

Rolls, Alistair, Clara Sitbon and Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan (2018) *Origins and Legacies of Marcel Duhamel's Série Noire*, Leiden and Bristol: Brill, 198pp., ISBN 9789004358973, Hardback €105.00, E-book €95.00.

Alistair Rolls, Clara Sitbon and Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan's *Origins and Legacies of Marcel Duhamel's Série Noire*, published in 2018 by Brill, advances a novel and intriguing reconfiguring of the critical view of the editorial and translation strategies of the iconic *Série noire* under the direction of its founder, and director until 1977, Marcel Duhamel. Both commercially and critically successful, the *Série noire*, published by Gallimard, numbers over 2,900 novels as of September 2018 and counted the late Jean-Paul Sartre, Gilles Deleuze and countless other famous intellectuals among its readers. Over the years, many of its earlier publications (principally translations of Anglophone texts) have received increasingly negative criticism for their apparently arbitrary and poor-quality translational efforts. This book attempts to challenge some of the misconceptions that have dogged these translations. The authors, coming from a background of French literary studies, demonstrate how a novel, interdisciplinary approach, in this case Translation Studies-based, can lead to fruitful enquiry. This book forces a reassessment of the foundational period of this essential series and is sure to be of interest to both translation and literary studies scholars.

As the *Série noire* enters its eighth decade, the authors offer a timely reassessment of the series and the *roman noir* more generally through an exploration of Duhamel's editorial and translation policies. Literary studies scholars have in the past framed the *roman noir* as representative of a 'search for an authentic idiom' (2) within French culture through its portrayal of criminals and other social pariahs and in the vernacular of the underworld. Closer inspection reveals however that this vernacular was outdated even at the time of translation and is more of a stylized *Série noire* sociolect. Thus, the authors argue *Série noire* may be more profitably viewed as a 'poetic [...] of inauthenticity' (3) that sees Duhamel's translation and editorial policies as attempts to institute a conscious, creative, and coherent aesthetic, most notably through the use of slang, studies of which in the *Série noire* the authors usefully reference.

To permit such a reassessment, *skopos* theory of translation is employed. Originally formulated by Hans Vermeer in the 1970s, *skopos* defines a translational practice that privileges a target text's purpose above other considerations, such as fidelity to the source text. Such an approach

draws criticism however, especially where the source texts have achieved canonical status. The author's exploration of selected early *Série noire* texts reveals Duhamel's translation and editorial policy as one that operates at the macro (series) level and approaches the translation of texts in a way that may appear to substantially alter their character and content but brings them into line with the aesthetic goals of the series. The disregard for fidelity of early *Série noire* translations can be put into context when viewed as a purposeful aesthetic and as playing a part in the creation of a 'a social criticism project' (9) which aimed to contribute to a new national narrative during the difficult post-war years in France.

Trading on the cachet of being (or appearing to be) American, early *Série noire* publications are seen to simultaneously privilege foreignization of texts; note the '*traduit de l'américain*' of many a *Série noire* frontispiece. The creative and idiosyncratic language used in *Série noire* translations is also indicative of a translation strategy of domestication that verges on adaptation, as indicated by the choice of a highly evocative and particular collection of slang that is far removed from the language of the streets. In this book's first chapter, the authors use the example of Baudelaire's approach to his translations of Poe, in particular his translations of Poe's short stories, as pre-emptive of Duhamel's translation and editorial strategies in the *Série noire* a century later, summarising it as 'a translation praxis that incorporates original creative writing and that generates an allegory of the target culture through an appropriation of the source text' (29).

Examining the claiming of Poe's tales of ratiocination by the French crime fiction tradition presents the genre and its transnational production (which must include translation) as a central aspect of the noir *skopos*. A 'model of miscegenation' (26), the *Série noire skopos* is a meeting of two different genera resulting in an entirely new sort of progeny. This qualifies the noir genre as a *Weltliteratur*, where national traditions do not simply meet and inform one another, but where they are transcended. And yet, the interaction of foreign forms and local materials is often elided in literary studies fields that are confined to the national space, as explored by the authors in their opening chapter.

With crime fiction often characterized as *the* transnational genre (and it is true that it seems to irrepressibly transgress international borders, traditions, and languages), the authors also seek to challenge the reductive characterisation of the early *Série noire* as simply a unidirectional conduit for American hardboiled texts. In chapter 3, the authors examine an example of the

Série's third publication, Duhamel's own translation of James Hadley Chase's *Pas d'orchidées pour Miss Blandish* (1946). Seen as the text that 'set the tone' (75) intended for *Série noire* texts, Duhamel translated *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* relatively faithfully. Subject to many subsequent retranslations following Duhamel's own in 1946, this chapter charts the existence(s) of this text and the deep effect its translations had on its author, and his own reworking of the text throughout his career. Thus, the *Série noire* translation can be seen to exist, not only as a target text, but also as a source text that reciprocally informs the later rewriting of the foreign-language original.

