

## Parisian Noir

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WRITING IN 1993, at the height of the “spatial turn” in cultural analysis, Rosalyn Deutsche drew our attention to the way in which the figure of the urban theorist—her examples are Edward Soja and Mike Davis—had merged with that of the private eye in noir fiction and film. Given that the city is both scene and object of noir investigation, she commented, the analogy between the detective’s disinterested search for the hidden truth of the city and the urban scholar’s critique of the capitalist city practically suggests itself.<sup>1</sup> Deutsche does not go so far as to explicitly base her case on the centrality of *one* city—Los Angeles—to both the urban theory then being produced by Soja and Davis and a noir tradition that includes Raymond Chandler and *Chinatown*. Yet if the analogy works so seamlessly, it clearly has something to do with the way it springs unbidden from the set of representations, both written and figured, that make up an imaginary particular to Los Angeles. And it is also because an earlier subterranean migration between the two figures—a transfer of practices and point of view—had already laid the groundwork for an understanding of the detective himself as a kind of geographer, engaged in the mapping of social space.

The detective as social geographer emerged in early essays by Fredric Jameson, writing about Chandler.<sup>2</sup> The spatial paradigm provided by the meeting of Jameson, Chandler and the urban particularities of Los Angeles has largely overdetermined the way in which we read detective fiction. Yet in France, where the detective genre has emerged as one of the privileged venues for social and political critique, the narrative mechanisms and the figure of the detective have been substantially altered and put in the service of a new critical project: that of historicizing the recent past. In their reworking of aspects of the noir paradigm to provide an alternative perspective onto postwar Europe, crime-fiction writers in France, publishing in the wake of the political upheavals of 1968, demand to be read as a new kind of historiography. Their analysis of the effects of events in the recent past, offered up in widely distributed and widely read “pulp” stories, parallels and, to a certain extent, surpasses developments within the fields of critical theory and contemporary historiography.

Of all the various kinds of literary characters, the detective is one of the easiest to think of as little more than narrative scaffolding, a string or device whose wanderings link the various anecdotes, local histories, and glimpses of local color into a narrative whole. After all, what other fictional character's underdeveloped personality or lack of "roundedness" is so regularly compensated for by an all-consuming fetish—the love of orchids, for example, or the love of opera? Jameson saw the problem confronting Chandler to be the peculiarly American mid-twentieth century dilemma of how to motivate the plausible narrative intersection of people from extremely different walks of life: different classes and races, all the fragmented social sectors, all the compartmentalized private dramas that make up Los Angeles's urban sprawl. For it was Los Angeles, the centerless, horizontal city, that in Chandler's novels would become a futuristic forecast of the country as a whole. The detective is the character whose professional obligations and routine wandering oblige him to travel between isolated parts of the city, those otherwise hermetically sealed social spaces: in the case of Philip Marlowe, between shabby rooming houses and elegant private clubs set back off the street on long driveways lined with manzanita trees; between seedy hotel lobbies and offshore gambling ships; between the desert dry-out spas for socialites and debutantes and the dingiest of office interiors. For Jameson the proof that the very content of Chandler's novels is a scenic one lies in the way we remember certain "types" or characters in his novels on the basis of the residences, the houses, doorframes, or interiors with which these types are associated, rather than on the basis of their own characterological merit or personal history. It is this essentially scenic content that conjures up and demands the invention of a figure who can, almost magically, unite the diverse parts of the city and, in grasping that spatial totality, create a topography of the social whole.

Jameson makes a strong case for the Americanness of this new invention: the detective as social geographer whose solution to the mystery derives from his ability to grasp a spatial totality. In France, when a number of far-left political activists in the 1970s and 1980s turned to writing detective novels (*polars*), they effectively steered the genre toward the depiction of a society whose current anxieties and troubles are the result of unexpiated historical crime. French *polar* writers like Jean-François Vilar and Didier Daeninckx retain the almost invariably urban setting of their North American precursors. But in the move from 1930s Los Angeles to postwar Paris, the figure of the detective—as vehicle for knowledge, as narrative scaffolding, as instrument of perception, as consciousness—could not be transported unaltered: he must be essentially reinvented. Noir fiction had become a significant part of

