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### Philippe Vasset's journey though the peri-urban

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## **Philippe Vasset's journey through the peri-urban: A challenge to cultural heritage and living testimony to existence in Paris's banlieues**

### **Abstract**

Long associated with negative images culminating in the violence of the Clichy-sous-Bois riots in 2005, the Parisian banlieues are now increasingly recuperated as the site of renewed encounter with the other and with diversity. Written at the time of the riots, Philippe Vasset's *Un livre blanc* forms the case study for this article. Vasset explores apparently empty Parisian spaces that have been ignored or erased from the map. Writing against the gentrification and museumisation of the city, he takes the travel writing subgenre of the 'récit périurbain' in new directions to suggest a *tabula rasa* of many of Paris's iconic monuments which he provocatively suggests would be more beneficially replaced by 'friches'. I will firstly consider the 'récit périurbain' as a record of the real and an indictment of Neoliberalism before questioning the notion of shared cultural heritage and ending with the idea of the text as a substitute repository and living testimony to existence.

**Keywords:** Vasset, banlieue, Paris, récit périurbain, museumisation, Neoliberalism, heritage, exofiction, testimony, installation art

## Introduction

There are as yet few articles on Philippe Vasset's work, despite the growing recognition of his importance in the fields of urbanization and the everyday. Recent *rentrées littéraires* have proclaimed the triumph of the newly identified genre of the 'exofiction', a term coined by Vasset.<sup>1</sup> As opposed to autofiction, which is centred on the life of the author, exofiction is constructed in response to the world around us.<sup>2</sup> With a background in geography, Vasset's works testify to an obsession with mapping marginal often inhospitable spaces, as evident in the title of one of his first works, *Carte muette* (2004), which attempts to geographically locate the internet and its cables. His most recently published work, *Une vie en l'air* (2018), looks at the ruins of the future, the material vestiges (too expensive to remove) left on the landscape by Jean Bertin's abandoned project for an aérotrain link to connect the Parisian suburbs which was once hailed as a 'vecteur d'un monde nouveau [...] jetant des passerelles entres les mégapoles du futur'.<sup>3</sup> In the case of *Un livre blanc*, I will return in particular to the idea of entropy both in travel literature (globalisation has led to the exhaustion of elsewhere and the anti-exotic destination is already identified by travel writers and anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Nicolas Bouvier) and in recent trends in postpreservation in the heritage sector, as evidenced in the physical decay witnessed in *Une vie en l'air* and the provocative vision of an alternative future in *Un livre blanc*. Whilst previous studies of *Un livre blanc* have centred on discussions of cultural cartography, I extend the debate to look at cultural heritage.

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<sup>1</sup> See Raphaëlle Leyris, 'Rentrée littéraire: le triomphe de l'exofiction', *Le Monde des livres*, 16 Aug. 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Frédérique Roussel, 'Philippe Vasset. De passage secret', *Libération*, 22 Aug. 2013.

<sup>3</sup> *Une vie en l'air* (Paris: Fayard, 2018), p.64.

At the beginning of *Un livre blanc*, Philippe Vasset outlines the rationale for his study. Intrigued by the 'zones vierges' on the map of Paris, 'lieux théoriquement vides', perhaps 'trop complexes' to be drawn or subject to 'occultations suspectes', he sets out to discover what really exists in these spaces.<sup>4</sup>

Pendant un an, j'ai donc entrepris d'explorer la cinquantaine de zones blanches figurant sur la carte n° 2314 OT de l'institut géographique national, qui couvre Paris et sa banlieue (p.10).

Vasset does not date his travels and this information has to be inferred from other dates in the text. Half way through the book we learn that the maps he is using have been updated in 2002, (p.62) which allows us to narrow the timeframe down to the period falling between this and the date of publication of the book itself in 2007. At the end of the book we learn that the timeframe is contemporaneous with the 2005 riots in in the northern suburb of Clichy-sous-Bois (Seine-Saint-Denis) '([...] je suis parti en voyage, et les banlieues nord et est de Paris se sont embrasées)' (p.129). Vasset sees these images unfolding on CNN news at the end of his expedition and views the scenes as a résumé of his journey: 'le film de mes douze mois d'expéditions défilait en accéléré' (p.129). As such, Vasset's journey takes on a larger socio-political dimension, retrospectively validated as an eye-witness testimonial to the conditions underlying the riots. It does not signal itself as such until the end however, denying any easy teleological perspective on events. The lack of precise temporal anchorage

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<sup>4</sup> Philippe Vasset, *Un livre blanc: Récit avec cartes* (Paris: Fayard, 2007), p.10. All references are to this edition.

in the text serves to highlight the enduring nature of the precarity on the urban peripheries which contributes to a situation that boils over into the riots.

