

THE FIGURE OF THE DETECTIVE

5: SPIES AND THRILLERS

The noir aesthetic could not survive postwar enthusiasm and by 1955 was dead. A new fear had replaced the earlier one that lay behind the origin of the Detective. The original task was to remove or at least patch over the eruption into settled society of irrational violence. The new threat was global destruction, irrational violence now threatening not merely the comfortable conventions of the gentlemen of Stiles – or styles – but society and civilization altogether, perhaps life itself. This could hardly be contained or patched over. A new strategy was needed, a new manifestation of the Detective.

The new Hero, the spy, was a version of the noir detective, but more compromised, darker and more ambiguous, capable only of ever smaller victories – in the end, as small as mere survival, a major rationale of the developing thriller – as befits the role and purpose of the spy, while the spy story became less and less a Romance in the mold of Laucelot or Roland or the domestic comedy of Ashenden. Another model was Conrad's *The Secret Agent* of half a century earlier. The spy and terrorist Verloc was a poor fool manipulated by a still more corrupt power, a spy whose mere survival seemed unlikely; in the end only the solipsistic and amoral Ossipon survives. Inspector Heat does a modicum of detecting but is co-opted by his aggrandizing superior to do nothing more than frighten Verloc into self-accusation, a pale and thin heir to Dostoevsky's Porfiry Petrovich. In Conrad's *ne moin ultra* story detectives and criminals are equally compromised and the only thing accomplished is the death of the good, dull-

witted Stevie.

This is a difficult model to go on with, about mined out by Graham Greene by the early sixties. Spy stories go back to the late 19th century at least, but as the detectives had to wait for the rise of such concepts of the rule of law and persons designated to enforce it before making his appearance, so the spy required something more than the amateur curiosity of individuals and a somewhat paranoid interpretation of events. Spies are the agents of governments and until the nation-state is mature and adopts a systematic practice of clandestinely acquiring intelligence concerning its rivals there can be no spies.

In comparing the spy to the detective it is worth noting what has happened to the word *intelligence*. This used to be an attribute and a working tool of the detective in solving crimes. For the spy it means information and is a property of the external world. The detective embodies intelligence. The spy seeks what he has not: intelligence.

As with the detective story, the spy story originates in sensationalism and derring-do and only coalesces into a set of standard practices and reader expectations after some years. World War I saw the first development of systematic spying by a nation-state¹, and the first spy story in the modern sense appeared some years later. It was *Ashenden* [1928] by Somerset Maugham, and was notable in three respects. First, Maugham had some personal experience in the war as a spy, or at least as a diplomatic attaché with an additional clandestine function, experience soon to become a practical requirement for an author in search of verisimilitude. Second was the desire for verisimilitude itself, to escape the Romantic excess of the originals.

¹ John Keegan, *Intelligence In War*. Knopf, 2003, 7-13 et.seq.

Maugham was the first to perceive that this new goal would require a certain matter-of-factness and the everydayness of any job, the ordinary existence of the spy being somewhat humdrum but punctuated by those eruptions of irrational violence which so troubled those who in another more secure time would invoke the Detective to control. It is the irrational violence itself which has now become routine and the agent of its control, the spy, no longer needs to be invoked but is engaged on a continuing basis. Here is a clear succession to the noir P.I. who can at least clear a space in corrupt society for truth and justice. Third, and this was Maugham's real addition to the developing spy genre, and one for which his observing and unjudgemental style was very suited, was to remove the moral tone and suppressed outrage from the noir predecessor. The spy is just doing a job and any outrage he may feel, as with Le Carré's George Smiley, is jingoistic partisanship and a contempt for bad spycraft.

Through the spy story we inherited detection in its classic form which was concerned with the getting and deployment of facts. A psycho-intuitive modification of the Classic which helped to set up noir had produced an ominous and paranoid atmosphere for the spy to work in — facts lie, and feelings are a truer guide; factual knowledge may not save you and in the end might even make the defeat more bitter. At about the time of *Doctor Strangelove* we had another watershed movie on the bitter plan: *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold*. (The title is ironic, since Alec Leamas didn't make it in.)

But as a master narrative this is far too bleak. Being caught out in the cold might be realistic but it won't sell — not more than once, anyway. Options were a reactionary revival of the English Classics or an injection of some optimism into intuitive noir by assimilating it to the co-

existing thriller. Spy stories are inherently thrillers anyway because they raise the possibility (which noir never did) of the detective's actually getting killed. Stopped in his tracks. Dumbfounded, as it were. It is a bitter truth that rather than elevate the thriller, the thriller absorbed and ended the spy genre, transferring the spy's heroism, made meaningless by the end of the Cold War, into a mere stunt.

