carné’s *Le Quai des brumes* (1938) and *Le Jour se lève* (1939). Explore Renoir’s filmography further. It is there in his *La Chienne* (1931), *La Nuit du carrefour* (1932) and *La Bête humaine* (1938). With the addition of Carné’s *Hôtel du nord* (1938) and Julien Duvivier’s *Pépé le Moko* (1937) the web of relationships grows. These films have crisscrossing connections with one another, as well as complex linkages to later films, and not only in France. Why then did this connection seem to go nearly unremarked for so many decades until the 1990s? The goals of this study are three-fold. It begins with an examination of the treatment of Poetic Realism in the most significant critical views of the genealogy of American film noir; then several films are analyzed in some detail to reinforce the connections and contrasts in specific French and American films. The paper concludes with several pro-

posals about why the role of Poetic Realism has been so often presented as relatively insignificant.

First, it is necessary to delimit the periods under discussion so the subject does not expand infinitely, which it easily could, given the difficulty of defining Poetic Realism and, even more so, film noir. The French films that will be referred to are from the 1930s, an era in which Poetic Realism, even defined expansively, represented just one relatively small strand of filmmaking in France (Vincendeau 1993, 52). The earliest French film to be discussed in this paper is *La Chienne* from 1931; the latest is *Le Jour se lève* from 1939. The period ends with the German Occupation of France 1940-4. The era of American film noir is even harder to delimit, but by general agreement the period begins with the *Maltese Falcon* (Huston 1941) and, while the films show a decline in inventiveness by the end of the 1940s, the period of innovation arguably can be prolonged through *Touch of Evil* (Welles 1958). The latest film relevant to the discussion here will be Lang's *Human Desire* (1954). Second, while these dates, particularly the boundary set by the Occupation, will be important, it is also essential to agree upon working definitions of the two modes of filmmaking under discussion. In *The Republic of Images*, Alan Williams notes of Poetic Realism that

Few labels in French film history are as vexing as *réalisme poétique*. It is arguably not a school, at least not to the extent that cinematic impressionism was. Nor is it a genre, yet it is something more than a style. Historians and critics do not even agree on a basic list of films to which it applies. (1992, 232)

Several decades' worth of remarks about film noir echo this frustration. In fact, could not Dudley Andrew's comment here about Poetic Realism apply just as well to film noir?

Poetic realism [...] commanded no adherents, promulgated no doctrine. Its name did not arise in the workplace, so to speak. It did not accompany the films associated with it, cuing the way they should be read or indicating in advance their projected import. It was in effect a fabrication of the critical establishment, and it remains so today. (1995, 12)

The two seemingly oxymoronic terms linked together as “poetic” “realism” describe a mode of filmmaking whose “realism” is characterized by the depiction of working class lives on the margins of society, mostly urban (sometimes industrial) milieus of dark, rain-splattered streets, grimy bars and shabby rooms and apartments, and a focus on the details of everyday life. The “poetic” aspects lie in the emphasis on the details of setting and atmosphere over action and

movement, evocative locations scattered with apparently mundane objects that may become fraught with significance, visual emphasis on context and subjective response, and a dark, pessimistic worldview that often climaxes with murder or suicide. Its “moody romanticism” (1995, 15) is a world of soft edges and outlines blurred by mist or fog. It is a world that is often warm, not cold. Many of these traits are shared with American film noir, but with a slight but significant shift in tone and visual emphasis. These points of connection will be explored later in this essay.

