INTRODUCTION
Crime, Magic and Politics DO Mix: In Defence of Eka Kurniawan and Southeast Asian Noir

Eric Wilson

‘What is admirable about the fantastic is that there is no longer a fantastic; there is only the real.’ –Andre Breton, ‘What is Surrealism?’, 125.

I developed the idea of organizing a conference focusing on a regional comparison of the various national traditions of Southeast Asian crime writing for two reasons. The first was to try to formulate an explanation for what strikes me as a curious, if not troubling, aspect of Southeast Asian letters, especially that of the archipelago: its failure, in contrast to other East Asian societies, to develop crime fiction as a sophisticated, or ‘high’, form of literature (here, of course, the most obvious point of contrast is with Japan). This is especially odd, as the signature theme of crime writing, and, most especially those of the sub-genre of Noir, is in providing a literary landscape that is reflective of the political geography of colonialism—the criminality of the everyday (or the ‘normal’), the multiplicity and duplicity of personal identity, the dissociative nature of the private Self, the subversive nature of speech, and the internalization of strategies of covert resistance. The second reason was the recent rise to fame of the Indonesian novelist Eka Kurniawan whose work presents an almost unprecedented hybridization of the supernatural imaginary with the classical tropes of the genres of both crime and detective fiction. A prolific writer by any standard, Kurniawan’s recent international acclaim is due to the three of his novels to have been translated into English: Man-Tiger (2015), Beauty is a Wound (2015), and, most recently, Vengeance is Mine, All Others Pay Cash (2017). Kurniawan’s elevation to the status of ‘poster child’ of Indonesian ‘lit’ has not been an entirely smooth one, however, as he has generated a fair amount of negative reaction, much of it from within Indonesia. Abroad, a vocal (and rather passionate) critic of Kurniawan is Max Lane, the Australian translator of the Buru Quartet. Lane’s assessment of Kurniawan—conveyed to me in a memorable personal conversation—is that Kurniawan’s success is symptomatic of the cultural decadence of post-Marxist literature and politics within the archipelago: the (so-called) ‘magic realism’ of the sprawling epic Beauty is a Wound (which, it should not be forgotten, is very much a disguised commentary upon the events of 1965) is a regressive and mystifying bourgeois substitution for the tough-minded neo-Stalinism of Socialist Realism—and, therefore, orthodox anti-colonialism—of Pramoedya Ananta Toer. In other words, the deficit of the rationalistic detective genre, in sharp contrast to the ‘frightening’ surplus of the decidedly irrational Horror genre within Indonesian cinema and literature, is a symptom of reactionary political infantilism. Contra Lane, and very much within the spirit of the conference, I will place Kurniawan within the progressive but decidedly anti-Stalinist tradition of neo-Surrealist Caribbean Negritude—the appropriation of supernatural motifs and imaginaries as a poetic mechanism for the ideological de-legitimation of neo-colonialist super-structures. ¹ My thesis is this: the apparent marginalisation in Indonesia of the rationalist Western-style detective/crime novel by the ‘folkloric’ Horror novel (or film) does not so much represent an essential contra-rational

¹ A trend that appears to be adopted by other Indonesian writers, such as Intan Paramaditha in her recent ghost novel Gentayangau (2017).
tradition within Indonesian culture but rather a deliberate political strategy of covert political resistance and social critique. The historical co-incidence of the genres of Horror and Crime was governed by the contingency of the operation of a specifically colonialist form of institutionalized censorship within the early phases of Indonesian ‘modernization’.

After three fascinating days of discussion the members of the conference arrived at a general consensus regarding what I have summarized as the general conclusions of the conference.

(i) Applying both Formalism and genre-theory strictly, neither Malaysian nor Indonesian noir objectively corresponds to the established classic or iconic tropes of American noir which is still generally considered to serve as the ‘world standard’ of dark crime writing. [Eric Wilson; Dag Yngvesson]

(ii) However, Indonesian noir does constitute its own nativist or indigenous form of crime writing, one that is marked by an inextricable confluence of the genres of Horror and Crime [Dag Yngvesson; Meghan Downes; Nadia Khan; Suma Riella Rusdiarti]

(iii) The prevalence of supernatural motifs within Indonesian crime fiction is not the manifestation of a trans-historical contra-rationalism but marks an historical continuation of the same political strategy at work within horror writing and/or folkloric supernaturalism, even if only unconsciously: the need to circumvent the repressive machineries of colonialist censorship [William Bradley Horton; Christopher A. Woodrich; Mundi Rahayu]

(iv) The more recent innovation of Indonesian crime fiction, as with the earlier and more nativist tradition of Horror and the supernatural, constitutes a direct continuation of this earlier strategy of political and social critique by covert means [Evi Eliyanah; William Bradley Horton; Christopher A. Woodrich; Mundi Rahayu; Susan Philip]

(v) The comparative absence of Horror within the Malaysian tradition of crime writing is due to that nation’s different developmental trajectory of Islamic modernity.

