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## Screening America

LYNN A. HIGGINS\*

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Bertrand Tavernier nurtures a passion for American cinema – both Hollywood and independent – and for the history and culture of the United States. In 1963 at the age of twenty-two, having completed a first short sketch that would be released two years later in the collective film *Les Baisers*, and having put aside a small sum from his work as a critic and press attaché, he took his first opportunity to cross the Atlantic and then travelled by Greyhound bus from New York to California. During the forty years since, Tavernier has been a frequent and honoured traveller to many corners of the country, filming, lecturing, presenting his work on college campuses and at festivals, and visiting his many American friends. His American English, although accented, is fluent.

Tavernier's response to the United States blends curiosity with critique. In a 1986 interview with Jean-Pierre Coursodon, Tavernier asserted: 'I have a love-hate relationship with America, because I admire so many of its artists and reject so many of its values.'<sup>1</sup> Expanding on this theme elsewhere, he explained: 'Mes rapports avec l'Amérique sont assez compliqués. J'avais une véritable fascination mais qui ne se séparait jamais d'une certaine méfiance. En plus, cette fascination s'exerçait essentiellement envers une culture marginale: les écrivains de romans noirs, les jazzmen, les auteurs de série B, soit des gens que les Américains ne considéraient pas comme des artistes importants ou représentatifs.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J.-P. Coursodon, 'Round Midnight: An interview with Bertrand Tavernier', *Cinéaste* XV, 2 (1986), 19.

<sup>2</sup> 'Préface: Les Films des autres', interviewed by Thierry Frémaux in Tavernier, *Amis américains: entretiens avec les grands auteurs d'Hollywood* (Lyon: Institute Lumière/Actes Sud, 1993), 20.

These reflections demonstrate that Tavernier's position is not ambivalent, it is multi-faceted. When he fulminated against Jack Valenti, the Motion Picture Association of America and the lobby opposing the French 'exception culturelle', or when he accused American distributors of putting French films illegally into the public domain, his diatribe should not overshadow the fact that he has authored two impressive tomes about American cinema. Co-written with Jean-Pierre Coursodon in 1991 (and revised in 1995), *50 ans de cinéma américain*<sup>3</sup> contains a meticulously researched history of American cinematic institutions, events, 'talents' and films, both major and minor, followed by alphabetically-arranged essays on some seventy-five screenwriters and almost three hundred filmmakers. While encyclopedic, the book is unabashedly personal, and Tavernier's voice rings true to his other writings and to his films, and reveals his preoccupations: Hollywood politics, the ravages of censorship and McCarthyism, the ways laws and financing have shaped the profession, the ascendancy of the Hollywood industry and the narrowing of opportunities for independent art cinema. Not surprisingly, the same interests inform *Amis américains: entretiens avec les grands auteurs d'Hollywood* (1993), which includes substantial chapters on Tavernier favourites such as John Ford, Budd Boetticher, Delmer Daves, Robert Parrish, Jacques Tourneur and Robert Altman. The interviews and their prefaces, like the entries in *50 ans de cinéma américain*, leaven analysis with personal reflection.

Given the depth of his interest and the breadth of his knowledge, it is not surprising that his love-hate relationship with America is played out within Tavernier's films themselves. What interests me here is how this engagement can frequently be discerned in scenes of spectatorship. I propose therefore to examine three instances in which he dramatizes within a film's narrative a position in relation to American values and artistic practices. In each case, America is screened as a *mise-en-abyme* within the French cinematic and social text.

### The Perils of Mimesis

Tavernier's most negative perspective on American culture is to be found in *L'Appât*, winner of the Golden Bear at the 1995 Berlin Festival. Set in the Sentier garment district of Paris, the film portrays three vapid young people who resort to murder in pursuit of their dream of moving to 'les States' to build a ready-to-wear empire. Nathalie works in a shop and spends her evenings attracting men who might provide important contacts in the entertainment world. To procure funds to launch their scheme, her boyfriend

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<sup>3</sup> B. Tavernier and J.-P. Coursodon, *50 ans de cinéma américain* (Paris: Nathan, 1995). Previous edition *30 ans de cinéma américain* (1970).

