

## THE FIGURE OF THE DETECTIVE

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### 7: METAPHYSICAL MODERN

Stories of the type which I will call Metaphysical Modern arise from contemporary questions about truth and evidence. At issue are the reliability of the knowledge we have of the phenomenal world, memory and the dubious claims we make about ourselves and others, and doubts about the foundations of psychology and personality. This is a huge package of questions – quite enough to justify calling in the Detective to straighten things out.

These are questions which the nostalgic neo-Classic ignores. Possibly it might be shown that the pressing nature of these questions is one reason for the neo-Classic revival.<sup>1</sup> The Metaphysical Modern follows the opposite strategy – confrontation. Most of the time the confrontation is unsuccessful. Given the premises of doubt, failure is nearly inevitable. In fact, we might say that failure is the real story.

*Twin Peaks* is a notorious example. Unable to get a grip on any coherent story it was allowed to wander off, and the audience with it. Most people do not much like this sort of thing. The Metaphysical Modern has not yet matured into a tradition and audiences don't yet know what to expect. The trouble is, as the list of questions implies, these stories are resistant to genre comforts. There is a deeper problem,

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<sup>1</sup> It would be absurd to claim that these are new questions – they go back to the beginnings of intelligent life. Why we find them to be of particular urgency just now would be a separate inquiry. I am only suggesting that the two counter-strategies of neo-Classic and Metaphysical Modern are an index of that urgency.

however. The Metaphysical Modern detective detects nothing. Clues remain clues, not linkable to form a coherent causal narrative. In some cases even the crime is problematic. The basic conditions for a detective story which were laid out at the beginning of this book are not satisfied. The Detective has clearly become a radically different figure.

The problems posed by the Metaphysical Modern were given a philosophical shape in the 1980s with the spread of French thinking in semiotics and related disciplines. The problems to be solved were not exotic. In communications, for example, the question was how to reconstruct inevitably garbled messages, In anthropology it was how to understand another culture without contaminating the findings with the anthropologist's own culture-bound thinking. In linguistics it was to explain how speakers successfully construct messages out of a pile of phonemes.

The implications of this thinking have been profound. Radical relativism has penetrated everyday experience. The anxieties which relativism carries with it lie at the bottom of all contemporary culture wars and some shooting wars as well. What is new in such wars is not doubt about whether a pile of shit can be art, or whether atheism is a viable alternative to religion, but rather the suspicion that such questions may themselves be meaningless.

Such doubts upset the security of a society just as the discovery of a murder at Styles did in 1919, and invite the intervention of the Detective. Radical relativism must be cured, the Detective is cautioned, lest the contagion infect common sense, truth, morality, and all values. Unfortunately, this sets the fox among the chickens, for the metaphysical Metaphysical Modern Detective has a very different objective.

The problem as seen by the Detective is not how to resolve doubt but how to live with it. How can some useful form of rationality be preserved under conditions of uncertainty, where every fact is only probable and every conclusion suspect? What solution is possible when evidence is variable from time to time and place to place and even a consensus on what counts as a crime is unavailable? The Detective, it appears, has entered a (metaphorically) quantum world without the tools needed to understand it. Things work differently here. An act of detection multiplies the worries and fears it was meant to allay. Evidence evaporates, clues fission, knowledge destroys the knower. The criminal becomes the detective who detects himself. Is it meaningful any longer to speak of the Detective?

One can make two responses to this, and so two different strategies. If you regard radical relativism as a threat to be countered then that threat to peace and order is the disruption which invokes the Detective. This is a conservative and traditional genre strategy which suggests that we modify the tradition only just enough to preserve its viability — a strategy we have already seen at work in the workings of nostalgia. To implement such a Metaphysical Modern would be to devise a suitably resonant metaphor linking the crime and the metaphysical problem. Radical relativism will have to be taken seriously if it is to be satisfyingly rejected.

Not to take relativism seriously would produce a movie like the pre-Modern *The Big Sleep* in which the proffered solution to the entanglements of the plot is circular and explains nothing. The genius of this movie is to cover all that up. In this the scriptwriters can hardly be accused of bad faith — the issues behind the Metaphysical Modern had not yet been raised when this film was made except by the

philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, the communications theorist Claude Shannon, the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss and a few others not likely to be asked to make a detective movie. We can also see this strategy (or non-strategy) at work in another genre, *Doctor Who* twenty years later. *Who* takes seriously Arthur Clarke's dictum that any sufficiently advanced technology will seem to be magic. Accordingly, the Doctor makes only nonsensical explanations for how things work or don't work (or nonsensical to us) or simply brushes off explanations altogether.

Ignoring or covering up the problem is not a possibility for how to write a Metaphysical Modern. And yet as we have seen that is just what the neo-Classic does. Nostalgia and the Lost Paradise make for entertaining fantasy.

The other strategy begins by taking the premises of relativism for granted. A detective story which can absorb these premises is what we are looking for. The simplest way would be to reverse the first strategy and construct the recrudescence of some sort of naïve realism as the threat which invokes the detective. Eco's *The Name Of the Rose* could serve as an example. A better solution (because richer in possibilities) would be to re-imagine the *detective* so that the traditional initiators (murder, usually) create a field for the display of relativistic detection. And what is *that*?