It is important to recall that, historically, the emergence of the detective story in the mid-19th century is inseparable from the development of conspiracy theory. The ‘conspiracy theorist in fact develops out of the classic detective’\(^2\); conversely, ‘a conspiracy theory narrative depends on the presence of a conspiracy theorist’.\(^3\) The link with conspiracy is intriguing, precisely because the very word denotes both organized criminality and the horrific—at least of the political or moral kind of horror. As we should expect, there are striking similitudes between the protagonist of the horror story and the much wider-ranging cultural stereotype of the detective. In one sense, this relationship is wholly obvious as ratiocination or the uncovering and naming of the Monster is one of the primary intellectual ‘seductions’ of the Horror genre. This is made clear by Noel Carroll in his important book *The Philosophy of Horror or the Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990),\(^4\) which overtly links detection with Horror, at least thematically. How to solve the paradox of people voluntarily viewing horror films thereby confusing pleasure with fear? Carroll’s answer, typical of a logical positivist, is that Horror provides us with a pleasure of an

\(^2\) Wisnicki, 18.
\(^3\) Ibid, 17.
\(^4\) Carroll, 178-95.
intellectual sort—the identification, naming and explaining of the ‘monster’ which is just one more instance of that ‘play of discovery and confirmation, supported by ratiocination, [that] can be found in detective thrillers. On a deeper level, though, supernatural literature can be seen as replicating the central metaphysical premise of all detective fiction: the re-establishment of orthodox cultural and social categories of meaning. The strongest treatment of this theme of ratiocination as ‘metaphysical thriller’ from the perspective of detective fiction that I know of is that provided by Nicole Rafter in her seminal study *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society* (2006; second edition). The basic pattern of the detective tale, very much like the horror story, is the search.

These tales have [...] ‘goal-oriented plots,’ patterns of action to which investigation is the key. Mysteries and detective films often mete out clues in small, progressive portions, so that the viewer’s process of discovery parallels the investigator’s. [...] Sometimes [...] they conceal the object of the search, such as the villain’s identity, as long as possible [...] At other times the goal of the search is clear from the start, and the investigator’s job is to find the thing that is missing.

Detective fiction strictly adheres to a realist epistemology (and metaphysics) premised upon the supremely optimistic representational theory of language: the final solution to any problem is nothing other than the establishment of the correct relationship between word and thing. Not coincidentally, the detective re-affirms the reader’s faith in the existence of ‘a benevolent and knowable universe [...]’, a world that can be interpreted by human reason, embodied in the superior intellect of the detective. The detective employs a kind of ‘practical semiotics,’ his goal ‘to consider data of all kinds as potential signifiers and to link them, however disparate and incoherent they seem, to a coherent set of signifieds, that is, to turn them into signs of the hidden order behind the manifest conclusion, of the solution to the mystery, of the truth.’ Therefore, as the successful art of detection (‘sleuthing’) is nothing other than the metaphysical validation of the objective rationality of the universe acted out through literary means, the function of ‘the detective hero is to guarantee the reader’s absolution from guilt. This is basic to the genre’s form of wish fulfillment [...] What matters is the detective’s revelation, not the murder’s punishment, for in this myth of rationality truth takes priority over justice.

The detective, no less than the scientist, is a harbinger of Modernity. Ratiocination is the hallmark of the detective (and the scientist), the investigator of ‘hidden’ truths who re-arranges reality into the semblance of order; ergo, the detective, just like the scientist, is a supremely Cartesian being. I define the-detective-as-Cartesian-being as Literature’s greatest personification of the ‘framework of modernity’ ambitiously identified by Stephen Toulmin as

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5 Carroll, 186.
6 In the (in)famous words of Stephen King: ‘We love and need the concept of monstrosity because it is a reaffirmation of the order we all crave as human beings [...] it is not the physical or mental aberration in itself which horrifies us, but rather the lack of order which these aberrations seem to imply [...] Monstrosity fascinates us because it appeals to the conservative Republican in a three-piece who resides within all of us.’ He could just as easily have said the conservative Republican in a rain-splattered trench-coat. King, *Danse Macabre*, 41.
9 Stowe, ‘From Semiotics to Hermeneutics’ 367-68. Emphases in the original.
the central legacy of the Cartesian Revolution (1618-55)\textsuperscript{11}: the ‘evolution of a new [post-medieval] Cosmopolis, in which the divinely created Order of Nature and the humanly created Order of Society were once again seen as illuminating each other...’\textsuperscript{12}

There is a horrific fly in the ointment, however.

The cultural status of the fictional detective as a Cartesian being is wholly dependent upon the stability of the assumptions governing the detective genre concerning the hierarchical order between reason and ‘un-reason’ (or, more generally, ‘emotion’) —the very demarcation that so much of literary Modernism attempts to subvert. In truth, the suppressed double of the detective novel is the crime novel, which is grounded in an equal but opposite anti-representational theory of language that emphasizes the irreducible arbitrariness of the relationship between words and things. Rafter has brought out the latent nebulousness of cinematic crime fiction brilliantly, which, as a film genre, encapsulates all of those other genres, including Horror, in which a tension-laden encounter with paradoxical meaning is central to the narrative.

The best way to [...] define crime movies [is] as \textit{films that focus primarily on crime and its consequences}.\textsuperscript{13} Crime films do not constitute a genre (a group of films with similar themes, settings and characters) as Westerns and war films do. Rather, crime films constitute a \textit{category} that encompasses a number of genres—detective movies, gangster films, cop and prison movies, courtroom dramas, and the many offerings for which there may be no better generic label than, simply, crime stories. Like the terms \textit{dramas} and \textit{romances}, \textit{crime film} is an umbrella term that covers several smaller and more coherent groups.\textsuperscript{14}

Tony Hilfer has identified an anti-Cartesian epistemological pessimism as the central literary conceit of all forms of the crime tale: ‘The central and defining feature of the crime novel [or film] is that in it Self and World, guilt and innocence are problematic [unknowable?]. The world of the crime novel is \textit{constituted} by that which is problematic in it,’ which works to overthrow the Cartesian complacency of the detective novel.\textsuperscript{15} Likewise, the metaphysical landscape of Crime, no less than that of Horror, is a chaotic wasteland of collapsed categories, what Hilfer denotes as an ‘ontologically pathological world’.

