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NO MAN'S LAND  
Poetics of a neutral zone

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When Georges Perec, in his seminal essay *Espèces d'espaces*, deals with the space of the border, he also describes the strange zone which still can be entered by crossing certain frontiers. If during his visit to Jerusalem in 1952 he would have passed underneath the barbed wire, he would not have set foot in Jordan, but in a «nothing», a «no man's land»<sup>1</sup>. Though it is often talked about, especially in a figurative sense, this specific type of space is little studied, owing perhaps to the intrinsic vagueness which seems peculiar to it<sup>2</sup>. The following essay aims to demonstrate that such a study would be useful. Starting with a brief history of the term and some concepts borrowed from the cultural theory of space which help to identify the area designated by it, I will attempt to show that the military and political origins of the term *no man's land* still haunt its metaphorical use in contemporary literature — notably in Patrick Modiano's novel *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue*, which evokes the disturbing atmosphere peculiar to the «neutral zones» of Paris.

A MILITARY AND POLITICAL TERM

The English phrase *no man's land* has been adopted by other languages during World War I. In French, however, it still remains a foreign word. As Jorge Semprún notes with some regret, there is no expression like *terre de personne* in the language of Proust, while you can say *tierra de nadie* in Spanish or *Niemandsland* in German<sup>3</sup>. Due to this international career after 1914, the term in most languages refers, first of all, to the area between the front lines of two opposing armies. To readers still unfamiliar with the English phrase, the newspaper *Le Matin* explained in 1916 that no man's land is «the area of land between the front lines, and under fire from the troops stationed there»<sup>4</sup>. In the positional warfare

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1 «[...] ce n'est pas la Jordanie que j'aurais touché, mais du rien, du *no man's land*». Georges Perec: *Espèces d'espaces* (1974), Paris: Galilée 1985 (L'espace critique), p. 100.

2 See, however, Eric J. Leed: *No man's land. Combat and identity in World War I*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979; Cornelia Vismann: «Starting from scratch. Concepts of order in no man's land», in: Bernd Hüppauf (ed.): *War, violence and the modern condition*, Berlin/New York: De Gruyter 1997, p. 46–65; Christoph Nübel: «Das Niemandsland als Grenze. Raumerfahrungen an der Westfront im Ersten Weltkrieg», in: *Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften* 2 (2008), p. 41–52. A shorter French version of the present article (thanks to Robert Ryan for linguistic support) has been published in: Philippe Antoine/Wolfram Nitsch (eds.): *Le mouvement des frontières. Déplacement, brouillage, effacement*, Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal 2015 (Littératures), p. 149–161.

3 Jorge Semprún: *L'écriture ou la vie*, Paris: Gallimard 1994, p. 303.

4 Cf. *Le Matin*, 1916/09/16: «la zone de terrain du front entre les lignes et sous le feu des

then dominant in Western Europe, this area was located behind the trenches which housed the soldiers at the front, behind the parapets and the barbed wire protecting against enemy attack. The military use of the term *no man's land*, therefore, confers a dual function on the attributive genitive. It is primarily a genitive of possession, since neither of the two armies can dominate the intervening strip; but it is also a genitive of description, because generally there is nobody on this strip, only the bodies of those who risked their lives to venture there. This double meaning is emphasized by Jean Guéhenno, who in his memoirs of the Great War evokes «this territory that the English had so ingeniously named <no man's land>, a land of no one, where no human figure could stand»<sup>5</sup>. Such ambiguity always marks the word when it is used in its military sense, such as in the film *NO MAN'S LAND* by Danis Tanovic, whose action takes place in a deserted trench between the lines of the Bosnian war<sup>6</sup>.

In addition to this first meaning, there is also a political sense of the term, which in English is much older than its military acceptance. Based on the Latin term *terra nullius*, a concept of Roman law designating territory with neither master nor owner, the phrase *no man's land* has been applied since the Middle Ages to the area between the borders or border crossings of two countries. It is true that following the First World War the two meanings often overlap, as if to recall the etymological kinship between *front* and *frontier*<sup>7</sup>. During the Cold War, for example, the area directly behind the Iron Curtain running through Germany was, with good reason, called the «death zone». It was heavily-mined and equipped with spring-guns, as if it were a zone separating the lines of two opposing armies. However, if the political no man's land is regarded as an area of danger, it is usually for other reasons. To the extent that the margin between two customs posts can become a free zone for traffickers and smugglers, it may also become a prison if someone should enter it without a passport — such as it happens at the Franco-Swiss border in Alain Tanner's film *NO MAN'S LAND*<sup>8</sup>.

