

Michel Houellebecq and crime fiction: between *polar* and *poésie*

- 1 Critical approaches to Michel Houellebecq frequently look to situate his writing within the French literary canon. Such efforts are regularly conducted through the prism of nineteenth century writing. Sandrine Schianno-Bennis notes the “relents dix-neuviémistes” of his work¹, while Sandrine Rabosseau describes him as “largement influencé [...] par Zola”². Julia Pröll establishes “une filiation littéraire menant de Baudelaire à Houellebecq”³. Other critics situate Houellebecq in the context of canonical twentieth century writing. Olivier Bardolle explores similarities in Houellebecq’s approach to those of Céline and Proust and Jean-Louis Cornille stresses the intertextual links between Houellebecq’s fiction and Camus’ *L’étranger*⁴.
- 2 The validity of such approaches is reinforced by the way his fiction displays a wide reading of French literary classics. They, however, risk overshadowing the fact that Houellebecq does not exclusively draw on the established canon. Gavin Bowd provocatively articulates this critical lacuna: “the frequency of comparisons to Baudelaire, Balzac, Proust, Zola and Camus could [...] be seen as a sign of fundamental insecurity: the author of *Les particules élémentaires* must be seen as part of the canon in order to avoid the critic’s marginalization within the academic field, especially in France”⁵.
- 3 For all of the canonical “relents” in Houellebecq’s work, his writing is equally infused with references to uncanonical texts, including those that sit outside the conventionally literary. The narrator of *Plateforme* maintains a dialogue with Routard travel guides. *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Les particules élémentaires* make use of the language of contemporary advertising, while *La possibilité d’une île* refers to *Radikal* hip-hop magazine, among a wide range of contemporary media⁶. Houellebecq’s writing also displays an interest in writing at the fringes of the literary or “paralittérature”: “l’ensemble des livres de fiction dont la diffusion est massive, et que le discours critique, le plus fréquemment, ne considère pas, ou pas encore, comme appartenant à la littérature”⁷. One of Houellebecq’s earliest texts was a critical study of fantasy writer H. P. Lovecraft. Wendy Michallat demonstrates how “*Les Particules [élémentaires]* draws on discourses and tropes prevalent in the popular youth press of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s”, and displays how influences can be mapped from publications including *Hara-Kiri*⁸. *Plateforme* includes a recurrent critical appreciation of the “best-seller anglo-saxon merdique” typified by Frederick Forsyth and John Grisham⁹.
- 4 Houellebecq’s work has been examined from the perspective of liminal genre by Robert Dion and Elisabeth Haghebaert who suggest his writing has been read as “la réactivation de genres inacceptables ou scandaleusement désuets” and folds the characteristics of a wide range of different forms into its narratives¹⁰. For them, this demonstrates Houellebecq’s “poétique des genres”¹¹, where any overall genre is consistently undermined by other forms of writing through “bifurcations qui menacent sans arrêt de faire dérailler le récit”¹². Dion and Haghebaert associate this process with a metaphorical “mode de résistance” to the “discours faussement unificateurs” of contemporary society¹³.
- 5 It is true that similarities with “le roman porno, le roman à thèse [et] le roman expérimental à la Zola” can be located in Houellebecq’s writing, but the crime genre is

an important and consistent point of reference¹⁴. As this article argues, it is possible to read Houellebecq's fiction in terms of how it persistently interrogates the *roman policier*. More precisely, the extent of Houellebecq's relationship with the genre can be illuminated through three diverse, but interrelated, critical perspectives. It is initially possible to read his work as a broad, affectionate homage to the crime genre, but also particularly in terms of how it displays a profound preoccupation with the work of Thierry Jonquet, an important exponent of the *néo-polar* sub-genre. This article equally suggests how critical understanding of Houellebecq's relationship with the genre can be deepened through an examination of what he, drawing on the work of theorist Jean Cohen, describes as the *poésie* of the *roman policier*. While crime fiction is frequently concerned with clarity and resolution, it is possible to note how Houellebecq frequently subverts such conventions in his work, which tends towards ambiguity and an overall lack of reconciliation, in a stylistic interrogation of the *roman policier* reflecting his pessimistic worldview.

Pastiche of the *roman policier*?

