

# “Il faudrait cesser d’écrire des romans”: The Paradoxical Influence of the Situationist International on Jean-Patrick Manchette

Sophie Dolto  
(University of Pennsylvania)

[Accepted for publication: 09/01/2023]

## Abstract

THE goal of this article is to examine the work of Jean-Patrick Manchette (1942–95) as a form of case study that could highlight some of the contradictory effects and emotions that the Situationists provoked in writers of their time. Sincerely influenced by ultra-left politics and Situationist theory, Jean-Patrick Manchette, a crime fiction writer particularly active in the 1970s, was conscious quite early on that his work could be recuperated or that he was himself a recuperator, his novels being “récupérations feuilletonesques du mouvement social”. This article summarizes the various aspects of this paradox, which he emphasized himself. It investigates how Manchette tried to develop a theoretically acceptable writing strategy inside this contradiction, a strategy that he would later consider faulty. This article also examines how, regardless of these unresolved preliminary conditions, Manchette experimented with different writing strategies that also bear the trace of political and formal questions sparked by his interest in this political current, thus reacting to it.

## A Spectre Haunting Manchette

THE Situationist International (SI) was undoubtedly the purest and most uncompromising twentieth-century avant-garde movement. It was notoriously suspicious of almost all forms of conventional artistic and cultural production of the time. A “situationist” crime novelist is thus something close to a contradiction in terms. And yet Jean-Patrick Manchette (1942–95), perhaps the most interesting crime writer of the post-1968 period, could fit this description insofar as his work is often referred to as having been strongly influenced by the SI.

This article intends to examine Manchette’s work as a case study that highlights some of the contradictory effects and tormented affects that the SI produced on novelists of the time. The most significant French crime fiction writer of the

1970s,<sup>1</sup> Manchette was published in the Série Noire, a collection famous for assembling and packaging American and British *noir* authors and making them known to a broader French audience.<sup>2</sup> Manchette's writing is not only inspired by Dashiell Hammett's hardboiled style, he saw it as inheriting the latter's legacy of social critique. At the forefront of a new generation of writers published in the immediate aftermath of May 68, Manchette wrote novels that talked about political conspiracies against Third-World leaders (*L'Affaire N'Gustro*, 1971) [*The N'Gustro Affair*], anarchist terrorism (*Nada*, 1972), antipsychiatry (*Ô dingos, ô châteaux !*, 1972) [*The Mad and the Bad*], and the boredom of everyday life (*Le Petit Bleu de la côte ouest*, 1976) [*Three to Kill*].<sup>3</sup> Manchette also wrote columns in newspapers and weeklies in which he developed a social and political theory of noir.<sup>4</sup>

Influenced by ultra-left politics and Situationist ideas, Manchette was paradoxically conscious early on that his work could be *recuperated* and that he might himself be a *recuperator*. Patrick Marcolini explains that the term *récupération* was used by the Situationists to describe the ways in which "new capitalism would seek to neutralize and reabsorb everything that stood against it" (283) and, furthermore, that the term shares aspects of what Debord called "the spectacle".<sup>5</sup> The SI was particularly critical of artists and writers who propagated Situationist ideas through their work but were not otherwise revolutionaries. Manchette knew this: he called himself a "pro-situ"—a derogatory term defined by Debord and Sanguinetti in *La véritable scission dans l'Internationale* [*The Real Split in the International*] (Debord, *Véritable scission*)—and described his novels as "récupération feuilletonesque du mouvement social" ["feuilleton-like co-optations of the social movement"] (*Lettres* 113–14), quoting Semprun's critical words about Manchette (Semprun 25).

In this article, I will summarize the various aspects of Manchette's paradoxical relationship with the SI, illustrating how the group had a fundamental impact on his ideas while simultaneously stymieing his work. I will examine Manchette's efforts to develop a theoretically acceptable writing strategy, without ever fully succeeding. Then, leaving aside this unresolved issue, I will analyse how Manchette developed a writing style that was in fact infused with Situationist content and formal experimentation (including the use of *détournement*).<sup>6</sup> Although Situationist theory alone cannot explain all of Manchette's writing choices, this article intends to illustrate some of the complex ripple effects that this small group had on its generation, even authors beyond its immediate circle. Furthermore, this case study explores the compatibility of Situationist ideas with the production of fiction, including popular genres like noir, that were said to convey an oppositional, even

---

<sup>1</sup> Most of Manchette's novels have been translated into English by Donald Nicholson-Smith along with Jim Brook and Alyson Waters. Nicholson-Smith is a former member of the SI and translator of many Situationist texts.

<sup>2</sup> On the history of the Série Noire, see Mesplède and Schleret.

<sup>3</sup> On the Situationist concept of "everyday life" and its relationship to Henri Lefebvre's work, see Gardiner.

<sup>4</sup> Manchette's columns have been published in French under the title *Chroniques*.

<sup>5</sup> On this comparison, see Marcolini; Hemmens and Zacarias, "Spectacle".

<sup>6</sup> On this key Situationist notion, see Zacarias.

radical slant. To what extent did Situationist theory challenge the prevalent idea that noir could comprise a meaningful "social critique"?

### Manchette's Worldview

SIX months before his death, Manchette replied to a letter-questionnaire sent to him by high-school students. In this letter, described by the publishers of his correspondence as a "form of self-assessment," Manchette reiterates a number of key points regarding his writing and influences. When asked about his "vision of the world", he replies: "Personnellement, j'ai toujours été proche de la 'politique' – ou plutôt de la dissidence d'ultra-gauche. C'est un élément majeur dans mon impression du monde, et qui détermine ce que j'essaie de communiquer. [...] Mon 'regard sur le monde' est anarcho-marxiste, pour le dire schématiquement" (*Lettres* 523–25).<sup>7</sup> Manchette's journal and correspondence confirm that although he was not fully immersed in the activities of the Parisian ultra-left, he was aware of the ongoing debates there. Without going into detail regarding these interactions, it is worth mentioning his correspondence with Guy Fargette (a former collaborator of the Debordian *Encyclopédie des Nuisances* who launched the journal *Les Mauvais Jours Finiront*), his contacts with the surrealist George Goldfayn and, finally, with Serge Quadruppani, a fellow noir-novelist who participated in the ultra-left journals *La Banquise* (with Gilles Dauvé) and *Mordicus*. Manchette also wrote a critical reply (*Lettres* 61–63) to "Les Amis du Potlatch", who had asked for his help in republishing the leaflet *Vive le communisme – À bas le proletariat* (1979) [*Long Live Communism – Down With the Proletariat*]. Two years later, when the same group put out *Notre royaume est une prison* [*Our Kingdom Is a Prison*], a Holocaust-denying pamphlet, Manchette published a critical reply, *Alerte aux gaz !* [*Warning, Gas!*], in which he denounced the "sinister" shift within the ultra-left but reiterated a critique of antifascism (*Les Yeux*, 267–73). Quadruppani recalls that, in the late 1990s, Manchette helped identify "plainclothes cops" in demonstrations by taking pictures that were later circulated amongst ultra-leftists. In 1968, however, Manchette, who at the time had a wife and young son to support, did not take part in the May 68 "events". He also stated in an interview that ever since he was beaten up as a young militant, he was terrified of the police (see Geslin and Rieben).

A pro-Algerian militant in the 1960s, Manchette recalled in an interview that his view of politics was altered by reading the SI (presumably the analysis of the Algerian revolution and the critique of nationalism and leftist militancy): "J'ai découvert ce courant radical [l'ultra-gauche] en découvrant la revue *Internationale situationniste* vers 1965" (Bourg).<sup>8</sup> He later added: "Mon propre système

<sup>7</sup> Transl.: "I have always been close to ultra-left politics or dissidence. This is a major component of my impression of the world, and one that determines what I try to communicate. [...] My 'worldview', schematically speaking, is anarcho-Marxist."

<sup>8</sup> Transl.: "I discovered this radical [ultra-left] tendency when I discovered the journal *Internationale situationniste* around 1965."

d'interprétation du monde peut être qualifié, pour aller vite, de pro-situ ou néo-prositu, si on veut le juger sévèrement. Je suis généralement très intéressé, et rarement choqué, par ce que publient Debord ou *l'Encyclopédie des nuisances* ou quelques autres" (Bourg).<sup>9</sup>

Manchette's admiration for the SI, perhaps unsurprisingly, was not mutual. Gérard Lebovici (Debord's sponsor after 1971 and founder of Champ Libre, the main publisher of Situationist texts) and Jaime Semprun (a friend of Debord's and author of *Précis de récupération*) both violently rebuked Manchette and called him a *recuperator* (Éditions Champ Libre 93–96; Semprun 25). More surprisingly, Debord was convinced that Manchette was in reality the pseudonym of Jean-Pierre George, a former Situationist turned enemy (see Debord, *Correspondance* 5: 389, 6: 72).

