From Politics to the Roman Noir

Anissa Belhadjin

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What constitutes a Roman Noir? At its heart, there’s quite a distance between, say, the cynical investigations of the original “hard-boiled” detectives (Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler), the clashes in the “underworld” typical of the mobster novels (William Riley Burnett, Auguste Le Breton or Albert Simonin), or the social or political crises evoked by the neo-detective novel. Their only point in common: criminality, violence—and above all their causes and consequences.

In this respect, the roman noir and the mystery novel are opposed: the conclusion of the mystery novel celebrates the triumph of convention because the guilty party is found, punished, and social order is restored. By contrast, the roman noir calls that order into question. There is of course a murder, but it is motivated, and becomes in a way a pretext: what’s more important than the crime is the road that leads to the crime, and its implications. Fifty years ago, Raymond Chandler illustrated this idea when he wrote that the roman noir, “returns the murder to the category of individuals who commit it for real reasons, and not only in order to provide the reader with a cadaver.”

Thus the themes entwine with one another to give a particularity to the roman noir. And one can say that the roman noir—sometimes called “polar,” a parasyronym, is produced when there is a plot based on a crime or an offense, along with the expression of an anxiety—not an individual one but usually social—an anxiety expressed through violence which leads to a pessimistic or indeed hopeless vision of the world.

Within this rather relaxed plot-line the roman noir is protean, despite its relatively short history, appearing in the 1920’s in the US and in 1945 with the creation of Gallimard’s Série Noire in France.

One of its latest incarnations displays an interest in the political which becomes a novelistic theme par excellence with the success of Jean-Patrick Manchette’s (1942–1995) “neo-polar.” Influenced by American writers of the roman noir, Manchette and other authors during this period of social crisis (the events of May 1968) use this model which virulently denounces social problems. The work of Manchette, begun at the start of the 1970’s, is foundational because of the link between the politicization of the roman noir and the questioning of the act of writing: the two are inextricably linked to his conception of the genre and of literature.
as expressed in his press releases and interviews (now published by Rivages/Noir). He states: “The polar for me, was—and still is—the novel of violent social intervention. I set off in that direction encouraged also by my experience as a leftist.”

For Manchette, inventor of the expression “neo-polar” in 1979, this “literature of crisis” is above all not a detective novel. The “neo-polar” “echos the striking reappearance of History on the torn up streets of Paris and elsewhere.” What characterizes it is first a particular tone where violence and dark realism dominate. This violence has as its target society in its entirety: political corruption, social injustice, the all-powerfulness of the well-off and the weakness of individuals are its major themes during the 1970’s. Sociologically, the fascination with the “neo-polar” appears as a new, comfortable, form of critique—at once individual and distanced—which satisfies readers who can then move “from the question of engagement as the kernel of social critique to complex forms of distanciation.”

The rise to power of the Left (Mitterand, 1981) marks the end of this period but the “neo-polar,” whose referential and mostly political reach is now in favor, had a lasting influence on the noir genre in France. Just as the “hard-boiled” detective was a constitutive element of the genre at the beginning of the century, the theme of social criticism becomes significant in France during the last decades. To such an extent that Les Temps modernes, which devoted an issue to the roman noir in 1997, offered an editorial article arguing that the roman noir is “social history”:

Romans noirs are an immediate and engaged literature. Immediate because they speak directly about the banalities and upheavals of our world: in their violent fictions they show us a “known” universe [. . .] Engaged because the reality that they take up and fictionally transform, stakes out either implicit or clearly formulated, political positions [. . .]. The roman noir also attempts, between fiction and reality, at its risk and peril, an elucidation of our century’s end by taking as indices, as its working hypotheses, current events that it organizes by proposing their coherence.

So what of its status today, nearly thirty years after the end of the “neopolar”? Is politics still the main ingredient in the noir genre? The answer is yes, even if it is true that romans noirs are more the product of authors than of genres. In what respect is the fictional plot now so often inseparable from politics—from the choice of political characters, of events linked to affairs of state or to the conduct of public affairs? What now
are the links between the novelistic and the referential, the fictional and the factual? Because, in contrast to other themes, the political poses questions about the relationship between the real and the imaginary more sharply, notably through the path the novels walk between fiction and denunciation.

A few important French authors plough the furrow of the political roman noir: there is Didier Daeninckx [See Donald Reid’s essay in this issue], who nowadays seems an old-timer; Dominique Manotti, who, in novel after novel, chronicles the collusion between the worlds of business and political power; Jean-Hugues Oppel, who writes the politician’s novel; or, more recently, the much widely discussed, DOA, whose first novel in the noir collection recounts the battle of secret services against terrorism.

