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Gaboriau's "Vague Terrain" and the Spatial Imaginary of the *Roman Policier*

Abstract

This analysis of the crime scene map in Emile Gaboriau's 1868 *Monsieur Lecoq* proposes the "terrain vague" as a foundational space for modern French crime fiction. Functioning historically as a liminal area for mid-19th-century Parisian urban renewal and symbolically as a blank page on which violence gets inscribed, Gaboriau's *terrain vague* registers a tension between urban criminality and the desire for cartographic, rational, and judicial mastery. It both anticipates a critical split between history and form and sets the stage for 20th- and 21st-century crime fictions set in the postmodern *banlieue*.

Résumé

L'étude du plan de "la scène du crime" que Gaboriau a inséré dans son *Monsieur Lecoq* de 1868 révèle l'importance du terrain vague comme motif déterminant pour le genre policier en France. Site à la fois historique, aux frontières de l'urbanisation parisienne du 19^e siècle, et symbolique, en tant que page blanche sur laquelle s'inscrit le crime, le terrain vague de Gaboriau signale une tension entre la violence urbaine et la pulsion de maîtrise cartographique, rationnelle, et judiciaire. Il anticipe une division entre la critique historique et la critique formelle, tout en posant les bases pour le développement du genre aux siècles 20 et 21, avec notamment ses romans situés à la banlieue, "terrain vague" postmoderne.

Key words

terrain vague, roman policier/detective novel, spatial imaginary, Emile Gaboriau, cartography

Bio

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Le terrain vague serait l'ultime recours de la vitalité irréductible.
Henri LEFEBVRE, *La Production de l'espace* (1974)

WHAT TO DO, in mid-19th-century France, when faced with a criminality that continues to plague citizens despite the best efforts of urban reformers and the *police scientifique*?¹ One option, employed by the “père du roman policier” Emile Gaboriau, is to turn the detective into a mapmaker, a potential master of territory and space.² Gaboriau inaugurated the *roman policier* genre in 1863 with *L’Affaire Lerouge*, a novel whose flash-back form posits a geographic disjunction between revolutionary politics – associated with provincial space and temporal regress – and domestic crime – associated with Paris streets and contemporary culture. But it was his 1868 *Monsieur Lecoq* that provided a precisely localized visualization of urban criminality through its inclusion of a printed map of the story’s “scene of the crime.”³

This diagram of a cabaret, with its now-iconic footprints and a coded layout of the building in its surroundings, marks the young Lecoq as a modern-minded investigator, for as has recently been demonstrated, the use of judicial cartography became increasingly systematic in the latter half of the nineteenth century as a technique for the “*enquête de terrain*” (Daniel, Berger). And with its patina of scientific authority, the map establishes Lecoq as an investigator to be reckoned with, one poised to replace the old-school inspector Gévrol. Certainly in the admiring eyes of his elderly assistant *le père Absinthe*, Lecoq’s cartographic gesture takes on its impressive proportions from the positivistic expertise it implies:

Le plan, particulièrement, émerveillait le bonhomme. Il lui en était passé beaucoup sous les yeux, mais il s’était toujours figuré qu’il fallait être ingénieur, architecte, arpenteur tout au moins, pour exécuter un semblable travail. Point. Avec un mètre pour prendre quelques mesures et un bout de planche en guise de règle, ce conscrit, son collègue se tirait d’affaire. Sa considération pour Lecoq s’en augmenta prodigieusement. (48)]

Lecoq’s superior powers are directly linked here to the technical skills of engineers, architects, or land surveyors: i.e., of those who master the landscape.