- 6 Specific resonances with the *roman policier* can be observed in all of Houellebecq's novels: his work consistently uses its key tropes as well as making more implicit references to the genre. Houellebecq's narratives make frequent use of what Boileau and Narcejac describe as the "pièces maitresses" on "l'échiquier" of the genre: an unsolved crime, a police detective and his subsequent procedural investigation¹⁵. Houellebecq's writing, however, never fully complies with the conventions of the genre, the overall attitude it displays towards the *roman policier* sitting at a median point between *homage* and *détournement* that I will describe as "pastiche"¹⁶.
- 7 In *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, the narrative presents a prospective criminal's viewpoint of an attempted murder as the narrator gives Tisserand a knife and entices him to slaughter a courting couple. Alexis Brocas proposes that the novel can be read as a *roman policier*. In a parody of the novel's marketing blurb for *Le magazine littéraire* he asserts: "Houellebecq révèle les mille violences et affronts impunis que subit tout informaticien affublé d'une tête de crapaud lorsque sa quête désespérée d'amour le pousse à franchir le seuil d'une boîte de nuit. De quoi pousser n'importe qui au meurtre..."¹⁷. Although the slaying never takes place, Tisserand's emotional and sexual alienation accentuated by the narrator's encouragement arguably provide the character with a legitimate motive for murder. The narrator's efforts also present the text with a corpse – as Tisserand is subsequently found dead in a car crash, the circumstances of which are left deeply ambiguous.
- 8 Police investigations are also of crucial importance to *Plateforme*. Here the narrative opens in the aftermath of the murder of the narrator's father and the subsequent investigation of the case by police captain Chaumont. The narrator deeply admires Chaumont, primarily for the officer's cynicism, a key personality trait of the hard-boiled detective¹⁸. Indeed, the narrator's understanding of police procedure has been entirely informed by his understanding of the *polar* in its made-for-TV form: "j'avais déjà assisté à des téléfilms de société, j'étais préparé à ce type de dialogue"¹⁹. The closing pages of *Plateforme* also present a criminal investigation: here following a terrorist attack, investigations are carried out by local police, and the CIA. Crime fiction is also referenced in *Les particules élémentaires*: describing his "crise de la

quarantaine”, the narrator notes that Bruno expresses himself like “un personnage de série policière de seconde zone”²⁰. His embarrassed retreat following an unsuccessful seduction is later described, “tel Peter Falk dans *Columbo*”²¹. *La possibilité d'une île*'s narrative is equally impacted by a murder that the members of a religious sect manage to conceal from the police.

“L'assassin, c'est le système”

- 9 As well as these narrative resonances with the tropes of the *roman policier*, the genre's spirit of reasoned investigation particularly characterises Houellebecq's writing. This investigation recalls a form of understanding, based on the interpretation of trivial data, or “clues”, which “permit the comprehension of a deeper, otherwise unattainable reality” as described by Carlo Ginzburg in his consideration of a “cynegetic” or “conjectural” paradigm which marks human experience, particularly throughout the historical period which has accompanied the development of the detective fiction genre, from the nineteenth century to the present day²². Régis Messac describes the detective novel as “consacré avant tout à la découverte méthodique et graduelle, par des moyens rationnels, des circonstances exactes d'un événement mystérieux”²³.
- 10 Such methodological investigation is frequently a characteristic of Houellebecq's writing which, as Eric Sartori argues, is influenced by nineteenth century rationalism, particularly the work of positivist August Comte²⁴. Descriptions in Houellebecq's narratives frequently focus away from an individual protagonist's experience of plot events to explain or justify them deterministically in terms of their sociological or historical context. In addition, his protagonists take a logical, reasoned approach to both diagnosing and proposing solutions to the mysteries of contemporary life, most frequently the functioning of sexual desire. Boileau and Narcejac describe the characteristic detective as “cérébraux à l'extrême”, a description that could equally be applied to Houellebecq's resoundingly cerebral protagonists²⁵. The ultra-rational Michel Djerzinski, who leads “une existence purement intellectuelle”, develops a eugenic solution to the elusive problem of suffering attributed to sexual desire within *Les particules élémentaires*²⁶. Equally, Michel and Valérie of *Plateforme* produce a rational solution to the inequalities of the sexual economy through their global network of legalised brothels.
- 11 There is, of course, an important difference between Houellebecq's novels and the traditional *roman policier* in that the latter sees a guilty individual brought to account for his crimes. There can be no precise individuals held to account for the “crimes” of social and sexual alienation as inflicted upon the protagonists of Houellebecq's fiction. As Houellebecq has asserted: “Il faut designer les coupables [...] j'injurie abondamment la génération soixante-huitarde et plus généralement le XXe siècle [...]. C'est de leur faute”²⁷. Individual suffering is unavoidable within his work since it is a deterministic production of a history and a society ruled by economic and libidinal economies. The victims, for example, include Daniel in *La possibilité d'une île* who, after the departure of Esther, is transformed into an ageing singleton and wallows in a society that values youth above all. It equally affects the victims of David di Meola, a serial killer evoked in *Les particules élémentaires*, who is presented as the inevitable by-product of social liberalism.