From the transition of P.I. to spy comes movies like *The Ipcress File* (1965). More complicated than *The 39 Steps* and not as lugubrious as *Confidential Agent* it is nevertheless a story of the same sort. Every man's hand is turned against Harry Palmer. He is an amateur snatched up by circumstance. His survival depends on his detective abilities. The story is resolved by a thrilling escape from doom. Palmer is a closed mouth to his associates, as the Classic detective was, but now not to heighten the drama but to keep from being betrayed. Whereas we know what confidential agent Denard knows because he tells people — everyone, in fact — we are denied Palmer's knowledge as we are in magic detection. And the characteristic mid-thirties humor has reappeared in a bit more acidic form: there is a lot of cleverness in positioning the camera and in editing which works like music to nudge us into spy mode. There is the James Bondish humor of technotoys, and there is byplay with a Miss Money Penny personage.² Palmer wears his outsiderhood insouciantly, with a swagger but also an inwardness reminiscent of the quieter Maigret. In short, such tales summarize features of their predecessors in the worthy but ultimately futile attempt to fuse them into a new detective who could again bear some moral weight.

All of these options — spies, thrillers, bitter noir, Classic

² This female character is played, however, with a vein of competence which looks forward to Smiley's armchair expert Connie.

nostalgia — served to domesticate the cultural anxieties of the fifties and sixties. If culture is what prescribes the boundaries of the ordinary, stories domesticate anxieties by reformulating them so as to fit within these boundaries. Thus cultural coherence is maintained. Domesticated narratives legitimize certain transgressions as interpretable, adding them to the acceptable unexpected and making the unacceptable invisible. What remains (the domestic, the interpretable) comforts us with the assurance that there is nothing new under the sun. It is the domesticated narratives which are available to the movies. We can't make sense of anything else.³

The origins of spy stories, thrillers, and flavors of noir, the hegemony of psychology and nostalgia for the old stories of classic ratiocination, form the pre-history of the modern synthesis, though it begins to look as if it might lead to less a birth than a decomposition.

The contemporary possibilities for understanding and managing our fears are of course not limited to forms of the detective already known. Odd new innovations may be possible. We might have detection by committee, no one member having access to all the knowledge needed. We might have detection by god, either a disinterested inquiry uncommitted to a satisfactory outcome, or a meddling god who continually alters the facts (as in *The Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*). Or we might have crime by inadvertence — an accidental or natural occurrence becomes intentional when someone assumes the burden of guilt (*13 Conversations About One Thing*) or some busybody willfully redefines it, as in Robbe-Grillet's novel *The Erasers* (1950, filmed in 1969). Or we can make arbitrary changes in the laws of physics or some other thing

³ This paragraph is paraphrased from Bruner 90-91.

ordinarily taken for granted as a precondition, and so fiddle with the nature of evidence (*Minority Report*, *The City Of Lost Children*), which could be encountered in an early form in *The Manchurian Candidate*. These innovations will be explored under the rubric of “metaphysical puzzlers”.

Spies

Spy stories are not that old because spying is not an old profession. There have always been spies, but only recently has the activity been industrialized. The aboriginal masterpiece is surely *Kim*, but the first novel to treat espionage as a job of work is Somerset Maugham’s *Ashenden* (1928), partially filmed by Alfred Hitchcock as *Secret Agent* (1936). Maugham’s inauguration of the modern spy novel was built around the flat voice he used, conveying a workaday sense of the mundane and suppressing sporadic bursts of the sensational, muting (but thereby intensifying) suspense, and conveying a neutral morality. It is significant that all these features of the book were ignored in the film.

Hitchcock’s movie is instead a melodrama, full of spurious romance, anxiety,⁴ and hand-wringing. The story has been shifted from distinctly cool to warm. Ashenden’s control of daily events is null, his knowledge of circumstances meager or simply wrong, and his ability to go about the business he was hired to do is hampered by the naiveté of his conventional morals. He is, in fact, an out and out amateur, a throwback to Erskine Childers’s busybody yachtsmen of 1903. Moreover, he is quite ignorant of the professionalism of *Kim* (1901) and the Great Game, the far

4 That is, 1936-style anxiety. Neither Hitchcock, nor anyone else, had yet learned how to convey the really serious menace of *Psycho* or *The Birds*.

more serious moral conundrum of Conrad's *Secret Agent* (1907), or the pervasive menace of John Buchan's Hannay trilogy, beginning with *The 39 Steps* in 1915.⁵ In fiction, by 1936 the essentials of the modern spy had been in place for a generation. In the movies these matters were not yet understood.

Hitchcock tried again two years later with *The Lady Vanishes* (1938). This movie is not hard to position when one notices that the dogged socialite detective is played by Margaret Lockwood, who would reprise the situation in *Night Train To Munich* (1940), and that the evil doctor is played by Paul Lukas, who had played an oddly accented Philo Vance the year before and in 1933 the role of Flambeau, Father Brown's charming nemesis. Again the spies are amateurs and their opponents are too clumsy to survive in the seriously deadly world of *Night Train*. What was needed in order to sweep away the remnants of classic puzzles and thirties carnival was the noir sensibility. Only then could the mature spy story emerge.

The Mask Of Dimitrios 1944 (Eric Amber's novel was titled *A Coffin For Dimitrios*) is just what we are looking for. Here the blend of noir, thriller, and detective as spy is complete. The detective is again an amateur, actually a novelist who intrudes himself into the business of one Dimitrios Makropoulos out of curiosity. Makropoulos is a smuggler who engages in espionage and other international rackets for whoever will pay, and the novelist's reward for endangering himself is a lesson in the sleazy truth. Now we are pointed in the right direction.