In its central relationship to military or political geography, the term *no man's land* differs markedly from two other terms referring to intermediate spaces that have conquered the literary and critical language with equal success and are sometimes rashly equated with it: the <non-lieu> and the <terrain vague>. For both terms refer primarily to the economic dimension of space, underlining the extent to which it is visited or exploited rather than the extent of military or political control. By the term <non-lieu>, which he

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troupes en présence».

5 «[...] ce pays que les anglais avaient si génialement nommé <No man's land>, ce pays qui n'était à personne, où aucune stature humaine ne pouvait se dresser». Jean Guéhenno: *Journal d'un homme de quarante ans*, Paris: Grasset 1934, p. 153.

6 *NO MAN'S LAND*, France/Italy/Great Britain/Slovenia, 2001, written and directed by Danis Tanovic.

7 Regarding this kinship, see the classical study of Lucien Febvre: «Frontière», in: *Revue de synthèse historique*, 45, 1928, p. 31–44.

8 *NO MAN'S LAND*, France/Switzerland/Great Britain/Germany, 1985, written and directed by Alain Tanner.

transfers from the vocabulary of law to that of social anthropology, Marc Augé characterizes a type of anonymous and standardized space that has been designed for maximal economic functionality<sup>9</sup>. Such a «non-place» — for example, a shopping centre, an airport or an aeroplane — is also a neutral zone, a space of transit without any cultural peculiarity, but it is at the same time a heavily-frequented space; it is only when it gets empty and, so to speak, cools down that it assimilates to a no man's land<sup>10</sup>. The «terrain vague», on the other hand, resembles to a no man's land by its emptiness, its status as a blank zone on the map<sup>11</sup>. But unlike the military or political no man's land, the indeterminate wasteland designated by this French expression is generally found on the outskirts of a town or city, and not on the borders of a country; and above all its emptiness points back to an economic rather than a political decision. For this reason, a *terrain vague* is more temporary and can shift more easily than a zone between the frontiers — except perhaps when they become again frontlines of war. Thus, the «non-lieu» and the «terrain vague» are not characterized so much as no man's land as secluded and inaccessible zones.

#### A DESERT SHAPED FOR THE EXTRAORDINARY

Although the «spatial turn» in the humanities has not yet led to a thorough discussion of no man's land, it has reminded us, however, of some outlines of a cultural theory of space which arose, much as the term itself, in the early twentieth century and which are still useful for a deeper reflection upon the military or political interspace the term denotes. From a sociological perspective, it is possible to consider no man's land with Georg Simmel as the spatial projection of social relations. According to this pioneer of German sociology, society projects itself into space in order to manifest relationships that would otherwise remain too abstract for most of the people. To this end, it uses the deserted as much as the urbanized space. Just as a capital city expresses the sovereignty of power or a common house expresses the solidarity of a corporation, the deserted space between two borders refers to the relationship between two different groups. In this empty space — or rather emptied space, since its loneliness is more due to cultural than to natural reasons — two opposing social relations materialize to the same extent. As a security cordon between two populated territories, the «border desert» is a projection of the relation

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9 Marc Augé: *Non-lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, Paris: Seuil 1992 (La librairie du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle), p. 97–144.

10 With regard to the temporality of «non-places», cf. Karl Schlögel: «Heiße Orte, kalte Orte», in: *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit. Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik*, München: Hanser 2003, p. 292–303, as well as my article «From the roundabout to the carousel: non-places as comic playgrounds in the cinema of Jacques Tati», in: Jan Tödtloff Schlosser/Mirjam Gebauer *et al.* (eds.): *Non-place. Representing placelessness in literature, media and culture*, Aalborg: Aalborg University Press 2015, p. 113–128.

