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Something old, something new, something borrowed: imitation, limitation and inspiration in French crime fiction

Abstract:

Looking at a range of creative strategies, namely imitation, limitation and inspiration, employed within the flourishing sector of French crime fiction, this study highlights some obvious intertextual borrowings and influences. Beginning with parody and pastiche and the replication of series' titles to launch new collections, it then moves on to explore the role of Jean-Bernard Pouy in founding some of these important series and encouraging new approaches to crime fiction writing. Although the *Le Poulpe* series he founded is widely-known, another series (*Pierre de Gondol*), created in 2000 with more muted success, attempts to take its readers past the high-low culture divide and even beyond the realm of the metaphysical detective novel.

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Introduction

Structuralist or structuralist-influenced critics such as Umberto Eco (1966) and Tzvetan Todorov (1977) have famously suggested that works of spy and crime fiction can be seen as limiting creativity in that they follow set patterns and thus produce predictable set pieces. While in referring to this as ‘scheme-variation’, Eco does allow for some invention, he maintains that it is the scheme that dominates, in other words that the overall framework of the story is dominant, to the detriment of deeper levels of creativity. French crime writers-turned-critics Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac express a similar idea, issuing what seems to be a warning against interfering with the ‘nature’ of the genre, through the metaphor of an apple tree:

qui donne différentes variétés de fruits, mais ce sont toujours des pommes. L’erreur, précisément, est de vouloir modifier son essence par des greffes qu’il supporte toujours mal. (1975: 120) [which produces different varieties of fruit, but always apples. It is a mistake, clearly, to try to modify its essence by grafting, which always goes badly.]¹

Contemporary crime fiction criticism is in some senses adopting a contrary viewpoint, focused on exploring nuance and difference, undermining such dismissive summations by performing the kinds of close readings normally deemed ‘worthwhile’ only for literary texts, and exploring rather than dismissing the presence of repetitive elements. A number of French crime writers, too, have not just experimented with these ‘surface features’ or variations, but have also attempted to alter the scheme itself. The aim of this essay is to describe the use of patterns and repetitions, although not in Eco mode, working mainly with French- and some English-language examples, to explore the creative contributions to the genre of those variations deemed by Eco to be of lesser importance. In so doing, I will identify some of the minor ways in which works of crime fiction, rather than simply replicating a fixed pattern, are inspired by, and can in turn inspire, other works of crime fiction. A second and more important focus will be on the contributions of a leading but relatively little-studied French crime writer, Jean-Bernard Pouy (b. 1946). Pouy might well be described as ‘a serial founder of series’, and his many projects warrant some attention, particularly the collection of ten novels (2000–2002) featuring the investigations of ‘Pierre de Gondol, the smallest bookseller in Paris’ (Pouy 2000: rear cover). Looking at creative imitation through parody and pastiche as well as simple allusion, and then at ‘spin-off series’ leading to the Gondol novels, I will argue that crime writers can be both imitative and innovative, with a particularly strong use of intertextuality, sometimes very overt, sometimes more discreet, and that crime fiction criticism needs to be equally attentive to both characteristics on several levels.

Imitation

Crime fiction in France, as elsewhere, can have an almost amœbic quality to it, reproducing itself in a plethora of revisionings and continuations. From the early days of crime writing, both pastiche and parody have been present, a tendency that seems only to grow more pronounced with the passage of time. The two leading British crime writers have both given rise to multiple reworkings. Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes has been imitated many times, both in English and in French: there is Maurice Leblanc’s well-known 1906-1907 ‘Herlock Sholmes’ parody,² or Robert L. Fish’s Schlock Homes, the Bagel Street-dwelling protagonist of more than twenty stories published from 1960 onwards, or, again in the French

context, Fabrice Bourland's *Le Fantôme de Baker Street* (2008), to mention only print replications of the Holmesian image. Even well into the 21st century, it seems the great detective is still with us, although he may by now be fighting zombies or aliens (see for example British writer Ian Edginton's 2010 *Sherlock Holmes vs Zombies* graphic novel).

