‘« Nous, au village, aussi … » ; the recent and rapid rise of the *polar à racines*’.

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(6327 words inclusive of notes)

ABSTRACT: This article charts the increasing popularity in France of the regional crime novel. The *polar*’s spread from Paris to major provincial cities is initially discussed, and the function of place within crime fiction is examined with specific reference to two writers using Lyon as scene of crime(s). The current success of provincial publishers of the *polar régional* is then highlighted, and an attempt is made to assess what the reader is looking for in series (such as those offered by small Breton or Burgundian publishing houses) which concentrate on crime ‘in one’s own backyard’, be it urban, *rurbain*, or rural. Finally a promising field for further exploration is posited, given both the healthy sales of *polars à racines* which can establish the smallest hamlet on the *polar* map, and the theories of place image currently being explored by a tourist industry eager to exploit the boom in postmodern literary/heritage tourism.

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« Nous, au village, aussi … » ;[[1]](#endnote-1) the recent and rapid rise of the *polar à racines*.

Mean streets, it is generally agreed, produce mean acts: crime fiction is identified as a product of the labyrinth/jungle/cesspit, etc., that is the city and its inner suburbs. Whichever branch of the wide-ranging genre is considered, be it the *roman (policier) à/d’énigme*, or the *roman noir* and offspring the *néo-polar*, most of ‘la production policière’, as Michel Sirvent has it, ‘s’ancre dans l’espace urbain’ (2000, p. 81). This space, so frequently exploited as to merit a definite article, may be tentacular or claustrophobic, stark or multi-layered, and is further characterised by Jean-Noël Blanc, in his study *Polarville*, as ‘complexe, contradictoire et *non-maîtrisable*’ (1991, p. 11).

For a long time, this ‑ *the* ‑ urban setting was, for French crime fiction, *par excellence* Paris. In the century separating Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris* from Léo Malet’s *Les Nouveaux Mystères de Paris*, for instance, Joseph Rouletabille, Arsène Lupin and Jules Maigret to name but a few elucidated criminal mysteries linked not exclusively, but for the most part, to the capital, Maigret in particular, according to André Vanoncini, exploiting to those ends ‘la vitalité d’un espace et d’un milieu telle que le genre policier ne l’a[vait] pas connue auparavant’(Vanoncini 1993, p. 59). The rise of the *néo-* (socio-politically orientated) *polar* would see Jean-Patrick Manchette (accredited with coining the term) begin and end the journey of Gerfaut, protagonist of *Le petit bleu de la côte ouest,* on the *périphérique*; Daniel Pennac people the Belleville district with the unique Malussène clan; or Thierry Jonquet situate his main character’s hideout in *Moloch* in the deserted industrial wasteland on the borders of the 20th *arrondissement*. In a somewhat different vein, Frédéric H. Fajardie, for example, sets his superintendent Antonio C. Padovani on many a Parisian trail; Marc Villard locates Jacques Tramson, his ‘éducateur de rue’, in Barbès; and in many of the ‘rompols’ she sees as ‘mini-proto-mythes’, Fred Vargas also situates much of the action in her native capital city, whose streets may on occasion quite literally hold the key to a case.[[2]](#endnote-2)

If the capital was and remains a favoured location, however, it has several worthy rivals, and these are growing in number. Jean-Claude Izzo, forerunner of the *courant aïoli*, famously put Marseilles onto the crime fiction map in a trilogy coloured by both criticism and celebration of the multicultural port, and which ‘takes as its central focus the political and social reality of the city’ (Ireland 2004, p. 22). (René Merle, grouping Izzo’s crime novels together with the films of Guédiguian and the music of IAM, underlines the impact they had when he maintains that these works ‘ont permis à une ville mal aimée de se regarder, de se retrouver et de respirer’) (Merle, 2001). René Belletto, a writer prone to ambiguity and suggestion when it comes to evoking the vagaries of human relationships, writes of his native Lyon, and evokes the city and its suburbs, in very concrete detail: with familiarity, sometimes irony, but always great precision.[[3]](#endnote-3) Grenoble is ‘scene of the crime(s)’ for Thierry Crifo (in *La Ballade de Kouski*), Le Havre is memorably depicted by Philippe Huet, Nice similarly evoked by Patrick Renal; and these are just a few examples ‑ to which might also be added the imaginary (and criminally-minded) towns of Courvilliers, Lamont, or even Framboisy … [[4]](#endnote-4)

