

## THE FIGURE OF THE DETECTIVE

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### 4: PSYCHO-INTUITIVE AND NOIR

#### Warm knowledge

By the early 1930s the original aspirations of the detective genre had reached their apotheosis in the English Classic tradition. As with any healthy literary form there had always been writers searching for new methods or materials but now, if the genre were to remain of interest more fundamental changes were needed. More work from the studios of Christie, Sayers, and other Classicists would begin to pall. Readers would begin to look elsewhere for new ideas. This would have been true in any case, but the Depression had introduced an interest in greater realism and fidelity to life as it was felt and lived, along with a requirement for moral complexity, which were not compatible with the Rules governing the Classic formula. These interests and concerns were addressed by the movies. Film does not portray cerebration well. Its strengths are in storytelling, event, and physical detail. Eventually, solutions to the problems of filming a detective story were found, but movies until the early fifties were better suited to gothic melodrama than to pondering mystification. Stories resembling chess matches, with long stretches of sparring, of dancing about with raised fists – punctuated with infrequent flurries of punches and too often ending in a TKO – did not work well. Contrast the dark tone and foreboding of the Basil Rathbone Holmes with the brighter Charlie Chan movies. These were crisper but required an excessive verbalization of the detective's thoughts to make the story intelligible.

If the detective genre were to be renewed along these lines

the options were few: alter the story content, find a new mode of narration, or tinker with the detective himself.

The first option was not promising. If the story were not about a murder what could it be about? As to narrative method, authors were equally constrained. One could, and did, dispense with the sidekick, giving the responsibility for the story over to an omniscient narrator or to the detective himself. One could rely more on such literary devices as the flashback, multiple or unreliable narrators, and irony.

But any real change to the genre required a divorce from the Rules, which meant a fundamental change in the Detective and the cultural work expected of him. Detectives would continue to Detect, but either the means of discovery had to change or alterations had to be made to the relationship of the detective to the community he served. The problem was how to preserve a family resemblance to the English Classic's defense of rational objectivity and its insistence on fair play.

Altering the means of discovery was the easier, and a solution was at hand in the earlier stories of Holmes and Father Brown. Holmes, as we have seen, was peerless in his inspired guesswork, and the Father Brown stories had to work hard to avoid the temptation of inspiration simplex and Divine. Simple guessing and inspiration were hardly acceptable, but to allow the detective to form his initial hypotheses by non-rational means (what we now would call thinking on the right side of the brain) or to choose between equal hypotheses using intuition and empathy rather than physical clues could be accommodated, while the rest of the detective's work would go on as usual.

The first iconic detective allowed to work routinely by psycho-intuitive methods was Georges Simenon's Inspector

Jules Maigret.

The Maigret tales sacrifice very little to the traditional formula. Aside from his moments of insight, Maigret reaches his conclusions in the ordinary way of reasoning. He operates within an institution created to protect the commonweal, he has the resources for gathering evidence and enforcing his conclusions given him as a policeman, and he has confidantes with whom he can speak freely if he wishes. The permission to be intuitive allows him to be emotive rather than merely quirky and makes it easier to humanize him. He can have a marriage and a family life, ordinary friends, and the story can dwell on and even utilize these things without dawdling or digression. Most importantly for future development, Maigret can sympathize with criminals and victims in new ways without sacrificing his membership in the society he is required to protect. This leave to criticize gives him leave to obtain evidence by moral suasion or psychological pressure (a shift made even easier by the requirement of the French legal system for a confession). Compared to previous detectives, Maigret has an enormous affective range: disgust, anger, righteousness, uxorious domesticity, delight in simple pleasures and an enthusiasm for food and drink.

We may now re-examine the conditions which brought Maigret into being with a view toward bridging the impressive gap between him and Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe.

Commercial movies are a conservative medium, constrained by the imperatives of mass taste and production expense and so not inclined to take risks. Inherently a story-telling art (because it consists of events coming one

after another),<sup>1</sup> film is organized around a dialectic of expectation-supporting norms and possibility-evoking transgressions.<sup>2</sup> Story-telling practices vary in their acceptance of this. In the detective genre the possibility of transgression is not very welcome. It is the main business of the formula to suppress this as soon as possible. No diddling about with what happened to Darcy's brother's aunt.<sup>3</sup> If transgressions were to be shrugged off this would mean that crimes would go unsolved (or what is more irritating, solved and found not to merit punishment and so not a crime). Outside the Classic tradition the unpunished crime is a social comment; in noir, a bitter one. Within the tradition, the solved puzzle is a replacement satisfaction for the more Romantic thrill of, say, the Scarlet Pimpernel. Unpunished or no, the crime must be solved. Not to solve it is a radical statement about the impossibility of knowledge which if accepted would destroy the premise of any future tales and block the usefulness of the genre as a response to social change. But that is just what we have begun to doubt: that experience is solvable, that there is knowledge to be had which will alleviate the fears which the detective is supposed to calm *by solving the crime*. The genre will not move forward, will not find new forms, unless this impasse

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<sup>1</sup> I say *coming one after another* rather than *sequence* to be clear that there is no order of scenes which will produce a story naturally. How to construct an intelligible story was the business of the first film theorists. I will not trouble to define an event. A frame, a shot, a scene or some larger rhetorical division, are possibilities which only enrich the definition.

<sup>2</sup> Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2002) 16.

<sup>3</sup> It is just because *Crime and Punishment* or *That Awful Mess On the Via Merulana* do — fail to stay on task — that we are reluctant to accept them into the mainstream of crime fiction, all aside from what they do to genre conventions. Detective practice is not very tolerant of largeness.

is broken up. If we grow bored or cynical with the crimes and the solutions on offer then new ones must be found. If not, fears about the reality of truth and knowledge will look for abatement in some other genre, some other narrative form.