Agatha Christie's favourite protagonists are also reproduced by later authors. M.C. Beaton's Agatha Raisin is clearly a spin on Christie's model of a single woman detective living in a quiet English village. Beaton (Marion Chesney) has to date published twenty-seven novels in the ongoing series. Earlier spin-offs, this time French, include revisionings by Maurice Andr  be (a dozen Elvire Prentice books, 1944–1977), Jean-Pierre Ferri  re's Bodin sisters (six books, 1957–1961) and Charles Exbrayat's Imog  ne McCarthery (seven novels, 1959–1975). Christie's influence on these three writers is very evident, although given a strongly humorous, even parodic, twist.

Crime fiction thus clearly has a long-established tradition of using successful models as inspiration for new works, and this would seem to be especially strong within the Francophone framework. In addition to the examples of Andr  be, Ferri  re and Exbrayat, there are pastiches of Georges Simenon's Inspector Maigret that see him landing on the moon (Belgian graphic artist Alain Le Bussy's BD *Grosset et le spatiandre perc  * 2003).³ A trilogy authored by Andr   Navlis⁴ features the Janissary Sam Clitonio – as the detective's name indicates, an erotic parody of the famous Commissaire San Antonio series of 175 novels authored by Fr  d  ric Dard.⁵

While some of these writers (e.g., Navlis, Ferri  re) are little studied, even by specialists in French-language crime fiction, there are plenty of much less obscure examples of this proliferation of influences and imitations. Writing duo Boileau-Narcejac not only produced a volume of pastiche short stories, *Usurpation d'identit  *, 'in the style of' authors such as Doyle, Sayers, Christie, Queen, Leblanc and others, but also wrote a new series of five Ars  ne Lupin adventures, published between 1973 and 1979. This French tendency to imitate the work of other writers can be seen at another, arguably more superficial level in the founding of multiple series. Here we turn to the *S  rie noire* founded in 1945 by Marcel Duhamel. While this series is relatively well known and has proved fruitful ground for critical examination, particularly with regard to the role of translation (and pseudo-translation) (Rolls et al., 2015), in offering hard-boiled alternatives to the clue-puzzle subgenre preferred by *Le Masque*, what is less evident is its role in creating impetus for other, often very different series arising from simple variations on the original name.

The twin of the *S  rie noire*, the *S  rie bl  me* [pale series] also founded by Duhamel and with the same publisher, Gallimard, but in 1948, lasted only until 1951, by which time 22 translated titles had appeared.⁶ The *S  rie noire et rose*, a mixture of spy and detective novels published by   ditions de Lut  ce, ran for 37 volumes from 1953 to 1957, then again for a further 12 from 1962 to 1963.⁷ While there is little overt resemblance, parodic or otherwise, between the *S  rie noire* and the texts published in this collection, its title confirms at least a commercial influence. Playing again with a series title, the *S  rie grise* founded by Pouy with   ditions Baleine consists of 19 titles published between 2000 and 2002. These short novels, in large print and labelled as suitable for a particular age range (in line with the protagonists' ages), tell generally humorous stories of elderly detectives, criminals and victims.⁸ These

narratives rarely bear much resemblance, even parodic, to the works their titles indirectly evoke.

Another variation on the original collection title is *Suite noire* (2006–2010), again helmed by Pouy, but published by Éditions la Branche during the period of financial difficulties experienced by Baleine.⁹ *Suite noire* consists of 36 short novels (each around 100 pages) by authors who had also published with the *Série noire*. Touted as an homage to the latter, the *Suite* books have titles that riff on those of *Série noire* works: for example, the first is Didier Daeninckx's *On achève bien les disc-jockeys* (2006), a salute to Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1936) published in French as *On achève bien les chevaux* (1945). Jean-Hughes Oppel's *La Déposition du tireur caché* (2006) evokes Jean-Patrick Manchette's *La Position du tireur couché* (1982), and Michel Embareck's *Le Futon de Malte* (2006) responds to *Le Faucon de Malte* (1952; Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* of 1930).¹⁰ We should also note that the cover design of *Suite noire* – the left third of it featuring a bright colour (red, blue, yellow and so on) contrasting with black – directly imitates that of the *Série blême*.¹¹