But given that, as Sirvent shows, one and the same city may be presented as place of claustrophobic dead ends or ‘espace qui échappe […] à ses habitants’ (2000, p. 84), and that different cities will project a different image and convey a different atmosphere, it is not necessarily always helpful or appropriate to generalise about the role a theoretical, non-individualised ‘urban space’ can be said to play in crime fiction. Crifo’s Grenoble, for example, is from the first page of *La Ballade de Kouski* depicted as situated on an Isère ‘aussi verdâtre qu’un cimetière oublié’; it is ‘cette putain de ville’ (p. 13), above which scud, morosely, ‘[des] nuages vautours’ (Crifo 1998, p. 250). This is not just any cityscape, then – it is what emerges as an unremittingly drab and stifling one, according to protagonist Kouski. Izzo’s affection for the Marseilles he held ‘au coeur’, on the other hand is, as is that of Gilles Del Pappas,[[5]](#endnote-5) unmistakable, just as Michel Grisolia’s for Nice would remain a constant. There is in fact no such thing as a general urban landscape; each is coded according to the ‘agenda’ of the writer creating it. Furthermore, where it might be exaggeration to claim that one man’s seething hellhole is another’s beacon of civic pride, it is obviously the case that a given place can be experienced, and thus presented, in different ways, and that while each individual interpretation can be added to or laid over a previous one – (city as palimpsest?) – the new reading does not efface that earlier reading of a self-same urban space, but rather extends and enriches it.

Thus Belletto’s protagonist in *Le Revenant*, Marc, recently widowed, is first seen heading to Lyon from the south; passing through the southern suburbs, he sees the Feyzin chemical plants and breaks out into a sweat. The ‘flamme perpétuelle de combustion des résidus’, clouds and columns of smoke, and references to the nauseous smell permeating the air offers, as the text goes on redundantly to indicate, ‘une idée assez plausible de l’enfer’ (p. 19). He is indeed about to spend a hellish few weeks between Lyon, Nice and Italy, losing his son to a brain tumour, killing to save his own life, the while driving around, from and back to the city. Belletto has a Manchette-like tendency to root his narrative firmly in a ‘branded’ fin-de-siècle lifestyle, which in this novel ensures that we know when he swaps his Fiat 128 for a Peugeot 403 diesel or a Citroën GS, the while dragging on the ubiquitous Benson. This eye for detail translated to his evocation of Lyon means here for example that an acquaintance’s suicide does not take place simply somewhere in the city, or at an anonymous building in the 3rd arrondissement; instead we learn that ‘il s’était jeté du cinquième étage de son immeuble place Guichard, en face de la Bourse du Travail’ (p. 85). Any positive associations the city holds for Marc are immediately effaced by this character in mourning for his wife, who applies a brake to any potential enthusing, as the qualifying clauses of the following extract illustrate:

Je roulais sans hâte, contemplant les courbes douces de la Saône, les vieux immeubles des quais, les contreforts de la cathédrale Saint-Jean, les couvents sur la colline, les pentes vertes qui montent jusqu’à la basilique de Fourvière, *construction sans beauté*, mais sur laquelle tout vrai Lyonnais est aussi peu enclin à porter un jugement esthétique que par exemple sur la forme de l’oreille humaine.

Quelques nuages violets se promenaient dans le ciel. Lyon est très beau, *à cet endroit*. Puis je pensai à Isabelle … (p. 67 ; my italics).

And even though ‘la plaisante petite île au milieu du lac’ in the parc de la Tête d’Or is apparently (despite housing a war memorial) rewarding to contemplate, ‘la vue en était en partie gâchée par les trops hauts immeubles’ lining the Rhône (p. 101). In short it comes as no surprise that, at the end of the novel, heading back towards the south, Marc again notices the Feyzin flame – and this time observes how the sky is luridly stained with ‘une grande tache rougeâtre’ (p. 439). Lyon has, we sense, offered various opportunities, various *vistas*, only to snatch them back, irreparably wounding the character now fleeing it.

