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Margaret Atack, *Jean-François Vilar: Theatres of Crime*. Research Monographs in French Studies 51. Cambridge, U.K.: Legenda, 2020. xi + 152 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. £75.00, \$99.00 U.S., €85.00. (cl). ISBN 978-1-781887-03-5; £9.99, \$12.50 U.S., €12.50. (pb). ISBN 978-1-781883-90-7; \$0.00. (eb). ISBN: 978-1-781883-91-4.

Review by Robin Walz, University of Alaska Southeast.

Jean-François Vilar may be the most significant *néo-noir* author you likely have never read. He was an acclaimed member of the May 68 generation of left-wing crime writers that included Jean-Patrick Manchette, Didier Daeninckx, Frédéric Fajardie, and Pierre Siniac, although today he enjoys less renown than his confrères and none of his novels are in English translation.[1] Margaret Atack, Professor of French at Leeds University, has revitalized his reputation in this comprehensive, concise, and sophisticated literary monograph on Vilar's writings, the first of its kind in English.[2] Her agenda is ambitious: "The aim of this book is to elucidate the coherence of the political, thematic, generic, and textual dimensions of his writing, to establish its wider significance, and to contribute to debates about fiction, politics and history; philosophy, narrative and art; text and images" (p. 2). She examines and interprets Vilar's crime novels, short stories, and photobooks for their "carnavalesque theatricality" (p. 1), a noir phantasmagoria that is populated with revolutionaries, criminals, chimeric women, male violence, and corpses, and overflows with historical, artistic, and philosophical references. The streets, passageways, and apartments of Paris constitute the principal urban setting for his crime novels, although other cultural geographies are traversed as well.

In interviews, Vilar frequently invoked Dashiell Hammett, Leon Trotsky, and Marcel Duchamp as his inspirational figures. "To these," Atack proposes, "one might add Walter Benjamin, André Breton, Léo Malet, famous figure of the French *roman noir*, and Jacques Monory, leading artist of the *Figuration narrative* movement from the 1960s onwards" (p. 2). A mélange of noir cynicism, revolutionary politics, and aesthetic and philosophical critique pervades all of Vilar's writings. The first chapter, "Black is Black," charts Vilar's early years as a political revolutionary and journalist.[3] His political radicalization began in the mid-sixties, when he was a philosophy student at Nanterre. While there, he joined the Trotskyite Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire, worked an *éducateur spécialisé* for special needs children, and actively participated in the events of May 68. From 1976 to 1981, Vilar was a journalist at *Rouge*, the newspaper of the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire, writing exposés on Occupation-era functionaries who continued to hold positions in the governments of De Gaulle, Giscard d'Estaing, and Chirac, and on political and media coverups of police brutality and the killing of Algerian protesters in Paris in 1961 and 1962. Vilar contributed articles and photographs to *Tango* (1983-1985), a short-lived

experimental magazine that published poetry, short stories, and commentaries on visual art, jazz, and pop music, within France and internationally. He also championed the *figuration narrative* movement in the arts, whose aesthetic critiques of contemporary politics, society, and mass consumption ran against the grain of abstract expressionism, *nouveau réalisme*, and Pop Art.

Vilar was also drawn to *la littérature délinquante*, particularly gritty French crime novels or *polar*s that feature the bad guys, beginning with Léo Malet in the immediate postwar era. By the 1970s, the genre had become strongly associated with Jean-Patrick Manchette, whom Vilar called “*notre père à tous*” (“father to us all,” p. 18).^[4] Beyond the genre conventions of the *polar*, Attack asserts that Vilar’s *roman noir* drew from a historically more extensive “literature of crisis,” whose development spanned the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (p. 19). From Edgar Allen Poe’s hallucinatory tales of mystery and imagination, labyrinthine British gothic novels, and the social underbelly of Paris penned into the serialized novels of Eugène Sue and Victor Hugo, to Louis Feuillade’s silent film crime serials, American gangster movies and hardboiled detective fiction, postwar American *film noir* and its French *Nouvelle Vague* transmutations, Vilar traversed subterranean cultural realms and summoned their shadows to conjure surreal criminal visions. Vilar’s novels meander through suppressed histories of political violence, state repression, and acts of intellectual and aesthetic resistance, to fashion complex, tragic, and ludic stories in the present. Unlike some *polar* authors, however, Vilar did not consider writing a substitute for political engagement.^[5] Rather, Attack emphasizes, Vilar pursued a “*roman critique*” that amalgamated past traumas with the damaged present (pp. 23-24), and he continued to believe that crises of historically produced structural violence and injustice could only be overcome through actual revolution, however distant that future might be.

