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### From feuilletons to romans policiers and to TV series: Forgotten Connections in Popular Culture

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### **From feuilletons to *romans policiers* and to TV series: Forgotten Connections in Popular Culture**

While Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, and in particular, *Murders in the rue Morgue* (1841) are considered the starting point for the detective genre (Baudou 159), Honoré de Balzac, has been seen as one of the genre's initiators too. In 1841 also, Balzac published as a serial and without any fanfare in the newspaper *Le Commerce* his novel *Une Ténébreuse Affaire*[1]. The narrative, set over a timespan running from 1803 to 1833, starts by depicting a sinister man cleaning his rifle in front of his terrorized wife and the arrival from Paris of two *espions de police*. Yet Balzac's narratives are not structured around a crime leading to an investigation, and are, therefore, dismissed as crime novels by many scholars[2].

There are however many connections between some of Balzac's novels, French serialized novels (*le roman feuilleton*) rooted in melodrama, TV series and crime fiction up to its current development by Virginie Despentes. Serialized narratives, with their episodes and their techniques of delayed solution, progressively influenced detective fiction and gave birth to series based on events linked to a main character, the literary forerunners of TV series.

As "Roman-feuilletons", such as Balzac's popular works of serialized fiction published in installments in 19th-century French periodicals started losing interest, the section "fait divers" (or miscellaneous contents, narrating news items, often in sensationalist terms) started attracting readers. This miscellany soon became a synonym for scandals, criminal cases, and court-related stories, which proved to be even more financially rewarding for the press than serialized fiction. It is not surprising, therefore, that the origins of the detective novel in France are usually linked to a specific daily periodical, "Le Petit Journal," created in 1863 and specialized in "*faits divers*." Émile Gaboriau, one of the journal's chroniclers, is also traditionally considered the father of French detective fiction. His narratives combined two writing modes: sensationalistic journalistic chronicles and feuilletons, the serialized fiction prized at the time.

As highlighted by Jacques Dubois, during this period the romantic feuilleton influenced by the melodrama experienced a progressive shift towards the detective novel, keeping some common characteristics like:

- an innocent accused falsely and a mystery to solve
- a romantic and honorable hero, acting at the margins of official justice, that tries to bring back justice and harmony to the community
- the city appearing in the background, as a labyrinth, a metaphor for the complexity of urban society
- fueling suspense, the installments that ended with the phrase “la suite au prochain numéro” (“to be continued”) influence the rhythm of the narrative

We find here many traits inherited from melodramatic plays: the innocent victim, the honorable hero, a narrative fed by a secret (in detective novels the crime will replace the secret from the melodrama), and many digressions that will delay the novel’s solution. Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842) is a perfect example of this. These characteristics incorporated the progressive-regressive movement of two intertwined narratives: the story of the investigation and the story of the secret (later, the crime). Gaboriau’s *The Widow Lerouge* (1863) inspired Conan Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), but Sherlock Holmes became much more famous than Gaboriau’s detectives, le père Tabaret and Monsieur Lecoq. In “Avènement et ascension du roman policier”, Jacques Baudou notes that mainly the later translation of Conan Doyle’s first three novels published in France by installments and later as books propagated the first wave of detective novels in France (159).

Yet, as Kálai Sándor observes in “Pratiques sérielles dans le roman judiciaire : Le cas de Gaboriau”[3], Gaboriau started a series of narratives that evolved into five separate novels published between 1863 and 1873 with a recurrent character, Monsieur Lecoq, and contributed to the founding of the genre. Sándor adds that the publicity for the feuilletons made by Moïse Millaud, owner of the *Petit Journal*, announcing and delaying Monsieur Lecoq’s novels also participated in the creation of the genre by creating the first series. This confirms Matthieu Letourneux’s assertion in *Fictions à la chaîne* (2017) that as mass culture started rationalizing its production, the 20th-century’s cultural industry fully understood the interest of considering novels according to a logic of cycles or series (291). Sándor mentions other writers of the time, such as Fortuné du Boisgobey (1821-1891), author of *Une affaire mystérieuse* and of *Le Forçat colonel*, both published in 1869, and Pierre Zaccone (1818-1895), author of *Mémoires d’un commissaire de police* (Dentu, 1875) whose detectives appeared in several novels without as much success as Monsieur Lecoq.