Another echo of the *Série noire*, the *Souris noire* ('Black Mouse') is a popular children's crime fiction series of graphic novels published by Syros since 2006, and often featuring established adult crime writers; in a further modulation with the same publisher, the *Rat noir* collection aims for a teenage readership. While there are still some possible colour modifications yet to be adopted – green eco-thrillers, perhaps, or purple melodramas? – it is clear from what precedes that the influence of the *Série noire* has been considerable, inspiring the creation of multiple spin-off variations. In some cases this may be little more than a useful marketing strategy, a genre signal or a mere verbal or visual echo; in others, although more rarely, it has shaped the narrative and tone of the works.

Jean-Bernard Pouy and the art of limitation

Enter J.-B. Pouy: with some twenty literary awards to date, including the *Grand Prix de l'humour noir* (2008) and the *Trophée Georges-Hugot* (2009), both for the totality of his work, Pouy is a familiar figure on the French *noir* scene. He is also known as the founder of one of French crime fiction's most successful series. Created in 1995, the multi-authored *Le Poulpe* series published first by Baleine and then by Seuil¹² brought out its 290th volume in October 2015. Pouy has been described as an adept and an advocate of the *Oulipo* (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, generally translated as 'Workshop for Potential Literature'). One of the characteristics of the workshop's members is to practise writing under constraints: most famous, perhaps, are Raymond Queneau's *Exercices de style* (1947), or Georges Perec's lipogrammatic novel, *La Disparition* (1969), the entire book written without using the letter 'e'. Despite his dislike for categorization of any kind, 'Oulipian' is a label Pouy does not entirely disavow: 'On m'a mis cette casquette. Je ne revendique pas le côté oulipien en ce sens que cela ne doit pas être ce qui motive et nourrit le récit' (Eibel 1996: 27) [I've been given that cap to wear. I don't push the Oulipo aspect in the sense that it mustn't be what motivates and feeds the story].

For many, Oulipo is a relatively short-lived phenomenon of the post-war period: in fact, it is alive and well in the crime fiction domain. The *Le Poulpe* series is not lipogrammatic, but it does require its writers to follow a set of strict rules: this *cahier des charges* or 'Bible' must

be respected by all contributors. There are eight set characters (one of them a dog), including the protagonist Gabriel Lecouvreur, nicknamed *Le Poulpe* (the Octopus) because of his physique. The basic content of the first two chapters, and the location of the closing, are preset, and the work must show Lecouvreur reading about the murder in a newspaper, as well as perusing a book of poetry or philosophy and drinking beer. Titles are often playful, involving a literary reference or wordplay of some kind, (such as Pouy's title for the opening volume, *La Petite Écuyère a café* (1995) [The Little Horsewoman Tattled], a play on 'La petite cuillère à café' [the little coffee spoon] (for a discussion of this novel, see Higginson 2015).

By 2000, after just five years, over 170 *Le Poulpe* books had been published. Clearly the limitations imposed by the constraints-based, arguably Oulipian approach had not (*pace* Eco) impeded creativity. Contributors were not just established or emerging *noir* writers: Pouy published all manuscripts in order of receipt, provided they respected the framework imposed. While – and perhaps by – opening the collection to all comers, however, Pouy was also reflecting on the popular nature of crime fiction. He has maintained for years, and in almost every print interview that has appeared, that there is no shame in 'littérature populaire' – indeed, he maintains that the value of 'the popular novel' lies precisely in its popularity:

[Le roman populaire] est une œuvre qui couvre le champ de la population. C'est en ce sens qu'il est profondément populaire (Eibel 1996: 31). [The popular novel is a work that is spread across the whole of the population. That's what it means to say it's profoundly of the people.]