Attack’s discussions of Vilar’s crime writings broadly unfold chronologically, with each chapter organized by interpretive theme. The second chapter, “Murder in the Art World,” focuses on Vilar’s earliest novels, *C’est toujours les autres qui meurent* (1982) and *Passage des singes* (1984). “It’s always other people who die” is the epitaph chiseled into Marcel Duchamp’s gravestone, and Attack highlights how the ghost of the anti-art provocateur animates Vilar’s first novel. Victor Blainville, a freelance photographer with Trotskyite political sympathies, a *flâneur* and *piéton* of Paris, is strolling the Passage du Caire in the early hours of the morning, when he observes that a shabby storefront display window, typically cluttered with disrobed female mannequins, also contains the actual corpse of a naked woman, carefully posed to simulate Duchamp’s final installation, *Etant donnés: 1° la chute d’eaux; 2° le gaz d’éclairage* (“Given: 1. The waterfall; 2. The illuminating gas,” 1946-1966).^[6] In the passageway, Victor chances upon a woman named Rose, and they ponder whether the dead woman was murdered or had committed suicide. Striking up a casual relationship, they have sex in Victor’s apartment and arrange rendezvous at various Parisian locales, where sometimes Victor photographs Rose in the nude. The climax of the novel occurs when a group of revolutionary activists, self-proclaimed *Célibataires* in honor of Duchamp’s *Grand Verre* glasswork, invade the Centre Pompidou, occupy the upper floors, hold works of modern art ransom, destroy some of them, and shout Dadaist slogans through a bullhorn, until the police, amassed outside the building, burst in and assault, maim, kill, and arrest the protesters.

The mystery in *Passage des singes* unfolds around the unsolved murder of Los Angeles celebrity artist, Dennis Locke. Through chance encounters in Paris with one of Locke’s groupies, Kiki, as well as his paramour, Ruth, Victor stumbles upon former revolutionaries who have reconstituted themselves into rival criminal gangs. To fund their activities, they arrange lavish orgies for

Parisian society types and then rob them of cash and jewelry. They also clash violently on the streets, assaulting and slaughtering each other for control over a market in faked art works, principally Locke's. It turns out, however, that Locke had staged his death and was living underground in Paris. In cahoots with shady patrons, investors, and gang muscle, Locke choreographed a scam in the sale of lost artworks by supposedly deceased painters, including himself, cranked out by a forger but displaying the artist's actual signature.[7] Attack notes the close proximity between the art market and criminality, "The signatures are genuine, the pictures are not, unless one considers them elevated to authentic art by the sole force of the signature, as Duchamp's ready-mades were" (p. 39). Victor is primarily an observer and witness to these criminal machinations, although he unwittingly ends up playing a part in them. Locke's newest scheme, the fraudulent reproduction of Atget's entire photographic catalogue, was inspired by a photograph Victor had taken of the fountain in the dilapidated Passage de Singes on the eve of its demolition. Although Victor attributed a documentary function to his photograph, to capture the memory of old Paris through an image, it ended up serving financially criminal ends.

