

IMAGINED AMERICAS: BORIS VIAN, VERNON SULLIVAN AND THE FRANCO-AMERICAN THRILLER

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You know, when I was a kid, I thought America was a magic land. It's so big... And you'd hear all that stuff about superheroes, and you'd believe it, because it was America. (Gaiman 60)

It is a feature of humanity that for as long as we have been aware of distant countries, we have mythologised them, making them into magical realms divorced from the mundane reality of our daily environment. Mediaeval cartographers illustrated the margins of their maps with miraculous beasts and warnings such as 'Here Be Dragons'; today we still romanticise or demonise the foreign. For anyone growing up on one side of the Atlantic, the continent on the other side, apprehended through books, films and television rather than empirical experience, can seem fantastic and fundamentally unreal. In recent years, both Baudrillard and Eco have written on America as a state which exists in hyperreality, at one or more removes from that which the European recognises as 'normal'; what I wish to do here is to examine an earlier author's acts of imaginary cartography, the construction of an individual country through a form of personal mythopoesis, and consider the way in which the French writer Boris Vian created his own America, drawing upon the raw ingredients of historical reality and popular literary forms to construct a 'New World' ruled by his own imagination and obsessions, an *America à la française*. In France today, America (and in particular American culture) is regarded by the cultural establishment with suspicion, if not downright contempt. Legislation (for example, the ill-fated and utterly impractical *loi Toubon*) has attempted to stem the influx of *Franglais*, and limit the amount of English-language popular music played on French radio. The forces of political conservatism, the French Far Right, and in particular Jean-Marie Le Pen, have been quick to denounce American culture as a threat to what they perceive as essential 'Frenchness':

Anti-Americanism, or fear of swamping by *la culture anglo-saxonne*, exists in many areas of French society. It co-exists with an insatiable appetite for hamburgers, baseball caps and American movies on TV. The Front [National] has taken the two facts and plaited them into a conspiracy by "Big Brother" America [...] to destroy the French nation and the French way of life. (Lichfield 8)

In other words, as the forces of political and cultural conservatism would have it, France is in danger of losing its essential *francité* through corruption by extra-hexagonal influences. However, simultaneously, the country (and in particular its youth) appears ever-ready to absorb and assimilate American culture, through film, music and clothing. This tone of horrified fascination, of an *odi et amo* mentality, runs through contemporary French responses to America, and it reflects a long history of cross-cultural traffic between the two countries. In the first decades of this century, and in particular in the years during and immediately following the Second World War, America was seen as the source of all that was new and exciting. Just as post-War Britain saw the appearance of beatniks, skiffle groups and Teddy Boys (all inspired by American music), so in the closing years of the 1940s and early 1950s a new French youth culture sprang into being:

groups of extravagantly-dressed teenagers, mostly middle-class [...] - the Zazous.

[...] The Zazous had no political beliefs and no real orthodoxy other than jazz. They believed only in themselves, dancing, and the good life - now. (Dank 161)

The Zazous were to be found in jazz clubs in and around the district of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, where their behaviour scandalised their elders and betters. As with all press coverage of items related to youth, a great many articles about Saint-Germain-des-Prés were unfavourable. *Samedi-soir* (15/11/1949) printed an article where two Russian journalists give their opinion of the milieu, and it is easy to imagine how their words would have been echoed by many contemporary readers:

Vous voyez ici, écrivent-ils, des filles en pantalon et des clochards en chemise, sans pantalon. C'est la jeunesse pauvre. Elle vit dans la crasse, vous demande de l'inviter à boire et de payer pour elle. C'est la jeunesse des bas-fonds de Paris: moisissure curieuse de la haine, de la jalousie, de la stupidité et de la plus vulgaire sexualité.

The man who was perceived as the prime mover of the Zazou movement was Boris Vian, who wrote in the Preface to *L'écume des jours* what practically amounted to the Zazou manifesto " il y a seulement deux choses:

c'est l'amour, de toutes les façons, avec des jolies filles, et la musique de la Nouvelle-Orléans ou de Duke Ellington (Arnaud, *Images* 80)".

