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# Thompson, Céline and Tavernier: An Historical Echo Chamber of Western Imperial Ideology

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## Abstract

**B**ERTRAND Tavernier's film *Coup de torchon* (1981) in dialogue with Jim Thompson's novel *Pop. 1280* (1964) and Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932) produces an historical echo chamber around racial violence which is rooted in layers of historical practices and discourses with transatlantic ramifications. This article argues that racial violence resonates across historical periods and functions as a metonymic narrative thread between the texts, bringing together the history of slavery, racial segregation, colonial violence and neo-colonial power as an integral part of Western culture and identity. This article analyses this historical convergence as a form of multiple enunciation, creating a metatextual space which allows for the articulation of a strong critique of Western imperial violence and thought systems.

**R**EADING French director Bertrand Tavernier's *Coup de torchon* (1981) in dialogue with the US-American noir novel from which it was adapted, Jim Thompson's *Pop. 1280* (1964), and its principal textual influence, Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932), facilitates a multi-temporal historical approach that offers a deeper understanding of global imperial ideology. All three narratives share elements of a detective storyline that progressively swallows up the main characters—Nick, Bardamu, and Lucien, respectively—in a spiral of violence. Nick Corey, the sheriff of Pottsville in the American South, Lucien Cordier, the cop of Bourkassa-Ourbanguï supposedly on the west coast of Francophone Africa, and Ferdinand Bardamu, a manager of a trading post for an important firm in Petit Congo, all have posts with important responsibilities. However, the protagonists cannot function normally in their environment and are depicted as inefficient and become frustrated by their social positions, which are constantly ridiculed and questioned. Nick and Lucien resort to killing the most toxic elements of their society, while Bardamu remains fascinated by his alter ego, a sort of doppelgänger, Robinson, who as an embodiment of misery develops a vocation to kill in order to escape his fate. The dialogue between these fictions functions as a parallel narrative that reveals state organized systems propitious to crimes that comprise sociopathic elements.

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*Coup de torchon* has received scant critical attention, particularly in relation to Thompson's and Céline's texts. However, the film is often acclaimed as one of Tavernier's greatest achievements. This article offers an enhanced understanding of a film that can be appreciated fully when read in light of the work of translation and localization undertaken by Bertrand Tavernier. Privileging the crime element in dialogue with the other two texts allows for an analysis of a wider critique of Western imperial ideology. Building on the concept of transnational intertextuality outlined by Lynn Higgins and the situation of a permanent state of emergency described by Oliver C. Speck, I argue that from the American Deep South of the 1910s to Western Francophone Africa in the 1920s and the 1930s, racial violence resonates across historical periods and functions as a metonymic narrative thread between the three texts. Furthermore, the processes of adaptation between the texts elicit a critical reading of the historical periods and locations of the three fictional narratives and the time of their release, all linked by a shared history of racial violence. The process of normalization of this specific form of power rooted in racial violence, which is at the core of all three texts, is also the main characteristic of a sociopathic thinking that normalizes the abnormal and is rooted in what Hannah Arendt ("Imperialism"; *On Violence*) and Slavoj Žižek refer to as systemic violence. This article analyses this historical convergence as a form of multiple enunciation, creating a metatextual space which allows for the articulation of a strong critique of Western political systems and highlights global coercive networks which are sustained by the normalization of imperial violence. Ultimately, this article argues that the process of adaptation subverts this normalization process by rooting imperial ideology in a form of sociopathy, unveiling the destructive and unlawful nature of Western imperial practices.

### Translation and Localization of Thompson's Novel

TAVERNIER had wanted to adapt Jim Thompson's 1964 detective novel since first reading it as a serialized piece in the *Observateur*. It was translated into French in 1966 as the 1000th volume in Gallimard's *Série noire*. Set in 1910s Texas, *Pop. 1280* is the story of the personal journey of Nick Corey, Sheriff of Pottsville, from a harmless bon vivant and feckless oddball to a much more sinister character. In an interview, Tavernier explains that the biggest hurdle in adapting the novel was the topography of the USA and the immense geography that was to be transposed to a French context (Arte Cinema). Influenced by the first work of adaptation of one of Thompson's novels, already undertaken by Alain Corneau and Georges Perec in 1979,<sup>1</sup> and after re-reading Louis-Ferdinand Céline's 1932 *Voyage au bout de la nuit* and André Gide's 1927 *Voyage au Congo*, he concluded that colonial Africa was the best setting for the adaptation. Céline's text provided not just the solution for a geographical setting and a social milieu, but also allowed Tavernier

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Corneau wrote and directed the film *Série noire* with Georges Perec based on Jim Thompson's 1954 novel *A Hell of a Woman*.

to dialogue with Thompson's US-American context as "a mise-en-abyme within the French cinematic and social text" (Higgins 311). West Africa is also a symbolic place within this dialogue between Thompson and Tavernier, since it was the port of departure of slaves shipped to the Americas. The society Thompson describes in *Pop. 1280* is the direct product of the global slave trade.

Lynn Hunt suggests that versions of global history written "from below" have the ability to unveil a "series of transnational processes in which the histories of diverse places become connected and interdependent" (59) and form richer critiques than a top-down approach. Hunt bases her analysis on Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano's "alternative anti-Eurocentric history of the origins of globalization" and his argument that "Globalisation revolved around two interrelated axes: capitalism based on forced labor and 'race,' the biological codification of differences between the conquerors and the conquered" (59). In addition, Quijano's work influenced Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, whose "thinking is provoked by the history of the Americas (including the United States) and the Caribbean since the sixteenth century, when the very inception of modern/colonial patterns (i.e. coloniality) began to emerge" (Mignolo and Walsh 2). Tavernier's adaptation thus offers a glimpse of the trans-national, trans-historical and interdependent coloniality of powers via an analysis of forms of cultural production. It is a real work of adaptation as translation, to borrow the trope from Robert Stam,<sup>2</sup> turned into "a principled effort of intersemiotic transposition" (Stam 62) that is particularly visible in the screenplay co-authored by Jean Aurenche and Bertrand Tavernier, but also in the ways in which Tavernier transposed the American South of the 1910s to the Francophone West Africa of the 1930s. It is a work of localization and cultural adaptation that required a dialogical process between the source and target text and the rooting of the film into "a much broader intertextual dialogism" (Stam 62). This is where Céline's text came into play for Tavernier, with Bardamu's journey to Africa working for the Pordurière company acting as the trigger for the cultural adaptation of Thompson's American Deep South.

