

Literary and Cinematic Responses to the Crime Story in Contemporary France

Deborah Streifford Reisinger  
*Duke University*

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**Deborah Streifford Reisinger,**  
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**Abstract:** In her paper, "Literary and Cinematic Responses to the Crime Story in Contemporary France," Deborah Streifford Reisinger examines society's relationship to violence in an era of increased media dominance. Reisinger's interdisciplinary approach integrates media, cinema, and literary studies to analyze how the crime story functions as a site of discursive struggle. Reisinger focuses on the sensational Paulin and Succo affairs that became mobile signifiers about crime, insecurity and the Other in France in the 1980s. By situating these crime stories in a larger historical and political context, she analyzes how media and politicians use the crime story as a tool for upholding dominant ideology. Yet rather than conclude that the crime story has become an absolute banality, as Jean Baudrillard has maintained, Reisinger shows how these crime stories attest to the public's renewed fascination with violence. Her examination of the artistic rewritings of these stories reveal alternative, complex readings of the *fait divers* that effectively subvert the media's sensationalized discourse on crime. Through an analysis of the processes of production, reception, and re-articulation that contribute to the representation of crime, Reisinger concludes that the crime story is an important place of social and political resistance for readers and artists alike in contemporary France.

**Deborah Streifford REISINGER****Literary and Cinematic Responses to the Crime Story in Contemporary France**

In this article, I examine French society's relationship with violence in the 1980s and 1990s, an era of increased media dominance. This study's interdisciplinary approach integrates media, cinema, and literary studies to analyze how crime news (*faits divers*) functions as a site of discursive struggle (in more detail, see Reisinger). During this period, the sensational Paulin and Succo *affaires* became mobile signifiers that sparked fierce debate about crime, insecurity and the Other in France. As examples of a perceived growing wave of motiveless crimes during this time, the Paulin and Succo cases are exemplary illustrations of the media's efforts to manipulate public sensibility about crime. By situating these crime stories in a larger historical and political context, I analyze how media and politicians use the crime story as a tool for upholding the dominant ideology. Yet rather than conclude that the crime story has become an absolute banality, as Jean Baudrillard has erroneously maintained, my research shows how these crime stories instead attest to the public's renewed fascination with violence. This examination of the artistic rewritings of these stories reveals alternative and complex readings of the *fait divers* that effectively subvert the media's sensationalized discourse on crime. An analysis of the complex processes of production, reception, and re-articulation that contribute to the representation of crime concludes that the *fait divers* is an important place of social and political resistance for readers and artists alike in contemporary France.

The late 1980s and early 1990s were an era of heightened crime awareness in France, a precursor for the hyper-focus on security and *délinquance* that would characterize the turn of the century. With the introduction of the word "serial killer" into the French language, the emerging popularity of "reality TV," and an increasingly pervasive media discourse focused on public insecurity, French society consumed crime as fast as the media could reproduce it. Stemming in part from American cultural capitalism, French society has incorporated and followed similar trends in the perception and representation of crime. Yet, as Tricia Rose explains, "Crime and violence have become the central focus of popular attention, not because more and more people are the victims of crime, but because more [people] vicariously experience violence through the repetition of tabloid, televised news, and other reality-based programming" (149). In other words, criminal acts have not actually multiplied, but the increased mediation of crime has heightened the public's perception of violent acts and in turn increased its concern. The rapid and constant circulation of these images combine to create what Bill Nichols calls an "aesthetics of immediacy" that threatens conventional historiography. As he explains, "The aesthetics of immediacy, conjured in a timeless, spaceless telescope of mediated reality, drowns out the descriptions that urge us to further actions beyond exclamation or dismay. Its claims of authenticity, its construction of an endless 'now,' its preference for the chronicle, the random and unforeseen over the order and cohesion of historiography, and the problem solving discourses of a technocratic order all come at a time when master narratives are a target of disparagement" (59). It is this mediated (omni)presence of crime that I interrogate throughout my research, as these violent images and discourse have become a defining part of the public's daily news diet.