And yet, rather than clear up the mystery post-haste, Lecoq’s map drops out early in this 600-page novel and the story’s resolution results from chance encounters and the external aid of Tabaret, rather than from Lecoq’s own rational deduction. In this way, *Monsieur Lecoq* serves as a prime (indeed, primary) example of what Dominique Kalifa has analyzed as the key *écart* in the *roman policier* genre between theory and practice. On the one hand, “il est clair que le récit d’enquête s’adosse à un régime

de savoir (observation, induction, reconstitution) empreint de rationalisme et de positivisme. La multiplication des plans, des cartes et des indices textuels font du déchiffrement et de la raison graphique l'un des ressorts du genre." ("Enquête," 248). But on the other hand, most popular 19th-century detective novels do not actually give much narrative space to the workings of logical reason; « Loin d'apparaître comme une mathématique capable de résoudre l'énigme dans un patient décryptage des indices et des traces, l'enquête y verse en permanence dans l'aventure, le coup de théâtre, la péripétie. » (248) Monsieur Lecoq's map might serve as nothing more than a generic red herring: an appeal to rational mastery that dazzles and distracts from its truly unsystematic and *feuilletonnesque* investigation.

After all, despite le père Absinthe's wide-eyed admiration for Lecoq's survey skills, the map of the scene of the crime provides neither the key to the solution, nor even a fully coherent, satisfactory view of the scene. For one thing, the diagram lacks some important data: where are the bodies? From looking solely at the map, one would not know how many men were killed (three), nor that the gun-wielding suspect remained in the main room. This seems especially strange, given that the key does mention the cabaret's other living inhabitant, la veuve Chupin, seated and sobbing on the steps. As if to underscore such gaps, the letters of the key appear in alphabetical order, but skip haphazardly forward: ABCDFHH-HTKLMMM. The resulting effect somewhat undermines the very systematicity invoked by the technical sciences – engineering, architecture, and surveying – whose skills Lecoq is said to wield in his mapmaking.

Equally unsettling is the map's lack of closure. Gaboriau could have included only *La Poivrière*, but he decenters it within the *terrain vague*, itself only half-circumscribed by the two roads mentioned in the text. And the cabaret is more than penetrable; though the building is first described as "hermétiquement close" and its door has to be kicked in by officer Gévrol for access, it soon becomes clear that witnesses have been able to exit under the police officers' noses, out the back of the *bouge* and through the gate of the yard's latticework fence. (14) Not even within the main house are spaces well-enclosed, as windows, doors, and stairways are indicated on the map by openings and indentations. Of course, within the visual vocabulary of architectural plans, these would not stand out as unusual, but the written key that Lecoq appends to the drawn map calls attention to their importance, as seven of its textual notations refer directly to liminal spaces: *fenêtre fermée*; *porte enfoncée*; *escalier*; *cheminée*; *porte communiquant avec l'arrière-salle*; *seconde porte du cabaret*, *portillon*

du jardinet. (37) The porosity of the cabaret space acts like a mise-en-abyme of the larger Paris; no matter how often its Barrières are re-drawn, unwanted social elements seep in and out. *Monsieur Lecoq*, one of the first detective stories – i.e. a novel that sets out to circumscribe violent crime through a ratiocinating process—designates the spaces of violence as resisting de-scription, circumscription, closure. Ultimately, Lecoq’s crime map is as vague as its central site, the “*terrain vague*” that is meant to separate the seedy bar from the cross-streets of “civilization.”

But it is perhaps this very site, the “*terrain vague*,” that can allow us to see the map in Gaboriau’s novel as more than merely a red herring of sham scientific authority. Let us analyze Lecoq’s map with attention both to its iconic function as visual supplement to the written text and to its sociological implications: how does the “*terrain vague*” spatialize the marginalization of the urban criminal class in the Hausmannian age? How does the *local clos* motif intersect with allegorizations of cultural porosity? And finally, how does Gaboriau’s coded image inaugurate a foundational conception of space for the *roman policier*?