Belletto has sunnier moments. But the atmosphere created in this particular novel can usefully be contrasted with a *polar* that is very different in tone. For two decades on, ‘grand reporter’ for *Le Monde* Catherine Simon also lands her unlikely heroine (already one investigation, in North Africa, to the good) in the author’s native Lyon. As *Du pain et des roses[[6]](#endnote-6)* opens, Emna Aït Saada, professor of archeology at the University of Algiers, possessor of a ‘silhouette de montgolfière’ (Simon 2003, p. 10), is staying with her niece and great-niece for the duration of a conference. If Professor Aït Saada’s initial impression of the old Gaulish capital (‘sinistre, pluvieuse, enkystée dans sa graisse de vieille cite bourgeoise’) is less than positive, it is instantly modified: ‘mais traversée d’éclairs, parfois, de coups de pêche inattendus’(p. 10). Her Lyon-born niece Gilda senses and resents her antagonism – ‘Tu n’aimes pas cette ville. Tu ne comprends rien aux ciels gris. Aux nuances de la lumière’ (p. 19) ‑ but the reader, at least, is pointedly made aware of Emna’s change of heart at the novel’s close:

Le ciel, cet après-midi-là, est d’un gris lumineux, tout crayonné d’orage. […] Tout au bout du boulevard, une lueur blanchissante monte vers le ciel, comme une fumée renvoyée par les eaux invisibles du Rhône.

‑ Finalement, Gilda n’a pas tort, souffle Emna Aït Saada.

‑ à quel propos ? dit Dupin.

* à propos de la lumière (p. 195).

Between times, however, the reader and the eminent Professor (usually accompanied by local journalist Jean-Baptiste Dupin) discover the richness of the city. The novel opens with an eyewitness account, by a waiter giving a statement, of a car crash just off the boulevard de la Croix Rousse. Within the space of three pages he has introduced a little Lyonnais patois, referring to ‘des gones’[[7]](#endnote-7) (p. 7); personified with affectionate familiarity the fog (‘ce gros balourd’ p. 8) rising up from the Saône; and evoked the first of many local landmarks with a precision possibly redundant when one is addressing a representative of one’s local police force: ‘c’est à peine si on distinguait, de l’autre côté de la Saône, les lumières de la tour émetteur et de la Basilique de Fourvière’ (p. 8). Meanwhile, Emna and her niece are pausing at the *buvette* of the Célestins, from which Gilda fondly contemplates ‘la longue silhouette métallique de la passerelle du palais de justice, son pilier rouge, ses câbles tendus comme des cordages’(p. 18). Beneath it, flowing through the heart of the city, ‘la Saône frémit, lumineuse, tandis que le ciel, dénouant ses fatras de nuages, s’étire lentement’ (p. 18)  On the other side of the *presqu’île* and in a vague parallel ‘le Rhône brille, paisible, son bras de malabar gris sombre, tatoué d’argent, posé au pied de la colline’ (p. 13). And the next day Emna, having identified a conference paper she would like to hear, crosses the rue du Premier film: ‘La villa des frères Lumière, transformée en Institut du cinéma, se dresse juste en face, dans la même petite rue’ (p. 26). Landmarks, linguistic peculiarities and also figures of local history and culinary specialties emerge thick and fast to root the narrative in this elegant and mysterious city, over which a fine rain is so often shown to fall…

It is probably around this point (nineteen pages into the novel) that Lyon aficionados reach for a pen to jot down a tick list of all the cultural, historical and gastronomical features likely to make an appearance further on (e.g. silk and silk-workers, Guignol, the Lumière brothers, *beaujolais*, Interpol HQ, the Roman theatre, *bouchons*, Jean Moulin, *quenelles*, Festival des Lumières, *traboules* …). And a mere twenty-three pages in, they will hit something of a jackpot. Here, Emna and Dupin are making their way to the journalist’s car:

Quand ils arrivent au parking, la nuit commence à tomber. Le palais des congrès, un bâtiment ultra-moderne avec d’immenses baies vitrées arrondies, jouxte le bâtiment d’Interpol, en bordure du Rhône. De l’autre côté de la rue, plongée dans l’ombre, s’étend la roseraie du parc de la Tête d’Or.

Alors que le journaliste va démarrer, son téléphone mobile sonne. La mélodie reprend un des tubes du folklore ouvrier lyonnais, « C’est nous les canuts, nous allons tout nus … », formaté en boucle. Jean-Baptiste Dupin colle l’appareil minuscule à son oreille.

* Près du théâtre de Guignol, tu dis ? C’est Bocuse qui a prévenu?’ (p. 30)

And should the reader be puzzled to encounter France’s greatest chef in the role of press attaché to the Lyonnais police force, any misunderstanding is quickly resolved: Dupin is referring to a local police officer with many useful connections: ‘C’est notre source numéro un, notre grenier à faits divers. Une fine gueule, si on veut. D’où son surnom’ (p. 31).