In [...] crime novels the everyday world of normal perception loses its taken-for-granted secure status. In an ontologically pathological world, those under threat must become phenomenologically hyper-acute. The crime novel presents a phenomenologically upside-down world, inverting or intensifying to the point of breakdown the normative structures of perception so brilliantly analysed in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s \textit{The Phenomenology of Perception}.\textsuperscript{16}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Toulmin, \textit{COSMOPOLIS}, 98 and 108.}
\footnote{Toulmin, 98.}
\footnote{Similarly, we may paraphrase Stephen King’s definition of Horror in the same way: the horror film is a film that focuses upon the appearance of the monster and its consequences. In a sense, every monster is a criminal—both are law-breakers.}
\footnote{Rafter, \textit{Shots in the Mirror}, 6. Emphases in the original.}
\footnote{Hilfer, \textit{The Crime Novel}, 2. Emphases in the original.}
\footnote{Hilfer, \textit{The Crime Novel}, 34.}
\end{footnotes}
Hilfer’s understanding of the protagonist of the crime novel by way of Merleau-Ponty yields up an abject figure who bears an uncanny resemblance to the hero of the horror novel, a radically de-centred Self who is forced to endure a metaphysical cataclysm; when ‘life has become de-centered’ the subject loses all power of rational perception, objects become both ‘too short and too wide: the majority of events cease to count for me, whereas the nearest ones consume me. They enshroud me like night, and they rob me of individuality and freedom. I can literally no longer breathe: I am possessed.’

All of which sounds quite ... horrible.

The Existenz of the (anti-) hero of the crime novel is a radically ant-Cartesian one: he or she viscerally embodies the paramount fallacy of classical epistemology, which, in the name of ‘realism’ is to reduce awareness to transparency, a metaphysical error that masquerades as a psychological conceit: the Cartesian being ‘teaches us that the existence of consciousness merges with the consciousness of existing, that there can be nothing in it of which it is unaware, [and] that reciprocally, everything that it knows with certainty it finds within itself’. In other words: the abolition of the unconscious. The lurking paradox here is that the recognized inventor of detective fiction is none other than one of the greatest of Horror writers who was utterly possessed by his unconscious: Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849). Just as with the reversible Monster-Gods of primitive religions who eternally migrate between creation and destruction, the conveyor of order is the instigator of chaos once stood on his or her head. It is a matter of no little import that the early detective writer, such as Poe, who could move from ratiocination to Horror so effortlessly, does so most subversively through his pioneering literary hybrids of crime/detective tales. Poe presents us with not one but two sets of double, each binary pair playing on a slightly different variant of epistemological uncertainty: Detective/ Crime and Crime/Horror.

An added complication here—one that is of the greatest importance when reading Kurniawan—is that there is a clear, although often under-recognized, distinction between two dominant motifs of detective fiction, the classical ‘who-done-it’ and the comparatively more recent ‘hard-boiled’. Literary criticism ordinarily subsumes the whole of detective literature under the former category, relegating hard-boiled to the inferior status of a grotesque hybrid of the detective and the crime novel—but for that very reason proving it a vital element in the literary migration from Detective to Crime to Horror. This insight is re-enforced by an appreciation of the respective literary landscapes of the two forms: who-done-it is English while hard-boiled is American, each sub-genre reflecting the social consciousness of their respective national cultures: social harmony versus alienated individualism. What serves to partially unify them, however, is the dramatic centrality of the figure of the detective whose signature trait in both his English (Inspector) and American (sleuth/gum-shoe) forms is ratiocination.

17 Merleau-Ponty, The Phenomenology of Perception, 300.
18 Merleau-Ponty, The Phenomenology of Perception, 299.
19Within the American literary tradition this migration from Crime to Horror was greatly facilitated by the centrality to American letters of that style known as the ‘Gothic’. See Leslie A. Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, passim.
‘On the evening Margio killed Anwar Sadat, Kyai Jahro was blissfully busy with his fishpond’\textsuperscript{21} is the opening sentence of \textit{Man Tiger} (London: Verso, 2015), the most hard-boiled of Kurniawan’s tales translated so far.\textsuperscript{22} The novel begins with an exceptionally nasty homicide that, we eventually learn, serves as the revenge killing of an adulterous and sexually predatory male by the son of a sexually exploited and physically abused woman. And here is how the novel ends, a direct evocation of the first line.

‘Marry my mother and she’ll be happy.’
Anwar Sadat shook his head nervously, and his reply came out brokenly.
‘That’s impossible, you know I have a wife and daughters.’ Something in his face said the proposition was absurd, making what he said next redundant. ‘Besides, I don’t love your mother.’
That was when the tiger came out of Margio, white as a swan.\textsuperscript{23}

The description of the crime scene, and the murderer, is clearly based upon the ultra-graphic hard-boiled manner of the contemporary American ‘procedural’ crime novel—that is, the plot is an exercise in forensic analysis.