Attack organizes the next two chapters under the common title "Paris Crime Scenes," the first subtitled "The Imaginary City." This section opens with a discussion of *Paris la nuit* (1982), a photobook Vilar co-authored with photographer Michel Saloff. A non-fictional work in the series "Piétons de Paris," Vilar asserted, "My Paris is a Paris of the imaginary and history" (quoted and translated by Attack, [p. 47]).[8] Vilar wanders Paris at night in the manner of a *jeu de l'oie* game, inventing commentary as he advances from one location to another: the Rue du Jour that borders the disappeared Les Halles public market; the Mur des Fédérés in Père Lachaise Cemetery where 147 Communards were massacred; Sacré Cœur as a monument to the triumph of church and state over the Commune; the Gymnase Japy, where thousands of Jews were rounded up and deported to Auschwitz in 1941 and 1942, and then again, in October 1961, the scene of the assault of CRS police forces upon 5,000 Algerian protesters, maiming and killing hundreds. Excepting instances where Saloff's photographs may have included documentary information, the possible meanings of his eighty-two color glossies remain indeterminate. Vilar's imaginary text is required, Attack stresses, to conjure the sights of Paris into sites of oppression, violence, resistance, and death. This chapter continues Vilar's imaginary mapping of Paris as a memory site of historical violence through the short story "Tandem" (1984), the twenty-installment serial "Paris d'octobre" published in *Le Matin de Paris* (1985), and the novel *Bastille-Tango* (1998), where the traumas of expatriated Argentine leftists, who had been disappeared, imprisoned, and tortured under the military junta, are replayed in a Parisian tango bar.

The following chapter, subtitled "History and Memory," focuses on *Les exagérés* ("The Excesses," 1989), Vilar's dark meditation on the bicentennial of the French Revolution. The novel opens with photographer Victor Blainville ambling through the Musée Grévin, characterized by Attack as "a crossroads, personal, historical, and theatrical, its connections reaching into film, literature...and crime" (p. 67). Visiting one of his favorite French Revolution tableaux, "La Famille royale au Temple, le 3 septembre 1792, à 13 heures," Victor is caught off guard by the missing decapitated head of Marie-Louise Thérèse of Savoy, the Princess de Lamballe, typically placed on the floor next to a pike at the center of the wax figure ensemble. As the novel unfolds, the troubled history of the French Revolution, a doomed movie production about the September massacres of 1792, and jealousies between the museum's wax figure makers and the movie actors, all intersect with one another. Attack ascribes a Benjaminian quality to Vilar's perspective, rejecting "how things really were" in deference to an imaginary *noir* history of the present

constructed from the ruins of the past, one that favors the excesses of the 1792 Republic over the bicentennial commemorations of 1789 (p. 73).

In chapter five, “Criminal Art,” Atack interprets two of Vilar’s novels, *État d’urgence* (“State of Emergency,” 1985) and *Djemila* (1988), through the literary lens of the city “appropriated as theatre and practice of murderous political confrontation” (p. 79). The setting for the first novel is the carnival of Venice, transformed into a violent spectacle of Red Brigade terrorism, mafia killings, political kidnappings and assassinations, police repression, and judicial corruption. The novel’s protagonist, a Jewish scriptwriter named Adrian Leck, is traumatized by this carnival of terror. Leck loops back in time to the Venice ghetto and the Holocaust, and then forward into the present, taking a trip with his girlfriend to Prague and Terezin and unmasking a covert Nazi orchestra conductor, whose murdered body is deposited on the tomb of Ezra Pound.

The lead male character in *Djemila* is François Sinclair, formerly a member of the Résistance under the Occupation and a leftist French military officer in Algeria who denounced the torture of FLN suspects, now a celebrity university professor who periodically appears on television interview shows. The narrative revolves around a number of Djemilas: the ancient Roman city as a site of FLN skirmishes during the Algerian Revolution; the Algerian nationalist Djemila Assedine, known to Sinclair and who died under torture; and her daughter, Ouria, who decades later surreptitiously arrives in Paris as Djemila Sariat. Traumatized by the events of history and her life, Djemila shoplifts compulsively and seeks Sinclair’s protection. At the end of the novel, Sinclair returns with Djemila to Algeria to visit the Roman theater ruins, where he reveals that he is the one who shot, captured, and handed her mother over to the military authorities. Atack wonders, “Did he kill her here? He says not, though he is now referred to as ‘le tueur’” (“the murderer,” p. 89). Sinclair’s heroic status as a leftist denouncer of torture is uncertain.