**Didier Daeninckx or Political Memory**

Since the publication of the very successful *Meurtres pour mémoire* (Murders for the Record), Didier Daeninckx occupies an important place in the heart of the French noir genre, consolidated by a good number of novels and short stories. Most of his works are situated at the intersection of history and politics, taking as subjects the sensitive moments of French history: the Second World War, colonization, etc. For Didier Daeninckx, the interest in reading, then in writing the roman noir is tied to his interest in these very questions:

I didn’t find in the dominant literature of the 1970’s, at a time which was however very preoccupied with politics (the Vietnam War, the 1968 events in Prague, Cuba, Che Guevara), these issues. After May ‘68 political discourse invaded everything, but in the realm of literature there was something like an escape, a modesty or a refusal: one doesn’t dirty language with things related to protest. There seemed to me to be something missing compared to all the reading I’d done of 19th century writers. I was a big reader of Hugo, Balzac, Maupassant. In them and even in Flaubert, a social preoccupation is always present, even when it’s not in the foreground. That sort of reflection of the real, I then found in the American roman noir, and then there was the Manchette explosion. Jean-Patrick Manchette grabs hold of a rejected genre which, in the 60’s was in great part conservative, right-wing, even far-right, and all at once he breaks the conventions. With him there’s a rupture. It’s odd because it’s hard to imagine what took place. I can’t find any other examples. Now,
authors have promoted themselves with these images of rupture, Houellebecq or others, but they’re not saying the same thing at all, on the contrary their writing is a writing of submission.  

What is the influence of Manchette and of the American roman noir? Daeninckx places himself in the tradition of most of the noir authors of his generation. With a bonus, which makes him today a true classic of the “polar,” whose novels and short stories are read even in French schools: the importance he gives to historical facts, which are the basis of his fictions and his comments on little-known stretches of our history whose importance he reveals. For example, *Cannibales* (Folio, 2000) evokes the Colonial Exposition of 1931, during which the Kanaks, brought directly from New Caledonia, were exhibited like animals. A thesis topic for today’s Kanaks, made possible thanks to Daeninckx:

I returned to Kanaky to seek out the great-great grandchildren of the Kanaks displayed in 1931 behind the bars of the Zoological Gardens during the Colonial Exposition and then in the zoos of Germany. All the people from the Canala tribe had read ‘Cannibale’ and the great majority had discovered this episode from their history via the book. Since then, a whole part of their lived experience has come to the surface and educational establishments, neighborhood libraries have assembled everything that’s been written, photographed or recorded. [. . .] The revelation of this episode dating back 70 years has noticeably modified the lines of debate in Caledonia. I’ve participated in numerous encounters with writers and historians who are unearthing the reality of colonialism in a land reduced to a “penal colony,” and where the attempt at the eradication of a people was followed by its repercussions.  

But the novel which brought Daeninckx into view is *Meurtres pour mémoire* (1984), the first pages of which evoke a massacre of French-Algerian demonstrators in Paris, on October 17, 1961. Its historical source was the peaceful demonstration organized by the FLN to protest against the curfew limiting the movements of French Algerians. Daeninckx evokes the feverish preparations, the convergence of demonstrators on the center of Paris, their hopes for collective action and ends with a bloody and violent repression by the forces of order:

Not a single one was armed, not the smallest knife, nor the tiniest rock in their pocket. Kémal and his men kept an eye on the suspicious ones; they had thrown out a half-dozen guys
who were dreaming of a fight. The goal of the demonstration was clear: remove the curfew imposed a week earlier on only the Muslim French and at the same time prove the FLN had representative power in France. The road was clear; they could see at a distance the Arc de Triomphe lit up for the official visit of the Shah of Iran and Farah Dibah. As was their custom, the women took the lead. There were even landaus surrounded by children. Who could have imagined that three hundred meters away, cloaked in darkness, a squad of Mobile Police aided by a hundred Harkis were waiting for them. At fifty meters, without warning, the submachine guns let lose a hail of bullets. Omar, a young boy of fifteen, fell first. The gunfire continued for three quarters of an hour.¹²

During the course of the demonstration, a man, Roger Thiraud, meets his death. Twenty years later, his son is assassinated and the police investigate. These two deaths are linked to archival documents dating from the Second World War on which the father and son were working, twenty years apart: the documents prove that a high-ranking bureaucrat, still in office, was responsible for the round-up of Jews sent to Drancy and then to death camps. He had the two men assassinated.

Massacre of Algerian-born demonstrators, deportation of Jews: these two historical events, fictionalized here, seem unrelated and detached. And yet, they aim in the same direction: what direction?