The scene was forever burned into Maesa Dewi’s retinas, there for years, unexpunged for decades, an image more brutal than any horror film She saw the half-severed neck; even the throats of cows slaughtered for the Festival of Sacrifice never looked that ghastly. There were clods of flesh scattered all over the floor, like spilled spaghetti sauce. The white tiled floor with streaks of red blood resembled the national flag. And still standing there was Margio, his face a mask of gore, nearly unrecognizable, while his hands and shirt were just as repulsive. For a moment they exchanged a glance at the strangest threshold of conscience, in a state where both comprehended the hideousness of what had happened.\textsuperscript{24}

The possessory spirit of the white tiger that periodically takes over the body of its host, the protagonist Margio, in moments of crisis is described in terms that directly invokes the literature of the serial killer: the homicidal impulse is spontaneous, irresistible, and viscerally embedded within the mechanisms of the killer’s own body.

As Margio later confessed to the police, yes, he killed the man by biting through an artery in his neck. There was no other weapon available, he said […] The idea came to him all of a sudden, as a burst of light in his brain. He spoke of hosting something inside his body, something other than guts and entrails. It poured out and steered him, encouraging him to kill. The thing was so strong, he said, he didn’t need a weapon of any kind […] ‘It wasn’t me,’ he said calmly and without guilt. ‘There is a tiger inside my body.’\textsuperscript{25}

But most subversive (or progressive) of all, is that the tiger is really a \textit{tigress}, a veritable Jungian \textit{anima} that inhabits nearly all of the male descendants of Margio’s patrilineal family, moving from generation to generation. In other words, the men of this clan are selected as potential instruments of vengeance for the sexual and domestic abuse of women (significantly,

\textsuperscript{21} Kurniawan, \textit{Man Tiger}, 1.
\textsuperscript{22} See Wilson, ‘Almost \textit{Noir},’ passim.
\textsuperscript{23} Kurniawan, \textit{Man Tiger}, 172.
\textsuperscript{24} Kurniawan, \textit{Man Tiger}, 31.
\textsuperscript{25} Kurniawan, \textit{Man Tiger}, 29 and 35.
Margio’s abusive father Komar bin Syueb is the only male who is passed over. Kurniawan’s narratively deft touch tremendously enlarges the social dimensions of the novel and lays out the groundwork for a nativist form of crime writing that is both orthodox and conservative: the challenging of Feminine identities is a central theme within contemporary Noir fiction. ‘Classic’ Noir (c. 1944-58) is concerned—if not actually obsessed—with a paranoid and besieged Masculinity of which the genre’s archetypal character of the femme fatale was the primary signifier. By transposing vigilant Feminist justice to a (female) supernatural creature operating through the passive body of a male marionette enables Kurniawan to artfully camouflage a purely secular crime story of a homicidal femme fatale as a mere folkloric entertainment concerning ‘everyday’ magical spirits. Simultaneously, he pulls off the most subversive feat conceivable: he ‘trans-genders’ the hero by making his spirit of power a feminine one—tigress for tiger.

In his Introduction to *Man Tiger*, Benedict Anderson makes a number of interesting and useful comments concerning Kurniawan’s ‘evolving style’ as a writer. Among these, including ‘the sheer beauty of his prose’ and ‘the pervasive voice of the storyteller’ is the one that I find to be the most insightful: ‘a growing discipline in the use of the supernatural.’ In Anderson’s own words

In *Beauty is a Wound*, the magical is everywhere, as it is in the still popular traditional puppet theatre based on local versions of the Mahabharata and Ramayana epics. In this theatre there is always a zoo of gods and goddesses, aristocratic warriors, devils, kings, giants, clowns, ghosts, princesses, and so on, all of whom are iconographically fixed. For example, princesses and queens are always prodigiously beautiful, while the female clowns are physical grotesques. There are no plain—but-fascinating women. In the earlier of Eka’s two [translated] novels, women are always either ‘too beautiful to believe’ or horribly ugly. But in *Man Tiger* there is only one supernatural being, and space is made for ordinary women whose characters develop as the story proceeds.

Two things in particular are worth noting in this passage. The first is that Anderson is making sly reference to the contemporary form of post-colonialist writing known as ‘magic realism’, which is commonly understood to originate with the quasi-fantastic novels of Gabriel Marquez Garcia (1927-2014) and with whose work Kurniawan is fashionably identified in the Western media. Anytime an indigenous writer in the Developing World directly evokes the supernatural as a plot device it is assumed that he or she must be operating within the trope of magic realism, itself an invention of Eurocentric literary critics. As Michael Richardson observes, magic realism is ‘... a reification of reality in a particular (exotic) form appropriate to the Other which, although implying a separation from the traditions of Europe, is none the less defined in relation to those rejected traditions’. Shorn of its Eurocentric appendages, magic realism may be viewed as an exotic form of anti-exoticism, not the deviation from but the subversion of

26 See Wilson, “You’ll Learn, Tough Guy”, passim.
27 Anderson, xii.
28 Anderson, xii.
29 Anderson, xii.
30 Anderson xii.
31 Anderson, xii-xiii.
Modernity through its re-presentation of supernaturalism (or archaic pre-modernity) as a localized form of ‘common sense’. This is made clear by Robert Menil in his seminal essay on Caribbean poetry, ‘Concerning Colonial Exoticism’.