In terms of rational knowledge the spy, especially the

⁵ Hitchcock had filmed this story a year earlier, in 1935. This disjunct between the contemporaneous *Secret Agent* and *The 39 Steps* will be looked into farther on.

professional spy, carries forward the premises of the classic tradition. Both detection and intrigue are concerned with identity and with uncovering allegiances – with outing the truth.⁶ And it is a recognizable and familiar truth: spies threaten the local and conventional ideology and it is the job of the counterspy to restore the balance and re-establish the hegemony of the proper.⁷ The spy operates with partial knowledge, with which he constructs and tests hypotheses intended to explicate events. However, here detection and espionage begin to diverge. The spy may explicate the truth, but his real goal is to achieve a certain disposition of power and he wishes to understand events only sufficiently to obtain the powers needed. We know (or rather, there is nothing in the fictional premises to resist the suspicion) that sometimes the spy does not succeed in this, whereas the premise of a detective plot is that there will be a solution and the truth will be found. In a detective plot the detective knows what we do not, and tells us so. In an intrigue plot the situation is (or can be) reversed – often we know what the spy does not, and we can only bite our fingers in the hope that the truth will be discovered in time. The detective, even when under cover, is never himself a participant in the misdirection and uncertainty characteristic of spying, nor is he (as a consequence) personally threatened. He is not embedded in events as the spy is.

Here lie possibilities for alteration and rejuvenation of the detective story. The Spy enriches the figure of the Detective. But this move is also a fatal opening for the thriller, contemporary with the spy since the time of the Hannay stories [1915]. In both, knowledge is a means and not an end, and the getting of knowledge and the resolution

6 Allan Hepburn, *Intrigue: Espionage and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) 4.

7 Hepburn, 20.

of the story are not, or only superficially, coupled. The spy story lies in a borderland between detection and thriller, and has affinities with both. If we set the detective-spy George Smiley beside the spy-detective Harry Palmer (*The Ipcress File*, 1965) we see the difference at once.

It is instructive to compare in three films a conventional scene: the recruitment of the spy from ordinary life (or of a workaday spy for a particular task).

In the *Secret Agent* (1928) the novelist Brody, resurrected by Intelligence as Ashenden, is a little annoyed at having been impressed but as a soldier he can't object. In any case, R (as with M in the James Bond stories) appeals to his patriotism and we can immediately get to business.

Harry Palmer (in *The Ipcress File*, 1965) is also a military man and cannot (officially) object to his assignment, for which he is fitted not by patriotic feelings but by his criminal tendencies (so called, but which are in fact only insolence). Like Ashenden, he is reluctant. Unlike Ashenden, he doesn't take orders or accept the modus offered. Palmer seeks truth out of self-interest and only enough truth to neutralize the threat to himself. This is the basic thriller plot.

George Smiley was recruited twice in the diptych *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* and *Smiley's People* (1980): Smiley was already a spy, but retired. Recruiting him is a matter of overcoming his reluctance to take on a distasteful task, overcome by the appeal not of setting wrongs right but the fastidious desire to correct mistakes. Appeals to his conscience are brushed off. Appeals to his self-interest (his vanity as the venerable master) are ignored. Smiley is not a forthcoming man. He is content to let Lacan come to his own conclusions. He has taken the measure of everyone

there and allows a bit of contempt to show around the edges for their willfulness with facts, except the rookie Mostyn, who shows that he might come to know his business. With Palmer, attitudes and feelings are needed for survival. With Smiley they are an impediment, dangerous in themselves. Both Palmer and Smiley are gourmets. They cultivate their sensibilities. Palmer is a hedonist; Smiley is an epicure. The two are as hot and cold. Palmer is the reduction of Marlowe; Smiley is the reduction of Holmes.

Marlowe was a moralist, Ashenden merely a patriot. For Ashenden it's only a job; for Palmer it's life and death. Palmer is a pragmatist; Smiley is a fatalist. In the forty years from 1945 to 1985 we have gone from the apogee of noir to the maturity of the spy. In a few years more the Berlin Wall will come down, the Cold War will end, and fictional spies will have lost their *raison d'être*.

Alphaville (1965) mixes the two genre traditions of detective and spy differently. It opens in decent noir — the criticism of cold by warm — but with new, un-noirish gestures of self-awareness, genre referentiality, irony and parody. We do not immediately discover that Lemmy Caution is a spy, and when we do his detective affect becomes confused. Lemmy knows some things we don't about his mission and its importance, but apparently as little as we do about *Alphaville* itself. The first half of the movie, up to the death of Lemmy's predecessor Henry Dickson (an earlier infiltrator from *Outside* who had gone native), is a *mélange* of cultural materièl, silently critical of scientific rationality as malign, a criticism which is carried into the often mystifying (that is irrational) narrative procedure.