Terrains vagues

Before Emile Gaboriau became known as the father of French detective fiction, he was a successful “chroniqueur,” a journalist who contributed verses, anecdotes, and *comptes rendus* to a number of Parisian papers. Throughout the year 1857, the young Gaboriau wrote a weekly column for *La Vérité Contemporaine*, a satirical newspaper previously called *Les Contemporains* (Bonniot, 32). Gaboriau’s subsequent newspaper chronicles, in *Le Tintamarre* and *Le Progrès*, as well as the articles he wrote in 1859 and 1860 for *Le Journal à 5 centimes*, display the future novelist’s interest not only in human types – from the picturesque *zouave* to the ambitious *demi-mondain* – but in their physical surroundings, with Paris taking pride of place.

In 1859, for example, Gaboriau reacted to the administrative establishment of the city’s 20 *arrondissements* by contributing a short essay on each (Bonniot, 52-3). Not surprisingly, in this high era of Hausmannization, he devoted many of his comments to the topographic changes currently underway in the capital city: “Ainsi,” he writes, “[...] les limites de Paris vont être portées au pied de l’enceinte fortifiée,” adding that “de grands travaux” will isolate the Jardin du Luxembourg and that construction around the canal Saint-Martin will include the cultivation of a large “*terre-plein*” planted with four parallel rows of trees (Bonniot, 53). One might contrast this “*terre-plein*” with the far less civilized “*terrains vagues*”

that escape urban renewal, for though Gaboriau keeps a neutral tone in his press column, his critical voice emerges in the following decade through the judiciary crime novels for which he became famous.

Indeed, the uneven topography of Paris sets the stage for *Monsieur Lecoq*, which begins as a loud cry attracts the attention of a police patrol making its rounds by the “ancienne barrière d’Italie.” (*Lecoq*, 11) The story begins, but not before the narrator has indulged in some sociological commentary on the dangers of this “vaste quartier qui s’étend de la route de Fontainebleau à la Seine, depuis les boulevards extérieurs jusqu’aux fortifications” – that is, in what is now the Eastern part of the 13^e *arrondissement* and what then Gaboriau described as a deserted region of “fâcheuse réputation.”⁴ The narrator explains why the quartier is dangerous: “C’est que *les terrains vagues*, encore nombreux, devenaient, passé minuit, le domaine de cette tourbe de misérables sans aveu et sans asile” who refuse the formalities of modest lodgings and “[l]es vagabonds et les repris de justice” who remain despite energetic measures by city police. (11, my emphasis)

The term “terrain vague” refers to any uncultivated space (“vide de cultures et de constructions,” says the *Petit Robert*), but in the nineteenth century, it appeared with notable frequency in crime gazettes and novels of the underworld. In Ponson du Terrail’s *Rocambole*, for example, the *terrain vague* serves as a handy place for shady dealings and is identified by the two streets that circumscribe it: “un endroit tout à fait désert, entre la rue Courcelles et la rue de Laborde, un *terrain vague* où nous serons à merveille”; and “quelques saltimbanques établis sur un *terrain vague* situé entre la rue du château-d’eau et celle du faubourg-du-temple” (T.2, 132; T.4, 31). Although Gaboriau personally hated Ponson du Terrail, his novels would echo his rival’s interest in socially marginal characters (the *saltimbanque* serves as disguise for *Monsieur Lecoq*’s central suspect) and in the *terrain vague* as their liminal habitus, a space where fog unpierced by lamplights provides cover for less-civilized acts. Neither urban nor rural, the *terrain vague* metaphorically transforms even the great city Paris into a sinister natural wasteland: “On se serait cru à mille lieues de Paris, sans ce bruit profond et continu qui monte de la grande ville comme le mugissement d’un torrent au fond d’un gouffre” (*Lecoq*, 13).

Criminality is thus abetted by semi-urban location, as Gaboriau ascribes the region’s danger to a mix of idiotic obstination on the part of the “rôdeurs de barrières” and the spatial characteristics of the *terrains vagues*: “Les lumières se faisaient rares et il y avait de grands emplacements vides entre les maisons” (22; 13). These are the empty spaces that facilitate

the appearance of seedy *bouges* and *cabarets* like *La Poivrière*, the scene of the triple murder that serves as the novel's instigating mystery.