Vian was an aficionado of American culture, and in particular he was devoted to two of its most popular manifestations: the *roman noir* and science fiction. His fascination with these two genres was to lead to the four novels here under discussion: works of which he was to deny authorship, passing himself off as merely the translator of the entirely imaginary black American writer, 'Vernon Sullivan'.

'Vernon Sullivan' was conceived in the early months of 1946, when Vian met the publisher Jean Halluin. As the result of a bet with Halluin, Vian undertook to write an 'American' thriller in ten days. Begun on the 5th of August 1946, he finished on the 20th the novel by which he became notorious, the pornographic *roman noir*, *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*. Published in November, the novel went on to sell 600,000 copies; an extremely lucrative outcome for a fortnight's work.

What was to happen later on need not detain us here. The details of Vian's subsequent trial for obscenity, the murder case where a copy of the novel was found beside the victim's body, and Vian's eventual death while attending a preview of the film version of the novel can be read about in any number of studies of Vian¹. What I wish to do from now on is to examine, however briefly, the nature of Vian's (or rather, Vernon Sullivan's) America, and try to determine why he was to write four novels as Sullivan, despite the fact that the books were (at least in terms of sales) progressively less successful.

Vian's four 'Sullivan' novels (*J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* (1946), *Les morts ont tous la même peau* (1947), *Et on tuera tous les affreux* (1948) and *Elles se rendent pas compte* (1950)), will, I suspect, never be regarded as 'great' literature. Whether they may even be regarded as 'literature' is an equally vexed question. The French have a tradition of intellectual erotic/pornographic writing which is utterly alien to the Anglophone world, and the sexual content of the 'Sullivan' novels strikes me as no more and no less repellent than that contained within *L'histoire d'Ô*, *L'histoire de l'oeil* or the works of the Marquis de Sade. All that need be said is that the assumptions about sexuality and gender roles are appalling to modern liberal sensibilities. Hechiche is right to say:

Les héros de Sullivan sont des matamores du sexe, des phalocrates, un peu comme le néolithique velu qui traînait les

dames par les cheveux, devant les aurochs pensifs [...] Le lecteur assimile par héros interposé du Donjuanisme à la tonne, des orgasmes-mitrailleuses, des érections imperturbables, des cris, des soupirs et des pâmoisons.²

Conceived as an imitation of an American original, *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* out-Herods Herod; I can think of no freely-available American thriller of the period which features necrophiliac sodomy. It is this excess which characterises Vian's America; he draws upon elements of American writing, from Faulkner to Theodore Sturgeon (who himself wrote a pseudonymous erotic novel) via Raymond Chandler, and magnifies them. In his preface to *L'écume des jours*, Vian describes his literary *modus operandi* as *une projection de la réalité en atmosphère biaise et chauffée, sur un plan de références irrégulièrement ondulé et présentant de la distorsion*" (Hechiche 31). In the first two 'Sullivan' novels, the 'distorsion' is that of pastiche; the final two novels are warped through the literary filter of parody. The adoption of the persona of 'Vernon Sullivan' allowed Vian to explore areas (overwhelmingly those related to sexuality) which decorum obliged him to rein in when writing under his own name. More than this, it gave him the liberty to create a huge country (for these novels range in order of publication from the Deep South to New York and from the West Coast to Washington D.C. itself) in which to let his imagination run riot. In short, Vian's America, if not the land of the free, is undeniably the land of the (textual) free-play. This strikes me as the principal reason why Vian continued to write as 'Sullivan' even after his reading public deserted him; while I would not go so far as to call them cathartic, they allowed him to write with greater freedom, while at the same time offering him the convenience of ready-made fictional structures to deform as he saw fit.