For some critics, however, Pouy's stated affection for popular fiction is simply a political positioning that allows him to speak from the margins (Rohrbach 2007: 6). Staying in the realm of popular fiction makes him a writer who is 'illégitimé et rebelle, en quelque sorte "maudit"' [excluded and a rebel, a 'poète maudit' in some ways] (Rohrbach 2007: 83). On occasion, although rather vaguely, Pouy points to a close relationship between what most people would consider unrelated forms of very different status:

Je pense qu'il y a des rapports très forts entre la poésie et le roman noir. Les deux genres s'entraident d'une manière où d'une autre. (Eibel 1996: 57) [I think there are very strong connections between poetry and the noir novel. The two genres are mutually supportive in one way or another.]

In a reflection of his 1968-inflected attitudes to class, Pouy would also proclaim himself to be an *auteur* rather than an *écrivain*, mocking the pretentiousness of the latter: 'Cette caste de gens autoproclamés cultivés et au-dessus du lot m'énerve' (Gonzague 2015) [That caste of self-proclaimed cultivated and superior people gets on my nerves]. Nevertheless, Pouy also claims that noir fiction is a platform that can be used for 'd'autres niveaux de lecture' [reading at other levels] where the writer can insert 'toutes les références qu'on veut, tous les jeux littéraires dont on raffole' (Eibel 1996: 22) [all the references you like, all the literary games you love]. What emerges here is a conviction that the genre can support being read on different levels by different people with different educational backgrounds and interests. It is in part for these reasons that, in Pouy's own words, he is 'un militant de la littérature populaire et du livre de poche' (Eibel 1996: 84) [a militant supporter of popular literature and the paperback].

Inspiration – the ‘intello-populaire’ with Pierre de Gondol

At the same time, Pouy makes no attempt to disguise his own privileged educational background, and his list of favourite authors includes Joyce, Musil, Sepulveda, Hölderlin and Broch, as well as Larry Brown (Eibel 1996: 18, 74). He refers readily to Spinoza, as well as more literary sources such as Greimas, Propp and Todorov (Eibel 1996: 89). Among his early successes is *Nous avons brûlé une sainte* [we have burned a saint], published in the *Série noire* in 1986, in which the obvious reference to Joan of Arc is accompanied by a string of clues that the investigators can only interpret by developing their knowledge of Arthur Rimbaud’s works:

[Les flics] sont obligés de se taper tout Rimbaud pour comprendre ce qui se passe réellement et se plonger dans l’histoire événementielle de Jeanne d’Arc pour saisir les choses. (Eibel 1996: 47) [The cops have to get through the whole of Rimbaud to understand what’s actually going on and really get into the Joan of Arc story to get a grip on things.]

Herein lies a possible source of inspiration for the Pierre de Gondol series, in which Pouy would experiment further with the notion of crime fiction in an ‘intello-populaire’ mode.¹³ Like the *Le Poulpe* series, which already aimed at ‘un lectorat intello-populo-gaoucho allant du prof de fac à l’ouvrier métallo’ (Devinat 1999) [intello-popular-lefty readers, ranging from university professors to steel workers], this is a multi-authored collection for which the writers needed to follow a set of rules. Instead of *Le Poulpe*, the main protagonist is Gondol, ‘le plus petit libraire de Paris’ (Éditions Baleine 2000: n.p.) [the smallest bookseller in Paris].

Despite Pouy’s preference for cheap and thus readily accessible paperbacks, Baleine apparently insisted on publishing the Gondol books in large format, perhaps also as a reflection of their more ‘intello’ status. Pouy’s basic concept for this new series was to break yet another of the rules of crime fiction.¹⁴ The ‘Bible’ for the Pierre de Gondol books required the invalidation of a vital element: the mystery to be investigated would be literary, and the investigation would take place, not in the outside world, but in written sources. When asked where the core idea for the series came from, Pouy remarks that it is a reaction against the expectation that popular fiction is strictly for readers with little cultural knowledge, ‘qui n’aiment que les histoires prémâchées, codifiées, les romans de grande surface et d’accès facile’ (Éditions Baleine 2000: n.p.) [who don’t like anything but predigested, predictable stories, unchallenging novels sold in department stores]. This stance is not the only motivation for participating authors, however: Rémi Schultz, whose *Sous les pans du bizarre* (2000) is the second novel in the series, refers rather to the opportunity to share obscure literary information, ‘de rendre accessibles des merveilles que quelques érudits se gardent jalousement’ (Éditions Baleine 2000: n.p.) [to provide access to some of the wonders that a handful of learned people are jealously keeping to themselves].

