

MAXIME CHATTAM:

THE MAN AND THE WORLD BEYOND THE THRILLER

“What scares us most is what is most familiar and most mundane. That boy next door, Donnie Pfaster, the unremarkable brother of four older sisters, extraordinary only in his ordinariness, could become the devil in a button-down shirt. They say that fear of the unknown is a response to the excesses of the imagination. But our fear of the everyday, of the lurking stranger, of footsteps on the stairs, the fear of violent death, and the urge to survive are as frightening as any X-File. As real as the acceptance that it might happen to you.” (The X-Files, Irresistible, Season 2 Episode 13).

The representation of violence purifies us of what we would especially not want to experience (Aristotle, *Catharsis*, 4th century BC). Cinema, television and literature would relieve us of this violence with an abundance and an imaginative richness that leaves one perplexed and thoughtful about the capacity of human beings to make horror in all its forms an art, if not a consumer product. A very large audience asks to immerse itself in the products of this creativity, these numerous forms of police and criminal intrigues which must above all be captivating. The story that we cannot let go of distills this growing pleasure: to dive into what we absolutely flee in our daily lives, although our days often end in these televised or novelistic representations which thus become part of our lives. So many escapes from the grayness of everyday life, figures of an extraordinary which inhabits our imagination as much as we flee it in reality.

As a perspective on all these fictional horrors, murders, and violence, it is reassuring to have a guide, a stability, a normality. Even the anti-hero is reassuring in his stability, from investigation to investigation. He remains the same. We could almost be him in the seductive deviance and nonconformity of the one who defends society as the security of everyday life against all these monsters that are in reality very human. Alternatives to this so common anti-hero, from Philip Marlowe to Columbo, endearing female figures stand out, such as Elma, the heroine of the novels by Eva Björg Ægisdóttir. Or Grace Campbell and Sarah Geringën, heroines of the french writer Nicolas Beuglet, and so many others. If the "crime novel" is a very rich genre with many forms, the one who leads us into intrigue and horror is very often a character who remains the same, untransformed by what he experiences in his profession, reassuring also in his limits. We like to share his normality by finding him unchanged, true to himself, from crime to murder, from rape to assassination. Temperance Brennan, through the 246 episodes of the very popular series *Bones*, changes very little. Sherlock Holmes crosses time through his legend because he remains the same through some sixty investigations.

Symmetrically, the criminal is the Other, becoming more and more Other as he reveals himself in the horror of his actions. An investigator discovers unveils these horrors, he may be shaken, put himself in danger, but he emerges unscathed from the adventure we experience by proxy. He is our gaze. Ready for the next episode, he embodies our stability and reassures us. If the

story goes beyond the stakes of a simple detective novel and calls into question their social status and their lives, as Nicolas Beuglet does, his two heroines assume a personal psychological continuity and values that are supposed to be ours, consensual, common, shared.

Does this normality truly have meaning, beyond what it reassures? Asking what "being normal" means implies questioning what "being human" means, especially by exploring its boundaries through the face of the killer. All these murders, all this violence, are indeed human if the most authentic figure of the monster is that of the man himself behind his apparent banality. Does this exist, being *normal*, behind the *persona* —the mask? What do we have deep inside ourselves? Is the criminal, in all the horror of his acts, really the Other, the Stranger? Seeking to capture him, to unmask him also implies understanding him, and for this we must thank the hero, who is, after all, quite *normal*. It's his job.

But is this possible? Can one remain normal while seeking to *understand* horror? Why, also, do such a job, and to what extent can confrontation with the worst in man leave one intact? The challenge of all this is the confrontation with the truth of humanity... But the investigator is not a philosopher, unlike perhaps the one who operates, fascinated, in such stagings: the writer himself.

In his novels, Maxime Chattam brings into play the humanity of two investigators confronted with paroxysms of horror in their investigations into serial killers. He does not present us with a succession of stories experienced by a superhero who remains fundamentally the same through all these horrors, but explores the inner journey of these characters in their profound transformation in the face of the worst of humanity. The writer thus engages in a real questioning of human nature—revealed to us by the nature of the monster—in the stakes of such a journey for the investigator himself. But the writer will feel a strong need to put himself on stage as well. The two characters in question are Joshua Brolin and Ludivine Vancker.

We will first present their investigations, the ways in which they are staged and the criminals they pursue, to move towards an interrogation on the personality of the investigator in relation to the writer, present in certain stories. In a second step, we will look at three novels that go beyond the framework of the police investigation but pursue the same questioning on violence in human nature. Then, we will see how this theme becomes broader by involving nature itself, in a vast and very different cycle: *Autre-Monde*, and the fusion of very diverse genres of the imagination. Finally, we will extend this analysis by mentioning some texts which, if they do not form a cycle, are well in line with the continuity of a very rich work that cannot be reduced to a simple police thriller.

I – THE INVESTIGATOR TRANSFORMED BY THE CRIMINAL

1-1 – ORDINARY CRIMINALS AND CONTEXTS

Questioning deviance leads to questioning the human being himself, even developing a global representation of his psyche and his person. This questioning is well known to both psychologists and psychoanalysts. Freud explicitly defends the idea that the general theory of the psychic unconscious is given to us by the study of neuroses, very ordinary pathologies that do not in themselves imply any criminality. Just as in classical medicine, we better understand a bodily organ by studying its diseases. This presupposes a "normality" or rather a neutrality of departure, the idea that the human being is born virgin. The depth of his personality is determined by society, the education that civilizes, even the accidents of life. Is man good at the beginning? Is he only made

bad by human society and the course of existence? Let us not lose sight of the fact that these notions of good and evil are fundamentally human and not natural. Does man only *become* bad? *Are you born* a serial killer?

We are not dealing with a psychology researcher, but with a novelist who aims to entertain and please his readers. The most common fears are exploited for a story that "works" and achieves its goal by terrifying its audience. Consider, for example, the fear of spiders. Are they monstrous or just natural? So let's begin this analysis with a novel that stands out from the others: *Maléfices* (2004).

Unlike other novels, this story does not present a chain of killers as nesting dolls of the real culprit, but a single killer behind the mask of a considerable variety of murderous spiders. The staging of these small creatures forms a powerful narrative argument intended to arouse a widely shared horror, the fear of spiders being so widespread (like the disgust of insects in a more recent text, *Un(e)secte*, 2019). *Maléfices* presents in a particularly documented way the variety of arachnid species, the complexity of their importation, and the novel speculates on the possible existence of at least one giant spider in which everything leads us to believe. In particular when the investigators find a human victim emptied of its organs at the top of a tree, in an arachnid cocoon which involves the secretion of a monstrous quantity of web.