11 See my essay «Terrain vague. Zur Poetik des städtischen Zwischenraums in der französischen Moderne», in: *Comparatio* 5 (2013), p. 1–18; an English version can be found on the internet site [www.terrainvague.de](http://www.terrainvague.de).

between two powers that somehow neutralize each other in this interstitial zone. As a contact zone between two neighbouring peoples, it concretizes on the other hand the relation between two trading partners who need a neutral zone of commerce<sup>12</sup>. Or, to say it with Youri Lotman, whose semiotics of space develops Simmel's sociological draft in various respects: the void set up at the edge of two territories is at once an enclosure that excludes the adjoining space and a membrane which enables exchange with it<sup>13</sup>. And as for Lotman the subject of narrative fiction generally consists in the temporary or definitive transgression of such a border, a no man's land lends itself particularly to serve as the backdrop of a novelistic or cinematographic plot.

From an anthropological perspective, one can additionally place no man's land among the areas reserved for <rites of passage>. By this term, Arnold van Gennep means those rites in traditional societies which accompany the transition from one period of life to another, such as initiation to the adult world, matrimonial or funerary rites. In each of these rites there is a «material passage» from one space to another in the form of an extended stay in a neutral zone. The French anthropologist compares this area to the marches of medieval Europe, where not yet borderlines, but neutral strips of land separated the countries, or to the border deserts characteristic of the ancient world which were protected by special deities. Like these, the transit zone that is traversed or even temporarily occupied during a rite of passage is a sacred space, from which other members of society are prohibited; one who goes there «hovers between two worlds», living in a fringe-world, where the rules of ordinary life are suspended<sup>14</sup>. If van Gennep evokes the frontier zone to illustrate the crossing of a ritual threshold, one can also approach, conversely, the time spent in a no man's land to a rite of passage. And if we assume with Victor Turner that the theater highlights and extends the state of hovering which in the ritual remains a temporary phase, we can understand why this area that is so conducive to liminal experiences constitutes a literary location *par excellence*<sup>15</sup>.

From an aesthetic perspective, no man's land can be characterized, lastly, as the extreme part of a <landscape of war>. By this term the German philosopher and psychologist Kurt Lewin names a type of landscape, which he himself had witnessed in World War I and which differs perceptibly from the landscape visible in peacetime. While this is a «round» or panoramic space that seems to stretch to infinity in all directions, even if here and there an elevation obstructs the view, the <landscape of war> is a space circum-

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12 See Georg Simmel: «Über räumliche Projektionen sozialer Formen» (1903), in: *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1901–1908*, vol. 1, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1995, p. 201–220.

13 See Youri M. Lotman: *Universe of the mind. A semiotic theory of culture*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press 1990, p. 131–142. On this ambivalence of the boundary, cf. Régis Debray: *Éloge des frontières*, Paris: Gallimard 2010, p. 25–46, especially p. 39.

14 See Arnold van Gennep: *Les rites de passage* (1909), Paris: Picard 2011, p. 27–40.

15 See Victor Turner: *From ritual to theatre. The human seriousness of play*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 20–60; on rites of passage in the contemporary French novel cf. Jean Duffy: *Thresholds of meaning. Passage, ritual and liminality in contemporary French narrative*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2011.

scribed by and oriented towards the front. For the soldier headed to the front line, the topological distinction between front and back, insignificant in the peacetime landscape, becomes of paramount importance. In the same measure as he approaches the «nothingness» that awaits beyond his army's front line, he enters a «danger zone» where every element of the landscape, be it a tree, a hill or a house, becomes inevitably a «combat object»: a shelter, an observation post or a possible sniping position. This re-oriented landscape is of course temporary, given that it shifts in accordance with the location of combat; but in trench warfare it can attain a certain permanence, so that the «landscape of war» bounded by the front can coexist with a «landscape of peace» that extends behind<sup>16</sup>. Whatever it may be, the proximity of no man's land brings forth a special perception mode under the sign of peril. Thus, the concept coined by Lewin under the spell of World War I helps to measure the aesthetic fascination this unsettling zone holds for a modern literature that explores the borderlines of human perception.

