



## “50 Different Ways”: Murder and Narration in *La chienne* and *Scarlet Street*

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“**T**here’s no scene in any movie that 50 different directors couldn’t have done 50 different ways,” director Paul Mazursky once observed.<sup>1</sup> The claim at once seems hyperbolic, yet a comparison of Jean Renoir’s *La chienne* (1931) to Fritz Lang’s remake *Scarlet Street* (1945) reveals the truth of the statement. Each film concerns an introverted cashier who, smitten with a woman nearly half his age, murders her in what appears to be a fit of passion, after which her boyfriend is convicted and sentenced to death. Renoir’s version, considerably more demure and ironic, resists facile pigeonholing in terms of genre and dramatic intent. Partly a social comedy, its random and loose narrative structure includes the murder as an unexpected twist. In contrast, Lang’s remake is partly indebted to *noir* conventions, and moreover its construction of character is more rigorously integrated to a tightly woven script. Despite having some moments of wry humour of its own, its narrative nonetheless moves headlong towards its grim finale at a sufficiently accelerated pace that appears fatalistic, evoking what Tom Gunning has aptly termed the “Destiny-machine,” the presumed “thematic core” in all of Lang’s films by which “individuality and even desire always become subsumed into larger impersonal and even sinister systems.” (xii).

Critics including Gunning have already commented on the stylistic discrepancies between both films. However, such discussions are typically grounded in broader analyses of each director’s work; depending on the subject of study, the discussion

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<sup>1</sup>Cited in Bordwell and Thompson 316.

is slanted to the Renoir film, for example, with only minimal attention paid to the Lang, or vice versa.<sup>2</sup> When both films have been studied together, the insights have tended to be largely interpretive.<sup>3</sup> While these analyses are certainly of interest, they speak only partly to the kind of stylistic concerns raised by the Mazursky quote at the start of this essay.

This paper will analyze how Renoir and Lang, in each version, stage and edit the aforementioned murder scene in relation to each film's intrinsic norms of storytelling, character construction, and style. This is therefore an essay primarily concerned with narration, based on David Bordwell's work on narrative poetics, and with a secondary focus on characterization based on Murray Smith's theory of cinematic character construction. While both Smith and Bordwell address the role of the spectator in comprehending and responding to film narrations and characters, this essay will be primarily concerned with stylistic analysis in order to reveal how each director's approach to narration informs the depiction of the murder.

David Bordwell's account of norms, in his text *Narration in the Fiction Film*, sheds light on some of the more precise patterns in filmic narration (149-155). A “norm,” as the word suggests, is a convention or discernible practice according to which a film may be constructed. However, Bordwell also distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic norms -- that is to say, norms that are either identifiable as being extraneous to a given film, or specific to the text in question.

One never watches films in a vacuum and as such, one usually understands a given film in relation to other works of its kind, as well as its historical and cultural context. In *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954), one is tempted to believe that L.B. Jefferies' (James Stewart) suspicions of murder, while hardly an everyday phenomenon in external reality, are entirely founded as malicious acts of this kind

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<sup>2</sup>See Gunning 308-312 or Sesonske 98.

<sup>3</sup>See for example E. Ann Kaplan's feminist interpretation, which, while offering some stylistic analysis, tends to subordinate the latter to the former.

are business as usual in an Alfred Hitchcock film. It is part of the norm of suspense films that a crime will be committed and, moreover, that by the end of the movie, the crime will have been solved and the criminal will be apprehended; this can be considered an extrinsic norm which *Rear Window* fulfils. More specifically, Bordwell notes that not all the norms exercised throughout the film are common to Hitchcock's oeuvre or suspense melodramas. Here, Bordwell introduces the general notion of the primacy effect.<sup>5</sup> In short, one forms expectations of what kind of film one is watching based on the information supplied in the opening scenes; thus, the subsequent scenes in any film will serve to confirm, undermine or revise the initial expectations of the viewer. For Bordwell, “[t]he first few scenes in *Rear Window* imply that we will be confined to what can be seen from Jeff's apartment.” (151). This therefore can be grasped as the intrinsic *spatial* norm of the film.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, films can also have intrinsic *temporal* norms; for example, if the film is happening in “real time,” or makes abundant use of cross-cutting, flashbacks or split-screen effects as seen in *Nick of Time*, (John Badham, 1995); *Intolerance*, (D.W. Griffith, 1916); *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), and Brian De Palma's *Dressed to Kill*, 1980.

No less significantly, intrinsic norms can be “transgressed” (Bordwell 1985: 150) and this may serve to jolt or surprise spectators. *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1975) cues spectators from the opening credits that the shark's presence will be signalled by forward and upward tracking subjective shots throughout the ocean, accompanied by John Williams's repetitive score. A corollary to this is the expectation that one will never actually get to see the shark due to Spielberg's

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<sup>5</sup>At the risk of over-simplifying, one can say that according the primacy effect, first impressions are what counts. When encountering fictional characters for the first time, to say nothing of people in real life, our initial perception and understanding of them will most likely be defining, and will even serve as a kind of filter for any subsequent information we are given of them. See Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 37-38.

