

7. Modelling Malfunction and Inverting the Populist Quest

BARON NOIR

There is a remarkable moment in “Satanas”, the fifth episode of the third and final season of the Canal+ production *BARON NOIR* (France, 2016–2020, BN). It shows the assault of the fictional French president Amélie Dorendeu, who is hit in the face by a protester.¹ Released on February 24th 2020, the scene became notable in the summer of 2021 when, on June 8th, a man slapped the historical French President Emmanuel Macron, allegedly yelling a royalist battle cry.² Entirely unrelated to one another, both the fictional and the historical slap come in the wake of heightened social tensions and an increasing detachment between the French polity and part of the country’s voting public.

BN tells the story of the Socialist Party functionary, Dunkerque mayor, and power broker Philippe Rickwaert (Kad Merad) as he rises and falls through the ranks of French politics during a time of extreme social tension. This chapter will examine how BN presents politics and politicians and how the series constructs a diegetic political climate that, in presenting the physical assault of a sitting president as a plausible (if condemnable) event, shows such striking similarities to the structural affordances of historical French politics.

A narrative analysis will demonstrate that BN’s plot revolves around the threats facing representative pluralist democracy through systemic dysfunction, the rise of populist agitators, and the decline of the ‘front républicain’ [*Republican Front*]. The term denotes the traditional rallying of moderate left- and right-wing parties during the runoff of the French presidential elections in order to block the extremist right-wing Front National from electoral victory. In its model of the malfunction of its diegetic polity, the series presents a vision of teleological realpolitik unusual for popular polit-fiction: in BN, it is the Machiavellian strivers charged with saving democracy from destructive idealists and

1 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 5, “Satanas”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 11.25”.

2 Rc/aw, “Protester slaps French President Emmanuel Macron in the Face”, *Deutsche Welle*, June 8, 2021, <https://p.dw.com/p/3uaeS>.

populists. Thus, I will show that the series, in many ways, present an inversion of the populist quest discussed previously.

In analysing BN's fictional polity, this chapter will demonstrate that the series constructs politics as an emergent diegetic actor-network of rare complexity. Politics, in BN, is by its very nature a product of multipolar systemic interaction. Analysing the various components of BN's diegetic polity, this chapter will show that, in the series, the nature of politics as an ongoing negotiation of the distribution of power equals the pluralist vision of realpolitik as the consolidation of dispersed legitimate interests by morally ambiguous means. In BN, politics equals pluralism as the process of navigating legitimate dissensus. The populist vision of a unified populous, on the other hand, appears as an illegitimately reductive rendering of the dictum of the 'end of politics', with its linear notions of self-evident *a priori* governance.

It will become clear that the series' notable narrative focus on the political left results from *pragmatic* rather than *intradiegetic* logic as a concession to the assumed discursive preferences of its various audience functions. As a production of the subscription-based channel Canal+, BN's audiences tend to belong to classically urban populations with an above-average higher education background and income and a tendency toward liberal, progressive left political positions.

Analysing its use of political spaces, I will show that BN evokes the historical French practice of using the names of government residences as *pars pro toto* metonymies for political institutions (e.g., the Elysée Palace for the French Presidency). Thus, it formally emphasises the dispersed distribution of power and acknowledges its audiences' political and cultural literacy.

I will subsequently analyse the various micro and macro actors that constitute the series' diegetic political actor-network. Starting with the institutionalised actors, I will illustrate that BN breaks an established taboo in French fiction by presenting a decidedly critical portrayal not only of French presidents but of the previously sacrosanct institution of the presidency itself.

I will demonstrate that BN shuns polit-fiction's traditional executive bias by focussing much of its narrative on power struggles within the fictional *Partie Socialiste* and, to a lesser degree, on interactions with other bodies of institutionalised, civil, and unofficial pluralist governance. The struggle for dominance within the PS and the fight to unify the political left constitutes a major story arc in BN. Other plotlines explore the function of parliament, trade unions, student movements, and even the European Union, the latter being a rare appearance in polit fiction.³

I will subsequently analyse the series' central characters and their function as pluralist or populist players in BN's political games. I will show that, with their dedication to self-advancement and readiness to circumvent established procedure and morality in their navigation of the political actor-network, the series' protagonist, Philippe Rickwaert, and deuteragonist, Amélie Dorendeau, appear as the incarnation of pluralist re-

3 Mentioned with regards to British polit-fiction in Steven Fielding, "In political fiction the EU is either non-existent or portrayed as corrupt and dystopian", LSE (blog), March 13, 2013, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurompblog/2013/03/13/political-fiction-european-union-eu-steven-fielding-corruption-dystopian/>.

alpolitik. As a born *homo politicus*, Rickwaert embezzles money, betrays friends and allies alike and still ends up saving French democracy through his very ability to compromise both his ideals and extra-political norms in order to do what is necessary.

A subsequent analysis of the series' tritagonist, Michel Vidal, will show that, in its presentation of uncompromising left-wing populism, BN illustrates the dangers of idealpolitik [idealistic politics] that would rather see a flawed but functional polity destroyed than compromise what it knows to be the right path forward.

Examining the series' main antagonists, the anti-systemic conspiracy theorist Christophe Mercier and the right-wing agitator Lionel Chalon, will demonstrate how BN presents the various guises of populism and their way to power through systemic malfunction.

A structural analysis will demonstrate that BN constructs a compositionally *dispersed antagonist* supporting the series' vision of a multipolar political actor-network. Instead of a personified cause and effect chain, the series divides its overarching plotlines (e.g., the protection of pluralist democracy) into various struggles and sub-plots featuring a variety of challenges and players. It will become clear that this narratively complex plot device creates the impression of a systemic origin of the series' populist antagonists. Likewise, it reduces their agency, featuring Chalon and Mercier primarily as spectres with relatively little active screen time, thus avoiding the agenda-setting dominance that the polarising nature of extremist positions usually has on political discourse independent of their affirmation or rejection.

This chapter will subsequently examine how BN models the fictional malfunction of its elaborately constructed diegetic political actor-network as a complex, emergent system that functions according to its own interior logic. It will become clear that populist success, in BN, is the result of an interplay of various miscalculations resulting in the decline of the front républicain: (1) the insoluble division of the political left and their abandonment of traditional voter groups; (2) a dangerous tendency towards uncompromising idealpolitik and a yearning for systemic overhaul that creates a paradox discursive blindness in which right- and left-wing extremist can ally against the system; (3) the acceptance of a cosmetically altered extreme right through the established conservative centre either because of the false assumption of reform or because of the equally false idea that an instrumentalisation of their destructive dynamic for constructive purposes is possible.

The analysis of BN will demonstrate that polit-fiction's predominant way of dramatising politics and political structures through a simplified, often binary, narrative focus on senior members of the executive branch is by no means inevitable. Instead, BN constitutes an example of a complex dramatisation of the interplay of various parts of official and unofficial governance under the leadership of a protagonist who holds no government office at all for the greater part of the series.

It will become clear that, with its pluralist, multipolar vision of politics, BN is an inherently political series with significant potential to create effects of authenticity – by no means to be confused with immediate, undistorted 'accuracy' – in its portrayal of contemporary French political discourse. With its run from 2016 to 2020, BN extended over a particularly tense period in recent French history. Starting with socialist president François Hollande still in power, it stretched across the collapse of the established party land-

scape in France. Its more easily quantifiable events saw the formerly presidential PS fall to 5,2% in the 2017 French legislative election and the rise of political newcomer Emanuel Macron to the presidency with his newfound party La République en Marche gaining 53% in the legislature.

It also saw an increase in the popularity of populist movements, particularly on the far right, with the leader of right-wing Rassemblement National (formerly Front National), Marine Le Pen, gaining 33% of the votes in the 2017 presidential election's second round. Likewise, it is a period of increased political alienation all over the political spectrum, a time that saw profound social unrest and even violent escalation in the 2018 and 2019's Gilet Jaune [*yellow vest*] movement.

As this chapter is being edited in the summer of 2022, The threat of systemic malfunction of the French political system seems, once again, an all too real possibility with an arguably controversial, moderate candidate Emmanuel Macron winning the 2022 presidential election against right-wing-candidate Marine Le Pen by a 10%-reduced margin as compared to 2017, various political leaders on the left and right refusing to endorse the front républicain against the extreme right ahead of the election's decisive second round, and French society demonstrating a growing degree of refraction. Two years after its conclusion, BN's fictional modelling of systemic malfunction has, thus, seemingly gained a troubling immediacy. The series' unusual presentation of politics thus certainly merits a closer look.

7.1 Politics as a Fictional Actor-Network

Politics, in BN, appears as a complex actor-network of diverse micro- and macro actors who wrestle for dominance, that is, the legitimate power to rule⁴ and realise often mutually exclusive interests. The series thus marks a decisive turn away from the AM series discussed in chapter 6, with their exposition of a unified – anti-political – populist political realm.

With its pluralist vision of politics, BN, other than most polit-fiction, does not show an executive bias, that is, a focus on the personified upper echelons of simplified government. BN's various political players come from all levels and branches of government and involve political parties (the fictional *Partie Socialiste* features extensively), trade unions, public initiatives, and interest groups alike. The central power base for protagonist Philippe Rickwaert, e.g., is not a particular office (such as a fictional presidency or even a crown) but his role as a skilled navigator of the broader diegetic political actor-network. While he remains in contact with the executive – either as mayor of Dunkerque at odds with the president, as an official or unofficial advisor, or as cabinet minister – Rickwaert, for extended stretches of the series, holds no official elected position at all.

4 See Klaus Schubert, Klaus and Martina Klein: *Das Politiklexikon*, 7th ed., licensed edition Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, s.v. "Herrschaft" (Bonn: Dietz, 2020), via *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung*, accessed 28.08.2022, <https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/lexika/politiklexikon/17608/herrschaft/>.

In BN, this pluralist state of affairs appears to be congruent with the very nature of politics as the continuous process of negotiating the distribution of power⁵ between various actors with diverging but legitimate views. The left-wing politician Michel Vidal, one of the series' central characters and its primary meta-exegete, expresses this sentiment while discussing a populist antagonist, stating: "Mercier is perfectly adapted. Every problem resolved with one answer. That is the real new world, the end of politics".⁶

The term 'end of politics' referenced by Vidal is a well-established, albeit controversial, concept, particularly in left-leaning political theory and sociology, discussing the consequences of neoliberal capitalism's supposed 'inevitabilities'. Pronounced by the fictional left-wing commentator Vidal in BN's negotiation of political discourse, it references the series' view of the destructive simplifications of populism.

In a pluralist democratic world, as Jacques Rancière notes with regard to the 'end of politics', "the essence of politics resides in the modes of dissensual subjectivation that reveal a society in its difference to itself".⁷ It thus relies on the "political litigation over the partition of worlds".⁸ However, in unified visions of politics, e.g. those conveyed by the populist quest discussed in chapter 6, the idea of a singular body of the populous, with one discernible will, renders such consolidation of varying interests unnecessary. What 'the people' need and want is evident and discernible to the populist leader alone, who, accordingly, holds the sole right to representation.⁹ At the end of politics, be it capitalist or populist, there exists, to say it with Rancière,

a theoretical idyll of a philosophical determination of the good that the political community would then have the task of achieving; a political idyll of achieving the common good by an enlightened government of elites buoyed by the confidence of the masses.¹⁰

Such consensus thus marks the end of politics by annulling dissensus, nullifying "surplus subjects", and reducing "the people to the sum of the parts of the social body".¹¹ The consensus-based end of politics, as Rancière notes, "posits the existence of a state of the social in which politics no longer has any necessary reason for being".¹² For a populist,

5 See Max Weber, "Politics as Vocation", in *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B Strong, transl. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004), 33.

6 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 44.08". My translation: "Mercier, lui est parfaitement adapté. Tous les problèmes résolus en une seule mesure. C'est ça [...] la fin de la politique".

7 Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed./transl. Steven Corcoran (London/New York: Continuum, 2010), 42.

8 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 43.

9 See Jan-Werner Müller, "Was ist Populismus?", *Zeitschrift für politische Theorie* 7, no.2 (2016): 188f., <https://doi.org/10.3224/zpht.v7i2.03>.

10 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, transl. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 93.

11 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 42.

12 Rancière, *Dissensus*, 43.

negotiating the distribution of power between different legitimate poles – the central vision of pluralist politics held by BN's protagonists – is not a necessary societal function but a betrayal of the will of 'the people'. In BN, however, while threatened by several populist antagonists throughout the series, the pluralist order remains a diegetic reality.