The bloody demonstration and its planning form the beginning of the novel. The few hours before the protest of October 17, 1961 are seen by three focal characters who each make a single appearance in the novel and find themselves in the same place. Thus, a polyphony of voices that Daeninckx explains in this way:

I had the idea of recounting the demonstration of October 17 1961 and, since the site of the demonstration was to be the Place de l’Étoile, I wanted to give a star-form structure to the novel. The star, as a symbol, refers to Algeria as well as to antisemitic persecution (think of Modiano and his book *Place de l’Étoile*), and offers in a way the themes—Algeria, the deportation—which are treated side by side in the book. The structure of the book is thus very simple; it starts out as a star and when the people are about to converge and arrive at the heart of the star, there’s an explosion. It’s this simplicity which gives all the complexity to the plot and the book. Once this architecture was adopted, I reconstructed the paths of all the characters and I followed them one after another. There were places which no longer existed, like
the shanty town of Nanterre. I managed to find in Beaubourg a slide montage of the shanty town; a sociologist had reproduced the road plan and told the story of their construction. With these photos, I was in the shanty town of Nanterre and I strolled my characters around in it; when they go to the butcher, it’s described in the work of the sociologist. Finally, thanks to my Kabyle brother-in-law, I met some people from the FLN who had been tortured and beaten.¹³

This bloody episode ends with the discovery of Thiraud’s body:

—Oh, shit, it’s not a *bicot*! Looks like a Frenchman.

The squad leader was pretty uneasy about his discovery; he decided to cover for himself by telling his superior.

The next day, Wednesday October 18, 1961, the papers headlined the rail and metro strike for increased pay. Only *Paris Jour* devoted the whole of page one to the events of the preceding evening:

“ALGERIANS IN CONTROL OF PARIS FOR THREE HOURS”

Around noon, the prefecture filed its report and announced 3 dead (including one European) 64 wounded and 11,538 arrests.¹⁴

There will be no more discussion of this massacre—except when the death of Thiraud’s son twenty years later throws suspicion on the death of the father which had always been attributed to error. The events of October 18, 1961 are thus only the starting point for the novel, even though the research done by Daeninckx indicates the importance for him of portraying as faithfully as possible this little known event.

The issue of the Jewish deportation is quite another story. In the novel, this episode of our history is extradiegetic since it is brought up only in archival documents accidentally read by the Thiraud’s in Toulouse. They implicated André Veillut, Secretary General of the Prefecture during the war, who, “fed the Nazi death machine and liquidated hundreds of human beings.”¹⁵ When Veillut sensed the impending victory of the Allies, he aligned himself with the Resistance, was decorated at the Liberation, and then climbed the rungs of power. As a result of which, feeling his collaborationist past would be revealed, he had two men killed, the Thiraud’s father and son.

Unlike the events of October 1961, the deportation of Toulouse’s Jews forms the basis of the plot and is revealed only in the final pages, when the
inspector Cadin explains that he has discovered that the father Thiraud, then the son, had discovered the role of Veillut in this affair:

And then one day he noticed the disproportionate number of children deported from the Toulouse region. A rigorous historian, he set out to understand the reason for the disproportion. [. . .] Studying in detail the documents filed under “DE,” he quickly understood that the responsibility for the swollen quota of children lay with a high government official in Toulouse, in charge of Jewish Affairs, and identified only by his initials: A.V.

Until then, the death of the two men remains very mysterious, even if the clues point bit by bit to a political event implicating a man in power.

But whether they’re an event providing the backdrop to an assassination, or the outcome of the plot, these two fictional events belong well and truly to a hidden (because inglorious) history of France, and that is what finally links them.

In fact, in this novel, even if the identity of the culprit (André Veillut) is fictive and the place (Toulouse) transposed, Daeninckx denounces the responsibility of the political regime and primarily, of Maurice Papon. Papon was a government official in Bordeaux under Vichy (later condemned in 1998 for complicity in crimes against humanity for his role in the deportation of Jews during the Nazi occupation), then Prefect of Paris during the Algerian War and thus directly responsible for the massacre of French-Algerians.

Today, the massacre of October 17, 1961 like that of February 8, 1962 (called the “Charonne metro massacre”) which brought the Algerian War onto French soil, are known. The same is true of the responsibility of the French State, via several high officials, in the collaboration to deport French Jews during the Second World War. But things were different at the time when Meurtres pour mémoire appeared in 1984. For example, the in-depth study of the events of October 1961 by the historian Jean-Luc Einaudi wasn’t published until 1991; and, unexpectedly, it’s the defamation suit brought against him by Maurice Papon in 1999 that allowed the emergence of the first public debates on the subject of the repression of the Algerian FLN demonstration. Even if work on the question had started before that date, it’s the work of Einaudi that really moved public opinion because his work reveals a much larger number of deaths than was currently understood. And Daeninckx truly contributes a great deal to the knowledge of these facts through the success of his novel. He has this to say about his work on the frontiers of fiction:
This concern with sounding out the real, it’s not a work of sociology; it allows me to nourish my characters and invent a method for arriving at fiction. How do you move things from the real to a state of fiction without it turning into a sociological, historical, or journalistic work? What I do is take from all of the social sciences a part of their methodology from which I make one for myself. It’s a work on words as they’re born, on fleeting things, the songs on the radio. It’s not a historical reconstruction, a period novel, but a desire to give truth back to fictional things. It takes up all my time.18

Thus reality and fiction are tightly linked, with history furnishing matter for the novel, oftentimes with whole collages of factual documents, hardly modified, as here:

For Daeninckx, this engagement with literature has its origins in his own history. He states:

I collided with History exactly 42 years ago, on February 8, 1962, when the Paris police killed a dozen demonstrators at the Charonne metro. A few days before, a commando of the OAS had thrown a grenade at the home of André Malraux, then Minister of Culture under General de Gaulle, and the explosion had disfigured a little girl, Delphine Renard. The demonstration was meant to protest against that terrorist act and to demand immediate peace with Algeria. My closest friends participated. And during the night came the news of the massacre. The mother of a class-mate, Suzanne Martorell, was among the victims. Another neighbor, Mme. Renaudat, seriously wounded, remained bedridden for twenty years, without ever pronouncing another word: the character of the aphasic mother in Meurtres pour mémoire owes a lot to her. No need to point out that the responsible parties in these police assassinations, Papon primarily, have never been determined, and the families owed their survival only to the solidarity of those around them. It’s clear that that day is essential in my writing choices. While working on the reconstruction of this event in 1983, I became aware of that other massacre kept in the shadows, that of the Algerian demonstrators in October 1961, victims of the same paponian police. I understood then the symbolic importance of that date, which explains in great part its cover-up. October 17, 1961 marks the end of the colonial venture.21

History and literature are tightly linked in Daeninckx’s work. Historical facts motivate the writing, then nourish the work, which in turn gives
history a greater visibility; this circuit proves if need be that the roman noir can, while losing none of its fictional qualities, base itself on historical or political facts, as if fiction assimilated the real without however dampening its strength. But as Libération put it, Daeninckx “could have drafted history theses, he writes “polars.” And it’s a lot more useful. An author recognized in the genre, Didier Daeninckx uses the roman noir to bring to the surface events that have been silenced.”

JEAN-HUGUES OPPEL: “EVERYTHING IS POLITICAL”

For more than twenty years, Jean-Hugues Oppel has been a prolific author of youth novels, of short stories and of roman noirs published mainly with Rivages/Noir. His novels are regularly awarded prizes and Six-Pack, which relates the activities of a serial killer, was adapted for cinema. French Tabloïds was directly inspired by James Ellroy’s American Tabloid which recounts the Kennedy brothers’ journey between November 22, 1958 and the same date in 1963, from John Kennedy’s arrival in power till the day of his assassination. Suffice it to say that Oppel’s title is more than a wink at the American master, it immediately alerts the “polar” fan that the novel is, like that of Ellroy, a work of political fiction, set in France and more precisely during the presidential elections of 2002. In his work, Oppel has moved “from the political novel to the politician’s novel,” as he put it. But why?

There’s nothing I can do about it, it’s political because that’s what I want to write about. Fiction allows me to say things that reality can’t say. That’s what Hugo did when he wrote Les Misérables, or Zola when he wrote Germinal. You can’t write Germinal without taking a stand.

Today, people like Fourniret [a French serial-killer], everyone knows that they’re horrific. But the well-dressed guy, full of money, who connives bribes and builds schools that collapse? It’s the same thing. The political, it’s a treasure for criminal fiction. From a simple current event, you tell yourself it’s not political, that it’s not big money’s fault: but perhaps it is. The Silence of the Lambs, that’s not a political film? Perhaps it is: you’re the daughter of a senator when you get snatched by a crazy killer. Everything is political.

All the same, you mustn’t make a treatise out of your novel. It’s the political in the wide sense of the word: the world of the “City.” It always comes back to politics. I’m not going to save the world with my novel, but maybe give it a conscience.
For Oppel, the roman noir, “novel of transgression, novel of the dysfunctional,” is also that “of the margins, of crisis, of the social.” The roman noir is engaged; but:

You mustn’t confuse militant and engaged. Overly militant books become treatises, not books. Agatha Christie has her position on social order: the rich, the poor, and everyone in his place. You’re necessarily engaged because the roman noir is going to look at the dysfunctional; you can’t be neutral on the dysfunctional. You have to weigh the for and the against. You have a position, you have to weigh it. You can have whatever position you want, but you have to show it. It means nothing to say you shouldn’t be engaged. For example, Tarantino, he scares me, it’s not just for laughs.28

In French Tabloïds, recent French history is evoked, and more precisely the situation during the reelection of Jacques Chirac as president in 2002. To the extent that the situation is made up of purely fictional hypotheses, the work belongs to the category of novels called “political fiction,” a name for novels where a factual plot, made up of real, known political elements, is interwoven with explanations, with repercussions, and with fictional facts which explain it and flesh it out. Political fiction aims at realism and that makes it a form of social critique. Given unexplained or incomprehensible political facts—but always accurate ones—the novelist’s task is to provide the reader with coherent, fictional hypotheses which give those facts a meaning and to show, if not what took place, what could have taken place. What’s particularly interesting in French Tabloïds is the study of the articulation between known facts belonging to recent history, and proposed fictional explanations: in political fiction, how does one pass from politics to fiction?