Literary novels had been flirting with these issues from the beginning, but except for oddities like *Tristram Shandy* did not go so far as to dramatize inaccessible knowledge in unresolvable stories. The detective story, finding a new sensitivity to the complexities of life, found also that most evidence is tainted, most knowledge is partial, and most judgments are suspect. The movies will be the last to register this. They are not the locus of innovation. When these phenomena appear in the movies we can be sure that something has irrevocably changed.

A renewed genre of detective stories as portrayed in the movies would not, we predict, attempt some avant-garde procedure such as getting rid of the story,<sup>4</sup> so it must of necessity create new plot expectations. One possibility would be to get rid of the crime. There are other peripataeias which might do. (The peripataeia is the story-generator, Aristotle's term for the reversal of circumstances, the disruption in the smooth workings of life which makes it seem worthwhile to be telling a story in the first place. In the case of cavemen around the campfire it is the decision to go on a dangerous hunt, disturbing the peace of daily life for the sake of some mammoth meat. If none were alive to tell that tale that would become the peripataeia for a new tale.) Or, rather than the crime, we might turn our attention instead to the detective, the doppelganger of the criminal, each created by the other in an endless *ronde*. If there is to be a new sort of crime then a new sort of detective will be

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<sup>4</sup> As in *Les Gattes*, for example.

required. It is because of Raskolnikov that Porfiry Petrovich was invented.

Or, instead of trying to explain the crime we might try to justify the violence, which is the main purpose of such Biblical stories as Isaac and Job. Or we might try to find analogs of the detective in other stories about the getting of knowledge (Cinderella) or its deployment for evil purposes (Sleeping Beauty) or its rickety unreliability (Rashomon). The noir and psycho-intuitive modifications strike us so powerfully because they go to the heart of how we come to know, and why we want to, and (unlike Orpheus) they come back with Eurydice, not just a sad song.

These matters were, of course, implicit in the genre all along. The genre and its social purpose are co-dependent. Just as social change drives generic innovation, a generic modification, introduced to freshen up a tired plot, may bring new anxieties to the fore and create new energy for social change. Socially important story formulas have it in them to alert us to problems we didn't know we had. It is also essential to remember that new forms grow up and old ones die *within* the dominant tradition. There is never a clean transition.

We see this in a triplet of movies. *Murder Man* of 1935 is classic detection, but the murderer who is driven to confess by conscience looks forward both to the dominance of psychology and the new moral weight of noir. *Grand Central Murder* (1942) looks backward to the old-fashioned English country-house murder, frosting it with noir shadows and hardboiled dialogue in the fashion current in 1942. *Mystery Street* in 1950 opens with some feeble noir imitation which fissions into a psychodrama and a modern scientific investigation, not yet understanding how to fuse these strands in the person of the detective. In all

three the murderer cracks under pressure and reveals himself, but the latter two evil-doers know only crude fear. Fleeing to escape capture, both are done in by falling under a train. Compare this with *The Man On the Eiffel Tower*, also from 1950, a much more taut and efficient narrative along the same lines, with Maigret driving both the puzzle-drama and the psycho-drama.

With Maigret, warm knowledge begins its rise into dominance. The psycho-intuitive and noir are distinctly warm: in them, knowledge is a matter of human relationships and the getting of knowledge is dependent on skill in interpreting and manipulating these human connections. The detective no longer queries things, he asks people. The Cold War was at first a struggle like this. Sputnik returned science to the public eye, and by and by we began to see how the staredown might be depersonalized, how it could be made a matter of tools and purely “factual” knowledge, a shift of mind pretty well complete by the time of *Doctor Strangelove*. It’s still about people, as that movie famously demonstrates, but the relationship between people and things has cooled. The Cold War became really cold and we began to need, from about 1960, a new way of constructing that kind of movie pre-eminently about knowledge, the detective story. The temperature of knowledge had become tepid. It needed either to be boiled or iced.

The last time warm knowledge was this dominant was the period of high Romanticism from about 1790 to 1820. Stendhal in his youth assembled from his reading of Helvétius, Hobbes, and Condillac an uncompromisingly warm attitude.<sup>5</sup> Essentially and indeed crucially for the development of Stendahl’s mature view of human impulse

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Keates, *Stendhal* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1994) 80.

and motivation, this involved the centrality of a self (*le moi*) suffused with a yearning for happiness (*le bonheur*) and commanding the allegiance of the soul. The soul in turn rules the body and the understanding, rooted though each is in habit. In Stendahl's Romantic view we are ruled by passion and by the search for happiness. All these Romantic ideas derive from feeling and imagination and have no reality without desire.

Aside from some antique categories no longer in use (soul, imagination) how different is this from present views? The relentless search, the unwillingness to accept as authentic any motivations not rooted in precognitive childhood experiences (and most of these traumas), the primacy of drives and (the hierarchy of) needs which treat rational thought as either a luxury or as a practice in service to the body,<sup>6</sup> the present-day acceptance of masks, agendas, and the will to power, the dominance of happiness over accomplishment – all these contemporary manifestations are implied in Stendhal's formulation. There is with us a strong current of warm knowledge running under the rational one, and this predilection is what gives force to noir.

### Noir

The noir transition is easily explained once the psycho-intuitive preparation is understood. Maigret worked within a humane and moral society and for a trustworthy institution, the police, as did his Classic predecessors. He was a *Detective*, with the institutional rank of Inspector.

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<sup>6</sup> Hence the importance of feminist readings, because feminism is so entwined with the physical. One third of all the genre literature since 2000 is feminist or related primarily to women's interests.

Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, Mike Hammer and Lew Archer, work within a corrupt and immoral society policed by venal and sometimes evil guardians of the oligarchic hegemony. Spade and Marlowe are not detectives, they are *shamuses*.