Claire Denis's film, *J'ai pas sommeil* (1994), based on the Paulin case, and Bernard-Marie Koltès's play *Roberto Zucco* (1990), based on the Succo case, both appear within ten years of the *fait divers*'s occurrence, allowing us to examine them in the historical context of the *affaire*. While these rewritings do not stray very far from the facts, each represents a deliberately fictionalized interpretation of the *fait divers*. In other words, neither artist claims to retell the crimes exactly as they happened nor to offer a biographical account of the criminal's life; rather, each alters its protagonist's name, invents characters who interact with him, and opts to omit the criminal's death, refusing the cathartic closure offered by the real case. In an analysis of the respective representations of these crime stories, it is clear that rather than justifying criminal acts as they have been accused, Denis and Koltès interrogate

and challenge contemporary society's relationship with crime. De-sensationalizing, de-constructing, and re-contextualizing the *fait divers*, these rewritings subvert the dominant media discourse about crime that constructs the criminal as a (racial, sexual, psychological) Other, in opposition to the (white, straight, sane) public. In contrast, Denis and Koltès incite the reader or spectator to experience the criminal as a person rather than a monster, and the crimes in their historical and cultural contexts, rather than as singular events that occur in a virtual social vacuum. Although Denis and Koltès do not suggest that we may "know" the Other, their rewritings destabilize boundaries between the public and the criminal, effectively neutralizing the criminal's difference.

During the 1980s, the notion of *insécurité* (insecurity, or anxiety about crime) dominated headlines and news stories throughout France, particularly in conservative newspapers. While this concept of public peril exists in other countries, in France this fear takes on particular significance. As Hughes Lagrange points out, "the theme of insecurity appeared in several western European countries from the middle of the 1970s. But it is in France where it has the most effect on public opinion and finds the most resonance in the whole of social life" ("le thème de l'insécurité est apparu dans plusieurs pays d'Europe occidentale à partir du milieu des années 70. Mais c'est en France qu'il acquiert le plus d'emprise sur l'opinion, trouve le plus de résonance dans l'ensemble de la vie sociale") (122). In general terms, the notion of *insécurité* has been largely constructed by conservative politicians, with conservative newspapers like *Le Figaro* reflecting and promoting these fears. As Ellen Willis affirms, "crime has always been an issue of the Right. Fear of crime, while it has not solely propelled the Right into power, has contributed significantly to creating a generalized anxiety about insecurity and social breakdown" (54). France is no exception, as several criminal researchers have pointed out (see Mucchielli). Stemming from a generalized anxiety, the public's relationship to crime and insecurity rests on a combination of social factors: economic instability, crises of identity, and changes in urban sociability, all issues of growing importance in the 1980s (Lagrange 122). Above all, it is the media's depiction of these components that informs the public and endeavors to shape its perception of crime, since feelings of *insécurité* are exaggerated by senseless crimes that defy rationality. Both the Paulin and Succo *affaires* are characterized by the "senseless" and "cool" manner in which the murders were committed; neither criminal gave a reason for his violent actions, nor was the public able to assign meaning to his acts. Unlike the *crimes de délinquance* committed by "troubled youth" that have remained at a steady rate for the last century, these motiveless murders seem to have drastically increased over the last two decades. While this statistical increase reflects new technologies that allow police to track and solve murders (Mucchielli 16), the sheer number of these murders provides fodder for fear-inspired stories about crime waves. These distinct crimes thus represent the growing menace of motiveless murders that has heightened public insecurity in a new and different way. The notoriety and prominence of these two *affaires* in the public sphere (ranging from front-page stories and magazine issues to television specials and political commentary) allow us to examine a broad range of public response to this particular type of murder and its mediation. By linking these cases together and placing them in the larger political and social context of the 1980s, then, it is clear that the *fait divers* is used as a tool for upholding dominant ideology, where state authority is constructed, legal control is expanded, and alternative politics are quieted. It is in this way, writes criminologist Ray Surette, that "the media establish powerful frames for perceiving the world while they control the distribution of shared social knowledge" (xvii). The rise of the right wing and the increasing media saturation of crime also provoked resistant readings of these crimes that highlight how the *fait divers* is manipulated to promote political, social, and cultural ideology. Analyzing all of these factors (media representation, political response, critical reaction, public controversy), we see how these authors and filmmakers directly subvert the media's alliance with political groups who shape our fascination with and increasing appetite for reports depicting crime. These artistic works highlight how the media - and society as a whole - use the criminal to frame larger debates.