The next chapter, “All That is Solid Melts into Air,” traverses the urban cultural geographies of London, Prague, and Paris. In the large-format photobook, *Sherlock Holmes et les ombres* (“Sherlock Holmes and the Shadows,” 1992), Vilar rewrites “A Scandal in Bohemia” (1891), the Holmes adventure in which the cunning opera singer Irene Adler outwits the renowned detective. Swerving between the urban geographies of London and Prague, multiple narrators fashion sympathetic portrayals of Adler, suggesting that Holmes is a dissimulator and his chronicler, Dr. Watson, an unreliable narrator. The full-page and half-page companion black-and-white photographs by Christian Louis, Atack emphasizes, are not illustrations of Vilar’s text, but shadowy images from everyday life—unidentified individuals, blurry street scenes, walking along train tracks—of indeterminate meaning.

Most of Atack’s chapter focuses on Vilar’s final novel, *Nous cheminons entourés des fantômes aux fronts troués* (“Wending our way, surrounded by ghosts with holes in their foreheads,” [1993]). Generally acknowledged as the *néo-noir* pinnacle of Vilar’s craft,[9] Atack pushes further: “*Nous cheminons* is also a *roman noir* in its gothic sense, a novel of the strange, of the marvelous,” attributing to it a gravity greater than mastery of the genre (p. 99). The primary historical scene is Czechoslovakia in the twentieth century: the Nazi occupation and Allied dismantling of the country in 1938, the slaughter of Czech student protestors in 1939, Soviet suppression of the Prague Spring of 1968, and the Velvet Revolution of 1989. Other European political and cultural conflicts are woven into the story as well: the Surrealist Exhibition of 1938 in opposition to the Popular Front, political betrayals between Communists and Trotskyists in the Spanish Civil

War, toppling the heroic status of communist intellectuals from the 1930s as Soviet apologists in 1968, and the uncertain future portended by the fall of the Berlin Wall.

This is the historical and cultural terrain upon which Victor Blaineville wends his way, driven by a very personal circumstance. Was the death of Alex Katz, a fellow revolutionary and former prison cellmate, killed by the inertia of pipes hurled forward from a cargo truck making a sudden stop at an intersection, shooting through the car's windshield and Alex's head, an accident or murder? Victor searches for clues in a 1938 diary left by Alfred Katz, a German communist émigré in Paris, an admirer of Andre Breton, a wannabe surrealist poet, and Alex's future father. A number of acquaintances, most notably a Czech exile named Solveig (a pseudonym taken from the abandoned lover who endlessly waits for Peer Gynt's return), join Victor in the quest to connect details from Katz's diary to events in 1989. Victor and Solveig leave Paris for Prague, where they discover that Alfred Katz's diary had been faked by a one of their friends. Like the hands on the clock of the synagogue tower in Old Prague, whose hands run backward (reproduced on a wristwatch Solveig gave to Victor), and Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*, who can only see debris from the past continuously blowing him backwards into the future, history has become a perfidious and unreliable guide to the present.

In the final chapter, "Memento Mori," Attack threads connections through Vilar's crime fictions and artworks by Jacques Monory, one of the leading figures in the *figuration narrative* group of the 1960s. Vilar contributed two stories in companion catalogues to Monory's exhibitions at the Galerie Sonia Zannettacci in Geneva, "Poses" in *Come-back* (1990) and "Memento Mori" in *Memento Mori* (2014). "Poses," Attack writes, is a "kind of psychological *noir*," narrated by an anonymous and unkempt male photographer (p. 118). The photographer is abusive to his girlfriend, has himself photographed being shot by a revolver in a morgue-like tiled room, and then sells the photographs in an art gallery. "Memento mori" is a meditation on mortality that, according to Attack, "elaborates on the thematics of *film noir* and *roman noir* with a story that features murders, massacres and executions, violent death, long discussions of dreams, eternity, and parallel worlds that are both metaphysical and personal, in a context of riots, civil wars, and catastrophe" (p. 122). Vilar's story is about a hired killer and artist named Jonq' Erouas Cym (an anagram of Jacques Monory), who paints a lot of canvases that feature guns and corpses, often including a *Memento mori* skull somewhere in the scene. Attack links this story to number of Monory's paintings, including the *Meutre* series ("Killing," 1968), *For All that We See or Seem, is a Dream within a Dream* (referencing the Edgar Allen Poe poem, 1967), and *Vie imaginaire de Jonq' Erouas Cym* ("The Imaginary Life of Jonq' Erouas Cym," 2002).^[10]