The meaning of this word *shamus* is unclear, and even how to pronounce it. It first appears in the works of Hammett and Chandler and may have a Yiddish derivation from slang for a policeman. The word gains power by association with *shaman*, suggesting an incantatory or mythic role which needs to be taken into account in transforming a simple P.I. into a combination of gumshoe and oracle.<sup>7</sup> A secondary association to be found in dictionaries is with the Yiddish *shammes*, or the ninth candle from which the rest of the menorah is lit, from the Hebrew word meaning “attendant.” In any case the word must include the fact that to be a shamus is an honorable calling<sup>8</sup> with a suggestion of supernatural authority and guardian of souls.

The shamus, then, is the heir of the Classic detective in his role as protector of society, but unlike the Classic version the shamus is an outcast, a *private* investigator, as Dickens's Bucket was. The shamus is a person of principle, who does the right thing because to do so makes possible the moral life which the shamus exemplifies and which

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<sup>7</sup> Marlowe (in *The Big Sleep*) denies that he is a detective and implies that a shamus is something much humbler. To imagine Marlowe as a humble man is difficult, but he certainly does not over-estimate himself, and we ought to take the denigrating word *gumshoe* (which he does not actually use), together with the shaman, as composing the whole concept.

<sup>8</sup> As to be a detective was not, there being abundant enough examples in the noir and hard-boiled canon to support this claim.

stands in contrast to, and refutation of, the irrational and immoral lives around him. In such surroundings the continued commitment of the shamus to rational thought is heroic.

Here begin major changes in the genre. The puzzle aspect of the Classic form was rejected by noir authors as unrealistic, but when the now unrealistic rational society which made deduction possible is thrown over for an irrational one Holmes's methods are no longer viable. Holmes reasoned by abduction<sup>9</sup> under circumstances in which some but not all of the evidence is reliable. It is a mistake, he says, to proceed in absence of the facts – implying that there are such objectively knowable things as facts. In the irrational noir society (this being one of the main reasons why it *is* noir) when the truth of all the evidence is uncertain there is no leverage on which abduction can work. The noir detective must instead use the psycho-intuitive methods created for Maigret when it became clear to Simenon that the Classic formula was worn out and its assumptions about the nature of human knowledge were unacceptably narrow.

To say this snares us in an anachronism of sorts. Maigret debuted in 1931, Spade in 1929. Anterior to these however were the pulp detectives of earlier years such as Nick Carter,<sup>10</sup> the seedbed of the hardboiled. Eventually, as the

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<sup>9</sup> The reader will remember the earlier discussion on the meaning of this term and the distinction between it, deduction, and induction.

<sup>10</sup> Pulp is so called from the cheap wood-pulp paper on which the magazines and books of these popular authors were printed. Hammett, Gardner, and many others of this period were first published in the pulps, the most famous being *Black Mask*. Pulp readers, mostly working class, wanted action and were impatient with cerebration. Hammett, Chandler et al did not so much as invent the *process* as to explain how it worked in a context which would appeal more to

style evolved, the shamus evolved out of the original operative into his hero's role, the man who, in Chandler's words, walks mean streets who is not himself mean. In an unjust world the shamus retains his commitment to justice. But this idea was slow to develop. The pulp hardboiled operatives (Hammet's Continental Op and his relatives) understood the bankruptcy of Classic rationality but had no resource with which to work other than fists and guns. The Op plays to win, and not for himself or justice but for an employer, and while he prefers to outsmart his opponents he is willing to beat the truth out of them if necessary. The Op is clever and canny, a man of action who we will encounter again as the engine of the thriller.<sup>11</sup> Before the validation of the psycho-intuitive method the hardboiled P.I. was working with crude force, beating up all the suspects until one of them confessed. So although hardboiled predates psycho-intuitive it could not mature into noir until a new method of getting at the truth was worked out.

Here a word about the terms noir and hardboiled. These words do not describe the same thing. Noir, as most readers will know, was invented by French cinéastes after WWII in reference specifically to American movies. There are not many true noir films – *The Maltese Falcon* created by John Huston and Humphrey Bogart (1941) is generally considered the first. As originally used the term is narrow. It is, for example, impossible to imagine a noir film in

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middle-class readers. Rzepka 181-182

<sup>11</sup> Rzepka (179-183), citing also other authorities, makes an attempt to theorize the early hardboiled as a rejection of history. It is a rejection of old social practices certainly, a new response to changed conditions, but so long as evidence and reasoning drive the story, no matter how feebly, we can not accept this on the fundamental ground that the whole *raison d'être* of the genre is to *explain* the past and not to reject it. To exorcise the past is as far as we might go at this point.

color, or anything noir which is not a crime story. But quite soon the term was appropriated to describe films of the 1950s and 1960s of a certain hard-bitten quality, with bitter endings, and thus available to describe movies quite unlike *The Maltese Falcon*, *This Gun For Hire*, or *The Mask of Demetrios*. The equivalent older word used to describe novels of the same sort was hardboiled. This word too was appropriated for another purpose, in this case to describe pulp writing of inferior quality which substituted tough talk and beatings for detection. To be sure, these were its origins. When the intellectual word noir came along, the older term hardboiled was released from its duties and now means exclusively what it meant at the beginning, a century ago: tough, pessimistic, and without illusions.

The first noir tales<sup>12</sup> might be the Hannay trilogy of John Buchan (1919) and the novels of Dashiell Hammett from 1923. Hammett clearly understood the noir principle before it became the controlling trope for the crime novel and the detective film. The 1941 film version tightly follows the novel and repeats much of Hammett's dialogue verbatim. It is useful here to look at an earlier version, the 1931 *A Dangerous Female*, ludicrous to our post-noir sensibilities even to its title. Spade is a dandy in the mold of Peter Wimsey and Philo Vance. The murder of Miles Archer is moved from the vicinity of the Stockton tunnel into Chinatown itself, and Spade (for the nonce, anyway) is found to speak Chinese, all this resembling the Shanghai fantasy of the period of the sort one can read in Milton Caniff's *Terry and the Pirates* and lampooned in the beginning of the second Indiana Jones movie. Joel Cairo has become an intellectual, as far from Peter Lorre's exquisite portrayal of a homosexual aesthete as can be

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<sup>12</sup> These early noirish stories are significant also for the spy and thriller types and so a full discussion will be put off until later.

imagined.