<sup>6</sup>Note that “specific” need not mean “unique” or “exclusive.” Plenty of films other than *Rear Window* confine their action to a single locale, particularly if they are film adaptations of theatrical plays. This is not unique to *Rear Window*. More importantly, there is no historical precedent for associating stage-bound narratives to crime thrillers or suspense melodramas, the latter two terms perhaps best designating what one is liable to expect from a Hitchcock film. It saves one a great deal of confusion if, when theorizing about norms, one remembers that individual films are almost always understood as belonging or being assimilable to a more general category.

reliance on first-person perspective. This is true of the first half, only for the film to break this expectation in the second half, providing a glimpse of the shark during one of the killings to the audience's surprise (albeit with Williams' score). This in turn sets a new pattern for the shark's presence, as it begins to appear in various shots from then on, usually surfacing in the water in anticipation of an attack, without the film's usual stylistic markers, particularly the subjective tracking shots and Williams' recognizable score. By then, spectators may have become so accustomed to the film's intrinsic norm of presenting the shark that its sudden eruptions in the midst of a shot stand as a veritable surprise. In short, as Bordwell reminds us, “the concept of intrinsic norm lets us study narration as a dynamic phenomenon, capable of developing through the film and shaping or challenging expectations in the process.” (151). The challenge of film analysis becomes the task of more accurately identifying and pinpointing the dynamically shifting norms of a given text. A film's “norm-shifting,” if you will, is never as simple as one might be first tempted to think, and can rarely be reduced to uniform conceptions of style, genre, auteur, or period.

Turning to *Scarlet Street*, one might say that among the film's intrinsic norm is that it gradually makes use of subjective point-of-view shots to mimic the protagonist's increasing insanity. More to the point, its slippages into subjective shots stand in contrast, as we shall soon see, with an otherwise distanced shot selection and tone – part of the film's richly woven style is that it appears at once as a sardonic and alienating black comedy, as well as a sincerely and intimately focused tragedy.

The plot centres on Chris Cross (Edward G. Robinson), a modest cashier and amateur painter, who hazards one night upon a man beating a woman. He intervenes, and in the ensuing scuffle, the assailant makes a getaway. Little does he know that the man and woman, Johnny (Dan Duryea) and Katherine, aka “Kitty” (Joan Bennett), are lovers and will soon proceed to take advantage of him, believing him to be a wealthy, famous painter. Chris agrees to foot the bill when

Katherine takes up a new apartment, stealing from his company to do so. When he learns that Johnny and Katherine have been deceiving him, he stabs Katherine to death. It is Johnny, however, who is convicted for the murder, but not before Chris loses his job, goes insane and winds up living alone on the street.

Despite its fatalism, it is only partly accurate to describe *Scarlet Street* as a *noir* film.<sup>7</sup> As Tom Gunning has indicated, “if one invokes Aristotle's understanding of comedy as the portrayal of characters that are inferior to us, *Scarlet Street* certainly maintains through most of its course a comic, or at least ironic and satiric, tone” (311). The film initially portrays character-types and situations that one might provisionally associate with screwball comedies – the henpecked husband (Chris Cross), as well as Johnny's mixture of slang and swagger that could just as easily be out of a newspaper room comedy and at the level of the story, a simple misunderstanding that quickly escalates into an elaborate deception. The scene in which Kitty misinterprets Chris's hobby for a presumably lucrative profession is milked for a considerable amount of irony. Concluding that he is rich and famous, she exclaims: “To think I took you for a cashier.” Chris, in one of the few moments when he appears more knowing than the characters who scorn him, diffidently looks down and mumbles something in seeming approbation.

More to the point, Gunning notes that the film establishes a degree of removal from its characters which fuels its sense of comedic incongruity. Just as Pudovkin has argued that a car accident will seem dramatic if shot and edited in accelerated close-ups but drawn-out and absurd if presented in long shots and long takes,<sup>8</sup> Lang creates vaguely comic effects. Particularly in the early portions of the film, he depicts actions that might otherwise seem surprising or dramatic, achieved mainly by distancing his camera-lens from his characters. For example, Chris is discussing painting with his friend Charlie in the former's apartment bathroom when

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<sup>7</sup>Tricia Welsch describes *Scarlet Street* as “a film noir that accents the fated hopelessness of its players through the jagged diagonal lines, harsh contrasts, and unnerving claustrophobia of its mise-en-scene.” (57). In fact, what is frequently “unnerving” about the film is its frequent comedic effects, albeit within the context of otherwise tragic subject matter – as I hope to show.

<sup>8</sup>See Pudovkin 95-99.

Chris's shrewish wife Adele (Rosalind Ivan) enters in the background of a long shot, dressed only in a night gown and letting out a discomfited “ah!” Later, Johnny is attempting to impress Kitty with his plot to swindle Chris when her roommate enters from behind, accidentally knocking him in the back with the door. In either one of these instances, an otherwise unpleasantly over-assured character is made to seem momentarily ludicrous, if only because the viewer has a split second to register the surprise before they do: that Adele is about to be seen in her gown by two men, and that Johnny is about to be visited by an unwelcome bump.