The first critical work to look seriously at American film noir was Borde’s and Chaumeton’s *A Panorama of American Film Noir 1941-1953* in 1955. Though improved upon and refined by many later writers, it is still the text to which all are indebted. The antecedents of American noir that they identify are American hardboiled detective novels (15), psychoanalysis (18-9) and the “noir realism” of directors such as Duvivier, Renoir and Carné (23). With a glance at Surrealism (“its real expansion in the United States is contemporaneous with the development of film noir” not antecedent) (24), the authors go on to say that the “most marked and persistent influence ... is surely that of German Expressionism” and they specifically cite the influence of “Caligarisism” on American horror films of the 1930s and the influence of German émigré directors who arrived in the United States under the influence of both German Expressionism and Surrealism. The source cited as most influential is the “synthesis of three kinds of film”, all of them American: the gangster film, horror, and the classic detective film (24-5). They bring up the “noir realism” of Duvivier, Renoir and Carné and ask “Did *Pépé le Moko*, *Quai des brumes*, and *La Bête humaine* announce American film noir?” only to answer bluntly, “We think not”, though they grant the “possible influences” of “the poetry of wet cobblestones, suburban nights, and pallid dawns” (23). In 1972, Paul Schrader takes up the question of the ancestry and definition of American noir putting his emphasis on noir as a period in which particular social and cultural attitudes coalesced. The only foreign influence to which he assigns a major role is the “German influence”, but he is careful to portray this not as an imported mode or style that changes local practices but a set of technical skills, especially in lighting, referred to as “old expressionist techniques” (2000, 56), that appeared in the United States at just the right moment to be applied to American films of “War and post-war disillusionment” (54) and “Post-war realism” (55). He cites the “French ‘poetic realism’” of Carné and Duvivier, along with “Sternbergian melodrama”, as possible influences in a list that does not warrant further analysis in his essay (54).

It was twenty years later that Ginette Vincendeau in her “Noir Is Also a French Word: The French Antecedents of Film Noir” took up the challenge represented by critics who brushed aside the influence of Poetic Realism on American noir. She proceeds by setting Borde’s and Chaumeton’s criticism in its own social milieu, that of “typical” French criticism of the mid-1950s that denigrated French cinema in favor of American film (1993, 49). She cites their book’s appearance only one year after François Truffaut’s “A Certain Tendency in French Cinema” (1954) which set the stage for the rejection of the past that would be exemplified by the French New Wave within a few short years. She also attaches far greater value to, and provides more extensive analysis of, the time that many German and East European directors and film technicians spent in Paris as they passed from the zone of oppression and impending war to, eventually, America and film noir. Against Borde and Chaumeton, who claim that “The distribution of European films has always been excessively weak on the American market [...] and there’s no evidence that a John Huston or a Howard Hawks may have attended the showing of a single French movie” from the pre-war period (2002, 23), Vincendeau responds,

This may well be true, but, on the other hand, other major exponents of *film noir* – Robert Siodmak, Fritz Lang, Billy Wilder, Max Ophuls, Jacques Tourneur and Curtis Bernhardt – had seen plenty of French films of the 1930s. Not only that, they had actually been *making* them. Before they went to Hollywood, these directors spent time working in the French studios. Most had been sent there by political circumstances of the Nazi regime but also by the increased internationalisation of the film industry. (1993, 50)

The thesis that Vincendeau argues is that most of these émigré directors and other technical personnel were involved in the French film industry for anywhere from two to ten years and that those who went on to Hollywood carried not only their German influences but also the influences of their involvement, if not immersion, in French filmmaking. She cites as well French directors such as Renoir who spent some years in Hollywood and the fact that many French films were re-made in Hollywood by émigré directors, Lang and Litvak among them. Vincendeau argues that while Poetic Realism has sometimes been identified as a “‘German’ aesthetic” because of the influence of German and Eastern European émigrés on French filmmaking in the 1930s (1993, 52), these contributors had to accommodate themselves to certain characteristic aspects of French filmmaking, particularly the emphasis on community and social milieu and the expectations of concreteness, not abstraction, in such representation.

Additionally, the French, she claims, valued highly the “showcasing of actor’s performances” (with Gabin as the prime example) in contrast to the subordination of acting to “abstract compositions” (1993, 53) more characteristic of German Expressionist films. Interestingly, Dudley Andrew looks at the same situations and argues the opposite: that many of the German and East European directors and technical staff, especially cameramen and editors, exerted a strong influence on French filmmaking during their stays. In effect,

[...] the look of French films would be altered far more from below, by the techniques of artisans, than from on high by directors [...] As a group the émigrés entering the French industry raised standards and expectations. They also opened up stylistic options that would be crucial for poetic realism. (1995, 176)