But before Gaboriau, Balzac had used narrative techniques that we can link to the modern detective novel. In *Les Chouans* (1829), Marie de Verneuil, an aristocratic ‘femme fatale’ sent by Fouché, Napoleon’s minister of police, tries to seduce and have the anti-Republican hero captured. In *L’Auberge Rouge* (1831), like in many melodramas, and some of Agatha Christie’s novels, the murderer is confronted with the narration of the crime in front of an audience and is exposed by the expression on his face and his reaction. In *Maître Cornelius* (1832) there is a locked room mystery with a murderer that acts during his sleep. Based on true facts, *Une*

*ténébreuse affaire*, seems, in terms of detective fiction, as the most modern of Balzac's narratives. The two policemen, Corentin and Peyrade, appear as predecessors of the couple of the detective and his sidekick. Corentin is the natural son of Fouché and is the exceptionally intelligent and dangerous policeman. Peyrade is more of a comic figure. Since Balzac was a great admirer of Fenimore Cooper, Corentin is compared to an Indian explorer with exceptional senses that help him see what the normal eye cannot see. The two spies try to capture the returned sons of a noble family. The noble *émigrés* are accused of kidnapping Malin, a Republican politician that bought their properties and land after the revolution, but at the end of the novel they are pardoned and only their guard is executed. The last chapter takes place thirty years later in a Parisian salon, where a high ranked official explains that Malin, the kidnapped politician had documents concerning a coup against Napoléon and that Fouché was also involved. In fact, Fouché organized the kidnapping of Malin. In this last chapter, the reader realizes that he has been terribly misguided by an unreliable narrator, and that the official narrative does not correspond to reality.

From the roman-feuilletons whose intrigue lasted forever and digressed in many ways, TV series took many features, including the recurring character appearing in the *roman policier*. In TV serials with chronological episodes there is suspense and a rhythm fueled by the fragmentation of the episodes.” On the other hand, TV series with self-contained episodes (such as *Columbo*[4]) do not need to be watched chronologically since a character or a set of characters will experience a complete event in each episode (as it happened in Dupin's, Sherlock Holmes' or Arsène Lupin's short stories).

Multimedia and transmedia development of serials is nothing new. In *Le roman feuilleton français*, Lise Quéfélec notes that the numerous theatrical adaptations of romans-feuilletons contributed to the diffusion of the genre. As André Maurois recalls in *Les Titans ou les trois Dumas*, from his start as a playwright, Dumas père excelled at writing suspenseful endings for the acts of his plays, a technique that he brilliantly used to keep interested the readers of his roman-feuilletons (173). As in TV series, Dumas who had extensively studied Walter Scott's novels, excelled on defining the characters in detail at the beginning of a novel. We can also establish here a parallel with classical TV series, such as *Columbo*, since, as Stephane Benassi explains in *Séries et feuilletons T.V. : pour une typologie des fictions télévisuelles*, in a TV series the main character will be defined in the pilot episode with a very strong personality and will remain unchanged as long as the series will exist. Benassi adds that in *Columbo* there is a common universe throughout the series, but each episode represents a micro-narrative with a similar structure and rhythm, whereas in a serial, the common universe will form a cohesive macro-narrative that will allow many variations in terms of the evolution of the story, and a recurrent character. Benassi also notes that for the first adaptations of detective novels into TV series, TV channels' high executives prioritized policies of neutrality and consensus, erasing political or ideological contents. For example, according to Umberto Eco, with a very French touch, both *Arsène Lupin* and *Fantômas* were very successful TV series in France but since *Arsène Lupin* showed a more conventional behavior, the series lasted longer in hopes to keep the support of TV advertisers. We find here a parallel along the evolution of the roman feuilleton, most ideological in its beginnings, and more politically correct later on (Eco in Benassi[5]).

Surprisingly, melodrama as a genre resurfaces, in a different guise, among the profusion of judiciary TV series created in the US in the 1950s. In *Television and the Legal System*, Barbara Villez explains how the criminal process staged in these series connects with an investigation to uncover a mystery or a culprit, and to establish the truth[6]. As I see it, the figure of the lawyer that gives birth to a recurring character, can easily be coupled to the figure of the aforementioned honorable righter of wrongs of the melodrama, since the TV drama lawyer untangles misunderstandings and defends an innocent victim unjustly accused, winning all the cases. As Villez explains, judiciary TV series grew out of the lack of confidence in justice that took place in the US in the 1950s, when the lawyer, a trusted figure at the time, became part of popular culture. According to Villez, with not only a recurrent character but also a repetitive narrative scheme with an innocent wrongly accused, the weekly series of *Perry Mason* showed the inner workings of justice and emphasized the figure of the lawyer-hero fighting the prosecutor (and I add, the villain in the melodrama). For Villez, such series had a very high impact and educated the audience not only on justice, but ultimately on democracy, since as they evolved, they started dealing with issues of social justice, and the characters became more complex, less idealized (and we could also say, as it often happens in contemporary crime novels). As Borges claimed in his 1978 conference “The Detective Story,” (El cuento policial) the modern detective story also engendered a specific kind of reader that would no longer read a narrative without a hint of suspicion and incredulity. By exposing hidden truths and questioning the notion of what is perceived as “reality,” works of fiction like the North American legal series mentioned by Villez, but also Balzac’s and many detective novels up to Virginie Despentes’ contemporary rewriting of the genre, uncover the hiatus between official discourses and the truth. These works of fiction contribute, in fact, to develop critical thinking.