In a brief conclusion, Attack delineates what is distinctive about Vilar's *roman noir* in comparison to other leftist *néo-noir* writers of the May 68 generation. All strove to expose the structural violence embedded in contemporary French society, unearth suppressed memories of Vichy, Occupation, and the Algerian War, condemn state repression and killings, and share sympathies with revolutionary politics. In contrast to his noir confrères, Attack insists, Vilar's *roman critique* is "distinctively Benjaminian and surrealist" (p. 131). Vilar's most recurrent character, Victor Bainville, is neither a detective nor criminal protagonist, but a photographer who wanders Paris with a camera, without a predetermined plan or objective, a detached observer who captures images and provides ironic commentary. For the most part, Victor experiences crimes from the sidelines, while other characters play the leading roles. Vilar's crime novels are haunted by a sense of history that is best comprehended through imaginary and spectacular excesses of chance events, an abundance of characters, an overabundance of literary and cultural references, and

accentuated by structural and visceral violence performed upon urban cultural geographies. The excesses in Vilar's noir novels raise them to sur-reality, an amplified history that supersedes evidentiary sources. Yet the debris of history constitutes the material being transformed. Commenting upon the documentary video *Jean-François Vilar: 95% de réel* (1997), Attack affirms that the power of Vilar's noir writing emerges from "his emphasis on its engagement with reality (ninety-five percent of the work), and the combination of avant-garde politics and avant-garde art" (p. 132).^[1] Attack reaffirms Vilar's hope that his crime fiction will provide readers with a "changement d'optique" (p. 133) that can spur political activism and avant-garde art, rather than become a substitute for it.

Overall, Margaret Attack's *Jean-François Vilar: Theatres Of Crime* is a thoroughly researched and critically insightful assessment of Vilar's noir fiction. Critics and theorists of crime literature will find much to mine in Attack's interpretations, geared more for scholars than the generally curious. Some cultural historians may feel less convinced by Attack's argument that Vilar's imaginary excesses produce richer historical accounts than works constrained by an evidential basis. For myself, I wonder whether the gendered aspects of Vilar's *polars*, particularly Victor's relationships with chimeric and sexually available women, and populated by louche and violent men, might merit further examination. Attack does not shy away from such characters; there are multitudes in her narrative summaries. Yet Vilar's easy use of these hardboiled stereotypes might constitute another kind of crisis literature that warrants critical scrutiny. That said, Attack has written a superb, largely celebratory monograph on Vilar's writings, reanimating him from the shadows and introducing him to an English reading audience.

NOTES

[1] Among these French *néo-noir* writers, the most widely available in English is Jean-Patrick Manchette, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith and published by NYRB Classics (New York): *Fatale* (2011; orig. 1977); *The Bad and the Mad* (2014; orig. 1972); *Ivory Pearl* (2018; orig. 1996); *Nada* (2019; orig. 1972); *No Room at the Morgue* (2020; orig. 1973); and, *The N'Gusto Affair* (New York: 2021; orig. 1971). Two additional titles by Manchette have been published in the City Lights Noir series (San Francisco): *3 to Kill*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (2002; orig. 1976); and, *The Prone Gunman*, trans. James Brook (2002; orig. 1981). Some graphic novel collaborations between Manchette and illustrator Jacques Tardi have been translated into English and published by Fantagraphics Books (Seattle): *West Coast Blues*, trans. Kim Thompson (2009); *Run Like Crazy, Run Like Hell*, trans. Doug Headline (2015) *Streets of Paris, Streets of Murder*, 2 vols., trans. Jenna Allen (2020). Two of Didier Daeninckx's crime novels have been translated into English: *Murder in Memorium*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Serpent's Tail, 2005); and *A Very Profitable War*, trans. Sarah Martin (Brooklyn: Melville International Press, 2012). In France, Frédéric Fajardie and Pierre Siniac were prolific *néo-noir* authors whose novels are continuously in print. In the introduction to *Jean-François Vilar*, Margaret Attack also counts the Spanish communist writer and politician Jorge Semprun, Oulipo author Georges Perec, and novelist Patrick Modiano among Vilar's literary influences.