Viewed in this light, *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* and *Les morts ont tous la même peau* are less interesting than *Et on tuera tous les affreux* and *Elles se rendent pas compte*. The first two are too close to their models; they may differ quantitatively in terms of their sexual and violent content, but there is no qualitative difference. They are (albeit excessively so) pastiches of the 'hard-boiled' American thriller, of a piece with a novel like Hammett's *Red Harvest*, liberally larded with the 'Southern Gothic' sensibility of Faulkner, a writer Vian greatly admired. Faulkner's Popeye would be entirely at home in the atmosphere of violence and perfervid sexuality which pervades these two

novels. They also draw on the historical realities of America in the late 1940s, and Vian's disgust at the colour bar and endemic racism of the Southern states is clear. He wrote of his disgust at the lynching of Emmet Till (*L'écume des jours* 7), and Michelle Vian has stated that one of the sources of *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* was:

[...] un article d'une revue que nous avions trouvé dans un camp américain à l'occasion d'un déplacement de l'orchestre; cet article donnait des statistiques sur le nombre des Noirs qui passaient la ligne, c'est-à-dire devenaient blancs, et insistaient sur tous les dangers encourus par ces nouveau Blancs- enfants noirs, etc.: cela avait beaucoup impressionné Boris. (*Chroniques* 60)

However, it is to say the least highly dubious to mount a defence of these novels as anti-racist *littérature engagée*; the narratives are driven overwhelmingly by matters sexual, rather than racial or political. What is of interest here is the fact that they are at heart rooted in a historical reality and obey all the rules of the genre to which they belong. Here, Vian's America can be closely mapped onto both the literal and literary country from which they spring. In the penultimate and the final 'Sullivan' novels, it becomes triumphantly *sui generis*.

Et on tuera tous les affreux is a burlesque rewriting of Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, where the villainous Dr. Markus Schutz plans to flood the world with physically perfect androids (given the West Coast setting, this novel is eerily prophetic of *Baywatch*). As an attempt to combine erotica, humour, the thriller and science fiction, it fails: it tries to do too many things simultaneously, and ends up doing none of them particularly successfully. Where it is of interest is in the way in which it drags the imagined America closer to the parodic realms of Vian's first non-pseudonymous novel, *Trouble dans les Andains* (written in 1943 but not published till 1966). This is a delirious parody of the *roman-feuilleton*, replete with ludicrous coincidences, plot twists of byzantine complexity and a completely nonsensical dénouement, and *Et on tuera tous les affreux* is written entirely in the same vein. The stylistic and thematic division between Vian and 'Sullivan' has begun to collapse.

The final 'Sullivan' novel, *Elles se rendent pas compte*, is a work of mind-boggling sexism and homophobia. In an attempt to infiltrate a gang of lesbian and gay drug smugglers, the hero is obliged to don female drag, which gives him the opportunity to simultaneously show several of the lesbians the error of their ways (his opinion, and very definitely not mine). As Ray Davies puts

it in 'Lola', 'Girls will be boys and boys will be girls/It's a mixed-up muddled-up shook-up world'. To describe the novel as 'camp' would be an understatement; what is most fascinating about it is the way in which it continually threatens to overthrow its own preconceptions concerning gender roles, as Francis Deacon seeks to maintain phallocracy while simultaneously taking pleasure in his new-found femininity. Entirely unconsciously, Vian's America has by now become potentially deeply subversive, as the nation's capital is revealed to be teeming with 'unnatural' desire; the simple-minded machismo of the earlier novels has been abandoned, and the shifting of sexual identities mirrors the changes in narrative modes from thriller to comedy and back again. However, that said, Vian/Sullivan refuses to allow this subversion of conventional sex and gender rules to continue. At the end of the novel, the sexual *status quo* is restored. The novel ends with Francis and his girlfriend Gaya naked, Francis throwing Gaya to the bed, asserting the customary male sexual dominance over the female. In this book, this world, woman's 'natural' role is to be compliant, submissive, and sexually available; in this, if nothing else, *Elles se rendent pas compte* is typical of the 'Sullivan' novels. That Vian would not or could not abandon his belief in heterosexuality as the only 'right' form of sexuality, and only toys with the idea of a more fluid continuum of sexual orientation and gender attributes, strikes me as one of the great missed opportunities in literature. There has been to date little specific criticism of Vian's pseudonymous novels, and the works of 'Vernon Sullivan' have tended to be overlooked, or viewed as at best aberrations, at worst purely mercenary works. Pia Birgander exemplifies this point of view:

Les résultats d'une comparaison des deux groupes de romans corroborent donc l'impression maintes fois prononcée, dans des études antérieures, de deux auteurs sinon incompatibles du moins bien distincts l'un de l'autre. (Duchateau 68)