After this the science fiction elements begin to bubble to the surface and the story becomes a straightforward inside-

out plot of the escape-from-dystopia type. The noir atmosphere disappears and is replaced by the sleek industrial style of Monsieur Hulot's *Mon Oncle*, a movie made about the same time and to the same critical end. The quest to understand remains but it is revoiced as a social problem — Lemmy has worked out the solution and now wants mostly for the woman of the piece to run off with him. To agree to this she has to step outside the illusion of Alphaville which imprisons her in a loveless condition. The explicit existential standpoint is of warm blaming cold rationality for the loss of the good things of life, art and love. Alpha, the creator of the world, is a computer, the icon of scientific rationality, the twin to Hal in the movie *2001*, whose failed coup will come a few years later. The division with which we began this exploration, with the detective artist Holmes and the hegemony of cold knowledge, could not be more stark.

Godard's work here (and the French New Wave generally) is ancestral to the metaphysical puzzler variant of the detective genre which I will look into later. There are a number of features of interest, but the most immediately relevant is a new relationship between the detective and the spectator. Godard has limited our knowledge of circumstances in noir fashion — Lemmy knows more than we do and can interpret the significance of events when we cannot, with magic results. But set aside that we don't know even what the crime is, only that an investigation of some sort is going on. For us as spectators it is the movie itself which is the crime; that is, which is the subject of investigation. The method of inquiry forced on us is the psycho-intuitive. We are pulled along by events, relying on intuition and guesswork to keep our footing, filling our pockets with bits of things — uninterpretable observations, disconnected facts — waiting for a quiet moment when we will be able to sort it out. Our detachment has been

radically reduced and our pretense to objectivity disabled and we experience the condition of not knowing in a new, more cathartic way. Godard's goal is the same as Brecht's. But whereas Brecht wished to increase distance by breaking the dramatic frame, Godard pulls us within it. Both procedures are ideological in intent, but Brecht's ideal of self-criticism is rational while Godard's is not.

A quarter century after being driven from hot war into cold war (from warm to cool knowledge) we have nostalgically committed ourselves against the forces of reason and have chosen to fight under the red standard — the standard of fire against that of ice: the thriller. To judge by the construction of the detective genre at the end of its effective life the commitment we had made to technology in our everyday lives, to seek out the full resources of scientific thought for our comfort and protection, was worrying. Perhaps it was a faustian bargain? Yet another quarter century on, this is still unresolved. That's why *Dr. Strangelove* is still an upsetting movie. We are still thinking in terms of a conflict between hot and cold, warm and cool knowledge.

From this juncture there would seem to be three possible paths for the Detective. There is Swann's way, to reject the bargain and to seek our Odette come what may; this will lead to the post-modern puzzler. Or we can try to retreat the way we came, to reinvent the less threatening world of the First Men, Poirot and Wimsey and Vance. This way will lead to the Neo-Classic revival. Thirdly, there is the way of the thriller.

Stories are told for a reason — to explain, to reassure — and genres don't come into being arbitrarily. The detective genre existed in order to explore how knowledge can be brought to bear against certain threats — in its original

form, threats to social order and the safety of individuals. As the genre aged this threat became the threat of corruption and immorality, and finally threats to the continuation of society itself in a recognizable form, even to the survival of humankind. If the partnership between spying and detection didn't last, we ought to ask this: what do we now imagine the figure of the Detective to be, and to what fears are the modern forms of the detective genre addressed? After the spies are gone, who will protect us, and from what?

Thrillers

The thriller world is radically uncertain despite its hard, clinging embrace of science. The scale of the ever-growing threat from the Classic to the spy has in the thriller grown orders of magnitude and the consequences of failure are immeasurable. This is why we call them thrillers. What we want to know is, if we crank up the magnitude of the terror and the intensity of the struggle, will it still be possible to prevail?

The thriller's use of deduction and causal reasoning are superficial. Detection in a thriller is secondary to the action. The battle of wits is only the entrée, the necessary preliminary to the battle of muscle which we spent our dollars to see. There are two sorts of thrillers. In one the your task is to destroy the enemy; in the other the task is to keep the enemy from destroying you. The first variant is the one full of explosions which is more closely related to the romance of war. The other variant typically proceeds by guile and wile and is the variant descendent from the spy story in either its classical or its noirish form. The typical plot (think of *Three Days Of the Condor* or *The Pelican Brief* or even *The President's Analyst*) begins with the discovery of a conspiracy, preferably a very big and very dark one fomented by some goliathic adversary like a

whole government. This discovery puts the improbably little person who has stumbled on it at mortal risk, a risk from which he (or better, she) can neither run nor hide. The one way she can save herself is to reforge the broken sword and plunge it into Fafnir's heart. And this she will do, at greater or lesser cost. As inevitably as the crime had to be solved in the ancestral form of this plot, so must the threat to survival be averted.

What is new in the thriller (at least insofar as it is derived from the detective genre) is the degeneration of reason and its replacement as a tool by technology.