- 12 This social dimension of Houellebecq's writing also particularly recalls the spirit of radical politics that imbibes the work of the writers associated with the *néo-polar*, a sub-genre of the French *roman policier* which reinvigorated the genre in the 1970s and 1980s²⁸. In addition to Thierry Jonquet, the epithet has been applied to the work of writers such as Jean-Patrick Manchette and Jean-Bernard Pouy, two writers also greatly admired by Houellebecq, who imbue their novels with acute political and social sensitivity. Playing himself in the film *L'enlèvement de Michel Houellebecq* (2014), the author cites these three in a discussion of literature as rare positive examples in what he sees as a mediocre period for French writing. These writers articulate a distinctly contemporary French experience within the conventions of the *roman policier* genre and their work frequently portrays, as Claire Gorrara argues, socially alienated character types. These, which include, "terrorists, former left-wing militants, the unemployed, disaffected youth [and] the mentally disturbed", also form the major subjects of Houellebecq's novels²⁹. Gorrara notes that the *néo-polar* is marked by an overall sense of disillusionment following the political upheavals of late 1960s French politics and by a radical dissatisfaction with the realities of social life, which also clearly resonates with Houellebecq's own pessimism, particularly around the legacy of 1968 in French society³⁰. In the *néo-polar*, the guilty party is frequently to be found within administration or the state itself, rather than amongst the citizens. Frequently, the finger of guilt is pointed at societal structures, as Ernest Mandel has noted in a formulation that equally neatly encapsulates Houellebecq's work: "l'assassin, c'est le système"³¹.

Who killed Michel Houellebecq?

- 13 The most explicit and sustained references to the *roman policier*, and in particular the *néo-polar*, within Houellebecq's fiction occur in *La carte et le territoire* where inspector Jasselin leads the investigation into the murder of "Michel Houellebecq". This forms the bulk of the final third of the novel which can be read in terms of its explicit pastiche of the genre. The text, however, always avoids becoming a fully-fledged piece of detective fiction: while Houellebecq makes use of some of the characteristics of the *roman policier*, they are consistently subverted, hence the genre is never completely adopted³².
- 14 In a more sustained way than his preceding texts, this section of the novel exploits some hallmarks of the crime genre: it has a corpse, a police investigation and a weather-beaten detective. It resonates particularly with what Tzvetan Todorov has referred to as the "roman à énigme", where the narrative presents the investigation of a crime that has taken place before the beginning of the narrative. Here the detective's role is to piece together the motive and deduce the perpetrator, while the reader is kept in the dark for the duration³³. Indeed, the name of the culprit and circumstances of Houellebecq's murder are withheld from the reader until the text's epilogue, creating a degree of narrative suspense through a structural opposition between reader and narrative that is typical of the genre and atypical of Houellebecq's fiction.
- 15 Despite this section of *La carte et le territoire's* similarities with some of the motifs and structure of the *roman policier*, it cannot be fully assimilated into the genre. This is most striking in how Houellebecq flaunts one of the most fundamental rules of the genre, famously articulated by S.S. Van Dine, which specifies that the guilty part must

have played a prior role in the narrative and should on no account be introduced out of the blue³⁴. The murderer of *La carte et le territoire* is revealed as Adolphe Petissaud, who is identified in the epilogue without having previously appeared in the narrative. This immediately deflates the tension or suspense created through the case investigation. Indeed, the only two characters to have played any significant role in the narrative and had any direct contact with the fictional Houellebecq, artist Jed Martin and novelist Frédéric Beigbeder, are, unsatisfactorily from the perspective of the *polar*, rejected as suspects early on. In addition, any dramatic tension the reader might anticipate through a climatic reveal of the guilty party is further dissipated by Jasselin's absence from the text at the moment of the "revelation". By the time the murderer is unveiled, Jasselin has started his retirement, and the investigation is being led by Ferber, his younger colleague. Ferber's telephone call to Jasselin to inform him that the case has been closed, is suggested in the text but it is not reported directly, depriving the text of a final satisfying revelation where the detective who has steered the investigation since its launch presents his findings, a characteristic flourish of crime fiction, to be found notably within Agatha Christie's Poirot novels³⁵.

Houellebecq and Thierry Jonquet

- 16 Rather than reading this section of *La carte et le territoire* as a general pastiche of the genre, it resonates specifically with the work of *néo-polar* writer Jonquet. Jonquet is directly evoked in a discussion between Jasselin and a colleague. Jasselin asks the literate Ferber for a detective fiction recommendation. Ferber responds "sans hésiter": "Thierry Jonquet. En France c'est le meilleur, à mon avis"³⁶. This reference to Jonquet acts as a textual clue and provides a way of reading the unsatisfying resolution of the murder of Michel Houellebecq within *La carte et le territoire*.
- 17 The *dénouement* of the Houellebecq murder case can be read as a specific and deliberate homage to Jonquet³⁷. In particular it is an explicit intertextual reference to his most well-known text *Mygale* (1984). The links between Houellebecq's text and Jonquet's are striking; they appear designed to encourage a reading of *La carte et le territoire* with *Mygale* as a clear hypotext. These deepen an informed reader's immersion in the text since a successful recognition of Jonquet's implicit presence here presents a *mise-en-abyme* of the investigation, raising the reader's status to that of a meta-detective. As noted above, the culprit of Houellebecq's murder is revealed as Petissaud, a Cannes-based plastic surgeon, art collector and experimental artist working with real human body parts, supported by Patrick Le Braouzec, a career criminal whom Petissaud has engaged as an insect smuggler. Most strikingly, when the police apprehend Le Brouzec, he is found to be carrying "une mygale" concealed in the boot of his car³⁸. The reference is again explicitly underlined later in the text when the police discover a basement art gallery in Petissaud's home, including a bizarre insect collection where the surgeon would watch insects devoured at his command by "une dizane de mygales", reinforcing the direct line of influence from Jonquet's text to Houellebecq's³⁹.
- 18 *Mygale* also provides a model for Petissaud. In Jonquet's text, Richard Lafargue, also a plastic surgeon, avenges the rape of his daughter by kidnapping one of her attackers, holding him hostage in his basement, drugging and forcing him to endure a series of sex change operations and sadomasochistic sex acts. Lafargue himself is rich, famous,