It goes without saying that race, tom-toms, witchcraft, and luxuriant vegetation do exist and must be integrated into the poem. But it is enough that they are treated in themselves (for example evoked for their strangeness) instead of being subordinated to and seen through the historical human drama for them to shoot forth in decorative and exotic play.33

Classifying Kurniawan as a magic realist, therefore, is fundamentally misleading; misleading because such an overly neat classification reveals a Eurocentric refusal to come to terms with a central characteristic of Indonesian literature, both formal and popular: the use of supernatural narrative, in particular the forms of both the ghost story, with the ghost acting as the sign of trauma—either repressed memory (historical) or denied desire (erotic)—as well as more the generic forms of Horror, usually centred upon the return of a dead person (a ‘Revenant’ in Irish folklore) as a means of expressing cultural concerns and anxieties over the historical ‘woundings’ of colonialism, genocide and slavery.34 As Anderson rightly perceives, Kurniawan is deploying traditional forms of Javanese oral folklore and storytelling for his own (largely playful) ends; to label this ‘magic realism’ is to fail to come to terms with that which most demands direct engagement: within a culture that accepts supernaturalism as a form of causality (albeit subject to its own internal set of rules parallel to those of the Cartesian/physical world) magic realism is not magical—it is merely ‘realism’. The growing Western inclination to regard the belief in the supernatural—and, increasingly, with the religious in its entirety—as a ground for refusal of recognition as serious art (or thought) is nothing more than the continuation of neo-colonialism by other means. It is precisely through Kurniawan’s sly, and largely self-satirizing, deployment of the supernatural that allows his texts to operate nomadically, crossing across cultural boundaries and acquire new and more subversive meanings through their migrations, demonstrating that the occult can deconstruct and subvert power structures as effectively as the profanely political or the mundanely material.

One of my favourite pieces of anecdotal evidence proving the lingering ghosts of neo-colonialism within the post-modern Western present is the KITLV: The Royal Netherlands Institute of Southeast Asian and Caribbean Studies. At first glance, the obvious differences between Southeast Asia and the Caribbean would render absurd (or at least extremely suspect) any attempt to amalgamate them under a single institutional rubric of ethnographic investigation. At second glance it all makes sense: what unifies the two archipelagos is the primal trauma of colonialism; hence, The Royal Netherlands Institute of the East Indies and the West Indies (Studies). I will use this ‘lucky accident’ as my springboard into the final portion of my Introduction: the underappreciated similitude of Indonesian and Caribbean literature which is unified by a strategic deployment of supernaturalism as covert critique of colonialist and neo-colonialist realities within the true abject of the Modern World-System.

33 Menil, ’Concerning Colonial Exoticism’, 179.
34 In Beauty is a Wound (2002), Kurniawan beautifully manages to unite these two disparate threads: the vengeful ‘evil spirit’ that controls the action throughout the novel is the fruit of the spoliation of a native romance by a sexually predatory Dutch landlord.
For convincing proof of the status of both archipelagos as the abject we need look no further than the seminal work of Bartolome De Las Casas, *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* (1542): ‘... for, until now, there has been an effective conspiracy of silence about what has really been happening...’ What renders Hispaniola abject is the world historical arc from slavery to genocide.

There is one other general rule in all of this [apart from the worsening of Spanish depredations following the death of Queen Isabella of Castile in 1504], and it is that, wherever the Spaniards set foot, tight throughout the Americas, they subjected the native inhabitants to the cruelties of which we have spoken, killing these poor and innocent people, tyrannizing them, and oppressing them in the most abominable fashion. The longer they spent in the region the more ingenious we the tortments, each crueller than the last, that they inflicted on their victims, as God finally abandoned them and left them to plummet headlong into a life of full-time crime and wickedness.

Critically, De Las Casas frames the entirety of his ‘Short Account’ of anti-colonialism in terms of illegality; specifically, Spain’s breach of natural law and natural justice: ‘...everybody involved in the administration of the New World was blind to the simple truth enshrined in the first principles of law and government that nobody who is not a subject of a civil power in the first place can be deemed by law to be in rebellion against that power.’ Most noxious was the nefarious *Requerimiento*: drafted in 1513 by Spanish jurists, the ‘Requirement’ established the unilateral acquisition of the entirety of the West Indies by Spain on the basis of papal grant contained within the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494)—in contemporary terms this constituted unlawful extra-territorial prescription. Spanish envoys entering a native region for the first time were ‘required’ to read out the document aloud which constituted the lawful subordination of the Natives to the Crown; ‘What mattered was the act. Once the Europeans had discharged their duty to inform, the way was clear for pillage and enslavement’—in the face of guaranteed indigenous non-compliance.

This must be understood: De Las Casas frames the entire issue of colonialism not in terms of barbarity but criminality, the West Indies being reduced to an un-governable criminal landscape in which mass murder flows directly from primal theft. Hispaniola is discursively reconstructed as the site of ‘crimes that threaten to bring a collapse of civilization and to presage the end of the world.’ The lack of effective legal oversight of the pro-colonialist factions of the Spanish court (‘the prime movers behind the adventurism and the tyranny that has bedevilled the New World...’) and their agents (‘the taint of corruption and filth that has been indissolubly associated with the pursuit of wealth in the New World, the authorities there having been contaminated, body and soul, by the actions of those under them, a fact which goes a long way to explain why their agents have got away with destroying the region unchecked’) transforms the Indies from a place of mere crime to a site of absolute horror. The Spanish agents ‘whose brief was to plunder, exploit and devastate, and who had never known any regulatory check on their activities but had rather revelled in a chaos worthy