But this distance is hardly maintained throughout and an early pair of scenes, from Chris being suckered into serving as Katherine's hapless sugar-daddy to him contemplating embezzlement, intimates the film's many slippages from humour to pathos. The music cues the spectator to the characters' various moods, as well as the general tone of the scene. During a lunch date, Chris begins to confide in Katherine, and the score is noticeably treacly, as if to underscore the largely sentimental nature of his infatuation. At the same time, the romantic music can be read as heavily ironic, as the scene makes clear that the not so guileless Katherine is knowingly squeezing Chris for money.<sup>9</sup>

The comical – and frankly cynical – tone of the scene culminates with Katherine asking, in the most calculatingly off-hand tone, for five hundred dollars. A stupefied Chris, already having vowed to help her no matter what, breathlessly repeats the amount. In the scene immediately following, he is shown retrieving money from his employer's vault. The tone, however, has shifted. The scene is more dimly lit, with shaded areas surrounding Chris; as well, the fact that he is hunched over indicates the secretive and somber nature of this transaction. Most notably, the music, with its sparse use of brass sounds and decrescendo, cues the viewer to understand the scene as ominous. Even if Chris ultimately opts to return the money, a stylistic precedent has been set, on which the film will follow through: *Scarlet Street*

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<sup>9</sup>Surprisingly, while Welsh's study purports to be about the use of sound in Lang's and Renoir's respective films, she has nothing to say about *Scarlet Street's* musical score (56-61).

gradually grows more pessimistic and dark in its storytelling and equally foreboding in its style. Most significantly, Chris's actions to keep hold of Katherine become increasingly desperate: he first steals from his wife's savings, then from work, and ultimately threatens to kill a rival suitor. At the same time, Lang makes use of a variety of visual and audio devices to convey that Chris's mental state is starting to become unhinged. In doing so, he also narrows the aforementioned “distance” the film is said to maintain towards its characters.

It is here that Murray Smith's concept of “alignment” becomes relevant. In brief, for Smith, “*alignment* describes the process by which spectators are placed in relation to characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they know and feel.” (83). As the above description implies, alignment involves “two interlocking functions, *spatio-temporal attachment* and *subjective access*” (*ibid.*). Habitually, one might conceive of the two functions as going hand-in-hand, but to a variety of degrees, alignment may be restricted, blocked or mitigated. As we shall see with *La chienne*, a film may follow one central character while impeding the viewer's access to his/her subjective state or conversely making the character's thoughts and feelings transparently obvious. To a qualified extent, David Bordwell's observations on the “restricted narration” of detective fiction are pertinent here (1985: 64-70). For Bordwell, mystery films limit the spectator's knowledge, understanding and perception of the narrative events to what the detective sees and hears. Bordwell expands on this point by discussing two adaptations of Raymond Chandler novels, namely *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946) and *Murder My Sweet* (Edward Dmytryk, 1944): “In both films, we typically enter or leave a locale when Marlowe does; most if not all subjective shots are from his optical vantage point; and he is often placed so that we look over his shoulder at the action.” (65). With rare exceptions, one is almost never privy to narrative information to which the detective equally has access.

However, Bordwell further notes that the relationship between the spectator's and the detective's respective grasps of the narrative action needs qualification. Most

detective fiction “involves a play between various degrees of *depth* in representing the detective” (67); simply put, a spectator may see and hear everything Marlowe does, without sharing the latter’s mental alertness or insight – not unlike, to cite an earlier sleuth, Watson’s ability to accompany Sherlock Holmes on his adventures without ever being able to match the great detective’s many inferences and conclusions. It is here that Smith’s distinction between spatial-temporal attachment and subjective access proves indispensable. The bulk of detective fiction attaches audiences to the protagonist’s perceptual field, while offering only partial or delayed access to their mental reasoning – a nuance lost with the slightly more monolithic concepts of “restricted” and “unrestricted” narration.<sup>10</sup>

Although several of the effects of alignment discussed below are achieved via POV shots, it is a mistake, as Smith cautions, to conflate the two, or to maintain that POV shots are a privileged means of accessing a character’s subjectivity or person-hood. They are rather a device which might function differently within the contexts of various films: as Smith argues, the POV shots opening *Halloween* (1978) restricts one to what a character is seeing, but offers scant insight into his/her identity or intentions. Conversely, upon seeing Michel Simon’s cashier plead and sob with his mistress in *La chienne*, no POV shots are necessary to fill us in on what is already obvious: he is, in André Bazin’s well-chosen words, “*fou de douleur*” (26).

In the case of *Scarlet Street*, the film quickly establishes the norm of utilizing shots which represent a character’s field of vision, usually Chris’s. In a sense, the film uses this device to attach the spectator to the characters spatio-temporally. Additionally, Lang devises various means of granting one access to the various characters’ subjective knowledge and feelings. While this in itself is unremarkable,

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<sup>10</sup>To be fair to Bordwell, he does enlist the work of Dorothy Sayers who identifies different levels of description: purely external; middle viewpoint; close intimacy; complete mental identification. (67). Such fine-grained differentiation is of interest, but its degree of precision lacks the eloquent compactness of Smith’s attachment/access distinction. It also presumes that subjective access can only follow from spatial-temporal attachment, whereas the former can very easily surface without the latter: for example, if a character leaves behind a confessional letter which is then read aloud, in the character’s absence.



what is exceptional in Lang's film is how the various uses of alignment (POV shots among them) help to position *Scarlet Street* within film noir territory, culminating in the murder scene and Chris's subsequent spill into dementia.

The film seems to introduce POV shots innocently enough. The opening scene is set at a stag party thrown by Chris's boss, J.J. Hogarth, for the office. Chris is first glimpsed in long shot at the end of an oval table, his back turned to the camera. As Chris receives a gold watch from J.J., the camera tracks in on him in a medium shot. After this, there is a medium shot of J.J., sitting at the other end of the table, who looks into the camera as he speaks to Chris. This, and a subsequent long shot of the table seen from roughly Chris's seat, prepare the spectator that one recurring stylistic device will be shots from Chris's perspective, whether they be strictly subjective or not. These stand in contrast to *Scarlet Street's* dominant tendency for distancing long and establishing shots, and help point to its complexly dynamic and variegated style.