Accordingly, the complexity of the diegetic polity in BN is as remarkable as the breadth of represented political agendas and moral dispositions. Characters' motivations vary from personal ambition to reach a position of power (*power politics*) to implementing change through administrative compromise (*realpolitik*) to opposing visions of a fundamental societal overhaul (*idealistic politics*). The result is a fictional political realm of rare complexity about which the fictional Amélie Dorendeu, discussing the convoluted alliances necessary to navigate the labyrinthine French electoral system, states: "In politics, one plus one rarely equals two".¹³

Figure 37 provides an overview of the central actors involved in BN's political struggles. The nodes represent central macro actors and their respective position on the political spectrum (in a binary left-right configuration). Connections between the nodes indicate an active and direct association that is visible in the narrative. The personal names outside the nodes represent the series' central characters, and their position indicates their respective association with the various macro actors as well as their position on the political spectrum. The margins indicate the diegetic Overton Window, that is, the range of acceptable political discourse within the series' diegetic mainstream.¹⁴ Some characters find themselves clearly within the series' diegetic Overton Window (such as protagonist Rickwaert or deuteragonist Amélie Dorendeu). In contrast, most of BN's primary antagonists (right-wing extremist Lionel Chalon and the anti-systemic populist Christophe Mercier) remain outside these margins.

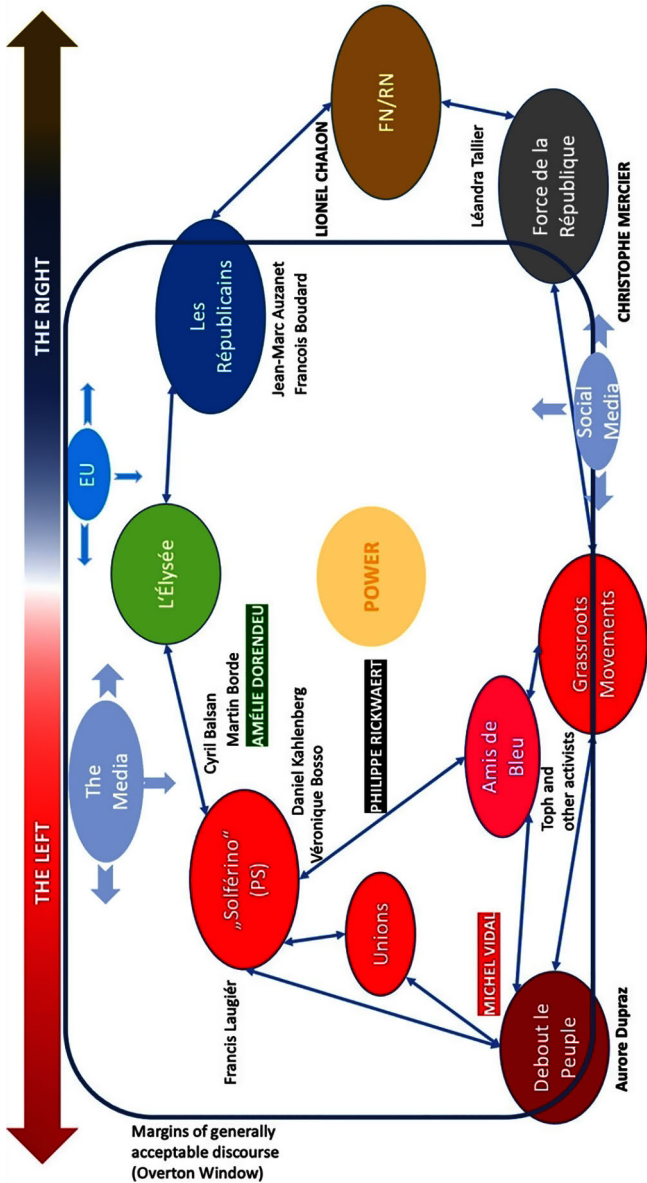
As the number and distribution of actors and actor-connections and the general position of the diegetic Overton Window indicate, there is a clear focus on the political left in BN, both concerning the series' characters and the represented political discourse. Most actors in the series' pluralist polity are historically associated with the political left. Examples include a traditionally obstinate and internally belligerent PS party structure, confident trade unions, the socialist international framework, and various grassroots movements surrounding progressive causes. Most characters are members of either the socialist PS (based on its homonymous historical role model) or the left-populist 'movement' *Debout le Peuple* (modelled after the historic leftist party *La France Insoumise*). Apart from the fictional party *Les Républicains* (referencing the homonymous historical French conservative party), a similar set of actors on the French right remains largely invisible in BN. Following historical precedent, it may include the organised Christian faiths, a more extensive consideration for moneyed interest, the so-called "Deux cent

13 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 2, "Diaspora", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, Thomas Finkelkraut, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 17.22". My translation: "En politique un et un fait rarement deux".

14 See Mackinac Center for Public Policy, "The Overton Window", accessed August 28, 2022, <https://www.mackinac.org/OvertonWindow>.

familles”¹⁵ (the 200 wealthiest French families), and a more conservative set of interest groups.

Figure 37: The multipolar diegetic actor-network in *Baron Noir*



15 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 7, “Pianoforte”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 06.10”.

BN's notable left-wing bias is partly due to Eric Benzekri, the series' credited showrunner function, who looks back at a notable career as an advisor and functionary on the French political left. Benzekri served as a political activist, an advisor of long-time PS-functionary Julien Dray, and member of the shadow cabinet of left-wing politician Jean-Luc Mélenchon from 2000–2002. As of 2022, the latter is the leader of the leftist party La France insoumise and has been a repeatedly unsuccessful yet disruptive contender for the French presidency. Serving as the series' showrunner function, Benzekri's intimate knowledge of the political process, especially within the French political left, has been extensively highlighted both in marketing and criticism of the series. At one point, even the prominent socialist politician Julien Dray himself claimed – and later disclaimed – to be the role model for Philippe Rickwaert.¹⁶

However, it would be a fallacy to suggest that Benzekri's political experience automatically guaranteed a more authentic portrayal of political processes or that any fictional character in BN is an 'accurate' representation of any supposed historical role model. Following long-standing procedures of prestige TV, BN's focus on the political left is ultimately due to the series' *pragmatic* logic as a 'prized' cultural commodity. As a high-profile production of the subscription-based channel Canal+, BN targets French-speaking prestige audiences and thus well-educated, urban, and progressive/left-leaning populations. Therefore, BN's ideological landscape is designed to appeal to its target audience functions and enable them to easily identify with the main characters and their ideological sphere.

BN's comparatively complex fictional model of politics is decidedly different from most other fictionalisations of politics that often rely on easy-to-follow personalised agonal conflicts with transparent cause-and-effect chains. The series' structural complexity makes frequent introductory comments necessary that, following *dramatic* logic, also serve to acquaint audiences with the intricate mechanisms of French politics. In "1932", Rickwaert's assistant, Cyril Balsan, for example, lays out the convoluted French electoral system to a *dramatically* naïve first-order activist, laying out both the systemic reasons for their actions and the stakes involved (a daunting victory for the far right)¹⁷ for the benefit of the audience.

7.1.1 Zero-Sum Politics?

In BN, all players within the acceptable political spectrum are happy to break codified law and common conceptions of moral conventions. Politicians conduct themselves in a less than becoming manner; campaign activists steal flyers; Presidents search for "room for manoeuvre" in their attempts to influence the judicial prosecution of their minis-

16 "Finalement, Julien Dray dit qu'il n'est pas le 'Baron Noir'", *Le Monde*, March 17, 2016, https://www.lemonde.fr/big-browser/article/2016/03/17/finalement-julien-dray-dit-qu-il-n-est-pas-le-baron-noir_5991934_4832693.html.

17 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, "1932", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 17:35".

ters;¹⁸ oppositional politicians organise a burglary in order to find incriminating evidence against their opponent.¹⁹ Characters likewise often discuss the merciless nature of politics, e.g., asserting that “Your responsibility to the country supersedes friendship”²⁰ or that “There is no friendship in politics”.²¹

Deuteragonist Amélie Dorendeu, describing her vision of politics, states: “Doing everything I can it takes to win is the rule. I didn’t make it”. In the French original, she adds: “C’est la règle du jeu en politique” [*It is the rule of the game, in politics*].²² While the trope of the ruthless and uncompromising power game is commonplace in polit-fiction, Dorendeu’s claim is false, or at least incomplete in the case of BN. So, what are the actual rules of the series’ ‘game of politics’?

Despite widespread ruthlessness, Politics in BN is by no means the uncompromising zero-sum slaughter it appears to be in other cynical polit-fiction of the 2010s (see, e.g., VEEP and Eichwald in chapter 6 or HoC in chapter 8). Politics, in BN, is a notably uncooperative game, that is, a game in which no force of higher order guarantees the upkeep of the rules. However, there is a substantial set of political players on all sides who, while being ruthless in their pursuit of personal power and majorities, do not seek to ultimately dismantle or destroy the system and indeed work to save it despite their differences. As a clear reflection of realpolitik, Dorendeu, for example, justifies her uncompromising attitude by pointing out the stakes of the political game: “What’s the alternative? The FN is high, the system is out of breath. I’m not waiting for it to collapse and take democracy with it”.²³ Dorendeu ultimately even agrees to sacrifice her presidency and reputation in order to give Rickwaert the chance to defeat Mercier in a renewed presidential bid.²⁴

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- 18 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 7, “Pianoforte”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 32.24’. My translation from the official German translation: “Welche Möglichkeiten haben wir?”.
- 19 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 8, “Pardon”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 14.03’.
- 20 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 1, “Jupiter”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 7, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 40.15’. My translation from the official German translation: “Wer für eine Nation verantwortlich ist, kann sich keine Freundschaft leisten”.
- 21 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 7, “Pianoforte”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 41.14’. My translation: “il n’y a pas d’amitié en politique”.
- 22 *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 5, “Chouquette”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, and Olivier Demangel, aired January 24, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 23.15’.
- 23 *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 5, “Chouquette”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, and Olivier Demangel, aired January 24, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 22.48’. Translation from the official German translation: “Was ist die Alternative? Der FN ist stark, das System ist ausgeblutet. Ich sehe mir nicht an wie es auseinanderbricht und die Demokratie gleich mit, weil ich nichts mache”.
- 24 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, “Brüder”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 49.40’.

Nevertheless, why does the emergent actor-network of politics in BN constantly verge on the brink of collapse? The reason is (1) the series' dramatic logic, which requires high stakes to create high-intensity plotlines that make a suspenseful narrative capable of engaging audiences. However, the series (2) introduces this *dramatic* requirement through an unusually coherent intradiegetic logic that merits a closer look.

7.1.2 Multipolar Leadership

Political power, in the pluralist world of BN, rarely comes automatically to any political office. In the series' multipolar political actor-network, slick behind-the-scenes operators like Philippe Rickwaert often exert significantly more influence than less savvy political officials. At a PS party function, Dorendeu's clumsy prime minister, for example, is reprimanded for trying to assert his office's ceremonial precedence. An obstinate party leader promptly reminds him of the difference between a ministers' council (in which officers of state act according to their nominal ceremonial function) and a party committee (in which these nominal functions are ultimately assigned).²⁵

As I have mentioned previously, popular polit-fiction is often seen to avoid presenting the "slow, powerful drilling through hard boards"²⁶ that constitutes the political process, according to Max Weber. Remarkably, BN's fictionalisation of politics, while selective and reductive as all fictional narratives must necessarily be, focuses primarily on the procedural elements of politics. Many of the series' conflicts revolve around the political business of securing the support of the population, the political parties, parliament and the republic's institutional framework. Politics, in BN, ultimately appears like a mixture of agenda-setting through campaigning and orchestrated media appearances, the negotiation of parliamentary majorities and debates,²⁷ and the obtaining of stakeholder support through complex backroom deals. President Dorendeu's commitment to renounce the use of the constitutional (and historically precedented) paragraph 49.3, which enables the French president to force the passage of a bill without parliamentary consent, e.g., results in elaborate attempts and underhanded deals to secure legislative majorities.²⁸ The plot in "Satanas" primarily revolves around rallying political support from diverse sources for a referendum on the reform of the powerful presidency,²⁹ with the plotline turning

25 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, "Check Up", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 19.30".

26 Max Weber, "Politics as Vocation", in *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B Strong, transl. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004), 93.

27 See, e.g., *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 4, "Bleu", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 15, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 40.00".