In his chapter on “Literary and Artistic Sources of Poetic Realism” he emphasizes that French filmmaking by the mid-1930s was already an international undertaking profoundly affected by the different kinds of training, skills and sensibilities represented by the large contingent, larger even than the number of Germans, of Russian and Eastern European artists working on everything from set design to lighting. His contention is that the “poetic realist look” was primarily the work not of native French designers but of artisans trained in countries to the east of France, countries such as Germany, Hungary and Russia (1995, 186). It appears at this time that Andrew’s view holds the most sway; even Vincendeau cites *Mists of Regret* as the “most authoritative discussion of poetic realism” (2007, 47). Undoubtedly Andrew’s is not the last word on the subject.

Renoir’s *La Chienne*, the story of a middle-aged man’s fall from a dull, middle-class, unhappily respectable life through the conniving of an unrespectable young woman, offers some useful illustrations of crossover and contrast between French Poetic Realism and American noir. The plot outlines of *La Chienne* and the American remake by Fritz Lang, *Scarlet Street* (1945), are the same but the films have significant differences in their looks, certain points of emphasis, and finally, because of differences in their endings, in their tones. While the settings and sets of the two films are similar – urban restaurants and bars, apartments, rainy streets, factory offices – the French settings have the look of reality, a lived-in look, while the American sets seem like stark arrangements of props that merely furnish a backdrop for performance. As Maurice Legrand (Michel Simon) looks out the window of the apartment he shares with his nasty wife, he looks through the window of another apartment, a window hung with laundry and beyond which life is going on. Outside the window of

the spacious, though suffocating, New York City apartment of Christopher Cross (Edward G. Robinson) and his wife is a fire escape, and the window is not associated with the warmth of communal living but with Adele's relationship with her downstairs neighbor, a relationship from which Chris is excluded. And in the top floor, Greenwich Village apartment that Chris rents for Kitty, the scenes we glimpse through the window are painted sets suggesting a city, but completely without life or movement. This does not diminish the story that's told, but it does allow the story to be acted out in an environment where the focus is on only the actor and his individual tragedy, not the actor whose story is only one in an environment of social interaction where life goes on around him and he is, as in *La Chienne*, after disgrace, eventually taken back into its folds. *Scarlet Street* is a film of melodrama with that mode's high contrasts and dramatic confrontations.

Pursued by his guilty conscience, though not by the law, Chris gets away with murder but is psychically haunted and isolated from humanity because of his crime. After his failed suicide, his life becomes that of a Bowery bum. In a winter landscape, he is harried from a park bench. He walks down an avenue to the strains of a Christmas carol (replacing the strains of "Melancholy Baby" that have haunted the film) and in the spirit of high melodrama undergoes a dramatic ocular confrontation with his "Self-Portrait" of Kitty. He trudges on in a crowd with a visual transition that dramatizes his solitary life and his isolation from the human race. By contrast, Maurice, though he lives through a similar disgrace, is not, finally, a tragic figure. His descent to poverty and a life on the streets still leaves him with companionship on the sunny, bustling streets of the city. His is no tragedy. He has simply accepted other satisfactions in life and he is still held within the social fabric of his city. Renoir shows viewers the valuable portrait passing by Legrand and his friend, the former Sgt. Godard, but the two bums are happily stooping for the money dropped on the street and do not see it. "Life is beautiful", says Legrand, "We'll have a feast!". The murderer and the lawman are now social allies who have accepted their changed circumstances. Legrand's fall is not seen as a punishment for his crime, since he's side-by-side with the policeman and exists relatively simply and happily. Renoir successfully resists the melodramatic impulse where Lang, under the sway of the Hollywood Code, cannot. The tone of the ending of the Renoir film is strongly reinforced by the frame that opens the film and closes it: a Punch-and-Judy show. At the film's opening, on the small Punch-and-Judy stage, to the strains of accordion music, viewers are invited to consider three different ways to approach the story that follows. The first character says, "This is a social drama proving that vice

is always punished". The second says, "This is a comedy of manners with a moral". The third says, "The play that follows is neither comedy nor drama. It has no moral whatsoever ... and proves nothing at all. The characters are neither heroes nor villains, but plain people like you and me". So, while the frame might be described as a device to distance viewers from the story, it is also a device that guides our viewing of what follows and encourages a response to Legrand as one who is our neighbor, who is one of us, not a figure of personal tragedy or the conveyor of a cautionary tale in the spirit of melodrama<sup>1</sup>.

