TANGENTIAL FILM NOIR: Britain and France

UNE ST JOLIE PETITE FLACAGE ("Such A Pretty Little Beach", France, 1951) Released in the USA as "Riptide" by Films International of America; Directed by Yves Allagret; Produced by Edme Derbe; Screenplay by Jacques Sigurd; Camera, Henri Alakam; Music, Maurice Thiriot; 82 mins. With English subtitles.

With: Gerard Philipe (Pierre); Madeleine Robinson (Marthe); Jane Marken (Landlady); Mona Dol (Mrs. Ulmann); Jean Servais (The Stranger); Julian Carette (Travelling Salesman); Andre Valry (Garage owner); Gabriel Cohen (Orphan Boy)

Both of tonight's films are borderline film noirs, related by period (one made within a year of the other) by mood and by theme — a haunted man (one by despair, the other by an obsession for revenge) playing a waiting game in a deserted seaside town during the drab winter months. Seeing the two films together reminds one how the British film noir movement owes to the French cinema of the immediate pre-war years, just as American noir is far more influenced by German cinema of the 20's. Also, both of tonight's films deal with personal and small-scale crime, as opposed to the organised crime that us a hallmark of American noir.

"Une Si Jolie Petite Flacage" was possibly a little over-rated at the time, though it did open at a smaller downtown art-house rather than one of the major uptown cinemas. But at that particular time French cinema seemed to be shying off the pretensions of the immediate post-war years, and producing films that reminded of pre-war glories. "Les Amants De Verone" by Detfette preceded tonight's film into US release by just a week or two. "Une Si Joelle Petite Flacage" is perhaps rather too determined to re-mine the poetic realism of such pre-war Gabin/Carme classics as "Quai Des Brumes" and "Le Jour Se Leve". At the time, a return to the former style was welcome; today, nearly 40 years later, it seems somewhat too self-conscious in those aims, and has a little trouble. But the craftsmanship and especially Philipe's sensitive performance remain impressive, and the film remains a little orphan film that should be brought back into circulation.

The wind" seemed to have influenced it. It is a pity though, that it lays things on with such a heavy trowel. The non-stop rain, more applicable to England than to France, is well under way before the titles begin, and is still falling as the End titles zoom up. At one mid-way point there is about a 30-second lull in the inclementity of the weather, but the puddles remain and the sun's attempts to break through are quickly defeated. There is also no real reason for Jean Servais to be a drug addict either, though admittedly that angle is downplayed by being limited to one scene. Just as American gangster films of the 30's were plagued by protests from Italians and often had to insert titles or bits of dialogue to "apologise", so this film (which deals with an orphan who becomes a killer) seems to have aroused the ire of French oranghances, since there is a long (untranslated) title at the beginning, repeated at the end, which absolves oranghances from blame, and points out that many French orphans grew up to be doctors, artists, statesmen etc., and were generally a credit to the nation.

THE LONG MEMORY (A Europa Film-General Film Distributors, 1952) Directed by Robert Hamer; Produced by Hugh Stewart; Screenplay by Hamer and Frank Harvey from the novel by Howard Cashes; Camera, Harry Waxman; Music, William Alwyn; 95 mins.

With: John Mills (Davidson); John McCallum (Inspector Lother); Elizabeth Sellars (Fay Lother); Eva Berg (Eliza); Geoffrey Keen (Craig); Michael Martin-Harvey (Jackson); John Chandos (Boy); John Slater (Pewsey); Thora Hird (Mrs. Pewsey); Vida Hope (Alice Gedge); Harold Lang (chauffeur); Mary Hackenzie (Gladye); Laurence Naismith (Asprey); Peter Jones (Fish); Henry Edwards (Judge) and John Glynn-Jones, John Horsley, Fred Johnson, Christopher Baer, Julian Somers, Denis Shaw, Russell Waters.

Technically, "The Long Memory" is a suspense thriller, and has a lively opening and close. But Robert Hamer, one of Britain's finest noir directors (second only to Cavalcanti, who was hardly a British talent though he made his best films there) plays it primarily for mood and characterisation. It's a little too slowly paced for its own good, and John Mills is perhaps a trifle too mature to be totally convincing in the lead, though his warm features can be attributed to his years of suffering. The background is virtually interchangeable with that of tonight's French film, and Eva Berg is certainly a rough parallel to Madeleine Robinson — although the British were never too successful at developing sultry, smouldering women, and one can almost sympathise with Mills' oft-repeated demands that she leave him alone. Elizabeth Sellars performs well in what had by then become her stock-in-trade — the female betrayer who yet retains an element of sympathy, something that few American noir women were asked to do. The bizarre, deserted cafe where much of the action takes place seems more European than British, but I admit to not being overly-familiar with sleazy truckdrivers' cafes in the Gravesend area, where much of the film was shot. Basically though the film is more realistic and less stylised than its French counterpart, with more location shooting and a nice assortment of second-string English villains, and welcome interpolations by familiar character players, not least the indubitably Thora Hird, still going very strong on British television.

--- TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION ---

The THE NEW SCHOOL FILM SERIES 63 Program #5 November 10, 1959

Program ends 10:46. No discussion session this evening.

--- William E. Everson