For it can be stated that no man's land, as a desert shaped for the extraordinary, has frequently preoccupied the writers of the twentieth and twenty-first century, sometimes up to the point that it inspired a work's title<sup>17</sup>. Some of them even describe a no man's land in the literal sense of the word, setting the story in an area between two fronts or borders. Among the writers of the interwar period, the military sense still prevails. In his work *Copse 125*, a «chronicle from the trench warfare of 1918», Ernst Jünger depicts a dangerous incursion into the strip separating the front lines at the battle of the Somme. With his aide-de-camp, he slips under the barbed wire erected behind the trench in order to eliminate an enemy gunman who has hidden in «the weeds of no man's land». Before terminating this daring feat, he becomes intoxicated by the particular scent and savagery of the landscape, for years uncultivated; and he even returns there after completing his mission, because in this war-made «desert», he can unshackle himself in an instant from «a thousand relationships, considerations and doubts» that envelop him even in the nearby trench<sup>18</sup>. The postwar writers, on the other hand, are more interested in the political version of no man's land. In his little-known novella *No man's land*, originally a film treatment for a sequel to *THE THIRD MAN*, Graham Greene tells of how a British secret agent crossing the inner border of post-war Germany almost loses his bearings in the Anglo-Russian no man's land. It is not for nothing that this area between frontiers inspires him with the «sense of an unfathomable emptiness» and that he is warned not to «get lost in the folds» of the Iron Curtain, which can shudder as much as a regular

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16 Cf. Kurt Lewin: «Kriegslandschaft» (1917), in: Jörg Dünne/Stephan Günzel (eds.): *Raumtheorie. Grundlagentexte aus Philosophie und Kulturwissenschaft*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 2006, p. 129–140.

17 Examples: *No man's land* (1963), a collection of stories by Louis Calaferte, the homonymous drama (1975) by Harold Pinter, or Juan Carlos Onetti's novel *Tierra de nadie* (1941).

18 Ernst Jünger: «Das Wäldchen 125» (1925), in: *Sämtliche Werke*, Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 1978–2003, vol. 1, p. 371–377, 388 (my translation). For a more technical description of no man's land, see his essay «Krieg und Technik», in: Ernst Jünger (ed.): *Das Antlitz des Weltkrieges. Fronterlebnisse deutscher Soldaten*, Berlin: Neufeld & Henius 1930, p. 222–237, here p. 233.

curtain<sup>19</sup>. For the Soviet zone adjacent to this desert looks indeed like an impenetrable world where one can scarcely rely on appearances, even in the context of friendship or love. Whether it is a war story or a spy novel: no man's land, taken literally, continues to unsettle those who dare to enter it. This can occur even after the end of Cold War, as it is shown in Reinhard Jirgl's novel *Hundsnächte* (*Canicular nights*). The main setting of this work is an abandoned village in the former «dead zone» where a moribund man conjures death by writing incessantly. Living in a no man's land *par excellence*, he thus occupies «no man's land between life and death, between existence and extinction»<sup>20</sup>. His writing keeps alive the memory of a political and military no man's land, transforming it at the same time into an existential metaphor.

The original sense of the term can even persist in the background when it is used as a metaphor for urban interspaces which on a literal level could be classified as «non-places» oder «terrains vagues». If in such cases the resounding sense is mainly the political one, the urban «no man's land» appears as a refuge. Thus, Siegfried Kracauer describes the green centre of a roundabout with heavy circulation as a «Niemandsländ» in the midst of Berlin whose unspeakably pacific atmosphere reminds that of a national park<sup>21</sup>. If, on the other hand, the metaphor points back to the military sense of the term, the neutral zone in the city presents itself as a danger area. This is the case in Michel Leiris's famous essay on the sacred in everyday life. There, the French autobiographer and anthropologist employs the English phrase *no man's land* in order to characterize the «zone» surrounding the fortifications of Paris, which he often crossed in his childhood. He still remembers it as an «extraordinary, exceptionally tabooed milieu», as an «area deeply imbued with the supernatural and the sacred», because he recalls his mother warning him against the flashers and murderers who roamed around in this «ill-defined space». From the perspective of an ethnographer observing his own culture, the legendary Parisian «zone» therefore resembles an interstice reserved for liminal experiences, such as erotic or violent transgression<sup>22</sup>. Although the fortification area is an urban wasteland rather than a no man's land in the strict sense of the term, the metaphor reminding its military function underlines the potential dangers lurking there. In a similar way — and like Leiris in the tradition of surrealism — Julien Gracq remembers the view from his nursery on the outskirts of Nantes. At least for the non-motorized boy, to whom the topography of the fringe was not yet familiar, this wild zone full of *terrains vagues* raised a «strong sense of no man's land» and a «magic feeling of transgression»<sup>23</sup>. Both authors present no

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19 Graham Greene: *No man's land* (1950), ed. James Sexton, London: Hesperus 2005, p. 4–6.