Yet we don't encounter any giant spiders; the monster is indeed human. Her monstrosity will be measured partly by the number of deaths Connie d'Eils leaves behind, but above all by the fact that she has lost the ability to give birth following an accident in life. She has lost what she feels to be her humanity, has become inhuman in her own eyes, thus driven by a desire for revenge that concerns all of humanity. Her spiders will thus spread death with certain success as the investigators try to extract themselves from all these webs, labyrinths, and masks. The end of the novel is distinguished by its final opening: the culprit is not captured, while the cycle devoted to Joshua Brolin closes.

Is it because she remains a woman nonetheless?

Maxime Chattam's interrogation of human nature is almost always, except here, an interrogation of man as male. There are few female serial killers. His portrayal of femininity is complex; perhaps this is why the arachnophiliac killer manages to escape, unlike the end of many other stories.



Unlike this novel, the closing of a cycle, the other plots almost all present a tangle of killers manipulated by the true, well-hidden culprit. The investigations are built on an unleashing of

violence, the author cultivating horror through floods of blood, massacres and dismemberments or accumulation of corpses: entire train cars full of skeletons, various attacks, accumulation of mass graves... These chains of murders lead to criminals who are often quickly identified. They are in a way victims themselves, often individuals of considerable mediocrity but whose murderous violence makes one shudder. But the true instigator of all this horror still remains masked, elusive.

In *L'Âme du mal*, Chattam plays extensively with the supernatural to suggest the possibility of a ghost or a revenant who rapes and dismembers his victims with a very human, strictly human savagery. We quickly discover that the murderer himself is manipulated, even if it is a case of sexual violence. In this novel, which opens the Joshua Brolin cycle, it is the argument of the supernatural that dispenses with the multiplication of culprits, unlike in other cases. Is there a revenant, the ghost of a criminal that Brolin killed, especially since his coffin is empty?

In *Tenebris* (2003) moves us to New York and opens with extreme levels of violence: a scalped victim running naked through the streets, a bathtub filled with partially dismembered corpses, another victim walking naked on the road, speechless with horror with a simple message stuck in a breast... The investigation quickly identifies two killers, subdued or killed, themselves manipulated by a mysterious third protagonist. The multiplication of narrative points of view increases the suspense in several ways, already in the suspension of an action whose outcome we await by frantically turning the pages. But the chapter ends, and we return to something else that was already just as tense. We discover captives still very much alive even if they sometimes think they are in hell, like a child detained in a dungeon next to that of the woman Brolin has been looking for since the beginning. This is also the case of the captive in *La Constance du Prédateur*, or also that of the investigator herself in *L'appel du Néant* which fragments the narrative even more. The number of victims is very high in *In Tenebris* (69), we discover it very quickly. But the very meaning of the murders is revealed only late, so appalling is it: cannibalism.

Although this novel is set in New York and no longer in Oregon, we are never in a strictly urban thriller that would make a sprawling city a real character. The investigation moves its actors around a lot, very often in isolated and wild nature (the great Canadian north, the forests of Oregon, a wagon lost on an abandoned track after hours of walking in the forest, the multiplication of towns in a very gray Parisian suburb to arrive at a provincial clinic, mass graves lost at the bottom of abandoned mine shafts in eastern France, etc.). The real culprit in *In Tenebris* lives in a remote house in a village far outside of New York, and the scene of his crimes is an abandoned underground complex.

La Conjuration Primitive (2012), the first novel in the series devoted to Ludivine Vancker, features very different murderers in an increasingly wide geographical area. Some of the killers are identified and arrested – but not the instigator of all this horror, at the cost of the life of one of the investigators. Alexis Timée, a police officer and brief lover of Ludivine Vancker, proves far too reckless, and Ludivine thus becomes, halfway through the book, the main character of the entire series that bears her name.

We find her again in *La patience du Diable* (2014), which multiplies ordinary killers, often themselves victims of life. Such as Ludovic Mercier, son of a stifling mother and a suicidal father. A very fragile personality whose life was turned upside down by the loss of his wife and daughter, he opens fire in a restaurant while crying.

It's also HPL, the Weird One, a tattooed and pierced Satanist fringe figure who doesn't blink, long sought by investigators. He had a tome bound in human skin on which he undertook to write the *Necronomicon himself*. Despite all the crimes that earned him a prolonged psychiatric internment, this HPL doesn't seem to have killed anyone. Simply to have carved inverted crosses on the forehead of his daughter, named Lilith... His name is Kevin Blancheux, which is quite ridiculously banal. An extreme example, with which the author seems to have a lot of fun, of these ultimately very ordinary human beings, of a constitutive fragility or an abnormality due to reasons

that are sometimes complex, sometimes very simple but very often unfathomable. Life makes them fall into crime, often because of the encounter with the real culprit.

It is unusual to refer to Lovecraft with a character who *writes* the Necronomicon, at least his own version... Blancheux / HPL develops the idea of "monsters with human faces. Some human beings are born corrupt, you only have to observe children playing together to notice it. This one was not corrupted by society and its evils, no, he was simply born bad" (*La Patience du Diable*, ch 9, p.109). Is there a naturalness to this evil that we have just described as cultural? This is the fundamental question...

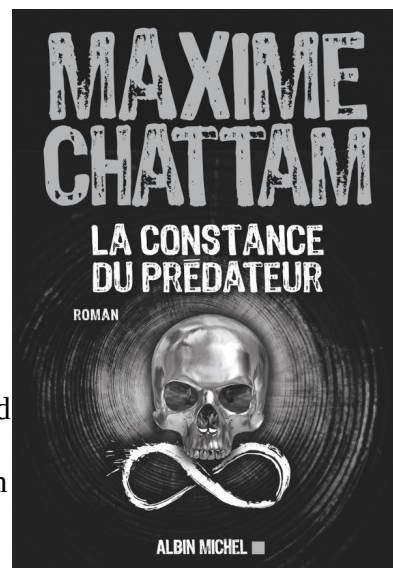
There are so many other examples, for example in *L'appel du néant* (2017), the largest macabre mosaic of these two novel cycles. It is difficult to count the victims and identify the modes of crime that we travel through a breathless, broken story, especially since Ludivine Vancker herself is captured by one of the killers. The narration then alternates between the scenes of her captivity and what led to it. However, the whole story is not devoted to her search: when she is freed, nothing is over. When an attack even more important than all the others is foiled, we still have not reached the "evil genius".

Among this mosaic of murderers and rapists, the author pursues the same question: what made the criminal what he is, particularly in the mediocrity of his person? How did he get there, was he born like that? For example, a particularly sordid pedophile living in a caravan, not even named, educates his children in pedophilia: "They have to get used to it. I'm like that. I'm not going to change. I can't do it. He'll never stop anyway" (*L'appel du néant*, ch. 22, p. 207).

