

“Atmosphère, atmosphère”:
On the Study of France Between the Wars*

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How does the category of period affect understanding of the recent past? What kinds of assumptions are at work in its determination? Few would dispute the assertion that France between November 1919 and June 1940 constitutes a discrete temporal entity marked at its ends by the Versailles treaty concluding World War I and the fall of France to Nazi Germany, yet various designations in French as “entre-guerre” ‘interwar,’ “entre les guerres” ‘between the wars,’ and “entre-deux-guerres” ‘between two wars’ imply at least a degree of slippage. The effect is enhanced by a fourth expression, “avant-guerre” ‘prewar,’ that, as Robert Brasillach used it in the title of his 1941 essay, “Notre Avant-Guerre” (“Our Prewar”), conveyed the sense of loss that renewed war with Germany represented with regard to the years in the 1920s and 1930s.

In contrast to the external limits established by period, chronology breaks the 1918 to 1940 duration down into smaller units—“après-guerre” ‘afterwar,’ “années folles” ‘wild years,’ “années tournantes” ‘turning point,’ “Front populaire” ‘Popular Front,’ “drôle de guerre” ‘phony war,’ “débâcle” ‘collapse.’¹ As a basic model of duration, chronology is often taken as an objective measure when, in fact, it devolves from a principle of significance in the form of meaningful events whose frequency varies from day and week to month and year according to the minimal unit of measure. This frequency, in turn, bears directly on claims to explanation attributed to forms of narration such as the annal, the chronicle, and the historical account proper (*The Content of the Form* 1-25).²

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Recent inquiry into twentieth-century France continues to explore viable alternatives to the longstanding practices that set grand narratives grounded in politics and wars apart from narrower analyses focused on practices and institutions of culture along a range of expressions and media. Where some accounts compare and contrast politics and culture by inscribing the latter within the former, the most incisive explore internal relations between them. In the pages that follow, I mean to consider a number of questions related to the study of France between the wars, with emphasis on the use of visual materials linked to popular press and film. My point of departure is a critical presentation of two books that explore aspects of mood and atmosphere in early twentieth-century France. I follow with an excursus into theory and a concluding example in the form of an analysis of a brief scene from Marcel Carné's 1938 feature film, *Hôtel du Nord*.

Adrian Rifkin begins *Street Noises: Parisian Pleasure, 1900-1940* by stating his intention to release "some of the repressed materials of the mythologies of Paris, to free them from those conventions that constrict them in the cruel objectivity of glamour."¹ Drawing on elite literary as well as popular and non-literary sources, Rifkin explores how images of "the timeless popular" drift through and transcend practices, institutions, and industries of Parisian entertainment. In particular, he explores these images in light of his working hypothesis that certain forms and degrees of pleasure deemed transgressive—and thus worthy of regulation—should be integrated more fully into historical accounts of early twentieth-century France.

When Rifkin first casts pleasure in the singular, he seemingly posits a geographic phenomenon, as though he meant to distinguish Parisian pleasure from pleasure in Strasbourg, Lyon, and Marseille or—outside France—from its counterparts in London, New York, Marrakesh, and Saigon. Is pleasure by definition singular and uniform within a given time and place? Or is it instead always plural and varied? This tension between an essentialized phenomenon and its multiform expressions points to a significant assumption on Rifkin's part to which I will return below.

The duration announced in the subtitle of *Street Noises* breaks down almost from the start as Rifkin explores representations of Paris not just from 1900 to 1940, but from the mid-nineteenth century evoked in verse by Charles Baudelaire to novels of the 1980s by Renaud Camus and Didier Daeninckx. After writing that *Street*

Noises is about Paris as he reconstructs it from sources documenting how the sociability of urban pleasure was regulated between "about 1900 and quite recent times," Rifkin adds that his primary concern is less with the real city of Paris than with "trying to secure relations between its different materials" (8). It is, then, somewhat disconcerting that a crucial chapter devoted to sexuality among soldiers and sailors draws extensively on archival materials from police files in the Mediterranean port city of Toulon.