There are a number of print examples. Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommages*, Gadda's *Quer Pasticciaccio Brutto della Via Merulana*, C.P. Snow's *A Coat of Varnish*, the Grijpstra and De Gier novels of Janwillem van de Wetering, the Inspector Barlach novels of Friedrich Dürrenmatt, some novels of Leonardo Sciascia, Roberto Bolaño's *Los Detectives Salvajes* come to mind.

In dealing with this problem the movies have some natural advantages. The grammar of film, such as it is,<sup>2</sup> lacks tense – everything depicted is always already present. Past and future are only weak conventions supported by some editing practices, which the viewer may easily misinterpret. This presentness is an advantage. The continuous present of the visual track makes it possible to move the spectator forward through the narrative by depictions of the “same” character or the “same” object (such as an automobile) on repeated occasions, creating a sense of story out of what is actually the mere sequentiality of images. Meanwhile the plot<sup>3</sup> is by this technique being seriously ambiguated by suggesting that they are not, in fact, the same object or event.

Written stories have the opposite problem. There are no bodies in literature.<sup>4</sup> To exist, a person requires a body. Bodiless characters do not have the continuity which makes us recognizable to ourselves and others as time goes on. In the movies time does not go on unless it is made to but

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2 A pocket summary of thinking about this, twenty years after Christian Metz's *Film Language* is Benjamin Rifkin, *Semiotics of Narration in Film and Prose Fiction* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994) 20-23.

3 To avoid a long digression into narrative theory we may distinguish here between *narrative*, which is the most primitive element, the mere sequentiality of events, and *story*, which is those events arranged (or rearranged) in temporal order. *Plot* is the construction (by the reader, in the end) of the causal links between events in the story and is thus logically anterior to both narrative and story. One reads the narrative, constructing the story as one goes. When one understands the story only then does the plot emerge. This usage differs somewhat from the convention. David Bordwell, *Narration In the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985). Umberto Eco, *Six Walks In the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

4 Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1973) especially the essays “Bodily Continuity and Personal Identity” (19-25) and “Are Persons Bodies?” (64-81).

bodies, though illusory, are not a problem. Physical continuities in fiction have to be purposefully created and maintained or the story will become unintelligible. It would be just a collection of inter-changeable names, actorless actions, and thoughts without identifiable thinkers.

In the movies there was never this problem with bodies until a few film makers found out how to call physical continuity into question and so to irretrievably ambiguate the plot. Metaphysical Moderns do not have innate solutions. Solutions have to be manufactured out of the fug of meaninglessness which beclouds systematic thinking. What the metaphysical detective does is to offer an explanation or discover a resolution which is *satisfying* without being definitive – that is, without concern for loose ends. The Metaphysical Detective does not uncover the truth, which is impossible, but rather finds a resting place in the continuous flow of events.

In this, the Metaphysical Modern closely resembles our contemporary conception of what it is to live a life. Lives do not end, they stop. The goal of a ‘good death’ is to contrive to stop at a point when honor and dignity are in the ascendant. What happens after that is (simply) another story. These stories are what we tell ourselves to make sense of who we are and what has happened to us. A multiplicity of equally believable stories is very unsettling. This unease is what permeates Kafka’s detective stories – in *The Castle* and *The Trial* K tries to find out the truth but is unable to detect anything because every story (in Kafka) is false, and when *everything* is false then everything is at the same time true.

Perhaps it would be useful to reiterate in plainer terms the problem posed by radical relativism. The worm in the apple is subjective (that is, *warm*) knowledge. Once it is admitted

that people can legitimately differ on the truth, if there is no way to verify the facts (let us call them facts for the time being) or to adjudicate the disagreement, then the discussion will be all downhill and will smash on the rocks, won't it? Everyone will be right about everything. Maigret knows. Who is to prove him wrong?<sup>5</sup> He collects what he purports to be reasons, browbeats the suspect with them, gets a confession, and asks us to close the case. If one does not weaken and refuses to confess out of pure stubbornness there is nothing more to be done. A thoroughgoing relativism is a frontal attack on rooted knowledge — on fixed truths, and unproblematic communication about what once passed for truths. From the relativist criminal's point of view, once Maigret makes up his mind there remains only the pure flame of conviction which burns away all dross. This is a recipe for totalitarianism.<sup>6</sup>

The path to this state of affairs (a state which philosophers have been puzzling over for a long time, even if the rest of us have only just arrived) is fairly easily traced so long as we avoid any elaborate rehearsal of the chains of reasoning, which anyway are open for study to anyone interested.

We might begin (there are other entry points) with Frege's

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<sup>5</sup> What makes the problem of radical relativism so intractable is the concomitant hard materialism of cold knowledge: the belief that every question has only physical origins and a purely physical solution. This is the old Berkeleyan position without God as guarantor .

<sup>6</sup> It is also the substance of the indignation of Sartre and others over Enlightenment humanism, an indictment which has become accepted wisdom since. Humanism assumes the possibility of a perfected society. It is the business of the detective to perfect matters, or at least to restore them to the degree of perfection already achieved. Before the metaphysical modern no detective story was, nor could be, anti-humanist. One could despair of any practical accomplishments without relinquishing the belief in a perfect community. Some would say this is why the detective genre appeals to bourgeois readers.

attempt to found mathematics on the elemental concepts of number and succession, and with the now-discredited positivist construction of objectivity as that which is independent of sensation, intuition, and memory. Husserl reformulated this — a collection of objects (such as numbers) defined by a rule, known as a set — as a puzzle in epistemology by asking not what a set is but how the idea of a set could arise in the first place. With a set, one becomes conscious of things together, and also conscious of the possibly arbitrary act of grouping them together. The notion of a group will ultimately fail. Such a thing as the infinite continuum of real numbers is not a set because it cannot be made present to the mind by considering the things in the set one by one. Instead, we can imagine this thing only as a whole. Because the parts cannot be enumerated it is without parts. The infinity of subsets is the same. And so on.