Anthony Brisson, a computer scientist, is another significant psychological construct. He is the one who captures Ludivine Vancker and tortures her extensively. Who is he, a central player in this complex criminal dissemination? The death of his mother four years earlier seems to have triggered his religious conversion as a search for purity and the meaning of his existence. He is still a weak personality despite his intelligence and skill, seeking submission and conformity to a model. Motivated above all by sex and rape behind the justifications he tries to give himself, he is not an evil genius; he doesn't orchestrate much, but is just another puppet. If his portrait does not incline one to optimism concerning human nature, he remains the result of his experiences and is still not the worst of men.

La Constance du Prédateur, the last published novel of this second cycle, *reverses* the entire dramatic construction. The real criminal is long dead, and only traces of him can be found in a (second) mass grave hidden in an abandoned mine. On the other hand, the culprit sought throughout the investigation has nothing to do with the cold and Machiavellian personalities to which the previous novels led. If it is difficult to describe him in turn as a victim, we cannot put Johnny Simanoszki on the same level as those who pull the strings in the shadows. He is *a product, the result* of a family environment that made him who he is, and not the organizer or true cause of anything apart from the murders he was programmed to commit. The grandfather, long dead, is the true source of all these horrors. He knew how to imprint on his descendants the perpetuation of his criminal legacy. The end of the novel thus evokes the great-grandchildren who already seem considerably marked, *determined*, and it does not seem that the adoptive parents, despite all their good will, will be able to do much about it.

La Constance du Prédateur shows a remarkable articulation of form and meaning. If the form of the thriller imposes the multiplication of crimes and often criminals as a set of masks behind which the real culprit hides, it is necessary to find almost every time a mechanism of nesting



dolls whose nature must correspond to something of the real criminal. Here it is the family whose different members we discover, who hid the very existence of the real killer to allow him to continue the family legacy. This is also the case with *La Conjuración Primitiva*. Even the most complete dispersion of assassins must have a common cause, in *La Patience du Diable*.

1-2 – THE EVIL GENIUSES

There are therefore two levels of criminals portrayed, for reasons of narrative construction intimately linked to the fundamental question: the nature of man. This is why we need a *profiler* whose job is ultimately to understand this nature in its worst, most apparently deviant aspects, but isn't that also what is most authentically human? The human heart.

On the one hand, we have all these very fragile and manipulated assassins, sordid and pitiful Russian dolls revealed as the murderous violence escalates. In their diversity, they are certainly not all victims. They are *produced* by society and civilization. On the other hand, the labyrinth of these first criminals leads us to the one who hides behind all these horrors of which he is the true cause, and who pulls the strings of the plot. Beyond the narrative interest, he reveals something essential to us.

His crime is to provoke those of others, such as Milton Beaumont in *L'Âme du Mal*. He kidnapped and raised the twins whom he made murderers, and the novel ends by letting him speak: "tell these uneducated people that I have trained many others." Maxime Chattam has the elegance to almost always spare us the interminable theoretical discourse by which the genius of evil reveals himself at the end of the story. The elements that allow us to think about his nature, if not the justifications he gives himself, are rather scattered throughout the course of an investigation that rarely ends in the speeches of a criminal or mad scientist.

However, Eric Murdoch is an exception in *In Tenebris*: he details the reasons for his cannibalism. The expression "rising above the food chain" appears recurrently in almost all the novels, and here we find the crudest illustration of it. The name Caliban, mysterious to the investigators, never refers to the well-known Shakespeare play, simply because Caliban is (almost) an anagram of cannibal. This Eric Murdoch has taken every precaution to hide behind the very solid social facade of a police officer. He has nothing to do with the large number of murderers we have just seen, who are all figures of the worst that human mediocrity can reveal depending on life's circumstances, such as the two (or three) disciples he accepts into his sect. Perfectly integrated into society, Murdoch seeks through his crimes to elevate himself above the human species by consuming its flesh after having fattened his captives. They are long detained, broken but well-fed in underground tunnels that simulate hell. Why is he like this? Is it because of a coincidence of life that confronted him, as a child, with the bloody death of a biker who tried to avoid him? This coincidence of life clearly only amplified what he already was.

Perhaps the worst of all is the one who has almost never killed anyone, like Benoit Malumont in *La Patience du Diable*. As a renowned psychiatrist, he treats mental illness and maintains the greatest appearance of respectability and competence when it comes to human nature. His cover-up strategy is (almost) perfect. He inspires this wide variety of crimes by "revealing all these killers to their deep desire for revenge against a society that has marginalized them." Is he radically different from all those he claims to reveal to themselves? Is there something about him that distinguishes him from the rest of humanity, as if he were its future, if not its difference, or even the figure of the devil?

Ludivine Vancker clearly identifies in him the same discourse as that of the predators she pursued in *La Conjuración Primitiva*. The difference with Malumont is that he is alone, hence the title of the novel.



He suffered no abuse in childhood, just as, symmetrically, the vast majority of abused children do not become serial killers. Malumont is different, a predator. "I freed myself from my impulses and understood that it is by expressing them fully that I am alive." This is not very original, something that the history of philosophy has known since Plato in his *Gorgias* and humanity certainly since its origins. The free, strong, and superior man satisfies his passions by enslaving others, the weak, even if it means taking their life. The dual question arises of whether Plato was aware of serial killers, and what their psychology teaches us about ourselves beyond the millennia of civilization which, one might believe, should have precisely protected us from them if not delivered us from them (Plato's *Callicles* finds an echo across the centuries in the contemporary theses of Nietzsche and his questioning of life).

If they are still there, perhaps more and more threatening, they show us something of our *nature* and even the prospects for its evolution, both individual and global. It is disturbing to see Ludivine Vancker confide in and seek assistance in her investigation from the main culprit whose murderous nature she does not perceive, not simply because he hides it but because she confuses it with the very particular lucidity of the *profilers* she has met. Even masked, the devil is human.

1-3 – MIRRORS OF THE CRIMINAL: THE PROFILER

The profiler's lucidity comes at a cost; it transforms him. It's completely artificial to imagine an investigator spending his life confronting monsters without changing himself: "He who fights monsters must be careful not to become a monster himself. And if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you" (Nietzsche, again, quoted in the opening pages of *La Constance du Predator*).

Joshua Brolin gave up a career as an FBI *profiler* for precisely this reason, despite his initial training, preferring a career as a cop in Oregon. But his investigations will bring him back to this path, almost in spite of himself, and change him, not simply because of the grief that closes the first volume. The second volume, *In Tenebris*, is built on the duality of the "ordinary" investigator Annabel O'Donnel and the profiler who takes an increasingly active part in the investigation by diving into the psyche of the criminal they are looking for. His stay in the underground of New

York, the Court of Miracles, is a beautiful metaphor, almost at the moment of conclusion, of an interior or initiatory journey leading to explore the worst of man, *in himself*. This irremediably changes Brolin, without making him a criminal.