Five chapters and a lengthy introduction allow Rifkin to re-shuffle "the archaeological layers of Parisianism" by tracing how images of the French capital "nourish and represent the national and the popular" (24-25). The images he studies vary in material and medium from the ragpicker evoked in words by Baudelaire in *Les Fleurs du mal* and pictured in the figure of Jérico in Marcel Carné's 1945 feature film, *Les enfants du paradis*, to recorded songs by Yvette Guilbert and Maurice Chevalier in which Paris becomes an image-archive of women and the places where they are reputedly available.

Rifkin constructs his streets of Paris as a composite of images linked to literature, film, and popular song. As these images accumulate, they cluster in ways that overdetermine specific names and sites. Referring to a scene in *Les enfants du paradis* in which the character of Garance (played by Arletty) narrates her origins as a woman of the people, Rifkin adds that the Ménilmontant to which she refers is not just the village of 1830, but also the Ménilmontant of 1943 "known throughout the world of cinema and gramophone as the 'Ménilmuche' of Maurice Chevalier" (34). Along similar lines, Rifkin supports his remarks on the "Zone non aedificandi" surrounding the former city gates of Paris with reference to fiction (Eugène Dabit's *L'Hôtel du Nord* and Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*) as well as film (Carné's 1938 adaptation of Dabit's 1929 novel). Finally, cover pages of the illustrated weeklies *Déetective* and *Voilà* display figures of popular culture such as Edith Piaf and Lucienne Boyer in settings ripe with the promise of romance and intrigue.

Rifkin overlays this geography of Parisian pleasure with analyses of emergent forms of popular media in word, image, and—especially—sound. Citing the impact of early forms of the radio, gramophone, and juke-box on the acoustic spaces from private home to public café and bar, he contends that the emergence of radio technology after 1900 inverted a model of urban space that had

privileged listening over hearing and significant sound over noise. In becoming authored, voluntary, and equated with seeing, "the instatement of peripheral noise at the heart of modern mass cultures became a fulfillment and a pleasure" as well as a technical means of figuration and narrative (92). Along the same lines, the proliferation of photographic images in the form of postcards supplements emergent sound technology. Much as the narrator of André Breton's *Nadja* (1928) walked the streets of Paris hoping to act out his fantasy of meeting a beautiful naked woman (preferably at night in a park or wood), so Rifkin sees the postcard and snapshot as a talisman and/or fetish of an urban subjectivity addicted to the rush that accompanied such an encounter. These and other analyses throughout *Street Noises* devolve from Rifkin's sense of the urban street as site of a two-way movement between an illuminated center of contained exchange and the darker margins of alterity and transgression embodied in figures of the *zonard(e)*, the criminal, the foreigner, and the homosexual.⁴

Rifkin contends that Paris blurs boundaries, but this blurring also derives from his juxtapositions of past and present. And this to a point where *Street Noises* often seems less of an historical account of Paris "as it was" or might have been than a construct in word and image layered with cultural references from Baudelaire to Daeninckx. Only when Rifkin qualifies this juxtaposition by holding that *Street Noises* is "emphatically, therefore, not about 'subculture'" (11) does the full meaning of Parisian pleasure emerge. For instead of the simple opposition to norms and/or conventions, Rifkin's Parisian pleasure appropriates the signs and codes of dominant culture commodified in clothes, dance, music, and—above all—spoken language in the form of slang.⁵ Had Rifkin opted in his title to assert pleasure in the plural, the result would have underscored a centrifugal movement away from the center. In *Street Noises*, a two-way movement between center and periphery evokes a multiform pleasure grounded in norms of monogamous heterosexuality and the nuclear family against which Rifkin plots ("maps") the interplay of glamor and tawdriness exploited for commercial ends in the illustrated press and in popular song.

Michael B. Miller states early on in *Shanghai on the Métro* that his desire to study World War I as a dividing point in modern European history led him to consider espionage a distinctive feature of France between the wars. Instead of the breakup of empires and the rise of new political systems, his interest in spies and intrigue drew

him to explore “the softer realms of moods and atmosphere . . . without straying very far from the harder realities of security that dominated these years and gave them their identity as lying between one war and another.”⁶ Even though years of research had made him reluctant to uphold a strict distinction between the 1920s and 1930s, Miller concentrated on the latter because that was where “the action (and sources) were greatest,” even if it meant treating the inter-war years *en bloc* (6). Simply put, Miller studies espionage as the measure of an era that—in terms that echo Rifkin—“blurred distinctions between private life and the great events of one’s times” (81).