Given the new media environment, then, we must ask ourselves what is the significance and role of the *fait divers* in contemporary society. How does the media construct and feed the public's fascination with these crime stories? Baudrillard claims that the *fait divers* has become "absolute banality," that in contrast with earlier periods, when it was considered exceptional, today's *fait divers* is forgotten soon after its initial media appearance. Calling it an ordinary fascination, Baudrillard concludes that "It is no longer spectacular in the sense that there's no scene or scenography, but it's very fascinating ... cancer, tuberculosis led to a whole kind of romanticism. One could still make things literary, now no, it's simply obscene, there's nothing left to do" ("Ça n'est plus spectaculaire au sens où il n'y a plus de scène ni de scénographie, mais c'est très fascinant ... le cancer, la tuberculose, ont donné lieu à tout un romantisme. On pouvait encore littériser ces choses, maintenant non, c'est simplement obscène, il n'y a plus rien à faire") ("Cool Killers" 143). Thus, according to Baudrillard, the ordinary nature of today's *fait divers*, due in part to its mediation and proliferation, prevents it from achieving an important stature. Given Baudrillard's subsequent conclusion, that such banality cannot be made cinematic or literary, what is the effect of the literary or cinematic text that does re-enact the contemporary *fait divers*? How does this work address the media's impact on the crime story, and what kinds of critical negotiations might arise for readers and spectators of these re-writings? In looking at the artistic re-articulations of the crime story, this research addresses a component of crime discourse that is habitually neglected; indeed, Baudrillard's previous statement denies the very possibility of such a literature. Although the artist's role in influencing the public discourse is frequently discounted and likewise difficult to determine, the importance of incorporating artistic productions into discussions about crime cannot be understated. Their role in interpreting and challenging the dominant discourse on crime merits an in-depth examination, something that has not yet been accomplished.

The prevalence, or rather the omnipresence, of the *fait divers* in contemporary society is pivotal to this study because of its focus on reception and re-articulation. Continuously re-written and re-circulated by a variety of media, the "truth" of the sensationalized *fait divers* is in constant flux. In fact, there is no one "truth" that may be culled from the *fait divers*, but rather a large number of historically significant readings. Each new piece of information that is printed, televised, filmed or spoken about the crime story serves to alter and shape the public's understanding of it; the discourse surrounding the event thus determines our sense of what is real. In examining how meaning is made through the sensational *fait divers*, then, it is most useful to employ what may be termed a context-activated cultural studies model to engage with the crime story and its rewritings (here I borrow both Tony Bennett's conception of the "activated text" and Janet Staiger's explanation of a "context-activated theory"). This approach emphasizes my conviction that the text is not a vessel of inherent meaning, and that the wide variety of responses to it are structured by a complex set of cultural, social, and political systems. Examining as texts both the discourse surrounding the *fait divers* and, secondly, its artistic rewritings, this model is effective in its emphasis on the fluid nature of the *fait divers*. My understanding of this approach, where the text is viewed as a process rather than a finite object, is greatly informed by John Fiske, Michel Foucault, Tony Bennett, and Janet Staiger, critics whose research in discourse, media and cultural studies illustrates how we might begin to read these crime stories and their artistic rewritings as sites of discursive resistance. Unlike traditional comparative studies that focus on metaphorical argumentation, then, this analysis is both contextual and empirical. In looking at the "how" rather than the "what," my approach examines what happens to these particular cultural products. How are they watched or read, and by whom? How are they criticized, discussed, and absorbed -- or rejected? And, perhaps most importantly, in what ways do they become part of the culture at large?

My initial interest in this project stems from concerns about the media's increased dominance and proliferation in recent years; French critics and scholars such as Baudrillard and Bourdieu warn the public of this growing public menace on a regular basis. In *On Television*, for instance, Bourdieu writes that "so much emphasis on headlines [*faits divers*] and so much filling up of previous time with empty