The phenomenal initial success of *Le Poulpe* would be difficult to emulate – the first four novels quickly attained total sales of 140,000, with Pouy’s opening volume alone reaching 50,000 (Devinat 1999). Even though several of the same authors contributed to the new Gondol series (Serge Quaddrupani, Noël Simsolo, Jean-Jacques Reboux, Guillaume Nicloux, and Jacques Vallet among others), it could not match its predecessor in this respect, and although ten novels were published in the first two years the financial upheavals undergone by Baleine over the same period no doubt contributed to Gondol’s ‘retirement’ from the market in 2002. The entire series consists of Pouy’s *1280 âmes*, exploring the *Série noire*

translation of Jim Thompson's *Pop. 1280* (given the title *1275 âmes*); Schulz's *Sous les pans du bizarre*, in which Ellery Queen and Pouy himself provide clues to the murders of several leading classical scholars; *La Montre du Mède* by Philippe Kerbellec, about a curse linked to the standard metre in the Place Vendôme; *Le cinquante-quatrième jour* by Roland Brasseur, which focuses on Georges Perec, author of *53 jours*; *Sam suffit* by Jacques Vallet, featuring Beckett's *En attendant Godot*; *La Pente si sage de la vie* by Cedric Fabre, in which Gondol is visited by the ghost of writer Jean-René Huguenin who asks him to find the secret children of Luc Dietrich who are hidden in the latter's autobiographical novel;¹⁵ *Les Derniers Mystères de Paris* by Noël Simsolo, a 'continuation' of Léo Malet's 1954–1959 series; Pierre Brasseur's *Hortense Harar Arthur*, which requires Gondol to identify the Hortense of Rimbaud's poem 'H.'; Gekko Hopman's *La Berceuse de Chihuahua*, written around paintings by Matisse; and *La Parabole de la soucoupe* by Michel Pelé and Frédéric Prilleux, about graphic artist Yves Chaland.

The series' basic concept certainly challenges even a well-informed reader, and the 'wonders' the writer seeks to share are presented in ways that might discourage anyone but an expert in intertextual allusions. This can be illustrated through a few examples from the books. Since it is not possible to analyse all 10 volumes here, I will focus on Schulz's *Sous les pans du bizarre* (number 2 in the series), which relies heavily on analysis of obscure clues, and Brasseur's *Hortense Harar Arthur* (number 8), selected for its relatively lively plot.

Schulz's mystery begins with the visit to Gondol's bookshop of an eminent Latinist, Roland Boulenger. Two of his colleagues have died in 'accidents', and he has just received an enigmatic card in the mail. For clues, Gondol turns first to the books of Raymond Roussel,¹⁶ then to an Ellery Queen novel. It is the latter that provides him with the information necessary to warn the police, via his official 'side-kick', Commissaire Yèble – too late – that Boulenger is about to be poisoned. Gondol's detecting skills are now turned to Pythagorean geometry, Freemasonry and the Kabbalistic calculation of the numerical values of letters of the alphabet to arrive at the next clue, which is accompanied by the observation that:

Dans les polars, le malheureux qui détient un renseignement crucial se fait toujours trucher juste avant l'instant où il allait le confier au détective. C'est la vie. (Schulz 2000: 46) [In detective novels, the poor guy who holds a vital piece of information is always bumped off just as he was about to pass it on to the detective. That's life.]

This metafictional remark reminds readers of the artificiality of what they are reading, by drawing attention to the current book as fiction and to the conventions of the genre, an idea stressed by the evident untruth of the second sentence, taken literally: this is not life.