A sizable portion of *Shanghai on the Métro* is organized into stories (Miller’s term) of colorful and often obscure individuals ranging from Leopold Trepper and Joseph Crozier to Marthe Richard (born Marthe Bettenfeld) and Trebitsch Lincoln.⁷ As a set, these stories construct a composite of espionage that Miller sees as distinctive with regard to the mood and style of France between the wars. Where Rifkin writes almost as a cartographer who maps the sites and passages of urban pleasure, Miller directs his stories of spies and intrigue instead toward a typology of popular and mass cultures linked to literature, the illustrated press, and film. In this sense, the term “French” in *Shanghai on the Métro* refers less to collective identity at the level of nation or people than to something on the order of the imagined communities Benedict Anderson has identified via reading practices.⁸ In such terms, the cultures of nineteenth century print analyzed by Anderson extend in *Street Noises* and *Shanghai on the Métro* toward a mix of hearing/listening and spectatorship linked to radio and the phonograph as well as the postcard, the snapshot, and sound film.

Miller provides compelling accounts of spy wars fought by professional agents organized in extensive networks. He also argues convincingly how the marketing of exoticism and romance transposed real spies and real espionage into literary bestsellers such as Maurice Dekobra’s *La madone des sleeping* (1925) and Paul Morand’s *Flèche d’orient* (1932). Finally, Miller assesses the links between fictional espionage and related phenomena such as the 1931-32 Expédition Centre-Asie (known as La Croisière jaune) funded by André Citroën to promote the versatility of his corporation’s motorized vehicles. He describes in detail how a taste for exotic adventure transformed the motorized expedition into an updated variant of earlier voyages of discovery and conquest that

devolved from France's self-appointed civilizing mission. Catching details of mood and moment embodied in the Expédition Centre-Asie's leader, Georges-Marie Hardt, Miller portrays him thus: "Not even his closest collaborators could come up with more than formulaic expressions for [someone] who had lived since the first Sahara crossing in the twenties almost solely for adventure but had made these grand, organized affairs, swashbuckling projects designed like a blueprint" (301).

The passion for obscurity and obsession with detail that Miller attributes to Hardt typify the aura of the exotic that linked the Croisière jaune and its African predecessor, La Croisière noire, to the mood and style of France between the wars. As in many of the "stories" in *Shanghai on the Métro*, the motorized expeditions also led to articles, books, and films whose popularity tempered the realities of a historical present-mindedness (349) with a collective hunger for imaginary adventure and flights from reality. All too often, Miller concludes, an eagerness to venture into the real world foreclosed when images and stories of exotic intrigue were brought back home by those who sought to romanticize the century by creating a "Shanghai for the métro" in the form of a newspaper or magazine article, a book, or a film (345). In contrast to accounts of the 1930s as a decade of crisis and decline, Miller asserts a resiliency on the part of the interwar French that he takes to be distinctive of the period: "We cannot escape the fact that in the supposedly darkest days of the thirties spies and intriguers were absorbed easily into the stuff of storytelling. It leaves the impression of a people who could keep on an even keel and who sensed that they would somehow muddle through" (237).

It is, I believe, one thing for Miller to recognize the extent of popular interest in storytelling about spies and quite another to accept his assertion that this storytelling provided a means of muddling through. For to do so trivializes the social and political problems of the period. At the same time, it forecloses the very interplay of politics and culture that led Miller from empires and government to the softer realms of mood and atmosphere linked to spies and espionage.