The thriller world is a Hobbesian one outside the law in pursuit of a solution also lawless (though often justified by the suspect logic of a war to end all wars). The hero in this world usually ends up killing his (her) antagonist or killing some metaphorical equivalent of death. As with the detective from which this story is partly inherited, they are *döppelgänger*, these two — they create each other, they cannot exist apart, they cannot stand to be separated. In victory the detective becomes the criminal he has killed, creating the crime, releasing it from his imagination into the world. This is the structure laid out in its barest essentials by (to cite him yet again) Alain Robbe-Grillet in the ancestral *The Erasers*.⁸

The thriller is primarily concerned neither with true and false nor with right and wrong. The thriller is about the just and the unjust. This is, as Richard Bulliet points out, a distinction which Westerners are not accustomed to make; it is plainer in the sharia.⁹ Traditional Islamic political thought had a horror of *fitna*, a word signifying upheaval

8 Robbe-Grillet was also (with Resnais) the creator of the type specimen of the slow movie, *Last Year At Marienbad*.

9 This and the immediately following argument are from Bulliet, 62-63.

and disorder as embracing everything from riot to civil war. We recognize the affinity with the detective peripatetia at once. Government (the detective) was to be a check on this anarchy, but rulers tend to the opposite evil, which is tyranny. The guarantor of moderation is law: the sharia, which in a Muslim society is administered and kept pure by the clergy. Sharia is a balancing power to that of the government. Westerners have become accustomed to think of good and bad in terms of tyranny and liberty. In traditional Muslim society the converse of tyranny is justice, not goodness, freedom, or happiness. The just ruler rules by right (he is not a usurper), according to law, and (hopefully) to moral principle. Being just, his deeds are right and true. This is the pure form of the thriller. It does not admit of detectives because it does not give primacy to evidence. The evidence is simply ignored.

It is the breakdown of justice rather than rather than morality which generates the thriller. The actions of those in power may be wrongheaded, overbearing, arrogant, and ignorant, but so long as they threaten neither law nor order they are just, and thus acceptable. The first (the threat to law) was the fault that brought down Nixon; the promise of the second (the threat to order) was the lure which raised up Hitler. Thus, what generates the thriller also justifies it.

A detective who behaved this way in a noir or a Classic plot — seeking justice at the expense of (or at least unconcern with) truth and right — would be repugnant. He would be part of the problem. The modern thriller, as distinct from the generic suspense plot, may seem (appearing as it did out of the ancestry of the spy and detective stories) to belong to those genres. But the armature of the thriller is vigilante justice and its affinity is with the Western, that other story of what is going on at the Hobbesian frontier. The spy story, which likewise took place in a Hobbesian

world outside the law and with a dubious connection to justice, ultimately passed beyond its detective origins and is buried in this grave.

Given this concern for justice and the causes of its breakdown, reason is not the best tool for redressing the situation. The detective has been pink-slipped. Tyranny and anarchy are more nakedly about power and are resistant to anything but power and a calculus of self-interest. The tools best suited to enable the hero of the thriller in his quest for justice come from technology. In the Western these were the gun, the horse, barbed wire, the railroad. In the thriller they are the same: bigger guns, faster transport, better infiltration. Knowledge serves mostly to obtain these tools, a connection famously parodied in the Bond films. Of the two varieties of thriller the techno turn would appear to be more prominent in the first, which is more concerned with overwhelming and blowing up the enemy. But the other type — call it the intellectual thriller — is also heavily dependent on toys. Listening devices, remote sensors, clever boobytraps, magic wands and secret passages are all means to an end which was once mediated by thought alone — by little gray cells.

The thriller also shows how we have refocused our anxieties. In the English classic it was the actions of individuals which disturbed the social order. In noir the social order was disturbed (corrupt) from the beginning, though perhaps not hopelessly, and the detective shows that if we are tough and unblinking we can navigate through the narrow channels of honor. Since noir we have begun to doubt that these channels have remained open. Guile and wile keeps us safe now, and the spy story comes to prominence. The detective spy engages in a battle of wits — which he may lose, and sometimes does — with a superior adversary, a battle in which empathy and intuition

are important weapons. The thriller hollows this out, removing the detection, substituting reflexes for wit and muscle for empathy. This transformation is more complete in the explosive variety of thriller than in the intellectual. Here the scale of the threat is world-destroying; the forces at work have already been unleashed; we're doomed. Enter the hero, who demonstrates that survival, though unlikely, is possible for an elite few. That's us.

The decadence of noir

The engine of noir is the struggle of an outsider to behave morally in a corrupt society. The alterations that noir made upon the classic tradition from which it was derived were to shift the threat from a disruption of existing social order to an effective response to a society already disordered and corrupt, and to shift the role of the detective from the expert consultant to the social critic. The noir detective is an outsider because that allows him to speak and behave in ways which we cannot.

Film noir is by convention a certain visual style: darkness, paranoid framing, ominous cutting and camera angles, hidden continuities. The noir style was used to present some themes particularly appropriate to it, such as the futile struggle with corruption, inevitable violence, desires run amok. The style quite soon fell out of use. Audiences grow tired of conventions, and the soul of the style lay in black and white and could not survive the advent of color. But so strong is the memory of the style that we continue to call *noir* films which have noir themes without the noir style. Conversely, a chiaroscuro, consciously cinematographic film is often called noir despite what it is about. Examples of quasi-detective films which use noir content without the style are Costa Gravas's *Z*, or *The French Connection*. Welles's *Citizen Kane* would be an example of the

opposite. Most of the references to noir are misleading or illegitimate.