A fan of TV series, the French writer Virginie Despentes has achieved great success following the controversies of the famous adaptation of her first novel, *Baise-moi*, published in 1994 as the first volume in a paperback series (Poche Revolver) devoted to crime fiction by publisher Florent Massot. Her more recent trilogy *Vernon Subutex* (2016-2018) has been celebrated as a modern roman-feuilleton. Although *Vernon Subutex* has not been published as a crime series, the novel is presented by the editor as a ‘fake crime novel’ with short chapters that take the form of each character’s flow of consciousness and an intricate web of characters, of both marginal and conventional status. The narrative takes place around two suicides or eventual crimes, and La Hyène the detective from *Apocalypse bébé* (2010) also appears in the novel. Despentes treats the chapters of the first volume as if they were episodes, slowing down the rhythm of the main narrative to introduce Vernon’s acquaintances, and narrate his wanderings through the voices of these secondary characters. Like in most recent American series, the set of characters displays an uncommon level of diversity for high-brow French literature, including a Tunisian non-religious professor and his devout daughter, rock musicians, a rich trader, a black singer, pornstars, and transgender characters. This group of characters described with details in the first chapters allows Despentes to consider issues from different angles and to resist dominant mainstream heteronormative representations (like Villez suggested for the series, Villez 26). In the second and third volume, the group starts acting as a collective hero, as it happens in many

TV series (Villez first sees this happen in *Hill Street Blues*). Vernon Subutex had a record store in Paris and lost it with the arrival of virtual music platforms. Whereas, the first volume gives the setting for the Parisian identities and mentalities that once surrounded Vernon, and how they have changed, the second one does not uncover the truth about the two eventual crimes but it highlights that for many of the characters an irremediable sense of loss came along with the new economic model, and what it destroyed since the 1980s. Despentès's narrative seems to assert that "human beings" stopped being at the center of how society considers things, that money took over the system, displacing the most vulnerable, not giving them a place in society, and destroying all sense of community. The perception of this latter collective crime seems to be what brings all this disparate group of characters together. According to François Jost, the legitimate interest and the success of many American series revolves around several criteria. I would emphasize three of them. One is the fact that the main hero becomes a familiar character with qualities but also flaws (Jost refers to Norton Frye's "low mimetic mode" with heroes and environments similar to the audience's, and I would note that this also happened in detective novels). The second one is the use of common transnational tropes such as conspiracy or secrecy, the rejection of the elites, and exposing manipulations of public opinion. And the third is the appearance of the collective hero. We can see these three criteria through the voices conveyed by Vernon Subutex's group of characters and the social analysis Despentès includes in the novel. Despentès seems to think, as did Balzac for the post-revolutionary period, that our contemporary world is increasingly unreadable. Through his wanderings, the character of Vernon socializes with crowds from both the lowest strata and the richest milieus of French society (like another famous French detective, Arsène Lupin). Despentès reminds French society that there was a time when the working class felt as a collective, not as a series of individuals in competition, and provides an uncommonly rich and comprehensive picture of social, economic, and political realities. Despentès also claims her attachment to popular culture by using noir fiction, along with her admitted influences of punk culture, and TV series. Like Balzac does in *Une Ténébreuse Affaire*, Despentès alludes to the conflict opposing how facts were officially narrated and what actually happened as neoliberalism took over the economy in the 80s and the 90s. Despentès exposes and resists institutional violence by decoding the past, providing a better understanding of the present and of the functioning of power.

As we can see, from their very early forms, detective novels have contributed to promote critical thinking and political awareness, furthering Villez's claim that popular culture plays an important role in shaping the public's perceptions of law, justice, and ultimately democracy.

I would like to dedicate this research to Dr. Julia Przybos, Professor of French at the Graduate Center, New York and author of *Entreprise mélodramatique*, Paris: Corti, 1987.

## Notes

[1] As noted by Maurice Serval, « Autour d'un roman de Balzac : Une ténébreuse affaire », in *Revue d'Histoire littéraire de la France* No. 4 (1922), pp. 452-483, « Elle ne trouva pour

l'accueillir, que le rez-de chaussée d'un journal politique, « Le Commerce », et aucun critique n'en parla ».

[2] See Pellini in Vanoncini André, « Balzac et la ténébreuse naissance du roman policier », *Romanische Studien*, 3 (2016): 260-273.

[3] Kálai Sándor, « Pratiques sérielles dans le roman judiciaire », *Belphégor* [En ligne], 14 | 2016, mis en ligne le 10 octobre 2016, consulté le 10 septembre 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/belphegor/696> ; DOI : 10.4000/belphegor.696

[4] Mentioned by Umberto Eco in “Innovation and repetition: between modern and post-modern aesthetics”, *Daedalus*, New York, August 1985. Translated as « Innovation et répétition : entre esthétique moderne et postmoderne », *Réseaux*, 12:68, 1994, 22-23.

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