### Consistency

WHILE Manchette's relationship with the SI was indirect, the group's ideas remained central to his writing. Before publishing his first novels he wondered whether, as a "creator of necessarily recuperated works," he could meet and discuss with the SI, and what sort of relationship he might have with the group. Early on in his journal, he raised the problem of *consistency* between his keen interest in the SI and his desire to have a career as a writer, which brought Manchette to reflect critically on the possibility of writing creatively:

Dans mes rapports avec l'I.S., la seule question sérieuse, c'est ma propre cohérence. [...] L'I.S., apparemment, tolère que ses membres produisent – des œuvres nécessairement récupérées. [...] Il paraît difficile de défendre ma démarche en termes situationnistes, même au nom de son résultat. [...] Je concevrais ma collaboration à l'I.S., dont je vois bien qu'elle est imaginaire, comme une poussière de rencontres et de dialogues.<sup>10</sup> (*Journal* 56–57)

The Debordian slogan "Never work!" not being an option,<sup>11</sup> Manchette focused on identifying areas in the culture industry, as well as writing strategies, that felt theoretically, aesthetically, and ethically acceptable. Producing "high art" was of course out the question; Manchette was instead interested in the attitude of Dashiell Hammett, Philip K. Dick or George Orwell, authors whom he described as "lying in ambush," and who managed to "infiltrate" and "fight behind the enemy lines" of popular culture. By theorizing the conditions of production of Hammett's

<sup>9</sup> Transl.: "My own system for interpreting the world might be described briefly as pro-Situ or, to make a more severe judgement, as neo-pro-Situ. I am usually very interested, and rarely shocked, by whatever Debord, or the *Encyclopédie des Nuisances* or a few other people publish."

<sup>10</sup> Transl.: "As for my relations with the S.I., the only serious issue is my own consistency. [...] The S.I. apparently allows its members to produce works that will inevitably be recuperated. [...] It seems hard to defend my own approach in Situationist terms, even based on the end result. [...] I would characterise my collaboration with the S.I., which I clearly see to be imaginary, as a dust cloud of meetings and dialogues."

<sup>11</sup> On this slogan and on anti-work traditions, see Hemmens.

hardboiled novels and by analysing his style as a tactic similar to the "mouvement de la cavalerie de Condé à Rocroi" ["Condé's use of cavalry at the battle of Rocroi"] (Bourg),<sup>12</sup> Manchette attempted to kill two birds with one stone: develop a coherent Hegelian-Situationist-infused theory of noir and carve a space for his own work to exist. However, precisely because of his theoretical rigour, Manchette realized early on that his position was precarious and that the questions raised by his interest in the Situationists might not find answers in Situationist theory itself.

### **Roman Noir and the Counter-Revolution of the 1920s**

**I**n his first article about the noir genre, in 1976, Manchette laid out fundamental aspects of a theory that he was to develop in subsequent columns. After opposing the whodunnit to noir (the former reflecting bourgeois fears of crime, the latter critiquing capitalist society), he proposed a historical genealogy of noir, a genre born, according to him, of the "counter-revolution" of 1920–50 (*Chroniques* 22). He then put forward conclusions regarding 1970s *néo-noir*. In doing so, Manchette used an analytical framework that recalls Debord's, since, as Bertrand Cochard writes: "L'analyse du processus historique au cours duquel l'art progresse dialectiquement d'une détermination à une autre constitue le cœur de l'effort de pensée fourni par Debord, effort consistant tout en même temps à prolonger et à renouveler ses thèses sur l'esthétique" (68).<sup>13</sup>

In all his articles, Manchette applied Situationist, Hegelian, and Marxist categories to describe noir as a form and insisted that this genre should be understood in a global historical framework: "[Les] pères fondateurs du roman noir, et leur descendance [...] méritent d'être situés non pas dans leur relation à la 'paralittérature', mais par rapport à l'histoire générale de l'art, notamment du roman américain après la Première Guerre Mondiale" (*Chroniques* 410–11).<sup>14</sup>

Like the Situationists, Manchette considered the trajectory of the artistic avant-garde a pivotal moment where both art and society attempt to "self-destruct" and *realize* art through revolution:

Le mouvement Dada, avec d'autres mouvements et œuvres contemporains, c'est le moment où, schématiquement, l'art s'autodétruit. [...] Mais cette autodestruction – dont on peut bien sûr suivre aussi le mouvement imminent dans la littérature de Mallarmé, Proust, Joyce, d'autres, et qui éclate en même temps chez les Russes (le *Quadrilatère* de Malevitch) et ailleurs –, cette autodestruction contient en négatif un désir de construction totale.<sup>15</sup> (*Chroniques* 408)

---

<sup>12</sup> Manchette, like Debord, was interested in military strategy.

<sup>13</sup> Transl.: "The analysis of the historical process whereby art advances dialectically from one determinant to the next constitutes the core of the effort of thought applied by Debord, an effort that both broadens and renews his theses on aesthetics."

<sup>14</sup> Transl.: "The founding fathers of the *roman noir* and their continuators [...] deserve to be viewed not in relation to 'para-literature' but rather in relation to the general history of art, and notably of the American novel following the First World War."

<sup>15</sup> Transl.: "The Dada movement, along with contemporary movements and works, represents the moment when art, to simplify, self-destructed. [...] But this self-destruction, whose imminence is of course clearly discernible in the writings of Mallarmé, Proust, Joyce and so on, and which

Manchette insisted that, as the revolution failed, Dada dwindled: "Les situationnistes avaient certainement raison d'écrire que Dada ne pouvait alors se développer qu'en liaison avec une révolution réussie" (*Chroniques* 408).<sup>16</sup> He added that, after 1920, Dos Passos's efforts to "injecter de l'avant-gardisme dans le réalisme" ["inject avant-gardism into realism"] were also bound to fail. According to Manchette, noir, although "regressing" towards an older genre, is a coherent formal answer to the failure of revolution:

La révolution ayant échoué, en Russie et en Allemagne, et ailleurs, le dépassement de l'art était impossible. Le surréalisme, malgré quelques bonnes intentions, est une involution, notamment picturale et littéraire au sens maintenant péjoratif de ces deux mots. Le reste du paysage culturel, dont le roman, subit une involution pire encore. C'est dans ce paysage que naît le roman noir. [...] Dans un temps où toutes les formes littéraires régressent, il semble être une régression aussi, avec son réalisme hérité du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle français et américain.<sup>17</sup> (*Chroniques* 409)

In Hegelian fashion (and quoting Marx), Manchette used the word "necessity" to describe the equivalence between historical moment and form: "Les écrits de Hammett et de quelques autres ont été un moment nécessaire des soupirs et des rages de la créature opprimée" (*Chroniques* 176).<sup>18</sup> He added that noir was a critical reaction to this counter-revolutionary period: "Ce sont les perspectives sociales qui ont réellement régressé; le roman noir subit cette régression, y compris sur le terrain formel, mais il la critique consciemment" (*Chroniques* 379).<sup>19</sup>

This formal "regression" is perceptible, according to Manchette, in the Hemingwayesque terseness of noir style (that Manchette called "behaviourist" because of its disregard for its characters' inner lives), whose insistence on only describing the surface of things constitutes a form of shield: a shield against the lies used by everyone in a heartless world to stab each other in the back; against one's own past illusions; against one's desolation that an entire generation might have been sacrificed to the convulsions of history. This is why Manchette, quoting Marx, himself quoting Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, described noir style as a reaction to "the cunning of reason":

---

simultaneously erupted in Russia (Malevich's *Black Square*) and elsewhere—this self-destruction also embodied the negative expression of a desire for total reconstruction."

<sup>16</sup> Transl.: "The Situationists were certainly right to assert that Dada could not therefore have evolved further without being part and parcel of a successful revolution."

<sup>17</sup> Transl.: "The revolution having failed in Russia and Germany, and elsewhere, the transcendence of art was thus impossible. Surrealism, despite some good intentions, was an involution, notably a pictorial and literary one in the now pejorative sense of those two words. The remainder of the cultural landscape, including the novel, underwent an even worse involution. It was in this context that the *roman noir* was born. [...] At a time when all literary forms were regressing, this also seemed like a regression, with its realism inherited from the French and American nineteenth century."

<sup>18</sup> Transl.: "The writings of Hammett constituted a necessary moment in the sighs and rage of the oppressed creature."

<sup>19</sup> Transl.: "Social perspectives are what really regressed; the *roman noir* underwent this regression, in formal terms too, but it criticized it in a conscious way."

Ce moment où, de nouveau, les intentions des hommes comptent pour rien, où leurs actes seuls peuvent être décrits par l'écriture behavioriste triomphante, c'est bien cette restauration de l'ordre sous laquelle *il résulte des actions des hommes autre chose que ce qu'ils projettent et accomplissent, autre chose que ce qu'ils savent et veulent immédiatement*. [...] Le behaviorisme comme style est le mode d'expression d'une conscience échaudée qui craint désormais la ruse de la raison.<sup>20</sup> (*Chroniques* 83–84)

In addition, Manchette wrote: "Et la forme du polar est bien la forme de son contenu,"<sup>21</sup> suggesting that the "greatness" of noir lies in this formal equivalence. Since noir "consciously criticizes" the state of social regression of the world, while adopting a regressive form, it became, according to Manchette, "la grande littérature morale [...] de la contre-révolution régnant sans partage" ["the great moral literature [...] of the counter-revolution reigning supreme"] (*Chroniques* 31).