Logically (rather than physio-logically) this is how film works. The frames aggregate as a whole in the mind, although a film is actually only one thing after another, twenty-four things a second. Smaller wholes then aggregate with each other (forming such objects as the conversational two-shot), becoming larger and larger as the context of similarity develops, until we have the whole film present to the mind as a single entity. If one then attempts to go back and break up this entity into frames, it vanishes. It's like trying to explain why a joke is funny.

This line of thought seems to require the existence of mental objects. These are not directly (objectively) verifiable. To imagine them is the major step which admits sensation and intuition as modes of knowledge, taking places alongside reasoned thought. To abandon them, there being no evidence for their existence, is the major step toward acknowledging the contemporary condition of

radical relativism. Warm knowledge drives out cold.

No film creates its whole grammar from scratch. However, the necessity for the viewer to construct the story out of the units and relations provided by the film-maker means that when things do not go as expected (the diction and semantics are unfamiliar) it is as if the movie were speaking a foreign language. The spectator must be educated in the particular semiotic system in use — that is, become visually literate in the “language” of this particular movie. Shared semantic units, that is, our willingness to grant that they are similar, that they form a set or family, are the basis of genre. Such a claim as “belonging to the family of noir movies” will be a variable definition which depends on the local grammar in use. This same dependency applies to any bit of film whatever, beginning with two frames in sequence. This is what makes it possible to construct a cohesive movie of indeterminate meaning, a movie which clearly belongs to some family of movies without being able to say exactly what the members of the family are.<sup>7</sup>

A “film” is whatever a spectator who is literate in the language in use *calls* a film. What one analyzes is not the film. Rather, what one does to become literate enough to read that film, and what the film does to assist in this. What is helpful to bring to the analysis is literacy in other films. The same is true of written fiction, a situation which Joyce exposed in its starkest form in *Finnegan’s Wake*. So-called postmodernist novels have yet to grapple with this. Or

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<sup>7</sup> This is actually an everyday problem. It is why for example, one cannot, in a conversation or a novel, say exactly what one means, but only suggest a family to which it might belong. One must negotiate the meaning with the recipient of the message, and the result is always a compromise.

perhaps it is that no author has been found who can make the reader *want* to grapple with it.

What may be called “the modern synthesis” is an accelerating process of extrapolating new grammars. As these become more complex, we learn to read filmic objects which were formerly obscure or unintelligible. So: what is meant when I say that the thriller is the graveyard of the detective story? What is meant by saying that the languages inherited by the thriller are too impoverished to provide much scope for expression? Is it that the gene pool of a species has grown too small to allow any further speciation?

Yes, that is what is meant.

Take these remarks as a demonstration of how a Metaphysical may work relativistically. The business of the Metaphysical Modern is to teach us how to read itself, to negotiate with it the message to be transmitted. It is the total immersion method of language learning. From this experience comes the fluency needed to extrapolate new roles for the Detective, and the experience is an analog of the pattern of the detective story, which is the appearance and domestication of an anomaly.

On this preparation of the ground, we can now examine some candidates for the designation of “metaphysical modern.”

A movie such as Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Les Gommages* (1969, based on a 1951 text)<sup>8</sup> is unproblematic as a detective story. Written in 1951, one of the first film products of the

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8 In the spirit of *Last Year At Marienbad*, also by Robbe-Grillet, *The Woman In the Dunes*, *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, *8½*, and others all made about the same time.

*nouveau roman* group, it may be taken for purposes of illustration as the prototype Metaphysical Modern. There is a murder. An operative named Wallas investigates. Twenty-four hours after the shot is fired, the victim dies. Wallas is the murderer, which he has become through his investigation of a crime he did not at first commit.

*Twin Peaks* is a perverse cousin to this narrative. Laura Palmer dies. An operative named Cooper investigates. Months pass. Nothing happens. Then Cooper is murdered. While Wallas is plodding and stolid, Cooper is baroque, but neither investigation *seems* to go forward by any principle other than happenstance. Not so. Philosophical points are being made, but they cannot be apprehended on first viewing. *Twin Peaks* had the advantage of being a series and having a whole season to establish its *raison d'être*, but it did not succeed. At the time, we did not have sufficient experience with the problem it poses.

*Celine et Julie vont en bateau* (1974) and *Les Fableaux destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001) are another instructive pair. Both of these movies manufacture crimes out of their heroines' imaginations. Celine's concerns a dream world which has intruded itself into the everyday one, and a house which passes back and forth between realities, in which suspicious things happen. There is some urgency about getting to the bottom of this which is not explained. Amélie's object of interest is smaller than a house — a photo booth, in which an unknown man takes pictures of himself which he then tears up. In the course of the investigation Amélie plays the role of criminal herself, stealing her father's garden gnome and metaphorically tearing it up by sending it to various exotic places from which it sends back *gnomic* messages. More significantly, she constructs a narrative roughly parallel with that of the photo booth man in which *she* is the mysterious figure who

challenges a man (to whom she is attracted) to discover who she is. Both of these movies utilize detective tropes, which are fitted into zany goings-on which if they are not irrational certainly have nothing of the cold lucidity of an English classic.