1931 was simply too early. Hammett understood what he was doing at a time when other authors did not. The English Classic was still dominant, psycho-intuitive detection was unheard-of, and mean streets remained to be discovered. Hollywood had barely found out how to make a talkie and in story-telling resources lagged far behind fiction. The situation was exactly that of science fiction movies before the making of *Blade Runner*.

In contrast to *A Dangerous Female* we might place a film from the end of the noir era, Mickey Spillane's *Kiss Me Deadly*. Mike Hammer has become distinctly soft-boiled and displays a new sympathy as a sense of the right thing. As with the 1931 *Dangerous Female* it does contain laughable elements, most notably Spillane's misunderstanding of the nature of nuclear reactions, and there is a good deal of equivalent silliness, but unlike the pre-noir movie it takes itself seriously and has nowhere the air of light entertainment in its treatment of this movie's Next New Thing, the sour police drama initiated by Steve McQueen's *Bullitt*.

Through the thirties and forties a double motion is at work in the written stories: the detective (the title of shamus was dropped in return to the P.I.) becomes more humanized and sensitive while the surrounding society becomes more sordid. Hammett's *Red Harvest* and *The Dain Curse* (1929) are fairly brutal and the criminals are self-aggrandizing and unscrupulous. After *The Maltese Falcon* we have *The Glass Key* and finally *The Thin Man*, ending Hammett's trajectory with a straightforward English Classic.

In the mid-thirties we have Gardner's Perry Mason, who bears little resemblance to the sanitized TV version twenty

years later. Mason is clearly sleeping with Della Street and Paul Drake's portrayal contains an element of the thug. Mason described himself in the first story, *The Case of the Velvet Claws* (1933), as "a lawyer who has specialized in trial work, and in a lot of criminal work. ... If you look me up through some family lawyer or some corporation lawyer, he'll probably tell you that I'm a shyster. If you look me up through some chap in the District Attorney's office, he'll tell you that I'm a dangerous antagonist but he doesn't know very much about me." Spade had no qualms about sleeping with the women who came his way, including clients and his partner's wife (the status of his girl Friday Effie is uncertain). While Spade is opportunistic, Mason is calculating. When Spade is directly confronted by the police it is as a potential criminal enemy. Mason, a brilliant trial lawyer and a (raffish) member of respectable society, is by comparison a nuisance. He is not quite noir, and as his character (and Gardner's portrayal of his society) matures he becomes less and less so.

With Chandler's Phillip Marlowe, MacDonald's Lew Archer, and the 40s novels of Graham Greene we are at last in the mythic territory of quest stories and moral fables, the home ground of noir. These are all bittersweet, Greene being the sourest, and pessimistic concerning the uprightness and authenticity of anyone but the detective himself. Traces of the questionable characters of Spade and Mason are gone. Greene's people are sleazy but the protagonist has at least the moral refuge of having been chivvied into his fate. With these authors we move out of genre limitations into mainstream literature. We have come a long way from the pulps to a style and outlook which, while it owes a great deal to noir is ripe with new genre possibilities. One might look to such authors as Carlo Emilio Gadda, Leonardo Sciascia, and Alain Robbe-Grillet (*Les Gommés*) to explore this claim.

Before we move on, however, there is an important caution. Raymond Chandler's famous manifesto for a new realism in the detective story was that

“Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not with handwrought duelling pistols, curare, and tropical fish. He put these people down on paper as they are, and he made them talk and think in the language they customarily used for these purposes.”<sup>13</sup>

But as Cawelti points out<sup>14</sup> the plot of *The Maltese Falcon* “revolves around a mysterious age-old treasure, eccentric villains, and complex webs of intrigue” hardly more realistic than a Dorothy Sayers novel of ordinary people and plausible motivations. We are not talking here of a realism which consists of grit, or of a resemblance to grim ordinary life such as Zola insisted on. That the story is about detectives and murder removes it from everyday concerns. The realism that Chandler sought was a *moral* realism, an honesty which the Classic was thought not to possess.

Here is a review the systematic differences between the

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<sup>13</sup> “The Simple Art Of Murder” Howard Haycraft, ed. *The Art Of the Mystery Story* [Simon and Schuster, 1946] 234.

<sup>14</sup> *Adventure, Mystery, Romance* 163-164

Classic and noir (hard-boiled) detectives.

The Classic detective	The Noir detective
Defends society against attacks by individuals	Defends individuals against attacks by corrupt society
Clues assembled into a narrative through reasoning	Clues assembled into a narrative through experience and wisdom
Clues acquired by observation	Clues acquired by testimony, usually forced, sometimes by guile
The detective is never himself at risk	The detective is the most endangered of all
The second murder erases all hypotheses but one	Subsequent murders only increase the violence and the urgency
The detective's narrative construction is confirmed by the affirmation of the criminal when presented with irrefutable evidence	The detective's narrative construction is confirmed only by confession, which is the only reliable access to truth
The solution is always complete and the aftermath provides closure	Solutions are generally local and partial and the aftermath provides only solace

### **More on movies: hardboiled into noir**

Earlier I suggested that, from perhaps the mid-30s, movies are a good and sometimes better way to understand the popular attitude toward detectives, warm and cool knowledge, the rational and the intuitive, and the puzzle plot and its action replacement. Presumably noir's success had something to do with the cultural work which needed doing and of which the spent and increasingly irrelevant Classic was no longer capable. We have seen some of this already. What then was the role of film in the noir transition?