### Frivolity and Recuperation

WE can imagine how, according to Manchette, noir might have lost the beauty of its "formal adequacy" when it ceased being historically "necessary", i.e., beyond the counter-revolutionary context of the interwar years.

In February 1978, Manchette wrote: "La créature opprimée ne soupire plus, elle incendie les commissariats et tire dans les jambes des étatistes. Du coup, le roman noir devient une futilité" (*Chroniques* 37).<sup>22</sup> Manchette used the term "frivolous" on several occasions, as when, for instance, he declared in 1978: "Le 'nouveau polar' est superflu. Frivolité toujours; ennui souvent. Au mieux, distraction, bouquins bons à lire dans le train" (*Chroniques* 39).<sup>23</sup> This last reference is to Hegel, in a passage quoted by the Situationists in 1959:

Bien sûr, le dépérissement des formes artistiques, s'il se traduit par l'impossibilité de leur renouvellement créatif, n'entraîne pas immédiatement leur véritable disparition pratique. Elles peuvent se répéter avec diverses nuances. Mais tout révèle "l'ébranlement de ce monde", pour parler comme Hegel dans la préface de la *Phénoménologie de l'Esprit*: "La frivolité et l'ennui qui envahissent ce qui subsiste encore, le pressentiment vague d'un inconnu sont les signes annonciateurs de quelque chose d'autre qui est en marche."<sup>24</sup> ("Le sens" 7–8)

---

<sup>20</sup> Transl.: "That moment, when, once again, the intentions of human beings counted for nothing, when their actions alone could be described, by means of the predominant behaviourist style, was indeed the moment of the return of the regime under which *the actions of human beings in world history produce effects altogether different from those intended, and from those that they know and desire in the immediate*. [...] Behaviourism as style is the mode of expression of a scorched consciousness that now fears the cunning of reason."

<sup>21</sup> Transl.: "And the form of the polar is well and truly the form of its content."

<sup>22</sup> Transl.: "The oppressed creature no longer sighs, it burns down police stations and fires at the legs of statist. The *roman noir* has thus become futile."

<sup>23</sup> Transl.: "The 'new polar' is superfluous. Frivolity always; boredom often. At best, entertainment, books fit only to be read on the train."

<sup>24</sup> Transl.: "Of course, the perishing of artistic forms, though it is reflected in the impossibility of their creative renewal, does not immediately imply their actual practical disappearance. They may

With this in mind, Manchette developed a theory about the possible persistence of noir in a newly revolutionary period, according to which néo-noir could survive as a vestigial and superfluous *exercice de style*, "forme dépassée, sur quoi des auteurs parfois talentueux peuvent faire des variations parfois excellentes, toujours vides" (*Chroniques* 139).<sup>25</sup> Of course, Manchette included himself in this derogatory critique and regularly claimed that his own novels were insignificant in the face of history.

However, as he would later concede (Bourg), there was something problematic in this "manoeuvre". The main problem, from a Situationist perspective, was that popular novels were more than "futile". Manchette himself noted that noir novels written in the 1970s were bound to be a form of "recuperation":

Nous avons insisté ici-même, [...] sur le changement de fonction du polar, quand il est écrit, vendu, lu dans les conditions nouvelles. Quand le retour violent du négatif apeure certains, ceux-ci consomment volontiers sa représentation, comme substitut et exorcisme, surtout si elle est ouvertement référentielle. Le *néo-polar* est récupérateur, soit qu'il se livre à la "mise en scène feuilletonesque de certaines attitudes non-conformistes" (Jaime Semprun, *Précis de récupération*), soit qu'il décore les intrigues polar de débris littéraires ramassés un peu partout. Généralement il fait les deux, mêlant à un propos gauchiste ou "anarchisant" ou "nihiliste" une abondance de *private jokes* de l'écriture sur elle-même, façon Queneau.<sup>26</sup> (*Chroniques* 89-90)

Given the definitions posed by Manchette himself, his novels correspond to those "recuperative" and thus counter-revolutionary cultural products that commodify radical attitudes by fictionalizing them and that are in turn consumed by those who fear the "return of the negative".<sup>27</sup> Manchette acknowledged and even laid

---

be repeated with variations. But everything bespeaks the 'crumbling to pieces' of this world, to speak like Hegel in his preface to *The Phenomenology of Mind*: 'Frivolity and again ennui, which are spreading in the established order of things, the undefined foreboding of something unknown—all these betoken that there is something else approaching'."

<sup>25</sup> Transl.: "as a superseded form on which some talented authors can perform variations that are occasionally excellent but invariably empty".

<sup>26</sup> Transl.: "I have already emphasized [...] the changed function of crime fiction when it is written, sold and read under new conditions. While the violent return of the negative frightens some people, they readily consume its representation as substitute and exorcism, especially if it is openly referential. The *néo-polar* is recuperative either in the sense that it 'engages in a feuilletonist mise-en-scène of particular nonconformist attitudes' (Jaime Semprun, *Précis de récupération*), or because it adorns its plots with literary detritus gathered from anywhere. Usually it does both, peppering a leftist, 'anarchizing' or 'nihilist' theme with an abundance of in-jokes about the writing itself after the fashion of a Queneau."

<sup>27</sup> Presenting Manchette as caught in the inevitable and unresolvable antagonism between the Situationists and popular culture might obscure the Situationists' ambiguous attitude towards the literary commodities of their time. Michèle Bernstein, an original member of the SI and Debord's first wife, wrote two novels (*Tous les chevaux du roi*; *La nuit*), which she later described as hoaxes, pastiches of the Nouveau Roman and Françoise Sagan's best-sellers, avowedly written with the intention of earning money for the Situationist group. Raoul Vaneigem also wrote novels, some of them erotic (*L'île aux délices*, under the pseudonym Anne de Launay). One might ask what formally differentiates Manchette from these other instances.



claim to this bind in his articles but provided arguments as to why his novels would or could remain insignificant and thus harmless. But these arguments contain contradictions which Manchette left unresolved.

First, Manchette emphasized that since capitalist society was so close to being overtaken by communist revolution (*Chroniques* 22, 37–39), his books would soon be a relic of the forgotten past. This argument avoids all discussion about the specificity of his books and about recuperation as counter-revolutionary. Second, the fact that Manchette vaunted the insignificance of his books in his articles could also be interpreted as a kind of false modesty, a paradoxical pretext for continuing to write while also claiming that writing was unimportant.

Moreover, Manchette seemed unconvinced by his own argument, adding in a post-scriptum that his past as a writer might not be "automatically forgiven" in a communist future (*Chroniques* 22). Gerard Lebovici, with whom he had an epistolary argument, perceived this uneasiness and was only too glad to attack Manchette over the matter. When Manchette asked Lebovici why the publication of science-fiction translated by Manchette and his wife had been rejected,<sup>28</sup> he was rebuked precisely for his "self-admitted recuperation":

Reconnaissant ma puissance, vous semblez chercher auprès de moi quelque protection pour soutenir une carrière cinématographique incertaine. [...] Lorsqu'on est ce que vous êtes, lorsqu'on le sait, lorsqu'on l'avoue, non pas en confidence à quelques relations, mais lorsqu'on l'écrit afin que le public l'apprenne et l'apprécie – espérant par ces aveux obtenir sans doute quelques circonstances atténuantes au jugement de l'Histoire – il y a quelques incongruité dadaïste (au sens d'Amin Dada) à oser parler d'honorabilité et de raison. [...] Moi je dis que pire que ce que vous faites, ce sont vos aveux truqués et honteux qui méritent dès aujourd'hui un jugement sans appel [...].<sup>29</sup> (Éditions Champ Libre 95–96)

### Hammett's Hardboiled Style: A Tactic

ANOTHER way in which Manchette explained his writing strategy was by comparing it to Hammett's: "Le choix que j'ai fait de pratiquer l'art industriel, i.e. de publier dans l'industrie du divertissement, découle d'une conviction (l'histoire de

---

<sup>28</sup> Manchette helped create "Chute Libre", a small sci-fi collection within Champ Libre. He and his wife regularly translated noir and sci-fi novels for various publishers.