Rifkin's construct of Parisian pleasure in *Street Noises* overlaps in a number of significant ways with the portrait of the French between the wars in Miller's *Shanghai on the Métro*. One such overlap occurs when Rifkin transposes the *lecteur-flâneur* into a *dragueur* (sexual cruiser) for whom urban space holds the promise of plea-

sure in the chance encounter.⁹ Once again, technology is a significant factor. For as silent film, press, and popular song evolved toward sound film, a mass-circulation press with a high illustrated content, and recordings on disk, they increasingly opened “the vistas of the glance between the spaces of the city and beyond, so that the distant seaport, the Spanish bordello or the colonial deserts [could] be mapped back on to it—a collapsing of cartographic distance and its problem of inaccessibility into the topography of city mnemonics” (162). As Rifkin concludes, such reversals illustrate the extent to which the exotic otherness that attracted the legionnaire was linked to the city of Paris.¹⁰

The collapsed distinction between cartographic distance and urban mnemonics that Rifkin explores in terms of pleasure and exotic sexuality extends to signs of mood and feeling that served in popular songs as a background noise of daily life whose circulation among multiple listening publics destabilized meaning and allowed it to run wild: “For almost any sailor or soldier hero of a popular song could just as well open the way into the enjoyment of the male body as of the suffering of the city-street woman, time and again left abandoned by him” (138).¹¹

The plurality of meanings and contexts at the core of Rifkin’s Paris returns for Miller in a culminating chapter on the allure of the real and the exotic in Shanghai. Miller begins by maintaining that there were three Shanghais—the Shanghai of the Chinese, the Shanghai of the Anglo-Americans, and the Shanghai of the French—and that interplay among them made the city unlike any other in China. Much as Rifkin does for Paris, Miller portrays a cosmopolitan Shanghai by setting the raw energy that made it “the New York of the Pacific” against the mood and style of a city notorious for the magnetism it exerted on “the lowlife of the world” and “the demonic or seamy side of human character” (241). Predictably, this energy held market appeal for popular writers such as Joseph Kessel (*Wagon-Lit*) and Vicki Baum (*Shanghai '37*) who exploited to the full the city’s aura as a capital of international intrigue.

Moving between fiction and history, Miller studies images of Shanghai in popular literature alongside the roles the city played as a nexus of global revolution involving figures such as Chiang Kai-Shek, Nguyen Ai-Quoc (later known as Ho Chi Minh), and the Kuomintang (“national people’s party”) fictionalized by André Malraux in *Man’s Fate* (*La condition humaine*). Switching cultural registers, he notes a visiting Frenchman’s disappointment on dis-

covering that there was no train called the Shanghai Express and that the filthy counterpart he found in its place was nothing like the train Marlene Dietrich rode in Josef Von Sternberg's 1932 film (256). In fact, Miller refers only in passing to cinematic images of an exotic Shanghai in Hollywood features from *Shanghai Express* and Von Sternberg's 1941 follow-up, *The Shanghai Gesture* (starring Gene Tierney, Walter Huston, and Victor Mature) to *The Shanghai Story* (with Ruth Roman, Edmund O'Brien, and Richard Jaeckel) and the eminently forgettable 1989 *Shanghai Surprise*, starring Madonna and Sean Penn. This series suggests that the "intense envelopment of consciousness in contemporary history and contemporary affairs" (349) that Miller takes to be distinctive of the French between the wars is tempered by a desire for spectacle and irreality that persists in time and place well beyond France and the French between the wars.

Rifkin and Miller explore the role of the minor news item (*le fait divers*) as a nexus of the everyday and the exceptional in press sources ranging from *L'Illustration* and *Comoedia* to *Pour Vous* to *Voilà*. Curiously, they both single out the illustrated weekly, *Déetective*, whose investigations (*enquêtes*) linked scandals such as the Stavisky Affair and the terrorist bombings of right-wing CSAR extremists to the everyday lives of its readers. Rifkin, in particular, transforms *Déetective* into a city map of Paris and its readers into textual *flâneurs* or *flâneuses* whose readings "through cities and the suburbs, between the quartiers and social echelons, between the champagne and the cheap red wine, the Metropolis and the colonies, stabilize the spectacle as a condition of normality" (124).