air -- with nothing or almost nothing -- shunts aside relevant news, that is, the information that all citizens ought to have in order to exercise their democratic rights" (18). Some critics have expressed a fear that the media's increasing power strips readers of their critical abilities, making the general public dangerously susceptible to this media rhetoric. Unable to decipher these manipulative messages, the public is presumably in danger of falling prey to this narrow view of the world, one that adheres to the status quo, refuses other voices, and promotes a fear-inspiring agenda that paralyzes the public. My resistance to this view is not that the media does not maintain and continue to gain increasing power in the public arena; certainly, its growing diffusion and proliferation is undeniable. Rather, I take issue with the implied assumptions about the public's inability to decipher media discourse. Thus, while I show throughout this project that the media - and the conservative media in particular - endeavors to manipulate public sentiment, I do not believe that readers/spectators necessarily accept, espouse, or replicate these views. Indeed, it is my conviction that contemporary readers and spectators are much more analytical and even cynical than they are often perceived and depicted. Both of the artistic rewritings that I examine in this project embody this perspective, offering examples of characters that resist the media and rebel against law enforcement. In examining how the public has thus far responded to Denis's and Koltès's rewritings, then, this research attempts to answer questions that are often fluid and intangible, such as how the artist affects the reception and perception of crime, what the significance of the author or filmmaker returning to the crime holds, and above all, what is the role of the *fait divers* in a society increasingly saturated with mediated crime reports. In activating these *faits divers* within their many textual incrustations, I highlight the symbiotic relationship of politics, history, media, literature, criticism, and film. It is out of the desire to emphasize this interdependence that I began this project, and these *affaires* attest to the relationship between the artist and society at a time when literature is being increasingly removed from its sociological and historical origins. By analyzing these crimes in the broadest contexts of their activations, I endeavor to show that the *fait divers* remains not only an important site of discursive struggle, but also a significant site for reader resistance in an age of increasing media and state control.

The Paulin and Succo *affaires* share several important similarities that warrant their close comparison. Despite their relative rarity, violent crimes committed by young immigrants represent some of the most feared criminal exploits in contemporary society, a feeling heightened by the media's disproportionate focus on these acts. As "motiveless" crimes, the Paulin and Succo *affaires* thus reflect the least common but most conspicuous crimes in the media. During the late 1980s, a time of perceived growing insecurity in France, these two crimes and their activations became easy targets for the Right's campaigns against crime and immigration. The Paulin and Succo *affaires* were thus used as examples of the Left's failure to ensure public safety, a tactic justified by law enforcement's relatively ineffective efforts to catch the killers: in the Paulin *affaire*, it was pure coincidence that a policeman stumbled upon the criminal, and in the Succo *affaire*, a young woman turned Succo in to authorities. While the rare circumstances of these captures do not imply the police's inability to fight crime, they do contrast the common view of reliable investigative tactics depicted by media, film and television, where the police's methodical efforts never fail to pay off in criminal convictions. Instead, these two cases reveal how law enforcement actually functions, thus presenting a divergent view of the justice system that conceivably drains public confidence in law enforcement. Denis and Koltès capture this public wariness in their rewritings, most notably through the diminished importance of law enforcement and the public's cynical attitude towards policemen and prison guards. In addition to the modest importance of law enforcement in these works, the rewritings of these *affaires* portray a considerably subdued media presence, one whose role falls secondary to the public's first-hand knowledge. This representation of the media radically contests the media's self-representation as the public's guardian. In *J'ai pas sommeil* and *Roberto Zucco*, characters interact directly with the criminal, erasing the media's intermediary role in transmitting the crime story. This new way of relaying the *fait divers* is significant in that it denies many of the ideological battles that take place over meaning. As Foucault

suggests, "we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies" (*History of Sexuality* 100). In bypassing the media's interpretive stance that separates the public from the criminal, these artists subvert systems of exclusion and allow for a direct interaction between the criminal and the public, proving that it is possible to envision the world of discourse that Foucault describes. In *J'ai pas sommeil*, characters out-rightly ignore the media: Daïga looks past sensational headlines, female characters ignore clear warnings to stay inside, and televisions warning of public danger go unwatched. Despite the omnipresence of these varied media channels, then, characters plainly disregard their presence. In *Roberto Zucco*, on the other hand, there is a distinct absence of the media, whose realistic presence in the play is noted only in Zucco's wanted poster in Scene VI.