The most intimate links that Thompson's, Céline's and Tavernier's texts share is the depraved atmosphere of a society ruled by a legalized form of racism and a concomitant normalization of crime and violence. This heavy, unpleasant and putrid ambience is at the core of all three texts, especially in the dialogues. Although it is transposed in different historical contexts, it emanates from similar and interlinked thought systems. Nick talking about the American South is quite revealing:

I figure sometimes that maybe that's why we don't make as much progress as other parts of the nations. People lose so much time from their jobs in lynching other people, and they spend so much money on rope and kerosene and getting likkered-up in advance and other essentials, that there ain't an awful lot of money or man-hours left for practical purposes. (Thompson, *Pop. 1280* 83)

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<sup>2</sup> For Stam, "the trope of adaptation as translation suggests a principled effort of intersemiotic transposition, with the inevitable losses and gains typical of any translation" (62).

The description Nick gives of the normalization of the lynching culture resonates with Céline's description of the relationships and atmosphere in the French colony, where the level of violence against black people and the stupidity of the whites abiding by the racist logic are highlighted (*Voyage* 139). Tavernier and Aurenche weave this violent and putrid atmosphere into the dialogues, which allows us to make connections between the thought systems that emanate from the three historical contexts and geographical locations. For example, Lucien is constantly bullied and disrespected by two pimps, Le Péron and Leonelli, who own a brothel in Bourkassa. When Lucien tries to stop the two pimps from shooting corpses of black people in the river, the conversation he has with them is symptomatic of the violent and racist mindset that has become normalized in this environment:

- Tiens! je lui ai fait sauter la tête.
- Non mais l'embêtant c'est sans vous en doutez, vous êtes en train d'enfreindre la loi mes amis là, et vous manquez de respects à des morts.
- Mais c'est des nègres, on les a foutus à l'eau comme des chiens crevés.
- [...]
- Et ça va chercher dans les combien la violation de machin là?
- Je serais curieux de savoir combien peut coûter un macchabé qu'on paye un franc par jour de son vivant. (*Coup de torchon*)

- [- Look, I blew his head off.
- You may not be aware of it, but you're breaking the law and mocking the dead.
- But they're niggers, thrown in like dead dogs. [...]
- So how much would the fine be for... that?
- I'd like to know the value of a stiff who used to earn a franc a day. (*Clean Slate* 7)]

Racial violence pushed to its extreme is the strongest link between the three texts. Although these texts are not set in times of slavery, it is clear that the status of black people in these societies has not evolved greatly from the time that their life was defined by the Code Noir (1685) and when their dehumanization was legalized. This social criticism is pushed further with a clear reflection on the ways in which years of normalized racial violence contaminate society and the physical environment.

While the dialogues are the most obvious meeting point between the film and the two texts where the putrid atmosphere is highlighted, Tavernier also works with set designer, Alexandre Trauner, on the aesthetic of the environment to reinforce the sense of decay. The frequent use of faded colours and run-down buildings emphasizes the insalubrious setting. Lucien also wears the same clothes throughout the film. The most elegant-looking people portrayed are, by contrast, the most depraved and exploitative: for example, the two pimps and the head of La Compagnie Africaine Forestière.

This putrid ambience that links all three texts is reinforced by the omnipresence of sexual violence. One of the first details the reader learns about Nick is

that he allegedly raped his wife, Myra. Although Nick denies the deed, the reader is never completely sure of the truth; later in the text he claims that he did something to her but that it could not be rape: “well, maybe I did do a little something. But with all them clothes she had on, it was god-danged little” (82). Both Nick and Lucien live with their wives’ respective “brothers”, whom they suspect not to be brothers but lovers and who call the wives “mummy”. In Céline’s text it is often clearly stated that the black inhabitants, including the children, are also used for sexual services; Bardamu often accounts for the inevitability of the situation around sexual violence almost as a form of consent of the oppressed (*Voyage* 132). He also reveals that his predecessor had a particular predilection for young boys: “il s’était entouré d’une domesticité très compliquée composée de garçonnets surtout [. . .]. En retour, il leur passait, bénévole, la main entre les cuisses à tout instant” (*Voyage* 167–68) [“he had surrounded himself with an elaborate domestic staff, consisting mostly of young boys [. . .]. In return, he would often oblige them with a kindly hand between their thighs” (*Journey* 140)].

The same level of sexual violence is also disclosed in *Coup de torchon* but, as noted above, it relates to the notion of a society in decay. It becomes clear that this is the case when Lucien convinces his counterpart from the next town, Marcel Chavasson, who has a predilection for young girls, to sleep at the brothel:

- Bah au bordel ça m’étonnerais! Surtout que les filles du panier fleuri c’est du premier choix, rien que des françaises, et toutes jeunettes!
- Qu’est-ce que t’appelles toutes jeunettes?
- Il y en a même une. . . elle a pas quatorze ans.
- Non de dieu et la police?
- Personne s’est plaint. . . et dans un pays où les petites noires baisent à douze ans. . .
- Pas de raison que les petites blanches soient défavorisées!
- Exacte!