<sup>29</sup> Transl.: "Mindful of my power, you appear to be seeking some sort of support from me in your uncertain pursuit of a career in cinema. [...] When one is what you are, when one knows it, when one admits it, not just in confidence to a few friends, but when instead one writes it so that the public learns about it and appreciates it—while hoping that by virtue of such confessions the judgement of history may allow for extenuating circumstances—then it is surely incongruous in a Dadaist (Amin tendency) sense to dare speak of honour and reason. [...] For my part I say that worse than what you create are your fake and shameful admissions, which call immediately for irreversible condemnation [...]."

l'Art est finie) et d'une espérance (ne pourrait-on pas répéter la hardie manœuvre de Hammett, Orwell, Dick, et porter la contestation dans les banlieues de l'esprit ?)" (Bourg).<sup>30</sup>

According to Manchette, Hammett's strength lay in his tactic of offering a fierce critique of society while avoiding any return to "art" as such. In consciously producing cultural commodities, Hammett had managed both to oppose artistic snobbery and to subvert mass culture: "S'agissant du roman noir, et sans que je méprise *a priori* son aspect distrayant, je ne lui trouve de la grandeur que dans son refus de la 'littérature' et dans l'audacieux mouvement qui lui avait fait porter l'esprit de critique en plein milieu du dispositif ennemi" (Manchette, "Réponses" 104).<sup>31</sup>

Manchette argued that after Dada one could produce only "cultural commodities" and that the point was to operate consciously within the commodity culture, no matter how disgusting "industrial art" was. In Manchette's eyes, as long as it remained clear to the readership that cultural commodities were mere commodities and that neo-noir was not a literary innovation, this recuperation could remain inconsequential. Manchette's real battle was thus against the artistic recuperation of noir: "La récupération a engendré le néo-polar plus ou moins extrémiste, dont nous ne nous plaindrons pas à condition qu'il soit convenu que nous y trouverons seulement une distraction et nullement l'importante avancée littéraire que certains critiques voudraient y voir, pour la vanter ou la décrier" (*Chroniques* 37).<sup>32</sup>

Manchette therefore makes the literary insignificance and the unartistic nature of néo-noir a condition for its acceptable existence. This prerequisite makes his overall argument perilous, since Manchette has little control over what the readership might think or feel. This notwithstanding, Manchette explains that he deliberately tried to "contain" neo-noir,<sup>33</sup> orienting it in a certain direction from the start, sabotaging it while creating it: "Quoique je sois notoirement (avec d'autres auteurs) à l'origine du 'jeune roman noir français' des années 70, on ignore donc généralement à quel point j'ai contenu ce petit sous-genre, et combien consciemment je l'ai fondé quand j'ai vu qu'il était inévitable" ("Réponses" 104).<sup>34</sup>

To show this critical distance, Manchette also coined the word "*néo-polar*", the "*néo-*" being for the Situationists a derogatory prefix, a term which radical critique

---

<sup>30</sup> Transl.: "The choice I made to work on industrial art, i.e., to publish in the entertainment industry, was based on a conviction of mine (the history of Art is over) and a hope (could one not emulate the doughty tactic of Hammett, Orwell, Dick, and bring resistance into the *banlieues* of the mind?)"

<sup>31</sup> Transl.: "Apropos of the *roman noir*, far be it from me to disparage its entertainment value out of hand, but the only greatness I grant it lies in its rejection of 'literature' and in the audacity of its introduction of the critical faculty into the very heart of the enemy's strongholds."

<sup>32</sup> Transl.: "Recuperation has given rise to the more or less extremist *néo-polar*, to which I have no objection so long as it is agreed that this represents merely entertainment and not the important literary innovation that some critics want to see there, whether in order to vaunt or decry it."

<sup>33</sup> On this question, see Hollister, "*Fatale* Revisited".

<sup>34</sup> Transl.: "Although I am notoriously (with some other authors) a prime exponent of the 'young French roman noir' of the 1970s, it is not generally known how much I restrained this little sub-genre and how consciously I founded it after seeing that it was inevitable."

employs to describe "les ersatz qui, sous un nom illustre, ont partout remplacé la même chose" ["those ersatz products designated by the illustrious name of the original article"] (*Chroniques* 227).

Manchette was later to contend that his strategy went unnoticed and that "le mot néopolar a été partout repris apologétiquement" ("Réponses" 104).<sup>35</sup> What Manchette had fought against on all fronts became prevalent, since by the 1980s, néo-noir had also become a genre with increasingly artistic and leftist pretensions, as Manchette recalled:

Les ouvertures du "néopolar" ont été progressivement conquises par des littérateurs (d'Art) ou bien des racketeurs stalino-trotskyistes gorbachévophiles. À mesure qu'ils se développaient, je ralentissais. [...] Dans l'audiovisuel, dans le polar, il n'y a plus de refuge formel. Il reste le talent individuel, isolé en rase campagne devant l'artillerie et l'aviation enemies.<sup>36</sup> (Bourg)

On top of the artistic recuperation of noir, Manchette stressed its academic recuperation, an exemplification of the general exchangeability, i.e., the commodification of all aspects of life, a dynamic that Debord described in his theory of the spectacle and that could be traced back to Marx's definition of "real subsumption":

L'intérêt des universitaires et du public cultivé pour la littérature alimentaire s'inscrit dans le mouvement de promotion culturelle-marchande [...] qui veut faire reconnaître l'égalité entre tous les produits culturels, leur commune mesure d'argent. [...] [Ce] fanatisme a saisi toutes les activités humaines, toutes mes activités, des plus bestiales aux plus nobles (manger et dormir, aimer et œuvrer, etc.), et quand je remarque de la poésie et de l'ironie dans l'expression "littérature alimentaire", on comprend bien qu'il est question d'abjection.<sup>37</sup> ("Réponses" 106-07)

Manchette did not resolve these theoretical contradictions and would later contend that to do so, he "would have to stop writing novels" (*Lettres* 113). Nevertheless, he kept writing and, as we shall see, his novels bear traces of Situationist ideas, content, and formal practices such as *détournement*.

---

<sup>35</sup> Transl.: "the word *néopolar* has been taken everywhere as approbatory."

<sup>36</sup> Transl.: "The paths opened up by the '*néopolar*' have gradually been invested by proponents of literary Art or by Stalino-Trotskyist Gorbachevophiles. The further they advanced, the more I slowed down. [...] In the audio-visual world, there is no longer any formal refuge for crime fiction. All that remains is individual talent, isolated in open country and exposed to enemy artillery and aviation."

<sup>37</sup> Transl.: "The interest of university professors and the educated public for bread-and-butter writing is part and parcel of the commercial/cultural tendency [...] that seeks to impose equivalence on all cultural products using the common yardstick of money. [...] This fanaticism has now taken hold of all human activity, all my activity, from the most bestial to the most noble (eating and sleeping, loving and working), and when I note the poetry and irony in the expression 'bread-and-butter literature', it should be understood that the issue here is abjection."

### Commonsensical Messages

**I**N a 1980 interview with François Guérif, Manchette explained:

Il y a beaucoup de bouquins qui sortent, que certains (moi le premier) appellent néopolars, et qu'on compare aux miens, occasionnellement, pour des questions de contenu : parce qu'on y tue des curés, on tue des bourgeois, on tue des flics, parce que les méchants sont des promoteurs, des industriels, etc. Bon, ce sont des bouquins de gauche avec un message explicite ; mais ce n'est pas parce qu'un bouquin a un message de gauche qu'il est bon.<sup>38</sup> (*Chroniques* 16)

In that interview, Manchette concludes: "La question des contenus-de-gauche, dont les commentateurs brouillons veulent faire la question essentielle, est débile" (*Chroniques* 16).<sup>39</sup> Manchette's characters are rarely "positive", and his books generally lack positive representations of revolt, but they nonetheless do convey messages or positions. Manchette himself readily acknowledged this in 1977, but did not consider those messages profound:

Je mets des "messages" dans mes polars, mais entendons-nous, je n'utilisais le mot "message" que pour me moquer de moi-même. Ce qui est un fait, c'est que je démarre souvent mes polars avec l'idée de "dire" qqchose [sic], qui est généralement une remarque de simple bon sens. "Il y a des fous en liberté plus dangereux que ceux qu'on enferme", ou bien, "le terrorisme en France aujourd'hui, c'est déplacé". Rien de suprêmement dialectique, comme tu vois. Mais certes, je démarre très souvent mes trucs avec un "propos" préexistant, qui parfois n'est pas un "énoncé", mais un sujet à la mode : le terrorisme ; le kidnapping ; le malaise des cadres ; etc. [...] L'intention générale étant 1. de distraire les populations 2. très accessoirement de faire réfléchir.<sup>40</sup> (*Lettres* 44-45)

Manchette would later restate the banality of these themes and say about *Three to Kill* that he chose the topic of the "malaise des cadres" ["malaise among office

<sup>38</sup> Transl.: "A lot of books appear that some people (starting with me) call *néo-polars*, and that are occasionally compared to mine on the basis of their content, because priests get killed in them, or bourgeois, or cops, and because the bad guys are developers, industrialists, etc. Okay, these are left-wing books with an explicit message, but it is not because a book has a left-wing message that it is a good book."

<sup>39</sup> Transl.: "The left-wing-content issue, which confusionist commentators like to make the central question, is dumb."

<sup>40</sup> Transl.: "I put 'messages' in my *polars*, yes, but let's be clear, I was using the word 'message' only to make fun of myself. What is true is that I often start a novel off with the idea of 'saying' something, and that something is usually just a commonsensical remark: 'There are crazy people walking about more dangerous than those we lock up', or perhaps 'Terrorism in France today is unwarranted'. Nothing highly dialectical, as you can see. But granted, I very frequently get my things started with a pre-existing 'statement'—sometimes not even a 'proposition' but just a topic in vogue: terrorism, kidnapping, malaise among office workers, etc. [...] The main aim is (1) to entertain the *hoi polloi*; and, in a quite subsidiary way, (2) to stimulate reflection."

workers"]<sup>41</sup> when looking for a "sujet spécialement ridicule, qui a été traité de manière spécialement ridicule par un maximum de monde" (*Apostrophes*).<sup>42</sup> But if the originality of a book is not defined by its topic, and if Manchette's primary goal is to "entertain", there is no shortage of evidence that he does indeed also try to "stimulate reflection".