28 See, e.g., *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 3, "Haram", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 30.45".

29 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 5, "Satanas", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode.

into a comparatively differentiated discussion of the Fifth Republic's overall power structure.

7.1.3 The Metonymic Corridors of Power

The seat of power in BN is fluid and multicentred. The question of where exactly power is situated in the series' fictional polity formally manifests in its portrayal of politicised spaces as symbols of access and insider knowledge. Following an established custom in historical French political discourse, BN's fictional seats of power often appear as metonymic toponyms, that is, the names of the ministries' physical residences serving as *pars pro toto* signifiers for the political institutions they house. Crucial metonymic seats of power are the Elysée Palace, the seat of the French president ("L'Elysée"), "Matignon" (seat of the prime minister), "Quai d'Orsay" (the foreign ministry), and "Bercy" (the ministry of economy and finance). A central metonymic seat of power in BN is the PS's headquarters, "Solférino" – often referred to as "Solfé" – which derives its name from the historical party's famous former residence in the Parisian Rue de Solférino. The series' liberal use of these toponyms as metonymies for institutionalised power hints at the relatively high degree of French cultural and political literacy that the series presupposes for its audiences.

In BN, the distribution of power appears as an implicit discussion (and relativisation) of Carl Schmitt's concept of "corridor formation"³⁰: the management of access to political officials as a means to determine power. As Schmitt would have it, the distribution of power in BN is often represented by a character's physical access to a metonymic place. The *pars pro toto* toponyms thus serve as a remarkably poignant representation of a character's political power. A character's access – or non-access – to these metonymic places often – but not always – indicated their position in the series' various political power games. The fictional PS, e.g., loses its metonymic headquarters in season 3 together with its political power and in accordance with the historical PS' loss of "Solférino" in 2017 following major electoral defeats. The series often features president Amélie Dorendeu wandering through the splendid interiors of the presidential residences. After his release from prison, the convicted felon Philippe Rickwaert, on the other hand, must meet President Dorendeu after hours at a swimming pool³¹ because the gilded corridors of "L'Elysée" are no longer (and not again) accessible for him.

The totality of BN's metaphorical 'corridors of power' is more varied than in most other series, partly owing to its status as a subscription service's prestige production and the resulting comparatively high number of locations. The ultimate negotiation of power can occur in kitchens and private gardens, hotel rooms in Spain, swimming halls, backrooms at union strikes, or via phone calls and text messages sent from prison via an ille-

30 Carl Schmitt, *Gespräch über die Macht und den Zugang zum Machthaber* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2008), 25. My translation: "Korridorbildung".

31 *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 1, "Twins", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, and Oliver Demangel, aired January 22, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 07:37".

gally obtained cell phone.³² However, sovereign use of the various metonymies of power serves as a clear indicator of a character's degree of initiation.

7.1.4 Dismantling the Presidency

Historically, the personified *body politic* of the French Presidency serves as a focal point for the French national imaginary. Since the establishment of the Fifth Republic in 1958, the French President possesses an extensive array of competencies that exceed those of most other republican heads of government/state. As a symbol of the nation, he*she furthermore fulfils wide-ranging representative functions accompanied by elaborate furnishings usually reserved for monarchical rather than democratic heads of state. Reflecting historical circumstance, BN's Amélie Dorendeu accordingly assures her predecessor, President Laugiér, "You're the face of national unity".³³ During her own presidency, she states: "Moi, j'incarne l'état" [*I incarnate the state*].³⁴

The presidency and its metonymy, the Elysée Palace, occupy a central position in the series' political narrative both as a narrative focal point and physical locale. BN thus breaks with established French cinematic tradition, which traditionally maintains a ceremonial sacrosanctity of the office of the President and, by default, those who occupy it.³⁵

Breaking this taboo, BN not only shows ambivalent portrayals of the characters who occupy the Elysée (season 1's President, Francis Laugiér, e.g., embezzles money to pay off his divorced wife)³⁶ but features extensive criticism of the institution of the presidency itself, going so far as to question its very existence. Taking offence with its sizeable powers and splendid representative furnishings, BN's meta-pragmatic Michel Vidal, e.g., denounces the presidency as the "monarchie présidentielle"³⁷ [*the presidential monarchy*]. In a similar vein, the fictional Marxist Aurore Dupraz comments on a planned referendum on the reform of the presidency, stating:

32 For the latter see *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 8, "Pardon", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 55.32".

33 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, "1932", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 08.50". Translated from the official German translation: "Sie verkörpern ab jetzt Frankreichs Einheit".

34 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 5, "Satanas", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 15.09".

35 See Marlène Coulomb-Gully, "Les femmes politiques au miroir des fictions télévisuelles: Commander in Chief et L'État de Grâce: une comparaison France/États-Unis", *Modern & Contemporary France* 20, no 1 (2012): 38, doi: 10.1080/09639489.2011.631701.

36 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 6, "Shutdown", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 22 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 48.07".

37 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 4, "Inventaire", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri and Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 46.53".

And on Sunday, we have the duty to see it through to the end. Just as in 1793, Sunday is about voting for the death of the king. The end of oligarchy. The end of cast privilege. The end of the system.³⁸

In BN, the distrust of the polity is caused, in no small part, by system-inherent flaws as identified by prevalent historical left-wing discourse. Accordingly, the main reason for the fictional actor-network's malfunction is the overly powerful office of the president. Its reform not only serves as the central motif in the political struggles of season 3 but is used to elaborate, in some detail, on the systemic conditions of the Fifth Republic. In "Inventaire", Amélie Dorendeau lays out the potential democratic deficit caused by the unusually powerful presidency (historically introduced in 1958 to provide Charles de Gaulle with a stronger constitutional position), citing it as the leading cause for the estrangement between public and government.³⁹ This manifests in a systemically caused alienation of any sitting government, shown, e.g., by the presidents' traditionally bad subsequent election results.⁴⁰

Describing the severe consequences of the Fifth Republic's inherent systemic flaws, she states:

With inevitable disappointment after inevitable disappointment [in the presidency], we turn to fortuitous profiles which increasingly turn against the system. Counter-powers are challenged. The entire democratic system will end up as the victim of presidentialism.⁴¹

Discussing the consequences of such political alienation – the rise of populism – the series' left-wing exegetes Michel Vidal and Aurore Dupraz state in one of their frequent theoretical excursions: "When history has no great men, it invents them".⁴²

38 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 37.05". Translation from the original: "Et dimanche nous aurons le devoir de la conduire à son terme. Dimanche il s'agira comme 1793 de voter la mort du roi. La fin de l'oligarchie. La fin des privilèges de la caste. La fin du système."

39 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 4, "Inventaire", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri and Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 02.05".

40 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, "Check Up", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 6.17".

41 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 4, "Inventaire", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri and Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 4.32". Translation from the official French version: "[...] et d'espoir forcément déçu en espoir forcément déçu on se tourne vers des profils providentiels de plus en plus antisystèmes. On remet en cause tous les contre-pouvoirs. C'est tout le système démocratique qui finira par être victime du présidentielisme".

42 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 36.26". Translation from the original: "Quand l'histoire n'a pas des grands hommes elle les invente" (with explicit reference to G.W.F. Hegel).

While material inequalities and discriminatory practices are often cited as reasons for political tension in BN, the question of systemic malfunction surrounding the presidency lies at the heart of the series' final conflict.

7.1.5 Parties and Non-Governmental Macro Actors

Political parties, particularly the PS, occupy a central role in BN. Itself an actor-network, the system consisting of the various formal and informal power structures within the party, appears as an unwieldy yet vital vehicle for the continued exercise of power. The fictional president himself needs to consider the dispersed landscape of varying interests and political currents within his/her party in the process of decision-making. Frequently defying their respective presidents, Francis Laugi r (season 1) and Am lie Dorendeau (season 2 & 3), the PS, e.g., refuses to sabotage Rickwaert and other socialist MPs by sacrificing their constituency to political opponents⁴³ and cannot be relied upon to uphold retribution measures against dissidents within its own ranks.⁴⁴

The PS appears to be a well-oiled machine within the political and civil systems of administration and government. As a long-reigning political force in the north, it, e.g., controls – and abuses – the region's vast social housing funds.⁴⁵ Its numerous activists ("militants") are an essential resource that can be called upon at a moment's notice to, e.g., plaster over an opponent's campaign posters⁴⁶ or steal their flyers from mailboxes.⁴⁷ The far-left around Michel Vidal's *Debout le Peuple* and populist Lionel Chalon's extreme-right RN possess a similar network of readily available activists. The latter's followers are prone to racist violence frequently instrumentalised by Chalon, e.g., during an attack on a student gathering on racism and racist violence.⁴⁸

The power struggles in BN primarily play out within the PS' established systemic party structures. Philippe Rickwaert devotes most of his energy and most of the series' narrating time not to achieving a political mandate but to (1) gain and retain sway over his party and (2) reunite the political left in France. In the episode "#MeToo", Vidal and

43 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, "1932", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 03.16".

44 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, "1932", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 9.10".

45 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 1, "Jupiter", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 7, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode.

46 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, "1932", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 10.45".

47 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, "1932", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 22.50".

48 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 3, "#MeToo", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkelkraut, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 00.45".

Rickwaert, likewise, court representatives from associated Southern European socialist parties to further establish their personal dominance within the left.⁴⁹

Parties and their cumbersome structures are omnipresent in BN. Amélie Dorendeau attempts to achieve a unification of the political centre. Extremist Chalon struggles to retain the support of the far-right. Even the anti-systemic, anti-establishment Christophe Mercier ultimately depends on the support of the well-organised party machines of the far-left and far-right, respectively, e.g., using activists mobilised by Aurore Dupraz and Debout le Peuple to mount public pressure for his destructive cause.⁵⁰

Dominance, in BN, ultimately depends very much on “the *accord* of the dominated”.⁵¹ The PS, for example, depends on the support of the trade unions, which are themselves led by shrewd second-order players not easily manipulated by Rickwaert’s otherwise convincing machinations.⁵² Political activism (within and outside political parties) forms another visible part of BN’s vision of the pluralistic democratic system. In the series, civil movements appear primarily tied to politicians, their agendas, and party resources. However, they also need to be constantly humoured, seduced, and considered.

The influence of civil organisations on institutionalised politics is exemplified by a diegetic student movement founded by Rickwaert and his associates as a tool to mount public pressure.⁵³ There are high-school strikes with their own intrinsic structures and logics that are encouraged, instrumentalised and manipulated by Rickwaert but ultimately prove to be yet another obstinate actor-network that must be continuously humoured, convinced, and seduced. The left-wing populist Michel Vidal, together with Rickwaert, similarly supports and instrumentalises the ostensible grassroots movement “Les Enfants de la République” for their own ends.⁵⁴

49 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 3, “#MeToo”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkelkraut, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 24.44”.

50 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, “Ahou!”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 11.00”.

51 Thomas Frank, Albrecht Koschorke, Susanne Lüdemann, and Ethel Matala de Mazza, *Des Kaisers neue Kleider: Über das Imaginäre politischer Herrschaft: Texte, Bilder, Lektüren* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2002), 73. My translation: “[...] dass Herrschaft der *Zustimmung* der Beherrschten bedarf”. Original emphasis.

52 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, “1932”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 13.00”.

53 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 5, “Grenelle”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 22, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 00.56”.

54 See *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 7, “Diprotodon”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, and Olivier Demangel, aired January 24, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 03.50”.

7.1.6 A Rare Fictional Appearance: The European Union

A remarkable feature of BN is the role of the European Union. The inclusion of the multi-national and highly complex construct of the EU in a simplified fictional polity is a rare feature in polit-fiction. As Steven Fielding remarks, it usually either does not mention the EU at all or refers to it in simplified tropes as a dystopian technocratic bureaucracy.⁵⁵

In BN, on the other hand, the EU plays an essential and highly differentiated role. European structures, treaties and interests continuously limit fictional France's national sovereignty. In "Shutdown", the French government, for example, struggles with a debt that exceeds the European deficit limits.⁵⁶ In the episode "Solférino", President Laugiér attempts to divert EU funds from Dunkerque in order to hurt Rickwaert's political base.⁵⁷ Likewise, the EU and individual European partners and institutions continuously feature as a crucial discursive and political influence, e.g., in a cross-partisan fight around French fiscal politics. As president, Amélie Dorendeau cites "hatred of Europe" as the force driving France's populist movements.⁵⁸

The EU, in BN, appears as a "critical mass" that enables post-colonial European nations to remain a factor in a hostile world full of self-confident old and new powers.⁵⁹ As one of the traditional pillars of historical European politics, the French-German alliance features heavily in season 3, where Amélie Dorendeau and the German chancellor plot a "great federal leap", a unification of France and Germany to "Franceallemagne".⁶⁰

7.1.7 The Media and the Political Soap Opera

Another crucial part of BN's diegetic actor-network are the media. They occupy an ambivalent position in several central political plotlines. On the one hand, traditional media, above all the fictional counterpart of the historical online magazine *Mediapart*, fulfil their attributed function as fourth estate and democratic watchdog, e.g., by releasing infor-

55 See Steven Fielding, "In political fiction the EU is either non-existent or portrayed as corrupt and dystopian", *LSE* (blog), March 13, 2013, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euorpblog/2013/03/13/political-fiction-european-union-eu-steven-fielding-corruption-dystopian/>.