Without the media in this intermediary role that encrusts the criminal with cultural and political battles, the public is freed to create its own meanings. So on the one hand, we see that without these fear-driven warnings so present in media reports on crime, individuals *choose* to interact with the criminal. This omission of the media's influence thus valorizes the public's autonomy by suggesting that the public does not listen to the media or rely on it to make meaning and choices. On the other hand, like Denis's examples of the media's strong presence in society, *Roberto Zucco* also reflects how the public as a whole has internalized the media's messages about crime and violence. Although the media is not specifically invoked in the play, Koltès shows us how it functions as a covert ideologue. Scene X, for instance, demonstrates how the public and the criminal act out clichés of violent scenes seen on television. Despite the inevitable presence and influence of the media, however, Denis's and Koltès's protagonists do not listen to or search out the media's authority about these events. Significantly, they choose to make their own judgments about the criminal's virtue. By ignoring police and media to act autonomously, these characters radically reject dominant sources of information. We can see a similar resistance of media forms in post-modern horror films where authority is undermined and institutionalized knowledges are subverted. *Halloween* (1978), the *Scream* franchise (1996, 1997, 2000), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Ring* (1998), and *Tesis* (1999) all contest symbolic forms of knowledge (the media, the police, the university system). They do not, however, present a "cool" attitude toward the criminal. In all of these works, characters greatly fear the criminal, who is to be avoided at all costs; terror, rather than personal gain, motivates these individuals. *J'ai pas sommeil* and *Roberto Zucco* thus go a step further by critiquing the machines of knowledge in the context of a real crime story that presents the criminal's point of view (for none of these other works is based on a mediated *fait divers*).

*J'ai pas sommeil* and *Roberto Zucco* reflect not only a devaluing of the media and law enforcement in the public eye, but also a deliberate subversion of the criminal's representation in the media. It is due in part to the characters's direct and often positive interactions with the criminal that Denis and Koltès have been accused of presenting "non-judgmental" representations of the criminal. They fundamentally subvert the media's fear-driven view of crime by reducing public insecurity and presenting a non-judgmental view of the criminal that rewrites Otherness. As I have shown, this desensationalized view of crime is accomplished in several principal ways: 1) by refusing the sensational cause and effect of crime. Neither Denis nor Koltès focuses on why the man becomes a criminal. Both artists emphasize that they do not wish to psychologize the criminal, thus subverting audience expectations of a resolution. Refusing the comfort of knowledge, Denis and Koltès do not offer their audiences a cathartic release at the end of their works; 2) by breaking down binary representations of evil/good and mad/sane. These rewritings present well-rounded criminals in the context of a fallible public. Gone are the clear divisions between the public and the criminal, a depiction that radically contrasts the media's efforts to classify the criminal through sensational labels, psychological evidence, and police testimony. Instead, Denis and Koltès provide the criminal with a subjectivity commonly denied by the media's focus on his Otherness; and 3) by depicting the public's fascination with the crimi-

nal. Whether through camera shots that linger on the criminal body or via the crowd's interest in the criminal spectacle, Denis and Koltès show that we remain fascinated by crime. The non-mediated fascination of female characters furthermore place the criminal in a broader historical context, which is brought out in *Roberto Zucco* through intertextual mythological and literary references. In these three primary ways, Denis and Koltès reorient their audience towards a more balanced view of crime that, in its uniqueness, is highly subversive. Within this non-judgmental representation of the criminal lie thorny questions raised by critics about how the public may interpret these neutralized representations of the criminal, namely: what happens when the element of fear is removed from depictions of crime? The powerful presence of female characters in both *J'ai pas sommeil* and *Roberto Zucco* underscores the importance of examining how they are represented in these works: as the largest cluster of potential victims of the criminal - and thus a group specifically targeted by the media - the role of female characters is pivotal to the rewriting of the *fait divers*. In each of these rewritings, Denis and Koltès present female protagonists that radically subvert the media's presentation of weak, fearful victims, offering readers a model of empowerment and resistance. Women in these works maintain a distinctly open and inquisitive relationship with the criminal that reflects research positing women's greater interest in crime stories. Female characters in *J'ai pas sommeil* and *Roberto Zucco*, however, do not appear to use the *fait divers* to echo their dismal lives, as earlier research suggested, but rather to realize their dreams and desires. Looking at these female characters, we note several shared characteristics: an intrigue with the criminal that exceeds that of the male characters, a recklessness with regard to personal safety and law, a history of abuse or victimization, and a cynicism towards police and the media. In the context of these personal stories, we can begin to see how and why women in these works appear charmed by the criminal.