An English classic is fairly easy to translate into film. The cast is limited and the characters are well differentiated, though apparent differences may prove false. The action is straightforwardly presented and ought to be free of devices such as showing us the act of murder but hiding the actor's face. It is fairly easy to free the *mise en scène* from the kind of commentary that would draw our attention to particular clues, a practice opposite to that of horror films or thrillers, which invariably attempt to ratchet up the suspense with appositely-timed music and other devices which give away the action. It is easy, given the omniscient narration common to (indeed, forced upon) all these films, to keep the spectator from finding out what the detective knows until the time is ripe.

Noir introduced subjective narration through its exclusive focus on the detective and what the detective experiences. A written narration can simply refuse to tell the reader what the detective thinks. Film cannot avoid giving away clues by facial expression, body language, and tone of voice. Even without direct access to the detective's mind, noir exposes its difficulty with preserving the Rules.

This is not because dramatic suspense and the Rules are antagonistic but that the balance between them has to be managed differently in film than it is in a novel. Suspense is natural to the movies because they move forward through action and we know nothing else about events other than what we are told. Direct access to the minds of the characters, easy in fiction, is unnatural in film. (The voiceover gimmick is now out of favor.)

In written fiction the opposite prevails. Suspense has to be created against the natural proclivity of the medium, which is to talk. Movies happen; novels explain. Rules and puzzles and other linguistic devices are a problem to the movies, whereas behavior, as legible in film as in daily life, is a problem for novels. This accounts for the chess-like character of English Classic movies, with long periods of sparring punctuated by bursts of action. Noir films tend to the opposite: a series of action scenes punctuated by setups for the next spurt of action. Conversely, the noir film's emphasis on mood, affect, nuances of behavior, with very little direct explanation of what is happening, is a problem to novels.

The Rules do not *require* transparency between detective and reader or viewer, only that there be no subterfuge. In the printed classic narrative the detective, as Bordwell says, is a "closed mouth"<sup>15</sup> whose knowledge is given to us only when the author deems it to be the right moment. Film has difficulty maintaining this control and works with less friction when the viewer knows what the detective knows.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration and Film Form* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) 67.

<sup>16</sup> The Classic tradition construes knowledge as existing in the world, external to its discoverer. Subjective knowledge raises the possibilities

As a genre style ages it tends to slide into self-parody as it becomes harder and harder to take seriously the central tropes of the style. A weakness of the English Classic is that its surfeit of civilized calm facilitates comedy more than it does tragedy, whereas the noir style is inherently tragic. Unfortunately, the Classic style was fading just at the moment when the movies were discovering how to tell these stories, so the first Classic films were lighthearted, without *frisson*. Earlier we explored the threat posed by cold knowledge and the dangerous power wielded by the detective who possesses it. Comedy is the best way of disarming this situation, but due to circumstances the threat was never a real one until film noir was fully established.<sup>17</sup>

All of these factors – the puzzle mode, the closed mouth, and the susceptibility to comedy – work to the advantage of film noir and against the filmed Classic.

The disappearance of comic elements toward the end of the decade is to be expected. We have already seen the seriousness of Basil Rathbone's *Hound Of the Baskervilles* in 1939; in 1930 he played Philo Vance with the same gravity in striking contrast with the Vance films of the middle years.<sup>18</sup> In 1939 Vance resurfaced as a muscular infiltrator of enemy organizations – ergo, a spy. The Classic was now completely dead.

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of private knowledge and inscrutable evidence. The noir narrative is predisposed toward subjective knowledge.

<sup>17</sup> Modern retellings of Classic stories don't fare well unless supercharged with the narrative devices developed for the Neo-Classic.

<sup>18</sup>An example would be the light-hearted *Kennel Murder Case* with Dick Powell playing Vance somewhat as he did Nick Charles four years later. This story is the basis of the 1939 remake *Calling Philo Vance*.

There was in the 1930s a surprising resistance to detection as a good thing. The emotional grip of the genre, first explicated by practitioners of the Classic form and later elaborated by Chandler and the early critics,<sup>19</sup> had this plot: an act of violence (murder) disturbs the sense of order and predictability necessary to the ideology of polite society. Truth is obscured and its ontology called into question. The detective arrives to set matters straight. The detective's tools are intelligence and rationality, coupled with a materialist outlook and a standard of proof requiring physical evidence and an unbroken chain of causality. By this means the truth is recovered and our comfort and safety are assured.

Absent (at least overtly absent) the emotional imperatives driving this narrative, this has been the program of scientific inquiry since the Enlightenment. The detective is a kind of scientist who brings with him the associated cultural values. We expect people now to regard science as a Good Thing, and given the spiritual emergency which is built into the archetypal detective plot we would expect the detective to be welcomed as a savior and regarded as a hero.

In the films of the 30s such is not the case. The initial transference of the tropes of detection to the new medium of film revealed an uneasiness about intellect and the products of the mind. This ancient attitude, in our time

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<sup>19</sup> A series of three columns by Edmund Wilson in the *New Yorker* trashed the form as lowbrow spectacle and are undeservedly remembered. The first, on 14 October 1944, "Why Do People Read Detective Stories?" started the brouhaha and provides a sufficient familiarity with this attitude.

expressed as a fear of science,<sup>20</sup> found expression in the first film realizations in the figure of the Detective. The *Detective* is a shaman whose knowledge gives him powers of life and death. The mere detective is a sorcerer, a witch-doctor. His knowledge is *forbidden*.

These qualities are completely absent from film detectives until noir. Films of the thirties employ a number of strategies for hedging round the detective, for protecting us without completely destroying the detective's powers and wrecking the plot. After all, there is still that disruption in the fabric of life to be mended. What is wanted is the thrill of violence without the actual danger – virtual danger,<sup>21</sup> physical and spiritual – with plenty of fail-safes.