Eric and his unemployed buddy, Bruno, use Nathalie as the bait: she will gain admittance to her dates' apartments, where her friends will then rob cash and valuables. Through incompetence and panic, breaking-and-entering lead to murder. Inspired by a 1984 *fait divers* and a true-crime account of it,<sup>4</sup> updated to the mid-1990s, the film shows the consequences of superficial values and get-rich-quick schemes. Despite the moral exemplum, the three characters are engaging and believable, and viewers are swept along by the film's fast pacing and the intensity of the trio's drive toward self-destruction, as inexorable as a classical tragedy.

Mimesis is the dominant *modus operandi* adopted by the three young murderers of *L'Appât*: they identify with characters in fanzines, advertisements and movies, modelling their expectations and behaviour accordingly. As the most insistent purveyors of such models, the visual media are targeted relentlessly. At every turn, the ambient culture proclaims what Tavernier calls the 'dictature de l'argent'.<sup>5</sup> Within this milieu, young people pursue fantasy ambitions by means of cartoon strategies adopted wholesale from facile entertainments. Consequently, their behavior is a patchwork of clichés. For them, the world is full of rich lawyers with vaults hidden behind paintings. Moreover, the trio seek victims who are older, more successful versions of themselves: materialist, glib, and without moral compass. Robbing and killing their doubles in order to become more like them, the murderers thus perform a kind of ritual (self-)sacrifice or a form of cannibalism.

Tavernier suggests in interviews that the central moral challenge he faced was that of positioning his spectators. Since the criminals' worldview is shaped by media, in order to ensure that the film itself does not reproduce the faulty vision of its protagonists, Tavernier seeks to avoid tempting his spectator to desire violence as a voyeuristic commodity. The distance between these two positions can indeed be felt in the difference between the spectatorial behaviour of the characters and that demanded of us as spectators of *L'Appât*. We see that Nathalie, Bruno and Eric are avid consumers of media violence. We are forced to experience the horror of the crimes, but we do not watch the murders.

*L'Appât* constitutes Tavernier's second meditation on the morality of the image in its institutional contexts. *La Mort en Direct* [*Death Watch*, 1978] concerns a reporter with a camera embedded in his eye. When he is hired by a television station to film 'en direct' a dying woman's final weeks, his story provides an opportunity to examine the moral choices involved in the production of images. *L'Appât* continues that exploration, this time targeting the image as commodity. Both films are acutely self-conscious: the characters'

<sup>4</sup> Morgan Sportès, *L'Appât* (Paris: Seuil, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> 'Entretien avec Bertrand Tavernier' in *L'Appât, un film de Bertrand Tavernier*, press booklet for *L'Appât* (1995), n.p.

practices as producers or consumers of images function as *mises-en-abyme* and thus serve as cautionary counterexample to the film as a whole. In both cases, Tavernier experiments with ways to avoid gratifying voyeuristic impulses while instead awakening moral conscience.

Within the blanket and often unsubtle condemnation of the society of the spectacle, Tavernier notes the particular 'importance qu'a prise l'Amérique dans l'imaginaire visuel des jeunes'.<sup>6</sup> American visual culture is conveyed by incorporating *en abyme* an American movie 'hero' who inspires the young men's ambitions. In the opening sequence, Nathalie arrives home to find her two friends watching – for the twentieth time, she estimates – their favourite video: *Scarface*. Significantly, the intertext here is not Howard Hawks's classic 1932 *Scarface*, starring Paul Muni, which Tavernier considers a 'chef-d'oeuvre',<sup>7</sup> but rather the more horrific 1983 version by Brian De Palma with Al Pacino. After reviewing De Palma criticism in *50 ans de cinéma américain*, Tavernier and Coursodon conclude about the filmmaker that 'nous nous rangerions plutôt du côté de ses détracteurs' because 'la réussite de la forme ne rachète pas nécessairement un propos souvent douteux'. They include *Scarface* among the 'bon nombre de films de De Palma [qui] s'enlisent [...] après un départ prometteur. Dans tous les cas, c'est la même tendance au rabâchage, la même accumulation d'effets chocs qui affaiblissent notre intérêt. Le carnage interminable qui occupe la fin de *Scarface* en est peut-être l'exemple le plus flagrant.' At the same time (and here, of course, lies the danger), 'mais on ne peut pas nier son sens très aigu de l'expression visuelle, le plaisir communicatif de filmer [...] le pouvoir euphorisant de certaines séquences.'<sup>8</sup> Since the extended reference to *Scarface* in *L'Appât* does not figure in the *fait divers*, Tavernier's choice meaningfully loads the dice against a certain American cinema.