The world represented by the view of Le Havre portrayed in Carné's *Le Quai des brumes* (1938) is in many ways more familiar to aficionados of American noir. The port city is as anonymous a stage as the New York City of *Scarlet Street*. With its wet streets, persistent fog, tacky carnival and huge ships that loom over the town, dwarfing the people and buildings, all the pieces are assembled for a truly noir environment. Consider the spaces represented by the isolated bar, Panama's, where Jean (Jean Gabin) and Nelly (Michèle Morgan) meet, the cluttered shop of Nelly's guardian with its dark basement and entrapping interior spaces, the hotel bedroom where Jean and Nelly spend their one night together, and the ship's cabin where Jean and the dog who adopted him prepare to leave for Venezuela, which in some ways bring to mind the spaces of American noir. Everything in the film is depicted in shades of gray – the sky, the seaside, the street viewed from within the shop, the shop itself. While it is tempting to see these as incipient noir tropes that will be repeated in American noir, we would have to ignore the fact that most of these spaces are transformed in this film in ways that set them apart from the noir spaces of American films. This film exhibits an extreme fatalism and a romantic sensibility accompanied by a sense of the consolations of community and all three work together to heighten a small point of light within the dark picture of life that is presented. Panama's is a two-room, cockeyed shack that sits on a spit of land at the edge of the harbor. Both day and night it sits in fog and mist within the sound of lapping waves and the deep horns of the ships. In the background, industrial

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<sup>1</sup> One idea that I have been unable to develop or even allude to in the current project is the possible significance of viewing both Poetic Realism and American noir through the lens of melodrama, especially that of male melodrama as suggested in the work of Thomas Elsaesser, Janet Staiger and Ginette Vincendeau. Schrader refers offhandedly to "Sternbergian melodrama" (2000, 54), another possible route into the subject. The work of Linda Williams on the specific relevance of melodrama to narratives of American life and history is likely to be a rich avenue of inquiry. Her exploration of the narrative resonances of "Too late" and "Too soon" echo the quotation that gives this paper its title.

smokestacks send up clouds that add to the heavy atmosphere. Panama's is a refuge for dreamers and for those who don't fit in anywhere else. It is a space in which people support each other, sometimes by letting each other be and other times by taking care of their needs. Jean just has to mention his hunger and Panama, the proprietor, provides food. Jean wishes for some civilian clothes to replace his uniform and the next thing we know, Michel, the artist who has contemplated suicide, leaves behind his clothing and identity papers for Jean. Nelly hides out in Panama's with no questions asked of her except the cynical questions from Jean who finally realizes that his assumption that she is a prostitute is all wrong. The atmosphere at Panama's is warm and protective. Inside this rough, low-ceilinged shack outcasts of one kind or another are bound loosely together by the kind of human care that is not available outside. Their lives are lived alone but they are bound together by the lightest of human threads. Balancing the suffocating home of Nelly's guardian/godfather, Zabel, where she is constantly prey to his hypocrisy, lechery and murderous jealousy are the shack and the hotel room she shares with Jean. In the hotel room, Jean grows to accept the theory of love that Nelly voiced at Panama's and that Jean rejected earlier: "Maybe they [men and women] can't get along, but they can love each other". It is here that Jean experiences the single night of pure, unselfish love that gives him a glimmer of hope but, in another sense, allows him to die.