One means of obtaining this was simply to look the other way. We can divide films into those in which the detection takes place before our eyes and we are made privy (eventually) to the chain of reasoning by which the crucial discovery was made, and another sort of film in which all this is suppressed. Let us call this hidden detection *magic* (or black-box detection, to use a modern image). The murder occurs, the detective is called in (or intrudes himself), there is some hocus-pocus and the murderer is pulled out of the detective's hat. We don't complain because our most important needs are satisfied and because the characters in the film, whom we regard as being in a

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<sup>20</sup> Remarkd upon earlier in explicating the deviance of the 1959 *Hound Of the Baskervilles*. As the argument proceeds the public role of science will play a large part, because science is now the most culturally powerful proponent of things rational and empirical.

<sup>21</sup> The concept of virtuality as definitional in the arts was developed by Suzanne K. Langer from Ernst Cassirer's thought. Unfortunately, this idea came at the wrong time (1942) and was overwhelmed by other formulations, so that it is now taken for granted as a little too elementary.

position to speak with authority, accept the solution as valid. It is easy to see that this mode of proceeding will be destructive of the tradition through its injunctions to be open and fair.

Another solution for dealing with the threat of scientific detection was to industrialize it, to convert the process to something mechanical. This is a familiar strategy in all aspects of the Industrial Revolution, and indeed it can be said to have made that revolution possible.<sup>22</sup> In detective fiction this strategy becomes the police procedural, sometimes referred to as the *roman policier* in recognition of the older French tradition (one with which it is not coextensive). The type-specimen of the English variety is Freeman Wills Crofts's *The Cask* [1924]. Notable film procedurals are French – *Secrets Of the French Police* (1932) and *Pépé le Moko* (1938), with the memorable Inspector Slimane.

A third strategy for neutralizing fear was to humanize the detective, to make him fallible and un-heroic. Other than E.C. Bentley's *Trent's Last Case* already mentioned as (paradoxically) the first complete manifestation of the English Classic,<sup>23</sup> this was not a popular strategy until the Frenchman Maigret showed how a man of petit-bourgeois tastes could be spiritually satisfying as a detective. For that the grip of gritty realism (the noir tradition) had to be relaxed, so that in film (English-language film) the first steps were not taken until much later.

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<sup>22</sup> Sigfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948)

<sup>23</sup> Bentley was also the inventor of the Clerihew, after his middle name, a deliberately clunky verse form. One cannot help thinking there is some significance in all these things being found in the same man.

However, the same end could be achieved by another means. Rather than humanize the detective, belittle him. The main precondition of the comic strategy is a shift to magic detection. Once the detection process is hidden it is easier to make the detective a comic<sup>24</sup> figure. The sidekick and other figures around the detective, who do not share his functions in the narrative, can be very broadly comic. This is the way of Sergeant Heath, a detective manqué whose “deductions” are always quickly exposed as ludicrous and who, unlike the detective himself (Philo Vance), is completely ineffective. The comic sidekick enables us to shift our ambivalence about detection away from the central practitioner. In the Vance films the companion District Attorney not only loses *gravitas* but literally stature – he gets smaller and shorter, to the point that by 1939 he was unredeemable and was replaced by a spymaster. Holmes may have made fun of Watson at times, but Watson was never treated as disrespectfully as this. Watson was an important element in the narrative structure, not simply as the proxy narrator but also as the representative of human values.<sup>25</sup> When detection becomes magic the sidekick loses that purpose and can be co-opted for a new one.

The Charlie Chan films of the 30s contain a mixture of qualities, as one would expect from a genre in transition.

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<sup>24</sup> By this I don't mean *funny*, although the detective is often light-hearted, even joking. I mean comic in the technical sense as opposite to tragedy. The sidekick and other secondary characters *can* be funny, even slapstick. The detective cannot, without destroying the whole rationale of the genre.

<sup>25</sup> The question of Holmes's coldness presumes an opposition between intellectual – scientific – values and warm human emotions. This opposition is inherent to the genre. It was the particular task of noir to mute this without denying it.

Chan is a respected, workaday detective.<sup>26</sup> While not a magician, his amusing “Confucian” remarks do mask his methods, which have a strong psycho-intuitive component; Chan walks about the scene, observing, touching, a shrewd man who gives little away. Chan’s bumbling, hyperkinetic sidekick Number One Son is a comic element, cousin to the shrinking D.A. we see in the Philo Vance movies of this period, making Chan himself smaller and apologetic. His humanization extends only as far as to be jolly. He is given nothing really menacing to work on – his villains are cardboard. We rarely see Chan at home as we do Maigret, or relaxing with cronies, or enjoying himself except by detecting things. A comparison with the Chan tales of Earl Derr Biggers, which are straightforward Classics, underlines the mid-decade confusion regarding the figure of The Detective in the movies.

The film Chan is an outsider in the way that Poirot is, quarantined behind his foreign ways. He is the Chinaman in search of the Golden Mountain,<sup>27</sup> allowed to live among us for the services he can provide and then sent back Outside, having found nothing. The Detective will never be taken as an equal. Allingham’s wellborn Campion must use a false name so as not to embarrass his family. The poor middle-class inspector brought to Gosford Park can’t even get the suspects to pay enough attention for him to introduce himself. The film Chan has been condemned as a Chinese Uncle Tom but the shoe is actually on the other foot. Chan is the direct ancestor of Philip Marlowe.

Another role which is hospitable to a less threatening

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<sup>26</sup> Chan was based on a real detective, Chang Apana. Yunte Huang, *Charlie Chan: The Untold Story Of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous With American History* (Norton, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> See Maxine Hong Kingman’s *China Men* (Knopf, 1980)

combination of detection with humor is the sidekick. The utility of the comic sidekick is not limited to the detective genre. He is also prominent in the oater, for example. The comic sidekick exposes the cleverness of the film industry in responding to changes in public taste for what is entertaining. When we have need of sidekicks we will have more of them. We don't find sidekicks in movies about the Battle Of Britain or in *The Great Escape*. We do in *Stalag 17*, at a time when television audiences felt it safe to be lighthearted about the old war and were needing to pretend some nonchalance about the scary new one. There is a good reason why that notorious and sometimes criticized porter bangs on Macbeth's door at just that moment of dramatic tension.