aristocratic, an aficionado of high culture: he drives a Mercedes, plays chess, appears on television, engages domestic staff at his countryside home and is a fan of Chopin and Liszt. Petissaud is similarly solitary, aristocratic and sadistic, and is described in terms of his “cadre de vie classique, prévisible, d’un grand bourgeois hédoniste”⁴⁰. Lafargue’s grotesque experimentation takes place on his captive, which involves the removal of his genitalia. Petissaud similarly experiments on the human body, in the name of art rather than revenge and produces “monstrueuses chimères humaines”, whose genitals are similarly mutated with: “Des sexes [...] greffés sur des torses”⁴¹. Petissaud is thus a perverse purveyor of body art, while David Le Breton describes Lafargue as “l’artiste corporel le plus accompli de l’œuvre de Thierry Jonquet”⁴². Similarly, Lafargue aims for complete domination over his captive, being responsible for his “rebirth” as a woman, a position echoed by Petissaud in *La carte et le territoire*: “Il se prenait pour Dieu, tout simplement; et il en agissait avec ses populations d’insectes comme Dieu avec les populations humaines”⁴³.

- 19 The artist is an important and recurring figure for Houellebecq and Jonquet, both of whom use it as a key trope to support their ongoing critique of social ethics. The “transgressive” contemporary artist in particular can be read as an acute symptom of *mal contemporain* in their work, which repeatedly explores themes of exploitation and the subsequent suffering of the exploited. Petissaud seems equally influenced by the similarly aristocratic, and no less evil, body artist Maximilien Haperman of Jonquet’s *Moloch* (1998). Haperman is as cruel and as narcissistic as Petissaud and Lafargue: his gruesome *œuvre* is to culminate in a repulsive installation based around the torture of small children. For Houellebecq, this dialectic of domination and suffering is an unavoidable, and repellent, part of contemporary existence. As he notes, the “foirage triste” of contemporary art is, regrettably, “le meilleur commentaire récent sur l’état des choses”⁴⁴.

Houellebecq and *roman policier* style

- 20 Jonquet and Houellebecq can also be examined together from the perspective of style. Both writers repeatedly exploit the affective potential of language and manage horrific images in their work to maximise its emotional impact. Deeply disturbing visceral images including worms and enucleation abound in Houellebecq’s writing⁴⁵. The Houellebecq murder scene is another notably repulsive example. David Platten demonstrates how gruesome images are an important part of Jonquet’s technique. In his discussion of a crime scene in *Moloch*, which relates the discovery of infant corpses, Platten analyses the way in which the “emotional impact of the horror” is managed with a brief initial description before being “transmitted in full to the reader” to greater affect later in the narrative, thus building suspense⁴⁶. Precisely the same technique can be observed in *La carte et le territoire* in the crime scene of Houellebecq’s murder. The murder scene is focalized through Jasselin, but a high degree of narrative tension is introduced into the text by the delayed description of its grim details. On page 273, the narrative reveals that “Jasselin comprit qu’il allait vivre un des pires moments de sa carrière”, but it is not until page 288 that the narrative reveals the grisly details of the scene. In between, tension has been increased through the description of the emotional responses of Jasselin’s police colleagues who have seen the corpse, as well as a description of the flies that have gathered on the corpses of Houellebecq and his dog, before the full details of the scene are revealed.

