

H-France Forum
 Volume 11, no. 5 (2016), No. 4

Andrea Goulet. *Legacies of the Rue Morgue: Science, Space, and Crime Fiction in France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. 295 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 978-0-8122-4779-4.

Review Essay by David Pike, American University

Andrea Goulet's fascinating book begins in North America with the birth of the modern detective story on a Poe-imagined street in Paris; it concludes on the same continent with Montreal-based Maurice Dantec's cyberpunk novel of a fragmented detective traversing a deterritorialized post-apocalyptic Europe, its Paris an empty space on a useless map. In between, Goulet ranges widely through French detective fiction, from canonical figures such as Émile Gaboriau, Gaston Leroux, Marcel Allain and Pierre Souvestre, and Léo Malet, through heretofore unidentified sub-genres such as "catacomb crime fictions" and "street-name mysteries" to the "metatextual play" of the *nouveau roman* and the "anti-'crime novels'" of "cyber-noir." The strength of the book comes from its innovative organization around space and spatial representations: the two main sections analyze vertical and horizontal conceptions of space in terms of "geological" and "cartographic" imaginaries, respectively; a shorter, bridging chapter discusses the city street as "intersection" between these two imaginaries. But there is much more. Goulet is centrally concerned with the permutations undergone by several binaries during the roughly century-and-a-half that her book spans: the local and the global, individual and national identity, and the private and the political. She also considers the emerging discourse of modern science and the poststructuralist dynamic of the destabilization of a totalizing and referential spatiotemporal order through the eruption or "'shadow-space' of cartographic disorder, brutality, and crime" (p. 229). This is a lot to juggle within 250 pages, and Goulet does an impressive job of keeping in play the myriad intersecting elements in her study. For mostly idiosyncratic reasons—I am not professionally or personally invested in the genre of detective fiction per se, and most of the popular fiction I read is Anglophone or global rather than French—I found the central argument of the book regarding French detective fiction less compelling than the farther-flung places where it begins and ends, the questions that emerge from the many nooks and crannies it peeked into along the way, and the methodological challenges Goulet's approach raises for my own interests in subterranean studies, film, urban cultural studies, and the slum/urban poverty imaginary. These questions and issues are what I discuss below.

Goulet is admirably attuned to the nuances of the sub-literary status of nearly all of her nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sources, the multiple and serial mode of their publication and consumption, and their broader cultural lives and afterlives, including movie adaptations. She is sensitive to their mixed quality in conventional literary terms as well as to the ways that textual ambiguities are often accompanied by sensational images that follow different conventions or are doing different cultural work, as when she notes that a cover illustration of Leroux's *Balaoo* straightforwardly demonizes the title character in ways that the text does not (p. 114). Still, I wanted to hear more about the stakes involved in the slippage from a nineteenth-century corpus of

sensational popular fictions to a twentieth-century corpus composed either of self-consciously experimental fictions (the *nouveau roman* or Oulipopo—L’Ouvroir de littérature policière potentielle, the detective novel spinoff of Oulipo) or critically recognized genre fiction (Malet, Japrisot, Vargas, Dantec, Radoman). This slippage is interesting historically: what is the process whereby a genre and its tropes migrated from pulp to respectability and how has that process changed the way we read and understand those pulp texts today? It is also interesting methodologically: which critical tools work better with which kind of text, and which methodologies are more effective in unpacking these questions? Goulet’s default critical mode is a poststructuralist suspicion of order and convention, but her approach is flexible enough to vary the kinds of information and interpretations it draws from that suspicion. So, for example, psychoanalytic categories dominate the readings of subterranea, while Deleuzian concepts dominate analysis of the horizontal spaces. At other times, as in her extended reading of *La Double vie de Théophraste Longuet*, Goulet leans more towards a neo-formalism, arguing that Leroux consciously parodies the conventions of “the nineteenth-century catacomb crime genre” (76) and that in *Le Parfum de la dame en noir* he would “take on the historical implications of paleontology more directly” (79). Now, I would never suggest that popular culture is simple and literature is complex; as Caroline Levine has persuasively argued, one common critical fallacy is to assume that aesthetic forms are *a priori* more complex than, say, political forms.[1] But I do notice that Goulet’s formal analysis of sensationalistic novels tends to draw out sociopolitical meanings while her formal analysis of the *nouveau roman* tends to draw out meta-textual meanings. Leroux falls somewhere in the middle; this middle ground especially piques my interest, as it suggests a long-term shift in the mode of readerly interpellation if we are thinking about the genre historically. That is to say, it is not unconventional in 1844 when an uneducated and crudely drawn villain pauses in the middle of a brutal murder to lament the loss of his “lovely old crib” to urban renewal in the opening installment of Reynolds’s *Mysteries of London*. But it is not yet a meta-textual commentary on the workings of the genre in the way that the stratification in the apartment building of Fred Vargas’s *Debout les morts* most certainly is (p. 142). So how can we account methodologically for the changing function of a particular kind of self-awareness within the same urban spatial imaginary? How does it mean differently when a nineteenth-century sensation scene addresses the changing cityscape than when a contemporary novel addresses the ways it is addressing a changing cityscape? And what is happening in the early twentieth-century transition from one way of representing space to another within the conventions of a shared generic form?