The three weeks of riots were triggered by the deaths of two adolescents, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traoré, electrocuted in a power substation which they had entered to escape the police. The two policemen in question were later tried and acquitted for non-assistance to individuals in danger. The violent protests against the police spread throughout France's *cités* as the boys became symbols of the seething discontent and hopelessness felt by those relegated to the poorer districts, usually first, second and third generation immigrants from France's former African colonies. The riots were the worst in modern French history and led to the declaration of a national state of emergency. In the commemoration of the tragic events a decade later, the international press spoke of 'a stain on the conscience of France', as president and prime minister travelled to some of the most notorious *cités* with promises to tackle urban ghettoization.<sup>5</sup> As the press headlines reveal in the commemorations, most residents, however, feel that despite the promises of politicians, little has changed and the precariousness, which Vasset's work testifies to, remains as entrenched as ever.<sup>6</sup> These national events form the context for Vasset's work which can be read as a commemorative response to a national and humanitarian tragedy.

Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier in their authoritative survey of contemporary French literature highlight a preoccupation of contemporary writers with writing the real.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Amelia Jenne, 'Paris riots ten years on: Unemployment is rising and the 'banlieues' problem remains a decade on from teens' deaths', *Independent*, 26 Oct. 2015.

<sup>6</sup> See previous note.

<sup>7</sup> This is the subject of Éric Trudel's article on Vasset, 'Passions du réel (sur Philippe Vasset, Olivia Rosenthal et Thomas Clerc)', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 54:2-3, 2017, 113-127.

Along with critics such as Michael Sheringham, they confirm the shift away from fiction to testimonial writing. In particular they identify an increasing number of writers 'qui se consacrent ainsi à simplement dire les lieux et les façons possibles de les habiter'.<sup>8</sup> Philippe Vasset's work illustrates this turn in contemporary writing. Since François Maspéro's foundational study of what is now referred to as the 'périurban', *Les Passagers du Roissy Express* (2000), a new subgenre of travel writing or 'ethnologie non-exotique' has emerged.<sup>9</sup> Maspéro turns the genre of travel writing on its head, travelling to Roissy airport, not to catch a plane to a distant and exotic land but rather, 'à rebours', to walk the RER B trainline back from the airport and journey through the everyday lives of the marginal communities living in the overlooked outposts on the outskirts of Paris and through which the traveller normally speeds on his/her way to the airport and onto distant destinations. Walking thus emerges as a transgressive alternative to the accelerated pace of life that Paul Virilio and others theorise.<sup>10</sup> In *Ethnologue, mais pas trop* (2003), Jean-Didier Urbain analyses a shift of focus onto home ground which accompanies the call for a deceleration of the pace of life and travel. The 'ethnologue de proximité' is 'un observateur à domicile dont le projet est de restaurer de l'étrangeté en des mondes proches ou familiers, cette exploration intérieure, de l'immédiat'.<sup>11</sup> The increased mechanisation of travel, globalisation and the cocacolarization of the planet has eroded the distinctiveness and integrity of different cultures.<sup>12</sup> Rather than chasing after a vision of the exotic that no longer exists, the new

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<sup>8</sup> *La littérature française au présent* (Paris: Bordas, 2005), pp.227-228.

<sup>9</sup> Filippo Zanghi's recent book, *Zone indécise: Périphéries urbaines et voyage de proximité dans la littérature contemporaine* (2014), offers a good synthesis. Michael Sheringham in *Everyday life* (2006) likewise offers a good outline of contemporary urban literature prior to Vasset's work.

<sup>10</sup> See for example *Vitesse et Politique: essai de dromologie* (Paris: Galilée, 1977).

<sup>11</sup> Urbain, *Ethnologue, mais pas trop* (Paris: Payot, 2003), p.11.

<sup>12</sup> See Charles Forsdick for example on the exhaustion of 'elsewhere' and the turn to seeking diversity closer to home, *Travel in Twentieth-Century French and Francophone Cultures: The Persistence of Diversity* (OUP, 2014), p.2.

subgenre of travel writing advocates taking a closer look at the communities, often made up of immigrants, living a marginal life closer to our own everyday lives. In *Un livre blanc*, Vasset explicitly and unambiguously situates himself within the lineage of this 'ethnologie non-exotique', citing Maspero, Iain Sinclair, François Bon and Jean Rolin as pioneers in the field (p.80). He further positions himself as will be seen with reference to Marc Augé's *Non-lieux* (p.51) and methodologically aligns himself with Perec and the tradition of detailed observation (p.64).

In this article it is in particular to Augé's concept of the 'non-lieu' that I shall return and problematize alongside Pierre Nora's concept of 'lieux de mémoire'. On the one hand Augé's 'non-lieux' are the anonymous spaces through which we transit in our daily lives, train stations, shopping centres, hotels; on the other hand Nora's 'lieux de mémoire' are sites, concepts or objects that have been invested with a collective will to remember as symbolic of a historical moment. In playing off the two concepts I will use Pierre-Henri Jeudy's reappraisal of cultural heritage in *La Machine patrimoniale* (2008).<sup>13</sup> Although Vasset does not refer to Jeudy (*La Machine patrimoniale* was published the year after *Un livre blanc*), Jeudy's work can be seen to theoretically underpin Vasset's and forms part of a wider discussion on what Caitlin DeSilvey, in a recent radical re-thinking of cultural heritage, calls 'curated decay'.<sup>14</sup>

In setting out to encounter reality in these marginal spaces, rather like the installation artist Chris Burden that he admires, Vasset often puts himself at personal risk