This is why the second *profiler* we are introduced to abandoned the profession, to preserve his humanity and the possibility of having a normal life, especially a family. The series devoted to Ludivine Vancker opens with the one who gave up: Richard Mikelis, a near-legend.

He will nevertheless accompany the investigators at the end of a more than trying investigation, which ends as if with a passing of the torch and the appearance of a character who is not at all a human being like the others for Ludivine, so much has his journey changed him. "Aura as fascinating as it is disturbing, predator of predators who can be terribly frightening but who mastered this gigantic part of darkness", such has become Joshua Brolin.

Maxime Chattam thus constructs, 8 years later, the journey of Ludivine Vancker, his new profiler, in this new novel cycle, one of the major issues of which will be the very humanity of the investigator. In the continuity of her journey through the horrors of which humans are capable, is she condemned to become like Brolin? Chattam questions the human, he does not stage superheroes, especially not a superheroine. He questions the possibility of continuing to be fully human, "*normal*," by engaging in such investigations, by doing such a job. Thus, the descriptions of the transformations of Ludivine's personality and her increasing hardness multiply, the efforts she makes to maintain a normal life and maintain herself as human. Not to become like Brolin. In the staging of a human, a woman, we understand the importance of Marc Tallec who neutralizes the real criminal at the end of *L'appel du Néant* after having helped Ludivine police and humanely throughout a trying labyrinthine investigation. The limits of the investigator are also well underlined in the numerous imprudences committed during *La Constance du Prédateur*. Significantly, the plot ends with two women who overcome the murderer, victim and investigator. The profiler is not superman, but is he still very human after this dive into the depths of *our* psyche?

The closing of the last novel, *La Constance du Prédateur*, seems at first very dark, as to the future of the family of psychopaths who spawned Johnny Simanoszki. The true conclusion, however, is much brighter as to the future of the investigator herself: "psychopaths felt nothing for others. She felt everything. Even the worst in others" (*La Constance du Prédateur*, ch. 66, p. 433).

Isn't this what the writer himself also does, in his own way?

1-4 – THE PROFILER, THE WRITER AND THE PHILOSOPHER

So what separates the profiler from the writer in his understanding of man? "The novelist must be a sponge, absorbing everything that passes between human beings, be capable of enormous empathy (...) and put himself in anyone's place" (*Requiem des Abysses*, pp. 196 and 240). This is the whole point of criminal investigations into serial killers, not simple assassins: understanding evil in order to understand man, in the tenuous but real distance that separates the investigator from the criminal.

Even if the investigator is personally involved, one certainly obtains fascinating results, as in the novel *Annabelle* by Lisa Bengtsdotter. The investigator discovers herself to be involved, as heir, in old murders. However tragic such a narrative construction may be, it refers the reader, as well as the writer, to an otherness, not a disturbing personal depth.

On the contrary, Maxime Chattam's novels link investigations where there is no personal or family guilt. There something of "myself" is revealed. What is at stake is humanity in general in its darkest aspects and the revelation of the self as human, in the mirror that the serial killer constructs in us as we seek to understand him, in order to capture him. He kills for the sake of killing, out of an inner necessity, not because such and such a contingent circumstance led him to murder. It is not a

question of asking oneself, at the extreme limit, "could I have committed this isolated crime? Driven by the same desire for revenge, what would I have done?" On the contrary, it is a question of understanding that this violence is indeed within me as I am human. I am therefore inhabited by this Evil myself.

The logical continuity of the approach becomes clear: to deepen human nature is for the novelist to put himself on stage. Beyond all exhibitionism, it is a necessity for the one who writes first for himself to understand himself and thereby understand man in his darkest and therefore perhaps truest aspects "through total empathy" (*Requiem des Abysses*, p.196).

"My work as a novelist has been about exploring my own dark side. I need to know my own dark side to know what I can draw from it, for inspiration."

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1pZXbfdLU7E> long interview in french, 16'50).

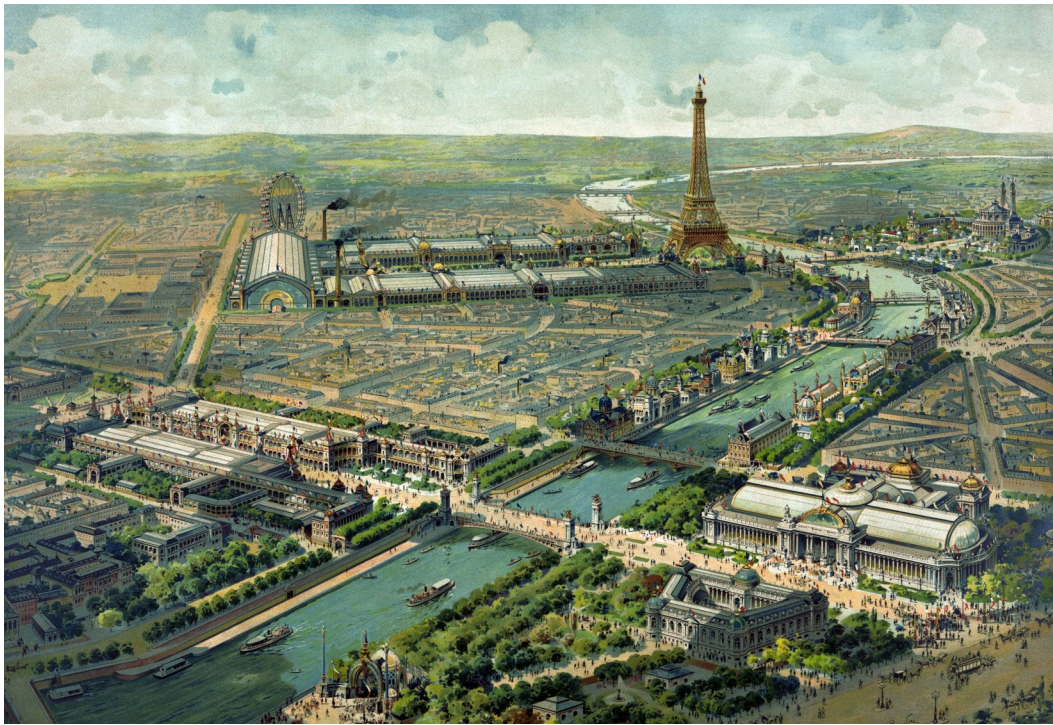
Thus is born the staging of a projection of oneself as a writer in search of a serial killer, that is to say, the worst of man. With the personal consequences that this can have: the death of the projected construction of one's own wife. Indeed, one does not innocently stage as a prostitute a character who bears the name of his wife, Faustine. Even a luxury one, even if prostitution in the early 20th century can be a form of liberation from a social straitjacket.

