

CELL-NOIR TALES

BY ROBERT ABELE

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The colors pop and the stupidity glistens on MTV's insanely watchable new reality soap *The Hills*, in which *Laguna Beach: The Real Orange County* star Lauren Conrad — hot, blond and appealingly neurotic — cruises up the coast to Los Angeles to bag an internship at *Teen Vogue*. The dangerous relationship waters that complemented all that orangey shop-and-surf teen vapidity on *Laguna* will now accessorize a career-girl story line that is already paying off huge in the guilty-pleasure department after only one episode: When Lauren's suntanned slacker roommate Heidi interviews at the Fashion Institute of Design & Merchandising — "I want to do PR" is the new "But what I really want to do is direct" — she emits unearned confidence like perfume, cheerily bragging about her discipline-free school life, desire to party for a living and honest disdain for work. It's like deadpan sketch theater, awesome to behold. Later, much is made of the fact that Lauren is given the incredible responsibility of protecting a VIP-lounge space at *Teen Vogue*'s big Hollywood bash. She mustn't sit, she mustn't be seen carousing. She's supposed to be pretty and guard the spot *or she'll lose her job*. But doesn't the fact that Lauren stars in her own hit MTV series make her a VIP too? Is this MTV's idea of a philosophical celeb dilemma?

But the real scene-stealer here, again, is cinematographer Hisham Abed, whose lush, saturated palette of artful vistas and shimmering close-ups — a *Laguna* holdover — is probably doing more for Southern California's visual appeal than today's movies. After Lauren gets a stomach-roiling call at the party from Heidi, saying she and some friends are outside and want her help crashing — which could threaten *everything!* — the blue/gray light from Lauren's mobile washes over her whole face like a mirror to her newly agitated state. **Hisham, I think you may have created a whole new photographic aesthetic: cell noir. MTV, give this man a raise.**