Another question concerns the afterlife of popular genres. Near the end of her book, Goulet speculates that Dantec’s cyberpunk novel *Babylon Babies* writes “an end to crime fiction” (p. 250); on the next page, she remarks, correctly, that the crime fiction genre nevertheless continues to flourish and proliferate. In what ways does the meaning of the latter kind of texts change in light of the existence of the former? This is one of the challenges facing the kind of diachronic/synchronic project Goulet has undertaken: to account for discernible historical change while also avoiding the assumption and the effect of a single linear trajectory of evolutionary progress. I came away from *Legacies* persuaded that the texts Goulet discusses do indeed all partake of “a spatial imaginary that anchors formal tensions between reason and disorder in the violently cracked terrains of home, city, and nation” (p. 251). But I am not yet clear about the composition of that spatial imaginary, about how unique or non-unique it is to detective fiction, or about its relationship to particular historical moments or chronotopes. This is partly because the chronological sweep of Goulet’s book militates against other kinds of expansiveness: towards

Anglophone or other non-Francophone detective fictions; towards detective fictions in other media, especially film; towards other genres' relationship to the same imaginary. She touches on these branches of a large and venerable tree (to borrow one of Franco Moretti's productive models of distant reading[2]) at tantalizing moments—the opening with Poe; the existence of film adaptations; the fact that *Babylon Babies* was released as science fiction or that the maps of Tolkien's fantastic Middle Earth occupy the opposite pole of a cartographic spectrum from Malet's maps of Paris arrondissements—but (and probably wisely) she resists following where they might lead.

Part of what I have always found compelling (as a scholar and as a reader) about popular genres is their irresponsibly looser relationship to convention and protocol compared to what we used to call literature, and to the often productive ways that they demonstrate not only the pitfalls but also the unforeseen possibilities of what Brazilian critic Roberto Schwarz termed "misplaced ideas," the new and travestied functions and meanings that ideas, tropes, and spaces take on in new spatio-historical imaginaries.[3] Schwarz's concept certainly encompasses the various kinds of direct influence that Goulet's book stresses, but it also opens up those influences to the alternative modernities envisaged by much of post-colonial literature as well as to the alternative temporalities of contemporary popular genres such as steampunk. Here, literary and urban history are structured not only by the conflict between a stable, ordered, and repressive authority and a destabilizing, disordering, and liberatory counterforce—the classic poststructuralist and postmodernist scenario which many of Goulet's readings invoke. Instead, they tend to be composed of multiple, varied, conflicting, and contradictory forces that refuse to cohere into a single binary model. For example, Dick Flairer, Reynolds's preservationist murderer to whom I alluded above, is simultaneously a force of criminal destabilization *and* a voice for conservative resistance to urban change. As frequently occurs in pulp genre fictions, his moral calculus is difficult to reduce to either a single politics or a single coherent subjectivity, even as each of the multiple positions is perfectly clear on its own terms: "I'd much sooner take and shove a dozen stiff uns myself down the trap than see a single rafter of the place ill-treated—that I would." [4] To cite another example, film noir, in addition to the bleakly existentialist worldview that so attracted the postwar Parisian film critics and literati who first identified and named it, articulates a sophisticated and primarily visual argument about the changing demographics of the postwar city. This argument interacts in complex ways with the more overtly narrativized tension between a fascination with the seduction of criminality and socially marginal behaviors and a reliance on the structures of authority and morality to contain that fascination. [5] The afterlife of popular genres and outmoded ideas has been a fundamental interest of steampunk in general and of science fiction and fantasy more generally. As I have argued elsewhere, the function of this interest is not simply a postmodernist rejection of temporality or a nostalgic retreat to an atemporal or imagined past. It is also a creative rethinking of modernist conceptions of history and technology as rational and immutable.[6] In other words, I want to resist limiting the capacious and multifarious spatial imaginary laid out so well in *Legacies* to the single rubric of "tension between reason and disorder" through which Goulet tends to reduce it in her conclusions.