the contemporary struggle over the popular memory of the recent past, and particularly the popular memory of the political upheavals of the 1960s. Taken as a group, and quite unsystematically, the novels offer a new form of history and memory of the recent past that is neither commemorative nor nostalgic, and that frequently blurs the line between history and memory. In novels by Daeninckx, Vilar, Frédéric Fajardie, Gérard Delteil, Jean-Bernard Pouy, Jean-Claude Izzo, and Thierry Jonquet, among others, the causes of contemporary crime are to be found in the history of bourgeois society, and within that history, in the events of the recent past: the Spanish Civil War, the consequences of World War II and the extermination of European Jews, May '68, but above all the Algerian War and the persistence of colonial crime and its unfinished politics.<sup>3</sup> The emphasis on colonial crime by writers of the 1970s and 1980s derives in part from the authors' own political experience: their childhood and adolescence coincided, for the most part, with the troubles in Paris and elsewhere as the Algerian War drew to an end. But their insistence, more generally, on an event-driven history of the recent past, particularly at a moment when professional historians favored the glacial narrative rhythms of the *longue durée*, has led many critics, practitioners, and readers alike to claim for the *polar* of these years the status of the novelistic form best suited to the twentieth century, and the one that offers the most accurate version of postwar history. In an introduction to fellow Trotskyist Ernest Mandel's little book on the *roman noir*, Vilar summed up what he took to be the fortuitous match between noir sensibility and the era which, in Europe at least, its adherents set themselves the task of chronicling: "The century of wars and revolutions, and thus of utopias a hairsbreadth away, is necessarily the century of trials and betrayals."<sup>4</sup> The plot, intrigue, and attitude of noir, it seemed, could be used to narrate key moments in a totality conceived of first and foremost not as spatial, but as historical.

As a practice in writing an alternative historiography, *polar* history was particularly untimely, running counter to at least two of the dominant discourses of the moment, both of which could be characterized as sidestepping any attempt to conceptualize or narrate change, and as bracketing any analysis of the recent past. Within historiography, the postwar period was dominated by the Annales school's preoccupation with summoning up the full weight and inertia of centuries of ways of doing, with reaffirming the whole circularity of nature and function, particularly in early modern times. Annales historians offered the excavated details of a past that was past, and that had little to do with or say to the present. The disciplinary purpose of social history more generally was limited to understanding ideologies and social movements within

the particular economic and political contexts that these secrete like a mollusk's shell—thus flattening any possibility of event or change. While academic historians and social scientists were intent on dissolving “the event” by altering the scale of agency to geographic, if not geologic, proportions, *polar* history retained “the event,” the great conflagrations and state crimes, the insurrections and emancipatory moments, as the central organizing category by which to chronicle their era. And if Annales-inspired history often spatialized the historical narrative beyond the limits of the nation form, *polar* history focused on the illusory and precarious—yet persistent—nature of the national fiction.

As a project conducted by political activists and former activists, *polar* history also departed sharply from the “ethical” discourse then beginning to be popularized by another group of former comrades—ex-militants that included the New Philosophers. At the same moment in the late 1970s and 1980s, in an outpouring of confessions, apologies, television appearances, and memoirs timed, for the most part, to coincide with the twentieth anniversary of the May events in 1988, these *gauchistes*, well situated in the Parisian media or en route to becoming so, took flamboyant leave of their former political commitments.<sup>5</sup> For ex-student leaders anxious to both capitalize on and deny their former militancy, it was the language of human rights or humanitarianism, with its obligatory reference to the twinned catastrophes of Gulag and Holocaust, that was called upon to provide a kind of moral or spiritual supplement to their new-found reconciliation with the laws of economic fatality. The discourse of totalitarianism these writers popularized told us that an unthinkable and irreparable crime had occurred, the work of a pure and unlimited force of evil exceeding any political, even thinkable, measure. New Philosophers were, in effect, wielding the weapon of scale, rendering every action negligible or suspect, dwarfed or criminalized in the face of the twin catastrophes of Gulag and Holocaust, and the various endisms these gave rise to: the end of art, the end of politics—even the end of history itself.

*Polar* writers, for their part, chose a less grandiose, less heroic, and less nihilistic route through the hypocrisies of the 1980s. Writers of detective fiction, unlike philosophers, have always been associated with a kind of rote laboriousness; they lack the originality that is the mark of belles lettres. They are obliged to honor the contract between reader and subgenre writer described by Brecht—the contract that the reader's desire for a certain stereotyped format be met, that readers not have too many “high cultural demands” placed on them. *Polar* writers *did* share with their former '68 comrades a concern with crime. But in the everyday world of the *polar*, the plight of the Malian immigrant on the

outskirts of Paris, say, took precedence over the victims of faraway Gulags; evil was neither absolute nor unrepresentable; agency was human and not divine; and events played out on a scale—neither geological nor catastrophic—that allowed their incorporation into a suspenseful, readable plot.