20 Reinhard Jirgl: *Hundsnächte*, München: Hanser 1997, p. 16 (my translation).

21 Siegfried Kracauer: «Der neue Alexanderplatz» (1932), in: *Schriften*, ed. Inka Mülder-Bach, vol. 5.3, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1990, p. 150–154, hier p. 151.

22 Michel Leiris: «Le sacré dans la vie quotidienne» (1938), in: *La règle du jeu*, ed. Denis Hollier, Paris: Gallimard 2003 (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), p. 1110–1118, here p. 1113 (my translation)

23 «[...] le vif sentiment d'un no man's land, d'une zone ensauvagée de terrains vagues [et] le sentiment magique [...] de la transgression». Julien Gracq: «Lettrines 2» (1974), in: *Œuvres*

man's land not so much as a place of possibilities, where something new may appear, than as a forbidden district which only can be explored at the risk of one's own disappearance.

#### AN EXAMPLE: MODIANO'S «NEUTRAL ZONES»

Few modern or contemporary writers are so intrigued by the metaphor of no man's land as the French Nobel Prize winner Patrick Modiano, a declared reader of Gracq<sup>24</sup>. As his fictional universe is almost entirely restricted to Paris, he certainly never uses the term in its original meaning; but he uses it quite often to characterize the interstitial zones of the capital frequented by the narrators and protagonists of his novels<sup>25</sup>. When in *La ronde de nuit* (*The night watch*), an early work reminiscent of the spy novel, the metro stops suddenly on the Pont de Passy, the shady protagonist, a double agent who takes it daily, wishes that «it shall he never restart again and that no one may wrest him from this no man's land between the two riverbanks»<sup>26</sup>. And when in *Dora Bruder* the narrator, who seeks to trace a young Jewish girl that disappeared under the German occupation, walks along the wall of an old barracks near the Boulevard Périphérique, he imagines a «no man's land» that lies beyond, and which appears to him as a «zone of void and oblivion», but also as a «magnetic field» where one can receive the radio waves of the past<sup>27</sup>. Still greater, however, is the importance of this particular type of space in Modiano's novel *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue* (*In the café of lost youth*).

This work, published in 2007, refers repeatedly to certain «intermediary zones» in Paris, to metropolitan «no-man's-lands where you [are] on the fringes of everything, in transit, or even suspended»<sup>28</sup>. Time and again, these «neutral zones» preoccupy the last of the novel's four narrators, a certain Roland, who prefers to conceal his real name

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*complètes*, ed. Bernhild Boie, vol. 2, Paris: Gallimard 1995 (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), p. 247–401, here p. 346 (my translation).

24 Cf. Patrick Modiano: «Autour de Julien Gracq», in: Maryline Heck/Raphaëlle Guidée (ed.): *Patrick Modiano*, Paris: L'Herne 2012 (Cahiers de l'Herne), p. 215.

25 On the importance of these zones in Modiano, see Régine Robin: «Le Paris toujours déjà perdu de Patrick Modiano», in: Heck/Guidée: *Patrick Modiano* (n. 24), p. 93–100, here p. 96–97.

26 «[...] qu'il [le métro] ne reparte jamais plus et que personne ne vienne [l']arracher à ce *no man's land* entre les deux rives». Patrick Modiano: *La ronde de nuit* (1969), Paris: Gallimard 2001 (Folio), p. 111 (my translation).

27 Patrick Modiano: *Dora Bruder* (1997), Paris: Gallimard 1999 (Folio), p. 131 (my translation). On radiotelegraphic metaphors in Modiano, see my article «Le passé capté. Mémoire et technique chez Patrick Modiano», in: Anne-Yvonne Julien (ed.): *Modiano ou les intermittences de la mémoire*, Paris: Hermann 2010 (Savoir lettres), p. 373–390.