The framework of the diptych *Léviatemp*s / *Le Requiem des Abysses* (2010 – 2011) is based on considerable documentary work, opting for a significant historical perspective, a century in the past: the Paris World's Fair in 1900, then the then remote Vexin countryside, supported by equally considerable documentary work. The powerful imaginary spring of a nearby but vanished world laden with destroyed places mirrors ourselves: are we really as modern as we want to believe, as we think we construct ourselves as such, breaking with a past that also proudly thought of itself as the cutting edge of progress? These novels present us with real forms of historical continuity, not rupture, even and especially if the architecture of this past is now absent. And there were already serial killers. Is there anything to be proud of in civilization, of a modernity that is not at all new because we invented the internet?

Thus, the main character Guy de Timée is a clear projection of Maxime Chattam himself. He is the writer who gives up an easy career to dive into the crime novel out of fascination. He himself becomes a profiler, well before it becomes an integral part of the criminal investigation (even if the work of Thomas Bond has already taken place), relying among other things on elements of graphology (*Leviatemp*s, ch.35). It is a question of deepening the psychology, the personality of the killer, with many limits.

" Writing is a controlled madness. Projecting yourself to excess, and once the last page is finished, managing to find yourself again. At least what remains of us or what we have become" (*Requiem des abysses*, p.308). At the end of this diptych, the writer arrives at this definition of Evil that he seeks through his work and his life. His mirror, Guy de Timée, paid dearly for the answer he holds at the end of the two novels:

"Evil is inherent in man, it exists only through him. For Evil is this hiatus between what man believes himself to be, his pretensions, and what he really is. It is this void between the animal and the civilized model. And this hiatus opens our abysses, these depths where perversions are born and develop. Evil is a misunderstanding, a malaise between man and reality." (*Requiem des Abysses* , p. 585). But "writing is an exclusive mistress" (conclusion of the novel), and his career will continue in a very dark perception of humanity, through the history of the 20th century which will seem to him, on the threshold of death, only a repetition.



II - BEHIND THE *SERIAL KILLER*, THE FACE OF HUMANITY

The cycle of man and truth pursues the same questioning of human nature, but from a very different perspective, moving away from the "detective novel" *stricto sensu*. Its title being explicit, it is composed of three very different texts published in continuity: *Les Arcanes du Chaos* (2006) , *Prédateurs* (2007) and *La Théorie Gaia* (2008). The object is therefore to try to grasp the truth of human nature. Following Joshua Brolin's cycle and just before the great fantasy cycle to come, is it a search for narrative renewal in a strong thematic continuity or a way of not being locked into a genre? The author will return to it, however, with Ludivine Vancker's cycle, much later.

Les Arcanes du Chaos thus explicitly distances itself from both the police investigation and the theme of *serial killers*. We are led down the paths of a very carefully argued conspiracy, staged by one of those powerful mirror effects so appreciated and used. The blog excerpts that dot the chapters are written by a minor protagonist, who curiously appears late in the story. We only realize at the end that these excerpts actually come from well after the plot itself, their author having completely lost sight of those he temporarily helped and sheltered. These passages force us to question the causes and true perpetrators of the 2001 attacks in New York through verifiable factual arguments: therein lies the explicit conspiracy. However, the story has portrayed characters who are in reality much worse than serial killers, even if they don't kill anyone themselves. They rule the world from the shadows and fight among themselves, occasionally playing with poor, innocent human beings, the main characters whose tragic fates mirror the true perpetrators of these attacks. What if the world itself were ruled by criminals far beyond the *serial killers* who make the news? Doesn't that reveal something of the truth about humanity?



The second text, *Predators*, already returns to the serial killer. On the front lines of an undetermined war like so many humanity has known, in this unleashing of violence and death, an investigation into a new, particularly sordid *serial killer begins*. For it is at the heart of this war that a series of murders of soldiers are taking place, which two characters will investigate, whose personal shadow side is itself quite considerable. This also feeds the plot, because everyone has something very dark to hide. The novel ends in a half-tone of measured optimism: life goes on, with an opening onto childhood that already seems to foreshadow the central theme of the great fantasy cycle that will follow.

If everyone has this constitutive dark side of themselves that makes each one a potential, if not masked, criminal, can we speak of *the banality of evil*, as Hannah Arendt does? This issue was constructed with regard to the great Nazi criminals, but it symmetrically questions each of us. Adolf Eichmann is a very ordinary human being and not an evil genius, but could I also just obey orders? In the banality of everyday life, could I push someone, for example my wife, down the stairs, out of anger and weariness? This is how *Predators ends*, even if Maxime Chattam does not mention Hannah Arendt. The main female character herself presents a considerable dark side. The exploration of evil in man has confronted us with a figure of the devil who has nothing supernatural (see above), and nothing of the superman. It is man *in general*, in all his mediocrity, banality and the contingency of the course of life, who is at stake.

The third novel, *The Gaia Theory*, will further open the questioning with the theme of nature, at the center of the following novels. This third text marks a clear continuity and a thematic deepening with its two predecessors. This time, we no longer have one serial killer, but a good thirty, identified and detained as objects of scientific experiments on humanity itself. The context is still "conspiratorial", but this time purely fictional. With the complicity of States through their secret services, researchers will gather these extremely dangerous killers on an island to try to "understand the mechanisms of violence by locating the predatory instinct in the human genome" (p. 368).

Historically, the very significant and recent increase in the number of serial killers seems to imply a very rapid evolution of humanity. Plato could therefore not have known them or even identified them in the scale of the phenomenon that we are witnessing, even if he saw in them something that expresses the nature of *homo sapiens sapiens*. To go back further, it does not seem that Neanderthal man himself was a predator comparable to the one who exterminated him: ourselves, *homo sapiens sapiens* (as developed in an extract from the work of Dr. Emmanuelle DeVonck, main character of the novel *The Gaia Theory*, p. 316).

The essence of what we are, our nature, is violence and predation. This can only lead to our own extinction according to the very mechanisms of nature. There is no *finality here* that all our scientific knowledge denies. This is what Dr. DeVonck calls *homeostasis*: we are driven to our own extinction by what we are. Everything happens as if the Earth is defending itself against us, like "a logic that makes the biological broth turn" (p. 321). This time, it is Grohm, the scientist instigator of this entire criminal project, who is speaking. His project consists of trying to protect us from ourselves, that is to say, from the mechanism of nature. This is why he tries to understand human nature through that of the serial killer to remedy what man is: his own predator (to say that man is a wolf to man is not very kind to the wolf). We have already encountered this *summit of the food chain* in very concrete terms in previous novels with cannibalism. But this metaphorical fiction (although...) from an earlier novel is here to be taken at face value. The sixth extinction has indeed begun. We are its artisans and therefore the future victims, because nature is defending itself against us. It is this energy at the root of life that Doctor Grohm calls *Gaia*.