In Vilar's fiction, for example, the urban setting is used to turn his novels into the place where the revolutionary memory of Paris might well be revived *as* it is being obliterated. The city is the historical milieu par excellence, because it is at one and the same time the concentration of social power that makes historical enterprise possible, and the consciousness of the past. The space of the city and its various markers each allude to moments in a complex and differential history, to the varying timescales of staggered evolutions of institutions, ways of being, and material space. And in the case of Paris, those moments are moments of violent political struggle. It follows then that the event, in Vilar's fiction, is first and foremost that of revolutionary insurrection, just as the street is a determinant place or space of dispute and disputed power.<sup>6</sup> Everything happens as though the streets and the facades of the city keep to themselves the unconscious of the event, the insurrectional moment as trace. Layered in the interstitial spaces of the city, these traces can only be perceived by a character whose intimacy with the most minute details of the material fabric of the city, whose taste for the terrain, is matched by his own implication in the city's revolutionary history. Philip Marlowe, it is important to remember, is a literary hero without a background, and without any cultural or political substratum. The same cannot be said of Victor Blainville, *ex-soixante-huitard*, sometime journalist, sometime photographer, sometime investigator and Vilar's recurrent protagonist. Victor Blainville experiences the city's materiality not as dumb, or unspeaking, but rather as an immense space of resonance where prior histories rub up against murders, dreams, earlier incarnations derived from detective stories, past incitations to act, the ghosts of previous struggles, each overcharged, overburdened by different historical layerings and potent affective charges. "He parked the car on the rue Daval, several yards from an apartment that, many years earlier, had served as a refuge for organizers of the Jeanson network, and then afterwards for some of Curiel's friends. I had used it as well. Cities have curious abscesses. Certain apartments with certain traditions."<sup>7</sup> A chance reencounter with the apartment he had once occupied, years after radical anticolonial activists Francis Jeanson and Henri Curiel had lived there, allows the narrator to economically allude to all the links that tie the third-worldist politics of the end of the Algerian War to the events of May, and the anti-imperialism of the 1970s.

On his bicycle, which is his preferred mode of transportation through the city, Victor passes “the pharmacy that Pierre Goldman hadn’t attacked” (15). Both as readers and as inhabitants of large cities, we are accustomed to remembering a place through the crimes that were committed there—in fact, criminality is mostly figured through its association with place. But as Gregory Bateson once remarked, the letter you do not send, the milk you don’t leave out for the cat—these things are also meanings. Even a “scene of the crime” for a crime that was not, in fact, committed is significant. In this case, the unattacked pharmacy serves as a shorthand evocation of the police-instigated events and frame-ups surrounding one of the more tragic (and unsolved, like that of Curiel) deaths of the post-’68 upheavals.<sup>8</sup> Yet even this poignant memory from a shared *gauchiste* political past lies in direct and curious proximity to a figure from a very different register, another kind of history, equally important for Vilar, but fictional in nature: “Returning the other way, I went down the Boulevard Richard Lenoir, past the pharmacy that Pierre Goldman didn’t attack, crossed the overpass, thinking about a walk I’d taken along the glistening canal wharfs below, raised my hand in greeting on the other side to the apartment attributed to the Commissioner Maigret.” In Victor’s Paris, the ghost of Pierre Goldman frequents the ghost of a fictional policeman: Georges Simenon’s Maigret. And the *real* unsolved mysteries of the history of the French Left—militants like Henri Curiel and Pierre Goldman, gunned down on the streets by unknown assailants—are woven into the interaction of the narrator’s consciousness with the texture of the city, evoked, and thus remembered. The narrator’s *trajet* not only moves the narrative forward, it serves as the structure for a whole network of interrelated histories, affects and associations that, for Vilar and his protagonist, cannot help but be recalled. The *trajet* links the spaces of the city to time: it personifies temporal movement.

Issues of point of view are, of course, preeminent in the detective novel, a genre whose obsession with ways of seeing and ways of knowing constitutes its specificity. Bicycle riding, Victor’s way of moving about, particularly at night, goes hand in hand with a certain kind of perception and a specific cognition. In fact, bicycle *trajets* seem to facilitate the peripheral registering of the sudden *aperçu*, a fugitive and fleeting impression of a history that is felt as deeply personal. The city street is elaborated in and through the narrator’s mobility rather than contemplated. His perception of what has been lost is, as such, not a strict archeological superimposition of the traces of history but rather the way in which street and *trajet* organize their own archeology, making vestiges of older times emerge without the least excavation, a moving décor of urban events, more or less recalled, instantaneously, as the

product of a glance. This is not a frontal, solemn commemoration; it is not a monumental or sterile face-to-face with history. It is much closer to a playful glance.

