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## Crime and the *Figuration Narrative* Movement: the Case of Jacques Monory

This chapter analyses depictions of crime in Jacques Monory's paintings, particularly in the series *Meutres* (1968), seeking to determine how the author engages with criminal aspects of the contemporary world, and to identify the ways in which this approach is codified in his aesthetic project. Belonging to the *figuration narrative* movement, Monory's paintings invite a process of interpretation which makes compelling and disturbing use of many of the motifs of crime writing and *film noir*, including revolvers, the double and the enigmatic, beautiful *femme fatale*. Monory's thriller novel, *Diamondback* (1979), is also considered to be representative of his ongoing fascination with crime.

### Pop Art and *Figuration Narrative*

*Figuration Narrative* has long been in the shadow of Pop Art. Its origins lie in the exhibition 'Mythologies quotidiennes' organised in July 1964 at the *Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris* by art critic Gérard Gassiot-Talbot and painters Bernard Rancillac and Hervé Télémaque. (Just one month prior to the exhibition, American Pop Artist Robert Rauschenberg had received the *Grand Prix de la Peinture* at the *Biennale de Venise*, marking the arrival of Pop Art in Europe.) The proponents of *Figuration Narrative*, much like their American Pop Artist counterparts, drew inspiration from contemporary society and rapidly-evolving modern artistic techniques. According to Gassiot-Talbot, the movement emerged as a response to painting styles showing a 'négation temporelle'<sup>1</sup> such as *impressionism*, *fauvism*, *lyric abstraction* and *action painting*. One of the main objectives was to restore an otherwise lost or obscured temporality to artistic images. Additionally, its proponents strove to respond to artistic modes which persistently showed objects out of context, such as *Nouvelle Abstraction* and Pop Art. As such, the movement had rich potential to explore themes central to crime: context, situation and narrative development.

The original 1964 exhibition 'Mythologies quotidiennes' included artists such as Arroyo, Berni, Klasen, Monory, Rancillac, Recalcati and Télémaque.<sup>2</sup> The title 'La

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<sup>1</sup> Gérard Gassiot-Talbot, *La figuration Narrative*, (Nîmes: Ed. Jacqueline Chambon, 2003), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> For a complete list of participants, see Jean-Louis Pradel, *La Figuration Narrative*, (Vanves: Hazan, 2000), p. 35.

Figuration Narrative' was adopted in 1965 on the occasion of the 4<sup>th</sup> Biennale de Paris. Later, in 1967, came the 'Bande Dessinée et Figuration Narrative' showcase at the *Musée des Arts Décoratifs*. Each exhibition was accompanied by guides containing rich theoretical texts by Gassiot-Talabot, and these became manifestos detailing the movements' developments. In the guide to 'Bande Dessinée et Figuration Narrative', Gassiot-Talabot provides a definition of the movement: 'est narrative toute œuvre qui se réfère à une représentation figurée dans la durée, par son écriture et sa composition, sans qu'il y ait toujours à proprement parler de récit'<sup>3</sup>. The sustained influence of French intellectuals upon *Figuration Narrative* is also apparent, and Barthes' seminal 1957 publication *Mythologies* inspired the title of the 1964 exhibition ('Les textes qui suivent ont été écrits chaque mois pendant environ deux ans, de 1954 à 1956, au gré de l'actualité. J'essayais alors de réfléchir régulièrement sur quelques mythes de la vie quotidienne française'<sup>4</sup>). Sartre's support of the *artiste engagé* would further inspire these artists.<sup>5</sup>

After the movement's emergence in the 1960s, several exhibitions continued to consolidate and update it. In 1977, 'Mythologies Quotidiennes 2' was organised at the *Musée d'Art moderne de la Ville de Paris* showcasing newer artists and 'Figuration critique' was held in 1978, but three decades would pass before serious critical attention was once again directed at the movement, in the 2008 'Figuration Narrative' retrospective at the *Galeries nationales du Grand Palais* in Paris, which brought together over one hundred paintings, objects and films. This retrospective was grouped around the following topics: 'The Origins of Narrative Figuration (1960-1964)', 'Day-to-day Mythologies (1964)', 'Narrative Figuration and Comics', 'Painting Transformation', 'Narrative Figuration and Detective Novels', 'Narrative Figuration and Politics', and it is wholly significant that the exhibition emphasizes *Figuration Narrative's* engagement with the motif of crime.