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<sup>13</sup> Henri-Pierre Jeudy, *La Machine patrimoniale* (Belval: Circé, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Caitlin DeSilvey, *Curated Decay: Heritage Beyond Saving* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

(p.116). He has run-ins with security guards, who do not see the artistic value of his presence (p.116), and with the police (p.89). He goes further than Maspero and Jean Rolin who stay in cheap hotels (though in the same vein Rolin eats *in situ* endangering his health with his invariable diet of fast food), sleeping rough and trying to live in inhospitable places (p.116). He keeps a stock of dog food with him to deter unfriendly canines (p.37) and on several occasions has to hand over the contents of his bag (p.52). In so doing he pushes the fieldwork of the ethnologist to the point where it resembles an art installation and indeed he later describes his work as 'des récits d'installations'.<sup>15</sup> I will explore here how Vasset's 'parallel geography' (p.36) and his determination to encounter reality on the ground gives testimony to the precarity of life on the margins of Neoliberalism and further, applying Judy's critique of cultural heritage, how he challenges notions of shared cultural heritage to propose alternative repositories of the Nation.

### **Vasset's parallel geography as testimony to precarity on the margins of Neoliberalism**

*Un livre blanc*, charts how a Post-Fordian world has marginalised many of the urban poor. Since the 1980s, this latest stage of capitalism with its decentralisation of the market place and need for flexibility in the workforce has led to increasing marginalisation of those unable to compete for jobs or living on temporary contracts. The reduction in state spending and social welfare has left an increasing number of unskilled or semi-skilled

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<sup>15</sup> *Une vie*, p.76.



workers exposed and subject to the fluctuations of the market place and forced to rely on their own resilience.<sup>16</sup>

As his project evolves, Vasset hesitates between what he variously describes as both a 'documentaire engagé' (p.27) and a 'recensement *neutre, dépassionné*, des lieux visités et des divers objets qu'ils recelaient (p.52) [*italics mine*]. As well as suggesting the blank spaces on the map, the title of the book might also suggest a non-partial multi-party administrative white paper, a 'livre blanc' or scoping document preparatory to any government legislation. Or as Éric Trudel suggests, it might be a reference to Barthes's 'degré zéro de l'écriture',<sup>17</sup> which we also find in Annie Ernaux's attempt to render the reality of the suburbs in her textual snapshots or 'ethnotexte' of the *Journal du dehors*. The title of the book also suggests the erasure of sites that nobody wants to see. Vasset is in fact profoundly shocked by the 'anachronistic' squalor and poverty he discovers in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (p.18), and the neutrality to which he aspires is in fact to better illustrate the stark reality of what he uncovers (p.52). The 'recensement neutre' is actually a 'recensement des traces de conflits' (pp.67-68) and does not stand outside history and politics.

Vasset's double-edged use of neutrality is accompanied by a call to awareness. He begins with a parody of the literary markers of an entry into fiction. '[...] j'ai fini par trouver, tout contre le talus du périphérique, une brèche dans le béton. Je m'y suis glissé' (pp.13-14).

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<sup>16</sup> See Jeremy Lane's review, 'Not So Nice Work, Always Supposing You Can Get it: Some Recent Literature on Post-Fordism', *Modern & Contemporary France*, 19:4 (Nov. 2011), 511-517.

<sup>17</sup> Trudel, p.115.

The soft fur-lined 'double fond' (p.10) of the wardrobe in the children's fictional world of Narnia, becomes instead a breach in the hard concrete perimeter fence allowing access to the grim world of reality. It is a passage from naivety to realisation which implies a call to political awareness on the part of the reader and general public. Unlike the world of his childhood books, once *in situ* he is quickly confronted with ugly reality.

[...] en lieu et place des mystères espérés, je ne trouvais qu'une misère odieuse et anachronique, un bidonville caché aux portes de Paris. C'était le premier d'un long défilé: au Bourget, le terrain nu délimité par la voie ferrée et les rues Jean-Jaurès, de Verdun et du Commandant-Rolland sera lui aussi, lorsque j'y passerai, occupé par des huttes de tôle et des enfants en guenilles courant entre les tas d'ordures fumants comme sur les photographies du bidonville de Nanterre qui illustraient, au lycée, le chapitre sur la guerre d'Algérie de mon livre d'histoire (pp.18-19).

Vasset goes on to tell us, in an aside which is bracketed off from the main text, that on his return, both the camps he discovers at the start of the book have been cleared and at the Bouget site he finds instead a large billboard advertising luxury homes to be constructed there (p.18 and p.20). In the bracketing out, Vasset textually reproduces the fate of the Roma and other migrants, relegating them to the side lines to make way for the rich.