- 21 The downbeat or “plat” mode of writing that is noted by Houellebecq’s critics also reinforces the relationship between his writing and crime fiction. Todorov demonstrates that the language of detective fiction does not typically draw attention to its aesthetic qualities, arguing that its style is generally “parfaitement transparent”, using language that is “simple, clair [et] direct”⁴⁷. Boileau and Narcejac also stress this rejection of the aesthetic: “le roman policier évacue tout romanesque [...]. Ce qu’il sait dissiper, c’est le flou poétique, la convention littéraire, les clairs-obscur du cœur”⁴⁸.
- 22 Comments about Houellebecq’s lack of literary style from critics including Marie Redonnet have been intended as negative judgements when viewed from the perspective of the “literary” novel, but they can however be viewed as positive within the context of the roman policier⁴⁹. It is thus possible to suggest that the roots of Houellebecq’s “plat” style, which is frequently appropriately described as “simple, clair [et] direct” and seems to shun the “romanesque” aesthetic, can be read as a further demonstration of the extent to which Houellebecq has embraced the paraliterary conventions of the *roman policier*.
- 23 Dominique Noguez views Houellebecq’s style in terms of an ongoing movement towards clarification, explanation and precision, where the author’s recurrent use of “en fait” emerges as a characteristic trope of his writing⁵⁰. This movement is the stylistic manifestation of the spirit of Ginzburg’s “conjectural” paradigm. Alain Besançon also makes an explicit comparison between the novelist’s use of language and that of the genre and invokes Georges Simenon as “le point de comparaison éclairant” in terms of style. Besançon suggests that Simenon and Houellebecq are largely concerned with mundane characters who are “brusquement arraché[s] à l’engluement par un accident: un crime, une passion amoureuse, ou les deux” before subsequently being dragged back to the quotidian. He argues that Houellebecq’s protagonists can only articulate “un langage pauvre et neutre” as they attempt to come to terms with the extraordinary events they have experienced⁵¹. Such a description aptly captures the post-traumatic narrative perspective of *Plateforme*, where the narrator is the shell-shocked victim of a terrorist attack, but can also be extended to the majority of Houellebecq’s protagonists who are similarly all damaged, disaffected, alienated or broken-hearted.

The roman policier: “une phrase sans sujet”

- 24 There is a flatness to much of Houellebecq’s writing, but it also belies poetic effect, the texture of his prose often displaying techniques drawn directly from his poems⁵². In this regard, Besançon argues that Houellebecq’s post-traumatic protagonists may be doomed to mull the grisly details of their suffering, but the reader is in the privileged position of being able to experience the poetry that results. “Le lecteur”, he concludes, “peut s’enlever vers les hauteurs”, “seulement la poésie apparaît” as he feels the emotional force of the narrator’s simple, yet evocative language⁵³. Such an assertion might seem incongruous in a consideration of the largely “prosaic” genre of crime fiction, but an examination of Houellebecq’s writing in context with his reading of the genre highlights that it is precisely this quality that his work celebrates. In the above quote, Boileau and Narcejac suggest the style of the *polar* should avoid “flou poétique”, but this effect is exactly when Houellebecq locates in the crime genre. Poetry for Houellebecq can be defined not only as aesthetic experimentation, but also

by the potential of language to create an emotional effect on the reader.

- 25 This can be enlightened through an unusual source, the work of structuralist poetry theorist Jean Cohen. Houellebecq is an avid admirer of Cohen, best known for his early work on the definition of the specificity of poetic language, which differentiates from prose in terms of its potential to create an ambiguous emotional effect⁵⁴. In *Le haut langage* (1979) he extends his analysis and considers the “puissance poétique” of prose fiction⁵⁵. Cohen makes a number of observations about the *roman policier*, particularly concerning its distinctive mood. He considers the *polar* in terms of the “poétique” effect it can create and describes techniques that bring about “la pathétisation du texte”⁵⁶. This is a property of crime fiction Houellebecq has noted in terms that recall Cohen’s analysis: “Pour moi, les romans policiers d’énigme deviennent très poétiques lorsqu’ils arrivent au point où tout le monde peut être coupable, où le danger peut être partout, où la raison est radicalement désorientée”⁵⁷.
- 26 Cohen is concerned with how detective fiction engages a reader’s emotion through the mood of mystery or suspense a successful *polar* generates. Cohen describes a typical text as “une immense ellipse” since crucial narrative information⁵⁸, is withheld from the reader until the final pages in what amounts to a “défi intellectuel lancé par l’auteur au lecteur”⁵⁹. Using the same distinctions between “prosaic” and “poetic” language he established in *Structure du langage poétique*, Cohen notes that while it is largely a prosaic genre positing a “défi intellectuel”, the *roman policier* has a concurrent “poétique” effect on the reader since its narrative ambiguity brings about his or her emotional “enchantement”. This disappears once the crime is solved: “la clarté finale dissipe le mystère et en même temps l’efficace du roman”, thus moving the tone of the novel back from the poetic to the prosaic⁶⁰.
- 27 Cohen stresses this overall tone of “obscurité” that is typical of the *polar* and asserts it is “la loi du genre et son ressort poétique unique”⁶¹. Cohen attributes this to the narrative information withheld from the reader as well as the broader mood of obscurity that is often typical of genre fiction. He notes, for example, how “Le roman policier, le film d’épouvante, le roman ou film fantastique n’introduisent pas le destinataire à un danger précis et localisé, mais à la peur sentie comme atmosphère, comme une sorte de qualité répandue à la surface du monde”⁶². Such an atmosphere is accentuated by the creation of isolated spaces, the blurring of narrative information and by means of pathetic fallacy such as the dense fog of Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1901) or the incessant storms of Christie’s *And Then There Were None* (1939). Cohen stresses how, both in literature and lived experience, such an “effet de voile” can enhance a “puissance poétique” since it “dissout les formes, exténue les couleurs [et] noie les différences”⁶³. For Cohen, when perception within writing and experience becomes blurred or indistinct (his vocabulary includes “flou”, “vague” and “vapoureux”), the potential emerges for it to be read or experienced poetically.

