A French Fashioning of the Gaze: A New Look for Old France in Post-War Parisian Fact and Fiction
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In 1945 Léo Malet’s famous detective Nestor Burma is stunned, in Nestor Burma contre CQFD, by the sudden appearance on the streets of Paris of an elegant young woman; seconds later all hell breaks loose. In 1947 Colin the protagonist of Boris Vian’s L’Ecume des jours, is drawn up the staircase of a Parisian flat by the seams of a young woman wearing nylon stockings: his life will never be the same again; indeed, the whole novel collapses into entropy. And in the ‘real’ streets of Paris in 1947 another fashionable young woman causes a riot: l’élégante de la rue Lepic is the first model to sport Christian Dior’s New Look in public. The result is outrage, as a number of French women try to rip the clothes from her back. This paper will seek to renegotiate the attitudes and myths surrounding elegant young women and their impact on the mean streets of Paris. It will be argued that the post-war French noir novel hinges upon a fetishisation of the female form; similarly, Baudelaire’s 19th-century prose poetry generates a myth of la vieille France around images of young women that haunts the collective memory to this day; and after les années noires of the Occupation Marianne, the symbol of the resurgent French Republic, makes a come-back that is necessarily set against the new American model of modernisation. Suggestions will be made as to what a New Look may be said to mean in these different but connected instances of the French gaze.

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