By setting his crime in the borderlands of the Barrières rather in center-city streets, Gaboriau shows himself to be up-to-date, for as Kalifa has suggested, two strands of crime *fiction* immediately followed Haussmann's dispersal of *real* crime from city center to periphery: one strand, exemplified by popular serialists like Pierre Zaccone, anachronistically continued to set their crime stories in the symbolic center of La Cité, while the other, led by Gaboriau, captured "le transfert vers les barrières des espaces de la dangerosité urbaine."⁵ Whereas Eugène Sue had famously begun his 1842-3 *Mystères de Paris* in the "dédale de rues obscures, étroites, tortueuses, qui s'étend depuis le Palais de Justice jusqu'à Notre-Dame" Gaboriau responds to the Hausmannian decentering of contemporary crime by displacing danger to the borderlands of the Barrières (Kalifa, *Crime et culture*, 19). He refuses, in other words, the nostalgia of novelistic romanticization in favor of journalistic observation of the present moment—a moment during which, historically, "Fortifications, terrains vagues et espaces incertains des marges de la ville favorisent [...] l'exercice de la violence" (*Crime et culture*, 36).

The peripheral displacement of urban crime was not completely new, of course; Kalifa cites the transfer in 1832 of the guillotine from the Place de Grève to the Saint-Jacques Barrier as a highly symbolic start to the center-city clean-up process, adding that Sue's novel itself marks the gradual transition outward: "S'ils s'ouvrent rue aux Fèves, c'est à la barrière Saint-Jacques que s'achèvent *Les Mystères de Paris*, signalant ainsi la vigueur de ce transfert" (23). Nevertheless, by the 1860s and 70s, the effects of Hausmannization had largely shifted poverty and crime to newly sinister locales.

À la Belle Epoque encore, la dénonciation de l'insuffisance policière en banlieue nourrit le discours sécuritaire. [...] En diminution dans les vieux quartiers du centre, les violences nocturnes se multiplient en revanche après 1860 dans les arrondissements périphériques (notamment les XV^e et XIX^e arrondissements, nouveaux coupe-gorge), ainsi que dans la partie orientale de la ville qui totalise alors plus de 62% des agressions (36).⁶

Gaboriau's fictions follow the criminal topography of his time, as he sets violent acts in liminal spaces such as the edges of the *18^e arrondissement* and the suburb of Batignolles – or La Jonchère, whose borderline nature in *L'Affaire Lerouge* is read by David F. Bell as symbolic of murder's location both inside and outside the boundaries of civilization ("Reading Corpses," 95).⁷ Bell rightly identifies this as a specifically modern civilization whose

barriers have been pierced by nascent train technology; the increased number of routes in and out of the city lead to the disquieting mobility of criminal bodies.⁸ As with *L’Affaire Lerouge*, *Monsieur Lecoq* indexes a modern shift, in this case the move outward of crime to the *terrains vagues* of the Barrières in an age of urban renewal.

The importance of the *terrain vague* is indicated in *Monsieur Lecoq* not only by the novel’s introductory descriptions of the criminal and liminal space, but by the prominence of the very phrase in the map that is reproduced in Chapter 5 of the book edition.⁹ This diagram, as we have seen, is presented in the text as hand-drawn by the young detective Lecoq after he has been given the case of the *La Poivrière* murders, but oddly, the map appears to the reader before the description of its creation, for it is only in Chapter 8 that we find Lecoq at work “esquiss [ant] le plan du théâtre du meurtre, plan dont la légende explicative devait aider singulièrement à l’intelligence de son récit” (47). The “récit” at stake is Lecoq’s police report, destined to raise his professional profile, but it also of course refers implicitly to Gaboriau’s own “récit,” since the “plan” and its “légende explicative” function to orient *Monsieur Lecoq*’s readers as well. We “read” the map as a substantiated document of the (fictional) space.