- [- Not at a brothel. . . Especially with girls of top grade. . . French, little girls.
- What’s little for you?
- One of them is not 14 yet.
- Christ. . . and the law?
- No complaints, yet. . . and in a country where black girls fuck at 12 [. . .]
- Yeah, white girls can’t be left out.
- You bet. (*Clean Slate* 14)]

The protagonists are faced with a depraved environment that they ultimately despise, but from which they also benefit. Their social and racial status gives them access to all manner of privileges. Bardamu’s sole purpose in going to Africa is to flee after the war and get better both mentally and financially: “Va-t’en !. . . qu’ils m’ont fait. T’es plus bon à rien !. . . - En Afrique ! que j’ai dit moi. Plus que ça sera loin, mieux ça vaudra !” (*Voyage* 111) [“Beat it! . . .” they said. “You’re no good for anything any more! . . .” “To Africa!” I said to myself. “The further the better!” (*Journey* 92)]. Nick admits that “All I’d ever done was sheriffin’. It

was all I could do. [...] if I wasn't sheriff, I wouldn't have nothing or be nothing" (Thompson, *Pop. 1280* 8). Lucien admits to the pimps that his lifestyle is a lot better in Bourkassa than in France: "Non j'ai pas à me plaindre: J'suis logé à l'œil, j'ai la TSF, la salle de bain, l'électricité ; par moment mais pas toujours je me dis que moi mon paradis je l'ai trouvé sur terre" (*Coup de torchon*) ["I can't complain. I've got free housing, the wireless, bath, electricity. At times, not always, I think I've found paradise on earth" (*Clean Slate* 5)].

This ambiguous relationship between the main characters, their environment and their status, is also toxic for their mental health, even as they are privileged by the depraved system. Their self-regard is both lucid and tainted with sarcasm and forces the reader/viewer to look at what is deeply unpleasant about those people and the societies they inhabit. Tavernier drew on his readings of Simenon and Céline to highlight the feelings of self-loathing and abandonment. In *Coup de torchon*, Lucien's conversation with the priest demonstrates this clearly:

- Tu n'arrêtes jamais personne, comment veux-tu qu'on te respecte? Faut montrer aux gens que tu es un homme courageux honnête et travailleur. [...]
- Ça j'peux pas!
- Et pourquoi donc?
- D'abord parce que je ne suis ni courageux, ni honnête, ni travailleur, puis ensuite parce que je crois pas que mes chefs voudraient que je le sois.
- Qu'est ce qui te fait dire ça?
- Bah si ils voulaient un homme courageux honnête et travailleur c'est pas moi qu'ils auraient nommé!

[– You never arrest anybody. You've got to show folks you're brave, honest, and hard-working. [...]

- I can't.
- Why not?
- First, because I'm not brave, honest and hard-working. And second, I don't think my chiefs want me to be.
- What are you talking about?
- Well, they wouldn't have picked me otherwise. (*Clean Slate* 18)]

This conversation echoes that of Nick with the court attorney Robert Lee Jefferson: "For one thing, I ain't real brave and hard-workin' and honest. For another, the voters don't want me to be." "And just how do you figure that?" "They elected me, didn't they? They keep electing me" (Thompson, *Pop. 1280* 54–55). They use their low self-regard to explain that only decaying societies would entrust them in positions of power.

The narratives in all three texts begin with a series of scenes in which the protagonists struggle with incompetence and public humiliation. In *Voyage*, Bardamu goes to Africa because he is thrown out of the army and is told he is not good for anything in France. In *Coup de torchon*, the first thirty minutes are structured around six scenes where Lucien is faced with his own incompetence and complete humiliation. He chooses not to intervene against one of the white farm owners,

Marcaillou, who beats up his wife Rose in the middle of the street, and in another scene children do not to trust him, despite the fact that he makes them a fire. The other four scenes that open the first half hour of the film are a series of humiliations coming from the most depraved characters: his wife, Huguette Cordier, who is having an affair with Nono, whom she calls her brother and who lives with both Lucien and Huguette; the two pimps who constantly insult and humiliate him, and Marcel, the racist paedophile chief of police who believes Lucien to be stupid.

The tone used in all three texts acts as a critical meta-discourse about the settings. In fact, the sarcasm, irony and derision characteristic of all three narratives work to subvert the putrid and violent atmosphere. Tavernier and Aurenche also pursue Thompson's and Céline's use of onomastics—whereby most proper nouns are a source of derision—that subverts structures and figures of power: like “Pordurière” from “ordure” [trash] in *Journey*, the admiral “Bragueton” from “braguettes” [fly], Commander Tramichel—“tra comme tralala et Michel comme la mère Michèle” [“tra like tralala and Michel like *la mère Michèle*”]—from a children's lullaby. Sarcasm, irony, and onomastics become political acts used by the three main characters and narrators, but also by the authors, who attempt to undermine the power and reputation of state apparatuses like the army and the police. The reader can find similar play with nouns in Thompson's novel, such as the name of the town where the story takes place, “Pottsville”.