There is a ludic spirit at work here. Amélie's mysterious quarry turns out to be the photo booth repairman. Even the dead people in *Twin Peaks* seem not quite dead. Is there something about a Metaphysical Modern which is inherently humorous, a property which reduces its cultural weight? *Twin Peaks* is the immediate progenitor of both *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *X-Files*. Is this really something we need to pay attention to, or is it merely the workings of a contemporary distaste for self-importance and sentimentality which conceals material of significance, in the way that noir repartee hid its soft underside? If you turn these critters over on their backs they die.

All of these elements can be found in a 1995 French movie *The City Of Lost Children*. There are two narratives of detection (along with much else). The major one concerns the efforts of a carnival strongman (named One) to find out who is stealing children off the streets, including a street orphan One had adopted. The other narrative concerns the question of who is the father (the Original) of a family of clones — who as it happens are the nephew(s) of a brain-in-a-bottle also at the bottom of the child-stealing racket. These children are wanted for their dreams, something the brain doesn't have.

The dreamworld is significant in all five of these movies. In *Les Gommés* by its absence, a vacancy which is an important story engine. The interpenetration of the phenomenal and imaginary worlds, their porousness to each other, is the means by which rationality is separated from

its ordinary context of materialist realism and objectivity without sacrificing the detective structure. These worlds are purposeful, causally structured ones in which actions have largely predictable consequences. By demonstrating that an infinity of such worlds can be constructed the Metaphysical Modern has enlarged the field of its predecessors in the same way that noir opened new possibilities to the exhausted classic tradition.

The detective tropes run deep in *The City Of Lost Children*. Once we begin to assemble a cogent story out of these strange and manic happenings it becomes possible to extract a conventional noirish plot built on the thematic ground of threats to the family, the identification and defeat of these threats, and the reconstitution of the survivors into a restabilized and rebonded group.

In one segment we see one of those moments when new evidence causes some old encounter to assume new significance. The evidence in this case is provided by a sentient dream which seeks out its dreamer. With that dream One (the detective) realizes that the children he seeks are being kept somewhere in the City's harbor, protected by a mine field, and suddenly an earlier remark about a tattooed man reveals the next step in the search. We learn of One's insight through a voiceover reminiscent of those moments in the Dalgleish and Mirren stories in which the spectator is given a scrap of the detective's thoughts. One, however, is not naturally or professionally reticent as those police inspectors are. He is simply inarticulate. Within that constraint, conversations with Miette (his Watson) function as they did in the Holmes stories, to present to the spectator a rational procedure with nothing hidden. There follows a standard police routine of questioning all of the City's tattoo artists.

Here is another sequence of possible Metaphysical Moderns:

- 1966↓ *Trans-Europ-Express*
- 2000↓ *Memento*
- 2001↓ *Mulholland Drive*
- 2004 *Eternal Sunshine Of the Spotless Mind*

Again we have Robbe-Grillet, undoubtedly the *eminence grise* of the Metaphysical Modern. *Trans-Europ-Express* is a detective story rather in the way that *The Singing Detective* is (or that *Babette's Feast* or *Fried Green Tomatoes* are cooking shows because they have characters in them who are cooks). Likewise the other three. We have here movies which create themselves through characters who determine the premises of their own stories. It's an Escher trick, or one of those cartoons in which a hand draws a body for itself. The prototype of this may be Pirandello's *Six Characters In Search Of an Author*. Why is *Memento* backwards? Because if you have a memory of something to which you want to connect a causal chain you have to start at Now. If you don't attach one end of the chain to this capstan you will not be able to raise the anchor. We create the past out of ourselves and then demonstrate the felicity of our invention with a lot of Polaroids we took of how it was done. The sequence illustrates the decay of one's sense of self. Yet each one is a detective story. The detective works out what is happening and tries to do something about it. The Classic rules are followed more or less, in part to make the story easier for us to negotiate. There is a crime, a criminal, a narrative confidante, and a collection of innocent bystanders. The Detective is invoked with the familiar charge to provide an explanation and restore the status quo ante. There are clues, conclusions are tested, the criminal is identified, and the whole business follows Todorov's double narrative

structure discussed earlier.

Of these four movies it is the one by David Lynch (*Mulholland Drive*) which — predictably, given *Twin Peaks* — is the least engaged in this process of retrospective self-justification. Lynch is like a potter who, having decided to use a wheel, must resign himself to making a round pot. The others are more complicit with the film and with us and offer some ameliorations. The spotless minds even come to relish their own artificiality.

A closer look at another movie, *13 Conversations About One Thing* (2001), suggests the attribute in common to these self-creating, self-consuming movies. At every point in the story the whole thing has always already happened. We can't find out what is going on by taking events one at a time, as experienced. Because "one at a time" is the only way in which we can experience events — the consequence of a continually now now — there is no external vantage from which we can watch the thing going on. We never have anything but memories, which are only ours *now*, and we will never figure out what happened because nothing happened. It only happens.