The beginning of French Tabloïds is classically roman noir: a young girl—clearly a prostitute—falls from the top floor of a private home during a party given by a member of Parliament. This very romanesque plot (a prostitute, a strange death, political corruption) is bit by bit replaced by another.

Here it is: Jacques Chirac must win reelection in 2002 because if not, “beaten, returned to the status of mere citizen, the courts will be waiting for him as he exits the Élysées. And if he falls, he won’t fall alone.” And, “faced with his usual adversary, as un-charismatic and power-weary as he may be, the President could well be beaten.”29 In the shadow of power, a plan is hatched to assure his reelection:
Make it so that the votes are widely spread during the first round, so encourage a proliferation of presidential candidates. Encourage the opposition to go after the named party; motivate his dissidents and his opponents. Don’t discourage his party affiliates from standing up. The traditional adversary mustn’t be standing for the second round: he must be beaten in the first by a surprise opponent.

Then you have to spread fear.30

The only candidate who would undoubtedly serve the reelection of Chirac in the second round of the presidential election was Jean-Marie Le Pen (candidate of the extreme right), whose candidacy was carried by a wave of security fears whipped up by the media. Thus, a part of the novel relates the efforts of a cabinet of consultants in the Spring of 2001 whose three members try secretly to get newspapers, the radio and the television press to accentuate the sordid stories of ghetto problems, crimes and offenses tied to lack of security, unease in the police force, etc. The goal of this approach is to spread fear in public opinion and to provoke a voter reaction based on law and order issues.

Alongside their work, the novel is centered around three other characters whose points of view alternate: Jacques Lerois, superintendent of the Intelligence Service of the French police, is given the task of facilitating the work of Piers Goodwhile, a mercenary experienced in techniques of persuasion and an “expert at mental manipulation.” Goodwhile is entrusted with choosing from a panel provided by the R.G., an easily influenced and dangerous man, capable of committing a massacre which, with ample coverage by the media, would add to the public’s obsession with law and order. This man is Victor Courcaillet, a character directly based on Richard Durn, the man responsible for the killings at Nanterre.31 Moreover, the latter’s personality, barely modified, is evoked in French Tabloïds: his taste for guns, his psychiatric counseling, his hatred for society, all the way to the slaughter he carried out at a council meeting, which ended with eight deaths and numerous wounded, before he manages to kill himself by jumping from an open window at the “Brigade Criminelle.” Except that in French Tabloïds, Courcaillet doesn’t kill himself: he is assassinated by Lerois who disguises his death as a suicide. And it’s Goodwhile who, meeting him at the shooting club where he’s a member, becomes his friend and encourages him to commit this act of vengeance.

The last focal character of the novel is Hélène Carvelle, a police lieutenant obsessed by the death of the young prostitute. Removed from the
case by her superiors, she investigates the death of the young woman on her off hours but can’t manage to piece together the circumstances of her death. She is punished for her obstinance by being assigned surveillance duty at the municipal counsel where Courcaillot has his rampage and she is powerless to stop him.

It’s clear that these diverse perspectives are more or less independent from one another. This novel divided into more than a hundred chapters presents numerous perspectives which serve several parallel plots. *French Tabloïds* closely resembles a labyrinth: red herrings and detours complicate the unfolding of events and fool the reader at several points.

In this incongruous novelistic progression, the chronological progression (a precise date headlines each chapter) is the only tangible unit and compensates for the extreme incongruity of perspectives: it also hides the fact that most of the characters don’t know one another and never meet. They are in a sense parallel diegesis that play out with only one identical aim: to assure the reelection of the President.

The explosion of fictional perspective is also emphasized by the recurrence of chapters in the form of documents. The passage from one character to another, but also from one form to another: the work of re-composing that the reader must do is emphasized because s/he has to synthesize the information, establish the correlation with events mentioned in the fictional chapters and re-compose the whole thing in a linear progression. These types of chapters, entitled “Front Page,” “Confidential,” or “Email,” are more frequent than the fictional chapters, but much shorter.

The “Front Page” chapters are made up entirely of actual front pages collected by Jean-Hugues Oppel from dailies covering the time period evoked in *French Tabloïds*. These front pages come from six national daily papers, (*Libération*, *Le Figaro*, *France Soir*, *Le Parisien*, *L’Humanité*, and *Le Monde*) and from eight regional dailies.