Recalling the title of Jean Rolin's book, *La Clôture* (2002), Vasset draws attention to the restricted nature of the first and many of the subsequent sites he visits:

Avant que quoi que ce soit n'apparaisse, on ne voit que des murs et des clôtures. La carte dit qu'il n'y a rien derrière, mais difficile de la croire: si ces zones sont effectivement vierges, pourquoi cette débauche de protections ? (p.13)

All of the initial scenes highlight the precarious nature of the lives of those living or rather transiting through these zones. The conflation of the two camp scenes with the airport zone highlights the risks and realities of expulsion. The empty site near Charles de Gaulle airport is the only one in the book that he never manages to gain access to. From talking to the plane spotters he learns there are buildings not represented on the map 'par où transitent les étrangers en instance d'expulsion' (p.16). These and many of the other spaces visited are in fact highly charged spaces that produce an emotional reaction in Vasset and one that is passed on to the reader. Roissy is also the point of departure for Maspero's journey as he examines on foot what the jet-setter misses. Similarly of interest here in Vasset, in the initial disembarkment at Roissy, it is the hidden, shameful, inhospitable nature of the 'welcome' for many would-be migrant workers that is glimpsed and this theme of inhospitality pervades the rest of the book. Far from neutrality what Vasset highlights is the emotionally charged nature of the separate sites and we may even infer a return of the colonial repressed as he admits shortly after to being 'hanté par les images de taudis et de bidonvilles' (p.27) which remind him of his history-book chapter on Algerian immigrants in the passage quoted previously. For Vasset it is a call to conscience:

les blancs des cartes masquaient, c'était clair, non pas l'étrange, mais le honteux, l'inacceptable, l'à peine croyable [...] J'ai donc radicalement changé d'approche, décidant, à rebours de toutes les règles que je m'étais fixées, de m'intéresser au contexte, d'interroger les gens, de consulter des rapports et des spécialistes, bref d'écrire une sorte de documentaire, un texte qui dirait: 'Regardez comment des gens vivent dans votre ville, et vous, vous qui ne voyez rien; pire, vous vous organisez pour les cacher.' (p.23)

The collective guilt of the past and the poor living conditions of Algerian migrant workers resurfaces with the resurgence of bidonvilles or camps at the turn of the twentieth century, of living conditions that were thought to be consigned to history but which are still an everyday reality for too many. As Achard-Martin says, 'Les friches abritent en réalité une population misérable, errante et marginalisée, aussi peu considérée que les zones interstitielles qu'elles occupent'.<sup>18</sup> As dates are withheld for most of the book, the choice to start with these conflated scenes is important and sets the tone for the rest of the narrative which unfolds in the italicised passages, as will be examined later, in a gnomic present.

Vasset wants to expose what is hidden behind the necessarily reductive representation of reality on a map. This sort of reduction is also mapped onto our representations of reality and our political horizons and our ignorance or refusal to see the world around us. Vasset makes a direct appeal to the reader and implicates him/her in the

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<sup>18</sup> Frédéric Martin-Achard, 'Des promenades dans cette épaisseur de choses reconstruites: Introduction au récit péri-urbain (Bon, Rolin, Vasset)', *Compar(a)ison*, 1 (2008) 5-27, p.23.

personal address in the second person in the passage quoted above (p.23) which he returns to at the end of the book to highlight the fact that our increased technical prowess which has enabled satellite and surveillance coverage has in fact made us blind to the reality of the world around us (pp.135-136).

### **Challenging notions of shared cultural heritage**

The subtitle of *Un livre blanc* is  *récit avec cartes* and Vasset at various points considers the nature of maps and what they represent. In another throwback to the colonial age, he begins the book with a reflection on how maps can be yielded as trophies in the conquest over space and by extension everything contained in that space. The places shown are reduced to the gossamer wings of butterfly specimens in a collector's album: 'Séchés, découpés, compressés, coloriés, annotés, les lieux y sont comme des ailes de papillons dans un album: des trophées à manipuler avec précaution' (p.9). Taken out of context these places on a map are denatured and Vasset's aim is reinsert them into reality.

In terms of acknowledged influences on the work, Augé's concept of the 'non-lieu' is the most relevant. The latter defines a 'non-lieu' as opposite to a 'lieu': 'Si un lieu peut se définir comme identitaire, relationnel et historique, un espace qui ne peut se définir ni comme identitaire, ni comme relationnel, ni comme historique définira un non-lieu'.<sup>19</sup> Initially the places Vasset describes certainly seem to fit this definition. There are no historic city centres in these places, no places of worship, town halls, schools or any other buildings

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<sup>19</sup> Marc Augé, *Non-lieux: Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p.100.

which might feature on a map and give a sense of place and identity. In his 'diagnosis' of the contemporary 'spatial condition' typical 'non-lieux' for Augé are places like hypermarkets, hotels and airports which, as Emir O'Beirne clarifies, are places

designed to be passed through or consumed rather than appropriated, and retaining little or no trace of our engagement with them, these spaces, principally associated with transit and communication, are for Augé the defining characteristic of the contemporary period he calls 'supermodernity', the product and agent of a contemporary crisis in social relations and consequently in the construction of individual identities through such relations.<sup>20</sup>

Whilst Augé's concept has been highly influential it is not without its critics. As such, it has been pointed out that for many the airport is the opposite of a non-lieu; it is only a neutral, generic space of transit for those whose identity papers are in order.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly Augé also claims refugee camps as 'non-lieux'.<sup>22</sup> It is difficult to see the detention sites as non-relational, non-historical, and as not about identity. Églantine Colon argues that Vasset's work occupies a middle ground between Augé's 'non-lieux' and Pierre Nora's 'lieux de mémoire'. For Nora, sites of memory can be material or abstract in nature and are

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<sup>20</sup> Emir O'Beirne, 'Mapping the Non-Lieu in Marc Augé's Writings', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 42:1 (Jan. 2006), 38–50, (p.38).