However, the mere fact that these novels were written and published as the works of 'Vernon Sullivan' does not mean that we can divorce them completely from the novels of Boris Vian. If we treat the novels as if they were in fact the work of a completely different author, we do no more than their contemporary audience, and perpetuate the myth of 'Vernon Sullivan's' autonomy. In order to understand the novels of Boris Vian, we must study the novels of 'Vernon Sullivan', and vice versa. The argument I am attempting to advance is summed up in the title of Jean-Baptiste Baronian's 1989 article on *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, "Docteur Vian et Mister Sullivan". Like Jekyll and Hyde, Vian and 'Sullivan' are not separate individuals, however much they

may appear so. The two groups of novels are practically contemporaneous, springing from the same social and cultural circumstances; it would be strange if they did not share common features.

There are undeniably differences between the 'Sullivan' and non-pseudonymous novels, most notably as regards setting and explicitness. The 'Sullivan' novels take place in a world more recognisably 'real' than that of the other novels, and which becomes more precisely defined as the novels progress. From the fictional 'Buckton' of *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, we move to New York in *Les morts ont tous la même peau*, then to the West Coast for *Et on tuera tous les affreux* and ultimately to the American capital in *Elles se rendent pas compte*. In this final novel, there is a wealth of geographical precision, as streets, clubs and monuments are listed. I have not checked the details with a street map of Washington, but this is arguably unnecessary; what matters is that the setting gives the appearance of verisimilitude, seeking to present itself as an accurate picture of Washington.

In the novels signed 'Boris Vian', the setting is less precisely defined, more dreamlike and fantastic; there is no attempt to paint a realistic picture.

Similarly, with the exception of *Et on tuera tous les affreux*, the events described in all the 'Sullivan' novels could conceivably take place in our world, and although the concept of twin transvestite detectives does seem someone less than plausible, we should remember that the Chevalier d'Eon pursued a successful career as a spy in female dress (or consider the case of the French diplomat whose long-standing lover turned out to be male, the origin of David Hwang's play *M. Butterfly*), while several women fought as men in Wellington's army and during the American Civil War. This heightened realism is due to the 'Sullivan' novels' reliance on the American *roman noir*; this form is rooted in an almost overtly 'realistic' style, replete with corruption and violence. It is of course as artificial as any other fictional form, but it seeks to present itself as an accurate depiction of society. By choosing to write according to the rules of this genre, Vian was compelled to alter his style. This leads to one of the more interesting features of these novels, namely that as the settings become more concrete, the basic premises become more fantastic, and the style more recognisably 'Vianesque'. Study of Vian's first four non-pseudonymous novels, from *Trouble dans les Andains* to *L'automne à Pékin*, shows a gradual darkening of the mood, as the novels move from adolescent fantasy to confrontation with the realities of adult life. This darkening continues in Vian's last two novels, ending with the bleak picture of family life seen in *L'arrache-cœur*. Conversely, the 'Sullivan' novels become progressively lighter in tone, running backwards from adult (and 'adult') problems to the adolescent fantasy seen in *Elles se rendent pas compte*. We

cannot say why this should be the case, merely that the two personae seem to have run into each other. The 'Sullivan' novels allowed Vian to deal with adult issues, and perhaps they mark a turning point in his career; the thematic and stylistic regression seen in *Et on tuera tous les affreux* and *Elles se rendent pas compte* may reflect a realisation that Vian did not need to hide behind a persona in order to deal with adult issues, and was able to handle them within the confines of his own style. Another more cynical and perhaps more realistic explanation is that Vian had grown tired of 'Vernon Sullivan', and the last two novels were simply written as quickly as possible (hence the reversion to the familiar style) in the hope of making a quick profit. Whatever the reason, the death of 'Vernon Sullivan' was closely linked to the end of Vian's novelistic career; after *Elles se rendent pas compte*, he was to write only one more novel, *L'arrache-cœur*, seemingly tired of lack of success and critical acclaim. The effect of 'Vernon Sullivan' on Vian's own career and reputation was cataclysmic, and it is in a way fitting that he should have died at a screening of the film version of *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*; his first published novel, it was arguably the cause of his death. This is an apt allegory for the way in which the novels of 'Boris Vian' and 'Vernon Sullivan' are inseparable. We should not let cosmetic differences blind us to the many similarities of theme and structure. During a round-table discussion at the 1977 conference on Vian at Cérisy-la-Salle, Georges Unglik indulged in some (to my mind rather unconvincing) wordplay:

en mettant *ver* de côté, le *Ver* de Vernon, qui peut indiquer qu'il faut peut-être le lire à l'envers, on trouve Vian qui est à la fin, mais on trouve la fin de Vernon qui est *non*, et *Sul*, début de Sullivan, qui est à l'inverse de ce qui est au début, alors *Vian non lu*.