In his original exhibition guides, Gassiot-Talabot undertakes to classify the different approaches to *Figuration Narrative*, identifying four main techniques. These offer fertile ground for the exploration of crime and criminality:

*Narration anecdotique* takes the form of either a continuous style or a series of scenes or 'takes', as in 'Vivre et laisser mourir ou La fin tragique de Marcel Duchamp', influenced by *Bande Dessinée* and films. This 1965 series of eight paintings by Arroyo,

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<sup>3</sup> Jean-Louis Pradel, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, (Paris: Seuil, 1957), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).

Alliaud and Recalcati depicts Marcel Duchamp, an icon of *art bourgeois*, being interrogated, tortured and thrown down the stairs, rendering him the victim of his own earlier painting 'Nu descendant un escalier' (1912). His coffin is then carried away by the *Nouveau Réalisme* artists.

*Narration par juxtaposition* uses comparison, as in 'Angoisse' by Peter Klasen (1960) which is composed of three superposed images: the portrait of a woman, a hand over the woman's mouth and an eye. The artist drapes a single, suggestive object over the canvas: a rope.

*Narration par images cloisonnées* uses a comic strip format where the images are separated into boxes or blocks, as is the case with Peter Foldes' 'Les petits pois' (1962) or Rancillac's 'Les tribulations d'un téléphone' (1965) or Erró's 'Che' (1976), reflexion on domination, war, oppression and revolution.

*Figuration évolutive* (probably the rarest of the techniques) focuses on the transformation or metamorphosis of the characters, such as 'Six laitues, un couteau et trois épiluchures', by Eduardo Arroyo (1971) or the forced and tortured bodies painted by Velikovic in 'Grand Epouvantail n°3' (1963).

*Figuration Narrative* also has a politicized imperative, engaging not only with single acts of crime, but also those crimes which occur at a political level, following Sartre's notion of the *artiste engagé*: 'Un jour vient où la plume est contrainte de s'arrêter et il faut alors que l'écrivain prenne les armes (...), la littérature vous jette dans la bataille; écrire c'est une façon de vouloir la liberté; si vous avez commencé, de gré ou de force, vous êtes engagé'<sup>6</sup>. 'A verser au dossier de l'affaire' by Bernard Rancillac (1966) is inspired by the 1965 kidnapping of Mehdi Ben Barka, a Moroccan politician and the then-head of the left-wing National Union of Popular Forces. In Rancillac's painting, Georges Fignon, who was involved in the kidnapping trial, is found dead at his Paris apartment. Was it murder (as the painting suggests) or suicide (the official version)? Moreover, many works focused on contemporary events, particularly the deployment of American forces in various regions of the globe: Vietnam ('La salle rouge pour le Viêt-nam', a collaborative exhibition at the *Salon de la Jeune Peinture* in 1969), the Antilles ('One of the 36000 marines over our Antilles'; Télémaque, 1965), Cuba ('Bay of Pigs'; Erro, 1967) and Panama ('Entrée du Diable à Panama City'; Rancillac, 1964). Unsurprisingly, the artists of *Figuration Narrative* were also the protagonists of May 68; Arroyo, Rancillac and Fromanger were the driving

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, p. 72.

force of the *Atelier Populaire de Beaux Arts*, where posters of protest were printed using the newly-developed technique of serigraphy.