Texts that encrust the *fait divers* question whether the artists cast the criminal as a hero. Essentially, this debate may be divided into two primary -- and diametrically opposed -- ideas: 1) that these works mark the end of the *héroïsation* of the criminal and 2) that they instead signal the emergence of the criminal as depicted as a hero. The second chapter of my book delineates several flaws in Baudrillard's claims that the Paulin *affaire* signifies the end of the "héroïsation des criminels," which I return to in reference to this project as a whole. Again, it is important to address these issues as they form part of the *fait divers*'s incrustations, thus contributing to its meaning in the public arena; as Bennett reminds us, "the text is only available for analysis in the context of its activations" (14). In diametric opposition to Baudrillard's claims that the criminal-hero has disappeared, other spokespersons in France and the United States claim that society is witnessing a startling new trend that venerates the criminal, a group that includes not only protesters and journalists, but psychologists and philosophers. Not matching definitions of the criminal-hero, nor of the non-hero of Baudrillard's claims, the criminals of these two *faits divers* seem to float between fascination and banality, depending on their representation and their readers. As I emphasize throughout this work, perhaps a better approach than debating whether and to what extent society glorifies the criminal, we ought instead to probe how the criminal serves the media and society as a whole, looking at how we use his existence to frame larger debates. Rather than focusing on sensational and provocative questions, we learn much more by examining these crimes through a context-activated theory that attempts to go beyond the primary levels of meaning. A fundamental question that arises, then, is exactly how *J'ai pas sommeil* and *Roberto Zucco* have influenced the meaning of these *faits divers*. Throughout this research, I demonstrate how the criminal and his acts shift in meaning according to the discourse and events that frame his actions. The heightened reactions to the rewritings of these *affaires* signal a concern that the actual events will be altered in the public memory, and certainly, these fears are not unfounded. As Bennett has theorized and demonstrated, texts are "constantly inscribed within different contexts and caught up in an ever shifting set of relations with other texts, such that it is productive of variable effects and meanings" (5). In *Roberto Zucco* especially, the public protests demonstrated a genuine fear that Koltès's vision of Zucco would alter or replace the image of the real Succo.



With *J'ai pas sommeil*, we see how the film did indeed affect the "truth" of the events; recent reviewers have referred to Denis's film to cite criminal details, with one reviewer erroneously stating that Paulin's partner Raphaël was Caucasian, an error that is particularly significant given the racial overtones that characterized coverage of the Paulin *affaire*.

In the years following the artistic rewritings of these *faits divers*, we begin to ask which particular activations of the crime story become privileged in the dominant discourse of crime. Certainly, the *fait divers* is privileged because it comes closest to the "truth" and because it came first. Yet for the broader public, *J'ai pas sommeil* and *Roberto Zucco* are clearly privileged because of their circulation; their worldwide distribution allows a larger population to access these re-articulations, exceeding the reach of the original crime stories. In addition, however, the reviewers and protestors of these two works have touched perhaps more people than the actual film and play. Ironically, while one might argue that Koltès's play has made famous the violent actions of a madman, it is just as likely that the play's censors are "to blame"; it was they who created the conflict that seared Succo's name in the minds of citizens who would not have otherwise seen the play. In other words, because the play and its censorship have become inextricably linked, it is impossible to determine whether the international success of *Roberto Zucco* is due to the brilliance of the play or to the controversy it stirred. We see how these incrustations function, for example, when protestors picketed *Roberto Zucco* without having seen the play; its hype preceded its representation, encrusting it with a meaning that stemmed from its activation (or the threat of this activation since *Roberto Zucco* was not actually staged in Chambéry). Thus, while it is clear that Koltès's play is about more than a patricidal cop-killer, and worthy of watching regardless of its controversy, the employment of these controversial elements to attract spectators has also had the effect of resuscitating theater as an art form. When a literary work can cause a controversy of this proportion, it is testimony to its importance, and at a time when public support for literary studies and cultural activities is at a low, this kind of press reminds the public that art and literature play an important role in defining and shaping our cultural values.