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35 De Las Casas meant the West but he may just as well have written about the East. See Wilson, *The Savage Republic*, Chapter Six.
36 De Las Casa, 127-8.
37 De Las Casas, 25.
38 De Las Casas, 52-3.
39 Pagden, xxiv-xxv.
40 De Las Casas, 128.
of Lucifer himself [...] these godless agents, by now beyond any respect for the law, quite openly flouted the [royal] provisions and, accepting that they had in effect placed themselves beyond the pale, proceeded to behave [...] as true outlaws, recognizing no limit whatever to their actions and inflicting a tyrannical misery on the people [...] They have all been, in every case, extremely reluctant to give up the position and the wealth they have won for themselves during their lives of crime, and unwilling, also, to free the natives they have acquired and condemned to perpetual slavery. De Las Casas concludes his phantasmagoria of primitive criminology with nothing less than the invocation of *lex aeterna*, or transcendental justice: ‘My deep love of Castile has also been a spur [in writing the *Short Account*], for I do not wish to see my country destroyed as a divine punishment for sins against the honour of God and the True Faith.'

As Anthony Pagden observes, indigenous resistance to the *Requerimiento* was guaranteed—but what form was it to take? For the politically progressive, it is all too simple to focus upon the externalizable signs of anti-colonial resistance: uprisings, jacqueries, and rebellions. Altogether too difficult, because altogether too ambivalent, are the internalized forms of resistance, the covert critique and re-appropriation of what James W. Scott has identified as the colonalist public transcript: ‘With rare, but significant exceptions, the public performance of the subordinate will, out of prudence, fear, and the desire to curry favour, be shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful. I shall use the term *public transcript* as a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate.' Here, *public* refers to action that is openly avowed to the other party in the power relationship [master to slave], and *transcript* is used almost in its juridical sense [...] of a complete record of what was said. This complete record, however, would also include non-speech acts such as gestures and expressions. The almost inverted appropriation of the colonizer (the model) by the colonized (the subject) is an intrinsically subversive action because the colonized is always in a position to re-deploy the colonizer’s discourse (freedom; rationality; westernization; progress) against him or her—a fact not unappreciated by Homi Bhabha.

It is as if the very emergence of the ‘colonial’ is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition within the authoritative discourse itself. The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace.

For Bhabha, ‘colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference.’ If this is true, then it would not be going too far to categorize the folkloric supernaturalism that underpins magic realism as the weaponized mimetic ‘double’ of Cartesianism. It would also make clear the full meaning of this remarkable passage from Aime Cesaire’s seminal *Discourse on Colonialism* (2000) where he explains the seduction of French Surrealism for early 20th century Caribbean writers and poets.

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41 De Las Casa, 128-9.
42 De Las Casas, 127.
43 Scott, 2.
44 Scott 12 fn.1.
45 Bhabha 127. Emphasis in the original.
46 Bhabha 126. Emphases in the original.
I was ready to accept surrealism because I already had advanced on my own, using as my starting points the same authors that had influenced the surrealist poets [e.g., Isidore Ducasse, aka Comte de Lautreamont, *Chants de Maldoror*]. Their thinking and mine had common reference points. Surrealism provided me with what I had been confusedly searching for. I have accepted it joyfully because in it I have found more of a confirmation than a revelation. It was a weapon that exploded the French language [...] Surrealism interested me to the extent that it was a liberating factor [...] if I apply the surrealist approach to my particular situation [a Caribbean émigré in France] I can summon up these unconscious forces. This, for me, was a call to Africa. I said to myself: if it’s true that superficially we are French, we bear the marks of French customs; we have been branded by Cartesian philosophy, by French rhetoric; but if we break with all that, if we plumb the depths, then what we will find is fundamentally black [...] I felt that beneath the social being would be found a profound being, over whom all sorts of ancestral layers and alluviums had been deposited.47

The multiple associations between the magical (realist or otherwise) and the surreal is hardly coincidental—it is absolutely central to Surrealism which is grounded upon a re-configuration of magical thinking as a form of automatic psychism that will culminate in the emancipation of the Freudian Id as a revolutionary ‘social force’.48 Andre Breton makes this clear in his *Manifesto of Surrealism*:

*Surrealism: n.* pure psychic automatism, by which it is proposed to express (whether verbally, in writing or by any other means), *the real functioning of thought*. Dictation of thought in the absence of any control exercised by reason and beyond any aesthetic or moral preoccupation.49 [...] Surrealism is based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought. It tends to ruin once and for all other psychic mechanisms and to substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life.50

Surrealism’s overriding aim was to achieve a ‘unified field’ of all those literary and artistic forms (fantastic literature, the Symbolist, the Grotesque, Horror, the Gothic, Romanticism, Science Fiction) that were discursively governed by a reified logic of substitution—the radicalization of metaphor. Hence the surrealist’s credo that from the point of view of Life itself ‘everything is contained within the whole, everything is related, there is a complementarity of