The front pages corroborate the thesis of the novel according to which Le Pen’s entrance into the second round of voting is due to a rise in French concerns over crime. These concerns were fostered by a climate of fear provoked by the media’s decisions to emphasize crimes and offenses, petty or otherwise. All of this was orchestrated by men serving the President. Thus, the novel opens with a chapter in which there is no mention of crime or violence but starting with the second such chapter, these issues proliferate:
PAGE ONE:

—THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY PASSES A “MASTER” BILL FOR DAILY LAW AND ORDER

—AGAINST INCREASINGLY COMMON OFFENSES SECURITY ON A DAILY BASIS: A MORE REPRESSIVE LAW

—VIOLENCE: HOW TO PROTECT SCHOOLS AGAINST UNCONTROLLABLE KIDS

—CREDIT CARD ABUSE

—WHISTLE-BLOWER PERSECUTED

—MAP OF THE MOST DANGEROUS NEIGHBORHOODS

—DELINQUENCY EXPLODES IN THE METRO

—THE ROBBERS WERE IN A HURRY

These “Front Page” chapters form the hinge between the fictional and the factual in Oppel’s novel. Since they’re made up entirely of real titles, they serve as a sort of guarantee for the fictional explanation of Chirac’s reelection, a fiction which forms the plot of the novel. The role of these chapters is to demonstrate that Oppel’s thesis, which is pure conjecture, has a legitimate basis.

The conspiracy imagined by the author is echoed in other chapters, completely invented but based on bureaucratic and factual documents: the chapters “Email” and “Confidential” serve a secondary purpose as relays with History. They remind readers of the names of the candidates for the election, the dates on which they declared their candidacies, their place in the polls and their results in the election.

The novel ends with a mission “accomplished” by the President’s consultants: Chirac and Le Pen are both in the second round of the election and the former will carry it hands down.

After French Tabloïds, Jean-Hugues Oppel wrote Rêveillez le président! [Wake up the President!] which could be its sequel. The different chapters evoke a range of incidents or accidents which took place here and there on the globe and which could have resulted in a world catastrophe. According to Oppel, “risky situations, there are lots of them, everywhere, all the time. That leaves room for paranoia, but calculated paranoia; that’s what I write about.”

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DOMINIQUE MANOTTI OR THE POLITICS OF BUSINESS

Dominique Manotti has been writing since 1995; her first romans noirs, *Sombre sentier*, *Kop*, and *A nos chevaux* form, in her words “a trilogy on the traffic of money during the Mitterand years;” *Nos fantastiques années fric* [Our Fantastic Money Years] takes as its subject the clashes between different police organizations and the Élysée’s antiterrorist cell during an illegal sale of weapons to Iran. *Le Corps Noir* recounts the alliances between the German SS, the French Gestapo, and politicians and industrialists in 1944 Paris, on the eve of the liberation of Paris. Manotti considers himself an activist author, but with a twist: “I started writing romans noirs at the same time that I stopped being a political activist, an activism that wasn’t going anywhere. [. . . ] The most interesting thing that I can do is to tell the story of the society that I know. That’s my activism; I don’t believe for a minute that one can launch a revolution with novels.”

Her last novel, *Lorraine Connection*, recalls the privatization of the Thomson group in 1996, and its brief transfer to Korean Daewoo. The incident was a harbinger of the changes at play today in attitudes toward the political at the national level:

It’s really the first sign of Sarkozyism. In *Nos Fantastiques années fric*, politicians still have political aims. In *Lorraine Connection*, it’s the extreme promiscuity between businessmen and politics [. . .]

There’s no longer a political goal in *Lorraine Connection*, there’s nothing but the politics of business, which is Sarkozyism. The politics of business, it’s maintaining good relations with the bosses, and running politics in relation to the interests of the businesses you control.

[. . .] The first element of the story is in 1996. Juppé [Alain Juppé, Prime Minister at the time] wanted to give Thomson to Daewoo. In the proposal for commercialization, Juppé decided to give Thomson to Daewoo after having recapitalized it: the State puts money into Thomson and then cedes it to Daewoo for a franc. Daewoo produces inexpensive televisions, they made a lot of money of course, but they’re at the end of their game.

This causes lots of concern, Thomson goes on strike, even the professionals find the decision odd and two months later, Juppé changes his mind and annuls the Daewoo option, with no explanation. I say to myself, there’s something to this. I’m following a lot of financial scandals, so at first I just make a file and let things develop.
In 1999 Daewoo went bankrupt. Then it’s one surprise after another: the press isn’t surprised by the bankruptcy and everyone knows that Daewoo had been facing a potential bankruptcy since 1985. But no one had said anything in 1996. So, the first surprise. Second surprise: Daewoo’s owner has fled because the South Korean official receiver discovered that he took off with two and a half billion dollars. It’s money stolen in the business. Third surprise, South Korea puts out an arrest warrant, they find him in France, and France refuses to extradite him because he has French citizenship, having been naturalized in 1987 for his service to the French State. The idea that he gave money to Chirac and Juppé for the presidential campaign gains currency. I’m in the middle of writing Nos Fantastiques années fric, I let it go.