The clearest example of this is perhaps *Nada* (1972), in which a group of anarchists and leftists kidnap the US ambassador to France. The novel offers a critique of left-wing terrorism that resonates with ultra-left texts published around the same time, including Situationist texts (Gli Amici dell'Internazionale). At the end of the novel, Buenaventura Diaz, an anarchist, puts it this way:

J'ai fait une erreur, dit-il soudain. Le terrorisme gauchiste et le terrorisme étatique, quoique leurs mobiles soient incomparables, sont les deux mâchoires du...

Il hésita.

...du même piège à cons, acheva-t-il et il continua aussitôt. Le régime se défend évidemment contre le terrorisme. Mais le système ne s'en défend pas, il l'encourage, il en fait la publicité. Le desperado est une marchandise, une valeur d'échange, un modèle de comportement comme le flic ou la sainte. L'État rêve d'une fin horrible et triomphale dans la mort, dans la guerre civile absolument généralisée entre les cohortes de flics et de mercenaires et les commandos du nihilisme. C'est le piège qui est tendu aux révoltés et je suis tombé dedans. Et je ne serai pas le seul. Et ça m'emmerde bien.<sup>43</sup> (Manchette, *Romans* 438)

In his letter mentioned above to the class of high-school students, Manchette cites *Nada* as an example of one of his novels' goals:

Par exemple en 1973, je connaissais des gens tentés par la "lutte armée", et c'est vraiment en pensant à eux que j'ai écrit un roman sur un kidnapping anarcho-terroriste en France, en essayant de montrer pourquoi ce genre de chose ne pouvait que tourner très mal. Des années plus tard, j'ai été profondément heureux d'apprendre que de jeunes extrémistes que je ne connaissais pas et qui envisageaient des actions violentes avaient lu mon

---

<sup>41</sup> The critique of *les (petits) cadres* was an enduring theme for Debord and the late SI.

<sup>42</sup> Transl.: "a particularly ridiculous subject that has been discussed in a particularly ridiculous way by a maximum number of people."

<sup>43</sup> Transl.: "I made a mistake", he said abruptly. "Leftist terrorism and State terrorism, even if their motivations cannot be compared, are the two jaws of..."

He hesitated.

"... of the same mug's game", he concluded, and went on right away: "The regime defends itself, naturally, against terrorism. But the system does not defend itself against it. It encourages it and publicizes it. The desperado is a commodity, an exchange value, a model of behavior like a cop or a female saint. The State's dream is a horrific, triumphant finale to an absolutely general civil war to the death between cohorts of cops and mercenaries on the one hand and nihilistic armed groups on the other. This vision is the trap laid for rebels, and I fell into it. And I won't be the last. And that pisses me off in the worst way." (Manchette, *Nada* 160)

roman, l'avaient discuté comme un texte théorique, et en avaient été influencés. [...] C'est cela que je souhaite, ce genre de chose, et nullement un rêve de postérité.<sup>44</sup> (*Lettres* 523–28)

As a counterpart to *Nada*, let me turn to the unfinished project "Les Gens du Mauvais Temps" [People in a Bad Time], written at the end of Manchette's literary career. Manchette noted in his journal that his goal was to show how left-wing terrorism was used by counterintelligence services in order to counter communist revolution. When talking about this new project in 1988, Manchette described it as a rectification of *Nada*, which he considered no longer sufficient: "[*Nada*] ne traite que de la forme sincère et idéaliste du terrorisme qui a vu le jour pendant une brève période vers 1970. Tout individu qui n'est pas complètement idiot sait aujourd'hui – et le sait depuis des années – que la plupart des groupes terroristes durant les années soixante-dix et après ont été infiltrés et *utilisés* par des agents de renseignement de l'État" (*Lettres* 308).<sup>45</sup>

This position recalls Situationist texts on terrorism and the secret services, in particular Sanguinetti's observations and Debord's *Commentaires* [*Comments*]. In 1991 Manchette wrote to Fargette:

[Debord] a décrit dans ses *Commentaires* "ce qui est", i.e. le renforcement du spectacle et spécialement de sa face cachée, et tout spécialement le développement d'un embrouillamini de complots – afin d'éclaircir les tendances du chaos contre-révolutionnaire. [...] Et je ne vois pas de "théorie du complot" mais seulement une description critique de la pratique et de l'idéologie du complot dans la classe dominante, son État et ses serviteurs, ainsi qu'une critique réitérée de la clandestinité hiérarchisée pseudo-révolutionnaire.<sup>46</sup> (*Lettres* 434–35)

Manchette intended his projected new cycle of novels to deliver both a "message" and an analysis. He planned to use fiction to portray the progressive unfolding of a large counter-revolutionary strategy after WWII which entailed a "*covert*

---

<sup>44</sup> Transl.: "In 1973, for example, I knew people who were tempted by "armed struggle", and it was certainly with them in mind that I wrote a novel about an anarcho-terrorist kidnapping in France, trying thereby to demonstrate why that sort of thing must inevitably go horribly wrong. Years later I have been overjoyed to find out that some young extremists whom I didn't know and who were pondering violent action had read my novel, discussed it as a theoretical text and been influenced by it. [...] That is what I hope for, that sort of thing, and by no means recognition by some imagined posterity."

<sup>45</sup> Transl.: "[*Nada*] deals only with the sincere and idealistic form of terrorism that emerged briefly around 1970. Every individual who is not a complete idiot now knows—and has known for years—that most terrorist groups during the 1970s and later were infiltrated and used by the State's intelligence agents."

<sup>46</sup> Transl.: "In his *Comments* [Debord] has described 'what is'—i.e., the reinforcement of the spectacle, especially its hidden face, and, most especially of all, the development of a thicket of plots. His intention was to clarify the counter-revolutionary tendency to create chaos. [...] For my part I don't see 'conspiracy theories' here so much as a critical description of the theory and ideology of conspiracy in the ruling class, its State and servants, along with a reiterated critique of a pseudo-revolutionary hierarchical underground."

action généralisée dans la société spectaculaire" ["a generalization of covert action in spectacular society"] (*Romans* 1022–23). As he explained to his publisher:

[Il] s'agit principalement des divers épisodes de cette période où ce sont des actions occultes qui ont permis de rétablir et d'aggraver la gestion despotique de ce monde, et son usure catastrophique. (Pour prendre un exemple familier mais mal connu en profondeur, la liquidation de l'"autonomie" dans l'Italie des années 1978–80 contient assurément assez de matière pour un volume – voire trente-six – quand on y examine le rôle des groupes armés archéo-staliniens et des services spéciaux, le gouvernement du pays par la "Loge P2", la "politique de l'héroïne" pour détruire les éléments antisociaux, ou bien encore cette partie de l'opération qui fut menée de manière combinée par les partis socialistes d'Europe occidentale).<sup>47</sup> (*Lettres* 412–13)

As Manchette added in the same letter, "il est techniquement épineux donc intéressant, pour un romancier, de saisir ce qui a été présenté par les médias sous une forme fantaisiste et feuilletonesque (l'affaire Moro, grands dieux ! la chute du vampire des Carpates saperlipopette !) et de déterrer les vérités en romançant les *affabulations romanesques* sous lesquelles elles sont enterrées" (*Lettres* 412–13).<sup>48</sup>

Manchette seems to be attempting to turn recuperation on its head: since the media (and spectacular society) presents events in "a fantastical and feuilletonist form" (Manchette once again uses Semprun's definition of recuperation), he might, by consciously fictionalizing them, succeed in revealing their truth.

### The Presence of Death Within Life Itself

AMONGST the various commonsensical "Situationist" or "ultra-left" themes in Manchette's novels, the critique of everyday life is worth mentioning, especially his negative narratives of rupture, in which characters try unsuccessfully to escape the repetitiveness of their existence. As he puts it in a letter about *The Prone Gunman* (a novel in which a hitman attempts to quit his job): "Je considère [...] que toute répétition dans l'existence est la présence de la mort à l'intérieur de l'existence (et par exemple le travail ouvrier à la chaîne relève de l'extermination, c'est assez évident)" (*Lettres* 336).<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Transl.: "The main concern will be with the various episodes of the period where it was covert interventions that helped maintain and worsen despotic control of this world and its catastrophic erosion. (To take a familiar example, but one that is not fully understood, the liquidation of the 'autonomy' movement in Italy of 1978–80 has enough aspects to easily fill a volume—or even thirty-six—when you consider the roles of the archaeo-Stalinist groups and the secret services, the control of the government by the 'P2 Lodge', the 'politics of heroin' designed to destroy antisocial elements, and even the portion of the operation led in cahoots by the Western European socialist parties, etc., etc.)."

<sup>48</sup> Transl.: "it is technically thorny, and thus interesting for a novelist, to take what the media presents in a fantastical and feuilletonist form (the Aldo Moro affair—gosh and golly!—or the fall of the Vampire of the Carpathians [Ceaușescu]—gadzooks!) and unearth its truth by novelizing the novelettish confabulations under which it has been buried."