I suspect I am not alone in finding this rather less than conclusive, even though we know Vian had a taste for wordgames; the chosen name is less important than the act of adopting an authorial persona.

There is one aspect of the 'Sullivan' novels which, as has no doubt been seen, I find indefensible, namely their sexual content, or rather, the stereotypical nature of their sexual content. As Michel Rybalka says, "esthétiquement moins valable que Vian, Vernon Sullivan est plus explicite, plus lisible sur le plan des fantasmes", and this is undeniably true. However we look at the novels, the depiction of women is appalling, and the indignities they suffer reflect the status of women in pornography as a whole. Vian's female characters are, regrettably, almost inevitably two-dimensional or appalling, and 'Sullivan's' represent the nadir of Vian's female characterisation;

of course, we should not expect pornography to display characters of any depth, but it is unfortunate that instead of improving his female characters, Vian turned to a form which allowed him to indulge this weakness in his writing. However, they mark Vian's first attempts to deal, however clumsily, with the issue of sexuality; in his later novels, rooted as they are in adult experience, sex appears, and one may fairly wonder whether the crude stereotyping seen in the 'Sullivan' novels marks a form of apprenticeship, a phase which evolved into the greater subtlety seen in *L'herbe rouge* and *L'arrache-coeur*.

The 'Sullivan' novels, then, play an important part in Vian's literary career. They allowed him to experiment with genres, and to deal with issues which were unthinkable in contemporary French fiction. They mirror the progression we have traced in Vian's first four non-pseudonymous novels, from adolescence to adulthood, only in these works the movement is in the opposite direction, from the violence and complexities of a world of adult sexuality and racism to the comforting daydreams of the teenage years. As Vian's novels moved towards maturity, 'Sullivan's' regressed; *Et on tuera tous les affreux* and *Elles se rendent pas compte* duplicate ideas seen in earlier works. From a nightmarish landscape of racial and sexual violence, Vian's America ultimately became an adolescent daydream.

This, then, is a brief outline of the imagined America of Boris Vian; the interested reader should consult the original texts. It is not the 'real' America, nor yet the 'hyperreal': it is ultimately entirely Vian's, for as Jacques Bens writes:

Tout écrivain refait le monde, soit parce qu'il est impuissant à restituer parfaitement une réalité dont la structure complexe échappe à la parole, soit parce qu'il a envie de libérer ses démons familiers. (Rybalka 344)

No matter where in this imagined America the novels travel, they always return to the same place: the complex web of influences, enthusiasms and obsessions which make up the mind of Boris Vian.

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NOTES

¹ Vian, B., *L'Écume des jours*, Paris: 10/18, 1981, p.7. By an interesting irony of history, Ellington was to be godfather to Vian's daughter Carole.

² I would recommend: Arnaud, N., *Les vies parallèles de Boris Vian* (5e éd.), Paris: Christian Bourgeois, 1981, and Lapprand, M. 'Les traductions parodiques de Boris Vian', in *The French Review*, 65(1992), 537-46 for a closer study of the 'Sullivan' novels. An earlier article by myself, 'J'irai cracher sur vos tombes - a two-faced 'translation'', focussing in particular on the novel's ambiguous status as a pseudo-translation, appears in G. Harris (ed), *Through The Anglo-French Looking-Glass: Essays in Translating French Literature and Film*, Rodopi: New York/Amsterdam, 1996, 209-225.

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---. *Et on tuera tous les affreux*, Paris: 10/18, 1970.

---. *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes*, Paris: 10/18, 1983.

---. *Les morts ont tous la même peau*, Paris: 10/18, 1981.