Appearing first in October 1928 with an editorial team directed by Georges—brother of Joseph—Kessel, *Déetective*'s initial run of 300,000 copies grew within three years to 800,000 by perfecting a journalistic formula that reduced politics, crime, and entertainment to spectacle (*Outrage and Insight* 33-50).¹² Over the following decade, the weekly's "lurid reports of crime, investigation into the underworld, and *reportages* on the seamier side of society" fueled sales and notoriety to a point where, in 1932, the Paris Prefect of Police, Jean Chiappe, banned the posters that advertised it within the city limits (34). *Déetective* was also a commercial venture undertaken by the book publisher Gaston Gallimard in order to offset losses incurred elsewhere in his operations. As in the case of *Marianne*, the politico-cultural weekly that he created in 1932 to compete with rightwing rivals such as *Candide* and *Gringoire*, con-

tributors to *Détective* included prominent literary figures such as Francis Carco, Pierre Mac Orlan, Albert Londres, and Georges Simenon.¹³

The interwar version of *Détective* was a paraliterary phenomenon that straddled conventional literary practices and the illustrated press geared toward film and music.¹⁴ This alone did not distinguish the weekly from other dailies and weeklies that sought to boost sales by including specialized columns or sections such as sports, fashion, and so-called women's topics. What changed markedly between the wars grew from production technology that increased the number, variety, and illustration content of the mass-circulation press in the final decade before radio and postwar television displaced it. Eugen Weber argues convincingly for the primacy of the illustrated press when he evokes the mood of France in January 1934, less than a week before Serge Alexandre (born Alexandre Stavisky in the Ukraine), a Parisian theater owner and financier sought in connection with a junk-bond swindle involving high-ranking government officials, was shot dead in a ski chalet outside Chamonix. Weber first notes that some spectators attending a production of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* at the Comédie-Française extended the play's critique of corrupt government in ancient Rome toward the French parliament under Radical Party leadership. He then describes the face of a young woman on the cover of the January 4, 1934 issue of *Détective* where a caption on the weekly's lower left corner reads: "1934 opens anxious, panicked eyes on a future heavy with hatred, tragedies, and catastrophes."¹⁵

The switching of cultural register and medium display Weber's grasp of the moment. But what Weber describes in words, Rifkin also shows in a full-page reproduction (89) whose lighting from the side and below sets off a beaded curtain cutting the woman's nose down the middle while she raises her left hand toward her cheek in a gesture of fear. The effect is akin to an illumination by flash or strobe light that catches what Rifkin terms "the transience of the flesh vulnerable to the violence of the unexpected" (120). A sultry Marianne, the blonde woman on the cover of *Détective* exudes the very mood and style of what Rifkin and Miller show in word and image as distinctive features of France and the French between the wars.

What kinds of insight into France between the wars do the analyses of pleasure in *Street Noises* and of espionage in *Shanghai on*

the Métro provide in ways that historical accounts grounded in politics might not? Exactly what do they tell us about early twentieth-century France and . . . of what value is it? I want to offer two answers to these questions. The first involves an *excursus* into the recent past that begins with an imperative: "Il faut que la sémiologie descende dans la rue" 'semiology must go down into the street.' This slogan fashioned during the 1968 demonstrations in the Latin Quarter of Paris challenged semiology to forsake theory for the street. Rumor had it that the slogan first appeared on a blackboard at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes so that its initial *destinataire* might have been Roland Barthes, Gérard Genette, Christian Metz, or another master thinker of the period. Whatever its origin, it is reasonable to surmise in retrospect that the slogan expressed a view on the part of at least some *soixante-huitards* that the science of signs in society outlined 50 years earlier in Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* was—or had become—removed from the force of circumstances.

A decade later, Michel de Certeau described Manhattan as an urban island viewed through the haze stirred up by the winds from atop the World Trade Center. For de Certeau, the pleasure of the city viewed from above stimulated a scopic drive—a desire to see more—that the perception of the whole at a distance did not satisfy. Against imaginary ("theoretical") totalizations from above similar to the panoramic simulacra fashioned by the urban planner and cartographer, de Certeau asserted the city of ordinary practitioners living below the thresholds at which visibility began: "They walk—an elementary form this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thicks and the thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it."¹⁶

Rifkin never mentions de Certeau, but what I have called the liberatory ambitions of *Street Noises* display a number of affinities with the spatiality analyzed in *The Practice of Everyday Life* in conjunction with the minor ruses by which urbanites dealt with the constraints on movement imposed by architecture and city-planning. Much as de Certeau's walkers devised creative ways to trick or cheat systems of space and/or labor, Rifkin's figures of *zonard(e)*, immigrant, and sexual cruiser adapted the Parisian street to their own purposes. In terms of method, *Street Noises* builds on de Certeau's sense of the differences between the totalized urban entity conceived by the city-planner and cartographer and the more concrete (down to earth?) spatiality experienced by the urban walker.