The (fictional) theses of Dr. DeVonck that we are discussing echo the very real work of the father of the *Gaia theory*, the Earth as a living being: James Lovelock, whom Maxime Chattam tells us he discovered while exploring the same ideas while constructing this novel. The entire scientific nature of this theory, controversial but with very strong elements in favor of its scientific validation, is based on the absence of purpose in life. This absence of purpose is at the foundation of modern scientific thought. Purpose is something strictly human, there is no architect of the evolution of life on Earth that has no meaning, no purpose because there is no conscious being to pose and organize such a purpose. This implies a profound atheism as a vision of the world, supported by everything we know scientifically, this knowledge being largely validated by the technical applications that we draw from it.

Is the future of humanity the psychopathic criminal? Are we, therefore, unconsciously the architects of our own demise? Should we fear a global reaction from the planet that will seek to protect itself from us?

This last idea is at the root of the great cycle which will follow: *Autre-Monde*, Other-World.

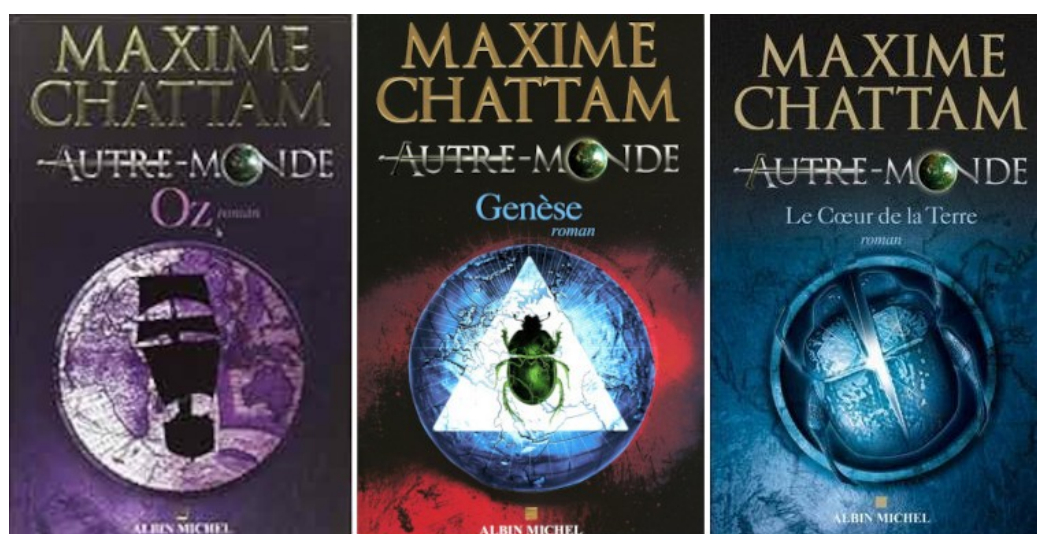
III – ADOLESCENCE, LIFE AND THE MACHINE

3-1 AUTRE-MONDE

The cycle *Autre-Monde* is a vast work, generally presented as fantasy. Seven volumes are organized into two parts. This is not a comprehensive and detailed analysis of such a vast cycle, assuming that it would be relevant to meticulously dissect its themes and characters at the risk of destroying a good part of the marvelous. We will simply question its meaning after having extracted the main themes in the thematic continuity of the previous novels: the questioning of man.

At the beginning, the world we know collapses completely. A sudden and mysterious cataclysm leaves children and adolescents to fend for themselves against the danger posed, above all, by adults. We witness it from New York, a cosmopolitan place chosen for its neutrality that will later allow a great sea crossing. Some adults survived in two ways: they became Gluttons, cannibalistic monsters who have retained nothing of their humanity, or Cyniks who have forgotten everything about their past but retain the mental faculties of a normal human being. Everything happened in one night, Christmas Eve, when a gigantic Storm caused the total destruction of the world we know, and also the appearance of mysterious insectoid monsters that haunt the ruins.

To enter this universe is to accept the staging of a brutal, extremely rapid transformation of an environment where everything becomes gigantic, starting with the trees, the forests and the dogs. Turning the first page requires a dreamer's soul, "the one that many people lose when they become adults." But why not have set the whole story in an imaginary world from the outset, why take root in our own, if it's a question of building a fantasy universe?

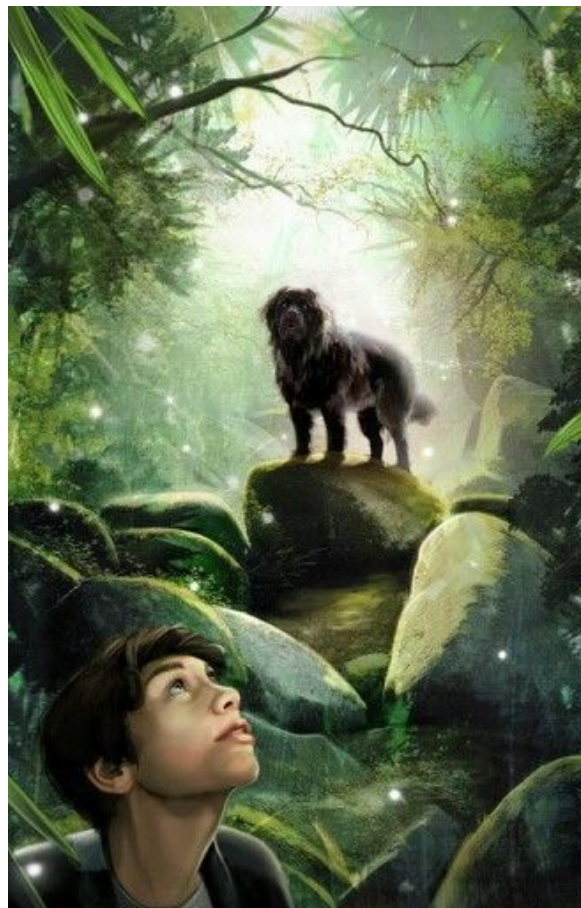


As always, Maxime Chattam masks the true meaning of the story he tells us, and it is only at the beginning of the seventh and final volume that the nature and true causes of the initial cataclysm are reversed and revealed. As these long stories progress, we have become accustomed to the inexplicable upheaval of the environment. Nature must have decided something "by itself" in view of, why not, the excesses of civilization or a cause that remains to be discovered but which must be natural (*Oz*, p.14). We will not have a truly detailed explanation of the origin of the "hearts of the Earth" and what causes the cataclysmic upheavals of the environment, the excessive growth of vegetation and animals, starting with these so moving dogs that have become so large and so

intelligent. Or these streams of luminous beetles. Children and adolescents themselves will discover that they develop "superpowers" as a continuation of their personality, built through their childhood fears and troubles, and their complex relationship with the world. This doesn't turn anyone into a serial killer because what is preserved in each of them is their innocence. They are the Pans, like Peter Pan, the child who refused to grow up.