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47 Cesaire, 83-4.
48 Which might also unconsciously constitute a racist double-entendre: the Id equals ‘darkness’ which equals ‘blackness’ which equals the African.
49 Admiringly elucidated by surrealist Paul Aragon thusly: ‘It should be understood that the real is a relation like any other; the essence of things is by no means linked to their reality, there are other relations besides reality, which the mind is capable of grasping and which also are primary, like chance, illusion, the fantastic, dream. These various groups are united and brought into harmony in one single order, surreality. ... This surreality—a relation in which all notions are merged together—is the common horizon of religions, magic, poetry, intoxications, and of all life that is lowly...’ Cited in Breton, ‘What is Surrealism?’, 126.
50 Breton, *Manifesto*, 26. See also Breton in ‘What is Surrealism?’ at 129: ‘Everything leads to the belief that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future, the communicable and the incommunicable, the high and the low, are not perceived as contradictions. It would be vain to attribute to surrealism any other motive than the hope of determining this point.’
everything, everything resembles everything else—in an organic way. [...] Metaphor breaks the solitude of ideas and things in the mind (a solitude we call rationality) and, as a result, discredits stagnant, putrefying and idealist stabilities.51

Although there is no formal name for this fusion of covert political critique with folkloric supernaturalism in the East Indies, in the West Indies it is called Negritude, and it is this ‘vital’ connection between magical thinking and the colonial abject that enables surreality to aesthetically migrate from magic to politics, as Michael Richardson’s discussion of Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier’s critique of European Surrealism makes abundantly clear.

[T]he European surrealist was condemned to a paucity of vision because surrealism was not embedded in society, the European cultural soil being too barren for its richness. Its real domain was Latin American and Caribbean, where magic remains part of everyday life. Surrealism thus becomes the appropriate means of expression in Latin America, but it is that surrealism divorced from its critical roots and recuperated as a ‘real marvellous’, or the ‘magic realism’ that today substantially conditions our idea of an appropriate Latin American literature.52

We can easily read this as an elaboration of Andre Breton’s remarks made in his famous interview with Rene Belance.

[...] in considering race and other barriers that must before all else be corrected by other means, I think that surrealism aims and is alone in aiming systematically at the abolition of these barriers [of the difference between people]. You know that in surrealism the accent has always been on displacing the ego, always more or less despotic, by the id, held in common with all [...] Surrealism is allied with peoples of colour, first because it has always taken their side against all forms of imperialism and white banditry [...] and secondly because of the profound affinities that exist between surrealism and so-called ‘primitive’ thought, both of which seek the abolition of the conscious and the everyday, leading to the conquest of revelatory emotion.53

Historically, this is wholly accurate; Surrealism’s self-conscious shift to the political was occasioned by anti-colonialist struggle, specifically the Rif War (1920-26).

No coherent political or social attitude, however, made its appearance till 1925; that is to say (and it is important to stress this), till the outbreak of the Moroccan war, which, re-arousing our particular hostility to the way armed conflicts affects man, placed suddenly before us the necessity of making a public protest. ... Surrealist activity at that moment entered its reasoning phase. It suddenly experienced the necessity of crossing over the gap that separates absolute idealism from dialectical materialism. ... In reality, we are faced with two problems, one of which is the problem raised, at the beginning of the twentieth century, by the discovery of the relations between the conscious and the unconscious. The other problem facing us is that of the social action we should pursue.54

54 Breton, ‘What is Surrealism?’, 117 and 128. Emphasis in the original.
The publication of ‘Murderous Humanitarianism’ by the Surrealist Group of France in 1932 marked the explicit shift of Surrealism towards anti-colonialism; the tenor of this seminal work was reproduced eleven years later in Martinique with the publication of Suzanne Cesaire’s ‘1943: Surrealism and Us’, arguably the foundational text of Negritude.

Thus, far from contradicting, diluting, or diverting our revolutionary attitude toward life, surrealism strengthens it. It nourishes an impatient strength within us, endlessly reinforcing the massive army of refusals. ... Millions of black hands will fling their terror across the furious skies of world war. Freed from a long benumbing slumber, the most dispossessed of all peoples will rise up from plains of ashes. ... Our surrealism will provide this rising people with a punch from its very depths. Our surrealism will enable us to finally transcend the sordid dichotomies of the present: whites/Blacks, Europeans/Africans, civilized/savages—at last rediscovering the magic power of the mahousis, drawn directly from living sources. Colonial idiocy will be purified in the welder’s blue flame. We shall recover our value as metal, our cutting edge of steel, our unprecedented communions. Surrealism—the tightrope of our hope.55

Cesaire’s text served as the manifesto for *Tropiques*, a quasi-underground literary journal established by indigenous surrealist intellectuals in Martinique, 1941-1945;56 according to Menil, ‘...faced with a regime [Vichy57] that had to be combated as quickly as possible with a total refusal, the writers in *Tropiques*, running as fast as they could [...] considered the act of writing as a poetic operation of suggestion capable, through the calculated use of a myth invented in a literary way, of provoking such a shock in Caribbean man that, submissive to the tumultuous forces of life, he would revolutionize both himself and society.’58 What is critical here is that *Tropiques* consciously refrained from imitating the Marxist ‘models’ of the colonizing metropole; instead, it deliberately re-deployed nativist ‘magical thinking’ as a double of neo-Cartesian revolutionary discourse. Writing in the 1941 edition of *Tropiques* Suzanne Cesaire openly rejected orthodox Marxism in favour of an explicitly politicized surrealism, calling on the journal’s readership to welcome “the domain of the strange, the marvellous and the fantastic, a domain scorned by people of certain inclinations [i.e. historical materialists]. Here is the freed image, dazzling and beautiful, with a beauty that could not be more unexpected and overwhelming. Here are the poet, the painter, the artist, presiding over the metamorphoses and the inversions of the world under the sign of hallucination and madness.”59 In short—Negritude,60 a form of Caribbean neo-surrealism that eschews the Eurocentric model of a universalizing Cartesianism while preparing the poetic groundwork for the creation of a