Schulz also takes aim at the precariousness of deductive logic: after spending the entire night calculating the numerical values of verses from Virgil's *Bucolics*, Gondol is reminded that the exact wording of these is open to debate (Schulz 2000: 91). Other seemingly endless calculations involve a poem by Maryline Desbiolles included in Pouy's *Suzanne et les ringards* (1985), and the autobiography of Hopi chief Don Talayesva, the title of which, *Soleil Hopi*, is an anagramme of Héliopolis (115–116). How is this meaningful? Where is this overabundance of clues and laboured deductions leading the investigator (and the reader)? To Gondol's last-minute realization that the killer is in fact his acquaintance, one Jean-Bernard Pouy:

Il a tué, soit, et alors? C'est un auteur de polars, il lui faut bien s'entraîner de temps à autre. C'est comme un pianiste, ça emmerde tout le monde qu'il fasse ses gammes, mais on sait bien que c'est indispensable (Schultz, 2000, 174) [So he's a killer, so what? He writes crime novels, he has to train from time to time. It's like a pianist, it pisses everyone off when he practises his scales, but people do know it's essential.]

This blurring of the lines between reality and fiction is an important feature of metafictional writing, to which we shall return.

In Pierre Brasseur's *Hortense Harar Arthur* (2002), Gondol's new investigation is launched when a friend alerts him to a competition which requires him to identify the 'Hortense' named in Rimbaud's poem 'H.' (from *Illuminations*) and to find proof that he continued to write poetry after seemingly renouncing it at the age of 20. To carry out his investigations, Gondol retraces Rimbaud's travels, from his birthplace in Charleville-Mézières on to London and Harar in Ethiopia. His investigations remain fruitless, despite being more active; his analyses once again are ludicrously (and ludically) complex. Taking a name from a Rimbaud text, he 'finds' H.:

Léonie Auboïs Ashby. Or, Ashby = H. by = H. bis, et la boucle est bouclée! Rimbaud l'a fait exprès, forcément. (Brasseur, 2002, 55) [Léonie Auboïs Ashby. So then Ashby, pronounced like H. (in French) + by = H. twice, and it's all sewn up! Rimbaud did that on purpose, obviously.]

Of course the solution is not so easy, and the text is equally littered with clues to another, parallel mystery. References also abound to real life Rimbaud experts and enthusiasts, including singers Léo Ferré (*Rimbaud* album 1964) and Hubert-Félix Thiéfaine ('Affaire Rimbaud', *Météo für nada* album, 1989), poet and scholar Alain Borer, author of *Rimbaud en Abyssinie* (1984), Jean Teulé, writer of the novel *Rainbow pour Rimbaud* (1991), and Dominique Noguez's study *Les trois Rimbaud* (1986).

Crime fiction and creativity

In spite of the objectives announced by Pouy at the launch of the series, that all investigation would be carried out through literary works, Brasseur's version of Gondol achieves success only when he realizes that he has to 'vivre Rimbaud' (Brasseur 2002: 101) [to live Rimbaud]. His initial attempts to solve the mystery, by visiting the National Library, are quickly discontinued. Even Pouy's first volume, *1280 âmes*, requires Gondol to travel to the USA in search of clues: clearly text-based investigation does not suffice. We should perhaps not be surprised by this infringement of the Gondol 'Bible' – after all, constraints are made to be broken, or as Pouy puts it:

Dans le roman noir il y a des règles précises et l'un de mes bonheurs est de les détourner tout en faisant un produit qui se vende et qui soit passionnant. (Eibel 1996: 82) [In the crime novel there are precise rules and it's one of my pleasures to bend them and at the same time produce something that sells and is riveting.]

What is noteworthy here, though, is that the Gondol series was designed to break the 'roman noir' rules in the first place, by stressing the abstract nature of the investigations instead of

giving the stories a degree of believability, the much-vaunted ‘reality’ of crime fiction. What is the effect of breaking new rules that themselves are designed to break rules?

This brings us to the central enigma of the Gondol books. The investigations may be literary, the characters mostly invented, but some of them and the settings and literary works are real. Several of the books contain fictional ‘real’ deaths, in other words there are murders in the narrative: for example, Simsolo’s *Les Derniers Mystères de Paris* sees Gondol and Yèble struggling to catch up with the murderer before he kills again. How are these murders any different from those in a traditional work of crime fiction? If the aim of the series was at least in part to break the equivalent of film and television’s ‘fourth wall’ by infringing the implicit pact subscribed to by readers of fiction expecting verisimilitude, limiting the mystery to the textual realm, then surely it has failed.