The intertextual relationship of the film is not only with Céline's literary work, but also with contemporaneous colonial cinema. One scene features a screening of Leo Joannon's 1938 film *Alerte en Méditerranée*, starring Pierre Fresnay. This presence in the diegesis as a form of intertextuality allows Tavernier to situate his narrative in 1940s imperial France. Also, in the diegesis of *Coup de torchon*, Joannon's film *Alerte en Méditerranée* is projected onto a white sheet for the inhabitants of Bourkassa-Ourbangui by the Compagnie Africaine Forestière [African Forestry Company]—which rhymes with the Compagnie Pordurière (du petit Congo) from *Voyage*—, providing the viewer with a *mise-en-abyme* that underlines the parallel process of transnational adaptation that Tavernier engages in. The scene also features the poster of the 1937 film *L'Affaire du courrier de Lyon*,<sup>3</sup> a murder story set during the French Revolution which ends in a miscarriage of justice and, despite conflicting evidence, with the death of an innocent. *Alerte en Méditerranée* is a colonial film that represents the cinematic formalism and ideology against which Tavernier takes a stand. Influenced by the description of a different African continent found in Gide and Céline, Tavernier refuses any form of exoticism such as the use of wild animals or exotic panoramic views. The cultural palimpsest created by this multiplicity of influences and hypotexts gives the film a critical dimension that in retrospect illuminates both Thompson's narrative and its dialogues with that of Céline, while rooting imperial ideology at the heart of the narrative.

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<sup>3</sup> The film by directors Claude Autant-Lara and Maurice Lehmann was one of two early French films inspired by the historical 1796 *Courrier de Lyon* case.



### Narrative Tools: Frame, Image, Characters

THIS cultural palimpsest also helps link the different societal contexts together. Tavernier's use of the camera highlights the ways in which the context impacts on all characters. His use of the Steadicam<sup>4</sup> not only opposes the formalism traditionally used in 1930s French colonial cinema, which is known for its use of fixed and rigid frames, but it also translates some of the narrative tools used by Thompson and Céline. The narrative voices of both *Voyage* and *Pop. 1280* are unpredictable and destabilize our interpretation and identification with the characters. The Steadicam shots used by Tavernier translate the confusing approach to the characters and their surroundings, destabilizing the viewer in an equivalent manner. The disorienting camerawork also underlines the discrepancy between the appearance and the reality of characters who are very determined in their personal projects. This discrepancy is also found in the use of language. Both Céline and Thompson were pioneers of the integration of the popular voice, using narrative techniques that reveal a sophistication of thought behind the use of slang and popular vocabulary. Céline inserts slang, insults, and neologisms within complex syntax. Thompson uses Nick's mental voice to contrast the way he is perceived by others with the way he actually functions. Nick is progressively presented as an unreliable narrator whose enigma the reader needs to uncover. Lucien's apparent naivety and simplicity, encapsulated in his overuse of idioms and colloquial expressions, is contrasted with his long, existential monologues. He is often seen in sequence shots which reinforce the fluidity of his character but also the uncertain atmosphere of the society. This editing process and the use of the Steadicam<sup>5</sup> reinforce his fluid and evolving nature. While being smoother than a hand-held camera, the Steadicam portrays a sense of detached and alienated presence which confuses the process of identification and recalls the narrative tools used by both authors to highlight the sinister impacts of the environment on the characters.

Tavernier's use of framing further reinforces the perception of Lucien as someone who is not at the centre of his own story. Once again, the cinematic style reacts against the formalism traditionally used in colonial cinema, where everything of importance happens at the centre of the frame. Tavernier explains: "Moi, je voulais une image sans centre, je voulais m'opposer à cette vision qu'était la vision coloniale où il y avait toujours un centre qui devait montrer le point important de l'image" (Arte Cinema) ["I wanted an image without centre, I wanted to oppose this vision: the colonial vision, where there was a centre that had to highlight the most important aspect of an image"]. Lucien Cordier is introduced onscreen with a shot of his hand on a tree and then with a shot of his back. Lucien is decentred, on the side of the frame, where the viewer cannot interpret fully his feelings and emotions. These shots present the viewer with what Lucien is looking at from behind a tree: a group of children surprised by a solar eclipse. They also introduce a sense of de-individualized structures that feeds into the con-

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<sup>4</sup> Tavernier had used Steadicam (Panaglide) shots before in *La Mort en direct* [Death Watch] (1980).

<sup>5</sup> This technique is known for its first use in *The Shining* (1980).

cept of systemic violence. With the use of a tense extra-diegetic music, Tavernier reinforces the fact that Lucien is presented as a threat, yet the music softens as he starts a fire for the children to keep them warm and make them feel safe. This scene announces Lucien's internal conflicts around the meaning of his existence within a violent environment. It also foreshadows the closing sequence, where the setting and the extra-diegetic music are repeated, though this time Lucien watches the children through the sight of his gun and scares himself at the prospect of the crime he is about to commit. This scene reminds the viewer of the opening scene and emphasizes the realization of Lucien's full personality as a sociopath.

By decentring the main character at pivotal moments of his evolution, Tavernier not only rebels against the formalism of colonial cinema, but also presents the individual as a product of their historical and social context. The framing of the first scene is also echoed in the framing of those in which Lucien commits the murders. In both, Lucien is relegated to the side of the frame, accompanied by shots of his back, almost as if to avoid focus on his individuality, face and emotions. The notion of collective crime is a clear common thread to all three texts but is most strongly elucidated in *Coup de torchon*. When Lucien talks to the brother of the pimp he murdered, he is explicit:

Moi je suis le Christ, le Christ en personne, qu'on a envoyé à Bourkassa avec un tombereau de croix plus grandes les unes que les autres; je cherche à sauver des innocents et il y en a pour ainsi dire pas, les crimes, ils sont tous collectifs, on participe à ceux des autres et les autres participes aux vôtres. Ton frère tout le monde l'a tué et moi aussi... et peut-être un petit peu plus que les autres.