28 «Il existait à Paris des zones intermédiaires, des *no man's land* où l'on était à la lisière de tout, en transit, et même en suspens». Patrick Modiano: *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue* (2007), Paris: Gallimard 2008 (Folio), p. 117. All English quotations of this novel refer to the translation by Euan Cameron: *In the café of lost youth*, Quercus/London: Maclehorse Press 2016, here p. 112 (pagination in brackets).

behind a false «all-purpose first name, which [can] also be used as a surname»<sup>29</sup>. Like the three narrators before him, he frequented in his youth Le Condé, a café near the Odéon, long since gone. At that time, he wrote piece called «The neutral zones» which he dedicated to his friend Jacqueline Delanque, alias Louki, the third narrator and the central protagonist of the novel. In summarizing from memory these few typed pages which he never developed and which he can no longer find in his archives, Roland characterizes the Parisian «no-man's-lands» somewhat ambivalently. On the one hand, he regards them as spaces of transit that afford «a degree of immunity» to those who occupy them. This is why he prefers to call them «neutral zones» instead of «free zones», the political, rather than the economic, term, seeming to him to be «more exact»<sup>30</sup>. A neutral zone protects the traveller against persecution, which in an adjacent territory remains a threat, and permits him at the same time to leave for somewhere else. According to Roland, this promise of a new beginning is manifested for example in all the streets which, north of the 15<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, lead to the overhead railway bridges, just as with other similar streets catalogued in his lost writings. It is probably this positive aspect which had led the work's dedicatee to propose a systematic tour round the neutral zones: «You know, Roland, we could go and spend a week in each of the areas you mention...»<sup>31</sup>. Just like the ethnographer in Modiano's *Voyage de nocces (Honeymoon)*, who intends to explore the outskirts of the capital from regularly changing hotels<sup>32</sup>, Louki toyed with the idea of leaving the well-known territory of Paris for an extended period, in order to visit all «no-man's-lands» listed in the anti-touristic city guide of her friend. Roland does not, however, hide the unsettling side of the areas he described in his text. For, on the other hand, he classifies them as dangerous, specifying that the listed streets are «not only neutral zones, but [...] black holes within Paris» or rather «fragments of that dark matter that occurs in astronomy, a matter that makes everything invisible and which would resist even ultra-violet, infra-red or X-rays»<sup>33</sup>. With this metaphor, borrowed from the science fiction novels which he loves to read as much as his friend, Roland evokes the danger faced by the explorers of neutral zones: should they begin to dwell there, they risk, in the long run, «being sucked up by the dark matter» which erases all traces of their existence<sup>34</sup>.

If we believe the last narrator of the novel, he has himself experienced the deep ambivalence of the «neutral zones» to which he devoted his missing manuscript. For he

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29 «[...] un prénom passe-partout, qui pouvait servir aussi de nom de famille». *ibid.*, p. 116 (p. 110). This pseudonymous camouflage by which the seemingly marginal narrator gives himself the most French name imaginable recalls, of course, Guy Roland, the narrator and protagonist of Modiano's novel *Rue des boutiques obscures (Missing person)*, published in 1978.

30 *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue*, p. 117 (p. 112).

31 «Tu sais, Roland, on pourrait aller vivre une semaine dans chacun des quartiers dont tu parles...». *Ibid.*, p. 118 (p. 113).

32 Cf. Patrick Modiano: *Voyage de nocces* (1990), Paris: Gallimard 1991 (Folio), p. 19.

33 «[...] des éclats de cette matière sombre dont il est question en astronomie, une matière qui rend tout invisible et qui résisterait même aux ultraviolets, aux infrarouges et aux rayons X». *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue*, p. 129 (p. 123–124).



has not only explored some of them in the company of Louki, but even inhabited them with her, although their tour was less methodical than that proposed by his friend and somewhat closer to a situationist *dérive*. Like Guy Debord, whose famous inscription NE TRAVAILLEZ JAMAIS (NEVER WORK) Roland remembers well, the young couple loved to «drift around» aimlessly in the streets of Paris, almost always arriving, however, at an intermediary zone<sup>35</sup>. This kind of space attracted them especially as a potential refuge and hideout within a city full of persecutors. For Louki, like many of Modiano's protagonists, has absconded more than once. Before her meeting with Roland, the police had been looking for her as a runaway teen; afterwards a private detective shadowed her, because she had run away from her former boss and husband. Given this precarious situation, the two young people shared the constant desire to disappear into the urban no man's land<sup>36</sup>. Two neighbourhoods in particular, evoked in detail by Roland, seemed to fulfil this desire. First, the couple found shelter in the Rue d'Argentine, located near the Place de l'Étoile, where all buildings close to their hotel had the air of «areas that people pass through, where no-one asked you for identity papers and where you could hide»<sup>37</sup>. This impression was even stronger in winter, when they had the feeling they were «marooned in a mountain-top hotel», as if the «neutral zone» had shifted to Switzerland, the stronghold of neutrality in Modiano's œuvre<sup>38</sup>. There, Louki could believe that she was separated from her past by «a sort of iron curtain» and that she had arrived at a new «starting point»<sup>39</sup>. Towards the end of their living together, the young couple had once again this impression of security in a «neutral zone just before Arsenal, a few deserted streets in which [one] wondered whether anyone lived»<sup>40</sup>. Just there, they wanted to have an apartment — in an urban no man's land, which they would leave never again.