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56 ‘*Tropiques* was the expression of the perspectives, the hopes, and the will of the revolutionary Caribbean left in the forties.’ Menil, ‘For a Critical Reading’, 77.
57 For a useful ‘sampler’ of anti-Vichy articles and poems published in *Tropiques* that were both wholly political and purely surrealist, see Richardson (ed.), 67-182.
58 Menil, ‘For a Critical Reading’, 75.
59 Suzanne Cesaire in Richardson, 15.
60 For a general discussion of Caribbean writers strategically deploying surrealist imagery for anti-colonialist purposes see the Introduction by Richardson. For a slightly dissenting view, see Edwards, in general, who criticizes Richardson’s overly easy identification of Negritude’s surrealism with that of Andre Breton—the sources and varieties of Surrealism, such as those of Georges Bataille, are far more diverse and pluralistic that the authoritarian Breton ever allowed for.
localized but parallel discourse of revolutionary emancipation specifically suited to the West Indies. As Rene Menil expressed it:

 [...] cultural appropriation, which is a fact of universal civilization, could not in the present case be reduced—prematurely and in a simplistic way—to being no more than a negative, colonial phenomenon of political assimilationism, as some Caribbean critics have claimed [...] Obviously the analysis must become complex and refined, especially to reveal the extent to which the poetic texts in *Tropiques* distort French surrealist form in order to establish another form in a new literary structure imposed by Caribbean socio-historical circumstances at a particular date.61

For the tough-minded and hard-thinking historical materialist, however, we still have a problem: is Surrealism (or Negritude) a truly revolutionary force? Or, expressed differently, can the deployment of the unconscious and magical thinking ever be employed for progressive purposes?

Jean-Paul Sartre certainly thought so.

In his 1948 essay ‘Black Orpheus’, written as a preface to an anthology of African and West Indian poets edited by Leopold Sedar-Senghor (*Anthologie de la nouvelle poesie negre et malgache de langue francais*), Sartre admits to being unable to detect any contradiction between Negritude and historical materialism; ‘The unity which will come eventually, bringing all oppressed peoples together in the same struggle, must be preceded in the colonies by what I call the moment of separation or negativity: this anti-racist racism is the only road that will lead to the abolition of racial differences.’62 Anticipating (?) Max Lane, Sartre admits that the master signs of scientific Socialism, ‘Rationalism, materialism, positivism—the great themes of [the proletarian’s] daily battle—are least propitious for the spontaneous creation of poetic myths.’63 Unlike Lane he does not see this as a problem; instead, very much in the spirit of Anderson, he proclaims the culturally subversive potential of the magical.

One must dive under the superficial crust of reality, of common sense, of reasoning reason, in order to touch the very bottom of the soul and awaken the timeless forces of desire: desire which makes of man a refusal of everything and a love of everything; desire, the radical negation of natural laws and of the possible, a call to miracles; desire which, by its mad cosmic energy, plunges man back into the seething breast of Nature through the affirmation of his Right to be unsatisfied.64

So far, so good…but then, this Cartesian caveat: Negritude (or ‘Black surrealist poetry’), when understood correctly in terms of historical materialism, is nothing more than a transitional phase (or ‘stage’) to the internationalization of the African proletariat—in other words, Universalism.

Nevertheless, the notion of race does not mix with the notion of class: the former is concrete and particular; the latter, universal and abstract; one belongs to what [Karl] Jaspers calls comprehension, and the other to intellection; the first is the

61 Menil, ‘For a Critical Reading’, 71.
62 Sartre, 18.
64 Sartre, 31.
product of a psycho-biological syncretism, and the other is a methodic construction starting with experience. In fact, Negritude appears like the up-beat [or un-accented beat] of a dialectical progression: the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of Negritude as an antithetical value is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is not sufficient in itself, and these black men who use it know this perfectly well; they know that it aims at preparing the synthesis or realization of the human being in a raceless society. Thus, Negritude is for destroying itself, it is a crossing to and not an arrival at, a means and not an ends.65[...] It is when Negritude renounces itself that it finds itself; it is when it accepts losing that it has won: the coloured man—and he alone—can be asked to renounce the pride of his colour. He is the one who is walking on this ridge between past particularism—which he has just climbed—and future universalism, which will be the twilight of his negritude; he is the one who looks to the end of particularism in order to find the dawn of the universal.66

In the final instance Sartre refuses to go native.

Or refuses to surrender his conceit of his own Cartesian-being as universal model.

And which beautifully subverts the initially Eurocentric premise of the conference: Southeast Asian Noir is not the failed imitation of a global model (its antithetical value realized only at the moment of its purest negativity) but rather is its own thing, the uncanny hybridization of nativist and imported forms and genres enabling the construction of an indigenous tradition of covert social, political and cultural critique. Yes, the Westerners brought crime fiction to the East Indies, but the East Indians offered us an exchange that we couldn’t refuse.

So, crime, magic and (anti-colonialist) politics really do mix.

Vale Eka.

References


65 Sartre, 49.

66 Sartre, 51. Italics in the original.


Menil, Rene, ‘For a Critical Reading of *Tropiques’*, in Richardson (ed.), 69-78.