 Not only is it the case, then, as this brief comparison aims to illustrate, that the urban space that is Belletto’s Lyon in *Le Revenant* is, figuratively speaking, a long way from Simon’s second-city landscape, but it is also clear that the two writers are in these two novels using the city differently – to different degrees, certainly, but also, arguably, to different ends, in different ways. Here is not the place to go into much detail about the role of setting in fiction in general, but it is of use to recall in this context Eudora Welty’s impassioned defence of place, the ‘lesser angel’ she felt was often neglected in an appreciation of (general) fiction: ‘Every story would be another story […] if it took up its characters and plot and happened somewhere else’ (Welty 1957). With reference to the detective story H. Douglas Thompson for example declares categorically that the two main ingredients are ‘the problem and the setting’ (Thompson 1978, p. 151). And Willard Huntington Wright (with regard to crime fiction) even aspires to a storyline that should itself seem a function of that setting: ‘the plot must appear to be an actual record of events springing from the terrain of its operations’ (Wright 1928, p.38).[[8]](#endnote-8)

What then might Catherine Simon be said to be doing, with regard to place, in a text so demonstrably shot through with things *lyonnais* ‑ and which René Belletto is patently not attempting in his? (So detailed and informative is Simon’s portrayal of the distinctive sights and characteristic attractions of Lyon, indeed, that one might be forgiven for wondering if she had not, *à la* Fay Weldon,[[9]](#endnote-9) contracted with a literary-minded director of tourism to insert a pre-set number of references to dignitaries or cultural milestones in her novel …) She is, I would submit, consciously or otherwise, reacting to the emergence of a very rich trend which seems in recent years to have developed in response to an unmistakable demand on the part of the reading public: the *polar régional*, yes, but specifically the *polar ‘bien de chez nous’*.

It is this phenomenon I wish to examine in this second part of the present essay.

‘Regional’ has not as a rule been seen as a positive epithet to append to any literary product (although *bio*regionalism’s approach to the mapping of local environments is seen as an offshoot of considerable potential), and ‘provincial’ seems to have blatantly pejorative connotations. Eudora Welty deemed ‘regional’ ‘a careless term, as well as a condescending one’, believing that it is ‘an outsider’s term; it has no meaning for the insider who is doing the writing, because as far as he knows he is writing about life’ (Welty 1957). And as Michael Kowaleski has wryly remarked, ‘“Regional fiction at its best” is a blurb emblazoned on any number of remaindered novels’ (Kowaleski 2003, p. 22). But as far as current French crime fiction is concerned, the *polar* is offering the term a new lease of life’, ‘le noir’, as the ‘Bibliographie’ of the 2003 Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines *Polar dans la ville* festival has it, ‘se met au vert’ Saint Quentin, 2003) ‑ and is doing so rather successfully.

Thus while publishing houses such as Bastberg (Alsace) may create series entitled ‘les polars régionaux’ (theirs was launched in 2000) devoted to crime novels set anywhere in France, others such as Corlet Editions (Normandy) or Liv’éditions (Brittany) specialize in those set in their home region. Indeed the *polar Breton* is a particularly successful phenomenon, with Coop Breizh (Lorient) publishing amongst others the winner of the *Prix du Polar SNCF* 2001 (Gianni Pirozzi’s *Romicide*), Alain Bargain (Quimper) offering two complementary series: ‘Enquête et Suspense’ and ‘Pol’Art’, and Terre de Brume (Rennes) going from strength to strength with their ‘Granit Noir’ collection, for which, they proclaim, ‘l’enracinement géographique est volontaire et souhaité’ (Saint-Quentin bibliographie, 2003).

Not all authors of works that might be placed under so localized a banner are comfortable with what they may see as a reductive or unhelpful categorization. Richard Deutsch, creator of the *bon viveur* Rennes academic Hippolyte Braquemare and incidentally from the Terre de Brume stable, is of the opinion that ‘le “polar régional” existe parce qu’il répond à une demande’, and considers that ‘si un polar est bon, que l’action se situe à Ploërmel, à Evolène (Suisse) ou Manhattan n’a pas d’importance’ (Deutsch, 2006). The fear that this is a bandwagon onto which many mediocre writers are happy to jump is evinced by caveats issuing even from those sources likely to be the most well-disposed towards such works, such as the local press and organisers of *polar*-orientated events. Thus an anonymous critic contributing to the bibliography of the 2003 Saint-Quentin *Polar dans la ville* festival suggests that some writers of regional crime fiction ‘auraient [pourtant] tendance à utiliser des ficelles un peu grosses’, while an unnamed *Ouest-France* journalist exploring ‘l’explosion du polar breton’ can note that ‘la production est très inégale’, and conclude ‘au lecteur de repérer les vrais talents’ (Le Mer 2003). Richard Deutsch reaches a similar conclusion : ‘le tri final est effectué par les lecteurs qui, eux, ne se trompent pas’ (Deutsch 2006).