### *Thirteen Conversations About One Thing*

In this movie five stories<sup>9</sup> are entwined in the narrative. Each story is presented in plot order, but the individual pieces are interpolated into the sequence of the others. Since the stories are not simultaneous but do intersect there is a major disjunction between spectator time, narrative time, and story time. That this movie is immediately comprehensible and fairly easily decoded indicates how

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9 I am reminded of Satie's *Trois Morceau en Form d'une Poire* which does not have three parts.

visually literate we have become. Still, one suspects at the end that, as in *Mulholland Drive*, there has been some temporal slippage and that, strictly speaking, we do not come out after we went in. For most viewers this is not a question to be answered in the theater. It requires making a lot of notes.

As with many, perhaps most, of the Metaphysical Moderns discussed so far, it does not seem very promising to try to read this movie as a detective story. There is a crime — the unmotivated or accidental pedestrian death — but there is no murder. The murderer, however, does not know this, and goes through a process of self-discovery, accusation, conviction, and penance. The dead woman, meanwhile, descends from her initial happy ignorance to bitter knowledge. Intending to kill herself, she is saved by chance. A stranger smiles at her. If she had stepped in front of that car as she first intended she would have become the dead woman herself and the conclusions reached by the detective would come true. He would become the murderer he was found out to be. The movie is thick with repeated images which both help the spectator to read it and reinforce the material of events — determined by chance or obscure causes, of the false sense of security we have in cause and effect. There is the sheet which earlier was a shroud for the car which killed the temporarily dead woman — and herself, because for a moment the parking garage looks as if it might be a morgue — and the white shirt with a hole in it which blows away with her happiness and occasions her re-death. There is the doll's head with one eye closed, to be opened when wisdom is attained. And so on. In another story-world a student is unthinkingly killed by his unhappy professor, who takes away hope. There is a sort of chorus, a man who assaults a co-worker only to suffer the consequences himself. But in these there is no detective, no investigation, no discovery. In fact, all

these people are much the spectator's inferior in perception and understanding. They are feckless victims of happenstance who could save themselves but rarely do. We are the ones who explore these people's mean streets, assembling evidence obtained from the movie into a story which explains them all and reveals who is responsible for the death of happiness. *Thirteen Conversations* has all the attributes of a Metaphysical Modern, but have we encountered a crime movie about knowledge that we *cannot* read as a detective story? Does this mean that the only promising path which might have led to a renewed genre is in fact a dead end? Have we crossed a stile and wandered out into a muddy field and ended in an ancient circle of stones, purpose unknown?

Perhaps not. As we saw in the previous four-movie sequence, the essential elements *are* there, those elements that we have encountered from the time of Sherlock Holmes. There is a crime, a victim, a detective, and innocent bystanders. The roles are mixed, is true, and the solution does not (in this case) conform to the Rules, but all this amounts to is that these stories are not so easily decoded and that the cultural work they are doing is contemporary, not the now-familiar concerns of earlier times. Whether these stories will *continue* to be recognized as detective stories is another matter. It may be that we will find another classification which fits them better, and then the Figure Of the Detective will have indeed run its course.

This superficial summary of some exceedingly complex movies is intended only to indicate how the Metaphysical Modern is able to integrate what should have been contradictory requirements into a strategy for re-birthing the detective genre. Möbius structures and the avoidance of closure are the strategies common to all these movies. These strategies which make it easier to depict the porosity

of worlds with different epistemic rules.

Why, it might be asked again, for this is the significance at the core, are these heroic efforts needed? What is at stake here?

This question may not have a definitive answer that is easily recoverable, but the fact that the detective story is being hammered into these new shapes suggests that *something* is at issue. Here is a story about this, not a true story but one which shows how such an explanation might go.

In the early modern period we made a now irrevocable faustian bargain when we decided to test the limits of rational inquiry. One cultural code for this is the (pre-existing) good scientist/bad scientist pair which can be found all over fiction and the movies since, and before that since we began messing with knowledge. By now it would be anachronistic to portray empirical inquiry as a benign enterprise. To do so would be as blithe and foolish as the attitude toward atomic warfare and the effects of radiation which we once paraded and which can be seen in the 1982 documentary *The Atomic Café*. At the same time, we are so deeply committed to technological solutions for almost everything that a straightfaced portrayal of the pundits of rationality as evil loonies would class us with the people who see things, talk to trees, or channel Osiris. Empirical inquiry is the source of both hope and despair, and we can divest ourselves of neither.

In Modernist art, this intellectual program involved the effort to find an art free of craft, that is, free of material purposes, causes, justifications.<sup>10</sup> This program, while

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<sup>10</sup> Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Berg, 2007)

instructive and liberating, was not successful, as the subsequent *post*-Modern thinking has shown.

This conflict needs stabilization. It requires amelioration at both the cool end (too little acknowledgement of the world of everyday experience is madness) and at the warm end (too much mundane reality kills the sense of magic which powers the intellectual enterprise). The need for amelioration is transparently illustrated by the movie *A Beautiful Mind*. John Nash's madness is both the origin of his creativity and is also Shiva the Destroyer of himself. The mirror case might be *Sky Captain and the World Of Tomorrow*, an amusing cartoon version of the very old Dr Mabuse plot in which a lab geek cheats even death and through his creations brings about a hell of ecstasis without catharsis. Dr. Death's madness is the origin of his true self and the destroyer of his creativity.

Neither of these situations is desirable or acceptable.