It follows then that although Vilar's novels are saturated with an ongoing loss, what is lost does not elicit the mournfulness of the antiquarian—neither Vilar nor his narrator want the city to become a museum. For Vilar what sutures old Paris to the Paris of Haussmann, the Paris Commune to the surrealist imaginary of the 1920s, and on to the strikes and *gauchiste* violence he participated in during the 1960s and 70, is the tangible trace of revolution. The great civilization of Paris lies in its long experience in the matter of civil war and class insurrection; the specific texture of its urban imaginary derives from this experience. In his commitment to a political history of emancipation and its missed moments, Vilar echoes the direct identification Victor Hugo was perhaps the first to make between Paris and its revolutionary history: “Qu’a donc Paris? La révolution.”<sup>9</sup> If Los Angeles caused Chandler to confront the narrative dilemma of its fragmented social geography, the city of Paris presents Vilar with a different narrative challenge. The challenge is how to tell two stories at once: the history of revolutionary violence that has unfolded in the space of the city; and the history of that other violence enacted by the economic production of urban space—all the disappearances, demolitions, and expulsions that accompany mindless urban renovation, and the generally insipid, hygienic, inevitably boring, and sterile constructions that are thrown up in its wake. The two stories are of course not unrelated. An “enlightened” modernization like the one Paris has undergone since World War II always means the destruction of certain of the tangible traces of the city’s revolutionary past and usually means the forcible relocation of some of its inhabitants. Cleaning up a city like Paris, whose streets—especially those of the *faubourgs* that are the setting for Vilar’s novel, *Bastille Tango*—are saturated with the signs of political upheaval and popular sociabilities, inevitably means erasing the traces of its history.

*Bastille Tango*, published in 1986, along with Daeninckx’s better-known 1985 *Meurtres pour mémoire*, perfected the “imbrication of eras” technique widely used by noir writers to show, for example, how forgotten incidents of the Algerian War thread their way into the present and persist as fascist behavior in the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> This technique allows an apparently individual crime committed in the present to reveal an historical crime that had remained hidden or obscured until then, or it shows the roots of a profound social crisis to lie in past state crimes. It provides a contextualization that unites otherwise segregated and compartmentalized temporal moments. The concern on the part of French noir writers with

linking the decomposition of the present social world to unresolved residues of large-scale political events distinguishes them from their few North American predecessors—Chandler and Ross MacDonald, most notably—who made a structural use of the past in the construction of their plots. For in the French novels, contemporary murder masks a bloody past crime, but crime is not defined, as it is in Chandler or MacDonald, as a family affair, an Oedipal crime, or an incestuous dirty secret. Compare, for example, MacDonald's 1971 *The Underground Man* to Daeninckx's 1985 *Meurtres pour mémoire*. The books share an identical premise: a father and son are killed twenty years apart. In both novels the son's murder hides past wrongs; in the course of the investigation past injustices come to light whose contamination has lingered or resurfaced into the present situation. Yet here the resemblance ends. In *The Underground Man*, a quasi-genetic heritage dictates that the sins of the parents must be revisited on the children. The moral of the story goes something like this: flee your parents and choose new, makeshift ones, and you may have a chance of breaking the chain of malediction from the past. "He belonged to a generation whose elders had been poisoned, like the pelicans, with a kind of moral DDT that damaged the lives of their young."<sup>11</sup> In this sense MacDonald, as Geoffrey Hartman once remarked, represents a complex reworking of one of the earliest instances of the genre, Horace Walpole's 1764 *Castle of Otranto*, in which a child who is heir apparent to a noble house is killed when the enormous helmet of an ancestral statue falls on him and buries him alive.<sup>12</sup> In Daeninckx and his cohort, on the other hand, crime is not, as in MacDonald, a family affair, nor is it, as in Chandler, produced by the residues of the fantasmatic menace sexually rapacious women pose to men. It is a national crime, an actual event in French history that authorities—usually zealous or not-so-zealous bureaucrats and the Ministry of the Interior—have gone to great lengths to keep hidden. In *Meurtres pour mémoire*, the routine investigation of the son's murder makes visible the massacre of hundreds of peaceful Algerian demonstrators by riot police in the streets of Paris on October 17, 1961.