[I am Jesus Christ in person, sent here with a load of crosses, each bigger than the next... I try to save the innocent but there aren't any. All crimes are collective. We contribute to each other's crimes. We all shot your brother... And maybe I did a bit more than anybody else. (*Clean Slate* 38–39)]

This notion of collective responsibility for crime is central to the fact that all three protagonists become the product of a system of violence and dehumanization. Their first crime is committed as a reaction to the constant aggression and humiliation to which they are subjected. Both Nick and Lucien kill the pimps after years of humiliation and abuse. They also both seek approval from higher authorities. Lucien goes to discuss the issue with Marcel, and Nick with Ken Lacey, the sheriff of a nearby county, who gives them instructions as to how to react. Lucien and Nick then frame their colleagues for this first murder and let them know that they have become fall guys. The act of seeking approval is repeated for almost all crimes. The priest himself prompts Lucien to get rid of Marcaillou and invokes God to help him in his task: "Débarrasse le pays de cette ordure qui nous empoisonne!" (*Coup de torchon*) ["Get rid of the trash that poisons us all!" (*Clean Slate* 18)]. The approval granted confirms the collective nature of the crime and that these crimes are motivated by the inevitable aggression arising from the political and social environment. This resonates with Hannah Arendt's and Slavoj Žižek's

defence of the notion that violence is not exceptional, but rather stems from the system itself.<sup>6</sup> This toxic environment, where violence against society's most vulnerable is normalized, is at the source of all the protagonists' crimes. Lucien's, Nick's and Robinson's crimes are symptoms of this deeper systemic violence. They represent the "visible subjective violence", that would not have happened without the systemic violence; the latter "may be invisible, but it has to be taken into account if one is to make sense of what otherwise seem to be "irrational' explosions of subjective violence" (Žižek 2). The protagonists provide the reader/viewer with a direct insight into the racialized society as they become "the very agents of this structural violence" (Žižek 31). The crimes are never unmediated; they are the result of a long reflection whereby the protagonists seek advice and approval from figures in position of authority. Nevertheless, in *Coup de torchon*, most crimes, with the exception of the murder of Vendredi, trigger viewers' sympathy for Lucien, because his victims are also presented as vile. The shot/reverse shot in the climactic scene reinforces the fact that Lucien is finally in control of his life and no longer suffering. In the case of Bardamu, on the other hand, it is his alter ego Robinson who acts in his place. As a result, the reader is never sure if Bardamu takes control of his own life or if he just follows Robinson's shadow:

La vocation de meurtre qui avait soudain possédé Robinson me semblait plutôt somme toute comme une espèce de progrès sur ce que j'avais observé jusqu'alors parmi les autres gens, toujours mi-haineux, mi-bienveillants, toujours ennuyeux par leur imprécision de tendances. Décidément d'avoir suivi dans la nuit Robinson jusque-là où nous en étions, j'avais quand même appris des choses. (Céline, *Voyage* 308)

[The vocation for murder that had suddenly come over Robinson struck me in a way as an improvement over what I'd observed up until then in others, always half-hateful, half-benevolent, always boring with their vagueness, their indirection. I had definitely learnt a thing or two by following Robinson in the night. (Céline, *Journey* 252)]

In the case of Nick and Lucien, the crimes empower them as subjects in control of their own lives. In both Thompson's and Céline's texts, the protagonists' principal motivation is to react against external violence, although they never quite know what to do or say. The exterior world acts with violence against Bardamu, Nick and Lucien and silences them. The reader understands immediately that Bardamu was forced to go and fight despite his antimilitarism and was obliged to go to Africa despite his contempt for the colonial environment; Nick is forced to marry Myra due to the accusation of rape; both Nick and Lucien are obliged to agree each to live with their wives and their wives' lovers. All three evolve in contexts that they despise, but which they use to their advantage, which in turn impacts irreversibly on their well-being. The normalization of violence that is intrinsic to a colonial or an apartheid society represents the core of the protagonists' trauma. Racial violence as a systemic form of violence erupts throughout the texts in the form of a metonymic thread that links Nick, Bardamu and Lucien together.

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<sup>6</sup> Arendt, Balibar, Benjamin, and Habermas and Calhoun all address this notion of systemic violence.

### Metonymic Violence

THE cultural palimpsest built between Thompson and Tavernier principally via Céline, but also André Gide and Georges Simenon, acts as an historical echo chamber. Racial violence is at the core of all three texts; however, although physical violence against the black population is hardly visible in *Coup de torchon*, it is normalized via racist discourse. In both societies, the American South and Western Africa, the violence against the black population is established as a given, even for the protagonists who do not necessarily agree with it or practice it. For example, in *Pop. 1280*, when Nick interferes with Rose's abusive husband, Tom Hauck, beating up Uncle John, "a coloured fella", in the middle of the street, he is more worried about looking fair in relation to his affair with Tom's wife, Rose, than about the violent act committed against Uncle John. The only reason for Nick's reaction is the legality and the cultural normality of the act of beating up a man of colour at that time. This inheritance from the former slave system dictates all racial relationships. Tom is a product of this system and has internalized it as normal: "You tellin' me a white man can't whip a nigger if he feels like it? You sayin' there's some law against it?" (51). The only means Nick can find to stop Tom from beating up Uncle John in broad daylight in the middle of the street is to invoke noise disturbances: "Well,' I said. 'I don't know about that. I ain't saying there is, and I ain't saying there ain't. But there's a law against disturbin' the peace, and that's what you're doin'" (51). This absurd, yet strategic, thought process avoids confrontation with the dominant ideology and discloses the ways in which racism as an ideology is transcribed as a set of accepted social practices and cultural norms that are institutionally naturalized. Tavernier adapts this scene to the French colonial context when Lucien chastises Marcaillou, the white farmer who abuses his wife Rose, on the basis of his use of a plank with which to hit the black peanut seller:

- Est-ce que par hasard tu aurais l'intention de m'arrêter parce que j'ai cogner un nègre?
- Bah non, c'est pas ça, mais c'est pas le contraire non plus! L'important c'est la planche. (*Coup de torchon*)
- [- You gonna arrest me for clubbin' a nigger?
- No, not exactly... The main thing is the board. (*Clean Slate* 17-18)]

In Bambola-Bragamance, Céline's imaginary colony, Bardamu describes scenes of everyday life that are the normality of the place: "Des files de nègres, sur la rive, trimaient à la chicote, en train de décharger, cale après cale, les bateaux jamais vides, grimant au long des passerelles tremblotantes et grêles, avec leur gros panier plein sur la tête, en équilibre, parmi les injures, sortes de fourmis verticales" (*Voyage* 129) ["On the shore files of black men were busy, encouraged by whips and curses, unloading hold after hold of ships that were never empty, climbing up flimsy, teetering gangplanks with big baskets balanced on their heads—like vertical ants" (*Journey* 107-08)]. The lack of direct description and language avoid naming

the level of responsibility for this normalized violence which in turn can only be interpreted as being systemic.