I would warrant that what most readers first notice on the map is the very phrase “terrains vagues,” appearing in large letters in the central open space of the drawn diagram. The two words appear skewed, at an obtuse angle to one another, as though to underline the site’s deviation from what is “right.” And indeed the very choice of “terrains vagues” – as opposed to “Barrière,” which would have emphasized civic jurisdiction – echoes the written text’s introduction of this as the place for vagabonds and ne’er-do-wells, a propitious setting for the type of crime that attracts the patrol’s attention: a low-class bar brawl that ended badly.

But readers of *Monsieur Lecoq* know that despite appearances, both murderer and witnesses turn out to come from the highest ranks of society – and it takes hundreds of pages for the detective Lecoq to accept what seemed sociologically and spatially impossible: that death at this *bouge des barrières* came at the hands of a wealthy nobleman, the duc de Sairmeuse. An early clue to that fact comes in the crime scene map itself, which inscribes the *terrain vague* as a space of potential contact between high and low society: the murder scene is framed by two roads, the relatively straight Rue du Château des Rentiers and the somewhat more disorderly and curvaceous Chemin sans Nom. The social allegory is obvious, an intersection of property and poverty that creates a criminality specific to this time of uneven urban development. The police agents themselves,

indicated by the letter A on the map and identified in the key, are situated closer to the nameless path than to the “high road” – an appropriate location given their own socio-economic status and their mandate to venture into lawless lands. Or rather, semi-lawless lands, since the *terrain vague* sits at the exact intersection of a nameless path and a recently-annexed official road: the Rue du Château des Rentiers had been part of the suburban “commune d’Ivry” in 1855 but was re-classified in 1863 as belonging to the “voirie parisienne.”¹⁰ Once again, Gaboriau demonstrates an up-to-date awareness of the capital city’s changing topography, a trait that combined with the titillating exposure of behind-the-scenes judiciary process to all but guarantee commercial success for this follow-up to *L’Affaire Lerouge* and *Le Crime d’Orcival*.

Blank space

In the previous section, we have been reading the *terrains vagues* in *Monsieur Lecoq* as a journalistic detail reflecting urban reality. But that is just one side of the interpretive coin, one that emphasizes *Monsieur Lecoq*’s feuilletonesque lineage over its status as early *roman policier*. Though the novel retains the vestigial “péripeties compliquées” that allow purists like Fereydoun Hoveyda and Boileau-Narcejac to distinguish it from the pared-down classics of a Doyle or Christie, it also establishes an investigative order that will become the genre’s narrative formula. And I would propose that the novel’s *terrains vagues* do double duty, having as much to do with creative narrative form as with reflective sociological reality.

For when Lecoq arrives on the scene of the crime, he doesn’t muse – as had the narrator—on the *terrain vagues* as junkyard of the homeless and recidivists; rather, he wipes away any distractions from the crime at hand and takes the terrain as a text to be read by the detective deciphering clues – in this case, a line of footprints in the snow leading out from *La Poivrière*:

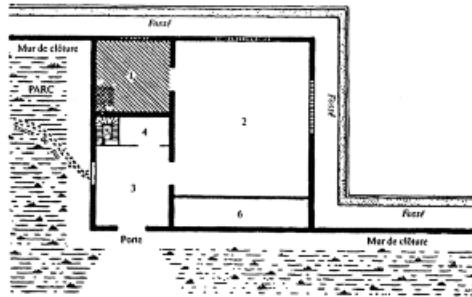
Ce terrain vague, couvert de neige, est comme *une immense page blanche où les gens que nous recherchons ont écrit*, non seulement leurs mouvements et leurs démarches, mais encore leurs secrètes pensées, les espérances et les angoisses qui les agitaient. (32, my emphasis)

Through the intervention of the fictional detective Lecoq, the *terrains vagues* are taken out of their socio-historical context and rendered abstract. They become a purely epistemological “field,” a space of inscription and interpretation.