56 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 6, "Shutdown", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 22, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode.

57 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 3, "Solférino", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 15, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 39.20".

58 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, "Check Up", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 38.50".

59 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 6, "Shutdown", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 22, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 25.17".

60 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, "Check Up", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 39.21".

mation that reveals President Laugiér's involvement in an embezzlement scandal (season 1).⁶¹

Social media, on the other hand, appears both a vital part of political agenda-setting and a dangerous, disreputable, and unreliable realm in which populists do the bulk of their damage. Both the populists Michel Vidal and Christophe Mercier reach a vast percentage of their power base outside established media. In the episode "Diprotodon", misdirected public outrage leads to the social media slandering of a technocrat who gets caught in the spotlight.⁶² Moreover, Amélie Dorendeau deals with – and ultimately dismisses – highly questionable representatives of an agency that uses social media to influence targeted public opinion.⁶³

While both traditional media and social media play an essential role in the political games of BN, the series, other than most examples in this study, focuses little on the construction of the mediatised simulacra of the *body politic* of its protagonists. In BN, the moderate politicians of the political centre are ultimately concerned with campaigning for or against policy. Unconditional self-marketing, in BN, is reserved mainly for the populist margins of the political spectrum. Acceptable political self-presentation, in BN, always appears like a mixture of personal mise-en-scène and more or less constructive policy proposals. Accordingly, Amélie Dorendeau states:

The presidential election is a soap opera, a TV series in which image and personality are more important than ideas. Look how this over-personalisation impoverishes debates.⁶⁴

Dorendeau, here, cites a common – though oversimplifying – claim that has often been made with respect to more current developments in contemporary political discourse surrounding the 'gamification' or 'ludification' of simulative spectacle politics and "politainment"⁶⁵ (as discussed in chapters 2, 4, and 5). In its increasing reliance on media spectacle, contemporary politics has often been said to produce oversimplified and distorted images of complex political issues in order to appeal to audiences schooled in the affordances of mass media consumption. Van Zoonen points out that the very trope of

61 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 6, "Shutdown", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 22, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 41.31".

62 *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 7, "Diprotodon", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, and Olivier Demangel, aired January 24, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 23.45".

63 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 4, "Inventaire", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri and Raphaël Chevenement, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 37.07".

64 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 3, "#MeToo", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkielkraut, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 41.20". Translation from the original: "La présidentielle est devenu un feuilleton, une série télévisée dans laquelle on confronte plus les images et les personnalité que les idées. Vous voyez comme cette hyperpersonnalisation appauvrit les débats".

65 Term coined in Andreas Dörner, *Politainment: Politik in der medialen Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2001).

“politics as soap opera” – evoked by Dorendeu – is a common platitude in the discourse surrounding the perception of contemporary gamified politics.⁶⁶

BN demonstrates populist success as a partial result of the ability to turn the media’s inherent logic of focusing on the new and scandalous – rather than the regular and constructive – against the system. Accordingly, BN’s fictional media outlets afford significant attention to polarising populists like the polarising but otherwise entirely unremarkable Christophe Mercier.⁶⁷

7.1.8 The Dispersed Antagonist

BN’s presentation of the diegetic polity as a complex, emergent actor-network manifests in the composition of its protagonist-antagonist structure. Structurally speaking, the role of the antagonist in BN is not personified by one or several discernible characters, as is usually the case in fiction. Instead, the narrative derives its agonal dynamic from a dispersed systemic setup in which the interplay of several more or less unrelated plotlines creates favourable or unfavourable conditions for the protagonists’ own goals.

In BN, protagonist Philippe Rickwaert and – starting in season 2 – deuteragonist Amélie Dorendeu always face more than one potential opponent. As political alliances in BN are in constant flux, almost all characters within the series (barring the antagonistic extremists Mercier and Chalon) are allies at one point in the series and adversaries at another.

In a break with popular fictional tradition that usually features discernible conflicts between identifiable personalised actors in a tangible cause and effect chain, many of BN’s main arcs (e.g., its primary conflict: pluralism vs populism) involve several dispersed struggles across the political actor-network. Rickwaert and Dorendeu’s primary task to prevent the rise of the right (season 2) and a populist, anti-systemic alliance (season 3), for example, involves far more direct on-screen conflict within the political left and the wider front *républicain* than visible confrontation with right-wing leader Chalon or populist-leader Mercier. Season 3’s main antagonist, Christophe Mercier, notably appears as late as its fifth episode, “Satanas” (out of a total of eight).

In BN’s comparatively complex diegetic polity, victory, accordingly, never just involves winning an election. Instead, it entails various subordinate tasks, e.g., achieving and retaining a firm standing within one’s own party and larger political denomination, gathering majorities for various legislative propositions, accommodating various political and social interests, and neutralising diverging voices within one’s own camp.

The variable nature of an individual player’s position in the narrative’s ally-antagonist configuration and the dispersed nature of the seasonal struggles that play out on a variety of changing battlefields serve to make visible the emergent actor-network of BN’s political system. Interestingly, in this multipolar configuration of narrative conflict, the

66 See Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 19–35.

67 E.g. throughout *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 5, “Satanas”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode.

central antagonists (Chalon and Mercier) rarely appear as the tangible orchestrators of the respective political struggle. Their screen time and visible agency remain notably limited throughout BN.

While the racist Chalon and the conspiracy theorist Mercier remain personally reprehensible, their potential to inflict systemic damage appears as a product not merely of their political talent – Mercier is a comparatively clumsy political operator reliant on the ill-conceived support of his right- and left-wing allies – but of the system's overall inability to neutralise destructive influences. Chalon and Mercier become threats not because of sinister Machiavellian plots that would reveal their sovereign agency. In BN's emergent political actor-network, they become dangerous because (1) the left is divided and uncertain about how to approach pressing political and societal concerns and (2) because other, more established political forces believe themselves able to instrumentalise these destructive forces for their own gain. I will examine this further in the coming section.

BN's dispersed antagonist reduces the agency, screen-time, and consequently the discursive influence of the series' extremist characters. By partly withholding central antagonistic agency from Chalon and Mercier while retaining the impression of their destructive potential, the series avoids legitimising these characters as dominant participants of political discourse. In historical reality, well-intentioned repetitive vilification of political extremists has often produced the unintended effect of providing these extremists with an unwanted dominance of the political agenda. Through BN's fictional refocusing on the systemic structures that provide the conditions for extremist developments rather than the extremists themselves, the series ensures that the thread posed by Mercier and Chalon remains tangible while their extremist, racist discourses never attain an equally dominant status within the narrative discourse. The fact that the left-wing antagonist Michel Vidal, with his far less destructive socialist agenda, becomes a dominant presence in much of season 3 illustrates this further (as the coming sections will show).

In its highly complex narrative composition, BN creates a tangible climate of suspense without directly linking a conflict's resolution to the neutralisation of individual characters. Where, in most polit-series, the elimination of an opponent usually spells the end of his*her plotline, BN's dispersed antagonist makes a satisfying resolution much more complicated. The series' finale, accordingly, offers reprieve but not relief. While Rickwaert wins the presidential election by a thin margin,⁶⁸ both the political alliances and the societal currents that had enabled a mad, anti-systemic populist to almost take the Elysée remain in place. Only one person ends up truly vanquished in the finale of BN: the disgraced former president Amélie Dorendeu commits suicide as a martyr for the democratic cause.⁶⁹

68 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, "Ahou!", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 48.35".

69 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, "Ahou!", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 52.25".

7.1.9 Pluralists and Populists

BN presents a highly politicised France that is unable to reroute its unsettling energies into constructive channels of political participation. Part of the reason for this critical state of affairs is a dangerous diegetic intolerance of systemic complexities and imperfections. While the pluralistic protagonists struggle for the consolidation of various interests across their respective political target audiences, their populist counterparts offer simplified visions of categorical political reasoning (on the left) and an incoherent emotional vision of a unified ‘people’ with a clear set of enemies (on the right).

In the complex moral universe of BN, no character is unambiguously positive, few are entirely reprehensible, and all commit crimes or transgressions for political gain. However, as the series progresses, it features an increasingly clear normative division between the pluralist protagonists’ morally sound goals and the categorical delusions of their populist counterparts. In BN, *realpolitik* thus becomes tasked with saving the system from the onslaught of power politics and destructive idealistic politics.

7.1.9.1 Philippe Rickwaert: *The Red Baron Noir*

Philippe Rickwaert is the series’ uncontested central protagonist and appears, from the start, as a born *homo politicus*. Following BN’s vision of *realpolitik*, Rickwaert is a politician who, in determining his course of action in a complex and morally ambivalent world, weighs necessary negative against desired positive effects and decides accordingly, bearing the consequences of his decisions. As an astute political operator, he can deduce an opponent’s tactics merely by glancing at a stolen leaflet.⁷⁰ As an experienced activist of the PS, he effortlessly channels and manipulates public engagement. Even as a convict, he encourages political organisation amongst fellow prison inmates.⁷¹ In “Bleu”, a newspaper accordingly portrays him as the puppet master of an ensuing youth movement christening him “Le Baron Noir”, the black baron.⁷² The epithet that references the series’ title is not only a play on the slightly sinister motif of the “*éminence grise*” – Rickwaert will, throughout the series, remain most potent as an operator behind the scenes – but also on the influential and venerable set of socialist party functionaries sometimes colloquially called the “*barons rouges*” [*Red Barons*].

Initially, the ruthless machinator Rickwaert appears to follow the cynical tradition of polit-fiction, treating politics as a highly agonal *Zero-Sum* game for personal advancement. Watching a presidential TV debate, he states: “This isn’t about politics now. It’s just two men, a winner and a loser.” Rickwaert subsequently affirms a bystander’s remark

70 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, “1932”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 21.20”.

71 *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 1, “Twins”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 22, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 01.19”.

72 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 4, “Bleu”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 15, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 47.55”.

about the “Darwinian” quality of his view on politics.⁷³ His political philosophy seems, at this point, to revolve mainly around personal advancement. The fact that the Black Baron is involved in an embezzlement scandal and attempts to frame an old family friend⁷⁴ further supports this early impression of Machiavellian power politics.

BN’s first season quickly establishes the central plot around Rickwaert’s criminal activities as mayor of Dunkerque. By 07.45” in the season’s first episode, “Jupiter”, audiences learn that Rickwaert embezzled funds to support his party comrade Laugiér’s successful presidential campaign, that the police are on his heels and that he has seven hours to replace the money.

However, while the series starts by showing Rickwaert as a ruthless and highly efficient political operator, he also appears as a politician with ideals (albeit not illusions). In the somewhat expository episode “Solférino”, the protagonist Rickwaert has his critical ‘Save the cat’-moment, that is, a defining diegetic incident serving the *dramatic* purpose of demonstrating the nature of his character to audiences.⁷⁵ After a boy almost dies during a cruel prank involving his teenage daughter, Salomé, the self-proclaimed political Darwinist Rickwaert scolds her, calling the mistreatment of the weak “barbarism”.⁷⁶ In season 2, Rickwaert, accordingly, instructs fellow prison inmates not to racially stereotype and avoid using derogatory terms for LGBTQ* people.⁷⁷ In “Shutdown”, he states: “I became a politician to defend minorities. I’m proud of it, but I want to go beyond that”.⁷⁸

In the expository episode “Solférino”, Rickwaert lays out his materialist views on the increasing refraction of French society, citing a generation-spanning wealth gap as the main reason for decreasing national unity.⁷⁹ However, while Rickwaert has firm opinions on what a better world would look like, as a follower of *realpolitik*, he has no illusions about what it takes to get there. In his quest to achieve his political goals, Rickwaert is undeterred by morality or law, applying extensive moral licensing by citing ‘good’ reasons

73 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 1, “Jupiter”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 7, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 3.48”.