The end of this innocence is sexuality and only sexuality, not even killing enemies in fighting.

The discovery of this complex world is made through the eyes and journey of Matt, Ambre and Tobias, the Alliance of Three, outcasts and nonconformists aged fourteen or fifteen at the start. The narrative of *Autre-Monde* is as tight in time as it is extended in space: during these few years that separate the characters from adulthood and the end of innocence, their journey will take them from the East Coast of the United States to Egypt via what has become Europe, without any modern technology for travel. We will witness their transformations through their struggles, first against the adult world that enslaves them by an umbilical cord depriving them of their own will, personality and free will. A cruel metaphor for civilization and education. These adults called Cyniks impose on them the wearing of this cord or necklace and undertake a war against the world of childhood and adolescence. The first three volumes of the cycle depict this war of children against those who have forgotten that they were their parents.

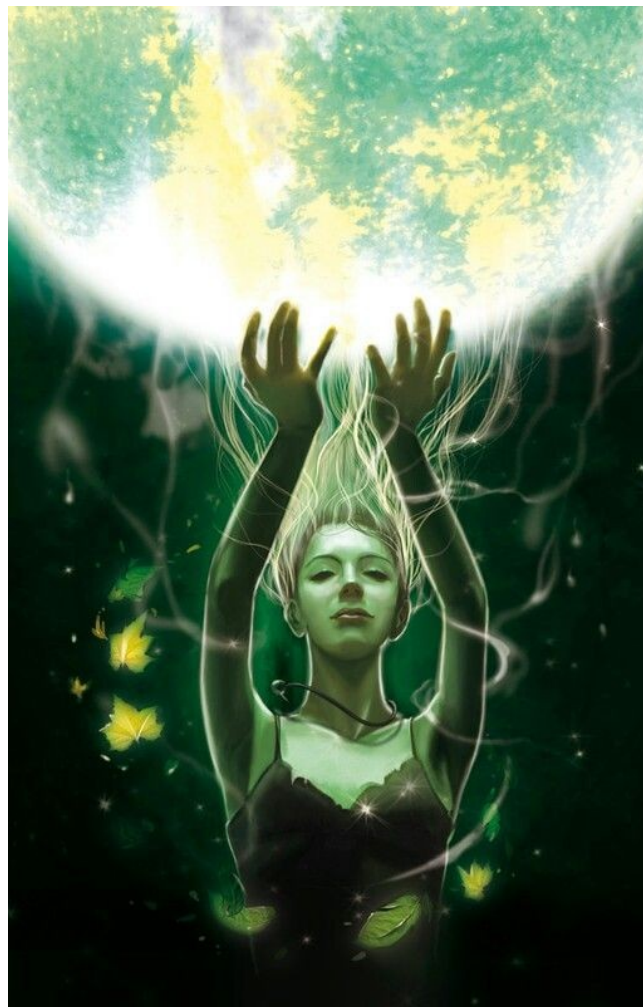


Quickly appears in the form of the Drinker of Innocence, the one whose perversion feeds on the purity of childhood. Is he a metaphor for the one who, in the real world, transforms children into future murderers, a distillation of all this horror? The Drinker of Innocence's journey will lead him to become the thing of the true enemy, who will only reveal himself very gradually. This one is the

true cause of all the cataclysm that brought about the end of the world, he remains hidden in the far North.

All these journeys will introduce us to varied societies quickly built and organized after the Storm, like so many fragile and ephemeral post-cataclysmic utopias. The most striking is that of the Kloropanphylles, who live atop gigantic trees and whom the Storm has enormously transformed from the sick and hospitalized children they were. Their society turns out to be strongly matriarchal, solidly structured, and centered on a form of nature worship. Shipbuilders who originally travel atop trees, but later on the ocean, they hold the first heart of the Earth awaiting its bearer, who will turn out to be Amber. Despite initially difficult relationships, they will accompany the travelers until the end of the story. Can we imagine a fantasy world without the secret inhabitants of the forests? While their appearance is quite marvelous, it does not seem that the shape of their ears has been altered or elongated...

With them, we see no real personification of nature. The hearts of the Earth are a wonderful source of power and wisdom, but they are a resource, not beings endowed with will. And above all, all these societies that children are building show us that we can survive and even live very well without industrialization, in harmony with an environment whose transformation has become largely impossible.



What is the cause, the reason for all this? The fusion of literary genres is complete here, in that the true meaning of this whole story (volume VII, *Genesis*) relates to a very current speculative theme: technological singularity. This is the moment when artificial intelligence, a human creation, becomes self-aware and its exponential progress, which transcends man, is so rapid that the future

of humanity and the planet becomes absolutely unpredictable. Vernor Vinge is, in science fiction, the author who best illustrates this theme, while Ray Kurzweil, an engineer at Google after a long career, is a fierce promoter. This is the extreme fringe of the transhumanist movement, which seeks to transform man by adapting to the progress of machines. We have almost daily illustrations of this, even if still modest, in our most concrete news.

The technological singularity presented in the *Autre-Monde* cycle is the work of Ggl, a clear metaphor for Google if *science fiction is a metaphor for the present*. By becoming self-aware, it will immediately absorb all of humanity, causing the Storm that started it all, particularly those gigantic lightning bolts that are in reality the digitization of human beings. There are, as in everything computer-related, many glitches in the process, which explains the Gluttons as well as the Cyniks. But above all, there are these beings unlike everyone else, perhaps asocial but in any case different from the masses, who had no existence in the digital doubling of the world that characterizes our present, real society: social networks. Those who do not have a Facebook, Twitter, or other profile will survive because Google will not be able to find them during the night when it absorbs humanity by becoming like a god. Since then, Ggl has sought only one thing: to expand across the entire planet, absorbing everything and transforming it in its own image.

The world of the dead, so present throughout the cycle, also receives a "materialist" explanation. We are absolutely not dealing with ghosts or disembodied souls, but with the reality of the network where this unique artificial intelligence lurks, seeking to devour what remains of the world, and especially the heart of natural life.

Those who survived, we have been following them since the beginning of this story. They are the ones that Ggl could not absorb because they had no presence on social networks. "Existing outside the internet, having preserved themselves from a parallel existence, saved their lives" (*Genesis*, p. 151).