Like the three young criminals of *L'Appât*, Tony Montana, the protagonist of De Palma's *Scarface*, is engaged in a monstrously perverted version of the American dream. The mimetic madness is more complicated still, because Tony Montana in his turn (like Belmondo in *A Bout de souffle*) models his style after Humphrey Bogart. Montana's brutal death, face down and leaking blood into the lavish swimming pool inside his mansion, recalls the greatest literary incarnation of the American dream gone wrong, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.<sup>9</sup> Bruno's bloody jeans soaking in the bidet are thus a pathetic, ironic – even farcical – reenactment of that fatal drama. What is more, the similarly apocalyptic ending of Matthieu Kassovitz's *La Haine* (1994) alludes to De Palma's *Scarface* through the ironic presence of an airline advertisement in both films: a globe bearing a banner inscribed: 'Pan

<sup>6</sup> *L'Appât, Un Film de Bertrand Tavernier*.

<sup>7</sup> *Amis américains*, 52.

<sup>8</sup> *50 ans de cinéma américain*, 418, 422.

<sup>9</sup> First published in New York by Scribner in 1925.

American: The world is yours' can be seen as Montana falls to his death. 'Le Monde est à vous' proclaims the advertisement at the bloody ending of *La Haine*. The inclusion of *Scarface* within *L'Appât* thus opens out a story within a story within a story, a loop of images running from Hollywood's Cuban immigrants in Miami to African immigrants in the Parisian suburbs to money-hungry youthful middle-class schemers, in an endless chain of damaged and dangerous dreamers. In all these fictions, the fantasy of America is a nihilistic vision of quick success, with no reward except death at the end, and no effort expended along the way. It is ironic but not coincidental that the trio in *L'Appât* opt for off-the-rack 'ready mades' in both clothing and dreams.

Unlike De Palma's or even Hawks's *Scarface*, however, and unlike Jay Gatsby, the protagonists of *L'Appât* harbour flaws of vision that are literal. The teenagers don't dream the wrong dream; they watch the wrong movie. In the historical context in which Tavernier's film was made – the 'GATT spat' and MPAA president Jack Valenti's fierce lobbying against *l'exception culturelle française* – Tavernier's choice of De Palma allows him to vent his rancour at Valenti and Company without compromising his passion for the classic masterpieces of American cinema.

While Tavernier faults the widespread obsession with money and the violence of popular culture, the film itself suggests that the problem may be less the images themselves than a failure of visual literacy. This becomes clearer once one recognizes that spectatorship in the film revolves around screens in two senses. Video technology permits the young men to replay *Scarface* endlessly on their television screen. They may choose to repeat one scene over and over and perhaps never watch the ending at all. The screen can thus also serve to 'screen' or mask: it prevents their knowing what they are doing. Were they able to decipher the screened scene and really (fore)see its ending, they might have a chance to understand their own role in the larger drama.

Because they both display and hide crucial knowledge, the film's inner screens function like its many doors, which both contain and exclude. During the first burglary, the spectator waits with Nathalie outside the victim's door as her friends torture and kill him. Unlike more typical examples of the crime thriller genre, *L'Appât* contains no parallel detective plot, so that until the police actually arrive, we cannot know whether these kids will be caught, whether or how the violence will end. The spectator thus experiences claustrophobic entrapment in the scene, powerless either to escape or to intervene in the violence taking place behind the closed door. Unlike the spectator, Nathalie simply refuses to think about it: instead, she increases the volume on her Walkman to drown out the victim's screams. During the second murder, she cowers on the couch outside, watching music television. The content of the 'clip' she watches is significant: a froglike monster in underwater pursuit of a swimming woman. Nathalie's panicky

expression is perhaps a response to the televised images or the insufficiently-muffled screams in the next room, or perhaps the two merge to form the visuals and soundtrack of a single movie. Because she watches it to screen out the deadly drama taking place behind the closed door, the televised image simultaneously displaces the crime and reveals it metaphorically. Had she been able (or willing) to decipher it, she might have read and understood her own role as bait.

Tavernier has suggested that the murder scene as recounted at the trial resonated with him because he remembered an episode in *La Guerre sans nom*, his documentary about Algerian war veterans. One interviewee in that 1992 film recounted having inadvertently glanced into a room in which an Algerian prisoner was being tortured by French 'information agents'. Like Nathalie, he simply closed the door, blocking out the scene both visually and psychologically.