### **Jacques Monory**

It was in this era of artistic innovation and political engagement that Jacques Monory would emerge, one of France's most prolific contemporary artists, whose career spans over five decades.<sup>7</sup> Monory's early paintings were influenced by Abstract Art, but from 1964 he is considered as an important member of *Figuration Narrative*, after having discovered Pop Art and its potential to turn everyday situations into sources of creative inspiration. Indeed, the latter movement's impact was so great that in 1962, he destroyed all his previous work. Nonetheless, his links to Pop Art are complex, as Jean-Luc Chalumeau emphasizes: 'Monory a vu les pop américains et les a compris mais supposer qu'il a subi leur influence serai inexact'.<sup>8</sup> For the artist's engagement with Pop Art must be considered in the context of his previous work and experience, which reveals several similarities with the most internationally successful Pop Artist, Andy Warhol. Both men were active in a range of media as writers and film directors, and both started in advertising: Warhol worked in an advertising agency, Monory in the print industry. These details are not innocuous coincidences, but situate these creators in an era of capitalism which became increasingly reliant on mass-produced images and telecommunications. Their work is iconoclastic and influenced by Dadaism, and displays a repetitive exploration of themes, motifs and colour. Both Warhol and Monory explore colour's evocative influence on mood, particularly monochrome and the use of blue, which is a particularly significant colour in the latter's exploration of crime. Indeed, another parallel is their obsession with violence and death, manifest in their appropriation of the same recurring symbols: guns and skulls. Yet as Chalumeau points out, rather than indicating that one artist was influenced by the other, these resemblances signify that both artists are products of the society in which they lived, the result of the cultural zeitgeist.

Monory grew up in a politically active family: his father was a revolutionary anarchist and his uncle a Stalinist, and his childhood reveals early indications of his

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<sup>7</sup> Although Monory gives 1934 as his birth date, some critics believe he was actually born in France in June 1924. Regarding this controversy, one critic declares: '(...) qu'important les dates puisqu'elles ne figurent plus dans son vécu, mais seulement dans le désir de ses biographes, Monory est peintre de son temps, mais nie le temps'. Catherine Flohic, 'Monory', *Eighty magazine, les peintres en France dans les années 80*, n°2, march 1984, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Luc Chalumeau, 'Pour une poignée de bleu', *Eighty Magazine, les peintres en France dans les années 80*, n°2, March 1984, p. 4.

burgeoning interest in darker human emotions. As a child, he spent his holidays in the countryside, where he made weekly visits to a travelling cinema. The cinema used a yellow filter to simulate daylight and a blue filter to evoke night, two colours which were to become prominent in his artistic production. Moreover, as a young child he received a revolver from his uncle as a gift. For Catherine Flohic this was a ‘mode de référence à un monde où la puissance naît de la violence, premier symptôme de sa fascination pour le meurtre’<sup>9</sup>. The influence of the events of his late childhood and adolescence cannot be ignored either. The intervention of the United States led to the conclusion of the Second World War and simultaneously imposed American culture on the Western world. It was a turbulent time, of Vietnam, Korea and the War of Algeria, as well as the (in)famous assassinations of Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Ernesto Guevara and Malcom X. These deaths exerted such an influence on contemporary culture that they became examples of what Louis-Vincent Thomas terms ‘des morts fécondes’ of an enduring significance, ‘celles qui prennent l’allure de modèles que l’on propose aux vivants. Les martyrs de la liberté et de la révolution, de la science et du travail, de la foi et aussi du progrès’<sup>9</sup>. However, although an enthusiastic witness to events, Monory kept a distance from May 68, commenting, ‘j’ai toujours pris cela comme une fête, pas comme un changement de société... je n’y ai jamais cru’<sup>10</sup>. Rather than set store in collective revolutionary movements, Monory invokes what he terms ‘individualisme révolutionnaire’<sup>11</sup>. It is against this backdrop that Monory creates the ‘Meurtres’ series, his work being predominantly concerned with individual narratives combined with wider social issues, rather than specific political events.<sup>12</sup>

### **‘Meurtres’ Series**

Having presented *Figuration Narrative* and Monory, the remainder of this article focuses on the motifs and narrative development of crime in ‘Meurtres’ (1968). This series of some twenty numbered paintings presents variations on death, ‘autodestruction du suicide, meurtre de la femme, assassinat par des tueurs dans les appartements, les escaliers, les autos, la rue’<sup>13</sup>, each one a ‘chapter’ in the narrative. Apparently, there is no particular

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<sup>9</sup> Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Anthropologie de la mort*, (Paris: Payot, 1988), p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> Pascale Le Thorel, *Monory*, (Paris: Paris musées, 2006), p. 27.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Luc Chalumeau, *La nouvelle figuration*, (Paris: Le cercle d’art, 2003), p. 155.

<sup>12</sup> One of the few exceptions would be ‘Velvet Jungle’ (1969-1971) dedicated to Vietnam.