In *Bastille Tango*, Vilar creates a temporal palimpsest with Paris superimposed over Buenos Aires, as survivors of the Argentinian junta living in Paris and preparing to testify against their torturers in the great state trials in Buenos Aires begin to disappear once again. The punctual disappearances of some of Victor's friends are set against the background of an ongoing process that actually occurred in the early 1980s, the demolition of the Bastille quarter to build the new opera house. The novel is set midway, that is, both historically and geographically, in what Adrian Rifkin has called "the nightmare or epiphany of consumer blandness



that is the reconstruction of the Paris of the *grands projets*.<sup>13</sup> The Bastille Quartier up until the 1980s had managed to resist all the various plans and projects of successive masters of rational management and urban planning, it had avoided the dreary “Hallification” of the center of Paris. But in the 1980s, a whole web of small streets, houses, passages, bistros, hidden courtyards, carpenters’ ateliers, dance halls, profoundly laden with a popular imaginary, was brutally modified to build the new opera house. The whole area was subject to the kind of treatment that consists in razing old buildings in order to rebuild them again “à l’ancienne”—rebuilt to look old, in a faux-old style. This was the fate, for example, of the *Tour d’argent*, the only remaining bistro whose façade existed during the actual storming of the Bastille prison.<sup>14</sup>

The pull that the Bastille neighborhood exerts on the narrator is unconscious in nature: the area has been the overdetermined terminus to any number of *trajets*, a possible definition of which is offered by Victor as “the time taken by a somewhat dreamy traversal of the city, without worrying about an efficient itinerary, made up only of remembered stimulations” (13). It is this unconscious centrality, a set of layered affects surrounding a walker’s recurrent appropriation of the space of the city, and not any frontal political outrage or preservationist’s impulse to rescue and safeguard beauty, that seems to explain why he feels called upon to record the history of the neighborhood’s disappearance and its replacement with a stage set as stripped of oneiric possibility as it is of the unexpected, a planned zone that offers cleanliness, order, and freedom from scandal and anxiety. “Simmel’s metropolis without the shock” is one description of the Paris of the *grands projets*.<sup>15</sup> “I had to take the minutes of the destruction. Without any denunciatory hidden motive. As one keeps a personal diary” (152).

In a non-fictional account he wrote of the renovation of the Bastille neighborhood in *Paris perdu*, Vilar makes it clear that the disappearances and changes in the built environment of the city that took place in Paris during the 1980s, the deterioration of urban life that always accompanies the accelerated urbanization of society, cannot be attributed to bad taste, or to the work of a clumsy developer. They are the symbol of a strategy: behind an apparently inoffensive operation like a simple “renovation” of a neighborhood lies an attempt to forcibly estrange people from their history and the social knowledge of the neighborhoods that had been their homes, a kind of organized urban amnesia that has as its target the revolutionary memory of the city.

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In its twisting of the detective genre to function as a kind of repository of historical memory, Vilar's *romans noirs* retain very little of the pure, rational elucidation of classical, Arthur Conan Doyle-era novels, devoted, as these were, to solving rather than examining a problem, and to restoring the forces of order. Very little remains of the narrative paradigm which leads the reader from ignorance to knowledge, opacity to transparency, dark to light. Rather than a solver of puzzles, Victor the photographer is much closer to the figure of the journalist, his photos a kind of reportage or report from the front. We might be tempted to trace Victor's genealogy back to another photographer-investigator, Nestor Burma, the private detective at the center of the series of novels written by Léo Malet between 1953 and 1959, the *Nouveaux mystères de Paris*. Malet's novels—he set out to write one for each of Paris's twenty *arrondissements*, and completed all but five—figure squarely in both the history of the Parisian *trajet* and the history of the French *polar*: with the publication in 1943 of the novel that introduced Nestor Burma, *120, rue de la Gare*, Malet was celebrated as “the first and only French author of *romans noirs*.”<sup>16</sup> (Vilar, we should note, prefers a much earlier origin for the *roman noir*, tracing its earliest forms back to the *romans terrifiants*, born in the vicinity of the French Revolution, that recounted the subterranean conspiracies and debaucheries of the era, tales that revealed a fascinated critique of the occulted power and tyrannies symbolized by nearby castles.)<sup>17</sup> But Burma's mode of registering the city is peculiarly lacking in feeling, adding up to the most minimal accounts of his own rudimentary desires for food or sex. As seeing subjects, Victor and Nestor Burma share little in common. Unlike Burma, Victor's gaze onto the city, what he sees and doesn't see, what sees him, what *regards* him (the demolitions as a personal matter) is a kind of political positioning. As well as a method of sorts. His relationship to the city is in fact less reminiscent of Nestor Burma and Burma's Paris than it is of another photographer he readily acknowledges as a predecessor, Eugène Atget. Victor's relation to the city is an aesthetic made up of the quotidian exoticism of aleatory urban objects, the trace of insurrection or civil war, and the aftereffects of previous Parisian *trajets*—be they Victor's own, or those of Atget, Maigret, or Auguste Blanqui.