Because of its dual nature as both metaphor and metonymy – as constitutive element and also as microcosm or interior duplication of the larger (filmic, social) text – the visual and narrative *mise-en-abyme* structures of *L'Appât* simultaneously replace the violence and suggest its cause. The murder scenes and the *Scarface* sequences provide both a mimetic model for the youths and a way for them to avoid knowing what they are doing. Living in a world of appearances-for-sale is thus both a metaphor for the void in their hearts and its cause. At the end, a policeman shouts at Nathalie to 'Arrête ton cinéma', but it is too late.

## Nostalgia

In his fictional *Round Midnight* (*Autour de Minuit*, 1986) and his documentary *Mississippi Blues* (1983), Tavernier indulges his 'fascination [...] envers une culture marginale', in this case black jazz and blues musicians respectively. Both were filmed in English, and both seek to give voice to 'des gens que les Américains ne considéraient pas comme des artistes importants'. In both films, once again, Tavernier's stance toward the United States (this time affectionate) is conveyed through figures of spectatorship.

Made and narrated jointly with his American colleague Robert Parrish, *Mississippi Blues* takes the form of a 'pilgrimage', as the opening voiceover calls it: a French film crew led by a native guide (Parrish) undertake a quest into *l'Amérique profonde* for the source of the blues, which they find in rural churches, diner kitchens, and peeling tarpaper shanties. The folk musicians they meet share a triple marginality with respect to dominant American culture: they are black, they are southern, and their music passes unnoticed by the mainstream. The filmmakers seek to document an undervalued, disappearing culture, a theme whose nostalgic tone matches Tavernier's preferred lighting: that of the fading day and of autumn. (The film's working title was *Pays d'octobre*.)



A French perspective can be detected in the film's verbal and visual ethnography, its essay quality, and its open-ended narrative shape. While most obviously a documentary, however, *Mississippi Blues* presents as well a blend of two Hollywood genres: the 'road movie' and the 'buddy movie'. Beginning at the tomb of William Faulkner (a writer more widely appreciated in France than in the United States), the venture is immediately placed under the banner of historical national alliances when a cemetery guardian evokes Franco-American friendship during the Second World War. The theme is subsequently driven home when the crew reverently contemplates a plaque announcing the bond between the remote Delta town of Paris (Mississippi) and Aubigny-sur-Nère, France. Later still a toothless black singer improvises a blues song in honour of the Champs-Élysées, a location whose existence he had discovered just moments before.

The central 'buddies', however, are Parrish and Tavernier, whose conversation serves as narration. As Parrish explains, 'My French friend – Bertrand Tavernier [...] and his crew knew the mystery of the South only through books and films.' Doesn't this remind you of Nick Ray or Flaherty or *Lost Horizons*, they ask each other. What films can you name that were made in Oxford, Mississippi? When Tavernier asks Parrish to name the best film about the South, Parrish, a Southerner himself (from Georgia), replies that his favourite was made by a filmmaker from the south ... of France: Renoir's *The Southerner*.

The buddy movie framework provides the pretext for a revealing spectator sequence, with Tavernier playing the role of apprentice American. Parrish is attempting to enlighten Tavernier about what it meant to be a Southern Baptist: as a boy, he was taught to fear Catholics, and he recalls crossing the street in front of the Catholic church, lest the hobgoblins catch him. (Tavernier: 'What is a hobgoblin, Bob?') Standing near an Oxford church, Parrish reminisces that 'The catholic church in our town was very much like that one there.' Cut to a black-and-white sequence showing two boys, whose dress and speech recall movies of the 1940s and early 1950s, and who dare each other to walk slowly by the Catholic church, the very church we have just seen in colour. One boy accepts the challenge, but at the last minute breaks into a run. The shot ends as the boys race past Parrish and Tavernier, still in colour and grown up. Parrish concludes: 'Just like that.'

In a follow-up sequence, Parrish explains religious practices more typical of southern African-American churches than more conservative white congregations – activist preaching, for example, and the physically and emotionally expressive singing of spirituals. The camera then moves outside and once again into black and white, where the several white boys (including the two we have already seen) approach stealthily, pull the door slightly ajar, and peek at the service in progress within (still in colour). At the sight, the boys take fright and flee across a graveyard.