<sup>13</sup> Pascale Le Thorel, p. 81.

order; we have to decide whether there is a hidden progression<sup>14</sup> (in this case we have to place the pieces of the puzzle into sequence) or whether the paintings must be interpreted individually. As well as exploring increased social concern about crime, the series is influenced by an important biographical detail. In 1967, Monory travelled to Cuba, and upon his return in 1968, he discovered that the woman he loved had left him. In 1972, Monory says: ‘J’ai peint les Meurtres pour indiquer ce que je vivais, une agression à mon égard, je l’ai petit à petit élargie jusqu’à l’idée que cette agression était généralisée, je n’étais plus particulièrement une victime, mais j’étais une victime comme les autres’<sup>15</sup>. In the construction of the series, he uses new artistic techniques and draws on his own pain and despair, recalling Pierre Tilman’s observation that ‘son œuvre n’est pas dictée par le social, mais au contraire fortement ancrée dans le vécu sentimental de l’artiste, intimement liée à ses expériences et à son histoire personnelle’<sup>16</sup>. Around this time, Monory also produced a psychedelic, experimental short film ‘Ex’ (4mn, 16mm), where we find all his subjects: tigers, cars, women, murder; in ‘Meurtre n. 10’, he uses a still from the film, depicting a man running in the street who is shot and falls to the ground.

Indeed, ‘Meurtres’ becomes a semi-autobiographical project, and Monory comments ‘mon but était de raconter ma vie en peinture’.<sup>17</sup> To do so, he must draw on a range of narrative techniques. Repeated fragmentation between images means that each painting becomes a part of a puzzle; ellipsis leaves his audience to interpret and fill in the holes of his stories. Murder may be physical violence, or take the form of abandonment and betrayal. Monory utilises several of the narrative strategies described by Gassiot-Talabot. ‘Meurtre no.1’ (1968), for example, makes use of *Narration par juxtaposition*. In this painting, children are playing in a street in Havana, alluding to his recent return from Cuba. To the left is a woman holding a gun, to the right a man – Monory – is falling down, fatally wounded. Without depicting any direct action, we are provided with enough visual clues to construct a narrative. The artistic rupture extends to the canvas itself, and Monory goes as far as to fire bullet holes in ‘Meurtre n. 10/2’ (1968), which shows a murderer fleeing an apartment block where two victims lie (presumably) dead on the floor.

To an extent, then, ‘Meurtres’ invites comparison with the detective novel. ‘Clues’ are scattered throughout the images, and the viewer must identify the victim, and the

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<sup>14</sup> There are probably several progressions, as in Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1963) where chapters can be interchanged.

<sup>15</sup> Pascale Le Thorel, p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Tilman, *Monory* (Paris: Loeb éditions, 1992), p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Catherine Flohic, p. 2.

perpetrator. Yet this process is not straightforward: the broken mirror or pane of glass appears in many of the paintings, disturbing our ‘reading’ and forcing us to examine the surrounding context more closely. The narrative is incomplete, shattered, even in its completed form. Monory explores this most fully in ‘Meutre n. 10’, which is partially painted on a mirror, the image thus changing with every viewing and even implicating the spectator in the crime. This technique of obscuration and self-reflection echoes the postmodern fragmentation of the text and recalling the interactive style of literature pioneered by Raymond Queneau in *Conte à votre façon*, where the reader becomes responsible for deciding plot development.<sup>18</sup>