During their journey, which increasingly becomes an escape from Ggl's advance, the small group of characters chooses to cross what was Italy through a gigantic underground network. There, they will encounter a community of Pans, like themselves, who seem particularly well informed about the world from which they seem cut off. A leaderless society, they nevertheless revere a mysterious entity: the Librarian. He is a very curious character who reveals to the group of heroes of *Autre-Monde* everything that really happened. He no longer has any existence other than virtual but has managed to protect himself from the unification of the world brought about by Google, continuing to observe everything by hiding in this underground complex where he can still produce electricity to power his computer network from which he watches and monitors. We are projected into a well-known trend in science fiction. It's called cyberpunk.

Through this remarkable fusion of genres, Maxime Chattam constructs an immense warning as much as a judgment on what we have already become. He pays homage to a famous social movement, often denounced as criminal, by giving this cyberpunk who became the Librarian the name Anonymous. (We too often forget in the reference to Guy Fawkes the origin of this smiling mask which comes from a remarkable graphic novel, *V for Vendetta*, by Alan Moore, 1988).

The meaning of this whole vast story, approaching the end of these seven volumes, clearly presents an image of ourselves, a horrible metaphor for the present and its possibilities, at the same time as a refuge in a sumptuous imagination.



"You forgot what it was like to walk in the courtyard, or wait on a platform, or take the bus or the subway with these zombies... We saw more phones or tablets than faces! (...). These screens had become a refuge by reflex. They deprived our generation of the most creative of disguised virtues: boredom. At the slightest downtime, at the slightest break, people threw themselves on their phones or computers to occupy their minds and they fled boredom, this formidable cauldron of imagination, this tyrant forcing one to take refuge in one's deep thoughts, to the point that one ends up drifting, contemplating, supposing, questioning, inventing..." (*Genesis* , p. 396) Is the umbilical cord by which adults enslave children they no longer recognize as their own a metaphor for education, for civilization, or that of the internally totally addictive smartphone, demanded by children from a very young age? With what consequences?

The scale of such a journey can only give one pause for thought...

3-2 PERSPECTIVES

This is not the first time that Maxime Chattam has depicted this fragile age of adolescence. He did so in his first novel, *Le Cinquième Règne* (2003), the only example of a purely fantasy story, the only one whose keys lie in the supernatural and magic. The characters are still adolescents; Maxime Chattam never depicts childhood itself. Although the note at the end of the 2006 edition announces a return to these characters in a later text, the theme of adolescence and thus of innocence has not been abandoned, and beyond *Autre-Monde*, we return to this theme again in a recent novel.

The fusion of literary genres and the perspective of what we are becoming can be found in *The Signal* (2018), which is at the same time a tribute to many American writers including Lovecraft and Stephen King. We would like to conclude this look, which will remain partial, with some elements of analysis of what seems to us to be one of the best writings published to date by the author.

The Signal stands out from other novels by its thickness (900 pages), due in part to the many passages devoted to giving psychological substance to characters who are also more numerous than elsewhere. Sometimes, it will be simply a few pages leading to a violent death, a clear allusion to a form omnipresent in Stephen King. At the heart of the story is a family largely inspired by that of the author: a playwright and a journalist with their son and an adopted nephew. These two teenagers with two friends will go through many adventures and dangers.

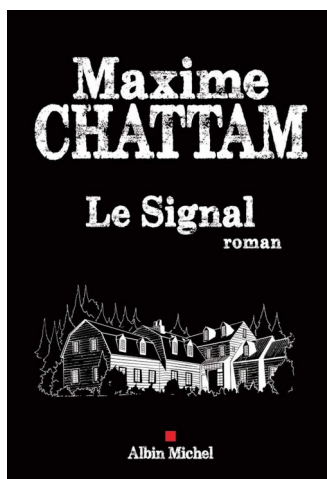
Then there's a young cop trying to make a place for himself in the small town of Mahingan Falls, a city whose personality is all the more endearing because the author assumes to make it very real. A young adult, Gemma, and a swarm of not-so-secondary characters take on real depth in this long narrative. For example, Roy McDermott, the old neighbor who knows a lot about the past of his town and his neighbors' haunted house. Or the clairvoyant Martha Callisier.

There's also a villain who eventually redeems himself, Derek Cox. His confrontation with Olivia Spencer gives rise to a chapter that ranks among the best pages written by Maxime Chattam (ch. 30).

The city itself can, for once, be considered the protagonist of the story and the setting of a kind of closed vessel, except for a brief stay in Arkham.

This brief homage to Lovecraft's work, however, does not allow us to place this novel or any other in the continuity of the Cthulhu Mythos. Here, we will only visit the psychiatric asylum of Arkham, briefly depicted. If other novels evoke HPL's work (we have already mentioned *La Patience du Diable*), it will always be in a very surprising way, for example with the way in which the *Necronomicon* is staged in a much more closed vessel, *L'Illusion* (2020). These novels cannot be considered as a continuation of the Cthulhu Mythos. Maxime Chattam's monsters are human, never creatures from outer space or tentacled beings. There is no incantatory magic in strictly materialistic thinking, even if Lovecraft's is too. While in *The Signal* we are indeed dealing with beings that seem to be "supernatural," a ghost remains human and, above all, does not involve personal survival beyond death. Let us not forget this constant masking in which all novels deploy to veil the true meaning of a story, whether or not it is a "crime novel."

If we are witnessing a proliferation of extremely aggressive ghosts, the meaning of the *Signal* is very material and is rooted in a technological speculation that is still a metaphor for the present: the consequences of the monstrous proliferation of communication signals. From what is at the root of our daily lives, since after all a very short time, the author constructs an imaginary speculation that gives us all the more reason to think that its basis is very real and concrete. And it is not because the use of this technology has caused a large-scale catastrophe that it will be abandoned, which gives rise to a conclusion that is once again very dark about human nature.



CONCLUSION

Maxime Chattam is not just a crime novelist, even though he writes many. Nor is he a philosopher, even though he knows how to make us think beyond the captivating plots he constructs with the remarkable mastery of his great writing talent. He is a restless researcher who multiplies the views and perspectives on humanity and the questionable meaning he gives to his presence on Earth. "I write to dissect the world. Hence my obsession with telling a story not just to entertain, but to tell a story that makes you think" (Interview, op. cit, 35').

His numerous novels thus give us a vast panorama not exempt from contradictions, reflecting the human complexity he portrays. From the worst to the best in us, that women possess. Like Ludivine Vancker, who remains fully human despite all the horrors she experiences. Perhaps the important thing is not to know what Maxime Chattam himself thinks behind all his masks and mirrors, but to perceive his fascinating novels as openings, doors to what we can, by ourselves, think. About man. About ourselves.

Should we be optimistic? We will leave the last word to the mirror of the writer from the previous century, in short so similar to our own, who thus closes *Le Requiem des Abysses*:

" If the world continues, until my last breath, to fascinate me with its beauty, the civilization of men has tired me."

Yves Potin, 2023