Chapter 4 introduces two subsequent chapters that explore examples of texts that have entered the *Série noire* through translation and the effects this has on them throughout their history. Chapter 5 takes the interesting example of Jim Thompson's *Pop. 1280* (1964), whose title is translated *1275 âmes* (1966), to demonstrate a deliberate turning away from textual fidelity in translation. Challenging the assumption that translational loss is directly equatable with loss of quality, criticism of Thompson's five lost souls is framed by the authors as an example of critics focusing on translational loss and declining to 'engage with the text that is present' (123). Also explored here is the attempts by rival publisher Rivages' to institute retranslations of some *Série noire* texts. Arguing against such retranslations, the authors see attempts to retranslate texts into a contemporary idiom as liable to erase the possibility of reading early *Série noire* texts in 'certain key ways' (13), namely as valuable historically and socially specific allegories that can tell us much about the time and place of their production. Thus, attempts to extirpate texts from the *Série noire* through the removal or reworking of the effects of the series' idiosyncratic translation policy results in translations being 'left to shuttle' (13) between their original publication and the present and risks occluding the aesthetic that led to their initial success.

The book's concluding chapter further explores the consequences of the *Série noire* *skopos* on its authors and translators, taking here the example of bestselling author Douglas Kennedy, whose career in France began with the publication of his 1994 novel *The Dead Heart* as *Cul-de-sac* in 1997. This is not this novel's only Francophone incarnation, however. Outside the *Série noire*, *Cul-de-sac* came to be sold as *Piège nuptial*, having been removed from the series' catalogue in 2009 following requests from the author himself who wished to have his work retranslated in a form unmediated by the *Série noire* aesthetic. What this chapter explores is how the request by Kennedy for fidelity to his source text in translation may paradoxically

deprive him or an authentic voice in translation; the possibility (or impossibility) of Derrida's *transportable univocality* in translation. Such attempts are of course hampered by the fact that it was in the distinctive *Série noire* mould that Kennedy's work was introduced to France, and its shadow looms large over *Piège nuptial/Cul-de-sac*.

Presented as a self-proclaimed 'apologia for Marcel Duhamel's translation strategy' (178), this book succeeds in reframing the early works of the *Série noire* as much more than bad translations of American texts. Each text, when viewed in the context of the wider series, forms part of a self-aware project of aesthetic myth-making. Not the search for an authentic idiom, but one that is idiosyncratic and instantly recognisable. A Translation Studies approach affords a novel and revealing outlook that French studies scholars have frequently overlooked.

This study also adds weight to the call by literary scholar Franco Moretti for a reassessment of the approach to (or a resurrection of the project of) World Literature. After Goethe's *Weltliteratur*, the studying of literature in a world where borders are diminishing and national literary traditions (and canons) lose meaning is 'a problem that asks for a new critical method' (Moretti 2000: 55).

One such new critical method is Moretti's *distant reading* – a controversial rejection of close reading (which he claims is 'at bottom, [...] a theological exercise'). Here distance is a condition of knowledge that 'allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or larger than the text' (Moretti 2000: 57). The fruits of distance are evident in the authors' examination of Duhamel's translational *skopos*. Their critical method sheds light not just on individual texts, but on each work of the *Série noire* under Duhamel's directorship by looking beyond individual texts to the production of the series more broadly.

The Fall 2009 edition of the journal *Representations*, called "The Way We Read Today", also challenged the literary studies critical doxa by looking at some ways of approaching the study of literature beyond close or symptomatic reading. The most common tool of the literary scholar, close reading is the search for the ostensibly *true* meaning that the text represses. According to Fredric Jameson in his seminal work *The Political Unconscious*, this is 'a latent meaning behind the manifest one' (Jameson 2007: 45) through which texts fulfil their function as ideologue. And yet, Best and Marcus observe in their article "Surface Reading: An Introduction", it is an approach that ill fits some of today's media and literature.

This also calls into question the role of the literary scholar as activist and interrogates the right of the critic to ascribe meanings not located within the text itself. Platten cites the appeal of noir as its presentation of ‘a narrative of events unencumbered by the abstract discourse of the philosopher-novelist’ (Platten 2005: 120). It is the appeal of a text whose meanings are plain and not latent that led Patrick Raynal, a successor of Duhamel as director of the *Série noire* between 1991 and 2004, to describe crime and noir fiction as ‘l’avenir de la fiction’ (Pons 1997: 88) [‘the future of fiction’]. The insistence on the surface, a rejection of symptomatic reading, searching for latent meanings within texts is part of a conversation taking place that challenges existing perceptions of literature, what literature is, and how we should read it. Considering this, an approach that can shed light on the life and meaning of a text without assigning itself the reader or critic the role of creative intervener is appropriate for a corpus such as the *Série noire*. This engaging and compelling book demonstrates that just such an approach is both novel and fruitful for engaging with the literature we read now.

Daniel Magennis

Postgraduate Research Student (French Studies)

School of Arts, Humanities and Cultures

Queens University Belfast

References

- Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus (2009) ‘Surface Reading: An Introduction’,
Representations, 2009, 1–21.
- Jameson, Fredric (2007) *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*,
London: Routledge.
- Moretti, Franco (2000) ‘Conjectures on World Literature’, *New Left Review*, II: 54–68.
- Platten, David (2005) ‘Into the Woods: The Contemporary “Roman Noir” as Modern Fairy
Tale’, *Yale French Studies*: 116–30.
- Pons, Jean (1997) ‘Le Roman Noir Est l’avenir de La Fiction [Interview with Patrick
Raynal]’, *Les Temps Modernes*: 88–99.

Rolls, Alistair, Clara Sitbon, and Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan (2018) *Origins and Legacies of Marcel Duhamel's Serie Noire*, *Approaches to Translation Studies*, volume 46, Boston: Brill.