The systemic racial violence as disclosed in these texts set in different historical periods offers a trans-national, trans-historical and interdependent account of the coloniality of power. The pluriversal reading of these texts suggested by Mignolo and Walsh's approach to historical temporality, allows for racial violence to become connected across time and space:

[...] the pluriversal opens rather than closes the geographies and spheres of decolonial thinking and doing. It opens up coexisting temporalities kept hostage by the Western idea of time and the belief that there is one single temporality: Western-imagined fictional temporality. Moreover, it connects and brings together in relation—as both pluri- and interspersals—local histories, subjectivities, knowledges, narratives, and struggles against the modern/colonial order and for an *otherwise*. (Mignolo and Walsh 3)

The dialogue between the three texts occurs not only *between* the narratives but also has resonance with the time of their publication or release. This double enunciation reinforces the metonymic violence that unites the texts and also forces the reader/viewer into a metatextual reading that prompts recognition of the historical connections between them.

Published in 1964, Thompson's novel recalls US-American slavery in the South; while presenting a savage portrayal of the racism and the lynching culture of the 1910s, themes and practices also resonate with the time of its publication at the height of the Civil Rights movement. The transtextuality at the core of the adaptation leads towards the creation of a multi-layered textual space within which racial violence resonates across historical periods and functions as a metonymic narrative for a racially violent societal structure, bringing together major literary and cinematic references. Nick, for example, in describing the 1910s lynching culture, echoes the mass racial violence of the 1960s. Between 1882 and 1968 almost 3,500 lynchings of black people were recorded (NAACP). In 1964, the Civil Rights Act rendered discrimination unlawful. However, 1964 was also the year of the Harlem riots, sparked by the murder of a 15-year-old African American by Lieutenant Gilligan. It was far from an isolated incident—historians talk about “collective racial violence” at that time in the USA (Janowitz 317). Nick reflects on the waste of resources linked to lynching and on the type of people who engage in racial violence. Talking about his dad, he says: “I don't fault him much for it anymore, because I've seen a lot of people pretty much like he was. People looking for easy answers to big problems. People that blame the Jews or the colored folks for all the bad things that happen to 'em” (Thompson, *Pop. 1280* 32). Tavernier and Aurenche adapt this sentence to the late 1930s by replacing “colored folks” with “Free-Masons” in their script; yet “colored folks” was kept in the French translation of *Pop. 1280*, where it is rendered as “des gens de couleurs” (Thompson, *1275 âmes* 46). Bardamu's journey to Africa is supposed to take place at the end of World War I, and there are mentions of the concept of “greater

France” that was specific to the 1930s, particularly at the time of the International Colonial Exhibition which took place in Paris in 1931. *Voyage* was published in 1932 and therefore reveals this double enunciation, between the 1920s and the 1930s, which intensifies the metonymic logic of the racial violence. As for *Coup de torchon*’s release date, it is worth recalling that between 1978 and 1980, the French army intervened in Chad and that 1981 was the year that President Bokassa in the Central African Republic was removed from power with the help of French troops after years of economic and political collaboration with the French government under the auspices of *France-Afrique*. The French neo-colonial involvement in former colonies in the 1980s is not directly referred to in the diegesis but has the potential to engage informed viewers in a metatextual reading. Examining these texts in dialogue brings together the history of slavery, racial segregation, colonial and neo-colonial violence as an integral part of Western culture and identity, highlighting the shared history of slavery and discrimination that Texas and West Africa share. The marriage between Thompson and Tavernier via Céline helps retrieve these connections and rethink racial violence as an interrelated phenomenon on a global level.

These historical connections are woven together by a common element in racist discourses that serves as a justification for racial differentiation within a society. Fed and normalized by the imperial culture, the articulation of the racist ideas of social Darwinism reaches the public sphere at the turn of the twentieth century, only to become dominant in the West in the 1930s due to its dissemination via the press and cultural exhibitions. This historical moment is the culmination of the process Quijano refers to as

the elaboration of a Eurocentric perspective of knowledge, a theoretical perspective on the idea of race as a naturalization of colonial relations between Europeans and non-Europeans. [...] this meant a new way of legitimizing the already old ideas and practices of relations of superiority/inferiority between dominant and dominated. (Quijano 534–35)

What the discursive ramifications of the three texts show is that racist discourse does not die out easily and still resonates in the 1960s. It is a discourse that stretches over decades and creates a semantic link between the texts. In reference to the title of the book and Pottsville’s inhabitants, Ken and Buck, two of Nick’s colleagues in a nearby town, explain why there cannot be 1280 inhabitants in Pottsville:

[...] “Y’see it’s this way, Nick. That twelve hundred and eighty would be countin’ niggers—them Yankee lawmakers force us to count ’em—and niggers ain’t got no soul. Right, Ken?”  
“Kee-rect!” Ken said.  
[...]  
“[...] Niggers ain’t no souls because they ain’t really people.”  
“They ain’t?” I said.  
“Why, o’ course not. Most everybody knows that.”