Given that these kinds of debates strongly influence public opinion (and thereby polls and votes), the struggle to control the *fait divers*'s meaning is paramount. This is evidenced by the battles between *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* during the Paulin *affaire*, where newspapers fought to control the printed representation of Thierry Paulin. As John Fiske elaborates, "to make sense of the world is to exert power over it, and to circulate that sense socially is to exert power over those who use that sense as a way of coping with their daily lives" (3). Fiske emphasizes that the ability to control discourse often signals a parallel capacity to control public sentiment. Recent battles over the depiction of crime have even been blamed for affecting the outcome of the 2002 French presidential race. After the Left's shocking loss to National Front leader Le Pen in the first round of the elections, *Le Monde* made an investigation into the mediatisation of *insécurité*. The paper found that between January and May of 2002, there were 987 "*faits divers-police-justice*" stories released every week over the sixty-five newspapers studied. *Insécurité* was treated twice as often as employment and eight times as frequently as unemployment, even though there was no rise in crime during this period ("Pourquoi les faits divers fascinent?"). These findings corollate the hypermediatization of the crime story with the political outcome of the elections, leading us to the conclusion that the public's internalization of the media-driven fear led them to ignore the real issues at stake. But what about the public who *does not* use this information to make sense of the world? Denis's and Koltès's works are unique in that they present characters who *ignore* these discourses presented by media, politicians, and law enforcement. Although the media and police influence the lives of these characters in subtle ways, there is a meaningful lack of attention paid to these powerful mediums of the message; in this neglect of legal and political powers, we may be able to best determine the significance of these artists's work. As I clearly outline in the book, the public in *J'ai pas sommeil* and *Roberto Zucco* sharply contrasts the media-constructed public. It does not follow the media's mini-soap opera of the killer's crimes, and it does not sit at home frightened to venture outside. Unlike *Le Figaro*'s claims that "France is scared," no one

in these works seems scared. Denis and Koltès instead show us individual characters that are fascinated with the criminal and who search him for solutions to their problems and fantasies; for these characters, the criminal symbolizes a liberating rupture with society's rules. In this way, these artists radically advocate ignoring the dominant knowledge machines.

Throughout my analysis, I have sought to theorize a way of examining these crimes in the context of their activations, and of analyzing their rewritings amidst battles over social, political, and cultural meaning. By closely examining these contexts, I have shown how dominant media and political groups use the *fait divers* to magnify public fear through sensationalized, immediacy-driven depictions of crime and insecurity. In response, Denis and Koltès subvert this dangerous combination of immediacy and insecurity by initiating a dialogue with the criminal that serves to reduce the public fear. Through this unique exchange, these artists provide a new model of contesting dominant readings, of confronting fears, of ignoring the media, and of taking individual risks. By providing an alternative representation of crime and of its audiences, these artists create a forum that valorizes a multiplicity of voices and a diversity of knowledges and readings. Recent trends suggest that these battles over crime will proliferate and continue to characterize political and cultural discussions in the media. Due to more accurate methods of reporting and documenting crime, the sheer number of "motiveless" killers in France is increasing. The media (and the public) continues to show a steady interest in these crimes, with the continued popularity and increase of reality shows, docudramas, and journalistic rewritings of the *affaires* attesting to the public's thirsty fascination. In the face of this undying interest, we may only hope that artists like Denis and Koltès will remain engaged in these battles over the meaning of crime, contesting dominant discourses that obscure important social issues with sensational fear tactics.

Note: The above paper is an excerpt from Deborah Streifford Reisinger, *Crime and Media in Contemporary France*. West Lafayette: Purdue UP, 2007.

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Author's profile: Deborah Streifford Reisinger teaches French language and cultural studies at Duke University. Her research interests include contemporary French theatre, media studies, and the pedagogical applications of technology, and she has published widely in these areas, e.g., "Writing Memory: Point kilométrique 190 and the Grimzi affair" in *Rethinking Crime in the French Cultural Imagination* (2008), "Course Management Systems and Foreign Language Curricula" in *Teaching with Technology* (2003), and "Murder and Banality in the Contemporary *fait divers*" in *South Central Review* (2000), including her first book *Crime and Media in Contemporary France* (Purdue UP, 2007). E-mail: <[debsreis@duke.edu](mailto:debsreis@duke.edu)>