<sup>21</sup> Robert A. Davidson, 'Spaces of Immigration "Prevention": Interdiction and the Non-Place', *Diacritics*, 33 (2003), 3-18, (p.14).

<sup>22</sup> 'La surabondance spatiale du présent aboutit concrètement à des modifications physiques considérables: concentrations urbaines, transferts de population et multiplication de ce que nous appellerons 'non-lieux', par opposition à la notion sociologique de lieu, associée par Mauss et toute une tradition ethnologique à celle de culture localisée dans le temps et l'espace. Les non-lieux, ce sont aussi bien les installations nécessaires à la circulation accélérée des personnes et des biens (voies rapides, échangeurs, aéroports) que les moyens de transport eux-mêmes ou les grands centres commerciaux, ou encore les camps de transit prolongé où sont parqués les réfugiés de la planète'. Augé, p.48.

places, objects, history books, mottos, songs or such like that over time have become symbolic of collective memory. Nora insists on the fact that there has to be a will to remember otherwise the number of sites would be endless and, in this light, Colon rightly argues that peripheral spaces in Vasset are not 'sedimented enough to be officially and collectively erected as lieux de mémoire'.<sup>23</sup> Despite Vasset's own concern to trace influences, he does not himself mention Nora and a critique of cultural heritage will help us understand this omission.

The works of Nora and Augé are roughly contemporaneous, Nora's monumental multi-author and multi-volume work being published between 1984 and 1992 and Augé's best-known work, *Non-lieux*, in 1992. Reconnecting with Halbwachs' notion of collective memory, Nora explores how French national identity is preserved and perpetuated in an age of ever increasing flux occasioned by what Augé terms 'surmodernité' in the subtitle of his work. In an article exploring historical revisionism through cultural topography, Douglas Smith emphasises to how a contemporary spatial turn has challenged monolithic historical perspectives in a 'pluralising movement' as the 'focus on place is deemed to open up perspectives closed down by a narrow preoccupation with timelines and teleological development'.<sup>24</sup> Given the prominence of Nora's work in the 1990s, Smith sees the title of Augé's work as a 'clear and implicitly critical allusion' to Nora's and his article on the two critics explores whether Augé's work is a 'corrective to the topological turn'. Others have emphasized the colonial lacunae in Nora's work (and Augé's). Michael Rothberg analyses the 'surprising absences' and how Nora's 'project ultimately puts forward a starkly limited

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<sup>23</sup> Églantine Colon, 'Neither lieux de mémoire nor non-lieux: Towards a Concept of Precarious Spaces in Philippe Vasset's *Un livre blanc*', *French Studies*, 71:1 (2017), 66-83, (p.70).

<sup>24</sup> Douglas Smith, 'Debating Cultural Topography: Sites of Memory and Non-Places in the Work of Pierre Nora and Marc Augé', *JFS*, 9 (2009), 31-48, (p.32).

conception of the nation purged of its imperial adventures'. Perry Anderson argues that the works avowed 'Gallocentrism' means that 'the entire imperial history of the country [...] becomes a non-lieu' of memory, subject to forgetting.<sup>25</sup>

The cultural theorist Henri-Pierre Jeudy has studied various aspects of the extreme contemporary ranging from terrorism to national heritage. His *La Machine patrimoniale* is important in calling for a reconceptualization of heritage.<sup>26</sup> It can be seen as part of wider reappraisal in heritage studies as represented by critics such as Caitlin DeSilvey, Maria Balshaw and Rodney Harrion who call into question the 'moral imperative of material conservation' and advocate instead an accommodation and appreciation of material transience.<sup>27</sup> Going against the prevailing paradigm of preservation, they identify a crisis of accumulation and which threatens to overwhelm us with the material remnants of the past and leads to Balshaw's imperative to 'let some things go'.<sup>28</sup> Alongside such recent work, Jeudy's thinking can be read as a reappraisal of Nora's concept of the 'lieu de mémoire'. It is relevant in a number of ways for understanding Vasset's work. Firstly Jeudy critiques the idea of 'lieux de mémoire' by exposing how a society selects and maintains them. Cultural heritage he defines as the 'maintien de l'ordre symbolique des sociétés modernes' against the risk of destruction.<sup>29</sup> This entails promoting 'la visibilité publique des objets, des lieux,

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<sup>25</sup> Perry Anderson, *The New Old World* (New York: Verso, 2009), pp.161-62.

<sup>26</sup> Luc Charles-Dominique offers an overview of studies in the field, taking Jeudy's 'heritage machine' his starting point and his confirming his importance as an important thinker. 'La patrimonialisation des formes musicales et artistiques', *Ethnologies*, 35 :1 (2013), 75-101, (p.75).

<sup>27</sup> DeSilvey, pp.4-5.

<sup>28</sup> DeSilvey, pp.4-5.