<sup>49</sup> Transl.: "I believe [...] that all repetition in life is the presence of death within life itself (for example, assembly-line work is pretty obviously related to extermination)."

In *Three to Kill* (1976) the man attempting to escape his own life is Georges Gerfaut, a simple "cadre" with "vague leftist ideas" who uses a brush with death (two hitmen attempt to drown him on a tourist beach) as an excuse to flee his wife and kids while he roams the French countryside. After finding and killing the contractor of his attempted assassination, but not sure where to go next, he simply returns home, feigning amnesia. The entire novel has a circular structure: in both the first and last scenes of the book, Gerfaut is drunk and driving on Paris's ring road, in "une espèce de mélancolie vaguement tchékhovienne et principalement amère" (Manchette, *Romans* 707) ["a kind of vaguely Chekhovian and essentially bitter melancholy" (Manchette, *Three to Kill* 3)]. The first chapter closes with: "Ce qui arrive à présent arrivait parfois auparavant" (*Romans* 708).<sup>50</sup>

Gerfaut does try to flee, to change his life, but fails in his escape because he invents an adventurous escape scenario. When Bernard Pivot suggested to Manchette in a television interview that Gerfaut, unhappy with his life, finds freedom in his escape, Manchette replied:

Oui, mais c'est finalement une liberté médiocre, car il passe par l'itinéraire de tous les rêves de cadres [. . .]. Il s'en va à la campagne, il fait connaissance avec la belle nature, et tout ça ne lui plait pas tellement. Il s'ennuie, il devient un peu alcoolique [. . .]. Il fait l'itinéraire de l'évasion classique, et l'itinéraire de l'évasion classique n'est pas très intéressant.<sup>51</sup> (*Apostrophes*)

While Manchette chose to construct his story on the basis of a "sujet spécialement ridicule, qui a été traité de manière spécialement ridicule par un maximum de monde",<sup>52</sup> the references he drew on add layers of interpretation to the text.

A major influence for Manchette is Flaubert (on this influence see also Rabaté). Gerfaut can be described as a sort of Emma Bovary in that his mind is filled with cinematic or novelistic images of what his escape looks like. He fantasizes himself as a fictional hero:

L'image qu'il avait de lui-même s'inspirait d'un roman policier lu dix ans auparavant, et d'un petit western baroque et métaphysique vu l'automne précédent au cinéma Olympic. Il en avait oublié les titres. Dans l'un, un homme laissé pour mort et hideusement défiguré par un caïd du milieu exerçait ultérieurement contre le caïd et ses sbires une épouvantable vengeance. Dans l'autre, Richard Harris était semblablement laissé pour mort par John Huston, et survivait en pleine sauvagerie, dans la haine de Dieu et en disputant sa pitance aux loups.<sup>53</sup> (Manchette, *Romans* 749)

---

<sup>50</sup> Transl.: "What is happening now used to happen from time to time in the past" (Manchette, *Three to Kill* 4).

<sup>51</sup> Transl.: "Yes, but it is ultimately a mediocre freedom, because he follows the route dictated by the dreams of all office workers [. . .]. He goes off to the country, becomes acquainted with the beauties of nature, but doesn't care for any of it very much. He is bored, becomes a bit of a drunkard [. . .]. He takes the classic escape route, but the classic escape route is not very interesting."

<sup>52</sup> Transl.: "a particularly ridiculous subject that has been discussed in a particularly ridiculous way by a maximum number of people".

<sup>53</sup> Transl.: "The image he now had of himself drew on a crime novel he had read some ten years



The second reference is to Hammett. The plot of *Three to Kill* is arguably a pastiche of the enigmatic "Flitcraft parable" in *The Maltese Falcon*, in which a well-off office worker also "escapes and returns" after a brush with death. While the Flitcraft parable is social and existential, Manchette's version highlights the social production of class roles and ideology, insofar as Gerfaut's escape and actions, including that of returning home, "il faut [les] chercher surtout dans la place de Georges dans les rapports de production" (*Romans* 707-08).<sup>54</sup> Despite the ironic nature of this distinctly Marxist turn of phrase, for Manchette, these characters' mysterious urge to go back to where they came from is undeniably linked to their previous social position.

Finally, yet another underlying reference in this novel is the Situationist International. Gerfaut's itinerary can be described as an anti-*dérive*,<sup>55</sup> the wanderings of a man who ends up in conventional tourist destinations, trapped in desires ready-made for him by spectacular society. On the first day of his adventures, Gerfaut finds himself in Paris, staring at the crowds while eating mass-produced sausages:

Vers 13 h 30, Gerfaut se tapa des francfort-frites dans une brasserie. Il faisait de nouveau beau et clair mais on n'y voyait pas très loin à cause de la pollution atmosphérique. Les passantes étaient vêtues d'étoffes légères. Mais le reste, les voitures piétinant dans un nuage de gaz et de F.I.P. 514, les yeux cernés des gens qui se hâtaient, les tours de béton, le potin, la chair aqueuse et trafiquée des saucisses sous la dent de Gerfaut, tout cela, c'était la merde. Gerfaut aurait préféré un lieu où il pourrait voir autour de lui quelque chose qui ne soit pas son visage, où tout ne lui parlerait pas de lui-même, un paysage inanimé.<sup>56</sup> (*Romans* 741)

With a nod to the Situationists' disgust for industrial food, Manchette here cites and inverts a passage from Debord's "Théorie de la dérive", with its supposed quotation from Marx:

---

earlier and from a small, baroque Western he had seen the previous fall at the Olympic movie theatre. He had forgotten the titles of both works. In the first, a man left for dead and hideously mutilated by a crime boss proceeds to wreak a horrifying vengeance upon the said crime boss and his lackeys. In the film, Richard Harris is likewise left for dead by John Huston, but survives, living in a completely savage state, hating God and fighting with wolves for morsels of food" (Manchette, *Three to Kill* 75). The film described by Gerfaut is Richard C. Sarafian's *Man in the Wilderness* (1971).

<sup>54</sup> Transl.: "must be sought first and foremost in the position occupied by Georges in the social relations of production" (Manchette, *Three to Kill* 4).

<sup>55</sup> On the Situationist *dérive* [drift], see Buckley.

<sup>56</sup> Transl.: "About one-thirty that afternoon Gerfaut dug into frankfurters and fries in a café-restaurant. In theory, it was a fine clear day, but in practice you couldn't see very far on account of the air pollution. The women passing by wore scanty summer clothing. But as for everything else—the cars moving at a crawl through clouds of exhaust fumes and jazz from Radio FIP 514, the hollow eyes of the rushing people, the general din, the watery and adulterated taste of the sausages as Gerfaut bit into them—it was all shit. He would so rather have been in a place where he could see things around him that were not in his own image, where everything did not speak to him of himself—in short, an inanimate landscape" (Manchette, *Three to Kill* 52-53).

Le caractère principalement urbain de la dérive, au contact des centres de possibilités et de significations que sont les grandes villes transformées par l'industrie, répondrait plutôt à la phrase de Marx : "Les hommes ne peuvent rien voir autour d'eux qui ne soit leur visage, tout parle d'eux-mêmes. Leur paysage même est animé."<sup>57</sup> (Debord, "Théorie" 20)

In these various references, Manchette gives Flaubert and Hammett a "Marxist" interpretation and also comments on what a real escape might be. First, "la seule aventure" for the Situationists is "contester la totalité" (*Critique de la séparation*),<sup>58</sup> not travelling around. This "sole adventure", as the Marx quote suggests, implies not looking for the unknown, but looking for one's image in the real world, that is, debunking fetishism. Manchette wrote in his journal that in writing *Three to Kill* he hoped to lead the reader on a journey of self-confrontation: "Je veux ainsi emmener subrepticement le lecteur en promenade, le faire passer d'un texte amusant et sans profondeur apparente à un texte noir et heurtant, à une réflexion finalement importante et heurtante" (*Romans* 702).<sup>59</sup>

In Manchette's view, noir's style should force readers to look around them and face what Gerfaut could not, that is, the real image of the surrounding miserable world and of themselves as part of that world:

La vérité du polar hard-boiled, c'est qu'il doit non seulement avoir été le roman de la misère moderne, mais devenir la misère moderne du roman. Il ne veut rien avoir de poétique, sauf ironiquement. Le polar achevé doit être comme une HLM qui serait parfaite. Aucun détail, aucun problème de plomberie, ne doit s'interposer entre le consommateur et son objet. Même la distraction doit être parfaite, comme une cuisine équipée. Alors le consommateur ne peut plus se consoler par des protestations sur les détails. Il est forcé de tout accepter parce que c'est parfait, ou de tout rejeter d'un coup parce que c'est l'horreur.<sup>60</sup> (*Chroniques* 318)

---

<sup>57</sup> Transl.: "The primarily urban character of the *dérive*, in its element in the great industrially transformed cities that are such rich centres of possibilities and meanings, could be expressed in Marx's phrase: 'Men can see nothing around them that is not their own image; everything speaks to them of themselves. Their very landscape is alive'" (*Situationist* 63).