Play with black, white, and colour is of course meaningful in a film about



race. These sequences function simultaneously as illustration – a film clip, shared between two *cinéphiles*, from a hypothetical period movie – and as imaginary autobiographical flashbacks. Significantly, there are two boys. If one is clearly associated with Parrish (who narrates the sequence as a memory from his childhood), the other stands in for Tavernier, who creates for himself what amounts to a fantasy American childhood. He even takes an American name – Bert – and first appears on screen acquiring one of an American boy's essential skills: the opening credits show the film crew playing baseball with a group of locals, images that dramatize what Tavernier likes about America – its spirit of competition and an emphasis on team play. Throughout, numerous moments project the French filmmaker into an American life, an imaginary citizenship dominated by the values and artists he admires.

*Mississippi Blues* begins in the 'Deep South' and follows the historical path of jazz northward from the Mississippi River Delta up Route 61. *Round Midnight* continues that journey to France. That film opens in 1959 Paris, where young French jazz enthusiast Francis (François Cluzet), lacking the cover charge for admission to a club, crouches in the rain outside to listen to his American idol, bebop saxophonist Dale Turner. He will succeed in meeting Turner, welcoming him as a guest in his home, and rescuing him from demon alcohol for a time. This straightforward plot is enriched by the fact that like Tavernier, Francis is both a jazz fan and an artist: he creates movie posters for a living (notably for Warner distributors of American films in Europe). He also makes home movies. This places him at the center of a series of *mises-en-abyme* and allows the film's anecdote to function simultaneously as a fiction, a historical nostalgia piece, and as Tavernier's personal tribute to his favourite artists. By inviting Dale to Tavernier's native Lyon, selling his movie posters to Warner (who helped fund *Round Midnight*), and other similar details, Francis becomes the filmmaker's autobiographical stand-in.

The character of Dale is informed by multiple sources. Adapted from a biography of pianist Bud Powell by his French fan and rescuer Francis Paudras,<sup>10</sup> the fictional musician also incorporates elements from the lives of saxophonists Lester Young and Dexter Gordon (who plays the role). The history of Franco-American friendship breaks the surface on several occasions, such as when Dale playfully reminds Francis that he and his fellow GIs liberated Paris (while letting de Gaulle take the credit) and in references to generations of African-American artists who sought refuge in an adopted country that treated them better than their homeland.

Tavernier's American cinephilia also contributes to the composite portrait of the American jazz musician. Among the components of the character is

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<sup>10</sup> *La Danse des infidèles* (Paris: Éditions de l'Instant, 1986).

John Ford. One of the young Tavernier's duties as press attaché during Ford's 1967 Paris visit was to keep his charge from drinking himself silly, a task at which he was only partially successful. 'Les quelques jours où j'ai travaillé avec John Ford à Paris ont été une des sources d'inspiration d'*Autour de minuit*,' he acknowledges in *Amis américains*. 'Tous ces jours, toutes ces nuits passés à l'empêcher de boire, à cacher les verres sous les canapés, sous le lit, à essayer de le protéger, je les revivais en écrivant ce film et surtout en le tournant avec Dexter Gordon.'<sup>11</sup> Tavernier's friend Martin Scorsese is also visible in the mix, in the role of Turner's New York agent.

The film ends as it began, with another representation of Francis as spectator of Dale, this time in a montage of imbricated commemorations several years after the musician's death in New York. The scene begins in colour at a memorial concert in New York intercut with images of the saxophonist. A shot of a simple tombstone follows, as viewed by Francis standing beside a car. This fades to the same shot in black and white on a smaller screen within the larger frame. The inner frame recedes to include Francis (in colour), and we realize that we are seeing the image Francis had captured at the gravesite. We are (he is) viewing a movie he has compiled that shows himself, his daughter, and Dale engaged in activities we have previously experienced in colour, as they happened. The interior movie finally enlarges to fill the entire screen, so that Tavernier's film and Francis's coincide, until the credits begin with a notice dedicating the film to Bud Powell and Lester Young.

Framed within the outer film, Francis's home movie thus enacts mourning in the very way that Roland Barthes describes the photograph. For Barthes, the photograph – unlike filmic images that convey a sense of presence in the present – evokes what is past (passed) and gone. The viewer (Francis, for example) who contemplates this 'micro-expérience de la mort' becomes an Orphic figure who seeks (and fails) to resurrect the dead through the 'vérité originelle du Noir-et-Blanc'.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Parrish's (Tavernier's) imaginary flashback commemorated fading cultural traditions remembered from a southern childhood. In both cases, imbrications of black-and-white within colour – Tavernier's fantasy American childhood; Francis's tribute to Dale within Tavernier's to Powell and Young (and to Dexter Gordon, who died in 1990) – interweave layers of Franco-American cultural relations, making film itself into a figure of friendship and nostalgia.