And one thing readers certainly are doing is buying. Interviewed in July 2003 for *Ouest-France*, one of Bargain’s star writers, Françoise Le Mer, cites some eloquent figures. Noting that ‘à Paris’ (whence editors systematically returned her manusripts unopened) ‘les polars sont tirés à 2000 exemplaires’ and that on occasion barely half of a print run sells, she is jubilant about the success she has met with as author of ‘des polars bretons’: ‘mon dernier livre, *Blues Bigouden à l’île Chevalier*, a été tiré à 10,000 exemplaires en mars, et l’on attaque un second tirage’ (Le Mer, 2003).

Such figures are of course impressive, and inspire reflection: *why* are these novels proving so popular; what are the (predominantly provincial) readers of the *polar régional* looking for? For one can hardly invoke escapism or *dépaysement* as motivating factor if the crime to be solved or mystery to be elucidated happens in a reader’s own backyard. Instead, the opposite is the case: it is rather the thrill of recognition that is the draw, the sense of familiarity with a specific town, or village, or road or building which one is instantly able to conjure up in one’s mind’s eye, and which now takes on a new significance with the author’s portrayal of it as scene linked to a criminal act. Of course, the location thus exploited is for the majority of its readership by definition the contrary of ‘exotic’; the fan of the *polar régional* exchanges the Reichenbach falls for his local river and the Orient Express for the Corail Téoz. But discussing the characteristics of (American) regional fiction in general, US novelist Marilynne Robinson has concluded that the epithet in fact contains a ‘blessing’, because ‘it makes people feel that they live in a peculiar place. Of course, people, by definition, do live in a peculiar place. But if they become aware of this peculiarity as something exceptional they are stimulated to an enriching interest in the particulars of their own lives’ (Robinson 1992, 65-6). Or at least, in the case of crime fiction, of their own surroundings.

One publisher who responded in timely and imaginative fashion to this trend is Editions Nykta, a small publishing house based in Etrigny in Saône et Loire, and who decided in 2001 to add to its staples of novels and *beaux livres* a series of *polars régionaux*, with a twist.[[10]](#endnote-10) First, Claude-Jean Poignant and France Baron set their potential authors (40% of whom have never previously published anything) the task of writing a crime story ‘dans un lieu qu’ils connaissent bien et qu’ils doivent décrire de la façon la plus subjective possible’ (Congiu 2006). Second, they impose a limit of some 100 pages maximum, thereby presumably justifying the name given the collection, whose works can be read at a sitting, in one ‘Petite Nuit’. Starting with the Yonne (Burgundy), they have published 10 novellas per *département*, available separately or as a set, and are now spreading west to encompass the Loiret, and south east to incorporate the Ain and the Rhône. Two years into the project, they were breaking even; where initial print runs were of 200 per volume, they now sell on average 1000 copies of each title, with some achieving sales of 2000+. Some fifty-four of these slim volumes are currently available; there are at least 16 more in the pipeline, and no plan to halt the initiative of producing what Nykta has had the happy notion of baptising *polars à racines*. How do they work?

Essentially, Nykta has laid the emphasis on variety, thereby avoiding the trap of formula writing, and encourages writers to explore ‘des univers variés, de l’historique au fantastique en passant par la poésie et l’humour’ (Congiu 2006) – the while evoking a specific town or village. Certain authors choose to anchor their realist texts firmly around a local attraction or event which is to a high degree integral to the plot. Thus Alain Bernot and Joselyne Perdreau set their *Gare à Saint Lazare* in Autun on September 1st, when the bi-annual *Foire à la Saint Ladre* has filled the centre with stalls and shoppers, and where someone has made the most of the crowds and bustle to steal two priceless manuscripts from the town hall. Lucette Desvignes’ *Nuit de la chouette* (2500 sales to date) begins on the evening of 5th January 2001, the night when the owl carved on the west buttress of Notre Dame de Dijon, and popular talisman of the Dijonnais, was (really) vandalised and disfigured. Guy Floriant locates his tale ‑ of vengeance and murder and a Colette manuscript – in the luxurious bed-and-breakfast he and his wife really do currently run (la Maison Marthe) in Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye (and whose well, one hopes, harbours sinister secrets only in his fiction). And *conseillère régionale de Bourgogne* Marie-Thérèse Mutin sets her political whodunnit in Dijon’s imposing Palais des Ducs (today both town hall and museum), on the day the outgoing mayor is visiting his office for the last time – and in surroundings she obviously knows professionally, and intimately:

D’un pas assuré, il gravit les escaliers abrités de Bellegarde qui jouxtent la fameuse Tour Carrée où le bon roi René, alors simple duc, resta emprisonné près de trois ans. Ses pas résonnèrent sur les dalles bleutées et inégales de l’immense Salle des Grades […] Combien de complots, de trahisons avaient été ourdis entre ces épaisses murailles […] ? Il fut soulagé d’atteindre les vastes salles des Etats et de Flore où flottait une écoeurante odeur de sueur, de tabac refroidi (pp. 12-13).

Some, on the other hand, opt to structure a plot that might theoretically take place in any number of places, and then tie it to their own elected location. Thus Olivier-Jacques Bernard’s *Lucy* requires a backdrop of a mining area (but not necessarily Montceau-les-Mines); the victim of the mysterious attacker armed with a flame-thrower of André Fanet’s *Chaud, derrière!* needs a river to jump into, but this does not have to be the Saône at Pontailler; and Jacques Fulgence’s *Kir Kabyle* has to be situated in a district scarred with 60s tower blocks marked for demolition (but from whose rubble ‘surgiraient des espaces verts et des aires de jeu’ (p. 36) – and Chenôve is hopefully not the only such. Each writer however tailors narrative to place, and often to (footnoted) local linguistic, historical or cultural curiosities, thus responding fully to the criteria Nykta imposes: ‘qu’il permette aux lecteurs de découvrir [l’endroit] et en même temps de suivre une intrigue policière’ (Congiu 2006).

A few Nykta authors, finally, decide upon a surreal or futuristic evocation of their chosen place. In a Talant where in July 1998 watching the final of the World Cup is quasi-obligatory, Jean Libis’ protagonist (of *Les Footballeurs dans le verger*) finds himself pursued by the Commission de Contrôle et de Communication who know he has no TV, has not seen the match and thus come to chide him for ‘une attitude foncièrement incivique’ and ‘élitisme aggravé par votre refus des moyens modernes de communication’ (p. 52-3). Claude-Jean Poignant has Auxerre perplexed by a spate of thefts by zombie criminals in his *Le gang avait de la morgue*. And in *D’une sieste au Beuvray* Mary-Gérard Vaude mingles the history of the Gaulish tribe who built the oppidum Bibract (Beuvray) with tales of evil spirits who drive men to despair and suicide, as told by a 3000 year old gnome ‘haut comme trois pommes, la barbe blanche, le verbe criard et chevrotant’(p. 5). All in all, the series is understandably of uneven quality, but it is a unique venture, and functions as a collection that is greater than the sum of its component parts, which parts are of course linked by their rootedness in the town or village of a given *département*.

Furthermore, it incorporates the odd comic touch ‑ a case in point being Denis Duclos’ *Semur et le désordre mondial*, described as a ‘thriller rural-planétaire’ ‑ and shows a predilection for word-play in its titles: Drouillet, narrator of Jean-Marie Perret’s *Timbré, évidemment*, does of course work in a post-office; Laure Gasparotto transforms the ‘Hôtel Dieu’ into the *Hôtel d’yeux* because of a macabre ocular discovery made there, etc.) This refusal to take itself too seriously would seem a characteristic of the *polar régional*, with Editions Corlet publishing Jean Calbrix’s Inspector Limard series *Mon cadavre se met à la diète à Dieppe/se lève tôt à Yvetot/s’enroue à Rouen* and Jean-Louis Vigla’s *Les Etripés à la mode de Caen*, and Terre de Brume’s Bernard Pouchèle giving a nod in the direction of Harry Kemelman’s Rabbi Small sleuth novels with his *Samedi, l’évêque a raté le bus*. At its best it can seem to be paying tribute to the wry humour of a Léo Malet, in so doing presenting its best defence against those suspicious of its credentials.