<sup>58</sup> Transl.: "the sole adventure [...] is challenging the totality."

<sup>59</sup> Transl.: "I want in this way, surreptitiously, to take readers for a walk, to have them move from a diverting and seemingly shallow text to a dark and jolting one, to an ultimately significant and jolting thought process."

<sup>60</sup> Transl.: "The truth about the hard-boiled crime novel is that it has to have been not just the novel of modern poverty but also has to become the modern poverty of the novel. It should have nothing poetic about it, save ironically. The perfect *polar* should be like a perfect housing project: no detail, no plumbing problems, should intrude between consumers and their object. Even the entertainment aspect must be perfect, like a fully equipped kitchen. Then consumers could no longer find consolation by complaining about details. They would be obliged either to accept the whole thing because it is perfect or to reject the whole thing because it is horrific."

### Pure Cretinism

IN 1960, the Situationists wrote: "Aujourd'hui la population est soumise en permanence à un bombardement de conneries" ("Communication" 20);<sup>61</sup> Manchette for his part wrote in his journal: "Pendant une période, j'ai découvert le crétinisme quotidien des mass media, et j'ai découpé et collé, avec une jubilation amère de type flaubertien. [...] J'extrais encore le pur crétinisme, comme matériau pour mes textes" (*Journal* 256–57).<sup>62</sup> An excellent pasticheur, Manchette frequently imitated *prêt-à-porter* expressions and stereotypical discourses from newspaper articles.<sup>63</sup> In *Nada*, for example, he imitates the media brouhaha over the ambassador's abduction:

*Le Monde*, par ailleurs, décrivait abondamment les opérations de police et se demandait à qui profiterait le cycle infernal violence-répression. Sous le titre, "Une page noire", un juriste réputé pour son sérieux faisait un parallèle imbécile entre la noirceur de l'acte commis et la noirceur du drapeau anarchiste. Une feuille entière était dévolue aux communiqués et déclarations de diverses organisations et personnalités, avec un encadré spécial pour les points de vue d'une quinzaine de groupuscules gauchistes.<sup>64</sup> (*Romans* 395)

The news bulletin and the way information is organized and delivered in it are also often parodied in Manchette's novels, as in *Three to Kill*:

Le présentateur avait une voix neutre et discrète, comme il a toujours, les nuits, sur RTL. Sur le même ton il parla du Proche-Orient, d'un attentat contre l'ambassade de Yougoslavie à Paris, d'une baignade tragique dans la Loire (deux enfants d'une colonie de vacances, et un prêtre qui les gardait et avait tenté de les sauver, avaient péri). Puis il y eut de la publicité pour un concert organisé par RTL. Puis il y eut l'indicatif de l'émission et on entendit du Leonard Cohen.<sup>65</sup> (*Romans* 753)

---

<sup>61</sup> Transl.: "Today the population is perpetually bombarded by drivel."

<sup>62</sup> Transl.: "For a time, after discovering the daily cretinism of the mass media, I cut and pasted with a bitter jubilation of the Flaubertian kind. [...] I still extract pure cretinism as raw material for my writings."

<sup>63</sup> On Manchette and journalism, see also Hollister, "Jean-Patrick Manchette".

<sup>64</sup> Transl.: "*Le Monde* also gave lengthy coverage to the police operations and asked who profited from the infernal cycle of violence and repression. Under the title 'A Dark Page', a jurist with a reputation for seriousness drew an imbecilic parallel between the blackness of the misdeed and the blackness of the anarchist flag. A whole page was devoted to communiqués and declarations from various organizations and personalities, with a special sidebar for the points of view of fifteen leftist groups" (Manchette, *Nada* 90–91).

<sup>65</sup> Transl.: "As always on Radio Luxembourg during the night, the newsreader spoke in a neutral and low-key tone. In the same tone he reported on the Situation in the Near East, on an attack on the Yugoslav embassy in Paris, and on a tragic drowning in the Loire (two children at some camp had lost their lives, along with a priest who had been in charge of them and who had gone to the rescue). The news was followed by a promotional spot for a concert sponsored by the station. Then came station identification, followed by Leonard Cohen" (Manchette, *Three to Kill* 72).

Dominique Rabaté comments: "Manchette souligne souvent dans ses livres l'empilement des informations dans les journaux, où se bousculent les titres les plus hétérogènes. Ils provoquent un effet d'indifférenciation accablant, de nivellement general" (96).<sup>66</sup> Manchette highlights such "indifferent differences" in *Nada*, in which a sports paper ends up being the only recognizable, and thus different, voice: "Des éditos étaient arrivés qui s'intitulaient, selon les opinions du journal concerné : Pour quoi ? ou Le Sang ou Jusqu'ou ? ou Le cycle infernal ou Tartempion téméraire devant les Allemands en surforme" (*Romans* 447).<sup>67</sup>

Manchette's irony resonates here with Debord's claim that "on dissimulera ainsi, derrière une multitude virtuellement infinie de prétendues divergences médiatiques, ce qui est tout au contraire le résultat d'une convergence spectaculaire voulue" (*Commentaires* sec. III).<sup>68</sup>

### A Well-Worn Noir Formula

ANOTHER important aspect of Manchette's work is his imitation of specific forms and styles. Unsurprisingly, noir is often pastiched in his novels, as homage or parody, with a tendency for exaggeration. Manchette explains that "refaire les grands Américains, c'est faire autre chose qu'eux : [...] [c'est] réutiliser une forme dépassée, c'est l'utiliser référentiellement, c'est l'honorer en la critiquant, en l'exagérant, en la déformant par tous les bouts" (*Chroniques* 18).<sup>69</sup>

Manchette conceded that, while necessarily unoriginal since he was reworking old forms, his personal approach was highly intellectual, infused with historical and literary references. When imitating a style, he tried to highlight the historical content that brought that style into existence. Note the Hegel-infused approach of such a formal inquiry, which might also be described as a *détournement*, not of quotations or themes, but of an entire stylistic logic.<sup>70</sup> As Manchette notes:

Les commentateurs [...] ont moins souvent aperçu que tout mon travail d'écriture est référentiel [...], que l'essentiel de mon travail, simultanément et identiquement sur le contenu de la forme et la forme du contenu (saprستي!), vise à produire un "méta-polar" (au sens où tel idéologue a pu parler de

---

<sup>66</sup> Transl.: "In his books, Manchette often underscores the way items are piled up in newspapers so that the most heterogeneous headlines stand cheek by jowl. The outcome is an insufferable feeling of indifferencing, of general levelling."

<sup>67</sup> Transl.: "Editorials had been delivered with headlines varying according to the opinion of the particular paper: WHY? or BLOOD or HOW FAR WILL IT GO? or VICIOUS CIRCLE or FOOLHARDY JOE BLOW VS. STORM TROOPERS IN PEAK FORM" (Manchette, *Nada* 175).

<sup>68</sup> Transl.: "A virtually infinite number of supposed differences within the media thus serve to screen what is in fact the result of a deliberate spectacular convergence" (Debord, *Comments* 7).

<sup>69</sup> Transl.: "re-doing the great Americans means doing something they did not do: [...] re-using an outdated form means using it referentially, honouring it by criticizing it, by exaggerating it, by distorting its every last aspect."

<sup>70</sup> We might extrapolate and wonder whether, by doing so, Manchette did not also pastiche Debord's attempt to use a well-known Hegelian style while writing *The Society of the Spectacle*, or the "grand style classique" for his *Panegyrique*.

"métalangage"), mais voudrait rester discret, et toujours fournir le simple divertissement avant tout.<sup>71</sup> ("Réponses" 102–03)

Manchette also put this more concretely: "Techniquement, je pars généralement d'une idée vague, et je cherche une structure romanesque noire usagée qui peut servir à l'écrire" (Bourg).<sup>72</sup> He suggested a few specific examples, most strikingly *Fatale*:

[La] description socio-politique de la ville de province [...] s'appuie sur les notions de marxisme dégénéré produit par la 2e Internationale, et aggravé plus tard par la 3e, ("la bourgeoisie et ses laquais", la tueuse "déclassée" et "à la solde des capitalistes", le baron décafé comme "hobereau d'Ancien Régime lumpénié").<sup>73</sup> (Bourg)

Manchette added elsewhere that "la typologie marxiste y était utilisée de façon très rigide, et très délibérée", car "l'idée, pour ce qui touche au style, en était que la corruption des concepts marxistes en une typologie rigide à la fin du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle appelait un style symboliste décadent" ("Lettres" 398).<sup>74</sup> This was why he used a post-Flaubertian style (à la J.-K. Huysmans) and concluded: "Voilà un exemple convenable d'une insoumission aux règles du genre polar par un excès de soumission délibérée à des clichés idéologiques poussiéreux et à des manières d'écrire caduques" (Bourg).<sup>75</sup> Clearly Manchette's formal research was far from limited to noir.