But there is a second factor at work in Vilar's use of the *métier* of the photographer for his investigator. We have said that Victor's photographs constitute a kind of journalistic reportage, often political in nature, just as much as they do a personal diary. In the detective-novel milieu of the late 1970s and 1980s, there is a marked fluidity between the activities of

journalist, detective, and militant—a fluidity that effects both fictional characters and their authors.<sup>18</sup> Vilar, for example, has found several different yet related genres and venues by which to address his concerns with writing the recent past—in 1978, for example, at the moment of the ten-year anniversary of the events of May '68, writing a series of critical articles in the Trotskyist journal *Rouge* against the “commemoration industry” then getting into gear. Perhaps the most prominent of the 1960s militants who turned to detective writing, Didier Daeninckx, spent the years before he began to write *polar*s as a journalist:

My experience as a journalist on a daily was completely useful, even essential. From 1977 to 1982 I did investigations, I wrote hundreds of articles on the most varied and prosaic subjects. I accumulated. I loved being in the streets, looking into *faits divers*. Even with the most banal facts, the ones that appear unimportant, you always have to find an angle, a point of view that makes this or that story worth telling. You have to stay three, four hours, observing [ . . . ] The important thing is the time spent observing. Your eyes become accustomed, your state of mind also becomes accustomed if you stay long enough. Photographers work that way. . .<sup>19</sup>

In the confusing and overwhelming years after 1968, as militant collectives disbanded and regrouped, trying to find fresh spaces and directions for struggle, many militants looked to radical journalism and to detective-fiction-writing as a way of not returning back into the ranks.<sup>20</sup> By the mid-1980s, when the French *polar*writers to have reached prominence—Vilar, Daeninckx, Pouy, Fajardie, and Jonquet among them—all shared a militant past and a direct relationship to the events of May and post-May, it was clear that the *polar* had become a refuge of sorts, a place to develop an overtly political thematic at a moment when political militancy was waning if not in the throes of a crisis. As Thierry Jonquet remarked in 1985, “The *polar*'s gaze, its point of view is extremist, very scandalized. It resembles completely the militant point of view.”<sup>21</sup> Many of the editors of the large number of new series of crime fiction proliferating at that time were also products of the militant culture of the 1960s.

Much of the political practice undertaken during the '68 years was based on developing a political line that was not derived from any theoretical a priori but rather inductively, from the terrain, in physical displacements that took students and intellectuals out of the Latin Quarter to workers' areas in the city where they could hear workers' own representations of their conditions, problems, aspirations, desires, unmediated by party or union officials. These investigations, or *enquêtes*, were then frequently written up in worker/activist collectives and published in radical journals like the *Cahiers de Mai*. The emphasis, in other

words, was on forms of political organizing that led to encounters with people one would not meet in the normal day-to-day schedule, with overcoming the quite severe urban social segregation of the time that kept immigrants and factory workers on the outskirts of the city, far away and unapproachable. The insistence was on direct contact with workers, unobstructed by any theoretical or trade-union mediation, and on building understanding through practice—inductively, as it were. And for many activists this meant *trajets* of sorts to frequently unfamiliar parts of the city. Knowledge of workers must be arrived at inductively, which is to say, from the particular, beginning with the particular, empirical individual, rather than deductively. In deductive reasoning consequences are drawn from an abstract, general principle—an a priori theory or profile of the working class, for example. The geography of this militant practice, as well as its underlying emphasis on induction rather than deduction, would find its way into the detective writing, alternative journalism, and documentary filmmaking of former militants.

In the case of Vilar we can see how militant experience has the secondary gain of helping solve a grave structural difficulty that plagues the detective story as much as it does the practice of militant organizing: the gap separating the detective or the organizer from “the people” around him. The detective shares with the organizer the fate of being different from the other inhabitants of the city: the detective, famously figured in Edgar Allan Poe’s armchair genius Dupin, or Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, possesses superior reasoning power to the people he investigates, just as greater political experience if not theoretical education separates the militant from those he seeks to organize. The attempt to solve that problem in a way that didn’t merely paper it over was one of the defining political ideas of May culture—the attempt to unite intellectual questioning of the dominant ideological order with workers’ struggle. Victor, Vilar’s detective figure, is a street photographer with no particular assignment other than trade. “La photo, c’est mon job et un peu plus.”<sup>22</sup> He is a highly marginal protagonist with, at best, a peripheral view onto the real. He is not better than what he sees, but is rather “a knowing part of it.”<sup>23</sup> His activity—taking snapshots—makes him a professional of seeing, but it also functions as a paradigm for the illusion of disinterest that is the prevailing condition for any urban subject. His is the ordinary way of apprehending people out of the corner of your eye, the rapid glance that takes in a sweep of the contours, a few distinctive traits. The photograph, as a particular instance of a particular everyday, is the perfect device for an inductive history.