Not only the viewer, but also the artist, is implicated in Monory’s art. He often incorporates his alter-ego or *double* into his images, whom he names Jeascuq Myroon (‘La voleuse n°1’ (1985) or the *wanted by the C.I.A.* Jonq’Erouas Cym (‘La vie imaginaire de Jonq’Erouas Cym’ séries (2001). Innovative artistic techniques enhance the realism of the image: using an *episcopes*, photographic images (either of Monory or another person) are projected onto a canvas and are then painted over (a technique first used by Télémaque). This adds a troubling authenticity to images of his double, who is subjected to violence and crime. Indeed, art has long been a manner of exploring other, socially unacceptable personalities within its creators, recalling Jean-Pierre Melville’s crime film *Deux hommes dans Manhattan*<sup>19</sup>, which Melville wrote and directed as well as assuming the lead role of the flawed, ambiguous detective Moreau. Similarly, the text *Borges y yo*, by J L Borges<sup>20</sup>, offers a narrative double of the author. Borges offers a model for the articulation of this split-persona between art and reality, ‘c’est à l’autre, à Borges, que les choses arrivent. Je vis et me laisse vivre, pour que Borges puisse ourdir sa littérature et cette littérature me justifie’.<sup>21</sup> Such an attitude is also borne out in Monory’s paintings. His appearances in his own work are multiple and varied: we see him as a killer (‘Meutre n.° 20’), as fugitive (‘Meutre n.° 10’), even as a victim (‘Meutre n.° 2’).<sup>22</sup> When Monory appears, he is either the victim or the killer, either static or fleeing. As a killer, he becomes an employee, carrying out a transaction: he receives money, and bestows death. This is market law, capitalism at its most extreme. Painting enables Monory to live several lives.<sup>23</sup> This might

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<sup>18</sup> Raymond Queneau, *Contes et propos* (Paris: Gallimard, 1981 [1967]), pp. 221-226.

<sup>19</sup> Jean-Pierre Melville, *Deux hommes dans Manhattan* (1959).

<sup>20</sup> Originally published in *El Hacedor*, (Buenos Aires: Emecé, 1960).

<sup>21</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), p. 678.

<sup>22</sup> Monory repeats this exercise in ‘La Voleuse n.1’ (1985) which reads: ‘Jeascuq Myroon (Jacques Monory) gisait dans une des rues centrales de NY, il avait reçu cinq balles’.

<sup>23</sup> As seen in ‘Meurtres’ (1968), ‘La vie imaginaire de Jonq’Erouas Cym’ (2001), ‘La voleuse’ (1985), etc.

seem to indicate a playful attitude, but this game of duplicity sets up a dialogue about death, the fragility of life and ever-present danger. Monory, as a narrator of the twentieth century, creates a semi-autobiographical genre of art which has parallels with Dubrovsky's *autofiction*. This process may seem narcissistic, yet Monory prefers to qualify his work as 'sociological' (When in an interview, Chalumeau asks him why he had decided to paint skies, 'Ciels', in 1979, Monory acknowledges 'J'étais fatigué par mon travail *sociologique*')<sup>24</sup>. The over-exposure of Monory in his paintings also becomes representative of the over-exposure of the ego in a society consumed by the cult of the individual.

### **Colour and emotion**

Monory also explores emotion through his depiction of violence. Certain critics speak of eroticism, expressed through a 'décharge libidinale'<sup>25</sup>, and Lyotard, for exemple, in reference to the colour blue, says 'il vient s'écraser sur le monde et nos yeux comme une aveuglante glicée de sperme'.<sup>26</sup> It is my contention, however, that Monory's paintings do not seek to elicit such emotion. There are no reds in his paintings, nor are there any expressionistic traces. When dealing with violence, the weapon used for the crime is always a mechanical and impersonal tool: the revolver or the rifle. This is in contrast to the work of an author such as Borges, where the knife becomes a phallic symbol; in Monory's work, however, there is no penetration. What prevails is the coldness of the painting, accentuated by the use of the colour blue. This blue is not electric, as in the 'International Klein Blue' deep hue first mixed by Yves Klein, but apathetic, placing people and objects in the same visual field. A third element enhances a sense of coldness and distance: saturation, conveyed by the sheer number of murders depicted in the series. In Thomas, we find an extended meditation upon the effects of depictions of mass deaths, suggesting: 'rien de moins émouvant qu'un Western'.<sup>27</sup> The omnipresence of death and killing in the media, this intense saturation, leads to indifference and blurs the lines between what is considered shocking and what is acceptable, reinforced by the repeated use of blue to suggest emotional detachment.<sup>28</sup> Monochrome is in itself a kind of death: blue equals loss (of colour), absence. Monory explains:

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<sup>24</sup> Jean-Luc Chalumeau, *La nouvelle figuration*, (Paris: Le cercle d'art, 2003), p. 154.

<sup>25</sup> Jean François Lyotard, p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> Jean François Lyotard, p. 23.

<sup>27</sup> Louis-Vincent Thomas, *Anthropologie de la mort*, (Paris: Payot, 1988), p. 36.