“But if they ain’t people, what are they?”

“Niggers, just niggers, that’s all. That’s why folks refer to ’em as niggers instead of people.” (Thompson, *Pop.* 1280 21)

Tavernier transposes this dialogue between Lucien and Marcel. Marcel’s racist logic is very revealing and does not feel anachronical in comparison to that of Ken:

- Tes 1275 c’est en comptant les nègres et les nègres ils ont pas d’âme!
- Pas vrai Polo?
- Exacte!
- Bah je dis pas que vous avez tort mais je dis pas que vous avez raison non plus, qu’est-ce qui vous fait dire que les nègres ils ont pas d’âme?
- Et ben dis-lui, éclaires-y donc sa lanterne!
- Ils n’ont pas d’âme pas ce que c’est pas vraiment des gens.
- Bah, si c’est pas des gens qu’est-ce que c’est?
- Et ben c’est des nègres! Rien que des nègres! La preuve c’est quand on parle d’eux on dit pas des gens on dit des nègres.
- Non mais attendez, attendez, un petit enfant blanc qui vient de perdre sa maman qui est blanche aussi, ça peut arriver ça?
- Ça arrive, oui.
- Bon il n’y a personne, vraiment personne pour lui donner à téter qu’une négresse, elle lui sauve la vie? Il me semble que ça prouve...
- Bah ça prouve rien du tout, il aurait tout aussi bien pu téter une vache, et ça prouverait pas que les vaches c’est des gens!
- Bah, j’ai eu des rapports avec des gens de couleur que j’aurais pas eu avec des vaches...!
- Bah primo t’aurais pu et deusio ça prouverait toujours pas que les vaches c’est des gens! (*Coup de torchon*)

- [- Your 1275 souls, that includes niggers. But they’ve got no soul.
- Right?
- You bet.
- Maybe you’re right, but maybe you’re wrong. How come blacks have got no soul?
- Make him see the light.
- They don’t have soul ’cause they’re not really people.
- Well, what are they then?
- Just niggers, that’s all.
- The proof is we call them niggers, not people.
- Now wait a sec. How about this? A white baby loses his mama, who’s also white... It happens?
- It happens.
- And there’s nobody to feed him but a black woman. She saves him, right?
- Yeah, so?
- Well, that proves
- ... Nothing... He could suckle a cow, does that prove that cows are people?
- I’ve slept with black women, never with cows.
- You could’ve. But that doesn’t prove that cows are people. (*Clean Slate* 8–9)]

This technique, that takes racist discourse and exaggerates it until it is revealed as irrational and absurd, subverts the pseudologic of racist discourse with sarcasm, while also showing how central it is to everyday violence, as it allows for a justification and a normalization of racially motivated violent practices. As seen in these passages that aim to represent the 1910s and the 1930s, respectively, the racist discourse dehumanizes the black population, whether in the USA or Africa. The dehumanization is necessary to justify the dispossession of the land and dignity that colonialism presupposes. It is also the process that accounts for the coloniality of powers: “the codification of the differences between conquerors and conquered in the idea of ‘race,’ a supposedly different biological structure that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority to the others” (Quijano 533).

The racist discourse is at the very core of the system and ensures that colonial practices can be carried out without dissent or critique. As mentioned above, when Marcaillou, at the market, beats up Friday, a young black man, Lucien neither arrests or even reprimands him for harming a person, but rebukes him because he is using a plank that was covering a hole that could have put someone else at risk. Again, while subverting the discourse by pushing its logic to the most preposterous development, this exchange also exemplifies the dehumanization of supposedly inferior people that in turn justifies and normalizes a total lack of empathy and decency. Nick decides to start abiding completely by this system and asserts: “I’m really going to start cracking down. Anyone that breaks a law from now on is goin’ to have to deal with me. Providing, o’ course, that he’s either colored or some poor white trash that can’t pay his poll tax” (Thompson, *Pop. 1280* 134). The protagonists are embedded within a multi-layered history of racial violence and as a result are portrayed as entrapped in a system that justifies the unjustifiable.

### **The Breakdown of the Societal Matrix and the Loss of Humanity**

ACCORDING to Lynn Higgins, Thompson’s “protagonists [...] never appear entirely unsympathetic because their sickness is social as well as individual, a dimension which also helps explain Tavernier’s interest in transposing the novel to French West Africa” (Higgins 319). This social sickness is at the core of the protagonists’ descent into crime. The three main characters become murderers and, in the case of Nick and Lucien, even serial killers. Charles Derber explains that sociopathic behaviour is often triggered by a certain kind of society:

The sociopathic behavior is not a reflection of brain chemistry gone awry but of the triumph of a sociopathic system of institutions and elites who have rewritten social norms, rewritten the law, reconfigured the institutional power arena in such an extreme way that they have created a society in which the dominant norms of behavior require sociopathic conduct for survival.  
(*Corporate Crime Reporter*)

The society based on colonialism or apartheid social rules has rewritten social norms to justify what in other times would be unjustifiable. Fort-Gono, capital



of Bramagance, in Francophone Africa, Pottsville and Bourkassa Ourbangui all embody these characteristics and represent the milieu and discourse that influence the main characters in their descent into criminality.

Accepted racial violence, racist discourses and practices ultimately penetrate and infect the societal matrix of these places where corruption, incest, and murders are unremarkable elements of the protagonists' everyday lives. Céline's term to talk about poor people, the *miteux*, that connotes a form of depravation, echoes the state of the inhabitants of both Pottsville and Bourkassa Ourbangui.