[2] Among previous works of literary criticism and aesthetic critique highlighted by Attack for their serious consideration of Vilar's writings: Kristin Ross, *May 68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Annie Collovald and Eric Neveu, "Le néo-polar: du gauchisme politique au gauchisme littéraire," *Sociétés & Représentations* 1 (2001): 77-93; Madeleine Frédéric, *La Stylistique française en mutation?* (Brussels: Académie royale de Belgique,

1997); and, Jean-Olivier Majastre, *Approche anthropologique de la représentation: entre corps et sign* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999).

[3] According to BnF Data, Jean-François Vilar is the pseudonym of Patrick Yves André Zabel (1947-2014), https://data.bnf.fr/11928343/jean-francois_vilar/, accessed October 11, 2021.

[4] No doubt Vilar was referencing the argot phrase, *père à tous*, bestowed by nineteenth-century popular fiction writer Paul Féval upon Colonel Bozo, the behind-the-scenes criminal mastermind of *Les habits noirs*, a fictional secret society whose serialized exploits were published in newspapers, magazines, and popular editions, 1863-1875. For a concise and insightful treatment of *néo-noir* crime fiction, including the counter-cultural politics of Jean-Patrick Manchette, see Claire Gorrara, *The Roman Noir in Post-War French Culture: Dark Fictions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[5] On the tensions between *polar* authors over the abandonment revolutionary aspirations, see Kristen Ross, "Parisian Noir," *New Literary History* 41/1 (1990): 95-109.

[6] Duchamp's *Etant donné*s, permanently installed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art since 1969, is a mixed-media assemblage of a naked woman lying prostrate on a bed of twigs, whose left arm lifts a gas lamp. The diorama may be viewed only by peering through a hole drilled in a massive wooden door. Exhibition "Marcel Duchamps: *Etant donné*s," Philadelphia Museum of Art, August 15-November 29, 2009, <https://www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/324.html> and <https://www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/324.html?page=2>, accessed October 28, 2021.

[7] Atack credits the reference to Tom Ripley's scheme of auctioning forged paintings by a deceased artist named Derwatt in Patricia Highsmith's *Ripley Underground* (1970), p. 39. Derwatt is one of the artists whose paintings are signed and forged in *Passage des singes*.

[8] Series "Piétons de Paris," ed. Dominique Balland, 6 vols. (Paris: Éditions ACE, 1982). The photobook series by photographer and writer co-authors highlight various Parisian locations: nineteenth-century passageways and galleries, fountains and ponds, markets and fairs, parks and squares, railway stations, and Paris at night. Source: "Jean-François Vilar--Paris, la nuit," l'éditeur singulier blog, September 29, 2010, <http://lediteursingulier.blogspot.com/2010/09/jean-francois-vilar-paris-la-nuit.html>, accessed October 29, 2021.

[9] This, according to Louis Greusard, French noir editor and espionage author, "C'est avec *Nous cheminons entourés des fantômes aux fronts trouées* que Vilar atteint le sommet de son art." S.v. "VILAR, Jean-François" in *Dictionnaire des littératures policières*, ed. Claude Mesplède, rev. edition, 2 vols. (Nantes: Joseph K., 2007).

[10] An image from Jacques Monory, *Meurtre No. 18/1* (1968) is reproduced on the cover of Atack's book. See the Jacques Monory website for selected images from *Meurtres* series, <https://www.jacquesmonory.com/?portfolio=meurtres>, accessed November 4, 2021.

[11] *Jean-François Vilar, 95% de réel*, videocassette documentary, directed by Pierre-André Sauvageot (France, 1997, 50 min.). A film summary and excerpt are available on Pierre-André

Sauvageot's website under "Documentaires," <https://www.pasauvageot.fr/films/jean-françois-vilar-95-de-réel/>, accessed November 5, 2020.

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