In 2003, the last Daewoo factory burns down and four days later they arrest the arsonist; it’s an arab factory worker . . . and I tell myself that’s too much. I go to the Daewoo factory in Lorraine and I meet the people. I arrive at the top of the Chiers valley, I had already visited the steel mill, I’d gone there as a union member. I arrive by the plateau, there’s no more factory, not a trace, they left the foundations but everything is covered with weeds. And that’s when I said to myself: I have to write something. It’s a completely tragic landscape. It’s only tragic because of its negation of the past. I have to write about the death of the steel industry. I got in touch with sociologists, I was part of a support group for the accused, I followed the whole story. My project was to mix the two: the fire and the financial manipulations, all these ungrounded financial manipulations which have consequences for the folks who work. It’s fictional, but I wanted to make a novel about the links between factory and finance.41

How do you pull it off? Lorraine Connection begins in Pondange, a fictional town in the former Lorraine steel basin, where Daewoo built a factory which subsisted with the help of European credits and laundered money through an exchange with a Polish Daewoo factory. The workers go on strike because of their deplorable work conditions, then the factory burns down: one of the strikers is accused. At the same time, in Paris, the Daewoo company, associated with Matra, seals the deal for the privatization of Thomson even though Alcatel was expected to be the winner. Alcatel refuses to accept the decision and decides to contest it, both in Paris, by investigating corruption and collusion at the highest level; and in Pondange, by proving, if need be by inventing evidence, that the owners set fire to their own factory.
Lorraine Connection is a polyphonic novel combining numerous voices and in which several characters emerge as individuals: for example, Quignard, a corrupt businessman from Lorraine who has the factory set on fire and has workers killed in order to avoid the scandal associated with the revelation of Daewoo’s “cooked books” at the time of the buyback; Montoya, a detective who reveals the scheme; or Rolande, an angry factory worker who ends up stealing the firm’s hidden money.

A fire, false bills, a series of murders, pressure from the political and financial worlds, Lorraine Connection is truly a roman noir whose narrative complexity—multiple perspectives, the distance between the world of Parisian political finance and that of the exhausted factory in a provincial area devastated by unemployment—fully describes the intersections between factory and finance at the heart of this novelistic project. The plot is completely fictional but based on two real events: the announcement of the 1996 transfer of the firm to Daewoo and the actual burning of the Daewoo factory in Mont-Saint-Martin in 2003. In the novel, the transfer and the fire take place at the same time, with one resulting from the other. Manotti explains this fusion of facts: “The novelist has complete freedom to explain it as she likes, since we weren’t told anything else [. . .] In the media, it wasn’t explained.”

Truth? Lies? It’s both, says Manotti, and this paradoxical position between the real and fiction comes up again from the pen of Gérard Meudal, who goes so far as to speak of a “true novel,” thus underlining the romanesque quality of the events we’re living through:

Dominique Manotti is a trained historian and makes good use of that training. Lorraine Connection isn’t a roman a clef and it isn’t satisfied with telling the true story [. . .] but it exudes an atmosphere of striking resemblance, as if, for this author, the roman noir sits between contemporary history and investigative journalism. [. . .] Lorraine Connection reads like a novel, the true novel of the economic world in which we live.

DOA: Politics, Terrorism and State Secrets

DOA is the pseudonym of a French author whose first two novels, Les Fous d’avril and La Ligne de sang, appeared with Fleuve Noir in 2004. In 2007, he published a much noticed “polar” in Gallimard’s Série Noire: Citoyens Clandestins [Clandestine Citizens], which placed the author in the forefront of the noir genre.
The very political plot of the novel takes shape through different characters or groups of characters: a secret agent sniper, an officer of the DRM, two journalists manipulated by a secret service man also working for the CIA; members from different groups of French intelligence; islamic groups in cahoots or not with terrorist groups. . . The plot of *Citoyens clandestins* is thus diffracted through multiple perspectives because, according to DOA, “in order to make a complete statement, you have to envisage all facets separately. Even terrorists have their own personal motivations.” Polyphonic writing which is here serving to create suspense in the noir genre: how can such a complex approach fit in with the noir’s novelistic esthetic?

The reader’s interest is gained precisely by the link with a real, menacing international and political situation. In our Western world, after 9/11, how does one imagine the reaction of States to a crisis situation? This is DOA’s point: “The starting point [of the novel] is not September 11, it’s to see how what happened in the US threw us into something which was already there and which we hadn’t seen before. How do government agencies react? What are the stakes of the battle? Is it to prevent attacks or to cover something else?”

The connection between the referential and the novelistic situation is precisely here, in this particular period that France goes through between the events of September 11, 2001 and the presidential election of 2002, which opposed the departing president Jacques Chirac, with his First Minister, Lionel Jospin. In this particular situation, the novel poses a question which will be a completely fictional hypothesis, developed throughout: how can France react to a terrorist attack? The strong referential anchor plunges the reader into a familiar world the unfamiliar side of which is also explored: murders, extreme situations, violent clashes . . . the multiplicity of perspectives allows these levels of fiction to be juxtaposed. The reader reorganizes it into a linear plot thus adding to the suspense.