If, on the other hand, it had a different aim, then perhaps some degree of success was achieved. Schulz’s novel contains two substantial clues that merit further examination. The first is an affirmation of the stated aims of the series, when Gondol cites Van Dine’s twenty rules of detective fiction, only to insist that:

Le seul intérêt de la chose est le défi que représenterait l’écriture d’un roman contrevenant à TOUTES ces règles (Schulz 2000: 127). [The only interesting thing about it is the challenge it would be to write a novel that broke ALL the rules.]

Gondol then refers to an author and a novel that achieve precisely this, but that, as a postscript confesses, do not exist. Such a project, or even – as is the case here – the mention of such a project, certainly meets the criteria for the ‘metaphysical detective story’ as ‘a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions ... with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot’ (Merivale and Sweeney 1999: 2; see also Pyrhönen 1994).

A second passage is, I argue, of even greater significance in our reading of the series. Gondol complains that public interest in violence has no regard for the esthetic:

Le crime, la mort violente, fascine à tel point que les massacreurs sont sûrs de voir leurs moindres mots immortalisés. Landru, Adolf, Petiot, Néron, Ubu, Staline ... Tous ces types pas vraiment intéressants d’un point de vue littéraire sont connus de tous. (Schulz 2000: 172) [Crime, violent death, is so fascinating that those responsible for massacres are sure to see their slightest word immortalized. Landru, Adolf, Petiot, Nero, Ubu, Stalin ... Everyone’s heard of all these guys who have no real literary value.]

Conclusion

If we read carefully, we note that of all these examples, only one is not a real person but a literary character. Ubu is an invention of writer Alfred Jarry (1873–1907), who is known for a kind of apparently mathematically rigid but nonsensical logic called ‘pataphysics’, also known as the science of imaginary solutions, which defines itself as ‘purposefully useless’ and ‘almost impossible to understand’ (Hugill 2015), and seeks to comprehend what lies beyond metaphysics. The parodically complicated analyses and deductions performed by Gondol throughout the series bear a strong resemblance to those of Jarry’s ‘pataphysician,

Doctor Faustroll (1896, first published 1911). 'Pataphysics as envisaged by Jarry is a philosophy of life that is both ridiculous and serious, and for some critics a crucial element in many of the major artistic and literary movements of the twentieth (and twenty-first) centuries (Hugill 2015). Several of the authors in the Gondol series are also members of the *Collège de 'Pataphysique* (founded in 1948), of which Oulipo is a subcommittee. There are many other clues in this series that point toward Jarry, to his Ubu, plays, and to his earliest literary work, *César-Antichrist* (1895), in which Ubu and his wife, mère Ubu make their first appearance. Most importantly, many of Gondol's investigative calculations, particularly in the first two books of the series, closely resemble the tortuous expositions of deductive (il)logic that are typical of Jarry's characters.

Perhaps, then, these are not metaphysical but 'pataphysical novels drawing on more than a century of wild logic; perhaps, in fact, all crime fiction works, with their imaginary crimes and imaginary solutions, are 'pataphysical novels. And perhaps, when Pouy refers to the high level of demand associated with crime fiction as 'un milieu qui existe un peu comme une toile d'araignée en France' (Eibel 1996: 20) [an environment a bit like a spider's web in France], or an octopus's tentacles (octopus in French is *poulpe*) he is referring not only to a geographically dispersed demand but also to precisely the kind of inspirational creative networks that we have seen here, however briefly, drawing on their precedents and on one another in a 'Hall of Echoes' effect that goes well beyond the reductionist approach of structuralist analysis. The Pierre de Gondol series, in particular, with its multitudes of citations and allusions, may in its echoing be more 'intello' than 'populaire'.