A later scene insinuates a variation on this pattern, and begins to sketch out the possibility that Chris as a character, both literally and figuratively, has a little "trouble with perspective." In one sequence, he is showing one of his tableaux-in-progress to a sympathetic colleague, Charlie. Lang begins by framing the scene in a medium long shot, with Chris and Charlie considering the painting. The back of the canvas is turned to the camera, unable to be seen by the viewer, while the subject of Chris's painting, a flower, sits in the bottom corner of the screen. That the oeuvre in question promises to be somewhat unorthodox is foreshadowed by the sceptical glance and raised eyebrow Charlie throws Chris. As he then leans over and puts on his spectacles, Lang inserts a close-up of the painting in question, a flower with a monstrously over-sized bud. The cut to this close-up, right after Charlie has leaned over, suggests that this is his point of view. This is a fairly intimate alignment with his perspective, at least in the form of subjective access: the camera is now specifically showing us what Charlie sees. This access is further strengthened when he asks Chris where he found such an unusual flower. Chris

then points to the flower beside them. Lang then returns to a similar camera set-up as before as Charlie asks "You mean you see this when you look *at that?*" As he says, "you see this," there is a cut back to the painting, and subsequent quick pan to the flower with "look at that." To a certain extent, one is tempted to share Charlie's bafflement, not so much because one also shares his aversion to modern art, but rather due to Chris' inability to recognize any discrepancy between the flower and its not-so verisimilar artistic depiction.

One must hasten to add, however, that the tone of this early scene remains jocular, in large part due to the music. The score involves fairly upbeat and melodious violin and flute instrumentation. While the joke is largely at Chris's expense, the music in part conveying his simple nature, the irony is limited to revealing that Chris is an oddball or befuddled eccentric. It is only later in the film that his skewed and somewhat primitive view of the world is presented as potentially dangerous and even lethal. The above quote about Chris having "trouble with perspective" is, in the context of the film's diegesis, a criticism of his painting: his flattened and depthless compositions make little to no use of linear perspective. However, the comment is also suggestive of Chris's own imbalance: that his paintings can be seen as conduits of his mental landscape, which can never quite adjudicate the right response, rational or emotional, to his immediate surroundings. "I just put a line around what I feel," he tells Katherine, a sentiment stated less tactfully by Johnny, who reacts to a painting by exclaiming: "the poor sap must be a hothead." Without delving into the issue as to whether Chris's paintings are meant to have artistic merit, or not,<sup>11</sup> what is significant is that Chris's paintings, regardless of their reputation are read within the diegesis as abnormal or unconventional. Or, to put the matter differently, the responses range from "They've got something... a peculiar something... but no perspective," said by a fellow painter and vendor, to "They're getting crazier all the time" said by Adele. What underlines all these comments is that they help characterize Chris-the-painter psychologically as someone who may have a few more facets to his personality than anyone might initially guess upon

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<sup>11</sup>On the film's systematic ambiguity concerning this point, see Hall.

seeing Chris the cashier.<sup>12</sup>

Chris's less than temperate state is again evoked in his final scene when Katherine. Of course, any spectator seeing Chris impulsively stab the helpless Katherine to death must surmise that he is not exactly a paragon of self-control. But in terms of stylistics, what stands out during this episode are the effects of alignment, and specifically the POV shots. As Katherine mocks her would-be suitor for his far-flung aspirations (“Oh you idiot, how can a man be so dumb!”), Lang cuts to a shot which seems to indicate Chris's point of view: Katherine, in reverse shot, is looking approximately in the direction of where Chris should be standing. One not only sees and hears what he does but, upon witnessing Chris's pained gasp throughout much of this scene, also accedes to his relatively confused mindset. The blunt force of the scene arises not simply from one's shared sense of Chris's humiliation, but more to the point, his utter disorientation. Katherine, who has been affectionate and soothing in her treatment of Chris, reveals her true colours. Joan Bennett's performance, not coincidentally, exhibits here a noticeable change in register: hamming it up, she thrusts her chest forward, emphasizes her lines and slaps her palm on the bed. It is not simply that, in this scene, Bennett's performance appears much more over-the-top than elsewhere in the film; in aligning the spectator in these moments with Chris's own fraught perspective, Lang underscores how unrecognizable Chris's dear “Kitty” has become to him.

In contrast to *Scarlet Street*, *La chienne* forgoes many of the techniques of Hollywood film-making. Instead of over-the-shoulder shot/reverse shots and analytical editing, Renoir tends to favour either ensemble shots or isolating the characters in separate shots. However, his editing patterns and shot selections are

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<sup>12</sup>On the frequent link in 1940s Hollywood films between a character's presumed insanity and their taste in modern art, see Diane Waldman (cited in Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 70; see also Waldman 54-58). Note that Hall argues against Waldman that one cannot simply reduce Chris's paintings to mere expressions of his insanity (40). But much of the ambiguity which Hall praises in *Scarlet Street* involves us entertaining the likelihood that Chris is as mad as his paintings are maddening, even if the film elsewhere insinuates that this may not be the only way to appreciate or perceive his art-work.

not always systematically deployed or readily predictable. It may be tempting here to overstate the film's unorthodoxy, but film critic Ginette Vincendeau has cautioned against this. In her article “The Exception and the Rule,” she argues: “Renoir's cinematography is always seen as resistance to, or at least different from, Hollywood. This [...] ignores the fact that it was also part of the French mainstream.” (36). Indeed:

[T]he fact is that long and mobile takes were quite common in 30s French cinema and many directors used longer takes than Renoir. Such shots were both a stylistic signature of auteur-directors like [Julien] Duvivier and [Pierre] Chenal, but also of less remarkable film-makers, including those considered 'hacks', like Pierre Colombier or Roger Richebé. Films such as *Crime et châtiment* (Chenal), *La Belle équipe* (Duvivier) or *Ces Messieurs de la Santé* (Colombier) all contain shots that are almost two minutes long, with multiple reframings and complex negotiations of cinematic space and decor. (*ibid.*)

While this is no doubt true, as long as one restricts one's analysis of Renoir and his French contemporaries to a certain level of generality, it simply will not do to imply that the films of this era all adhere indiscriminately to some monolithic “French mainstream.” There are crucial stylistic discrepancies between Renoir's own films that problematize the idea of an undifferentiated national style, such that the “multiple reframings and complex negotiations of cinematic space” is counter-balanced, to varying degrees, by other effects of mise-en-scène and editing. The avowed mobility of the camera seems comparatively restricted, for example, in *La nuit du carrefour* (1932), Renoir's immediate follow-up to *La chienne*. Conversely, *Boudu sauvé des eaux* (1932) crosses the 180 axis on at least one occasion – a stylistic incongruity scrupulously avoided in *La chienne*.

One can thus delineate the film's intrinsic norms, with regards to editing and mise-en-scène, as follows. Renoir either confines himself to ensemble shots, or alternates between medium close-ups and long shots. As well, he either begins or ends the action on a detail that is more or less peripheral to the central action. Finally, he most frequently use fades to mark a change in location and passage of time. But no less significantly, *La chienne* transgresses these norms at decisive

moments in the narration, just as it establishes certain principles of constructing the character of Maurice Legrand, the film's equivalent to Chris Cross, only to diverge from them. Similarly, while several scenes are comparable to one another in terms of staging and editing, creating stylistic continuity throughout the narration, Renoir also interpolates significant variations between these scenes, which indicate progression or change in the narrative arc. I address some of these after my analysis of the intrinsic norms.

Let us begin with the first of the aforementioned intrinsic norms. As the Vincendeau quote suggests, when filming conversations or other such encounters between characters, Renoir systematically eschews two of the most reliable conventions of classical Hollywood style: over-the-shoulder shot/reverse shots, and analytical editing. He opts instead to keep the conversing partners within the same frame, usually in a medium or long shot, cutting only when one of them exits the frame or he will abruptly cut, back and forth, between medium close-ups and long shots. A clear instance of the latter is during the meeting at the café between Maurice Legrand (Michel Simon) and Alexis Godard (Roger Gaillard), the former husband of Legrand's wife Adèle (Magdeleine Bérubet). Renoir first alternates between medium close-ups of the respective characters, only to cut to a long shot, of both of them seated at the table. After that, Renoir presents a series of variations, cutting from Alexis to the long shot, for example, or from Legrand to the long shot, or from Legrand to Alexis to the long shot and back to Alexis.<sup>13</sup> The former can be observed in an encounter between Dédé (Georges Flamant) and Lulu (Janie Marèse) -- the film's equivalent to Johnny and “Kitty” -- in her apartment. Renoir begins, as he does many of the scenes throughout *La chienne*, with a close-up on a detail, in this case Lulu's hand signing a cheque, under Dédé's dictation,. This is followed by a track back to a long shot, following the ensuing interactions between the two as they move from background to foreground, cutting when they leave the

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<sup>13</sup>See Branigan for a consideration of how such sudden shifts in the representation of space can seem at once arbitrary and disorienting for a spectator (77-80). Note too that in interpreting this scene, Alexander Sesonske characterizes Renoir's shot selection and sequencing as “asymmetr[ical]” and “disrupt[ive]” in its divergence from analytical editing (98).

room towards an adjacent hallway.

A more complex variation on this editing pattern occurs during Adèle's disputes with her hapless husband. Adèle is shown entering the apartment and nagging him in the living room. When she exits, Renoir cuts accordingly and the next shot encompasses two separate spaces: in the foreground, the bedroom to which Adèle has adjourned, and in the background, one can see Legrand in the living room. Legrand then comes forward into the foreground, and the adjoining room. The changes in camera positions serve to create different spatial relations among the characters: in one shot Adèle and Legrand are placed along a horizontal axis in the same room; in another, the axis is vertical, with Adèle at the front of the image, and Legrand in the back, in different rooms.<sup>15</sup>

Still at other times, in lining the various characters along a horizontal axis, Renoir will stage and cut the action unexpectedly. For example, during the first encounter between Legrand and Lulu, Renoir begins with an over-the-shoulder shot of Legrand looking down at Lulu in close-up. Renoir then cuts to a close-up of Legrand as an axial cut-in from almost the same angle he had framed him in the shot before. This is followed by another close-up of Lulu. As she rises, and as the camera follows her in a tracking shot, she moves rightward towards Dédé. The shot now centres on Dédé and Lulu, until Legrand's head bobs into the frame from the left. In short, whereas in shot-reverse shot editing, the space delineated in each shot is occupied for the most part by a single character, allowing the spectator to duly focus their attention, here no shot seems to “belong” to any one character.

In the instances when Renoir begins or ends a scene on an incongruous or peripheral detail, one can also note patterns and variations. Sometimes the detail will eventually be integrated into the narrative action and sometimes it won't.