## Adaptation

Tavernier's most complex approach to American culture is to be found in

<sup>11</sup> *Amis américains*, 47.

<sup>12</sup> Barthes, *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 30, 128.

*Coup de torchon* (1981). Once again, he draws from 'creators America ignores, underrates, or rejects', here an 'auteur de série B'. The film is adapted from pulp novelist Jim Thompson's *Pop. 1280*,<sup>13</sup> which recounts the downfall of a sheriff in a Western Texas town. Published in 1964, the novel's references to slavery and its savage portrayal of racism reflect its publication during the era of the Civil Rights movement. In 1966, *Pop. 1280* was translated into French as the 1000th volume in Gallimard's *Série noire*.<sup>14</sup> That Thompson achieved greater fame in France than in the U.S. was perhaps attributable to his ability to combine pulp themes with a distinctly modernist *écriture*. *Pop. 1280*'s Nick Corey, on whom Tavernier based his Lucien Cordier (Philippe Noiret), is a damaged man, and like other Thompson anti-heroes, he harbours a hidden 'sickness' that manifests itself in violence. Thompson's genius is to show his characters' slide into perdition not simply as a symptom of post-traumatic shock, but as a cosmic evil force, an original sin which they fail to overcome. His brutal protagonists thus never appear entirely unsympathetic because their sickness is social as well as individual, a dimension which also helps explain Tavernier's interest in transposing the novel to French West Africa on the eve of World War II.

Once again, there is a scene of spectatorship in Tavernier's film: Lucien, his wife, his mistress, a schoolteacher, and townspeople gather around an outdoor movie screen. The evening's programme includes *Alerte en Méditerranée*,<sup>15</sup> released in 1938, the year in which *Coup de torchon* is set. We view a few shots (once again in black-and-white framed within colour), but more significant for our purposes this time than the film's content are the circumstances surrounding its projection. The film is French, but the event is adapted to the local setting: as in some traditions of shadow-puppet theatre (Indonesian for example), spectators sit on both sides of the screen, the images are narrated orally in the local language, and the community of spectators plays an active role, commenting, shouting, even throwing their own shadows onto the screen. The festivities are interrupted by a windstorm that chases the spectators away and rips the screen from its moorings. *Alerte en Méditerranée* provides a parable of the process of transnational adaptation to local conditions, and such is the challenge that Tavernier set himself in adapting Jim Thompson's novel.

But it is not only – or perhaps not even primarily – Thompson's novel that Tavernier adapts in *Coup de torchon*. Jill Forbes has pointed to the *polar* genre as 'a crucial means through which the relationship between the French cinema and the American was articulated'.<sup>16</sup> A similar dynamic underlies

<sup>13</sup> Jim Thompson, *Pop. 1280* (New York: Vintage, 1964).

<sup>14</sup> *1275 âmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

<sup>15</sup> I have not been able to view this film. If a copy is available anywhere, I would be most grateful to know about it.

<sup>16</sup> *The Cinema in France After the New Wave* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 73.

*Coup de torchon* in another more implicit scene of spectatorship that spotlights the filmmaker himself as fan of the western. Tavernier sees the American genre as a model and inspiration:

J'ai toujours vu la conquête de l'Ouest comme une représentation métaphorique de l'histoire américaine. Et le western comme le genre qui intègre le plus clairement les thèmes et les conflits idéologiques sur lesquels repose le cinéma américain. Rapports entre la nature et la civilisation, entre la collectivité et l'individu, entre le groupe organisé et l'homme sauvage, entre la foi et le doute. Je reste fasciné par leur représentation filmique.<sup>17</sup>

*Coup de torchon* appropriates an American genre, adapting it to a new context, a different audience, and for different purposes.