It is no longer a question of whether the Detective is coldly rational or warmly empathetic – of whether the detective's methods are warm or cool, of whether the detective inhabits a cool law-abiding society or observes a warm dark corrupt one, of whether we have a cool amoral spy or a hot action hero. Regardless of their temperature, all detective stories have one necessary, essential, defining element: the getting and deployment of knowledge. The present view of what knowledge is – that it is performative, unstable, local, inscrutable or only partially verifiable, and polluted by agendas of ideology and power — that knowledge is not a *thing*, a piece of the phenomenal world which can be picked up and put down, owned, but is a volatile product of action in the world.<sup>11</sup> We should no longer ask where

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11 There are no claims made here about the “existence” of the

knowledge is to be found but rather how it is created and destroyed. We can no longer ask whether knowledge is warm or cool: it is neither.

One wonders how a detective story would go in which the detective creates the knowledge necessary to solve the crime. Perhaps, with as yet no knowledge of the crime, it is created only in the act of solving it, and the detective is therefore the criminal. We have seen this plot before. It is, in fact, rampant nowadays. Many people are uncertain of what used to be certain. That existence may be semiosis all the way down is the great contemporary fear for which we evoke the contemporary Detective. The rules of the genre have not changed, only the way in which the story is told.

One wonders: can there be a zen detective? One who detects Nothing? Movies especially are firstly experience, and we are now speaking of knowledge as an experience. The underlying concern in the detective trope has always been some aspect of order and chaos. The ordinary view (the commonsense view, now superseded) was that knowledge yields order and resists entropy. Would we find the zen detective to be on the side of entropy? Possibly this figure is the *sensei* who will teach us acceptance, how to let go of the striving, competition, and desire for control which power the engine of karma which keeps that wheel turning?<sup>12</sup> Then what is a zen plot?

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phenomenal world. One is free to treat experiential encounters with it as scientific materialism or samsara without great consequences for the issues which concern us here.

12 This is the way of Janwillem van de Wetering's zen detectives Grijpstra and De Gier. Van de Wetering, like Stanislaw Lem, has not translated into movies. Since the true response to the solution of a koan is laughter, many people may have problems with seeming to laugh off murder, child abuse, and the other horrors which plague detectives' lives, and many moviegoers and readers are needed.

But is a plot very zen? Using the terminology we put to work earlier, if narrative is the sequence of events and story is the arrangement of those events into some conceptual sequence, and plot is the forging of the causal links in that sequence, then plot implies design, a sequence of events which is going somewhere on purpose. To the zen detective these things would be illusory. Even the detective is himself not a person, a coherent unitary being, but only a trick of memory.

*Possible futures*

For thirty years we have been fighting a cultural civil war over the issue of relativism. The progressive forces claim that no art which does not take account of relativistic thinking can be culturally significant. The reactionary forces divide into those who deny the legitimacy of that claim and those who entertain the possibility but find it pernicious. These opposing camps have each claimed the efficacy of a particular sort of story which comports with that camp's views on what we can know about, with the reactionary forces adopting the reactionary form of classic nostalgia and the progressive camp beginning to elaborate the metaphysical modern.

This has proved to be costly and exhausting. The war of movement has been replaced by entrenchments as in WWI and fraternizing across the lines which, while technically treasonable, has made the continuing mayhem more bearable. The main casualty in this war so far is the old pluralism. Metaphysical Moderns and classics embody contradictory assertions concerning knowledge. It is no longer a case of both/and; it is one of either/or. This has produced allegiances. There are those to whom the old ways seem outmoded and those to whom the new ways seem nonsensical and possibly evil. Whether the new ways

will come to relegate the old (in the way that quantum physics relegated Newton to the mundane world) or the old ways will continue their hegemony. Either way, the continued viability of the detective genre is in doubt because it is manifest that it *cannot deal with the full range of problems presented to it*.

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As previously noted, the core, the ancestral narrative of the detective genre is the uncovering of hidden knowledge. But why is knowledge is hidden to begin with? Perhaps we tend to think, when we're not thinking about it, that knowledge is like time, which lives a life of its own, is sometimes encountered in the street, is away from home for long stretches, and can go missing. "Lost time is not found again" Bob Dylan says<sup>13</sup> – not found despite our panicked search, but sometimes involuntarily remembered, perhaps on encountering an old photograph. Memory works in us like a movie, selecting elements and editing them into an intelligible narrative which we watch, sitting in the dark, bemused spectators. Is knowledge like that, liable to be lost and found like a dime on the sidewalk? Where is it when it's lost? Does it hide in a crack like a lizard?

Perhaps knowledge is a domestic arrangement with a human partner, where the human is the stay-at-home for whom knowledge earns the daily bread (or brings home the bacon). We might then imagine a philandering knowledge, keeping house with another and producing a secret family of ideas.

Knowledge is hidden, we say. But that reifies it as a *thing*. Better to talk of secrets, perhaps? Secrecy requires human

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13 "Odds and Ends" *The Basement Tapes*, 1975.

agency. Secrets are created when people *hide* things, which gets around the notion that knowledge is *out there* waiting to be found, discovered, picked up.