This abstraction is reinforced by a comparison one might make of Gaboriau’s map to Gaston Leroux’s diagram of the titular *local clos* in his

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pavillon pour la première fois et que chacun se demandait : « Par où l'assassin a-t-il pu fuir de la "Chambre Jaune" ? »



1. Chambre Jaune, avec son unique fenêtre grillée et son unique porte donnant sur le laboratoire. 2. Laboratoire, avec ses deux grandes fenêtres grillées et ses portes, donnant l'une sur le vestibule, l'autre sur la Chambre Jaune. 3. Vestibule, avec sa fenêtre non grillée et sa porte d'entrée donnant sur le parc. 4. Lavatory. 5. Escalier conduisant au grenier. 6. Vaste et unique cheminée du pavillon servant aux expériences de laboratoire.



1. Endroit où Rouletabille plaça Frédéric Larsan. 2. Endroit où Rouletabille plaça le père Jacques. 3. Endroit où Rouletabille plaça M. Stangerson. 4. Fenêtre par laquelle entra Rouletabille. 5. Fenêtre trouvée ouverte par Rouletabille quand il sort de sa chambre. Il la referme. Toutes les autres fenêtres et portes sont fermées. 6. Terrasse surmontant une pièce en encorbellement au rez-de-chaussée.

Le Mystère de la chambre jaune. [Fig. 1]

1907 *Mystère de la chambre jaune*. [Fig. 1] Like Gaboriau, Leroux uses a textual key to identify the map's spaces in relation to the written narrative; and he also designates footsteps, in this case leading out from the yellow room's small building (*le Glandier*) to the closed-off park. Gaboriau had called his footprints "empreintes de pas sur la neige" [M] – and he uses the word "empreintes" again for the marks left by drink-glasses on a table [H]. Leroux, on the other hand, calls them "Traces de pas." (Leroux, 88) The two are basically synonyms, but "empreintes" in Gaboriau fits with the terrain as blank page, since it is related to printing processes (*gravure* and *moulage typographique*); whereas, "traces" also has a mathematical meaning as point of intersection, which is quite appropriate to Leroux, since Rouletabille's solution to the mystery is all about mathematical points of intersection among characters. The abstracting, "whitewashing" function of cartography is furthermore evident in the difference between the "traces des doigts ensanglantées" (89) in Leroux's written description of the *Glandier's* crime scene and the simple "traces de pas" of his drawn diagram.¹¹ In both Gaboriau and Leroux, the map signals an impulse to ward off crime's messiness through the imposition of rational order and symbolic closure. Indeed, the cartographic act doubles the central "local clos" premise that runs through the murder mystery tradition, going back to Poe's *Murders in the rue Morgue*, which features an apparently sealed room, and Conan Doyle's "The Speckled Band," in which a snake is found to have slithered into the crime space.¹² As with any "récit impossible," the closure is an illusory one¹³ – and the crime scene map inevitably exposes the artificiality of its own attempt. In Gaboriau's and Leroux's maps, one might take the footprints themselves as a thematization of the very vulnerability of the crime spaces, as they lead outward from the scene of attack. Of the two, Leroux works harder to create the spatial closure that makes the mystery so compelling: in his map, footprints hit a wall and the park is enclosed by a "mur de clôture" and a "fossé" and another triple-thick wall. Gaboriau's drawn footprints, on the other hand, extend upwards toward the top of the page, implying an extension into the unframed space of the unknown, so that the *terrain vague* that Lecoq compares to a "page blanche" merges into the actual, material *page blanche* of the book.