74 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 1, “Jupiter”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 7, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 21.30”.

75 Blake Snyder, “Rette die Katze!: Das ultimative Buch übers Drehbuchschreiben”, 3rd ed., transl. Kerstin Winter (Berlin: Autorenhaus, 2020), 14f.

76 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 3, “Solférino”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 15, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 25.40”. My translation from the official German translation: “Barbarei”.

77 *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 1, “Twins”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, and Olivier Demangel, aired January 22, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 01.30”.

78 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 6, “Shutdown”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 22 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 28.50”. From the official German translation: “Ich bin hier als Verteidiger der Schwarzen und Araber und darauf bin ich sehr stolz. Aber darauf will ich’s nicht belassen”.

79 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, “Check Up”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 8.25”.

for his transgression. Rickwaert's embezzlement, e.g., takes place through a scheme initially set up by Dunkerque's socialist government to secretly reroute money into social housing. Applying the teleological morality of *realpolitik*, Rickwaert asserts: "We stole nothing. We are activists. We get dirty to help others".⁸⁰

BN quickly problematises this attitude by showing just how severe the consequences of the PS' excessive moral licencing can be. Joel, a socialist activist, protégé and family friend of Rickwaert's, commits suicide after having been manipulated to take the blame for the embezzlement.⁸¹

A big part of Rickwaert's political vision is tied to his own advancement, for which the Black Baron is willing to go to great lengths. President Laugiér, e.g., mentions that Rickwaert slashed his tires at a party conference in order to be able to offer him a ride and thus make his acquaintance.⁸²

However, Rickwaert is distinct from the 2010s classically cynical fictional power politicians in that his actions usually take a creative rather than destructive direction. He manipulates youth movements and helps them organise and make their views heard. He instrumentalises parliamentary debates and the procedures of his party but also helps to advance socialist causes. He mercilessly neutralises political allies and opponents but, in the process, preserves democracy. In a representation of teleological political morality, Rickwaert's morally ambiguous methods and ambition thus appear ultimately justified by his morally sound goals.

This impression increases as the series progresses. By the end of season 1, audiences are aware that politics is a profoundly dirty business with established structures for corruption, manipulation, and embezzlement in every political camp. However, with Rickwaert serving a prison sentence and atoning for his former machinations, the embezzlement arc and the previous antagonist, Francis Laugiér, all but vanish with season 2's recalibration. Starting in the second season, Rickwaert, still interested in his return to the metonymic corridors of power, appears increasingly motivated not by ambition but by the vital contributions he wishes to make. As the series progresses, venerable political goals (i.e., preserving the democratic order) become his main driving force. As of season 2, the purpose for which Rickwaert is ready to get "dirty" is no longer a personal but a decidedly political one: to unify the left and the extended front *républicain* in the struggle against the advance of right-wing agitator Lionel Chalon. To the newly elected President Dorendeu, he accordingly explains: "You know that your five years as president will

80 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 1, "Jupiter", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 7, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 21.00". Reference the official German: "Wir haben nichts gestohlen, wir tun etwas. Wir machen uns schmutzig, um Menschen zu helfen".

81 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 1, "Jupiter", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 7, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 27.29".

82 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 1, "Jupiter", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 7, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 53.30".

be measured in terms of how far the right progresses".⁸³ Continuing this development, Rickwaert's attempt to gain the presidency appears as a direct result of his wish to prevent the imminent decay of the pluralist democratic order itself by the end of season 3.

Interestingly, as his goals attain a more universal scope and selfless legitimacy, Rickwaert's "dirty"-work increasingly returns to the bounds of (fragile) legality. After season 1, his methods fall much less in the category of criminal activity and become much more a matter of fierce negotiation and skilled tactical manoeuvre. The higher the stakes, the more Rickwaert appears as an astute fighter for the established pluralist system. He is willing and able to stretch the system to its limits but rarely goes beyond its breaking point. The more Rickwaert struggles for the system, the more he is extradiegetically aligned with its rules. Nevertheless, Rickwaert's relative return to legality is a matter of recalibration rather than character development. Its reasons lie in the compositional aim to set Rickwaert's character apart from the destructive right-wing antagonists.

Philippe Rickwaert, in many ways, personifies the patriarchal ideal of a powerful political alpha male. In politics, he is a lone wolf who forces his own will against obstinate external forces. His friend and part-time adversary, President Francis Laugiér, even admits to being more afraid of his former ally than the political opposition.⁸⁴

Throughout the series, the decisive, at times, brisk go-getter Rickwaert retains a Parental position within every transactional configuration in which he is involved. As a classical alpha male with visible traits of internalised gender privilege, he retains this attitude even in defeat. His superior confidence remains undeterred even by arrest and potential ruin, and he continues to assert his political influence on President Dorendeu even from prison.⁸⁵

The series' transactional configuration emphasises Rickwaert's unconditional self-confidence, decisiveness, virility and dominance in line with patriarchal conceptualisations of masculinity. Most of the Black Baron's allies and opponents take complementary Child-states in any transaction involving Rickwaert. Even when opposing or contradicting him, they show an almost compulsive need to explain or justify their deviant behaviour to Rickwaert. Rickwaert's transactionally implied superiority is supported further by the fact that, despite temporary setbacks, he is almost always proven right by diegetic developments.

Rickwaert's powerful masculine presence is underlined further by the fact that the women in the world of BN find him extremely attractive. Rickwaert usually engages in relationships that implicitly follow a configuration I want to call the *Patronage for Pleasure* (P4P) game. This dramatisation of the traditional older male-younger female relationship

83 *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 2, "Tourniquet", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, and Olivier Demangel, aired January 22, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 49.50". Reference also the official German translation: "Du weißt, das einzige das während deiner Amtszeit gemessen wird ist die Stärke des Front National".

84 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, "1932", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 48.04".

85 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 8, "Pardon", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 55.32".

usually entails a Parent (him)-Child (her) transactional setup akin to a sexualised *Mentor-Student* game. The P4P configuration is one of the most prevalent motifs of patriarchal storytelling and has, until recently, been an omnipresent trope in mainstream fiction. It works under the sexist assumption that a man's attractiveness stems from his intellectual qualities and material dominance. In contrast, a woman's attractiveness stems from her physical desirability (usually defined by a highly discriminatory collection of attributes such as whiteness, a slender frame, a tall build and long hair).

The P4P game usually comes with the objectification of female bodies. The explicit sexualisation, particularly of women, had, until discursive changes primarily brought about by the MeToo movement in 2017 onwards, been considered an integral part of the "cultural logic of gentrification"⁸⁶ that governed almost all notable TV series aimed at prestige audiences.

However, it is interesting to note that Philippe Rickwaert is one of the very few fictional examples of a fictional politician who ends up with a happy private life. In season 3, Rickwaert marries the political pollster Naïma Meziani, although the relationship – due to the narrative's focus on external action rather than personal development – never actually gains much narrative weight.

7.1.9.2 Amélie Dorendeu: Dying for Realpolitik

BN's deuteragonist, Amélie Dorendeu, is the second *homo politicus* and personification of realpolitik in BN. She is a comparatively young, brilliant politician who is part of the PS's liberal, progressive wing. With her deep smoky voice, her chic, her cool demeanour, dark hair, slender figure, and excessive chain-smoking (the latter trait falling victim to a recalibration after season 1), Dorendeu is a striking presence within BN's character ensemble. She is clearly designed with reference to post-war images of what a chic, detached female Parisian intellectual looks and behaves like – so much so that she is almost reminiscent of more contemporary renderings of Marianne, the French national allegory.

As a calculating, unsentimental, realist politician of the moderate centre-left, Dorendeu embodies a version of French and Western European realpolitik that aims to govern and implement policy by harnessing the biggest possible societal consent at the cost of ideologically or conceptually pure solutions. While Dorendeu is a ruthless operator – in one of her stints as Rickwaert's opponent, she goes so far as to divert political support away from her own party to neutralise him⁸⁷ – she also possesses a strong moral compass. In "Pianoforte", Dorendeu, e.g., separates from Rickwaert after learning of his involvement in the embezzlement scandal.⁸⁸

86 See Dan Hassler-Forest, "Game of Thrones: The Politics of World-Building and the Cultural Logic of Gentrification", in *The Politics of Adaption: Media Convergence and Ideology*, ed. Dan Hassler-Forest and Pascal Nicklas (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 187–200. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137443854_14.

87 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 2, "1932", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 8, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 27.00".

88 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 7, "Pianoforte", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 43.55".

7.1.9.2.1 Pluralist Realpolitik

As BN's deuteragonist, Dorendeu personifies realpolitik's imperfect yet constructive side. In season 3, she appears exceptionally focused on policy, making her a compositional counterpoint to populism and political gamification. In the episode "#Metoo", she, e.g., responds to the superficial interview questions of a lifestyle magazine, stating:

If some of our compatriots who aren't interested in politics found me likeable, I'll be pleased. But if their vote depends on that, we have a problem. When personality overtakes the political programme, democracy is weakened so badly that it is at risk.⁸⁹

To her lawyers' objection that the French public would never accept a reform of the presidency, Dorendeu replies: "I take care of politics, you of the law".⁹⁰ This is not an acknowledgement of the need for illegal means or tyrannical intervention. Dorendeu's statement betrays a highly differentiated vision of pluralist politics which regards the ongoing process of creating consenting majorities and aggregating diversified agendas through political representation as fundamental mechanisms for legitimate political dominance. Differentiating between the legitimacy granted by procedure and adherence to codified law, on the one hand, and the legitimacy created through public discourse and the negotiation of "the *accord* of the dominated",⁹¹ on the other hand, Dorendeu points out the fundamentally *political* essence of government as a process to *create* a legitimate distribution of power. This is opposed to the populist vision of politics, where legitimate dominance is considered a singular fact of nature at the disposal of the populist leader.

This level of abstraction is uncommon for polit-fiction. A similar scene appears, e.g., in the populist DESIGNATED SURVIVOR (USA, 2016–2019, see chapter 6), with reversed results. The following dialogue occurs between President Kirkman (the series' protagonist) and his lawyers.

Kirkman: I need to know what my legal options are right now.

Lawyer 1: Well, Mr. President, you can invoke the supremacy clause. Issue an executive order saying Governor Royce must force his police to stand down.

Lawyer 2: That's a bad call. EOs can be perceived as very hostile.

89 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 3, "#MeToo", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkielkraut, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwaï/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 40.44". Translation from the original: "Et si certains de notre compatriotes qui ne s'intéressent pas à la politique m'ont trouvé sympathique je m'en félicite, mais s'il vote en fonction de cela nous avons un problème. Quand la personnalité prend le pas sur le programme la démocratie s'affadit au point de se mettre en danger".

90 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 4, "Inventaire", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri and Raphaël Chevenement, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwaï/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 03.15". Translation from the original: "Alors faites votre travail des juristes. Moi je me charge de la politique".

91 Thomas Frank, Albrecht Koschorke, Susanne Lüdemann, and Ethel Matala de Mazza, *Des Kaisers neue Kleider: Über das Imaginäre politischer Herrschaft: Texte, Bilder, Lektüren* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 2002), 73. My translation: "[...] dass Herrschaft der Zustimmung der Beherrschten bedarf". Original emphasis.

Kirkman: Then what would you suggest?

Layer 2: A presidential proclamation.

Lawyer 1: Which is nothing more than a symbolic empty gesture. It looks weak, Sir.

Lawyer 2: Bush used a proclamation to secure disaster areas after Katrina. That hardly seems like an empty gesture to me.

Lawyer 1: I wouldn't take declaring martial law off the table either, Sir.

Lawyer 2: If you want this to be the shortest presidency in history

Kirkman: Let me get this straight: An executive order will be perceived as too hostile. A presidential proclamation too weak. Martial law either very, very smart or incredibly self-destructive. Guys, let me ask you a question. Can you agree on anything?

Lawyer 1: Not really

Lawyer 2: Yes⁹²

In this scene, the inability of President Kirkman's *legal* counsel to advise on a proper course of *political* action serves as proof of the establishment's incompetence. In the populist absolutism of DS US, where the morally proper and rational course of action is easily discernible by any willing idealist with a direct connection to a unified 'people', the confusion of the realms of the law and the *political* is diegetically legitimate. At the 'end of politics', where there is only one legitimate 'will of the people', the need for *political* negotiation of interests that may diverge from the codified dictums of the law seizes to exist.