<sup>28</sup> Whilst the edgy, gritty pictures of the 'Meutres' series all use blue hues, the 'Technicolor' series offers a counterexample, depicting hotels, swimming pools, women and the beach, through garish yellows and pinks to underline the kitsch, vulgar and frivolous dimension of contemporary society (for example, 'Technicolor

Le bleu était la couleur la plus juste correspondant à mon propos. Le monde étant extrêmement réaliste mais en même temps complètement illusoire, alors en peignant des images apparemment réalistes et en les faisant bleues, j'indiquais la réalité et la non-réalité'.<sup>29</sup>

This artifice breaks any hypnotic effect which might arise from the fascination between the painting and its spectator. It becomes impossible to 'inhabit' the painting, forcing us instead to 'look at it'. The concept of artifice is fundamental to Monory's production, as he takes photographs, transforms them into slides, projects them and draws them with markers. Thus emotion is depicted, and numbed, forcing a chasm between spectator and painting. This is a mechanical era, enacting the death of the painter as we know him. Such artifice moves us away from the mimetic framework, and creates distance, as we find ourselves placed behind a pane, through the blue-filter, or indeed through the inclusion of panes of glass in the paintings. Indeed, by placing crosses upon some images – 'Noir n°23' (1991), 'Enigme n°4' (1992), 'Supplément n°43' (1997), 'Couleur n°18 Kidnapping' (2005), 'La vie imaginaire de Jonq'Erouas Cym n°7' (2001), 'Vitrine électrique n°1' (2003) to cite some examples – Monory takes this idea to its extreme and denounces our condition as *voyeurs*. It is as though he is saying 'you should not look at this' to the spectator, admonishing their interest or potential *schadenfreude* in this foreign scene. What is beheld is in fact a terrible sight and yet we remain anaesthetized, insensitive in the face of crime. Thus Monory denounces our modern passivity.

### **Monory as Author and Director**

Monory's literary and visual production are complementary, and he is also the author of a number of detective novels.<sup>30</sup> The most significant of these is *Diamondback*<sup>31</sup>, named after the popular American Colt revolver. This book is later translated into images in the 'Fuite' series (1980). *Diamondback* draws on the genre of the Road Movie: a man is persecuted and someone wants to kill him, for reasons unknown. To avoid death, he flees and crosses the United States, going from Palm Springs to L.A., San Francisco, Sacramento, Las Vegas

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n.2', 1977). This series also returns to the idea of crime and violence in 'Technicolor n. 11' (1977) depicting a shoot-out, colour enhancing the manic face of a machine-gun wielding man in the foreground.

<sup>29</sup> Catherine Flohic, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Monory's pre-1991 texts are published in the collection *Eldorado*, (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1991), with the exception of *Diamondback*.

and finally ending up in Nuevo Mexico. This novel contains Monory's personal 'mythologie', as he develops his passion for cars (Fords, Cadillacs, Buicks, Triumphs, Chryslers) and revolvers (Diamondbacks, Colts, Phyttons). *Diamondback's* Afterword enumerates prominent literary influences: 'Quelques phrases ont été piquées à Jonathan Swift, Arnaud Desjardins, Raymond Chandler, P.L. Brown, Harold Searles, Oscar Wilde, Jorge Luis Borges, [...]'.<sup>32</sup> This personal *bibliothèque* synthesises Monory's essence: a romantic yet violent dandy. Borges, a founder of post-modernism, develops the notion of 'Artifices' – the title of one of his compilations published in 1944 – paralleled by Monory who intellectualizes art and paradoxically seeks glimpses of the truth in artificial reflections and mirrors. In *Diamondback*, Monory establishes the dynamics of artifice: 'L'irréalité de la richesse de ces lieux (...)'<sup>33</sup> later adding: '(...) rien n'était vrai, chaque endroit était l'image fausse d'un luxe faux'<sup>34</sup>. *Theatrum mundi*: all the world's a theatre, all is representation. It is Monory's use of subtle or suggested narrative, using the techniques of the double, the ellipse and fragmentation, which means that his painting has much in common with the techniques of an author. He comments that, 'quand j'étais jeune homme, j'étais intéressé par Hopper qui racontait des histoires qui me touchaient particulièrement. C'était pas une narration comme la bande dessinée, mais un narration introvertie'.<sup>35</sup>