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<sup>15</sup>On the interaction of background and foreground elements in cinematic staging, see Bordwell 2005. See also Aumont 14-17 for a similar analysis of Renoir's 1930 comedy *On purge Bébé* within the context of French mise-en-scène aesthetics.

Moreover, in transgression of this norm, Renoir will sometimes cut in the midst of a scene to a close-up of an object, although here too, this object is sometimes crucial to the narrative action, and sometimes not. In the case of beginning a scene with a peripheral detail, consider two scenes set at cafés. At the party which Legrand attends with his colleagues, Renoir famously opens the scene with a close-up of a cake, placed on a tray in a dumbwaiter; the shot is from the point of view, in a sense, of the dumbwaiter, while the banquet table seating Legrand and his colleagues remains in the background. Soon after, a waiter takes the cake and recedes into the background to begin serving it to the guests at the party, at which point Renoir cuts to a medium shot of one of Legrand's co-workers giving a speech. Likewise, he begins the scene at the café-bar between Alexis and Legrand with a close-up of two glasses of beer, which a waiter promptly carries over to the table seating the two characters.

One can see here that Renoir utilizes very similar camera set-ups and principles of shot selections to lead a spectator into a scene. The same holds true for how he concludes several scenes. An encounter between Adèle and Legrand ends with a tracking-in on some money Legrand has reluctantly turned over to her. Unlike the images of the cake and the beer glasses, it is not immediately apparent how, or even if, this object will have any relevance to the narrative. As it turns out, several scenes later, Legrand will steal from Adèle to help subsidize his affair with Lulu. Conversely, Renoir finishes this scene by centering the camera on a girl playing the piano in the background, one of Legrand's neighbours who appears in some of the shots but never figures prominently in the plot. Finally, in transgression of this norm, Renoir will sometimes insert a close-up of an object in the middle of scene, as if to break the flow of the narrative. During a meeting between Dédé and his friend Gustave, he cuts to a close-up of a nominally unidentifiable contraption on the wall behind their table, which makes a grinding noise and resembles a mini-juke box.

Regarding the fades, one can begin by expanding on Alexander Sesonske's

description of *La chienne* as “a series of relatively self-contained sequences” (98). The film's episodic structure owes in large part to the use of fades, which habitually punctuate the action by denoting a change in location and a passage of time. When Alexis accosts Legrand in the rain and invites him to have a drink, Renoir ends this scene with a fade-out, and sets the subsequent scene at the café-bar in question. Conversely, when a change of location does not correspond to any temporal ellipsis, Renoir forgoes the use of fades. As Dédé is shown exiting Lulu's apartment, a subsequent shot places him at the foot of the building, as he and Legrand, who is on his way to visit Lulu, cross paths without noticing each other; as can be expected, Renoir links these two shots by a cut.

However, there are notable exceptions to Renoir's otherwise systematic use of fades. The first is the most conventional: Lulu and Legrand sit on the former's bed and, following a fade, are shown lying in bed, the elision implicitly omitting their love-making. More unusually, at the end of the meeting between Alexis and Legrand, the former rises to leave. Renoir ends this shot with a fade as Legrand, chuckling and nodding his head, looks over in the direction of Alexis's departure; however, the next shot returns us to the same location immediately after: a match-on-movement reveals Legrand looking in the exact same direction, with a near-identical expression on his face. It is in this scene that Legrand has hatched a plan to escape his loveless marriage, all the while duping Alexis. By joining two visually similar shots, the fade helps accentuate the repeated content in each of them: Legrand's apparent joy in tricking Alexis.

I would now like to turn to the film's style and techniques as they relate to the character portrayal and construction. Several of the characters can be associated with specific camera movements and/or shot-types. Legrand is often the subject of lateral tracking shots, following his movements across his apartment or office. Notwithstanding the prologue, our first real glimpse of him is at the end of a long travelling shot which moves along the row of heads seated at the banquet table



and finishes with him. Dédé, in contrast, is presented in a more stationary context: he is shown at least three times in a medium-close-up, chatting and gesticulating with his friend Gustave at the café-bar as the camera remains motionless.

However, both these stylistic patterns, and the attendant subject matter, are subject to variations. Legrand's actions and intentions change. In one scene he is shown painting, innocently enough, as the camera tracks back and leftwards, to reveal the neighbour's daughter singing in the background. A later scene has him crossing the apartment, and again the camera tracks leftwards and reveals the neighbour's daughter in the background, only this time he is less innocent and invidiously stealing Adèle's money. As for Dédé, he is shown later in the film chatting emphatically in a shot very similar to those featuring his meetings with Gustave. Only this time, instead of attempting to impress his friend with his obnoxious boasts, he is trying to talk his way out of several accusations directed at him during a police investigation.