“La peur sentie comme atmosphère”

- 28 Houellebecq frequently establishes such an atmosphere in his fiction. Martin Robitaille notes the unsettling “sentiment d’étrangeté” of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*⁶⁴. Robitaille attributes this mood to the protagonist’s uncomfortable place within society but it equally resonates with Cohen’s “pathétique” mood, or what he has noted

as “la peur sentie comme atmosphère”, which equally pervades Houellebecq’s novels. This clearly suggests the protagonist’s alienation, as Robitaille indicates, but the mood can also be described in terms of how it is the product of techniques that resonate with what Cohen has identified in the *roman policier*.

- 29 While they are not to be received primarily as detective fiction, all of Houellebecq’s novels can however be read in terms of their narrative lacunae and how they contribute to establishing a similar “enchantement” or “peur sentie comme atmosphère” to that highlighted by Cohen. A reader questions, for example, the exact circumstances of the breakdown of the narrator of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*’s relationship with Véronique. In the same novel, the fate of the narrator’s car that he strangely “loses” in the opening pages as well as the exact events surrounding the death of Tisserand are shrouded in mystery. The latter’s status as car crash or suicide victim is never explicitly clarified since the collision ambiguously takes place in “beaucoup de brouillard”, a literal and metaphorical blurring of details⁶⁵. Furthermore, the unclear status of Djerzinski’s suspected suicide in *Les particules élémentaires*, similarly shrouded in the mists of rural Ireland, is equally imprecise: “Nous pensons aujourd’hui que Michel Djerzinski est entré dans la mer”, is far from a categorical description of his fate⁶⁶. Equally, in *Plateforme*, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* and *Soumission*, the background of the bloody violence on the fringes of the text is never fully justified, lending the texts a mood that can clearly be described in terms of Cohen’s observation of an atmosphere of distinct tension and fear. Crucially, all of these questions are to remain “unanswered”, and contribute to the overall, and often unremarked, mood of mystery or poetic ambiguity of Houellebecq’s work.

Dissatisfying narrative closure

- 30 So, what is at stake as Houellebecq asserts the vague *poeticité* of crime fiction and uses the distinctive tropes of the *polar* but rejects full assimilation with the genre? By way of conclusion, it is possible to suggest a link between this unusual or inconsistent adoption of form and his much-discussed pessimism. This can be observed with reference to the implicit politics of crime fiction and final passages of Houellebecq’s novels. Much of the genre of course, is deeply conservative and many detective narratives are concerned with resolution or “righting” perceived “wrongs”. P.D. James notes crime fiction “confirms our hope that, despite some evidence to the contrary, we live in a beneficent and moral universe in which problems can be solved by rational means and peace and order restored from communal or personal disruption and chaos”⁶⁷. Jonquet, writing as a former left-wing activist and thus from a completely different political viewpoint to James, is similarly concerned with correcting moral transgressions and presents an equally conservative perspective: *Mygale* can be read as the lengthy torture and punishment of the rapists of Lafargue’s daughter.
- 31 Diana Holmes has explored the relationship between text and reader and suggests that popular novels can often be read in terms of how they promote a feeling of “reconciliation with the world”⁶⁸. Holmes notes that “these novels produce pleasure from the representation of a contemporary world in itself experienced as hostile or incomprehensible” which is resolved or overcome in the texts she considers, a conclusion that can also be seen to apply to much detective fiction⁶⁹. For Holmes, the emotional engagement of the reader is brought about by the “conventions of mimetic

realism”, including “the teleology of plot that draws all fictional events into a purposeful pattern”⁷⁰. Similar conclusions are again clearly valid for the detective novel, particularly in terms of how it presents an equally teleological or reconciliatory narrative.