For detractors there are, if only because of those negative connotations of the term as mentioned above. Renaud Marhic, for example, has written a merciless short story charting the tribulations of an aspiring young *polar regional* novelist, Simon (Marhic 2001). Simon is author of a regional crime novel (*Du rififi dans le pâté*) which begins by presenting young butcher Marie-Jannig and her *coup de foudre* for Job Gourlawen, against a fest-noz background ‘au son des bombardes, devant deux boles de cidre doux’. Simon conscientiously attributes Breton names to all his characters (Maïwen, Inspector Le Henan, Jopig) and carefully includes many references to local delicacies:

Bien sûr, l’intrigue est aussi prétexte à faire découvrir au lecteur le monde passionnant de la charcuterie et de la salaison. (Des recherches laborieuses m’ont permis de placer certains termes techniques comme “barquettes thermo-formables” ou “boyaux manufacturés”, garants de la qualité de ma documentation.) Je pense que les critiques n’auront aucun mal à écrire qu’il y a là “tous les ingrédients d’un bon polar régional” (Marhic 2001).

The first publisher to whom Simon shows his novel explains that he has on his books retired military men and captains of industry : ‘des gens qui connaissent les choses de la vie mieux que quiconque’, but also teachers : ‘Eux ne connaissent rien à la vie mais ils écrivent sans faute dans un style simple. Le lecteur aime ça’.[[11]](#endnote-11) The second takes it upon himself to suggest certain modifications he feels crucial to the novel’s success :

Le meurtrier : “Jopig”, ça ne colle pas non plus. C’est un sobriquet très couru par chez nous, mon jeune ami. Que diraient les familles concernées ? Usez donc d’un surnom passe-partout, moins breton…

– “Stanley” ?

Vous n’y pensez pas ! Avec tous ces retraités anglais qui ont acheté des terres dans la région… Ils contribuent grandement à l’économie locale (Marhic 2001).

He is also concerned that the character of Job is shown mourning his lost love during a dinner of oysters (not a happy linking for local ostreiculture), and requests that ‑ accompanied by a *vinaigrette aux échalottes* ‑ they be rather presented as inspiring in him happy memories. Overall, however, he is delighted, and hopes a second novel might be forthcoming: ‘Que diriez-vous de faire découvrir au lecteur le monde de la danse folklorique?’

But Marhic’s apparent cynicism should be taken in context; his own Brittany-based crime novels *Hermines et idées noires*, for example, centres around the nefarious activities of the Archdruide du Grand Collège des Druides de Bretagne and what his protagonist calls ‘des délirants celtomaniaques’ (Marhic 2000, p. 11-12)…. Indeed, what neither he nor anyone else can dispute is the growing popularity of regional works – works which, unlike the novel of the Simon of his story, do not seek to reinforce but generally to explode stereotypes. As Jean-Paul Ceccaldi (creator of ‘Le Flicorse’, and himself a Corsican police commander) explains, the *polar régional* is for him a way to affirm his *corsitude* while taking a stand ‘contre des préjugés qui caricaturent les Corses et donc me caricaturent’, an attitude he claims is shared by Corsican publishers who ‘refusent l’enfermement identitaire et savent qu’il ne faut pas confondre culture et folklore’ (the latter turning towards the past, but the former constantly evolving) (Jégouzo, 2006).

The trend is not, it should be emphasised, restricted to France. British crime fiction has of late for example begun to favour cities and towns such as Manchester, Glasgow and more recently Aberystwyth and Bath (where the *thermae* have already been the scene of a crime or two). America has long had a tradition of ‘state capital crime’, but the rural is no longer neglected, and as Mark Schaffer observed over a decade ago: ‘Lately, with the growth of the regional detective novel, *the crime novel is serving as an unintentional tourist map*, cluing us in on the great off-the-track blues joints in New Orleans and secluded desert picnic spots in Arizona’ (my italics; Shaffer, 1993).

His reference to a tourist map is an interesting one, and underlines a developing interface between the *polar* and tourism, a direction in which the novels discussed above may on one level be thought to be pointing. Literary tourism *per se* is a much-documented phenomenon as well as a lucrative industry, premised like heritage tourism in general upon the desire ‘to experience a version of the past (or imagined present) and to make connections between past and present, fact and fiction’ (Squire 1996, p. 129). Theories of place image are explored by the tourist industry in order to establish how best to package promising sites. These are then ‘marketed as desirable products; not necessarily as ends in themselves, but because visits to them […] are a vehicle for experiences which are to be collected, consumed’(Britton 1991, p.465). ‘Literary’ or ‘artistic’ places contribute to this socio-cultural phenomenon and are gaining in popularity as tourism experts learn how best to exploit them; in particular on holiday, people will detour to take in the birthplace of, house of, grave of or *pays de* a given writer/artist.

