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Pierre Bayard, Caroline Julliot

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HAL Authorization

Pierre Bayard & Caroline Julliot, InterCriPol (ICCPO) conference, New South Wales State Library, June 2018.

## How to investigate books like you've never read them before.

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[1<sup>ère</sup> partie : Pierre : Roger Ackroyd/Hamlet/Baskerville/10 petits nègres]

You've now understood it : As in real life, you can't trust anyone within fiction – and, above all, you can't trust any narrator. The cases my honorable colleague just explained here are far from being isolated. To show you that writers from *Perfidious Albion* are not the only ones who, deliberately or accidentally, hide the truth, let's take an example closer to you, geographically and historically speaking : *Top of the Lake*, Jane Campion's latest TV series.

This police thriller was produced on Australian, English and American budget, and the second season, released on 2017, takes place here in Sydney. I want to talk to you about the 2013 case, main plot of the First season of the show. We follow the investigations led by detective Robin Griffin, a police inspector recently returned from Sydney, in Laketop, her home town, small city lost in New Zealand mountains. A pregnant twelve-year-old girl, Tui Mitcham, is found half-drowned in the lake, and then, gone missing. I won't get into details because I don't want to spoil completely the pleasure for those who haven't watched it yet, but I would like to point out how obviously unsatisfying the solution seems. One of the main avenues of the investigation is discovering who's the father of Tui's unborn child, presumably the result of rape. Suspicion quickly falls on Tui's father, Matt, a local mafia godfather who runs the area with expeditious and violent methods. In the final episode, Al Parker, detective sergeant of the city, declares that « a double-crossed DNA test » confirmed that Matt is indeed the father of the baby Tui had just given birth to. Can we really believe that ?

There's no doubt that Matt's character has everything to be the ideal culprit – both from an internal and an external perspective. In the eyes of the local community, he's a well-known offender ; in addition, even if the matter is never directly addressed in the dialogues,

he's clearly a foreigner (actor Peter Mullan kept his scottish accent for playing that character, whereas Elizabeth Moss, the american actress who plays the part of Robin, pursued a specific training to talk with a « kiwi » accent) ; and many scenes in the series prove that, in a backwater such as Laketop, not being part of this closed community equals to suffer prejudice and hatred : Robin's credibility, for instance, is repeatedly damaged by the fact that she now lives in Sydney.

Even more serious, Matt has a full chance to be also the ideal culprit in the eyes of the audience : as spectators of an artistically demanding TV-crime series, directed by an award-winning filmmaker, our collective expectations are largely determined by the founding work of the genre : *Twin Peaks*, created by David Lynch and Mark Frost (1990). No doubt that *Top of the Lake* follows in the footsteps of this previous show : as in *Twin Peaks*, the scene takes place in a small isolated town, lost in a postcard mountain landscape ; there, the drowning of a young and (too) pretty girl reveals the hidden and shameful secrets of the local community, and we find out it all thanks to the investigation of a police inspector recently arrived from a big city. And so, from the beginning, following *Twin Peaks*' model plot, we are implicitly encouraged to consider that the evil villain can only be the incestuous father.

However, we all know that ideal culprits in the eyes of society may be perfectly innocent of the charges they're accused of. If the numerous detective novels that base their solution on this kind of twist can't convince you enough, you should watch the remarkable multi-awarded documentaries Jean-Xavier de Lestrade made about american trials who covered the front pages, in particular *Murder on a sunday morning* (2003) and *The Staircase* (2004/2017). Matt surely is a scoundrel, but, given what we learn throughout the show, the least we can say is that he's not the only one around ; putting all the blame on him as scapegoat is a convenient way to protect other potential suspects, probably a crooked community leader. Al, the one who supervised the DNA test procedure, eventually turns out to be an unscrupulous and depraved bastard ; and, as Chief of police, it would have been very easy for him to tamper with evidence, by surreptitiously switching Matt's DNA sample with the real father's, or by blackmailing both DNA labs. Especially if Tui's rapist is none other than himself : such evidence, if he didn't dispose of it, could prove conclusively the charges of child abuse he has to face (and stubbornly denies) in Season 2.

As you can see with this example, detective criticism can't narrow its focus to English crime novels, for there are lies and unpunished criminals everywhere : in Europe, Africa,

America, Asia and Oceania ; in books and in films ; in pop culture as well as in classics of worldwide literature. If we want Justice to prevail, we need every single fiction, in every country around the world, to be thoroughly examined.

Apart from hunting the unpunished murderers, because an innocent was unfairly convicted or because the crime was disguised in suicide or accident, detective criticism gives itself many other tasks :

- **Search for missing characters :**

Some characters all of a sudden vanish from the book or film in which they were playing an important part, and no one seems to notice it – or much more likely, have shameful reasons to act like they don't. Pierre has already carried out investigations in Shakespeare's *As you like it*, and in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. A small start compared to the immense task which awaits us.