<sup>29</sup> Jeudy, p.15.



des récits fondateurs de l'encadrement symbolique d'une société'.<sup>30</sup> In choosing what to preserve, a society reflects back on itself and its own values and in so doing showcases itself as a success story (this self-congratulatory gesture is something that Vasset contests as I will examine later):

Toute la 'machinerie patrimoniale' qui s'est mise en place ne suit plus qu'une seule voie: celle de la reconnaissance institutionnelle que le patrimoine confère à toute forme de revendication identitaire. L'équilibre politique et social qui en est résulté semble plutôt avoir réussi.<sup>31</sup>

Secondly, Jeudy explores alternative heritage sites and how 'la 'misère sociale' can also become 'un objet patrimonial'.<sup>32</sup> He examines the extent to which the 'patrimoine industriel', in the UK in particular, has become part of the museum sector. He then goes on to consider the centenary installation in France of the homeless on the parvis de Notre-Dame who were paid by the *mairie* to camp there as part of an art installation.<sup>33</sup> With such a proliferation of 'lieux de mémoire' and given the impossibility of conserving everything, Jeudy goes beyond Nora to ask the important question of what we need to destroy. 'Cette expansion patrimoniale illimitée oblige à se poser la question de ce qu'il faudra détruire un jour'.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps it is in this light that we can understand Vasset's suggestions for deliberately destroying many of Paris's most prestigious landmarks.

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<sup>30</sup> Jeudy, p.15.

<sup>31</sup> Jeudy, p.30.

<sup>32</sup> Jeudy, p.107.

<sup>33</sup> Jeudy, p.102.

<sup>34</sup> Jeudy, p.108.

Je rêvais de villes à la trame mitée, comme Rome et Berlin, où subsistent encore, près de la via di Bravetta et sur l'Oranienburger-strasse, des friches gigantesques, ou encore de Johannesburg, irrégulièrement perforé de profonds puits de mine. J'imaginai quel quartier, quel monument pourrait être avantageusement remplacé par un terrain vague: l'Opéra (pas Garnier – ses toits offrent un exceptionnel terrain de jeu -, mais Bastille) ? Le Sénat, L'Assemblée nationale ? L'île Saint-Louis (tentant: on ne laisserait debout que Notre-Dame et la Sainte-Chapelle, dont les tours, au bout de quelque années, émergeraient d'un indescriptible fouillis végétal)? Le XVI<sup>e</sup> [...], L'Arc de triomphe, ne serait-ce que pour le plaisir de rompre la perspective grandiloquente Concorde-Étoile-Défense? Rive gauche, on raserait l'Académie française, les Invalides, l'École militaire et la plupart des ministères en bord de Seine [...] Les Halles, le front de Seine et la Défense seraient intégralement vidés de leur population salariée et les bureaux, laissés en l'état, ouverts au public: on interdirait, sur ces sites, toute nouvelle implantation d'entreprises ou de commerces. (pp.126-127)

Vasset further proposes hiding certain other monuments such as the Panthéon or l'Obélisque' (p.127). In comparison with several other cities in the passage cited above, he laments the exhaustion or foreclosure of space in Paris.

Judy explores the logic of choosing to destroy, or not to preserve, parts of what might be our national heritage. In so doing he points to the paradox that 'la logique

patrimoniale est déjà par elle-même une entreprise de destruction'. What he means here is that in choosing to turn certain areas into museums, these areas become petrified and die off.

Conserver n'est-ce pas déjà une manière d'achever ce qui est encore vivant ? On le voit bien dans les villes où la reconstruction muséographique d'un quartier signe son arrêt de mort. Ce qui fait la vie d'un quartier ancien est son indétermination, le jeu des tensions qui le traversent au rythme d'un perpétuel réajustement vécu de l'espace. La conservation patrimoniale pétrifie le quartier, le fige dans une image inaltérable.<sup>35</sup>

Vasset is no doubt in part seeking to be playfully provocative. He proposes to spare some of the most iconic landmarks in the above quoted passage for what may well appear like spurious reasons. Yet behind such postmodern playfulness he makes a serious point about freeing up space for present and future generations. Jeudy even goes as far as suggesting that the future of conservation lies in the ability to conceive of destruction:

Penser la destruction comme le futur de la conservation n'est pas si paradoxal puisqu'on peut imaginer que l'expression des patrimoines, jusque dans ses excès contemporains, finira elle-même par engendrer ses propres 'ruines du futur'.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Jeudy, p.108.

<sup>36</sup> Jeudy pp.109-110.

In paying specific attention to disaffected industrial sites and other *friches*, what Jeudy and Vasset seem to delight in is the incongruity that characterises them, where old and new compete and exist alongside: '[où] se brouillent les frontières entre le neuf et l'ancien, l'occupé et le vacant' (p.81) and which creates the dynamism of the present. Nora's concept of 'lieux de mémoire' can be viewed as a feature of the museumisation and gentrification of the city centre which Jeudy critiques and against which Vasset is writing.