While they tried to take refuge in one of the capital's «neutral zones», Louki and Roland nevertheless also experienced the dangers discussed in the latter's short essay.

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34 «Oui, à la longue nous risquons d'être aspirés par la matière sombre». *Ibid.*, p. 129 (p. 124).

35 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 130, 136 (p. 124, 130). On the references to Debord in Modiano's novel, which begins with an epigraph taken from his film script *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978), see Mathieu Rémy: «Psychogéographie de la jeunesse perdue», in: Roger-Yves Roche (ed.): *Lectures de Modiano*, Nantes: Cécile Defaut 2009, p. 199–217.

36 On the general propensity of Modiano's characters to hide out in the Parisian environment, see Michael Sheringham: «Disparaître dans la ville», in: Jörg Dünne/Wolfram Nitsch (eds.): *Scénarios d'espace. Littérature, cinéma et parcours urbains*, Clermont-Ferrand, Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal 2014 (Littérature), p. 125–141, esp. p. 130–133. Such a «neutral zone» where one feels «sheltered from everything» («à l'abri de tout») is, for example, the Cité Universitaire in Modiano's novel *Fleurs de ruine* (*Flowers of ruin*), Paris: Seuil 1991, p. 55–56.

37 «Des lieux de passage où l'on ne demandait l'identité de personne et où l'on pouvait se cacher». *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue*, p. 119 (p. 114).

38 «[...] nous avons l'impression, rue d'Argentine, d'être perdus dans un hôtel de haute montagne». *Ibid.*, p. 128–129 (S. 123). Regarding Switzerland as a «no man's land» on a European scale, see Patrick Modiano: *Livret de famille* (1977), Paris: Gallimard 1981 (Folio), p. 118.

39 *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue*, p. 120, 124 (p. 115, 119).

40 «[...]« une zone neutre juste avant l'Arsenal, quelques rues désertes dont on se demandait si elles étaient habitées». *Ibid.*, p. 135 (S. 129).

Already in the Rue d'Argentine the feeling of being saved by anonymity commingled with the unsettling suspicion that this neighbourhood was haunted by people who were «dead as far as the registry office was concerned», reduced to the status of ghosts by a «declaration of absence»<sup>41</sup>. Thus, the no man's land on the edge of the 16<sup>th</sup> arrondissement took the appearance of a spectral zone lying between life and death, similar to that realm of shadows which, in other Modiano novels, is suggested by the tunnels of the metro<sup>42</sup>. Or, to put it in a more philosophical way, citing two works contemporary to the novel's setting in the 1960s: the utopian region where everything seemed possible, as in the «no man's land» of adolescence described by Simone de Beauvoir, also adumbrated a spectral neutrality, as conceived by Maurice Blanchot<sup>43</sup>. Haunted by this impression up to the time of narration, Roland even wonders, in relation to other the streets crossing the neighbourhood, whether they «still exist and whether they haven't been absorbed once and for all by dark matter»<sup>44</sup>. And with regard to Louki, he also implies that it was her continuous drift towards the «black holes» hidden in the «neutral zones» that finally drove her to suicide. After moving to the 14<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, he often accompanied her to her room, passing by the «street lined with plane trees and high walls that divides the Montparnasse cemetery in two»<sup>45</sup>. This street, which he had forgotten to put on the list of neutral zones because it seemed «more a frontier», nonetheless displayed the same duality as the Rue d'Argentine. On the one hand, it gave the young strollers the impression that they were entering a land where they were «sheltered from everything»; but on the other hand, the writer Maurice Raphaël, another regular in Le Condé, located it in «limbo», because of its proximity to the city of the dead<sup>46</sup>. In fact, it was through here that Louki had approached death, as she sometimes shared her new room with a cocaine addict friend named «Tête de mort» («Death's Head»). She was present when, one day, Louki threw herself from the window. This suicide certainly remains mysterious, given that none of the four narrators of the novel can unravel her motives<sup>47</sup>. But the last of them, however, locates the place of death in the vicinity of a no man's land *par excellence*. For Roland — and perhaps also for

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41 *Ibid.*, p. 118 (p. 113).