Following de Certeau's trajectory, Marc Augé contends in *Un ethnologue dans le métro* that a distinctly Parisian privilege uses the map of the city's mass transit system—*le métro*—as a mnemonic device, “a release mechanism of remembrances, pocket mirror in which the larks of the past are momentarily reflected and brought to life.”¹⁷ For Augé, the roles played by certain metro stations in his life is secondary to the potential for the system to plot a topography of social space. Because this plotting also sets space into time, it promotes the same kind of layered composite that Rifkin illustrates with reference to Ménilmontant/Ménilmuche.

My second answer devolves from the expression “Atmosphère, atmosphère” spoken by the late singer and actress, Arletty, in her role as Raymonde in Marcel Carné's *Hôtel du Nord*. As it occurs in the Carné film released in December 1938, the expression conveys neither an explicit nor even an implied reference to anything more or other than Raymonde's disaffection with her live-in pimp and lover, Edmond, played by Louis Jouvet. Here—in brief—is what occurs in the scene toward the end of the film. Raymonde wants to leave with Edmond for a few days in Toulon in order to avoid some former accomplices of Edmond who want to kill him after serving prison time following a botched robbery for which they hold him accountable. Edmond, too, wants some kind of change, but what he wants does not to coincide with what Raymonde has in mind:

Raymonde: Pourquoi qu'on ne part pas pour Toulon? Tu t'incrustes tu t'incrustes; ça finira par faire du vilain.

Edmond: Et après.

Raymonde: Oh, t'as pas toujours été fatalitaire.

Edmond: Fataliste.

Raymonde: Si tu veux, le résultat est le même . . . Pourquoi tu l'as à la caille? On n'est pas heureux tous les deux?

Edmond: Non.

Raymonde: Tu est sûr?

Edmond: Oui.

Raymonde: T'aimes pas notre vie?

Edmond: Tu l'aimes, notre vie?

Raymonde: Faut bien, je m'y suis habituée. Coquard mis à part t'es plutôt beau mec. Par terre on se dispute, mais au lit on s'explique. Et sur l'oreiller on se comprend. Alors?

Edmond: Alors rien. J'en ai assez, tu saisis? Je m'asphyxie. Tu saisis, je m'asphyxie.

Raymonde: A Toulon y a de l'air puisqu'il y a la mer, tu respireras mieux!

Edmond: Partout où on ira ça sentira le pourri.

Raymonde: Allons à l'étranger, aux colonies.

Edmond: Avec toi?

Raymonde: C't'idée.

Edouard: Alors ça sera partout pareil. J'ai besoin de changer d'atmosphère et mon atmosphère, c'est toi.

Raymonde: C'est la première fois qu'on me traite d'atmosphère. Si je suis une atmosphère, tu es un drôle de bled! Ah là là, des types qui sont du milieu sans en être et qui crânent à cause de ce qu'ils ont été, on devrait les vider! Atmosphère, atmosphère, est-ce j'ai une gueule d'atmosphère? Puisque c'est ça vas-y tout seul à La Varenne! Bonne pêche et bonne atmosphère.

Raymonde: Why don't we leave for Toulon? You're in a rut, in a rut; it's going to turn out badly.

Edmond: And afterward.

Raymonde: Oh, you haven't always been fatalitarian.

Edmond: Fataliste.

Raymonde: If you say so, but the result is the same. . . . Why are you so cool and distant? Aren't we happy together?

Edmond: No.

Raymonde: Are you sure?

Edmond: Yes.

Raymonde: You don't like our life?

Edmond: Do you like our life?

Raymonde: I'd better, I'm used to it. The black eye notwithstanding, you're not such a bad guy. On the street we argue, but in private we make up. And in bed we get along. So?

Edmond: So nothing. I've had enough, get it? I can't breathe, can't breathe.

Raymonde: In Toulon there's fresh air because of the sea, you'll breathe better.