Of course, it is this love for Nelly that drives him to leave the ship on which he is set to leave France for Venezuela to say goodbye to her one more time. He tells her that he came back to see her because in knowing her "I've been happy at least once in my life". Ironically, this trip back into town is also what gets him killed, gunned down in the street by the petty thug, Lucien. Lying in the street, supported in Nelly's arms, Jean says, "Kiss me. Quick. We have no time", but however tragic his end, viewers are well aware that, for him, this one experience of love has given his life meaning. His death occurs moments after he has murdered Zabel, whom he finds in the shop's cellar attacking Nelly, but there is no sense here, as there would be in an American film, that Jean must expiate some kind of sin with his death. His death is not a punishment for anything he has done. Within the philosophical tenets of the film, the horrors of life help accentuate those moments of beauty, of purity, of love. As Michel, the suicide, says at Panama's, "Oh, society is what it is, a bit sinister, a bit seamy ... But I've heard there are beautiful things in it too". For him, suicide is an outlet freely, rationally chosen. After all, as he says to Jean the soldier, and as the film proves, "Some commit suicide. You have to kill someone". As a soldier, Jean has killed in war; Zabel has killed Maurice out of jealousy; Michel kills himself



and Lucien kills Jean. The “beautiful things” give meaning to life, even if they only exist for a few hours. Their ephemerality heightens their beauty and their value. This is significantly different from the sense given by “I was born when she kissed me. I died when she left me. I lived a few weeks while she loved me”, spoken by Bogart as Dix Steele in *In a Lonely Place* (1950) and echoed elsewhere in that film by Laurel Gray (Gloria Grahame). Dix and Laurel are both alive at the film’s end, but their love is as dead, and unredemptive, as if it had never existed.

Renoir’s *La Bête humaine* came out in the same year as Carné’s film, 1938, and also starred Jean Gabin. In Renoir’s film, viewers are bound to feel conflicted about Jacques Lantier (Gabin), a train engineer, who is drawn into an affair with his colleague Roubaud’s seductive and manipulative wife, Séverine (Simone Simon). He is, after all, Jean Gabin, and though he has human flaws, he is also a man with scruples and one whose actions are complicated by what is presented as a genetic predisposition to violence. He doesn’t drink, because drinking precipitates his violent black-outs, so he has exerted that much control over these impulses. He still commits two murders, though, one of them of an innocent young woman who attracts him and the second to rid himself of Séverine. He is dragged into the secrets that she and her piggish husband share and he begins an affair with her, but finally he becomes disgusted with her, himself and life generally and he sees no other way to extricate himself from the sordid situation. After killing her, he throws himself from the train. Interestingly, the train tracks that are such a significant visual image in the film (and which conjure up the later “Straight down the line” repeated in *Double Indemnity* for a different murder-by-train) repeat the straight lines of poplars that border the dark, wet road and guide the truck carrying Gabin into night-time Le Havre in *Le Quai des brumes*. Both reinforce the sense that these characters are only fooling themselves if they think they control their destiny; they are, in fact, being railroaded by life. These tracks and the lines of trees along the road close each film as Jacques jumps to his death and Jean’s little dog runs back to the dark countryside from which it emerged at the film’s opening. Séverine is the first true femme fatale encountered in the French films under discussion here, but even her culpability is blurred by the obvious irrational brutality of her husband and our sense (at least as twenty-first-century viewers) that Séverine, too, is a victim of an uncaring universe, as she (as perhaps her mother before her) has literally been the victim of her godfather. *La Bête humaine* was remade in 1954 by Fritz Lang as *Human Desire* and, while the outline of the story is the same, many details have been changed to relieve the Gabin character, here called Jeff

Warren and played by good-guy Glenn Ford as a Korean War veteran, of his dark qualities and severely tainted morality. In the French film, when Séverine convinces Jacques that he must kill her husband, Jacques can't make his move when the time comes. Neither can Jeff. But Jacques does kill the young girl and, finally, Séverine who torments him. Jeff, on the other hand, does not kill the girl. She, in fact, remains an appropriate love-interest and Jeff is looking forward to going with her to a dance at the film's end. The Séverine-character, Vicky (Gloria Grahame), is killed by her own husband. Jeff is not deranged, does not carry tainted blood, and while he does fall into an affair with Vicky, the fault is laid mostly on her nefarious, lying ways<sup>2</sup>. Jeff has a moment of weakness but may well have a lifetime of happiness ahead of him. In place of the simple-but-complicated Gabin whose only way out is suicide, Lang provides a laundered version of the story and a laundered hero, free of any shades of gray or of any sense that his life can be worthwhile if he can grasp just one fleeting moment of happiness. Jeff will probably soon go to school on the GI Bill, marry Ellen, and buy a house in Levittown. The ending of *Human Desire* is so relentlessly upbeat that it's as if the rest of the plot happened in another country. France, perhaps.