- **Characters on the run :**

Just like real criminals, who start from scratch a new life in other countries under a false name and live there with perfect impunity, some fiction characters are very shrewd, and you can't confront them unless you prove that they are hiding in other books. As one can easily cross the border between two real countries, some characters move from a fiction to another, inside a *shared universe*. Fiction being multidimensional, detective criticism needs to prove first that such links exist and that the passage is possible, but, once it's done, cross-examination of various fictions linked together may shed a new light on unsolved mysteries. I've been personally in charge of various Fairy tale files – and all I can say is that the spotless reputation of various characters really takes a hit, in particular Prince Charming's and Fairy Godmother's. Prince Charming, if you consider, as in Bill Willingham's comicbook *Fables*, that it's the same character that seduced all princesses (Snow White, Cinderella and the others...), it changes it all. A character who seems absolutely unimpeachable within one book becomes clearly shady if you consider all the plots in which he appears. On that matter, moreover, we need to get at the root on the tale – because, as Bruno Bettelheim already suggested, there may be political reasons why the latest versions of the story are watered-down : For instance, if we stick to Perrault's or, worse, Disney's version, we can't see what really happens in *Sleeping Beauty* : as the original narration tells, the prince, already married, abuses the unconscious princess, and then leaves her alone for several years – before

eventually going back to her and the children she gave birth to, pretending to be a foremost gentleman.

- **Gumshoe criticism :**

Detective criticism can also be mandated to reveal secret affairs or relationships between characters. About his science-fiction cartoon *Valerian and Laureline*, French illustrator Jean-Claude Mézières once answered to his frustrated fans, wondering why there were no romance between the protagonists, that the two were actually kissing a lot – but between the « boxes » of the comic-strip... Pierre has already challenged the reputation of marital fidelity of Ulyses' et Othello's wives, Penelope and Desdemona. These investigations about the characters' private lifes can't be reduced to a voyeuristic activity : sometimes it helps a lot to understand what is really going on, and is the only way to untangle strings. For instance, unmasking the secret family links between The Beauty, the Beast and Donkey Skin (it turns out that they are all relatives) has allowed me to unveil the Lilac Fairy's machiavelic agenda, extending over three generations – and leading to her marriage, showed in Jacques Demy's 1970 film, with the King.

- **Conspiracy criticism :**

There's an another line research that I'd like to highlight today. I've initiated it working on Michel Houellebecq's latest book, *Submission* (2015) ; in France that novel has been repeatedly accused of playing into the game of extremists, by disseminating the racist conspiracy theory of « the Great replacement » (stating that there's a worldwide plot to make the European white, christian race disappear by replacing it with some massive immigration). I've tried to experiment to what extend such an interpretation was possible in the novel. At the age of conspiracy theories and alternative facts, detective criticism stands as a bulwark to sort out the true from the false. An approach that may be useful, especially for spy fictions and more generally for all plots involving major manipulations and state secrets.

It's been a year now that Pierre and I founded InterCriPol, the International criminal criticism organization (ICCPO), according to the model of InterPol (ICPO), international organization which works toward federating, troughout the world, the police forces, in order to make the search for criminals more efficient. The inaugural event took place in May 2017 :

we held in Le Mans University, in which I teach, the first detective criticism symposium, published online the following October. On this occasion, we re-opened several *cold cases* about suspicious deaths – among others, Emma Bovary's, Bartleby's, or the protagonists' in Goethe's *Elective Affinities*. Alistair Rolls, profesor in Newcastle University, thanks to whom we're talking to you right now, presented a paper about Agatha Christie's last novel, *Curtain* – where the murderer may not be the one the Duchess of crime pretended. During these last months, about fifty researchers in fiction, specialized in various fields of expertise, have joined our network, and we've been able to open offices abroad : in Argentina, Canada, England, Greece, Lebanon, Switzerland, USA, etc... and, thanks to Alistair, in Australia. Two weeks ago, returning to the scene of the primal crime, we organized the first ICCPO international summit, in Le Mans again, when we discussed about our action list for the future.

Meanwhile, in order to conduct joint investigations, we developed our digital lab, responding to the Code name MATRIOCHCA – open to our agents, and, more broadly, to any person eager to help our public utility mission. You'll find on our website a request form, which allows you to submit to us your doubts or hypotheses, based on the clues or inconsistencies you may have noticed. The website, ready soon, is available both in French and English (and maybe shortly in Spanish) ; you can already fill in the form, and participate in an ongoing investigation or request the opening of a new one.

<http://perso.univ-lemans.fr/%7Ealpar/index.html>

The first collective inquiry will be about Agatha Christie's classic, *And Then they were none*. As you can guess, Pierre has already completed his investigations about that case, and will publish his conclusions when the time comes ; so you can just wait for the truth to be revealed – or search it yourself or with us. Remember, you can't trust any narrator ; and, I hate to tell it, especially not Pierre's narrators. As far as I know him, my esteemed colleague seems to be the mostle gentle and honnest person on earth ; but I'm not sure we can say the same about his characters. As he himself confesses, in spite of the fact that he writes his essays in the first person, he can't master the various partially fictional characters who talk inside each of his works – to the extend that, when people ask him about the positions we can find in his books, he often feels like (I quote) « a court-appointed lawyer obliged to defend a criminal whose innocence he's not convinced of ». How could we not suspect Pierre's narrators to manipulate us all and hide the truth from everyone – my dear colleague included ?

We need to face it : like all others, Pierre Bayard's books are likely to be full of liars – maybe even full of unpunished murderers ; and eventually InterCriPol will have to investigate on them too. This legitimate suspicion doesn't question the outstanding skills Pierre's avatars show, and their remarkable capacity of deduction : it wouldn't be the first time that an evil genius turns out to be the best to hunt machiavellian cold-blooded serial-killers that the police fail to track down (see Hannibal Lecter and Dexter Morgan) ; but, just to be sure, we'd better lead counter-inquiries on their counter-inquiries, and don't take for granted what they assert. It will take a lot of us, and a lot more, to achieve a project as ambitious. So...

**INTERCRIPOL NEEDS YOU !**