Noir is also a way of speaking, the dialog invented by Hammett and Chandler. It is this voice (on the page or in the actor's mouth) plus a certain level of gratuitous violence which primarily distinguishes the hard-boiled variant of noir and which can be carried over into hardboiled movies which have escaped the noir atmosphere such as *Harper* or *Bullitt*.

The heyday of noir ended with black and white film. Probably one shouldn't speak of such a thing as modern noir, but while the pure style is dead the thematic elements are not. The heirs of noir are still the warm alternate to the cooler psycho-intuitive remake of the even cooler English classic. Psycho-intuitive sees knowledge as a product of thought, acquired through the formulation and testing of hypotheses. Taking emotion and intuition into account only enlarges the sorts of hypotheses to be considered, and some of what were clues can now be considered evidence. The psycho-intuitive detective interprets warm to cool, translates warm knowledge into the language of cool. Noir, on the other hand, views knowledge as a product of experience, acquired from (extracted from) the phenomenal world by force, as a reagent separates metal from ore. The knowledge that the noir detective has is of the workings of caste, dominance and power, politics, ideology. This helps to explain why so many noir detectives are working-class while the classic and psycho-intuitive detectives are more formally educated. The noir detective is literate. He can explain his procedures but his knowledge is in their performance. Noir is always warm. It moves toward cool as the detective becomes less implicated. The warmest noir is the most situated — it's taken personally. We look for commitment. Coolish noir tends to be cynical, mercenary,

professional. We might approve of cops and lawyers doing their jobs well, but the private eye has choices and to choose to be uncommitted is to be morally reprehensible.¹⁰ Noir is tightly bound to warm, to a focus on the detective's behavior more than his success or failure.

Bettelheim's analysis of fairy tales¹¹ fits the noir case exactly. He held that the dark material of fairy tales is needed by children to make sense of their own feelings of anger, resentment, and powerlessness. The violence and brutishness in fairy tales, our propensity to asocial aggression and selfishness, helps children to learn that the source of much of what goes wrong in life is our own fault. But at the same time, fairy tales give hope that steadfast endurance of unexplained and often unjust hardships will allow one to master these obstacles and overcome the threats posed by the human condition. This is also the burden of the biblical story of Job. Job survives by faith in God, the noir detective by faith in his own expertise and wits. Job learns that he will never understand. The inevitable outcome of noir is the same.

In considering the rather sudden disappearance of the noir tradition we need to confront something which has been lurking within the idea of intuitive knowledge since the beginning, which is the relationship between intuition and religion.

That there is a relationship is hardly to be doubted. William James allows for a type of conversion by logic or rational thought, but from within the framework of his scientific or

10 It is probably not an accident that noir and existentialism were born and died together.

11 *The Uses Of Enchantment* (1976). Bettelheim's ideas are no longer in repute, but his present reputation is irrelevant to my argument, which has to do with a sensibility rather than correctness.

phenomenal psychology the much more puzzling case is the irrational one. "Now there are two forms of mental occurrence in human beings," he writes, "which lead to a striking difference in the conversion process." Citing the well-known experience of trying consciously to remember a name, he notes that sometimes the memory is jammed. But "give up the effort entirely; think of something altogether different, and in half an hour the lost name comes sauntering into your mind, as Emerson says, as carelessly as if it had never been invited. Some hidden process was started in you by this effort, which went on after the effort ceased, and made the result come as if it came spontaneously."¹²

"What brings such changes about is the way in which the emotional excitement alters. Things hot and vital to us to-day are cold to-morrow. It is as if seen from the hot parts of the field that the other parts appear to us, and from these hot parts personal desire and volition make their sallies. They are in short the centres of our dynamic energy, whereas the cold parts leave us indifferent and passive in proportion to their coldness."¹³

Here, in James, is a perfect picture of the workings of magic detection. What is the status of truths acquired by this means? The beholder is in a state of assurance¹⁴ in which belief needs no confirmation by evidence, nor any procedure which could benefit by evidence. Such a degree of assurance might be an aid to the policeman or the witch-hunter but makes the effort of actual investigation pointless. Religious assurance and psycho-intuitive methods are cousins and are potentially fatal to the

12 *The Varieties Of Religious Experience* (New York: Modern Library, 1902) 222.

13 James, 192.

¹⁴ James, 242.

detective genre.

Compare Hume, writing at a time when religious truths (what we now call intuitive perceptions) were taken for granted as having the same status as empirical discoveries. Whereas the task of James was to explain intuition from within a rational context, Hume's task was to explain rationality (find its limits) within an intuitive context. He wished to know, for example, whether polytheism or monotheism is the more primitive (culturally prior). He described the condition of the "raw and ignorant multitude" as taking for granted ordinary experience but astonished by the novel and monstrous, whereas to such a "barbarous, necessitous animal (such as man is on the first origin of society)" the regular and uniform and familiar did not excite scrutiny. By contrast, "if men were at first led into the belief of one Supreme Being, by reasoning from the frame of nature, they could never possibly leave that belief, in order to embrace polytheism The first invention and proof of any doctrine is much more difficult than the supporting and retaining of it."¹⁵ One cannot ratchet back to a numinous polytheism from a position of reasoned faith.