Cities, of course, are rich in such sites, and obviously rich too in those linked to crime fiction. Journalist Marc Lemonier’s recent *Le polar à Paris* is not another book on the detective novel but rather a guide to ‘balades policières dans Paris’, taking us from Belleville to the ‘beaux quartiers’ in the footsteps of a variety of villains and sleuths. And Elizabeth Cowley Tyler currently seems bent on carving out her own ‘balade meurtrière’ as she sets scenes of crime at Les Halles, the Madeleine, but also significantly at the ‘Maison de Balzac’ (thus presumably aiming to interest both the reader of classic fiction *and* the *polar* aficionado).

But as this briefest of forays into heritage tourism shows, cultural tourists are often pleased to go off the beaten track, and *syndicats d’initiative* are ever-more prepared to help them. Pont Aven’s, for example, emphasises in its literature the (short) period of Van Gogh’s residence there, having apparently, in particular ‘a unique claim as the place where he attempted suicide and died’ (!) (Herbert 1996, p. 84). In England, claims Peter Schofield, ‘almost any type of tourism experience has become possible and popularly acceptable’, and he offers, as example of real life postmodern tourism, the sobering information that ‘the M25, a daily nightmare for many of London’s commuters, attracts the gaze of thousands of coach-borne tourists on a sightseeing tour of the motorway which incudes a commentary on the development’s recent history’ (Schofield 1996, p. 335). In the light of such developments, Catherine Simon’s evocation of Lyon, Nykta’s ‘Petite Nuits’ series and the success of the Brittany authors discussed above can surely be looked at in a new light. The *polar à racines* is both confirming and defending regional identities and offering new locations for (so to speak) the old story that is the crime novel.

And it is incidentally offering a promising new terrain (urban, and also *rurbain* and rural) for the ever-expanding field of popular cultural tourism.

# Notes

1 ‘Nous, au village, aussi, l’on a/ De beaux assassinats’ . From Georges Brassens’ *L’Assassinat* (1962).

2 See my article ‘*Rompols* not of the Bailey: Fred Vargas and the *polar* as *mini-proto-mythe*’, *French Cultural Studies*, vol. 12, Part 1, no. 34, Spring 2001, pp. 95–108.

3 See Marion François’ article ‘L’Enfer de René Belletto, le secret policier cache un autre’, *Echo*, no. 3, June 2005. Online journal at [www.echopolyglot.com](http://www.echopolyglot.com/)

4 The inventions of, respectively, Didier Daeninckx, Robert Deleuse, and Georges Chaulet (author of the *Fantômette* series).

5 In February 2002, he was awarded the *Grand Prix de Provence* for his *œuvre*.

6 Which obtained a ‘Mention spéciale’ from the jury of the 2004 *Prix Polar dans la ville*.

7 *Lyonnais* for ‘Lyonnais’

8 Better known to readers of crime fiction as S. S. Van Dine.

9 In 2001 Fay Weldon published *The Bulgari Connection*, having been contracted by the Italian jewellery firm of the same name to write a novel mentioning their name at least 12 times.

10 Each of the novels/novellas cited belongs to the Editions Nykta ‘Petite Nuit’ collection and was published between 2000 and 2002.

11 It is of interest to note that many of the Nykta authors, for example, are teachers or ex-teachers, as also is Françoise Le Mer.

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1. ‘Nous, au village, aussi, l’on a/ De beaux assassinats’ . From Georges Brassens’ *L’Assassinat* (1962). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See my article ‘*Rompols* not of the Bailey: Fred Vargas and the *polar* as *mini-proto-mythe*’, *French Cultural Studies*, vol. 12, Part 1, no. 34, Spring 2001, pp. 95–108. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Marion François’ article ‘L’Enfer de René Belletto, le secret policier cache un autre’, *Echo*, no. 3, June 2005. Online journal at [www.echopolyglot.com](http://www.echopolyglot.com/) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. The inventions of, respectively, Didier Daeninckx, Robert Deleuse, and Georges Chaulet (author of the *Fantômette* series). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In February 2002, he was awarded the *Grand Prix de Provence* for his *œuvre*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Which obtained a ‘Mention spéciale’ from the jury of the 2004 *Prix Polar dans la ville*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Lyonnais* for ‘Lyonnais’ [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Better known to readers of crime fiction as S. S. Van Dine. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
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