Female sidekicks as un-rational comic relief are especially useful, since the stereotypical woman was thought of be naturally so.<sup>28</sup> A notable element in the noir transition concerns some tentative attempts to remodel a female character.<sup>29</sup> Until 1935 women in these movies were simply props serving a purpose similar to the maid who drops the breakfast tray on discovering the body. *The Casino Murder Case* introduces two new types, the dame (a hard, cynical sort) and as a foil the lush, who is more sympathetic because she is softer, more emotional, more *womanly*. The dame is played so as to make her kinship with Mae West transparent. The lush's antecedents are more complex, but like the dame her narrative utility in focusing and

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<sup>28</sup> This not to say a man is disqualified. Chan's Number One Son is an example.

<sup>29</sup> The first female detective was a Miss Gladden, in a novel by Andrew Forrester Jr, *The Female Detective* (1863) preceded by a few months by Ruth Truill, *Ruth the Betrayer*, serialized 1862, by Edward Ellis. Judith Flanders, "The Hanky-Panky War" *Times Literary Supplement* 18 June 2010, 14.

polarizing a dangerous situation shows in her long cinematic career. We recognize here one of the stock characters of noir.

The next step was taken the following year when the lush and the dame were combined as the pert female sidekick, an Audrey Hepburn type. Women are useful as sidekicks because their presumed limitations assure that they will not usurp too much of the detective's centrality, so they can be both brainy and intuitive. But the Vance movies, already burdened by too many stock characters, did not take this very far and by the time the last one was made war was imminent and other imperatives dominated.

The figure of the Pert Dame which emerged in the Vance series in the 30s culminated in Rosie the Riveter and then was lost for two decades to the wiles of the Beaver's mom. The Pert Dame first came into her own in 1939, on the cusp of war, the same year that saw Vance himself metamorphosed as a spy, in two movies: *Private Detective* and *Nick Carter, Master Detective*.

In the first of these the Dame is the actual detective, a professional P.I. by name Jinks, and she gets some action sequences, of her own – fur coat, high heels and all. Of course, in the end she marries the official detective, the man to whom she gives credit, and retires. That's a sop to convention. This is a vibrant, gutsy woman who gives nothing away to brains and is an admirable embodiment of warm and cool.

The second film, *Nick Carter*, is less straightforward. The woman in this case is definitely a sidekick. But she has the androgynous name of Lou, and Nick is an action hero in the mold of Indiana Jones. He solves crimes, but he needs Lou. In one memorable sequence she wins an automobile vs.

airplane race which a male pilot lost in the first attempt, by taking the controls when he is incapacitated. Later on we find out she doesn't know how to fly! Lou swaggers like a man and gets caught like one, too.

In 2004 we find in *Sky Captain and the World Of Tomorrow* both Jinks and Lou reproduced in a charming imitation of the late thirties pulp milieu. Lou is Polly Perkins, intrepid girl reporter, with a sideline in love with her superman Sky Captain, and Jinks is Frankie, the one-eyed over-the-top leader of a mercenary air force. There's not much detecting here, but the anima of the two female types is fully displayed and strongly front lit.

Here we have two versions of the dame together in one movie. One (Jinks/Frankie — their names tell all) is the hard woman with the soft heart,<sup>30</sup> and the other (Lou/Polly) the soft woman with the hard core. And here we have also the subtext of the female detective exposed. These are really adventure movies. There may be secrets to be revealed but there will be no metaphysical frisson in the revelation. The case of Jinks shows how hard it is to keep a detective movie with a woman in it focused on detection. At once, all the interest becomes an example of Samuel Johnson's famous remark about intelligent women — that it's not how well the thing is done but that it's done at all. Detached curiosity about secret knowledge evaporates in the excitement of the threat to a woman and the (very unlikely, in this genre) possibility that she will not escape.

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<sup>30</sup> Frankie's soft spot is for the sidekick Dex. This Dex is a good example of the genius who keeps the machinery going, familiar as Scotty in *Star Trek* but going back much farther than machinery to such figures as the expert horse-coper, the maker of fantastic swords, and others. The figure had an interesting renaissance during the years of the heroic pilot and airplane romanticism which would be worthy of a study of its own.

It is only since the 1980s that we have crawled out far enough from under this stereotype to have in a woman the detective affect which formerly had only in a man. The tradition of Maigret complicated this shift by giving new significance to the emotions; ultimately an enrichment but initially working to the disadvantage of the hardboiled female – emotion and instinct which form the components of warm knowledge and the particular expertise of women, at the same time incapacitating the woman to be hardboiled.

The solution found by V.I. Warshawski and others at about the same time was not to do away with the soft core (the Lush) but to harden the Dame's shell by the same method as Sam Spade used in his speech to Brigid O'Shaughnessy at the end of *The Maltese Falcon*. In it, when he tells her why, despite some things said and done, he is sending her over. It is for honor. Honor is that which he owes to his dead partner no matter what sort of sleaze Miles Archer was, and it is prudence, that which he owes to himself, to thrust off the fetters this woman will use to confine him. It hurts, but Brigid O'Shaughnessy is going to jail. A woman like Washawski does not need to be instructed about honor.

Through these two women (the Lush and the Pert Dame) the balance of powers that we saw in Holmes is recreated. The function of the detective is distributed between them and the male hero and the necessary<sup>31</sup> humor is diffused through the script rather than attached to an identified (female) goat. This permits a revalencing of the detective's infallibility. Holmes was superior in deductive powers because it was necessary that he be so for the genre to fulfill its role, for it to be correctly positioned culturally.

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<sup>31</sup> Necessary in it's time. A cultural imperative as we have seen, not an a priori one.