There were the helpless little girls, cryin' when their own daddies crawled into bed with 'em. There were the men beating their wives, the women screamin' for mercy. There were the kids wettin' in the beds from fear and nervousness, and their mothers dosin' 'em with red pepper for punishment. There were the haggard faces, drained white from hookworm and blotched with scurvy. (Thompson, *Pop*. 1280 170)

The law that Nick and Lucien apply is sociopathic, ethically bankrupt; yet, they decide to fully embrace this law and the values attached to it. As Derber puts it: "Social norms or practices that undermine the society or environment of the society endorsing them—or wiping out their population—are [...] antisocial, because they harm and kill not only many people but, in many cases, even the society endorsing the practice" (4). Nick, Bardamu and Lucien are the product of such a sociopathic and degenerate system, and according to Derber, "this can be the outcome of the hardwiring of sociopathic society" (5). They eventually decide to abide by the mentality that structures these places. Using Walter Benjamin's concept of "state of emergency", and Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life", Speck argues that "the colonial situation that *Coup de torchon* depicts is [...] not a regrettable exception, but an apt portrayal of the everyday situation as a permanent state of emergency, where the human subject is stripped of everything human" (208). Reading the three texts together makes us realize that the scale of this emergency cannot be circumscribed geographically or historically. The critique and sarcasm displayed in *Coup de torchon* transcend the Francophone context and address the imperial roots of the world order.

The interaction between these texts and the dialogue between the protagonists articulate a metatextual space, which develops a strong critique of Western political systems based on imperialism and denounces the normalization of violence inherent to nation states whose powers rely on imperial expansion and control. The three protagonists cannot function normally in this type of system and are constantly mocked, ridiculed and challenged. Nick and Lucien resort to killing the most toxic elements of their society and active participants in the decay of the societal order. The pimps and Marcaillou/Tom are the first murder victims, but because Friday/Uncle John find out the truth about Lucien/Nick killing Marcaillou/Tom, they are also killed. Lucien's justification is revealing of a decaying social order whereby even the oppressed take part in the oppressive regime. When he is about to kill Friday, Lucien declares: "Tu as trop léché le cul des blancs

Vendredi et si tu te fais baiser tu l'as bien cherché. Tout ça pour te dire que des amis comme toi, voilà ce que j'en fais" (*Coup de torchon*) ["You kissed too much white ass. And now you're getting fucked, and you asked for it. So now this is what I do with friends like you" (*Clean Slate* 32)]. Nick is a little bit more explicit: "Even you, particularly you, Uncle John; people who go around sniffing crap with their mouth open, and acting surprised as hell when someone kicks a turd in it" (Thompson, *Pop. 1280* 103). The murder of Friday/Uncle John pushes both protagonists to the extreme of the logic in which even the most vulnerable are on the receiving end of their sociopathic behaviour. Lucien tells Rose "J'en ai plein le dos d'être le seul à écopé seulement pour avoir fait ce que les gens veulent que je fasse et n'ont pas le courage de le faire" (*Coup de torchon*) ["I'm tired of taking the rap, [sic] for doing what everyone wants me to do, [sic] and don't have the courage to do themselves" (*Clean Slate* 32)]. According to Derber, "in a sociopathic society, sociopathic individual behavior is so pervasive and socially accepted that perpetrators don't think of themselves as doing anything 'wrong'" (6). Here no one questions the murder of Friday/Uncle John; it is accepted as the norm in racially violent societies.

### Conclusion

As Hannah Arendt reminds us, imperial culture represents the perfect example of systemic violence and as a result "carries out the decline of the nation" ("Imperialism" 457). Imperial expansion with capitalist goals implies a rejection of democratic laws and structures, not just abroad, but also within the national territory. For Arendt, imperial culture, along with racist discourses and extreme forms of bureaucracy, weakens the concept of the nation state and roots the possibility of a totalitarian movement:

Without race as a substitute for the nation, the scramble for Africa and the investment fever might well have remained the purposeless "dance of death and trade" of all gold rushes (Joseph Conrad). Without bureaucracy as a substitute for government, the British possession of India might well have been left to the recklessness of the "breakers of law in India" (Burke) without changing the political climate of an entire era. (*On Violence* 65)

These three texts exemplify how much of an established system of racialized violence imperialism is and how long it remains engrained within a society once it has been established.

Nick's and Lucien's sociopathy resembles a general illness that not only devastates the environment within which they evolve, but which also destroys humanity. The process of adaptation that Tavernier undertakes subverts this normalization by rooting imperial ideology, accepted as a limited phase of Western culture, in a sociopathic system. Ultimately, the dialogue between the three texts unveils the destructive and unlawful nature of Western imperial practices and legal apparatuses and, most importantly, denounces the impact such systems can make on the individual.

Semantically linked within this network of texts, Nick and Lucien follow Bardamu's footsteps to "the end of the night"; they become serial killers and indiscriminately murder people as part of the system. The reader/viewer knows that this is a never-ending process, as most characters in the texts are unscrupulous, dishonest, violent and depraved. Nick and Lucien understand very well the societal codes and norms and live openly by their rule. Indeed, it is their honesty about it that causes the population to question their authority.

Ultimately, Nick and Lucien, as well as Bardamu, become products of their environment; they proclaim that individual crimes do not exist, as crime is always collective. Lucien explains: "les crimes, ils sont tous collectifs, on participe à ceux des autres et les autres participes aux vôtres" (*Coup de torchon*) ["All crimes are collective. We contribute to each other's crimes" (*Clean Slate* 39)]. They are determined to clean up a system in which the laws themselves are ethically and morally wrong. These laws are the direct product of imperial culture and ideology. Imperialism is depicted as a sociopathic system that destroys humanity, not only in the colonies, but also within the very societies that embrace it as an ideology. The study of these three interconnected texts resonates with Arendt's conclusion on the impact and limits of an imperial system: "the only limit in space of permanent expansion is destruction and its only limit in time is death" ("Imperialism" 463).

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