### Love of Writing

MANCHETTE's journal reveals his awareness early on that his attempt to write *in accordance* with Situationist theory was perilous and that a popular writer could perhaps not escape becoming a brand or, in his case, a "pro-Situ starlet" (*Lettres* 419). But after years of money troubles as a writer and translator, Manchette seems to have accepted living with this contradiction. As he commented in 1981:

---

<sup>71</sup> Transl.: "Commentators [...] have less often noticed that my writing is referential, [...] that the essential part of my work, being concerned at once and inseparably with the content of the form and the form of the content (yikes!), aims to produce a 'meta-polar' (rather as some ideologue or other has evoked 'metalangage'), though always doing so discreetly and supplying plain entertainment first and foremost."

<sup>72</sup> Transl.: "Technically speaking, I generally start from a vague notion, then look for a well-worn noir formula to structure the writing."

<sup>73</sup> Transl.: "The socio-political description of the provincial town [...] is based on the notions of the degenerate Marxism produced by the Second International and worsened later by the Third, ('the bourgeoisie and its lackeys'; the 'déclassé' murderess 'in the pay of the capitalists'; and the ruined baron described as a 'lumpenized Ancien Régime squireling')."

<sup>74</sup> Transl.: "the Marxist typology was used in an extremely rigid—and quite deliberate—way; as for the style, the idea was that the perversion of Marxist concepts into that rigid typology at the end of the nineteenth century recalled a *decadent symbolism*."

<sup>75</sup> Transl.: "This is an appropriate example of disobedience vis-à-vis the rules of the crime fiction genre by way of an excessive voluntary submission to dusty ideological clichés and to obsolete ways of writing."

Au bout du compte, il faudrait cesser d'écrire des romans, récupération feuilletonesque du mouvement social. [...] Je croyais écrire utile quand j'écrivais *Nada*, en particulier, mais j'ai abouti à devenir une jolie marchandise rouge, comme la cocotte SEB, ça m'est peu supportable mais d'autre part je répugne à disparaître et à retourner gagner difficilement mon pain comme obscur traducteur.<sup>76</sup> (*Lettres* 113–14)

In his letter to the high-school students, Manchette claimed that for him writing was a *métier* [trade], not a *vocation* [calling], and that he regarded himself as an *artisan* [craftsman] rather than an artist (*Lettres* 521–22). In a 1995 article about "the great American noir writers" and their craft, Manchette brought up a final factor that might better explain why he personally kept on writing despite his doubts: the *love of writing* itself. This, in the end, trumped political coherence, auctorial strategy or financial necessity:

Il faut admettre que les fondateurs du roman noir, et leurs successeurs, pratiquent une écriture régressive. Il faut admettre qu'ils l'ont choisie. Et je crois beaucoup trop bornée l'idée qu'ils l'ont choisie, et qu'ils ont choisi le roman noir, parce qu'il faut gagner sa pitance et aller la chercher là où il y a un public d'acheteurs. Cela joue, c'est sûr. Mais l'amour d'écrire vient d'abord. Ensuite on tâche d'établir une relation dialectique avec le public.<sup>77</sup> (*Chroniques* 410)

---

## Works Cited

**Note:** Unless otherwise specified, all French quotes were generously translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. The pages from the original texts are referenced in the article.

Les Amis du Potlatch. "Notre royaume est une prison." Oct. 1980. *Guerre de Classe*, 20 Feb. 2019, [URL](#).

—. *Vive le communisme – À bas le prolétariat*. 1979. *Centre de Recherche pour l'Alternative Sociale*, 23 Oct. 2022, [URL](#). PDF download.

*Apostrophes*. Antenne 2, 20 July 1979.

Bernstein, Michèle. *La nuit*. Buchet-Chastel, 1961.

---

<sup>76</sup> Transl.: "In the last analysis I would have to stop writing novels which are feuilleton-like co-optations of the social movement. [...] I believed I was writing something useful—especially when I wrote *Nada*—but I ended up turning into an attractive Red commodity, like a Seb pressure cooker; I find this hard to take, but at the same time I am loath to disappear and go back to scraping a living as an obscure translator."

<sup>77</sup> Transl.: "It must be admitted that the initiators of the roman noir and their successors were practitioners of a regressive kind of writing. And I believe it is far too short-sighted an idea [...] to say that they chose the roman noir just because you have to work for your pittance so you go and earn it wherever there is a readership. That plays a part for sure. But love of writing comes first. Afterwards, you try to establish a dialectical relationship with the public."

- Bernstein, Michèle. *Tous les chevaux du roi*. Buchet-Chastel, 1960.
- Bourg, Yannick. "Jean-Patrick Manchette, la Position du Romancier Noir Solitaire." *Combo!*, no. 8, 1991, [URL](#).
- Buckley, Craig. "Unitary Urbanism: Three Psychogeographic Imaginaries." Hemmens and Zacarias, *Situationist International*, pp. 183–200, doi:10.2307/j.ctvzsmldwo.15.
- Cochard, Bertrand. *Guy Debord et la philosophie*. Hermann, 2021.
- "Communication prioritaire." *Internationale situationniste*, no. 7, Apr. 1962, pp. 20–24.
- Debord, Guy. *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle*. Gérard Lebovici, 1988.
- . *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by Malcolm Imrie, Verso, 1990.
- . *Correspondance*. Fayard, 1999–2010. 8 vols. [numbered 0 to 7].
- , director. *Critique de la séparation*. Dansk-Fransk Experimentalfilmskompagni, 1961.
- . "Théorie de la dérive." *Internationale situationniste*, no. 2, Dec. 1958, pp. 19–23.
- . *La véritable scission dans l'Internationale*. Champ Libre, 1972.
- Éditions Champ Libre. *Correspondance*. Vol. 1, Éditions Champ Libre, 1978.
- Gardiner, Michael E. "The Situationists' Revolution of Everyday Life." Hemmens and Zacarias, *Situationist International*, pp. 236–51, doi:10.2307/j.ctvzsmldwo.18.
- Geslin, Luc, and Georges Rieben. "En direct avec... Jean-Patrick Manchette." 1973. *Temps Noirs*, no. 11, 2008, p. 79.
- Gli Amici dell'Internazionale. *Il Reichstag brucia?* 1969. *Archives du Jura Libertaire*, 29 Oct. 2006, [URL](#).
- Hemmens, Alastair. *The Critique of Work in Modern French Thought: From Charles Fourier to Guy Debord*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, doi:10.1007/978-3-030-12586-8.
- Hemmens, Alastair, and Gabriel Zacarias, editors. *The Situationist International: A Critical Handbook*. Pluto Press, 2020, doi:10.2307/j.ctvzsmldwo.
- . "The Spectacle." Hemmens and Zacarias, *Situationist International*, pp. 149–67, doi:10.2307/j.ctvzsmldwo.13.
- Hollister, Lucas. "Fatale Revisited: Reflections on the 'Radical' in Radical Crime Fiction." *MLN*, vol. 135, no. 4, 2020, pp. 888–911, doi:10.1353/mln.2020.0057.
- . "Jean-Patrick Manchette, Anti-journalist." *L'Esprit Créateur*, vol. 61, no. 2, summer 2021, pp. 70–83, doi:10.1353/esp.2021.0026.
- Manchette, Jean-Patrick. *Chroniques*. 2nd ed., Rivages, 2003.
- . *Journal*. 2nd ed., Gallimard, 2015.
- . *Lettres du mauvais temps: Correspondance, 1977–1995*. Table Ronde, 2020.
- . *Nada*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, New York Review of Books, 2019.
- . "Réponses." *Littérature*, no. 49, 1983, pp. 102–07, doi:10.3406/litt.1983.2190.
- . *Romans*. Gallimard, 2005.

- Manchette, Jean-Patrick. *Three to Kill*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith, City Lights Publishers, 2002.
- . *Les yeux de la momie*. 2nd ed., Les Nouvelles Éditions Wombat, 2020.
- Marcolini, Patrick. "Recuperation." Hemmens and Zacarias, *Situationist International*, pp. 281–89, doi:10.2307/j.ctvzsmldwo.21.
- Mesplède, Claude, and Jean-Jacques Schleret. *Voyage au bout de la noire*. Futuropolis, 1982.
- Quadruppani, Serge. "Jean-Patrick Manchette, l'écriture de la radicalité." *Serge Quadruppani*, 7 May 2008, [URL](#).
- Rabaté, Dominique. "Nada, un livre sur rien?" *Jean-Patrick Manchette et la raison d'écrire*, edited by Nicolas Le Flahec and Gilles Magniont, Anacharsis, 2017, pp. 91–103.
- Sanguinetti, Gianfranco. *Du terrorisme et de l'État: La théorie et la pratique du terrorisme divulguées pour la première fois*. Fin Mot de l'Histoire, 1980.
- Semprun, Jaime. *Précis de récupération: Illustré de nombreux exemples tirés de l'histoire récente*. Champ Libre, 1976.
- "Le sens du déperissement de l'art." *Internationale situationniste*, no. 3, Dec. 1959, pp. 3–8.
- Situationist International Anthology*. Edited and translated by Ken Knabb, revised and expanded ed., Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006.
- Zacarias, Gabriel. "Détournement in Language and the Visual Arts." Hemmens and Zacarias, *Situationist International*, pp. 214–35, doi:10.2307/j.ctvzsmldwo.17.