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Lecoq's analogy between vague terrain and blank page holds an undeniable appeal for the kind of textual criticism that dominated the study

of the detective genre in the 1970s and 1980s, inspired by Todorov's formal analyses of the genre's temporal sequences and by Lacan and Derrida's readings of Poe's "The Purloined Letter," which emphasized the displacements of a pure signifier within a symbolic system unanchored by external reference. The self-referentiality of Monsieur Lecoq's *terrain vague* as "immense page blanche" certainly invites a post-structuralist reading. We can see the detective, scanning the snowy field for tracks, as a stand-in for the reader, as we scan the book's pages for hermeneutical indices, the black marks or traces of a scriptorial absent presence.

However, the "absent presence" that Lecoq ends up identifying through his study of footprints is that of the crime's witnesses. And what is revealed is not so much their structural relation to the crime (he already knows they are witnesses) but their gender and class: the two sets of bootprints are smaller than a man's, one with flat soles indicating a servant and the other with tiny high heels, indicating a wealthy noblewoman – surely out of her element in this sinister location. Indeed, Lecoq surmises that a third person, a man, has escorted the women away from the *terrain vague* and re-oriented them "dans la direction de la rue du Château-des-Rentiers"—in the direction, that is, of the crime's true source, for as a 300-page flashback reveals, the murders in *La Poivrière* are the result of a Restoration-era family drama involving a property dispute among the upper classes. The novel veers away, then, from the pure textuality implied by Lecoq's blank-page analogy and re-inscribes the space of the *terrains vagues* with the sorts of social concerns that the narrator had introduced at the start. In this way, it ends up less susceptible to the "Purloined Poe" or formalist reading than to the alternate and parallel strand of crime genre criticism that developed out of D.A. Miller's Foucault-inflected *Novel and the Police*, with its emphasis on historical context and changing demographics of crime in the nation. The *terrain vague* may be a blank page, but its boundary – as the map reminds us – is that of the wealth/poverty intersection and its very blankness (i.e. its legibility) derives from its un-cultivated nature as liminal space between urban buildings and rural crops. Thus sociology joins textuality in this founding space of the crime fiction genre.

This is of particular interest if one considers the split between formalism and historicism that has characterized not only critical approaches to crime fiction but the very definition of the corpus itself: on the one hand, one finds the classic *roman d'enigme* whose logical puzzles and formal conventions are seen to pave the way for the self-referentially parodic anti-roman policier of the 1970s and 1980s (Robbe-Grillet, Butor, Ollier) and

on the other hand, the more historically-grounded *roman judiciaire* of the 19th century is understood as founding a strand of engaged detective fiction that culminates today with the sorts of néo-polars and noirs for which Didier Daeninckx is known. In histories from Boileau-Narcejac's to Stephen Knight's book of 2004, these two strands of the detective genre are posited as separate: the formal and the historical.

Gaboriau's foundational detective stories are, of course, both – both narratives of deductive ratiocination and glimpses into the contemporary workings of the French judicial system. With this reading of the *terrains vagues*, I hope to expose the artificiality of splitting the two strands off from each other, for Gaboriau's *Monsieur Lecoq* reminds us that the space of modern crime fiction has always been both real and textual. If the novel's journalistic narrator and enigma-solving detective seem to figure a split between history and form, its *terrains vagues* recombine the two strands by existing in the novel as both social borderland and blank page.

Moreover, the map itself, as visual supplement to the written text, reinforces that double function, for maps are necessarily both referential and abstracting. Perhaps this is why they have accompanied the detective genre into its most modern—and referentially ambiguous—forms.¹⁴ After all, the *roman policier* is built around the unresolved tension between bodily, brutal violence and rational, deductive mastery. Gaboriau's map situates that tension in the liminal space of the *terrain vague*, a space with its own social history from Second Empire urbanization to the quintessentially postmodern *banlieue*.¹⁵ In the end, the detective inquiry's turn to the mastering impulse of cartography reveals, more than represses, the location of what Lefebvre called the irreducible vitality of violence.