As a vehicle for knowledge, an instrument of perception, and an epistemological device, Vilar’s character is light-years away from the

aristocratic ratiocinations of a Dupin, secluded from everyday, mundane society. But the political biography, intentions, and experiences of a genre's practitioners do not, however, fully explain why the tools and techniques of that genre can be refashioned dramatically at a particular conjuncture to treat themes—the Algerian War, for example—shunned by a bourgeois novelistic theory like that of the New Novel, the dominant belletristic form the French novel took in the postwar period. Nor do they explain the books' enthusiastic reception by a mass readership. A remark by Daeninckx can help us begin an account for these phenomena. Daeninckx locates the stakes of the *roman noir* in the act of exhuming the trace of historical memory in a society that “never stops erasing everything and that exists in a kind of permanent present. The *roman noir* says that traces are of a capital importance and that's why they are being hidden from us.”<sup>24</sup> Daeninckx, as I read him, is suggesting that a kind of collective longing now exists for nothing so much as to be relieved of the burden of thinking and remembering at all, that in the years following World War II it is the past itself, in social and psychological terms, that became a casualty of Hiroshima and the Nuclear Age, and that the future, in turn, is ceasing to exist, devoured by an all-pervasive present. Since there is no longer any privileged vantage point from which the effects of the recent past can be reliably grasped, this historically new problem demands a new narrative invention, or, as the Russian formalists might put it, a new “motivation of the device.” The figure of the detective must be reinvented to become a figure who can be superimposed on the postwar era as a whole, whose routine and life pattern might serve somehow to bring separate and isolated moments together, whose optic apprehends the context that articulates historical events with each other and with the present. In this sense the detective figure stands in, voluntarily or involuntarily, as an historical consciousness in a world where official, bureaucratic discourse hides the crime, where the past has been effaced, and the future annexed to an endless present. While he might share the urban mobility of a Philip Marlowe, the French detective of the 1970s and 1980s—“pure product of May '68 and post-May”<sup>25</sup>—is called upon less to provide a cognitive map of the social terrain than he is to show how the residues of past large-scale political events, crimes, and instances of state terrorism thread their way into the present, disrupting the hygiene of the new urban consumer blandness as much as they do the hygiene of the contemporary national fiction.

History, then, is made visible, not with the purpose of giving the French images of their past, but rather to defamiliarize and restructure their experience of their own present. What I am describing is in essence a homeopathic cure, an intervention into what Daeninckx and others

point to as an “eclipse of historicity” by a subset of that ephemeral, commercially defined “product” that, if anything, has been in some very real but immeasurable way symptomatic of, if not responsible for, that very eclipse. *Polar* authors like Vilar, in my view, gamble with a readership adrift in the contemporary eradication of historical depth. How much can such a readership be tricked by the allure of a fairly traditional and suspenseful murder plot and by a page-turning pace, into a confrontation with the scandal of the present, or with the present itself *as* scandal?

## NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

## NOTES

- 1 Rosalyn Deutsche, “Chinatown, Part Four? What Jake Forgets about Downtown,” *Assemblage* 20 (1993): 32–33.
- 2 See Fredric Jameson, “On Raymond Chandler,” *Southern Review* 6 (1970): 624–50; “L’Eclatement du récit et la cloture californienne,” *littérature* 49 (1983): 89–101; “Céline and Innocence,” *SAQ* 93, no. 2 (1994): 311–20. .
- 3 See, for example, author and editor of *polars* and former *gauchiste* Patrick Raynal’s presentation of the genre as an alternative historiography in *Les Temps Modernes*: “In the year 3000, archeologists looking for the foundations of our civilization will unearth twenty-five hundred *romans noirs*. They will find there an entire history of the previous century: the consequences of World Wars I and II, the extermination of European Jews, the colonial wars of Vietnam, Algeria and elsewhere, racism, anti-Semitism. . . . (Patrick Raynal, “Le Roman noir est l’avenir de la fiction. Entretien,” *Les Temps Modernes* 595 [1997]: 96). Here and elsewhere, translations from the French, unless otherwise noted, are mine. See also Elfriede Müller and Alexander Ruoff’s brief but compelling survey of recent developments in French crime fiction, *Le Polar français: crime et histoire* (Paris: La Fabrique éditions, 2002).
- 4 Jean-François Vilar, “Noir, c’est noir,” preface to *Meurtres exquis: une histoire sociale du roman policier*, by Ernest Mandel Breche-Pec (Paris: 1986), 10.
- 5 I have written fuller accounts of the reactionary context in which the New Philosophers came to prominence elsewhere. See chapter three of my *May ’68 and Its Afterlives* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2002); “Ethics and the Rearmament of Imperialism: The French Case,” *Human Rights and Revolutions*, 2nd ed. Jeffrey Wasserstrom, Greg Grandin, Lynn Hunt, and Marilyn Young (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); “Establishing Consensus: May ’68 as Seen from the 1980s,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. (2002). See also Michael Scott Christofferson, *French Intellectuals Against the Left* (London: Bergahn, 2003).
- 6 Thus what counts as an event in the recent past, for example, in Vilar or Delteil in particular, is almost entirely determined by the calendar of militant experience.
- 7 Jean-François Vilar, *Bastille Tango* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1999), 46. Francis Jeanson was active during the Algerian War in establishing a network of “safe houses” throughout the city for the circulation of arms and cash by pro-Algerian militants. Henri Curiel, an Egyptian Jew whose murder in the streets of Paris in 1978 is still unsolved, was an important early anticolonial and “third worldist” militant in France.
- 8 For an account of the life and murder of Pierre Goldman, see Jean-Paul Dollé, *L’Insoumis: vies et legends de Pierre Goldman* (Paris: Grasset, 1997); for Henri Curiel, see Gilles Perrault, *Un homme à part* (Paris: Bernard Barrault, 1984).

- 9 Victor Hugo, *Paris*, quoted in Christopher Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), 103.
- 10 Müller and Ruoff, *Le polar français*, 47. In addition to Didier Daeninckx's *Meurtres pour mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard Sène Noire, 1985), see, for example, his *Le bourreau et son double* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986); Jean-Paul Demure, *Aix abrupto* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), the Marseille trilogy by Jean-Claude Izzo, *La trilogie Fabio Montale: Total Khéops; Chourmo-Solea* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), Francis Zomponi, *Mon Colonel* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1999) and *In nomine patris* (Paris: Actes Sudes, 2000), as well as Vilar's own *Djémila* (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1988). Of these titles, only *Meurtres pour mémoire* and Izzo's Marseille trilogy have been translated into English.
- 11 Ross MacDonald, *The Underground Man* (New York: Vitange Crime/Black Lizard, 1971), 203.
- 12 See Geoffrey Hartman, *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985).
- 13 Adrian Rifkin, "Gay Paris: Trace and Ruin," in *The Hieroglyphics of Space: Reading and Experiencing the Modern Metropolis*, ed. Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 2002), 125.
- 14 Vilar has told the story of the demolishing of the Tour D'Argent (not to be confused with the luxurious restaurant of the same name) in essay form as well in "Paris désolé," in *Paris perdu: quarante ans de bouleversements de la ville*, ed. Claude Eveno (Paris: Éditions Carré, 1991), 205–20.
- 15 Adrian Rifkin, "Gay Paris," 125.
- 16 Jean-Patrick Manchette, quoted in Alfu, *Léo Malet: parcours d'une oeuvre* (Amiens: Encaje, 1998), 5.
- 17 See Vilar, preface to Mandel, *Meurtres exquis*, 8.
- 18 This merging of the figures of militant, detective writer, and journalist is perhaps even more characteristic of Spanish noir during the period of democratic transition opened up with the death of Franco, beginning with the publication of Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's *Tatuaje* in 1974. See Georges Tyras, "Le noir espagnol: postmodernité et écriture du consensus," *Mouvements* 15/16 (2001): 74–81.
- 19 Didier Daeninckx, "Entretien avec Didier Daeninckx: Une modernité contre la modernité de pacotilles," *Mouvements* 15–16 (May–August 2001): 11–12. I have discussed Daeninckx's work in "Watching the Detectives," in *Postmodernism and the Re-reading of Modernity*, ed. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iverson (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1992), 46–65.
- 20 See my *May '68 and its Afterlives*, especially chapter two.
- 21 Thierry Jonquet, in an interview published in *Le Monde* (April 21–22, 1985), quoted in Mandel, *Meurtres exquis*, 168.
- 22 "Taking photos is my job and a little more." (Vilar, *Passage des singes*, 14).
- 23 Geoffrey Hartman, "Literature High and Low," 139.
- 24 Daeninckx, "Entretien," 15.
- 25 Mandel, *Meurtres exquis*, 163.