Against the perceived homogeneity of the centre, Vasset's turn to the peripheries opens out onto a less well defined space and one that potentially affords more diversity and possibility. For Vasset it is clearly a learning experience. As he says of his encounters with the people he meets there, 'je les écoutais et prenais des notes' (p.24). As will be analysed next, his fragmented, experimental style performatively reproduces the uncertain dynamics of the margins.<sup>37</sup>

### **Alternative repositories of the Nation**

Vasset senses early on that his attempt at a 'documentaire engagé' has failed because he cannot find the words: 'lorsque j'ai voulu synthétiser toutes les informations rassemblées, les phrases ont refusé de s'agencer en argumentaire: mes textes n'expliquaient rien, ne

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<sup>37</sup> See also Colon, p.67.

racontaient aucune histoire' (pp.24-25).<sup>38</sup> Yet the account does textually reproduce the fragmented, precarious nature of those surviving on the margins. The book consists of thirteen short chapters interspersed with twenty-three paragraphs in italics the nature of which is uncertain. There are also seventeen colour reproductions of sections of the map. Our attention is drawn in particular to the paragraphs in italics which are further distinguished from the main sections of book by the fact that they are right-justified only, leaving ragged edges along the left-hand side of the page where the reader is accustomed to a clean margin. These spaces are missing the clean vertical lines that we associate with urbanists and their uniform buildings. These stretches stand out in the writing typographically suggesting a link between them but their content is eclectic in nature. In the first, Vasset tells us that they are his notes written *in situ*: 'J'ai noté tout cela au jugé, très vite, comme on photographie sans viser, l'appareil à bout de bras' (p.16).<sup>39</sup> To this effect the sections in italics mainly appear in the present tense whereas the rest of the book is primarily relayed in the past tense. The use of the present tense reinforces Vasset's above-stated aim to shoot rapid-fire snapshots which he will go on to support with inventories, ready-mades and installations. As the scenes continue in the present tense, the lack of dates is indicative of the enduring nature of precarity. These lives exist outside the temporal conventions of days, months, dates and times. These are people who have nowhere to be 'on time' and probably do not possess a timepiece.

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<sup>38</sup> In Vasset there is a sense of inadequacy before the inability to express in language what is seen. In Maspero we also find a frustrated sense of inadequacy but it would appear to run deeper, 'ils se répètent qu'ils n'ont rien vu', (Maspero, p.62). In Maspero it is the impossibility of even apprehending the situation.

<sup>39</sup> Maspero explores the banlieues with the photographer Anaïk Frantz whose photos accompany the text. Vasset is more sceptical about the ability of photography to capture the precarity of what he sees: '[...] mes photographies ne montrent rien' (p.22); 'Je ne prenais pas de photographies, je ne voulais rien fixer' (p.27).

In its rawness, indecipherability and diversity, the text resembles 'ces espaces parcellaires', 'ces friches', suspended in a gnomic present: 'mon texte devait rester incomplet, parcellaire, fidèle à l'indécision de ces scènes où le foisonnement des lignes ne formait aucun dessin [...] (p.40). The writing further reproduces and amasses the items that Vasset finds in such wastelands. He proposes an inventory of the objects he discovers ranging from a large stash of pornography (p.46) to tellies, sofas and chairs (p.89). The latter Vasset himself buys in at an outside auction (p.87), perhaps in a spin-off of the ready-mades sold at auction in the art world. As such many of the objects Vasset chances upon become what Jerzy Lis calls Vasset's 'works of involuntary art':<sup>40</sup>

Le désordre des zones le pousse à jouer avec des choses hétéroclites pour en faire une exposition d'installations artistiques ou d'assemblages qui deviennent d'un coup des monuments de l'existence.<sup>41</sup>

This catalogue or inventory of items is not dissimilar to Nora's concept of the archive. Unable to find the words for a 'documentaire engagé', Vasset hopes that the sites and objects will speak for themselves: 'Pour éviter tout accès de lyrisme déplacé, je m'étais promis de me cantonner à un recensement neutre, dépassionné, des lieux visités et des divers objets qu'ils recelaient' (p.52). Nora believes we live in the age of the archive which is characterised by the stockpiling of information for use or interpretation at a later date.

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<sup>40</sup> Jerzy Lis, 'Nouvelles approches de la ville dans la littérature française contemporaine: Thomas Clerc et Philippe Vasset', *Studia Romanica Posnaniensia*, 39:2 (2012), 99-109, (p.99).

<sup>41</sup> Lis, p.107.

Vasset seems also however to parody the age of the archive and the need to preserve everything. One of his passages in italics reproduces a transient encounter with an administrative archive, the contents of which are being dissipated by the wind (p.81). The scene is like an ephemeral art installation, 'un long texte éphémère qui bredouillait dans le vide une langue hachée jusqu'au déchet, jusqu'au bruit' (p.81). It is easy to make a link to Judy here and see gratification in a release from the past, like the scattering of ashes.

Vasset specifically links his writing to the refuse that he comes across and in so doing also picks up literary fragments, from to Charles Baudelaire's oft-recycled metaphor of the ragpicker to T. S. Eliot's *Wasteland*, as Vasset tells us in a throw-away aside:

(Moi, je venais sur les friches non pas pour y vider mon sac mais, plus fondamentalement, parce que j'assimilais, dans les bouches, sur les écrans, le mot, la parole au déchet. Généré automatiquement, proliférant, le texte était ce nuage toxique qui nimbait les villes et noircissait les monuments et dont je souhaitais, confusément, étendre l'emprise jusqu'à obtenir un réel saturé de sens, irisé et lourd comme ces flaques de détergent dans lesquelles je mettais régulièrement les pieds.) (pp.59-60).