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Notes

1 Georges-Eugène Haussmann (préfet de Paris, 1852-1869) famously bragged about having eliminated criminal sites (such as the rue Transnonain, where the army murdered innocent residents in 1832) from the capital city, but of course criminal activity persisted. (Jordan, 265)

2 Though postmodern geographers like Derek Gregory and Edward Soja work to expose the illusory nature of cartographic mastery, they also reassert what Christian Jacob identifies as “the strange power of maps: [a]n authoritative, ontological power” that has perdured for centuries. (Jacob, xiii)

3 Readers today are well-habituated to the convention of a murder mystery published with accompanying diagrams, but Gaboriau’s was the first. The tradition of the fictional crime scene map spans the 20th century: from Gaston Leroux’s *lieu clos* in *Le Mystère de la chambre jaune* (1907) and Château d’Hercules in *Le Parfum de la dame en noir* (1909), through Malet’s *plans d’arrondissement* in *Les nouveaux mystères de Paris* of the 1950s, to the abbey library in Umberto Eco’s *Il nome della rosa*, 1980) and beyond.

4 This is the site now of the BnF-Tolbiac (Today’s researchers may find that not much has improved!).

5 See also John Merriman, who demonstrates in *The Margins of City Life* the increasing identification of the urban periphery with crime and disorder in the early half of the nineteenth century.

6 In 1872, Maxime du Camp writes: “Aussi le monde des voleurs est-il passé en masse du côté des anciennes barrières, dans ces quartiers nouvellement annexés et qui semblent n’avoir encore avec l’ancien Paris qu’une attache exclusivement administrative » (Cited in Kalifa, *Les Crimes de Paris*, 25). Unincorporated space also turns up in a rudimentary sketch of a crime scene from an 1877 *canard* reproduced in Cragin’s *Murder in Parisian Streets*; the area next to the Seine in this “plan du lieu où a été commis le crime” is marked: “#8. Champs incultes” (42).

7 This is also of course the historical moment, as the poorer classes are cast outward, when apartment buildings are becoming economically segregated after years of social stratification within the same vertical living spaces. See, for example, Loyer, *Paris XIX^e siècle*; and Marcus, *Apartment Stories*.

8 See also Bell’s “Technologies of Speed, Technologies of Crime.”

9 First published in installments in *Le Petit Journal* from May 27 to July 31, 1868.

10 <http://www.paris-france.org/Carto/Nomenclature/1918.nom.html>

11 “The value of empirical and forensic evidence is subordinated in this story, through the character and actions of Rouletabille, to the abstract realm of Cartesian reasoning” (Platten, 260).

12 Robert Adey’s *Locked Room Murders* (1979) lists over 1200 “local clos” narratives, “dont sont exclus tous les ouvrages n’ayant pas été traduits en anglais” (Eisenzweig, 229). Catherine Chauchard, head librarian of the BiLiPo (Bibliothèque de Littérature Policière) has also kindly directed me to Roland Lecourbe’s *99 chambres closes*, which catalogues international detective novels and stories using the device.

13 Eisenzweig identifies the “chambre close” as the perturbation of or challenge to a national ideology of unified social order. (228-234) It thus exemplifies the genre’s failed repression of economic and political History, i.e. of the social “real”; “Illusion textuelle, la négation policière de l’Histoire s’ancre néanmoins dans un discours fort réel.” (215)

GABORIAU AND THE SPATIAL IMAGINARY OF THE ROMAN POLICIER

¹⁴ Michel Butor's 1956 *Emploi du temps*, for example, uses its map of the fictional English town of Bleston to play with the codes and conventions of realist detective fiction. See Goulet.

¹⁵ See Michel Sirvent, especially "Représentations de l'espace urbain," which identifies the *terrain vague*, a motif that appears in novels like Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommages* and Thierry Jonquet's *Moloch*, as central to the postmodern detective genre.