As a writer, Monory eschews the rules of painting. In *Diamondback*, even if colours are – surprisingly – not in abundance, we nonetheless find examples of colour reinforcing the physical, corporal aspects of crime and violence: 'Il avait vingt boites de balles 38 spéciales, dix dans le coffre arrière, neuf sous les sièges et la boîte à gants, une en vrac dans la poche gauche de sa veste en cuir jaune – il imaginait la couleur rouge de son sang sur le jaune violent'<sup>36</sup> and 'La jambe gauche de son pantalon blanc devenait lentement rouge [...]'.<sup>37</sup>

The corpus of Monory's work can itself be interpreted as a *Journal intime*. We have already seen the importance of his personal life in the 'Meutre' series. Just as Derrida associates Valerio Adami's work with 'frontières'<sup>38</sup>, the need to escape or explore, Monory's fiction and painting may be associated with roads, or highways. In 'Death valley no. 1' (1974), the righthand side of the painting shows skulls of men and animals in a

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<sup>31</sup> Jacques Monory, *Diamondback* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1979).

<sup>32</sup> *Diamondback*, p. 91.

<sup>33</sup> *Diamondback*, p. 28.

<sup>34</sup> *Diamondback*, p.30.

<sup>35</sup> Pascale Le Thorel, p. 44.

<sup>36</sup> *Diamondback*, p. 28.

<sup>37</sup> *Diamondback*, p. 35.

window (above) and Monory standing next to an antique car (below). In the centre, there is a reproduction of Dürer's 'Le chevalier et la mort'. Of this curious composition, Monory comments, 'J'ai d'abord peint le tableau de droite (...). Le tableau fini, je m'aperçus qu'il était une transposition moderne avec tous ses éléments symboliques de la gravure de Dürer (...) que je n'avais plus regardée depuis mon adolescence (...). Enfin, j'ai peint la Death Valley'<sup>39</sup> – and to the left is a highway.<sup>40</sup> The highway is the representation of life: the present is desolate and so is the future, monotonous and predictable. Death is never far, and its emblems – animal bones – are the only signposts along Monory's highways. Indeed, there is a discernible connection between Jack Kerouac's seminal beatnik novel *On the Road* and Monory's *Diamondback*. Dean Moriarty, the protagonist in *On the road*, travels along the United States West Coast to Mexico, as does the character in *Diamondback*. Being a beatnik is to 'se rebeller contre toute autorité organisée, mépriser le Square... (en un mot le Bourgeois)', the beatnik 'a rejeté le mensonge social, il s'est enfui sur les routes d'Amérique... désespéré, lucide, dur au cœur tendre, amer (...)'<sup>41</sup>. In the prologue to *Sur la route*, the French translation of *On the Road*, Michel Mohrt states: 'il y a une autre monotonie, qu'il faut apprendre à aimer, si l'on veut comprendre l'œuvre de Kerouac, c'est celle du jazz. Il faut lire les pages de ce roman comme on écoute, des heures durant, dans une salle obscure, un orchestre de jazz'.<sup>42</sup> This underlines another aspect of the colour blue: it is the colour of Jazz (consider, for example, the famous record label, *Blue Note*<sup>43</sup>). The colour blue lends Monory's work an internal coherency, a monotonous rhythm, evoking the repetitive piano notes of the walking bass which serve as a base to improvise melodies. The influence of cinema, especially American films, is evident in Monory's corpus:

'Dès le quatrième ou cinquième plan de *Scarface*, Howard Hawks a distribué la plupart des images qui hanteront (...) la peinture de Jacques Monory. Une boîte de nuit bientôt déserte. Un caïd qui téléphone. Un gangster coiffé d'un chapeau mou qui tire. Son ombre sur un mur. Son reflet dans un miroir. Son revolver. Les serpentins qui flottent dans l'espace et, baignant tout cela, la lumière de l'aube mêlée à celle de l'électricité'.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida, *La vérité en peinture*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1979).

<sup>39</sup> Pascale Le Thorel, p. 34.

<sup>40</sup> Another road reference can be found in 'USA n. 1/2' (1974).