The above account also hints at other patterns and variations running throughout the film. Whenever Legrand is shown in his apartment during the day, his neighbours can be seen in the background through their window, and both times they are associated with music: singing the first time, and playing the piano the second time. Several shots also employ frames, either that of a window or an open door. Sesonkske has already noted that six shots are framed from the outside of the window on Lulu's apartment, each one gradually bleaker and more melancholic in tone (99). To this observation, one can add the numerous shots which make use of doorway frames; for example, when Legrand opens the door to his apartment's guestroom to reveal, before the police and a flabbergasted Adèle, the latter's first husband, or when Legrand opens the door to Lulu's apartment, only to see her in bed with Dédé, the latter's face is visible in the background and framed through the aperture. The latter shot recalls in staging, setting and shot selection an earlier episode when Lulu comes home to also find Dédé in bed: the shots of her and Legrand climbing the stairs to open the door are long shots which begin to tilt down

and rise as they reach the entrance. Finally, the film begins with a prologue of a marionette show, the square-shaped stage serving as a frame within the frame. It ends with a shot of Legrand and Alexis strolling along the street. As the camera tracks back, it reveals what seems to be a window-framing, indicating that the shot is taken from the inside of a room whose window looks out onto the street. Tracking further back still, however, it is revealed that what seemed to be a window-frame is in fact a marionette stage-frame, similar to the one appearing in the film's opening. Taken together, these two corresponding images also serve as book-ends to the entire movie.<sup>17</sup>

In spite of these initially maintained stylistic strategies, the film later presents divergences from its narrative norms. While most of the time the camera is immobile, or limited to lateral movements, one scene is different: when Dédé and Lulu dance at a soirée, the camera rocks back and forth in accompaniment of their circling across the room. As well, while much of the action is restricted to one location at a time, on rare occasions Renoir makes use of cross-cutting: right before Legrand hazards upon Lulu and Dédé in bed, or when he murders Lulu. Lastly, in two scenes Renoir has his characters look directly into the camera: when Alexis and Adèle stare at each other, reunited; when a witness offering damning testimony against Dédé looks directly at the jury, who reciprocally look back into the camera. The former helps underscore Alexis's and Adèle's shock at their unexpected reunion. The latter create the appropriate sense of encroachment and entrapment, as Dédé will soon be sentenced to the guillotine.

The establishing and rupturing of norms is also significant to the portrayal of Legrand. Generally Legrand has three patterns of behaviour or types of demeanour. Around his colleagues, he is evasive and emotionally muted. Even when he explains to one co-worker in the second scene why he won't accompany them to a brothel, his justification takes the form of a series of aphoristic metaphors ("I know it's possible to find nature in a bouquet of faded flowers, or the forest in a

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<sup>17</sup>On the significance of theatre to Renoir's cinema, see Braudy. 65-103.

vial of perfume [...] but there is always the morning after!”), rather than a direct declaration ( “Sex with a hooker is never what it's cracked up to be”). Around his wife, he is more openly contemptuous, without ever being assertively defiant. When Adèle chides his masculinity for not measuring up to her late husband, Alexis, he rolls his eyes and smirks, but avoids matching her insult with a retort. Finally, around Lulu, he tends to be far more emotionally expressive, at first tender and cajoling, and during the murder scene, alternately despondent and indignant.

Describing Legrand in the terms set forth by Smith, one might say that one's alignment with him is, if not entirely blocked, then at least mitigated and imperfect. One seldom has subjective access to him, as he only rarely states his thoughts, intentions and feelings, just as his visage remains largely inexpressive. As an actor, Michel Simon evinces an uncanny ability for maintaining a kind of emotionally neutered self-effacement throughout, evoking a measure of ambiguity which Renoir reinforces by not always providing spectators with a clear view of Legrand's features. As the latter lies in bed with Lulu and she asks for more money, he acquiesces uncertainly with his typical “poker-face” expression: as Renoir stages the action and positions his camera, he has Simon looking towards the ceiling, his eyes thus scrupulously avoiding the camera's lens. As well, when Legrand's colleagues mock him at the office, he sits silently at his cubicle, his face not only cast downwards but his features blocked from our view by the gilded cage surrounding his desk. The most ambiguous scene occurs during the police enquiry subsequent to Lulu's murder. Legrand, speaking of his infatuation, is reduced to tears. His pain seems authentically felt, except it also serves him well: the police perceive him as such a hopelessly meek man that they immediately dismiss him as a likely suspect .

The few times his emotions are forthcoming revolve around his encounters with Lulu – most notably when, following the reunion of Adèle and Alexis, he rushes towards her apartment believing he can claim her as his wife and exclaims “*la vie est belle!*” But in his two subsequent encounters with her, when he learns of her

involvement with Dédé and kills her the next day, Renoir again devises strategies to intrude upon our alignment with him, not so much by way of subjective access, but spatial-temporal attachment. After he has discovered Lulu with Dédé, Renoir cuts to a shot taken from outside the apartment, the rain-splattered closed window reducing Legrand to a shadowy figure in the background. It is only after a subsequent medium shot of Lulu, defiantly proclaiming Dédé as her lover, that one is granted a clear view of Legrand, his face looking predictably forlorn.

Indisputably, the shot of the rain-splattered window conveys that Legrand is crestfallen by his discovery. What is notable about this scene, however, is Renoir's willingness to put considerable physical distance between Legrand and the camera. Prior to this, the film has tended to attach us to Legrand's actions and movements without furnishing any assured insight into his inner life; now, the process is reversed – we may be as close as we have ever been to Legrand's heart and mind, but we are far from his body.

This is continued during the murder scene, which mobilizes certain norms, while undermining or establishing variations on others. Most notably, Renoir introduces two fades, neither of which conforms to this device's habitual use throughout the film. The first fade occurs presumably shortly after Legrand has stabbed Lulu. As Legrand is shaking Lulu while she jeers him, Renoir cuts to a close-up of a letter opener, the fateful object which will be the cause of Lulu's demise, and then to an ensemble shot of a crowd gathering around two musicians at the foot of the building. The camera then tracks up the building, only to fade out at the third floor. As the shot fades in, one sees a black cat on the ledge before a window sill; the camera then tracks up and in to reveal, through the window, Legrand kneeling before Lulu's slain body. From the third floor window to Lulu's apartment window, there has been little if no change in location. As well, there is most likely minimal temporal lapse, especially given that the same diegetic music continues without any breaks or jumps over the fade.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>For an extended analysis of the soundtrack during this scene, see Leutrat 34-39.