Edmond: Everywhere we go it will smell of rot.

Raymonde: Let's go abroad, to the colonies.

Edmond: With You?

Raymonde: How about it?

Edmond: It'll be the same everywhere. I need a change of atmosphere and my atmosphere is you.

Raymonde: This is the first time anyone has called me an atmosphere. If I'm an atmosphere, you're a weird kind of boondock. Oh boy! guys who are inside the crime world and who shouldn't be and who show off on account of what they were, they ought to be run out! Atmosphere, atmosphere, do I look like an atmosphere? If that's where it's at, then go on your own to La Varenne! Good fishing and good atmosphere to you!

Circumstance and representation oppose the nostalgia with which this scene and the entire film are usually linked. By which I mean to suggest that this scene is perhaps not just a conjugal spat. Further work in support of this reading against the grain might, for example, compare significant differences in the plot and tone of Carné's 1938 film treatment and Eugène Dabit's 1929 novel of the same title. (To be precise, the novel is titled *L'Hôtel du Nord* and the film *Hôtel du Nord*.) Alternatively, Carné's film might be situated within the ambiance (atmosphere?) of poetic realism deemed of late a distinctive aesthetic of French film between the wars. Finally, one might analyze the commercial considerations that brought established figures of the music hall (Arletty) and theater (Jouvet) to share billing with the rising box-office stars Annabella and Jean-Pierre Aumont.¹⁸ My remarks on *Hôtel du Nord* link a classic film of the 1930s with an approach that sets specific cultural practices within multiple contexts engaging film, politics, and the aesthetics of literary adaptation. After the fact, emphasis on a detail relocates meaning, with the potential insight hinging on a demonstration that the detail in question is meaningful and pertinent. As a result, Carné's film remains a constant point of reference, even while its meaning is reopened and extended. In this instance, the meaning of the scene showing Arletty and Jouvet on a footbridge over the Canal Saint Martin derives in large part from the dissonance that it stages within the Carné film and from the fact that it does not occur in Dabit's novel. I also want to suggest that Raymonde's final explosion of anger illustrates the extent to which politics—or, at least, the displacement of certain kinds of politics—always emerges within the symbolic engagement that links the Carné film to France in late 1938. In this sense, I fully concur with Christopher Faulkner when he writes that the most interesting and politically charged docu-

ments are often those that test the limits of existing social relations by disclosing how the potential for violence inherent within them derives from relations of power, such as those “between a center and its peripheries, a metropole and its regions, or one class, race, gender, culture, and another.”¹⁹

I have long been puzzled by the contrast in *Hôtel du Nord* between the rather predictable character types adapted from Dabit’s novel and the darker the Edmond/Paolo character portrayed by Louis Jouvet. (Once again, the characters of Raymonde and Edmond do not appear in Dabit’s novel.) Looking to the aesthetic of poetic realism links Edmond’s self-destructive *fatalisme* to the deep depression (*le cafard*) of Jean Rabe, the central protagonist of Pierre Mac Orlan’s 1928 novel, *Le Quai des brumes*, that Carné adapted with Jacques Prévert for the screen in the same year as *Hôtel du Nord*. Looking to the film’s release in December 1938, I consider that Raymonde’s outburst of discontent with an Edmond of whom she had had her fill could be seen in light of the second and final demise of Léon Blum’s Popular Front government with which a majority of the French had become similarly disenchanting. It is also the case that *Hôtel du Nord* appeared less than three months after the September 1938 Munich agreements at which France and England ceded the Sudetenland to Hitler in what proved to be a vain attempt to avoid war with Germany. Did Edmond/Paolo embody the mood—*fataliste* or *fatalitaire*—of a France for which the inevitability of war with Germany was now a matter of time?

In making these points I mean less to transform Carné’s film into a fully formed allegory of France in 1938 than to promote a reconsideration of how popular culture supplements more conventional accounts of politics and, especially, of culture linked to practices and insitutions of fiction, poetry, theater, and essay. Setting the illustrated press and feature film alongside practices of elite literature provides an expanded field of reference within which the interaction of culture and politics can be fruitfully explored in order to reassess a recent past quickly fading from lived experience.