- 32 Houellebecq’s writing, while engaging the reader through mimetic narratives, clearly does not present the same optimistic reconciliation to that which Holmes locates in popular fiction. Houellebecq’s work has been described as politically conservative or even reactionary⁷¹. While this may, or may not, be borne out through his overall social vision, this does not always appear to be supported by the way narrative closure operates within his fiction since his novels do not always present the reader with a satisfying conclusion: the closing passages of Houellebecq’s novels rather situate his overall vision most accurately between conservatism, or optimistic reconciliation, and a more pessimistic fracture. In addition to the disappointing resolution of *La carte et le territoire* which subverts the reader’s desire for satisfaction, this is equally illustrated by the ambiguous fates of his protagonists in the closing pages of *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, *Les particules élémentaires* and *La possibilité d’une île* where their reconciliations with the world are inconclusive. The final lines of *La carte et le territoire* are among the most pessimistic in Houellebecq’s fiction. Jed Martin’s final artwork is described: plastic human figurines decomposing amongst ever-growing vegetation serving as “le symbole de l’anéantissement généralisé de l’espèce humaine” since “Le triomphe de la végétation est total”⁷². The suggestion here is that human life is doomed: fracture and futility rather than Holmes’ reconciliation.
- 33 A key facet of Kemp’s consideration of the pastiche of crime fiction is the ironic relationship the authors he considers have with the genre. If we are to conclude that Houellebecq’s relationship to the *polar* is also ironic, it can perhaps be observed in how *La carte et le territoire* fails to bring Jasselin’s investigation to a convincing or entirely satisfying *dénouement*, instead leaving room for doubt and the case slightly open. In some ways, the inconclusive reading experience thus reflects the pessimism of the text’s final line: there can be no satisfying conclusions and existence is doomed to be forever unresolved. In other ways, such partial narrative closure further immerses the reader in the text. Following Cohen’s analysis, if the case is not completely solved, the text retains a degree of “poéticité”. Similarly, the inconclusive text can be read as an implicit metaphysical or philosophical question that the reader is invited to contemplate. Considering “open” or unsolved cases, Kemp notes: “a denouement which acknowledges that human affairs are never settled and the questions of the human condition with which literature deals always remain open, extends an invitation to the reader to explore these areas further in their own mind (or their own creativity)”⁷³. In such a way, through what appears to be his deliberately disappointing detective fiction in *La carte et le territoire*, Houellebecq makes an implicit critical comment about the agency of literature to respond to such questions. Conclusions or resolutions are deeply artificial, his work seems to suggest, and the absence of reconciliation reflects a greater truth than artifice. Rather than false reassurance from crime fiction, Houellebecq draws on its strangely poetic atmosphere of mutual suspicion to further his bleak portrayal of the contemporary epoch.

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- ¹ Sandrine Schianno-Bennis, “Relents dix-neuviémistes dans l’œuvre de Michel Houellebecq” in *Le monde de Houellebecq*, ed. Gavin Bowd, University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 2006, p. 129-142.
- ² Sandrine Rabosseau, “Michel Houellebecq, un romancier ‘néo-naturaliste’”, in *Le monde de Houellebecq*, p. 105-113 (p. 105).
- ³ Julia Pröll, “La poésie urbaine de Michel Houellebecq: sur les pas de Charles Baudelaire?”, in *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, ed. Murielle Lucie Clément & Sandrine van Wesemael, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2007), p. 53-68 (p. 53).
- ⁴ Olivier Bardolle, *La littérature à vif*, Paris, L’Esprit des péninsules, 2004; Jean-Louis Cornille, “Extension du domaine de la littérature ou J’ai lu *L’étranger*”, in *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, p. 133-144.
- ⁵ Gavin Bowd, Review of *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe* in *French Studies*, 63:1, 2009, p. 114.
- ⁶ Houellebecq, *La possibilité d’une île*, Paris: Fayard, 2005, p. 48.
- ⁷ Alain-Michel Boyer, *Les paralittératures*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2008, p. 7-8. As examples, Boyer details: “les romans sentimentaux ou roses; les romans d’épouvante et d’horreur; les romans d’espionnage; les romans de science fiction ou policiers [...]; les romans de cape et d’épée [...]; les westerns”. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ⁸ Wendy Michallat, “Modern life is still rubbish. Houellebecq and the refiguring of *reactionary* retro”, *Journal of European Studies*, 37: 3, 2007, 313-331 (p. 315).
- ⁹ Houellebecq, *Plateforme*, Paris: Flammarion, 2001, p. 38, 95 & 97.
- ¹⁰ Robert Dion and Elisabeth Haghebaert, “Le cas de Michel Houellebecq et la dynamique des genres littéraires”, *French Studies*, 55:4, 2001, p. 509-24 (p. 510).
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 512.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 520.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 521.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 510.
- ¹⁵ Boileau and Narcejac, *Le roman policier*, Paris, PUF, 1977, p. 22.
- ¹⁶ The precedent for my use of “pastiche” has been set by Simon Kemp who explores how writers use the tropes of detective fiction. To define his use of the term, Kemp specifies that the texts he considers “are all hypertexts taking crime fiction as their hypotext” and relate to this hypotext “with a certain degree of irony”. Kemp also notes that the hypertexts “raise questions of metafiction, implicitly or explicitly exploring the hypotext from a philosophical or narratological viewpoint”. I suggest that Houellebecq’s deployment of the tropes of crime fiction can be read along similar lines, although the degree of irony he deploys is frequently ambiguous. Simon Kemp, *Crime Fiction Pastiche in Late-Twentieth-Century French Literature*, Oxford, Legenda, 2006, p. 22.
- ¹⁷ Alexis Brocas, *Le magazine littéraire*, 519, May 2012, p. 58.
- ¹⁸ “Après avoir signé ma déposition, je reconduisis le capitaine Chaumont à la porte. J’avais conscience d’être un témoin décevant, lui dis-je. ‘Tous les témoins sont décevants...’ répondit-il”. *Plateforme*, p. 21.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ Houellebecq, *Les particules élémentaires*, Paris: Flammarion, 1998, p. 30. Hereafter: *particules*.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- ²² Carlo Ginzburg, “Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm” in Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths and the Historical Method*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, p. 96-125 (101).
- ²³ Régis Messac, *Le detective-novel et l’influence de la pensée scientifique*, cited in Platten, *The Pleasures of Crime*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011, p. 12.
- ²⁴ Eric Sartori, “Michel Houellebecq, romancier positiviste”, in *Michel Houellebecq*, ed. Sabine van Wesemael, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004, p. 143-151.
- ²⁵ Boileau and Narcejac, p. 30.
- ²⁶ *particules*, p. 148.
- ²⁷ Houellebecq, “Je crois peu en la liberté”, *Perpendiculaire*, 11, September 1998, p. 6-23 (p. 12).
- ²⁸ See Claire Gorrara in *The Roman Noir in Post-War French Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58.
- ³¹ Ernest Mandel, *Meutres exquis*, cited in Gorrara, p. 58.
- ³² Raphaël Sorin describes this section of *La carte et le territoire* as “une parodie de polar”, but Houellebecq’s parodic intent is far from self-evident. Julien Blanc-Gras, “Raphaël Sorin: *Bravo Michel*”, *Evene.fr*, 8 November 2010 <<http://www.evene.fr/livres/actualite/raphael-sorin-bravo-michel-2905.php>> [accessed 25 February 2015].
- ³³ Tzvetan Todorov, *Poétique de la prose*, Paris, Seuil, 1978, p. 11.
- ³⁴ See Boileau and Narcejac, p. 53.
- ³⁵ Such a characteristic “set piece” can be found in Christie’s *Five Little Pigs* (1942).
- ³⁶ Houellebecq, *La carte et le territoire*, Paris, Flammarion, 2010, p. 383. Hereafter: *Carte*.