The equation of the otherwise distinct purposes of the law, categorical morality, and politics is only sustainable in a populist mindset, where such a legitimate division (and thus the legitimate need for negotiation and accommodation) does not exist. However, in BN's pluralist societal vision, politics, as the process of constantly negotiating a feasible division of power in a world of ambiguous morality and endlessly diverse interests, performs a vital societal function.

7.1.9.2.2 Patriarchal Games

Throughout the series, Dorendeu alternates between being Rickwaert's enemy, ally, and lover. In seasons 2 and 3, Rickwaert, at times, becomes the unofficial advisor for the president. The pair transition from the typically patriarchal configuration of the P4P game in the pre-MeToo, 2016 season 1, to a less ostensibly sexualised yet decidedly patriarchal version of the *Complex Macbeth* game (see chapter 2) in the post-MeToo seasons 2 and 3, 2018–2020.

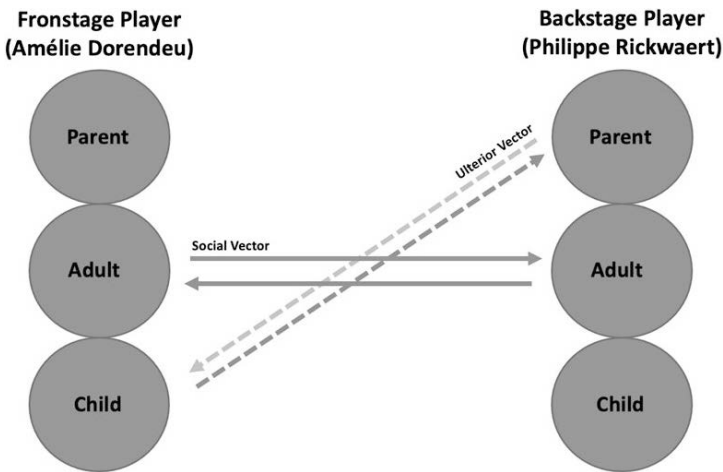
In its initial classic P4P configuration, the couple's asymmetrical relationship rests on exchanging male expertise and power for female beauty and (physical) companionship. For example, the couple's love affair starts when the experienced Rickwaert helps the newcomer Dorendeu in her bid to become the PS' general secretary.⁹³ Dorendeu's appearance, likewise, remains an essential part of her character, with male protagonists

92 *Designated Survivor*, season 1, episode 2, "The First Day", directed by Brad Turner, written by John Harmon Feldman and David Guggenheim, aired September 28, 2016, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80133833?trackId=255824129>, 32.10".

93 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 3, "Solférino", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 15, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 43.00".

frequently remarking upon it. Audiences, e.g., learn early on that while she might not be an ideologically reliable socialist, Amélie Dorendeau is ‘at least’ gorgeous.⁹⁴ At a PS-party conference, she is accordingly noted to possess exceptional “beauty and intelligence”.⁹⁵ In season 1, Dorendeau shares this reductive fate with several other female characters. A powerful female right-wing senator is, e.g., discussed as “an attractive woman”.⁹⁶

Figure 38: *The Complex Macbeth game Dorendeau-Rickwaert*



The duo's game ultimately takes the shape of a classic *Complex Macbeth* game, in which a dominant backstage player (éminence grise Rickwaert) engages his frontage co-player (President Dorendeau) in duplex transactions featuring ostensible Adult-Adult transactions on the social vector and Parent (him)-Child (her) transactions on the ulterior vector (see figure 38). While this configuration seemingly diverges from the *Macbeth* game's usual (decidedly patriarchal) “behind every great man is a great woman”-dynamic, it ultimately upholds the uneven distribution of dominance in the duo's otherwise fluctuating relationship. With BN's *dramatic* emphasis on the political backstage, Rickwaert's *intradiegetically* secondary position as the ceremonially subordinate player in the *Macbeth* game ends up making him the narrative focus and thus restoring his implicit, gender-based dominance. Thus retaining Rickwaert's transactional dominance despite his seemingly subordinate position, the series avoids turning the protagonists' interactions into a *Reverse Macbeth* game, which usually suggests itself as the traditional – albeit highly

94 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 8, “Pardon”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 29, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 56.10”

95 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 3, “Solférino”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri and Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 15, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 36.56”.

96 *Baron Noir*, season 1, episode 5, “Grenelle”, directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, aired February 22, 2016, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 4.09”.

problematic – narrative convention for the conflictive *preeminent female-subordinate male* configuration (see chapters 3 and 4). Accordingly, the characters' transactional configuration retains its patriarchal Parent (him)-Child (her) configuration, in some form or other, throughout much of the series.

Throughout BN, Dorendeu appears unconditionally attracted to Rickwaert's rude intellect, patriarchal confidence, and evident tactical superiority. Even in times of disagreement, the basic Parent-Child pattern of their relationship remains intact, with Dorendeu feeling the need to explain and justify her diverging actions in front of her (former) lover. Following the patriarchal configuration of their relationship game, President Dorendeu always takes Rickwaert's call and ultimately remains dependent on his advice throughout the series.

Whenever she acts without his consent or against Rickwaert's advice, Dorendeu is ultimately punished for it by extradiegetic intervention that assures the continued dominance of its (male) protagonist. As president, Dorendeu, e.g., undergoes a temporary emancipation from the P4P configuration when she issues the illegal order to assassinate two terror suspects arrested in France without consolidating Rickwaert.⁹⁷ She subsequently abandons the attempt to reunite the left to form a moderate government against Rickwaert's explicit wishes, thus seemingly completing the emancipation from the *Mentor-Student* relationship with her former lover. However, Dorendeu's actions end up further dividing the political left, refracting French society, and dispersing the political spectrum. The president ultimately sacrifices herself to prevent unfavourable political developments in the Republic.⁹⁸ Thus, *dramatic* intervention restores the couple's initial power dynamics.

7.1.9.3 Michel Vidal: Hybris, Gesinnungsethik, and Idealpolitik

In the diegetic struggle of populism vs pluralism and BN's compositional protagonist-antagonist structure, Michel Vidal, the ultraleft populist and leader of the leftist party *Debout le Peuple*, takes an ambiguous position. In the final two seasons' overarching plot to unify the left against an increasingly powerful anti-systemic force, the ultraleft Michel Vidal becomes one of Rickwaert's primary antagonists. In both experience and tactical prowess, Vidal is a worthy opponent of Rickwaert's. Starting as a secondary character, Vidal's role in the overall narrative increases parallel to the series' focus on the complex political actor-network. In season 3, the left-populist quickly becomes the tritagonist behind protagonist Rickwaert and deuteragonist Dorendeu. With his mixture of idealism, political cynicism, vast intellectual properties and hybris, Vidal grows into a highly complex and fascinating character and one of the central players in the game to prevent (or enable) the rise of the extreme right.

97 *Baron Noir*, season 2, episode 4, "Conversion", directed by Ziad Doueiri, written by Eric Benzekri, Jean-Baptiste Delafon, and Olivier Demangel, aired January 29, 2018, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 47:39".

98 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevenement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 49:40".

A savvy political operator, Vidal's uncompromising vision of a single political path for France – a complete systemic (socialist) overhaul – nonetheless renders him an implicit illustration of what Max Weber described as the dangers of uncompromising “ethics of conviction” [*Gesinnungsethik*] in politics⁹⁹ following the dictum “Fiat Justitia, pereat mundus” [*Let justice prevail, or else the world shall perish*].¹⁰⁰ In the series' modelling of the French political actor-network, Vidal becomes the personification of an extreme left that is, at the same time, well-intentioned, self-righteous to the point of hybris, and deontologically idealistic to the point of destructive irresponsibility.

Vidal's worldview rests on a highly evolved body of socialist theory. Together with his even more ideologically staunch right-hand-woman, Aurore Dupraz, he frequently embarks on elaborate theoretical discourses. In his cerebral and theoretically well-founded manner, Vidal – in season 3 – often serves as the meta-exegete of the season's political events.

Vidal's populism is a direct result of his (not wholly unjustified) awareness of the superiority of his intellect. Like all populists, his uncompromising idea of the ‘correct’ way forward (here: a socialist reordering of the French political system) presupposes the existence of one unified people with one unified interest that only he is able to discern and implement. As a populist, Vidal does not acknowledge the legitimate co-existence of diverging sets of political views. In a rejection of representative compromise in favour of frictionless populist immediacy, Vidal considers opposition to his plans either as a result of unintentional intellectual inferiority or else deliberate misdirection for ulterior motives.

With his categorically populist worldview, Vidal, thus, becomes an opposing figure to BN's much more pragmatic realpolitik characters. Rickwaert and Dorendeu accept negotiated compromise as the way to create political legitimacy. For the populist Vidal, compromise is a betrayal of truth.

Like the alpha male Rickwaert, Vidal, too, aligns the implementation of his political ideals with the success of his personal leadership. He, e.g., states: “Ma personne, c'est mon programme” [*my person is my programme*]¹⁰¹ in a play on Louis XIV's famous quote “L'état c'est moi” [*I am the state*]. Acknowledging the largely charismatic nature of his authority, which orientates from his mastery of the mechanisms of gamified political spectacle, he exclaims: “Welcome to the Fifth Republic, my friend. I embody. I personify. I haven't become coquettish, but I'm riding the waves”.¹⁰²

99 Max Weber, “Politics as Vocation”, in *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B Strong, transl. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004), 83f.

100 See David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, “Introduction: Max Weber's Calling to Knowledge and Action”, in *Max Weber: The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B Strong, transl. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 2004), xlv.

101 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 3, “#MeToo”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkielkraut, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 35.45”.

102 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 3, “#MeToo”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkielkraut, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 35.37”. Translation from the original: “Bienvenue dans

His assumption of an absolute 'greater good', and a historically determined ideal future for an imagined unified 'populous, initially enable Vidal to accept high levels of collateral damage. For long stretches throughout seasons 2 and 3, he refuses a unification of the left even if it means the dissolution of the front républicain and the ascent of extremists to the presidency. His deontological hybris takes Vidal to a point where he is willing to court systemic collapse in order to realise his vision of a "citizen's revolution".¹⁰³ Reflecting on the tense state of French society and President Dorendeu's attempts to consolidate the political centre, he rejoices: "We are experiencing the agony of the liberal disorder. This world is collapsing, and Dorendeu will fall with it".¹⁰⁴ Ultimately, his ideals save him – albeit too late – from supporting anti-systemic agitators as they begin to show their racist true colours. Vidal considers himself a staunch anti-racist¹⁰⁵ and is unwilling to cooperate with the political right in any way, stating that red and brown should never mix "because brown will always win".¹⁰⁶

7.1.9.4 Christophe Mercier – The Anti-Systemic Populist

Christophe Mercier is the clearest representation of radical populism in BN and arguably one of the series' most sinister antagonists. With his first major appearance coming relatively late in BN's final season, Mercier becomes the personification of the prevalent anti-systemic currents in the series' diegetic actor-network. He is a vlogger, spreading convoluted conspiracy theories and anti-establishment rhetoric and starting to gather diegetic attention as the force that inspires a discontent, radicalised citizen to slap President Dorendeu in the face.

Having been disappointed by both the left and right, he finds himself on the side of aimless, destructive opposition. Accordingly, his attitude is initially neither right-wing nor left-wing and, instead, demonstratively oppositional. Taking ideological loans from both the extreme left and the extreme right, Mercier ends up cooperating with both sides in an attempt to gain the presidency.¹⁰⁷ However, Mercier is – the series' *dispersed antago-*

la cinquième république mon ami. J'incarne, je personnifie, oh c'est pas que je sois devenue particulièrement coqué mais en fin je chevauche".

103 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 3, "#MeToo", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkelkraut, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 43.28". In the original: "La revolution citoyenne".

104 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, "Check Up", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 13.29". "Nous vivons l'agonie du désordre libéral. Ce monde s'effondre et Dorendeu va tomber avec lui".

105 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 6, "Oui", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkelkraut, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 17.35".

106 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 34.44". Translation from the original: " [...] car si on mélange le brun et le rouge c'est toujours le brun qui l'emporte".

107 Throughout *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode; and *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, "Ahou!", directed by Thomas

nist makes this very clear – less the creator and more the product of an increasingly tense and dysfunctional political climate.