42 See my article «Vers la famille par le métro. Identité et transport dans *La Petite Bijou* de Patrick Modiano», in: Sylviane Coyault/Christine Jérusalem/Gaspard Turin (eds.): *Le roman contemporain de la famille*, Paris: Classiques Garnier 2016 (Écritures contemporaines, 12), p. 169–182.

43 On the existentialist «no man's land», see Simone de Beauvoir: *La force d'âge*, Paris: Gallimard 1960, p. 300, where she evokes her transport to a hospital: «Oui, on m'avait arrachée à ma vie, à sa sécurité, pour me jeter dans un *no man's land* où tout était possible; rien ne me protégeait plus, tous les dangers, je les courais». On the much more unfathomable concept of the «neutral» in Maurice Blanchot, cf. *L'entretien infini*, Paris: Gallimard 1969, p. 447–450.

44 «Je me demande même si ces rues existent encore et si elles n'ont pas été absorbées une fois pour toutes par la matière sombre». *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue*, p. 133 (p. 127).

45 *Ibid.*, p. 148 (p. 141).

46 *Ibid.*, p. 29, 148–149 (p. 26, 142).

47 Cf. Bruno Blanckeman: *Lire Patrick Modiano*, Paris: Armand Colin 2009 (Lire et comprendre), p. 36; Jurate Kaminskas: «Traces, tracés et figures: *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue* de Patrick Modiano», in: *French cultural studies* 23.4 (2013), p. 350–357.

Modiano — to drift into a neutral zone that recalls a strip between two borders means not only to take refuge there for a while, but sometimes also to be lost there forever.

By these strange effects on the two main characters, the Parisian no man's land depicted in *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue* displays impressively a general characteristic of Modiano's urban spaces: an unsettling atmosphere from which no one gets away — neither the protagonist nor the narrator nor even the reader. Most critics would certainly subscribe Adam Thirlwell's observation that the Nobel Prize winner «has transformed the novel into a laboratory for producing atmospheres»<sup>48</sup>. His polyphonic homage to the situationist movement permits us to cast a glance at this laboratory from inside. For as we have seen, it stages precisely the tension that for the German philosopher Gernot Böhme is peculiar to atmosphere. Defining atmosphere as «the common reality of the subject and the object of perception», Böhme insists on its aesthetic as well as on its spatial nature: on the one hand, atmosphere principally depends on perception and therefore can be manipulated by or for the perceiving subject; on the other hand, it always belongs to a determinate space and thus may change the mood of all subjects located there, so that they not only share the same experience, but risk to get completely under a specific «atmospheric spell»<sup>49</sup>. This tension between the personal making and the impersonal power of atmosphere is quite obvious in the last part of Modiano's novel. *Prima facie*, the «neutral zones» of Paris seem to be a mere literary construction, since their specific ambience was first outlined in Roland's untraceable essay, where he apparently introduced the metaphors of «black holes» and «no-man's-lands». In the course of the young couple's explorations, however, this ambience has turned out to be more than a product of subjective perception or imagination, in so far as Louki always shared Roland's experience and finally responded with greater sensitiveness than himself to their irresistible impact. In that respect, the metaphors borrowed by the would-be writer from the universe of science fiction stories — and probably also of spy novels — prove suggestive. Like the gravitation of «black holes» on an astronomical scale or the attractive power of «no-man's-lands» on the scale of military or political geography, the atmospheric spell of the «neutral zones» in urban landscape seems something difficult to escape.

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48 See his review of some recent English translations of Modiano's novels in *The Guardian*, 19/11/2014.

49 Gernot Böhme: *Atmosphäre. Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1995, p. 34; cf. «Ästhetik der Atmosphären», in: *Architektur und Atmosphäre* (2006), München: Fink 2013, p. 19–31. On «atmospheric spell», see Reinhardt Knodt: «Atmosphären» (1993), in: *Ästhetische Korrespondenzen. Denken im technischen Raum*, Stuttgart: Reclam 1994, p. 39–69.