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- 37 Arnaud Viviant describes this section as “un hommage à Thierry Jonquet [...] et notamment à son roman *Mygale*”, but has not taken his analysis further. Arnaud Viviant, *BiblioObs* <<http://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/romans/20100831.BIB5564/houellebecq-le-monde-mode-d-039-emploi.html>> [accessed 25 February 2015].
- 38 *Carte*, p. 386.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 389.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 387-388.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 388.
- 42 David Le Breton, “Thierry Jonquet ou le polar gnostique”, *Temps Noir*, 9, p. 57-68 (p. 64).
- 43 *Carte*, p. 389.
- 44 Houellebecq, “L’art comme épluchage”, *Interventions 2*, Paris, Flammarion, 2009, p. 67-69 (p. 68). For a discussion of the relationship between Houellebecq’s work and transgressive visual art, see: Russell Williams “*La transgression ne m’intéresse pas, pour le dire brutalement. Michel Houellebecq, critic of transgression*”, in *MHRA Working Papers in the Humanities*, Vol. 9, 2014, p. 67-83.
- 45 See Murielle Lucie Clément, *Michel Houellebecq: sperme et sang*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003.
- 46 Platten, p. 164.
- 47 Todorov, p. 13.
- 48 Boileau and Narcejac, p. 31.
- 49 Marie Redonnet, “La barbarie postmoderne”, *Art Press*, 244, 1999, p. 59-64 (p. 59).
- 50 Dominique Noguez, “Le style de Houellebecq”, in *Houellebecq, en fait*, Paris: Fayard, 2003.
- 51 Alain Besançon, “Houellebecq”, *Commentaire* 96, Winter 2001-2002, p. 939-944.
- 52 See David Evans, “*Et il y a un autre monde: reconstructions formelles dans les Poésies de Houellebecq*”, in *Le monde de Houellebecq*, p. 21-40.
- 53 Besançon, p. 943.
- 54 See Jean Cohen, *Structure du langage poétique*, Paris, Flammarion, 1966.
- 55 Cohen, *Le haut langage*, Paris, Flammarion, 1979, p. 250.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 253.
- 57 Josyane Savigneau, “Tout ce que la science permet sera réalisé”, *Le Monde*, 20 August 2005.
- 58 Cohen, p. 252.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 248.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 249.
- 61 *Ibid.*
- 62 *Ibid.*, p. 255.
- 63 *Ibid.*, p. 262.
- 64 Martin Robitaille, “Houellebecq, ou l’extension d’un monde étrange”, *Tangence*, 76, 2004, p. 87-103 (p. 88).
- 65 Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, Paris, Nadeau, 1994, p. 121.
- 66 *particules*, p. 379.
- 67 P.D. James, *Talking About Detective Fiction*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2009, p. 174.
- 68 Diana Holmes, “The Comfortable Reader: Romantic Bestsellers and Critical Disdain”, *French Cultural Studies*, 21:4, 2010, p. 287-296 (p. 288).
- 69 *Ibid.*
- 70 *Ibid.*, p. 289.
- 71 Daniel Lindenberg describes Houellebecq as a “nouveau réactionnaire”. Daniel Lindenberg, *Le rappel à l’ordre: enquête sur les nouveaux réactionnaires*, Paris, Seuil, 2002.
- 72 *Carte*, p. 428.
- 73 Kemp, p. 74.