If its Western desert is America's primal scene, as Jean Baudrillard has remarked,<sup>18</sup> then the African desert plays that role in the French imaginary as portrayed in *Coup de torchon* and elsewhere. Superimposing the *mission civilisatrice* on the doctrine of Manifest Destiny requires only a semantic shift in the term 'West'. *Fort Saganne*, Alain Corneau's 1984 historical epic of French North Africa before *La Grande Guerre*, recuperates colonialism as a heroic narrative of conquest and brotherhood, as a crucible for manhood. While as we have seen, elsewhere Tavernier is avowedly nostalgic, neither in *Coup de torchon* nor anywhere else does he evince this sort of sentiment toward France's colonial past. Nostalgia for a *cinematic* past, however, and specifically here for the western, takes the form of joking references to specific films. For example, the schoolteacher's arrival at Bourkassa-Ourbanguï mirrors almost shot for shot a sequence in Victor Fleming's *The Virginian* (1929) showing the arrival of another schoolteacher in the uncivilized western frontier. (Tavernier even includes mooing sounds that must have emanated from *The Virginian*, since there are no cows in *Coup de torchon*!) But Tavernier's film is an adaptation, or *détournement*, or even a critique of Fleming's vision: any heroism that might be implied in the move away from hyper-civilization is overshadowed by Cordier's descent into a hellish heart of darkness.

The differences between *Coup de torchon*'s vision and that found in *The Virginian* derive in part from the fact that Tavernier owes his concept of the western less to Fleming than to Ford. In his essay on Ford, Tavernier notes that the American director whom he calls 'Le Parrain' favours moments of historical transition, an observation applicable to Tavernier himself. He also admires Ford's conception of the collective protagonist, observing that in

<sup>17</sup> *Amis américains*, 21.

<sup>18</sup> *America*, trans Chris Turner (London/NY: Verso, 1988), 28. Originally *Amérique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).

Ford's version of the western, 'Prédominant [...] les voyages, les pérégrinations: [une] lente odyssee [...] d'émigrants [...] d'une patrouille [...] d'une famille [...] dont le plus cher désir est de fonder une société.'<sup>19</sup> He approvingly interprets Ford's resistance to individualistic heroism as an attempt to distance himself from dominant conservative American ideology.

Both *Pop. 1280* and *Coup de torchon* portray as much the destruction of a community as the downfall of an individual. Tavernier's vision blends Thompson's nihilistic black humour with Ford's communitarian values, his framing and long shots that situate the individual within a geographical and a human landscape, and his focus on transitional historical moments. *Coup de torchon* uses American genre conventions to stage a sharp critique of French colonialism, and also possibly the reverse: incorporating the western into the French tradition of the *film colonial*, it rereads American frontier heroism and 'la conquête de l'ouest'. *Coup de torchon* could thus on several counts be considered an inversion of the western, what André Bazin called a 'sur-western'<sup>20</sup> and what I am inclined to call instead a post-western: the story of the unmaking of a society, the eclipse of community, a decline-of-the-West western, an Odyssey as apocalypse. One of the features that makes *Coup de torchon* a masterpiece is the dialectical nature of its adaptation: from novel to film, from Texas to Africa, a dialogue between a French sensibility and a quintessentially American genre.

The three modes of transnational intertextuality outlined above embody fantasies of the United States as object of fear, desire, criticism and inspiration. I believe that positioning Tavernier in relation to America helps situate him within French cinema as well. Even his appreciation of American cinema has a French frame of reference. His affinity with American artists helped launch his career from an oppositional position with relation to cultural politics and established cinephilia in France. In the context of 1960s anti-Americanism, he recalls that 'aimer le cinéma américain était une manière de se battre contre la culture officielle, contre l'intelligentsia de gauche ou d'extrême gauche qui mettait les films américains au ban.' Discussing his early film criticism published in rival journals, he notes playfully that 'Moi, je ne me situais pas par rapport à un clan. Cela m'amusa de défendre Fuller dans *Positif* et Daves dans les *Cahiers*. Un peu comme Julien Benda qui disait se sentir de droite avec les gens de gauche et de gauche avec les gens de droite.'<sup>21</sup> His is neither a popular cinema nor is it purely for an elite (perhaps it aims for both), nor does his passion for American cinema mean that he will subordinate himself to Hollywood either by ingesting it or by

<sup>19</sup> *Amis américains*, 53.

<sup>20</sup> André Bazin, *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 230.

<sup>21</sup> 'Préface: Les Films des autres', 20.

rejecting it. Rather, his interest in American cinema helps him define his identity as an *auteur* without locating himself too specifically, be it in the wake of the *Nouvelle Vague* or via a return to a 'cinéma de qualité'. In this way, he is able to sustain a position that can be 'contestataire' with respect to both American and French values. His thinking about America thus serves as a foil for defining his own identity as an artist.