Carné's darkly magnificent *Le Jour se lève* (1939) out-noirs American noir. Before the story proper begins, we are shown a brief introduction to what follows: A man has killed another man; he is barricaded in his room waiting for the police; he thinks back over what led him here. The opening that follows is visually stunning. The birds'-eye-view of streets of a city at the day's beginning show horses pulling a cart and entering from the top of the frame at a disconcerting angle. The camera pans down to a building where a blind man climbs the stairs. He hears an argument behind a door, a gunshot, and a man comes out of the door. The man falls down the stairs, then down a second flight. The blind man grapples for the body and calls out hysterically. In the first four minutes, viewers have been told of a murder and have seen a murder. Viewers have had their perspective knocked off kilter and have followed the guidance of a blind man. There will be, can be, no happy ending to this sequence of events, nor, guided as we are by a blind man, are we likely to understand everything that happens. The story is told in a series of movements between inside the room and outside in the square and from the present to the recent past. It has a complicated narrative flow in which the story moves backward and forward

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<sup>2</sup> It is Vicky (Gloria Grahame) who provides the line "It's always too late" as the title for this paper. It is also "always too late" for Pépé le Moko, Jacques Lantier, the soldier Jean, Christopher Cross, and so many others.

on two levels nearly simultaneously. Events shown in the past move toward the present, flashback-by-flashback as, inexorably, the future becomes the present. The line of poplars on a dark, wet road and the tracks on which the train runs carry the man in the room forward toward doom that is unavoidable from the first seconds of the film. The teddy bear on the mantel and the mirror in which the man keeps passing back and forth are objects given a strange emphasis that viewers will come to understand. François and Françoise meet cute, but the signs are all around that things will not work out: the flowers wilt in the factory's heat; François's cough betrays the sarcasm behind his comments about the freedom and health brought by his job as a sander. And on the night that he enters her home and suggests he spend the night, she tells him no, because she has to go out and meet someone. This points François toward the idea that there is more going on in her life than in his. Sure enough, her life has a history and is full of complications, of lies and fantasies. She is not deceptive in the mode of the femme fatale but is elusive and used to living with fantasies of what her life has been (postcards from the Riviera sent by the evil Valentin) and what it might be (trips to the Riviera or what life might be like if she and François were the only ones left alive). While François thinks their tawdry, restricted lives can be saved by love, she knows better. In his room, François sets an alarm clock, adding yet another countdown to disaster. Unseen by him, the police finally approach his top floor window from the roof; he looks at his gun. A shot is heard and he is dead on the floor as the alarm rings and the daylight dawns. Fade out. The redemption that is impossible in this world comes, instead, in Anatole Litvak's remake, called *The Long Night* (1947). Instead of being haunted by the oppression of human dreams and by life itself, this film is haunted by World War II. Here the François character is Joe Adams, returned veteran, played by Henry Fonda. "Welcome home" banners across the street in this Anytown USA, the comments of people in the crowd below his window ("A lotta vets go crazy for no reason at all"), and the uniforms that hang in his wardrobe reinforce the sense that Joe is a particular kind of guy who has been through a lot for his country and he deserves a particular kind of understanding. He is aware of enacting the stereotype of the disturbed vet ("Talkin' to yourself, huh? Yeah, they say that's a sure sign") and is confronted by (literal) signs hawking "For Peace and Prosperity" as if the line between war and peace can be sharply defined and prosperity is within the grasp of all. In this version of the story, Joanne, Joe's love interest, is far less culpable than was Françoise. She has a history with Max (Valentin in the original) but is shown resisting him; in her performance, Barbara Bel Geddes conveys more small-town girl innocence

than does Jacqueline Laurent as Françoise. When the police toss tear gas into the room Joe has to rescue Joanne, who has come to beg him to give himself up. “We’re people just like them”, she cries and then she assures him he’ll get a fair trial because “They know all about you”. American sentimentalism is on full display in this film with a little girl’s appearance to plead with the police for Joe’s safety or to greet him on the stairs at the end (this figure appears in the Carné film too) when he surrenders. In another sentimental show, this time of racial solidarity, Freddie, an African-American friend of Joe’s, lights Joe’s cigarette for him as the police bring him into the square. The focus is on Joanne’s tear-stained face. The crowd disperses.