Jinks, Lou, and Sky Captain overcome the forces of dissolution and irrationality because it's more fun that way. The *necessity* of evil has been compromised. This may be the difference between an isolationist America and the imperialist England of Kipling and the Boer War. To search out the subtle causes of these shifts in sensibility which movies document is another task.<sup>32</sup>

The noir revolution was in a sense French, for it was French critics who identified and named it, and we need to remind ourselves that much of my explication to this point has been seriously ethnocentric. While the underlying logic of the genre might be transferable, the way particular instantiations function (and indeed, that they exist at all rather than some other exemplar of immediate emotional needs) is culture-bound. In the case of the detective story, the French were present at the conception. Gaboriau published *L'affaire Lerouge* three years before *The Moonstone*. Even earlier (1843-5), Eugène Sue had made use of materials from the beginning of the century – Vidocq's memoirs and Dumas père's invention of the sinister Jesuit. Gaboriau's narrative methods and the characteristics of his primary detective Monsieur Lecoq were taken up by Doyle and his *Le Petit Vieux des Batignoles* (1876) is an early police procedural, demystifying detection just when Anna Green was doing the opposite. Gaston Leroux's *Le Mystère de la chambre jaune* (1907) is a locked-room mystery entirely opposite in spirit to his *Phantom Of the Opera*. Maurice Leblanc's Arsène Lupin is the original of all detective-dandies such as the Falcon and Ngaio Marsh's Saint, whose use of the *nom de guerre* can be traced to the Fantômas series which began to appear in 1913. However, Fantômas is a real criminal

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<sup>32</sup> See Linda Mizejewski, *Hardboiled and High Heeled: The Woman Detective In Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2004)

and as elusive as Batman. Despite these similarities and common origins, the French have different cultural urgencies and might be expected to make different use of the raw materials.

*Secrets Of the French Police* (1932) is our English take on the French. By the title we know at once that we have to do with a superior organization on which we might model ourselves, but also perhaps a little sinister and, well, *secretive*. It is an organization which evokes the world of Dumas and Baroness Orczy. Here we see French efficiency portrayed. (The use of pneumatic tubes running through the Paris sewers was by this time over half a century old.) Elsewhere we have a scene combining the methods of a police artist with the very old notion of criminal *types* similar to profiling. This idea is based on a quasi-Lamarckian French theory of the [1890s] that behaviors are predisposed and manifest themselves in appearance. Thus we see the police assembling a wall-sized portrait of the criminal with large tiles on which different facial features are drawn – noses, lips, chins, and so forth. Very scientific.

But there is also an undertone of implacable Dostoevskian persistence here, that if the screws are tightened enough, that if the tightener is hard enough of mind, there will be results. If we examine a French film about themselves this is the quality that comes to the surface. In *Pépé le Moko* (1938, remade and eviscerated in English as *Algiers*) Inspector Slimane is truly efficient, but this efficiency is used not to gather evidence against Pépé but to persecute him into leaving the safety of the Casbah where he cannot be arrested. Slimane's detection goes into finding ways of suborning people to aid him in this effort.

Slimane's behavior is to some extent a product of the importance of the confession in French law, but this is

really *Crime and Punishment* retold. The scene in which P  p   pushes away Slimane's fez and strokes his bald head is simply unimaginable in the Anglo detective tradition of the time. This Algerian Raskolnikov also cracks under the pressure and gives himself up but is redeemed by love.

In this movie genre elements are rebuilt to address quite different needs, some of which will emerge in American movies as noir. From here it is not a long step to *Le Corbeau* (1943) or *The Third Man*.

The one thing the noir revolution left untouched was the procedural strategies of detection as formalized in the classic tradition. These procedures were given over to the responsibility of the police, unshackling the detective to pursue less orthodox but more effective ways. Outside the police procedural there had always been this tension between the private sleuth and the official one, sometimes easygoing (Poirot's Jaap) and sometimes not (Marlowe's various b  tes).<sup>33</sup> Noir polarized this tension more thoroughly and make it a moral criticism. In a sleazy world only the detective, and just because the detective is an outsider, is not corrupt. Noir restored the detective hero not by perfecting the man but by degrading the man's world. We regard this as an increase in authenticity because it is only a heightened mode of our own way of perceiving the world, especially in times of war or moral confusion.

The noir detective is an artist in a more modern and more Romantic sense. He is charged with channeling the

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<sup>33</sup> It is significant that one has to look past the English classic to find a really hostile relationship with the police. The classic tradition, after all, is about the restoration of those conditions which the police are expected to secure. The classic uneasiness is rather than of the professional for the amateur.

contradictions of existence and casting them into an intelligible narrative, which he is able to do only by exposing himself to, immersing himself in experience. This requires guts, not brains. The detective's original rationality has been divided between two forces: a perverted form owing to the police and subject to politics and pragmatic cynicism and other definitely not objective forces, and a more respectable form owing to the private eye, an eye occluded by mud and desire and outrage. Under these conditions we would expect to find an embattled attitude toward rationality, the reverse of the English classic. Rather than being dangerous and needing to be kept in check, now there is not enough of rationality to be safe in the world, and it is the life of the body which threatens to overwhelm us.

This story may explain why so many excellent fictional detectives of the English classic tradition were not filmed until after World War II, and mostly not until the 80s when we began to need a respite from all this oppressive and gritty realism. Noir had upped the standard of truth in reporting and closed off the merely puzzling sort of rationality of Poirot, Marple, Alleyn, Wimsey, Vane, Carr's locked room formula, Nero Wolfe, Thorndyke, and the rest. Very few of these had any film presence until recently, when the Neo-Classic revival and television made it worthwhile.

However, between noir and the nostalgia of Neo-Classicism lie two more manifestations of the evolving detective genre. The final avatars of *The Detective*: are the spy and the hero of the thriller.