Endnotes

1. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.
2. The two stories collected under this title originally appeared in instalments in the periodical *Je sais tout* from November 1906 to October 1907.
3. Le Bussy (1947-2010) plays here on Maigret's name: *maigre* means thin, whereas *gros* (*grosse*) means the opposite.
4. Alain Dubrieu (1947-2002): aka Alain Bertrand, Alain Vallet, Phil Aberan, Jacques de Saint-Paul, Paul Innocenzi and other names.
5. The San-Antonio series, full of humorous wordplay, itself becomes increasingly parodic over the years. Dard (1921-2000) is said to have begun his career as a writer of *polars* (detective fiction) with a pastiche of Peter Cheyney published in 1948, entitled 'Une aventure vénitienne de Betty Rumba et Teddy Lauton'. The echo of Cheyney's 'Lemmy Caution' is clear, although the curvaceously sporty heroine seems a long way from being a *femme fatale*. See François Rivière (2010).
6. The discontinuation of the second series was likely due to its too marked similarities to the first, although it was intended to publish suspense rather than detective novels (*A l'ombre du polar* 2015). One of the series titles originally proposed was *Série verte* (in French one is 'green with fear').
7. Not to be confused with publisher J'ai lu's *Série rose et noire* from the 1990s, publishing translations of romantic crime fiction by authors such as Tami Hoag, Karen Robards and Tess Gerritsen.
8. Danièle Piani's *L'Écume des Brocci* (2002), for example, proclaims on the title page its suitability for age range 70 to 74; set in Corsica, its protagonist reads Christie and has a cat called Agatha. Francis Mizio's *Les Hommes préfèrent les sondes* (2000) is aimed at 65 to 78 year-olds, and tells the story of two retired men who try to create a little excitement by making crop circles (hence the reference to alien probes ('sondes') in the title, which also echoes the French translation (*Les Hommes préfèrent les blondes*) of Howard Hawks's film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953, based on Anita Loos' 1925 novel).

9. Founded in 1995, Baleine was taken over by Seuil 1999-2002, suspending activities, except for the *Le Poulpe* series, until Baleine was relaunched as an independent publisher in 2007.
10. The complete list of *Suite noire* titles and their *Série noire* originals can be found at https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suite_noire. The covers of the earlier series were limited to a clashing red and green, and the semi-circle shape of the series name which features on both is reversed (convex for the *Série blême*, concave for *Suite noire*). It should be noted that despite the references in the titles, the storylines rarely run parallel to the originals.
11. Not to be confused with the short-lived *Série blême* adult graphic novels published by Bois de Boulogne from 1977 to 1978 (four issues), or with the Boris Vian play of the same name (probably written in 1952, published in 1970 by Christian Bourgois), which in its representation of a serial killer named Monroe no doubt alludes to the crime fiction series.
12. The concept has also been translated into a graphic novel series of the same name, based on some of the print novels, published by Éditions 6 pieds sous terre (21 books, 2000 to 2010). Number 14 of this series, *Poulpe à la Pouy* ('Octopus Pouy-style'), by Francis Mizio and Florence Cestac (2004) is a stand-alone in honour of J.-B. Pouy.
13. The Bibliothèque de Littérature Policière (BiLiPo) in Paris holds ephemera relating to the launch of the Gondol series in which this term is used repeatedly. The library itself features in an early scene of the first novel in the series, Pouy's *1280 âmes*.
14. In *Le Rouge et le vert* (2005) [the red and the green] he would take this a step further again, creating a detective who is not only not a detective but has no idea what he is to investigate. While the title may be a reference to Stendhal's famous *Le Rouge et le noir* (1830) [the red and the black], and to the colours of the *Série blême* covers, it also evokes the colour-blindness of the protagonist, whose nickname is Averell (after one of the Dalton gang in the comic series *Lucky Luke* – the French term for this disability being 'daltonisme'). The book contains multiple references to works of art, music and literature and thus illustrates perfectly the level of complex allusions Pouy's writing can attain.
15. As an extension to the reference, the novel was sold with a red band carrying the names of deceased writers Luc Dietrich and Jean-René Huguenin, thus creating an impression they are the book's authors.
16. Raymond Roussel (1877–1933), an Oulipian writer before the fact, wrote within the constraints of homonymic puns. Philippe Kerbellec, named here as a Roussel expert, is also the author of the third book in the Gondol series.

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