If film noir is “defined by tone rather than genre” (Schrader 2000, 54) and is itself an expression of “subtle qualities of tone and mood” rather than specific conventions of “setting and conflict” (53), as Paul Schrader and others have claimed, then we must see a gulf between the French films of Poetic Realism and American noir, despite the many similarities. Schrader notes from the perspective of 1972 that noir has been rather ignored because American critics were “traditionally more interested in theme than style” (63) but I would say, from the perspective of the current day, that the very emphasis on American noir as a visual style has been one reason critics have linked American noir more closely to German Expressionism than to Poetic Realism. As I have shown in the examples here, the stark contrasts and cutting lines of American noir’s visual style are softened in the films of Poetic Realism. The French interiors, which might be very confining and give a sense of characters’ straitened lives or the pressures under which they try to live, are often imbued with a sense of community or social connection that undercuts a vision of life that is completely without meaning. It may be, as well, that the extraordinary prominence of the work of Jean Renoir in so many studies of 1930’s French filmmaking occluded the connections of Poetic Realism to noir, because of the diversity of his films and genres, the length of his career and the weight of his reputation. Beyond this, traditional French pessimism and production codes that controlled the depiction of politics and religion more than sex and violence are to be thanked for the richer sexual relationships of characters, their freedom to commit suicide as a personal response to life, and the fact that crime, as in real life, may go unpunished. Not all balances are redressed; whereas American films had to contend with a Code that demanded punishment for crimes, sex that could only be implied, and at least the appearance of a far more conventional middle-class morality in many ways. Some American noirs, such as *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), that attempt to be less than direct about intentions

and motives result in a rich ambiguity (does Robert Mitchum seek “suicide by cop” or is that just a deadly accident at the end?). While Vincendeau has pointed out that German and other non-French directors had to accommodate themselves to the requirements of the French industry as many of them passed through during the 1930s, it is also true – perhaps more true, in fact – that many of those French and non-French filmmakers had to accommodate themselves to the American industry of the 1940s and 1950s, including the Production Code. Lang, Litvak, Tourneur, Curtiz<sup>3</sup> and so many others brought a rich heritage to their American moviemaking but it could not necessarily be displayed fully because of cultural differences and because of the specifics of the period in which they arrived and made their films in America. The moralistic, restrictive Motion Picture Production Code, studio-driven industrial filmmaking, and the enforced post-war conformity all played a role in the transition of their skills and styles from European filmmaking to American filmmaking. It cannot be ignored, either, that the “Red Scare” period of the late 1940s and early-to-mid-1950s was a time in which it was not necessarily politically safe to be an unapologetic foreign presence in Hollywood or in America generally. For all of these reasons, it may never be possible to draw with clarity lines between Expressionism, Poetic Realism and American noir, but given all the richness to explore and analyze, why would we want to, since such clarity always works to belie, minimize and over-simplify the rich, strange reality?

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<sup>3</sup> Of these, only Lang and Litvak could be said to have come to the United States specifically because of war-time conditions, but the point I am making is more general. Curtiz came to America in 1926; Tourneur in 1914.

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the connections between French Poetic Realism of the 1930s and American film noir and argues that their significance has been understated. The goals of this study are three-fold. It begins with an examination of the treatment of Poetic Realism in the most significant critical views of the genealogy of American film noir; then several films are analyzed in some detail to reinforce the connections and contrasts in specific French and American films. The paper concludes with several proposals about why the role of Poetic Realism has been so often presented as relatively insignificant.