Vasset's experience immerses him in the messiness of the everyday. He sifts through the debris of discarded objects and washed-up lives like Baudelaire's ragpicker. This refuse of life can even take auditive form as Vasset makes it resonate like an echo chamber:

Ceint de hauts murs, le terrain fait office de caisse de résonance et restitue distinctement tout ce qui se passe alentour [...] on entend clairement les paroles prononcées à quelques rues de là, [...] parmi les gravats et les sacs plastiques, noyant le visiteur sous un babil de mots usés, ruinés, émiettés' (p.40).

Lis links the note format of the sections in italics to the provisional nature of the narrative 'ces esquisses à caractère résiduel'. The notes are written *in situ* and Vasset claims not to have reworked them but rather simply to have amassed them for the purposes of some future project which will bestow meaning on them: this collection of notes constitutes a 'véritable amas de déchets qu'il collectionne pour écrire un livre impossible, un livre blanc, comme le suggère le titre'.<sup>42</sup>

Martin-Achard sees in Vasset's work a new form of art or 'land writing' as he describes it: 'Derrière *Un livre blanc* se dessine donc l'utopie d'une forme de littérature *in situ*, de "land writing" comme on peut parler de land art'.<sup>43</sup> Indeed in his performance art, Vasset embraces new art forms and technologies and compares his writing to skating.

Tel était mon projet: porter le texte là où il n'a aucune place, où il est, au mieux, incongru, déplacé, et observer ce qui se passe. Faire non pas du reportage, mais quelque chose qui ressemble aux rebondissements des skaters sur les escaliers, les rampes et les murets: une performance limitée dans l'espace et le temps, où l'on

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<sup>42</sup> Lis, pp.106-107.

<sup>43</sup> Martin-Achard links this new form of writing to Vasset's exploitation of new technologies with for example the writer's suggestion for texting his work to anyone in the vicinity with a mobile phone, p.18.



sente constamment la tension de celui qui parle et ses efforts (rarement couronnés de succès) pour rester en équilibre (p.104).

Like the refuse and heteroclitic objects that he encounters and inventories, Vasset's writing heaps together the hyperreal to produce textual ready-mades of the everyday that piece together various art forms and methodological reflections from the humanities and the social sciences to create, like the dare-devil skateboarder, 'ce précaire équilibre au seuil de l'expression' (p.54). It seems appropriate to end on Vasset's recycling of such a new and often confrontational urban art, itself a reappropriation of space, as a metaphor for his literary exploits and forays in forsaken places. In flouting literary genres and trespassing on land, like the counter-culture urban activities of skateboarding and tagging, the text offers itself as a challenging confrontational gesture, a performative statement of defiance and non-conformity which, although risky, seeks to achieve a new equilibrium. The title of Vasset work recalls Mallarmé's *Livre* and, like Barthes' writerly text, it is a work that takes place in the interstices of the text, the blank spaces on the map that he explores. Like Barthes' writerly text, it is not a book, or a map, which can be bought in a shop but rather it is a performance which unfolds with every reading of the text, and like the skateboarder, no two performances, no two readings, are ever the same. The work textually reproduces its content matter as Vasset creates and explores marginal spaces, like the ragged left-hand margins which force the reader to slalom down the page before jumping to the next paragraph in a different typeface. Like the precarious lives of those he encounters and the precarious equilibrium of the conceit of the skateboarder he uses, the text is poised tentatively on the threshold of expression, a scattered collection of loose ends which challenges the reader to set up pathways of interpretation and understanding.

## Conclusion

One of the exacerbating factors behind the 2005 riots in Clichy-sous-Bois was the enclaved nature of the suburb and its poor infrastructure links with the capital and thus the job market. In the commemorations a decade after the riots, inhabitants were still lamenting the lack of a metro or RER stop and the absence of the promised motorway. Once again, Augé's non-lieux, the interchangeable transport hubs, seem more politically charged than he would allow.

Vasset takes us with him on a journey into the forsaken enclave and as such is representative of a turn away from the homogenous, museumified city centre in favour of the diversity of the 'périurban': 'Je ne supportais pas cette image d'une cité totalement balisée, sans jeu entre les diverses constructions, d'un monde où l'on sait toujours où l'on est' (p.123). He rejects the idea represented by the map of Paris 'celle d'un Paris uniformément construit, bloc grisé qu'aucune fissure n'entamait' (p.123). At this level, he sees that the city is reduced to a model: 'Ce n'était plus une ville mais une maquette' (p.123). Instead of this reductionist model, Vasset offers us alternative representations and repositories of the city. Like the knocking down of monuments which Vasset provocatively suggests, his book collapses literary conventions, disciplinary boundaries, cultural practices and social conventions and overturns political doctrine and government policy. As such it explores the theme of refuse, the residual and the unwanted, the marginalised and the forgotten, but is itself like a metaphorical clearing away of some of the clutter of literary conventions of subject matter and form as well as socio-cultural traditions and reverence.

Vasset textually reproduces the 'terrains vagues' which he explores and as such constitutes an alternative repository of the nation and living testimony to the reality of society's most marginalised communities and individuals.