Notes

1. In *Refus et violences: Politique et littérature à l’extrême droite des années trente aux retombées de la Libération* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), Jeannine Verdès-Leroux adopts a different strategy by extending what she terms *la fin de l’après-guerre* through 1939. In so doing, she enhances the

continuity of Franco-German tensions over some 30 years from the end of World War I through the aftermath of the Liberation.

2. Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse in Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989) 1-25.

3. Adrian Rifkin, *Street Noises: Parisian Pleasure, 1900-1940* (New York: Manchester UP, 1993) 3.

4. For more on the history of street lighting, see Wolfgang Schivelbusch, "The Policing of Street Lighting," *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 61-74.

5. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Methuen, 1979) 129. Perhaps not coincidentally, Hebdige contends on the same page that artistic expression and aesthetic pleasure are both intimately bound up with the destruction of existing codes and the formulation of new ones.

6. Michael B. Miller. *Shanghai on the Métro: Spies, Intrigue, and the French Between the Wars* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995) 4.

7. See also, Gilles Perrault, *The Red Orchestra*, trans. Peter Wiles (New York: Schocken, 1989). The book first appeared in 1969.

8. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 1991), especially chapters two and three.

9. Christopher Prendergast has shrewdly invoked Henry James concerning the prime requisite of the expert *flâneur* as the "simple, sensuous, confident relish of pleasure" (*Paris and the Nineteenth Century* [Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992]). At a later point, Prendergast argues that no city exists apart from the multitude of discourses that prompts it. Yet when he goes on to assert that one reads the structured space of the city as one reads the structured language of a book (Prendergast 38), he—like Rifkin—extends the reading/street-walking analogy to a point that elides irreducible differences between these two sites of semiosis and meaning.

10. Michael Sheringham, "Parisian Fields," *French Cultural Studies* 4 (1993): 195.

11. See Roger Chartier, "Texts, Printings, Readings," in Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989), 154-75.

12. My discussion of *Détective* draws on David H. Walker, "Cultivating the *Fait divers*: *Détective*," *Outrage and Insight: Modern French Writers and the 'Faits Divers'*" (New York: Berg, 1995) 33-50. See also Pierre Assouline, *Gaston Gallimard: A Half-Century in Publishing*, trans. Harold J. Salemson (New York: Harcourt, 1988).

13. In *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930* (New York: Viking, 1985), Jerrold Seigel framed

the boundaries of bourgeois life in proto-Surrealist visions of urban life in which technology, commodity relations, and advertising released the power of fantasy and the marvelous within the detail and fabric of the everyday. A quarter-century before 1924 *The Manifesto of Surrealism*, "it had become very difficult to separate the gestures best calculated to advertise artists from those that set them apart from the everyday world of commerce and utility" (Seigel 386). Along similar lines, while early twentieth-century figures such as Lucien Descaves and Francis Carco appeared in *Bohemian Paris* almost a decade before *Street Noises*, their reemergence within Rifkin's culture of Parisian pleasure underscores the insights yet to be gained concerning interwar France.

14. Richard Terdman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985).

15. Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s*, (New York: Norton, 1994, 134).

16. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: U of California P 1984) 93.

17. Marc Augé, *Un ethnologue dans le métro* (Paris: Hachette, 1986) 8. Other attempts to link urban subjectivity and Parisian underground transport include François Maspero, *Passagers du Roissy-Express* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), Annie Ernaux's *Journal du dehors* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), and—from a somewhat different perspective—Raymond Queneau's 1959 novel, *Zazie dans le métro*.

18. For recent work along these lines, see Edward Baron Turk, *Child of Paradise: Marcel Carné and the Golden Age of French Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989), Pascal Ory, *La Belle Illusion: Culture et politique sous le signe du Front populaire, 1935-1938* (Paris: Plon, 1994), and Dudley Andrew, *Mists of Regret: Culture and Sensibility in Classic French Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995). See also Jacques Siclier's "The Great Arletty," *Rediscovering French Film* Mary Lea Bandy, ed., (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1983) 127-30.

19. Christopher Faulkner, "Affective Identities: French National Cinema and the 1930s." *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 3.2 (Fall 1994): 4.

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