Secret knowledge is as old as human and perhaps hominid psychology.<sup>14</sup> There are secrets because there are people who don't want something known. This is the paranoid Fafnir scenario: they are under guard, protected.<sup>15</sup> There are secrets because something has been smashed and no one knows how to put it back together. This is the Humpty Dumpty scenario, closely associated with the defeatist premise that there exist only unreliable witnesses who each have picked up a piece of the eggshell and gone off with it never to be found. Distributed secrets are found in spy stories and certain occult tales such as that of Voldemort or Sarumon distributing themselves about, intending to regenerate from the surviving bits. There are secrets because the right people haven't been asked (the purloined letter scenario, or hidden in plain view) or the right questions haven't been asked of them (the lost in the fog scenario). These are mostly scripts of inadvertence or bumbling, but include also the honest witness who can't come forward (he's in jail, or dead), won't come forward (he's timid or ashamed), or doesn't know he's supposed to come forward (doesn't read the papers?). There is also that familiar person who will tell the truth if necessary but would just rather not.

What does all this amount to? It is that we can't get a sight of what we want to know because there are people in the way. The detective story is about how to get them out of the way, but this is not like getting a clear view of Mt. Fuji or

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14 Frans de Waal, *Chimpanzee Politics* (Harper and Row, 1982)

15 Richard Hofstadter, "Paranoid Style In American Politics." *Harper's Magazine* 229:1374 (November 1964) 77-86.

Mont Ste. Victoire. But wait, it *is* like that. It is the *mountain* which is in the way, which keeps us from catching sight of what we really want to see, which is all the curious and strange things made of the mountain by the tourists, mountaineers, and armchair travelers, and great artists who encounter it.

Perhaps, given this clue, we ought to consider the knower rather than what is to be known. We might look at the balance between active and passive resistance – how knowledge is extracted from people (various cool dystopias or surveillance schemes) or the warm communication of relationships. We might look at the balance between people and things, where only things are queried (the perfect police procedural, very cool) or only people (the perfect insight of Nero Wolfe without Archie, very warm). There is the cold view that everything which happens to us is an accident and the hot one that in order to know about people you need to know about people, because people mess up everything they meddle in. One becomes tired of an inquiry which never ends because the act of looking into something changes what you're looking into. It's hard to say whether quantum detection<sup>16</sup> is warm or cool. Warm if you're frustrated or feel trapped, cool if you've solved that koan.

A table of options may be useful. One element would be the personal involvement of the detective, which as we have seen has tended to drift away from objectivity, illustrated by a sequence of *Inspecteur Lavardin* to *Prime Suspect* to *Memento*. Another element would be the resistance of the corrupt and unforgiving world, which is the tension between noir and transcendental morality. Here an illustrative sequence might run from Jane Tennison or Rick

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<sup>16</sup> The plight of Wallas in *Les Gommies* (1969) or more recently, *13 Conversations About One Thing* (2001).

Deckard, who are official or quasi-official representatives of society and implicated in its structure, to private investigators like Jake Gittens, to people (or non-human machines, as in *Avatar* or the stories of Stanislaw Lem), entirely outside human society.

Let's make two columns, then, with hopeless conditions on the left and more affirmative situations on the right. The causes of the problem will form the rows.

	<b>pessimistic</b>	<b>optimistic</b>
<b>the problem is intrinsic</b>	it is impossible that we should understand <i>(Mulholland Drive)</i>	matters are driven mostly by accident, so do the best you can <i>(Minority Report)</i>
<b>the problem might be overcome</b>	but won't be because corruption will always be the stronger <i>(The Spy Who Came In From the Cold, Gorky Park)</i>	but might be because thoughtfulness and hard work are sometimes effective <i>(Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy)</i>
<b>the problem is not the solution but the power to enforce it</b>	might makes right (not an acceptable premise for a mainstream movie)	power will not necessarily be in the wrong hands <i>(The Pelican Brief, The Hunt For Red October, and thrillers generally)</i>

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This way of organizing the question also brings out the rough correspondence between the three rows and the three plot types worked out earlier. The bottom row is the Fafnir scenario (the knowledge we need has already been dug up but it is guarded by the dragon); the middle row is the Humpty Dumpty one (we already have the knowledge we

need but it's broken into little pieces); the top row corresponds to all those attitude-induced difficulties caused by the fear that it's all a sham, that what passes for knowledge is just glittery stuff. The columns are knowledge-centric, the rows are socio-centric.

Can a new crop of stories be genetically engineered from these possibilities? The socio-centric rows in the table compose the two tasks of the Detective, which are how to get knowledge and how to deploy it. Effective deployment requires power. Let us make two planes, one concerning knowledge and one concerning power, and correlate them according to the various forms of the Detective into a three-dimensional field. All of the possibilities for the detective story will be found within this field.

Each plane has two axes. On the plane of knowledge these are

1) whose property is this knowledge? — the extremes being entirely personal, unknown to anyone else, and common property or conventional wisdom;

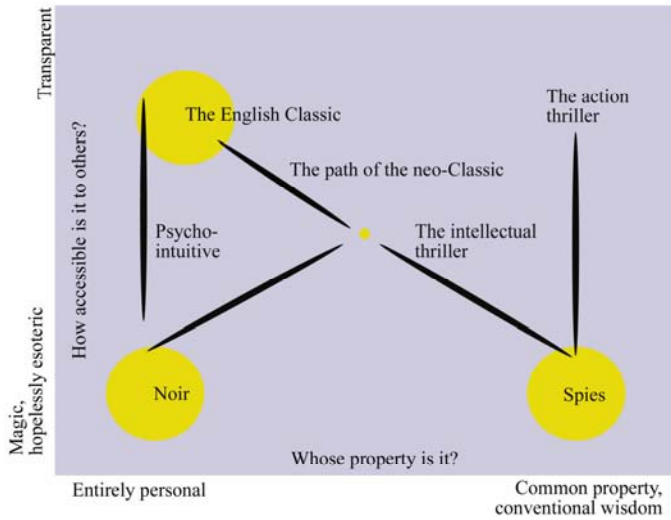
2) how accessible is this knowledge to others? — the extremes being magic (hopelessly esoteric), and transparent, knowledge which will inevitably be found out.