<sup>41</sup> Michel Mohrt, Preface to *Sur la route*, Jack Kerouac (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), p. 8.

<sup>42</sup> *Sur la route*, p. 11.

<sup>43</sup> Blue Note Records, created in 1939, is a prestigious Jazz label.

<sup>44</sup> Jean-Luc Chalumeau, 'Pour une poignée de bleu', p. 4.

In 1978, Monory presents 'Technicolor', a 24-painting series dedicated to the world of Hollywood.<sup>45</sup> In 1983, he painted 'Manet-Hawks', which will consolidate the relationship between his paintings and films. Chalumeau will quote Monory's words: 'Je n'ai pas un maître, mais beaucoup de maîtres: Manet par exemple pour les peintres, et le cinéma. Il faut dire que j'ai passé davantage de temps, dans ma jeunesse, au cinéma que dans les musées. Alors on trouvera dans mon tableau Orson Welles (celui de Citizen Kane) et des images venues de films comme Scarface'<sup>46</sup>. But what of French cinema? Did American culture influence him indirectly, as processed by the French artists of the time? In the late 50s, the *Nouvelle Vague* movement defies the laws of traditional narrative cinema. *Nouvelle Vague* is Godard breaking narrative linearity; it is characters modelled by existentialism, it is memories, an attitude, an appropriation of the city, of the night.<sup>47</sup> Le Thorel affirms: 'Comment ne pas rapprocher la course, la chute de Monory de la fuite éperdue de Jean-Paul Belmondo dans la scène finale d'*A bout du souffle*?'<sup>48</sup> Like Jean-Pierre Melville, he develops a cult of personality<sup>49</sup>; both have a paradoxical relationship with American culture, a relationship of fascination and distance. He shares the passions of Louis Malle; both use the imagery of the Film Noir, the city, beautiful women, jazz, cars, and crime. *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud*<sup>50</sup> can doubtless be considered a principle influence in Monory's paintings (albeit one which goes unmentioned by the artist himself).

## Conclusions

Monory's pictorial language becomes increasingly complex, and can be traced from 'Meurtres' (1968) to 'Noir' (1991). He explores his personal mythology, juxtaposing images and the flow of the unconscious. Yet this evolution is not only stylistic: it also ideological. At first sight, one finds Monory's personal ghosts represented in his paintings, although to reduce his work to this one theme is unsatisfactory and neglects the myriad influence of film, literature and politics. Furthermore, let us underline that colour is the key, or rather the absence of colour: this blue-pane, blue-shield, blue-screen.

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<sup>45</sup> Displayed at the Maeght Gallery, Paris.

<sup>46</sup> Jean-Luc Chalumeau, *La nouvelle figuration*, pp. 172-173.

<sup>47</sup> *The American night* is also the title of a film by François Truffaut (1973).

<sup>48</sup> Pascale Le Thorel, p. 63.

<sup>49</sup> Jean Pierre Melville always wears a Stetson hat and sun glasses, enacts the author-actor double role in his own films, such as *Deux hommes à Manhattan*, aged six he received not a gun but a camera, a Pathé Baby.

<sup>50</sup> *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud*, directed by Louis Malle, starring Jeanne Moreau, France, 1957, an example of film noir with music by Miles Davis.

Monory, twentieth-century artist, son of late capitalism, a product of the image and of technology, tells us that reality is another form of fiction. Contemporary man consumes violence. So visible is this violence that it loses meaning. The result is a man reduced to the category of animal, free to exist at the mercy of his impulses. Monory denounces our passivity by pushing us to wake up, through paintings that require a strong interpretative effort from the part of the spectator. Contemplation is his worst enemy. He does not produce paintings so that they lie in agony in museums. There are holes in his narrations, ellipses, he spreads out the clues – *a priori* hermetic signs – and we have to complete them. The public has to infer from the information he makes available, and thus to elaborate on his representation. This discussion of crime leads us to the notion of “guilt”. Society, because of its lack of activity and its passivity, becomes responsible for its own degradation. Through his paintings he denounces the dark side of Western civilisation, in which the individual is ultimately alone, as ultimately depicted in *Diamondback*: ‘Il ne pouvait demander de l’aide; cette société meurtrière l’aurait avalé’.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Diamondback*, p. 18.

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