The second fade, occurring soon thereafter, does mark some shift in time, but not in location. As Legrand remains bereft before Lulu with the diegetic music continuing, there is another fade. However, as one returns to the base of the building in the next shot, there is a jump in the music, at which point Legrand quietly exits onto the street, unseen. Taken together, both these fades create a startling effect. They not only contravene against the habitual use of fades throughout the film, but they also occur within a short proximity of one another (less than one minute), which is unprecedented for *La chienne*. They thus constitute an unusual set of breaks in the narrative continuity, serving to emphasize that a twist of some import has occurred in the plot.

No less significantly, the scene makes use of and transgresses other norms. The close-up of the letter-opener, a repetition of an earlier such shot during the scene, suggests that this item will play a pivotal role in the ensuing narrative. Recall that Renoir, in presenting an object in close view, usually does so to dwell on something which is superfluous to the principal action. In this case, given the mounting tension and incipient violence, even the most inattentive spectator is likely to register its ominous significance. Moreover, as in the scene during which Legrand stumbles on Lulu and Dédé, Renoir makes exceptional use of cross-cutting between the musicians outside the building and Legrand/Lulu inside the apartment, thus lending a more dynamic rhythm to the narrative. Finally, there is a variation on the use of lateral tracking shots in conjunction with Legrand; here the camera moves, only not from side-to-side, but up the wall of the building.

Perhaps most remarkable of all is the portrait of Legrand. As noted above, he tends to be somewhat muted in his interactions with his colleagues and wife, while evincing greater emotions around Lulu. At the same time, Renoir develops various means of placing the spectator at some removal from Legrand's affective and emotive states, and cutting away from him at crucial points in the action. The latter, as we have seen, occurs notably when Legrand realizes that Lulu has been

unfaithful, and Renoir defers any clear view of the poor cuckold's face, no matter how obviously apparent his emotional state must be. Here too, Renoir maintains some subjective access to Legrand even as he blocks one's spatial-temporal attachment: the murder occurs off-screen. More importantly, as with in Legrand's discovery of Lulu's infidelity, this reverses the general norm of how Legrand has mostly, up till now, been presented: spatial-temporal attachment with minimal subjective access.

In light of David Bordwell's well-known call for film scholars to abandon the totalizing methodologies of what he dubs "Grand Theory" and devote themselves to so-called "middle-level research," my own delimited focus throughout this essay might seem perversely "low-level" (1996: 26-30). This, in turn, can only weaken my approach in the eyes of theorists who evince scepticism towards the prospects of such modestly defined research programs. Consider Warren Buckland on the subject:

I am reminded of the story of the elephant and the six blind men. The one who felt the elephant's leg said that it was like a tree trunk; the second, who felt its tail, said it was like a rope; the third, who touched the elephant's trunk, said it was like a hose; and so on. Piecemeal theorizing may not be able to see the wood for the trees if it completely abandons the tendency to develop a unifying theory. (142-143).

At the same time, Bordwell himself has indicated that historical poetics requires a far higher degree of contextualization than I allow for here; the analysis of individual works must be fitted into larger paradigms, such as his own "historical modes of narration," or the stylistic norms of the classical studio system.<sup>19</sup> His tendency towards generalization has been so pronounced that, in contradistinction to Buckland, one of Bordwell's harshest detractors once accused him "pigeonholing" Hollywood cinema in the name of "pure unmitigated Theory." (Britton 427). Insofar that the above criticisms bear some pertinence to my essay, it is

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<sup>19</sup>See Bordwell 1985: 156-310 and Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson: 3-84.

appropriate that I assess them, however briefly, for the remainder of this paper.

Needless to say, the charge of pigeonholing is precisely what I have sought to avoid in my departure from some of the more reductive descriptions of *Scarlet Street* and Jean Renoir's cinema. In the early pages of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*, Bordwell concedes that: “No Hollywood film *is* the classical system; each is an 'unstable equilibrium' of classical norms.” (5). In other words, the artistic conventions which mark a given era will nonetheless be represented to different degrees in the works of the period. No two films will ever be exactly alike, and no single film can ever be the sum total of a “poetics of classical narration.”

This is not to say that one ought to abandon all descriptive categories. On the contrary, the diversity of films in a given mode or national style nonetheless adhere to what Bordwell has termed a “bounds of difference,” a delimited set of conventions out of which these films are not liable to stray (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson: 70-84). My discussing the intrinsic norms of *Scarlet Street* and *La chienne* can be seen as better differentiating them within the context of a period's reigning norms. This differentiation, in turn, has allowed me to focus on the finer nuances and specificity of their narrative construction and style, a degree of precision that would have been much more difficult to attain had my study been more broadly historical or theoretical.

Not enough theory might indeed lead to one seeing the forest for the trees, but the opposite is equally true. From a certain bird's eye perspective, one can fail to see what might seem crucial and noteworthy upon closer inspection. The interest of a certain “low-level” scholarship is that it allows that even when all trees are of the same genus, there will always remain a multitude of tactile variations from one to the next, or within the area of cinema studies, from one film to another.

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