Hume's view resembles Maigret's procedure in the same way as James describes coming to know as magic detection. Noir is a fragile alliance of science and religion, to be broken just as much by a retreat from the "hot parts of the field" as by too *much* hot intuition. But Hume's account does not help much to explain our recent encounters with the hot and dark.¹⁶ It is too detached, too cold and pale.

15 Principal Writings On Religion, ed JCA Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 136-7.

16 Hotblack, the leader of the loudest rock band in the universe, was named in Richard Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide*. Hotblack was dead at the time. Being dead was was a strategy to avoid taxes.

Freud's inquiry into our discontents, an inquiry by a man who considered religion to be an illusion, brings out the notion of the religious sentiment as originating in a "sensation of eternity, a feeling of something limitless, unbounded — as it were, 'oceanic'."¹⁷ This feeling dates from a time when the ego was not yet detached from the external world. Such detachment is the initial process of civilization and continues inexorably into frustration, disappointment, misery, and destruction. Thus is induced the irremediable antagonism between the demands of instinct and the restrictions of civilization. Might we liken noir to the one and rational detection to the other?

As with Bettelheim, we are not concerned with the "truth" of Freud's view (nor indeed with James or Hume) but rather with whether these associations can be asserted and plausibly maintained, and were so, upon the rise of noir. If so, its sudden disappearance would be explained (would form a resonant narrative) by our unwillingness to accept any longer the Freudian attitude which generates noir. But James now stands between us and Hume — that is, we acknowledge the continuance of the irrational, of the barbarous necessitous animal within the rational. Hume's account of the supercession of the rational cannot be accepted.

The residuum, the loose end left over after the developmental sequence from the Classic that dead-ends in the thriller is a certain sort of crime movie.

In *Chinatown* (1974, Roman Polanski), the fact which one needs to know to connect the beginning with the end of this movie is that Mrs. Mulwray was raped by her father, with

¹⁷ *Civilization and Its Discontents*, tr James Strachey (New York: WW Norton, 1961) 11.

the girl as issue. The girl is thus both daughter and sister to the woman, who in the final scene is killed (by the police) when she tries to take the girl from her father/husband. The last thing which Jake says (“It’s still possible.”) needs interpretation. The simplest understanding from our point of view is that the old noir corruption, pervasive evil, and probable bad end are still there, under a veneer of civilized Technicolor. We have not got out of Chinatown yet.

However, a comparison of *Chinatown* with *True Confessions* or Akira Kurosawa’s 1963 film *High and Low* reveals something of what is fading from the leftovers of noir. *High and Low* has decent hard-boiled antecedents — it was based on Ed McBain’s 87th Precinct novel *King’s Ransom*, but already in these books noir elements have given way to police procedural, leaving behind only a “gritty realism” which Kurosawa transforms further into a documentary affect. The same process is at work in the genre changes worked by *True Confessions*. The moneyed corruption is still there, the moral quandaries, and the detective’s status as a representative of the common man, but the mean streets, the discouraging sense of inevitable failure, the spiritual darkness are gone. *True Confessions* ends in the desert, in a sanctuary of penance and regeneration, in glaring desert sun. *High and Low* begins in an ominous atmosphere but we discover at once that the existential conundrum is not there to complicate what we know (or think we know). All that initial atmosphere is quickly evaporated by a repertoire of steeply angled shots, high-key lighting, and visually dispersed action. (Kurosawa uses the wide screen to divide the attention, either by distributing the action across the whole width or by positioning it at both ends, leaving the middle clear. The resulting visual compositions are striking. They encourage aesthetic distance in the spectator. Noir requires involvement, emotional immediacy, not thoughtful

appreciation and judgment.)

These crime movies with noir references may be called gestures, or eulogies, as when the gate comes down at the end of *High and Low*, separating the prisoner forever from the everyday world. We think at once of the end of *The Maltese Falcon*. The end of Polanski's 2010 movie *The Ghostwriter* recapitulates his own *Chinatown* with a new murder which renders futile everything which came before. These movies evoke noir, but the cultural work they are doing is quite different. *Chinatown* is a nostalgic atavism. Jake's world is the world of Sam Spade. All we need to take another step back to Poirot is try to resurgent a world in which it is possible too believe that a few, admittedly flawed but well-meaning, people can set the world right. Neither Jake nor Spade could do that, but Spade does clean up a little of it and gives us hope for more, while Jake accomplishes nothing except expose the wrong-doer. From this point, in the mouth of the thriller's cul-de-sac, there are two escapes. One is to look backward toward the Classic apogee. The other is look forward to the seemingly inhospitable post-modern.