As a populist, Mercier presupposes a simplified fictional vision of a unified people with a clear directional – and thus legitimate will – that he alone can discern. Unlike the left-wing populist Michel Vidal, however, Mercier's vision is not based on complex – if arguably ill-conceived – theoretical conceptualisations but on extreme simplification.

As Niklas Luhmann points out, purely moral categories contradict the fundamental principles of the democratic system because they serve primarily to delegitimise political opponents.¹⁰⁸ In a functioning democracy, however, participants must concede each others' general (moral) ability to compete. With recourse to Chantal Mouffe and Michel Foucault, Sandra Nuy likewise points out the difference between constructive political agonism, that is, the “democratically regulated [...] dealing with dissent”, and destructive antagonism.¹⁰⁹ With legitimate dissent being unthinkable in a unified populous, Mercier's struggle against the series' protagonists becomes decisively antagonistic and destructive. Towards Rickwaert, he accordingly states: “I do not consider you my opponent but an enemy, an enemy of the people”.¹¹⁰

In the populist vision of a unified ‘people’, known to and represented by the populist leader alone, dissent is thinkable only through ‘external’ forces. Following the populist notion of othering dissent, Mercier accordingly refers to Amélie Dorendeu as “l'Autrichienne”¹¹¹ [*the Austrian*] – a disparaging nickname famously used for Queen Marie Antoinette (who began her life as an Austrian princess) during the French revolution. Echoing the cries of an array of historical populists (past and present), Mercier claims that France's elites are, in fact, not part of the unified body of the unified French ‘people’. About President Dorendeu, he, for example, states: “This woman is no longer one of us. She sides with shadows and secrets, manipulation, and agreements between the powerful, behind the people's backs”.¹¹²

Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series.

108 See Niklas Luhmann, *Die Moral der Gesellschaft*, ed. Detlef Horster (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2008), 170f. For more on this see also my discussion of populist logic and narrative in chapter 6.

109 Sandra Nuy, *Die Politik von Athenes Schild: Zur dramaturgischen Logik des Politischen im fiktionalen Film* (Berlin/Muenster: LIT Verlag, 2017), 28. My translation: “ein demokratisch regulierter Umgang [...] mit Dissens”.

110 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, “Ahou!”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 53.34”. Translated from the original: “Je vous ne considère d'ailleurs pas comme mon adversaire mais comme un ennemi, un ennemi du peuple”.

111 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, “Ahou!”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 8.24”.

112 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, “Brüder”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 28.34”. Translated from the original: “Cette femme n'est plus de notre. Elle est du camp de l'ombre et du secret, des manipulations et des arrangements entre riches et puissants dans le dos du peuple”.

7.1.9.4.1 Evoking Populist Precedent

The fictional Christophe Mercier references several well-known tropes from prominent populist ‘movements’ of the late 2010s. In his seemingly aimless and destructive anti-systemic impetus, he is, e.g., reminiscent of the French Gilet Jaune movement, which shook the country in 2018 and 2019 with partially violent protests. Mercier’s demands to “banish evil” personified by Amélie Dorendeau¹¹³ and his refusal to accept electoral defeat¹¹⁴ reference two of the many infamous utterances of former US President Donald Trump. Trump had made the chant “lock her up” one of his campaign slogans in the 2016 presidential election, referencing his opponent, Hillary Clinton.¹¹⁵ Mercier alleging to have been “robbed” [*spolié*] of his victory and accusing the victorious Rickwart of a “coup d’état”¹¹⁶ clearly references Trump’s previously announced refusal to acknowledge his electoral defeat. Having lost to contender Joe Biden, the outgoing US President consequently started an unsuccessful campaign to assert his unfounded claim that the election had been ‘stolen’ from him.

Mercier’s campaign platform, furthermore, cites the predominantly populist British Brexit movement with its slogan “Reprenons le Contrôle”¹¹⁷ [*Let us take back control*]. British Brexiteers used the identical slogan in their ultimately successful campaign to lead the United Kingdom out of the European Union between 2016 and 2020.

7.1.9.4.2 Inverting Fictional Precedent

The character of Mercier shares many traits of polit-fiction’s idealistic populists. However, serving as a destructive antagonist, his normative evaluation is an inversion of populist saviour-heroes like Vasyl Petrovych Holoborodko (SLUHA NARODU – SN), Elizabeth McCord (MADAM SECRETARY – MS), and the two DESIGNATED SURVIVORS (DS US and DS 60) Tom Kirkman and Park Mu-jin. Mercier is a former teacher in a play on the idealistic saviour-hero’s mentor motif. Like his positive fictional counterparts, Mercier is seemingly independent of established political players such as political parties or the established media, using independent means (a vlog) to connect with ‘his’ people. Like his fictional counterparts, he appears as a play on the binary *inside-outside* juxtaposition.

113 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, “Brüder”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 28.34”. He demands: “Nous devons la bannir [...] bannir le mal”.

114 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, “Ahou!”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 51.23”.

115 See Monica Hesse, “What do ‘Lock her up’ and ‘Send her back’ have in common? It’s pretty obvious”, *The Washington Post*, July 20, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/what-do-lock-her-up-and-send-her-back-have-in-common-its-pretty-obvious/2019/07/19/74bc4790-a999-11e9-9214-246e594de5d5_story.html.

116 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, “Ahou!”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 51.25”.

117 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, “Brüder”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 38.20”.

Mercier has no political experience and appears as a demonstratively naive political operator with no understanding of political or societal complexities and a distorted idea of political procedure. He likewise shares his fictional colleague's disdain for the (*inside*) elites and, like them, believes in a unified populous with a one-directional will. However, while the saviour-heroes in SN, MS, DS US and DS: 60 DAYS were diegetically correct in their dismissal of the political establishment as a sinister Other and their assumption of being the only representative of a unified people, Mercier's similar vision, in BN's complex vision of the diegetic polity, appears as a clear misrepresentation of the ambiguous complexity of diegetic political reality.

7.1.9.5 The Extreme Right

The sleazy power politician Lionel Chalon personifies the far-right in BN. Chalon leads the fictionalised Front National, later Rassemblement National, a racist, jingoist party referencing a homonymous historical role model (the series even mirrors the historical FN's name change in 2018). Throughout the series, Chalon and his party serve as one of the main spectres for the political left, even though he himself appears infrequently in accordance with the series' *dispersed antagonist*.

Chalon is a slick political operator who, while sharing the racist and nationalist sentiments of his party's base, wishes to lead the FN/RN out of political isolation and onto social acceptability. Superficially, he appears as the opposite of the seemingly vulgar, violent right-wing nationalists that essentially constitute his movement. He is wealthy and cultivated and often appears in the context of his family, for example, while playing with his little son.¹¹⁸ The frame of the loving family serves as a counterpoint emphasising Chalon's otherwise despicable nature, which is visible both in his sinister physical appearance and his frequent open allusions to racist policy and even violence.

Throughout the series, Chalon attempts to move the RN into the fold of socially acceptable political forces through cosmetrical (rather than programmatic) concessions to the political mainstream. A scene that shows Chalon flying a drone with his little son becomes a metaphor for his political schemes and a meta-commentary on the French extreme-right's general recipe for success. Explaining to his child how to operate the toy, Chalon states: "You see; one has to ascend softly. A tilt to the left, a tilt to the right; we'll rise very high this way".¹¹⁹

While initially successful, his attempts to regain some ground in the political centre ultimately make Chalon lose the support of his own party's more extreme factions. Disappointed by yet another political leader, they defect to the camp of the anti-systemic populist Christophe Mercier in season 3.

118 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, "Check Up", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 26.00"; and *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 3, "#MeToo", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkelkraut, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 40.56".

119 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, "Check Up", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 26.41". Translated from the original: "Tu vois, il faut monter doucement. Virage à gauche, virage à droite, on va monter très haut comme ça".

With his personal wealth, his repeated near-successful attempts to become president, and his aim to move his party into the more accepted folds of the moderate political right through cosmetic rather than ideological alteration, Chalon's character is a thinly veiled allusion to the historical FN/ RN leader Marine le Pen. Like her fictional counterpart, she renamed the FN in 2018 in order to superficially distance it from its openly racist and antisemitic past and make the newly baptised RN more appealing to disappointed mainstream voters (a change, it is safe to say, that has to date done little to alter the party's extremist positions).

7.2 Modelling Malfunction

In "Brüder", Philippe Rickwaert once more lays out the stakes of season 3, stating:

Amélie, we're not in competition. It's your last term. We must succeed, period! Show that representative democracy can still change things. If not, the last damn will break, and that madman Mercier or a Nazi like Chalon will blow up everything.¹²⁰

With rising social tensions in historical France, right-wing extremist Marine Le Pen reaching the runoff in the 2017 and 2022 presidential elections, the experience of the anti-systemic Gilet Jaune movement vandalising the streets of Paris in 2018 and 2019 and the continued success of populist movements on the political left and right throughout the global north, BN may well appear as a fictionalised model of potential ways to systemic collapse. The fact that the fictional President Amélie Dorendeau's slap in the face aired roughly one and a half years before Emmanuel Macron met the same fate seems to suggest, for BN, a certain level of structural insight into French political and social developments. Of course, the fictional events in BN are by no means an 'accurate' reflection of French historical conditions. However, they can be regarded as an authentic fictionalisation of how a similar set of conditions in a complex emergent system that follows its own functional logic rather than a central guiding agency might amount to catastrophe. It is, therefore, instructive to more closely examine the series' recipe for systemic malfunction.

7.2.1 Alienation, Left-Wing Division, and The Dangers of *Gesinnungsethik*

Referencing the materialist discourse among much of the French political left, BN's first ingredient for democratic collapse is an increasingly unequal, fragmented society. Rickwaert, taking over as the series' primary exegete, describes the tense diegetic political

120 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 23.04". My translation: "Amélie on est pas en concurrence. C'est ton dernier mandat. On doit réussir, point! Démontrer que la démocratie représentative peut encore changer des choses. Sinon un jour la dernière digne va sauter et un malade comme Mercier ou un Nazi comme Chalon fera tout sauter".

situation as “A time of populism, a groundswell, a tidal wave.”¹²¹ His comment refers to societal circumstances in which parts of the population increasingly appear to question the systemic conditions that have enabled decades of neoliberal inequality and perceived societal fragmentation. In BN’s diegesis, people, finding no constructive channels to direct their anger, increasingly turn to extra-systemic forces that capitalise on blaming the comparatively small circle of people that traditionally constitute France’s political leadership.

Season 3 goes to considerable lengths to demonstrate the divide between the establishment and the alienated factions of the public. In “Brüder”, rally participants boo a journalist at the behest of populist Christophe after they come to regard the media as a representative of the elitist Other.¹²² In the same episode, political pollster Naïma Meziani introduces Rickwaert to the Brüder scale, a tool to measure belief in conspiracy theories, demonstrating a general conviction, among the diegetic French population, of politicians “concealing the truth”.¹²³ The result, in BN, is the rise of an unlikely and objectively less than grandiose populist idol, Christophe Mercier.

While Mercier is not the only populist in BN, he is by far the most successful. For the series’ diegetic meta-commentator, Michel Vidal, both the successes of right-wing extremist Chalon and anti-systemic agitator Mercier are partly due to their corruption of leftist methods of grassroots mobilisation. They are methods that the moderate left abandoned after its ascent into the societal mainstream. Having turned towards the centre and political mainstream, the left, in BN, is forced to become the conservative reaction to the destructive, pseudo-revolutionary powers on the right. Vidal accordingly states: “The strength of fascism and of all totalitarianism is to steal our words, the words of the popular rebellion”.¹²⁴

Vidal, once again the series’ theoretical neo-Marxist exegete, explains the destructive consequences of systemic disconnect and the material and societal inequalities in France, stating:

121 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, “Check Up”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 03.28”. Translated from the original: “Un moment populiste, une lame de fond, une immense vague”

122 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, “Brüder”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 08.58”.

123 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, “Brüder”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 31.09”. My translation: “La croyance générale dans la dissimulation de la vérité”.

124 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, “Brüder”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 34.10”. My translation: “La force du fascisme et de tout les totalitarismes c’est de voler nos mots. Les mots de la révolte populaire”.

The humiliation is immense. Since it can't find an outlet, the only way out is to twist reality. Reinvent reality to make it bearable. Humiliation is the force behind political mobilisation.¹²⁵

For him, the system's imminent collapse and its consequences are evident: "A citizen's revolution or barbarism".¹²⁶

In BN, mounting political tensions become an existential systemic threat because of the established political forces' inability to accommodate and direct public discontent into productive channels. With the series' *dramatic* focus on the political left, it is, above all, the internal left-wing division that appears as the main battleground of the diegetic system's malfunction.