The mixture of fictional with factual requires a huge amount of documentation on the part of the author:

You have to have a good knowledge of newspapers and articles . . . it’s very much about research and journalism. Next, I added in certain more personal items.

My documentation is over and done with when I meet with the professionals. What interests me is their experience. It’s not the secret missions, it’s what they think. Practice in relations to theory, which has nothing to do with what they’ve been taught: what’s it like to live under cover? What does a terrorist meeting
look like? But the actual meetings with professionals are minimal compared with the enormous work of documentation which anyone can do, you just have to take the time to do it.

This desire to write from a standpoint in reality includes the use of current events. Thus, DOA makes use of real deaths to link them with the murders committed by Lynx, the secret agent who neutralizes the terrorist group:

I used unexplained deaths in the newspapers from 2001 or 2002: one victim burnt in a car, one death on the railroad tracks . . . From these articles I backtracked to the original facts. Since I wanted these articles to be the consequences of my character, I backtracked, and that gave me the Lynx plot.49

In this profoundly referential structure—a known political situation, front pages from dailies between 2001 and 2002, presentation of different branches of the secret service, recourse to current events—the passage to noir fiction is made through the main characters. They are numerous in this polyphonic novel, but one of them stands out: it’s Lynx who, on behalf of his employer, ex-agent of the DGSE, attempts to recuperate, by all means including kidnapping, torture, sequestration, murder, the barrels of poison introduced onto French soil. It’s through Lynx that the reader understands the seriousness of the situation facing France. Thus, the barrels of poison exist because of a secret collaboration with the Irakis.

Doing everything to retrieve these toxic barrels is the hidden plot, the underside of the real setting evoked above. A large part of the novel’s suspense, besides the piecing together of the plot shattered among multiple perspectives, is in the quest for Lynx. Who is he? Who is he working for? What is his real role? Is he a soulless killer? He’s all the more difficult to understand because the author plays around with roles and identities: thus Lynx and Servier, a refined businessman, whose activities are alternatively described in the novel, are they in reality the same man . . . ? Who becomes, at the end of the novel, following a famous roman noir topos, a man who knows too much and who must be eliminated by the secret service. For DOA Lynx is a character whose posture and role define the novel: “What sums up the plot best is Lynx: democracy is globally the political construct acceptable to the masses, and gives them the illusion that they still have control over course of their destiny; but inside of it are tyrants who advance in disguise and who have their own
agenda: politics, secret services . . . the masses don’t give a damn.”

To conclude, Citoyens clandestins combines affairs of State with a real, confirmed situation,—that of immediate post-9/11 in France—as well as a purely fictive, indeed fictional, thesis: the possibility of an inter-agency war brought on by the threat of terrorist attacks on French soil. The density of insights into whole stretches of hitherto obscure State affairs can’t help but make this novel at once difficult and thrilling, “demanding,” according to DOA, for whom the secret services are “a complex nebula.”

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In the novels studied here, noir fiction works through questions confronting society at the moment of their writing: Daeninckx denounces the responsibility of the French state, through Papon, in the deportation of French Jews and the massacre of October 1961; Manotti evokes the collusion between finance and politics today. Oppel creates a fictional hypothesis of a conspiracy during the presidential elections of 2002 and DOA writes about terrorism in the wake of September 11, 2001. Subjects at the heart of today’s society that prove the great extent to which the roman noir is inscribed in its epoch. For the authors, the inevitable question of engagement has to accommodate itself with reality. One must “bring the real back into everything,” according to DOA; the theme of politics, pulled straight out of reality, thus feeds fiction and gives their uniqueness to our noir novels: dense, often polyphonic, demanding a great amount of research—emphasized by all the authors—with a strong referential content, they demand a good knowledge of political affairs, even if novelistic power lets the plot carry the reader. The result is novels which break out of the box assigned them, that of fiction, and disrupt even the world of the reader, who can then reflect upon the world we inhabit. Manotti, with her experience as a reader of noir novels, puts it this way:

I think that a book is a piece of magic: 50% of the author and 50% of the reader; when a book works, it has a thickness, there’s a dialogue which makes the reader think. In Ellroy I don’t care if the critique is intentional or not; he offers me the opportunity to think and to question. When I read Ellroy, it completely changes my conception of American society.
NOTES

13. Interview with Didier Daeninckx, “Une modernité contre la modernité de pacotilles,” in Mouvements, 12.
15. Ibid., 211.
16. Ibid., 212.
18. Interview with Didier Daeninckx, “Une modernité contre la modernité de pacotilles,” in Mouvements, 12.
20. Daeninckx, Meurtres pour mémoire, 34.
27. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
31. News item from March 27, 2002: Richard Durn, at the close of the municipal council meeting at Nanterre, kills or wounds around thirty people; he kills himself the next day by jumping out the window of the police station.
42. Ibid.
47. DOA, Interview with Anissa Belhadjin, April 27, 2009.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Dominique Manotti, Interview with Anissa Belhadjin