That reduction does help to clarify numerous critical insights that Goulet provides throughout her book; however, it precludes many others. So I find myself asking what would happen if Goulet analyzed the concatenation of revolutionary forces and geographic cataclysm not only in nineteenth-century detective fiction but also in the contemporaneous geographic romances of Jules

Verne (as Rosalind Williams has recently termed them[7]), which engage the geological sciences in the context of modernity very differently, but just as much through the vehicle of genre fiction. Although revolution, cataclysm, and political violence are less overtly invoked in Verne than in crime fiction and are often displaced to Anglophone or Germanic spaces such as the Scottish mines of *Les Indes noires*, the global scope of the British Empire (*Vingt mille lieues sous les mers*, *La Tour du Monde en quatre vingt jours*), or the Icelandic volcano explored by Professor Otto Lidenbrock and his team in *Voyage au centre de la terre*. They are no less productive of meaning and their imaginary has been no less influential in the years since their publication. I similarly wonder how the schizocartographies of cyberpunk relate to the contemporaneous mappings of otherworld fantasies from Tolkien's Middle Earth to Terry Pratchett's Discworld, of urban fantasy from J. G. Ballard and Angela Carter to Neil Gaiman and China Miéville, and of steampunk from Bryan Talbot and Michael Moorcock to Jean-Christophe Valtat and Cherie Priest. How do the often utopian and fanciful mappings of these writers interact with the dystopian and "realistically" speculative imaginings of cyberpunk? It is a testimony to the originality and openness of *Legacies* that it provides a critical space in which to raise such questions.

From my own work in material culture, subterranean studies, and cultural geography, I also want to bring to bear not only Henri Lefebvre's analysis of space in terms of its contradictions (p. 177), but also his insight that space is irreducibly comprised from a triad of abstract conceptions, conflicting imaginaries and everyday material experiences. So, clearly, does Goulet, as when she asserts early on that "abstracted conceptions of detective fiction all too easily suppress the visceral violence at the heart of the genre. [...] Reason dominates Instinct, Order reclaims Disorder, and the bloody corpse becomes the 'figure on the carpet'—an enigma to be analyzed, observed, and resolved" (p. 6). But what the enigmas of detective fiction distract us from is, for me, not only "the refractory and dispersive messiness of violence" and "the continuing struggle between reason and disorder" (p. 223), but also the phenomenology of that violence, its material effects on the world and individuals around it. What the careful mappings and tracings in Goulet's book also suggest to me is the contradictory promise of detective fiction. It offers not only control over (or at least full understanding of) the order/disorder of modernity/postmodernity, but also the vicarious pleasure of that same disorder from multiple subject positions (the visceral sensations and emotions both of committing violence and of having violence done to us), and a reckoning with the individual costs of those pleasures and that control. This is especially the case in the far more unruly genre fictions of the nineteenth century, where their violence is not cloaked in the safe conventions that have made dark and dystopian negativities the dominant discourse of the young adult, superhero, horror, action-adventure, science-fiction, fantasy, and crime genres, not to mention news reporting and urban studies. Like any academic trained in poststructuralism, so much unanimity makes me wary. So, for example, I'd like to see what happens when Goulet takes on the alternative mappings of Roberto Bolaño's *Ciudad Juárez* in 2666, the postwar slums of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels, the zombified imaginaries of Colson Whitehead's New York in *Zone One* and Alexandar Hemon's Chicago in *The Making of Zombie Wars*, or even the urban dystopian musicals Bollywood has been producing for the last few decades. Writing from an outsider's perspective on what appears to be a stable corpus, I want to test Goulet's provocative and productive ideas beyond the safe and familiar confines of its own genre, chronotope, and city.

NOTES

- [1] Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Networks* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).
- [2] Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (New York: Verso, 2005).
- [3] Roberto Schwarz, “Misplaced Ideas,” in *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture*, ed. and intro. John Gledson (New York: Verso, 2002), 19–32. Originally published in 1973 as “As idéias fora do lugar.”
- [4] G. W. M. Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London*, 4 vols. (London: John Dicks, [1846]), 1:5.
- [5] Edward Dimendberg, *Film Noir and the Spaces of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).
- [6] David Pike, “World Streets and *Viae Ferae*: The Nineteenth-Century Cityscape in Space and Time,” *Studies in the Humanities* 42, nos. 1/2 (2015): 194–221.
- [7] Rosalind Williams, *The Triumph of Human Empire: Verne, Morris, and Stevenson at the End of the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

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