It is a battleground that, referencing the well-known precarious state of the historical French left, is in bad shape and exceedingly preoccupied with internal battles. In BN, the young, liberal moderates around Amélie Dorendeu end up alienating much of the PS' working-class voters in their attempt to occupy the political centre. The populist left-wing around populist Michel Vidal and his *Debout le Peuple* movement prefer systemic decline to aligning themselves with a 'treacherous' moderate left, thus abandoning the idea of the front républicain. Under the leadership of the leftist-revolutionary Aurore Dupraz, *Debout le Peuple* even sides with populist anti-systemic forces in the hopes of triggering revolution and harnessing its destructive powers for socialist reform. Accordingly, right-wing extremist Lionel Chalon states: "The division of the left is our life insurance".¹²⁷

BN thus exemplifies the paradoxically destructive potential of rigid political *Gesinnungsethik* and ill-conceived notions of *ideapolitik*. The highly intellectual populist Vidal and, later, his predecessor, Aurore Dupraz, are ultimately prisoners of their own convictions, unable to adapt their chosen path for 'the French people' to political reality. The series plays out the paradox of a rigidly distorted *ideapolitik* which allows an ideologically uncompromising political left to justify siding with anti-systemic and even extreme-right forces to achieve their own ends: "the death of the king. The end of oligarchy. The end of caste privilege. The end of the system".¹²⁸ The danger here is not that the extreme left is betraying its ideals but rather that their populist belief in the impossibility of

125 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 5, "Satanas", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevenement, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 45.47". Translated from: "L'humiliation est immense. Comme elle n'arrive pas à trouver de déboucher la seule issue c'est de tordre le réel. On le réinvente pour le rendre supportable. L'humiliation est la grande force de mobilisation politique".

126 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 1, "Check Up", directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevenement, aired February 10, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 13.50". "La révolution citoyenne ou la barbarie".

127 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, "Ahou!", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevenement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 10.12". Translated from: "La division de la gauche, c'est notre assurance vie".

128 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevenement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 37.05". Translation from the original: "la mort du roi. La fin de l'oligarchie. La fin des privilèges de la caste. La fin du système."

intra-systemic reform and the resulting need for systemic overhaul is so absolute that it prevents constructive participation in the democratic process. For the left-wing extremist Dupraz, in her aim to incite revolution, the ‘conservative’ forces of the political centre become the enemy while the margins of the political spectrum and their shared aim to destroy the established system become allies.

7.2.2 Delusions of Instrumentalisation

The multi-faceted abandonment of the front républicain against extremists appears as the primary reason for systemic malfunction in BN. In the series, populist forces gain traction because the established political entities concentrate on the societal centre, leaving the political margins to fend for themselves. Destructive forces (Chalon, Mercier) take over these margins and – with their overly simplified notions of society and politics – mobilise and channel the unharnessed political energy of the discontent masses into their destructive causes.

The attempt of Lionel Chalon and his right-wing extremist RN to simulate a move away from political extremism and thus become a socially acceptable force in fictional French politics, e.g., leads to a partial breaking of the political establishment’s refusal to cooperate with his party. In “Inventaire”, a referendum proposed by the left attains a parliamentary majority through the votes of the RN.¹²⁹

Fatally, for Chalon and the diegetic democratic system in BN, the FN’s move towards the centre ends up freeing extremist forces on the far right of the political spectrum. Personified by the renegade party functionary Léandra Tallier, they ultimately break with their former leader’s course of rapprochement to join the openly destructive anti-systemic forces around Christophe Mercier.¹³⁰

In BN’s fictional model of systemic malfunction, Mercier’s strength derives partly from the fact that both the extreme right (around Tallier) and the extreme left (around Vidal and, after his dethronement, Dupraz) believe themselves capable of controlling and instrumentalising the movement. Both join Mercier’s campaign with the vague title Force de la République believing themselves able to harness the dynamic power of the movement for their respective – diametrically opposed – political goals. Both Tallier and Dupraz provide Mercier with the well-oiled apparatus of their respective parties, with Dupraz organising staged ‘spontaneous’ riots at Mercier’s behest.¹³¹ The rapprochement of the right-wing extremist Chalon is, likewise, aided by the conservative Républicains’

129 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 4, “Inventaire”, directed by Antoine Chevrollier, written by Eric Benzekri and Raphaël Chevènement, aired February 17, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 52.18”.

130 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 6, “Oui”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Olivier Demangel, and Thomas Finkelkraut, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 10.20”.

131 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 8, “Ahou!”, directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevènement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series, 11.00”.

conviction of being able to instrumentalise and profit from the political capital of the extreme right.¹³²

The fallacy that Mercier can be controlled ultimately proves to be near-fatal for his political allies on the left when he displays no interest in adhering to their reformatory plans and instead endorses the right's racist assumptions in his construction of a unified populous. A defeated Vidal, ousted from his party and facing the ruins of his political legacy, accordingly states about Mercier: "One after the other, we gave him a leg up thinking we could use him. One after the other, he annihilated us".¹³³

In BN, Philippe Rickwaert, the savvy éminence grise of political France, represents the valid fictional answer to this systemic problem: leave the political centre, unite the left, and recapture the socialists' old power bases, especially the marginalised poor. BN thus clearly references the political and societal debate prevalent in the historical French Left.

The series' forms a compellingly coherent and seductively authentic fictional vision of French political conditions. However, this fictional authenticity should – again – not be mistaken for 'accuracy'. Despite the complexity of its diegetic political actor-network, BN is a fictional narrative that follows *dramatic* and *pragmatic* logic rather than *historical truth*. Its focus on the political left, which, due to *pragmatic* consideration of target prestige audiences, appears as the topos deciding the future of the French republic, and its comparative blindness to proceedings on the political right, are only two of the series' many concessions to its *triple* logic. Thus, while BN presents compelling observations about the French political climate, the series should by no means be considered an analysis or reflection of historical politics. It is, instead, a compelling fictional composition whose interpretation of historical references can serve to illustrate and caution, not, however, to instruct.

7.3 Conclusion: Inverting the Populist Quest and Extending Polit-Fiction

As this chapter showed, politics, in BN as in most popular polit-series intent on creating suspense, appears as an uncooperative *Zero-Sum* game. However, other than in many other polit-series, BN's vision of realpolitik as the negotiation of a variety of legitimate interests across a dispersed actor-network does not convey a cynical, dystopian wasteland but a troubled yet desirable realm. In BN, it is up to the morally ambiguous realpolitiker to save pluralist democracy from systemic malfunction and the destructive influences of populist ideological absolutism. The series thus arguably represents an extension (and, at times, conscious inversion) of what has often wrongly been assumed to constitute polit-series' natural storytelling conventions.

132 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 5, "Satanas", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevenement, aired February 24, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 18.20".

133 *Baron Noir*, season 3, episode 7, "Brüder", directed by Thomas Bourguignon, written by Eric Benzekri, Raphaël Chevenement, aired March 2, 2020, Canal+, Kwai/StudioCanal, streamed TV series episode, 42.10". Translation from the original: "Les uns après les autres on lui a fait la courte échelle en pensant de se servir de lui. Les uns après les autres il nous a liquidé"

Instead of the presentation of a binary narrative construction surrounding the division of *inside* and *outside*, which dominates, e.g., the AM series discussed in the previous chapter, I demonstrated that BN's emergent diegetic actor-network creates a discursive, multipolar vision of power and a comparatively complex narrative ensemble dispersed across various (at times, metonymic) political institutions. In its fictional examination of the French presidency, BN likewise breaks with the established taboo of dramatising the previously sacrosanct institution presenting its overly powerful role as a core for systemic malfunction.

Considering BN's target audience functions, I showed that the series' *pragmatic* focus on the political left manifests in a *dramatic* emphasis on the inner workings of the fictional PS. Analysing BN's elaborate presentation of parties and other non-governmental actors, I demonstrated that the series shuns polit-fictions conventional executive bias and, instead, concentrates on a protagonist who is, for the larger part of the series, not an official part of the official administration but engaged in navigating the complex backstage of the multi-level system of French government. Similarly, I contended that BN presents the media as an ambiguous macro actor responsible for holding politicians accountable in their role as the Fourth Estate and encouraging and spreading distortive gamified imaginaries of politics.

A structural analysis showed that BN features the unusual plot device of what I called a *dispersed protagonist*. It separates the series' multipolar conflict from the personalised cause and effect chain that usual features in popular storytelling. Political tension thus appears as a systemic rather than an interpersonal phenomenon. This narratively complex *dramatic* configuration served to prevent the discursive dominance of the series' extremist protagonists by reducing their diegetic agenda and overall screen-time and making them appear primarily as a product of systemic malfunction.

Analysing the series' central characters, I contended that BN's protagonist, Philippe Rickwaert, and deuteragonist, Amélie Dorendeau, appear as the morally ambiguous but ultimately positive incarnation of teleological realpolitik. Both are flawed, ambitious and ruthless; however, both ultimately apply their morally questionable methods to serve a worthy cause: the preservation of pluralist democracy. Discussing the series' ambivalent tritagonist, Michel Vidal, I showed that BN is a detailed examination of the dangers of a rigid, populist idealpolitik whose aim at systemic overhaul ultimately leads to a potential failure to sustain the compromised yet protective front républicain against extremist political influences and thus potential disaster.

Discussing BN's personified antagonists, Christophe Mercier and Lionel Chalon, I demonstrated that both characters, clearly referencing historical and fictional role models, build their political personas around variations of the populist claim to sole representation of a fictional unified populous typical for AM narratives constructed around the "populist quest". Accordingly, the character Mercier repeats several motifs of his positively connotated fictional counterparts in idealistic polit-series such as SN, MS, DS US and DS 60 discussed in the previous chapter. However, I demonstrated that, in the pluralist political realm of BN, the same qualities that made Vasyl Petrvych Holoborodko and his fictional colleagues into positive saviour heroes turn Christophe Mercier into a dangerous madman. Therefore, BN is ultimately an explicit inversion of the populist quest.

It likewise became clear that BN ultimately provides a fictional model of the possible malfunction of pluralist liberal democracy. In order for the system to fail, the series introduces various factors that reference progressive political discourse: (1) political alienation of the increasingly marginalised masses; (2) a divided political left; (3) a political establishment no longer willing to support the front républicain against extremism because of (3a) idealistic delusions or (3b) the vain hope of harnessing populism's destructive dynamics for political reform.

As this chapter is being written in the summer of 2022, historical France has once again missed a systemic malfunction akin to the one simulated in BN by a troublingly narrow margin. In the first round of the 2022 presidential election, right-wing extremist Marine le Pen gained 23,1% of the votes entering the runoff for the second time. What is more, with Éric Zemmour, a racist extremist emerged on the far right of the political spectrum, gaining 7,1% of presidential votes on his first try.

Despite forming the NUPES-alliance (Nouvelle union populaire écologique et sociale) in Mai 2022 (a group that contains many of the major French left parties such as La France insoumise, the PS, and the French Green party Europe Écologie Les Verts), the political left shows many signs of decline and division. Anne Hidalgo, presidential candidate of the formerly presidential PS, for example, gained a mere 1,8% of the votes, a result that was nonetheless high enough to prevent the left-wing populist Jean-Luc Mélenchon, who came in third place at 22% of the votes, from overtaking Marine le Pen and entering the runoff himself.

Likewise, various actors all over the moderate political spectrum notably failed to rally in the traditional front républicain against the RN and endorse the liberal incumbent Emmanuel Macron. While this chapter does not aim to assess historical political conditions in France and certainly does not claim any historical *accuracy* or predictive qualities on the part of BN, the series' unusually coherent fictionalisation of its emergent diegetic political actor-network has undoubtedly produced compelling effects of narrative *authenticity*.

BN demonstrates that popular serial storytelling is well equipped to deal with a variety of complex political systems beyond the narrow confines of the Oval Office with its either depraved or messianic presidential incumbents. With its dismissal of executive bias and reductive binary narrative structures, its dramatisation of a multipolar polity, and its portrayal of pluralist realpolitik as a morally ambiguous but ultimately constructive force, BN is a notable diversion from many other popular polit-series of the 2010s. This chapter's analysis illustrated that the widespread fictional conventions of cynical power politics, on the one hand, and "the populist quest", on the other hand, by no means constitute inevitable laws for the fictionalisation of politics.