Before taking up the first option, nostalgic Neo-Classicism, it would be helpful to examine some transitional films. What Scholes calls the ornate or late mannerist style¹⁸, the dominant transitional style, is on view in a number of films — *The French Connection*, *LA Confidential*, *Devil in a Blue Dress* — which have in common the mannerist method of distancing. Recall the aesthetic or epicurean distancing in Kurosawa's film. Exotic settings, period styling, visual or referential complexity, a relish for intricate plotting, all achieve the same result, which is to

¹⁸ *The Crafty Reader* (Yale, 2001) 180. Scholes's ideas on this subject go back to his book *Semiotics and Interpretation* (Yale, 1983).

encourage a *noticing* attitude, a running internal commentary which gets in the way of a more direct experience. There is also the distancing that we encounter in *The French Connection* when we begin to get a true picture of the character of Popeye, as we would distance ourselves from a bad smell or someone distasteful – a detective who actually *is* himself mean. These are all instances of the difference between the spectator's involvement in noir action and in thrilling occurrences. In the one, the spectator's hindbrain evokes fears for his temporary alter-ego; in the other, his forebrain steps between to assure him that it's OK to enjoy this, that no nice people are going to get hurt.¹⁹

Blade Runner returns to and renews the pure noir elements without utilizing the traditional noir period and scenery as *Chinatown* did but it is nostalgic noir all the same. It is a period piece, not of our time and only indirectly critical of modern times. There are no such mean streets in our town.

It has been frequently remarked that this movie could not have been made before it was because the technology for an authentic rendition was not available. We may have been willing to suspend our disbelief for space opera and *Star Trek*, but the demands of nostalgic noir will not tolerate that degree of disbelief. Immersion in the spectacle is needed for the emotional force of the drama to be felt. It is this force which carries the subtext of intuition and irrational danger without which the film is not the real thing despite superficial uses of noir devices. The near-future setting made possible by this technology dissolves the main obstacle to contemporary (nostalgic) noir. That is, that while we still need noir comforts and assurances, we no

19 All this, I might argue, is true of mannerism in any art. Consider Archimboldo's vegetable people, for instance.

longer believe in its everyday manifestations. The recognizably alien environment of future Los Angeles gives license to the behaviors and attitudes which would seem camp in the suburbs where we live. Once we thought it would be possible to play at being Lauren Bacall or Humphrey Bogart, but not now.

Compare the opening scenes of *Blade Runner* with their counterparts in *The Big Sleep*. Marlowe's penetration of the Sternwood mansion is doubled by Deckard's return to police headquarters (which resembles also the spy recruitment formula) with the chief in the role of General Sternwood (or R) and then, a more exact recreation, Deckard's entrance into the offices of Tyrell's replicant manufacturing empire. Tyrell is the General in his hothouse and Rachael is Vivian Rutledge. The similarity between Sean Young (Rachael) and Lauren Bacall is marked: aloof, challenging, sardonic, not to mention the relationship with Deckard/Marlowe which will close the story.

What has happened in the twenty years since *Blade Runner*? There was a dismal attempt to translate V.I. Warshawski into film (1991). Warshawski is positioned as a hardboiled psycho-intuitive, covering both gender niches. There is detection at the start of the print Warshawski stories, but what is uncovered by detection serves only to put Warshawski in the way of trouble, to explicate what the trouble is, to justify Warshawski's Rambo behavior. The rest of it is a retribution plot and not about knowledge at all. This is the pattern of the type of thriller in which the titillation of beating up a woman substitutes for explosions and grander and more fanciful violence.

The Matrix can be seen as a contemporary development of the other possibility offered by Chandler's formulation, that of foregrounding the good man rather than the mean street.

As with neo-hardboiled, this sort of movie is also best analyzed as a thriller. There is the paranoid atmosphere, the hopelessness of resistance, the hero who survives by instinct and physical skill, and most important, there is no sense that discovering the truth will bring the victory which is sought. Discovery merely reveals the necessity of doing battle.

A comparison of three scenes which are explicitly about the getting of knowledge, and which take place in the traditional repository of knowledge, a library, will illustrate the fate of noir. We have the archives scene from *The Mask Of Dimitrios* (1944), the library scene from *Soylent Green* (1973), and the records office scene from *Chinatown* (1974). In 1944 access to knowledge is primarily a question of permission and an order sought in arcane systems of classification of information. In 1973 the privilege of access has become more closely guarded and the process of getting knowledge out of information is a circular exegesis itself requiring more knowledge. *Chinatown* revisits *The Mask of Demetrios* except that now information need not be ferreted out but merely stolen. Knowledge is neither reasoned nor hermetic but legitimately available to no one. Finally, in *Soylent Green* (and in the 2010 film *The Ghostwriter*), we have reached the point where the possession of knowledge *is* the crime and the ersatz detective (a succession of detectives) is convicted and executed for having it. It is the Detective who is the threat to order (admittedly a reprehensible order somewhat less desirable than the Classic caste system) and it is the criminals (multiple and institutional, as in the thriller) who restore the order.

All these places of knowledge are difficult to navigate, primarily because of a gatekeeper whose interests do not include any detection work. The archives in *The Mask Of*

Dimitrios are filed in code. The *Soylent Green* library is quasi-illegal, secretive. The *Chinatown* public records office is only bureaucratically public. The hermeneutic enterprise which initially is just difficult becomes a candle in the dark, replicating the shift from classic to noir. Snuffed out. Re-lit in the spy story, it illuminates nothing — the world has passed from totalitarian black to Orwellian white. Nothing is hidden, but it's all a sham. The great fear of bureaucracy is that it conceals only emptiness. Anything useful which might turn up has to be stolen and re-hidden before it vanishes completely. With the thriller the purpose and role of the Detective in the getting and deployment of knowledge comes to an end.