On the plane of power the two dimensions are

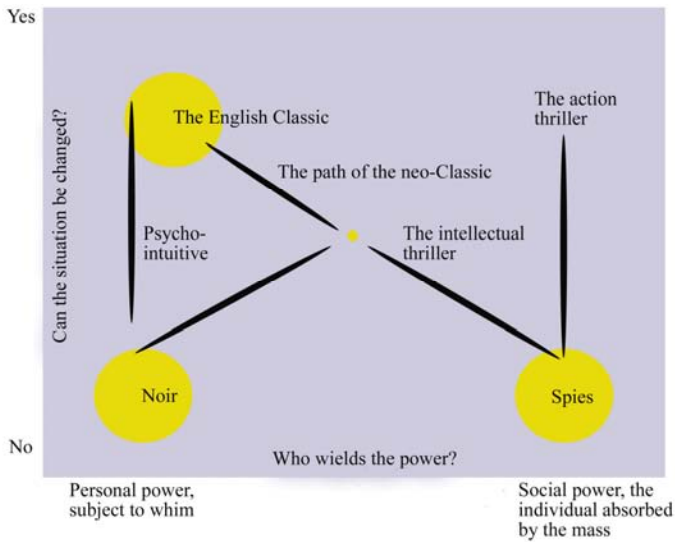
1) who wields the power? — the extremes being personal power used entirely by whim to complete social domination, and the dispersal of the individual into the mass;

2) how possible is it to change the situation? — running from hopeless to changeable.

The Cartesian space of knowledge in the detective story



The Cartesian space of power in the detective story



All English classics are single-person personal dramas. The problem is caused by one individual and rectified by another. On the power plane this genre variant is located in a similar position. That is, the crook acts alone with no social entanglements — he is not a puppet — and all crimes are theoretically preventable or at least expiable. The paths illustrate what happens to the pure form of the tradition when, as it inevitably will, it drifts toward the center under the influence of the other traditions and the changing demands of readers and moviegoers. The English Classic, for example, will drift toward noir (as it in fact did) and begin to accommodate its opposite, the spy story. Knowledge will become less transparent but more conventional. The power to deploy knowledge will decrease as power becomes less that of individuals and more that of groups or institutions. The modern neo-Classic lies on this path. Neo-Classics present matters as more socially determined, not quite so coldly rational, but also less amenable to change. The psycho-intuitive variant which lies on the path from Classic to noir sticks to the personal (detective and criminal act on their own motivation as determined by their personal understanding) but tends to drift toward intuitive knowledge (magic) and conditions less amenable to amelioration. Noir lies at the far end of this drift — highly personal, largely intuitive, hopelessly contaminated. Neo-noir, like the modern classic, drifts toward the center.

In this three-dimensional field the spy story is the diametric opposite of the classic. In the spy story problems are entirely out of the hands of individuals, the spy operates largely on intuition, with the most probable outcome being not understanding but simply that he not be caught. Any amelioration of these conditions would be local and temporary. Spy stories have tended to drift toward the center because this scenario is so bleak. If the story

originates from the spy's position on the field and is held to a dystopian environment (such as a pervasive conspiracy agreed to by the whole hive), but at the same time the story allows for the possibility of revolution, what results is the thriller. As noted earlier, there are two sorts of thriller – intellectual and action. The difference between them is the nature of the revolution sought. The intellectual thriller seeks an ideological revolution (and thus tends to drift away from the hive and toward a preference for the rational individual on the plane of knowledge). The action thriller seeks physical destruction of the enemy (and so drifts toward the position of the vigilante on the plane of power).

As the detective genre has aged, sub-genres tend to drift. On the planes of knowledge and power the center is now occupied by a blend of neo-Classic, neo-noir, and intellectual thriller, as already suggested. It may be that this dilution and blurring of the pure forms is one of the factors in the decline of the genre. It might be said to evaporate.

There is a notably blank space in the upper-left corner. On the knowledge plane this is the area of transparent social knowledge – reified conventional wisdom, statistical outcomes, and social objects which are transparently the case but which individual minds cannot perceive. On the power plane this is the area of totalitarian public opinion: the hive. The rules of behavior are easily altered but changes are not determined by individuals. This world is one of arbitrary and unforeseeable direction.

It's easy to see why this space is blank. It is an area of dystopia, repellent and stony ground for a detective story. The action thriller encroaches on this region and it is not a surprise that dystopian stories do tend to be of that sort. A detective in this region would find it impossible to know what a crime was, without authority to act, in a completely

inscrutable world closed to both deduction and intuition.

We saw in the case of *13 Conversations About One Thing* what happens when a story moves at all deeply into this area of chance, non-linear (causeless) occurrence, and existential freedom. Genre elements — the identity of the detective, the gathering of evidence, the construction of a story and then a plot out of the initial narrative fragments, the discovery of the criminal and the domestication of the crime — become tangled and uncertain and the story loses its identity as a member of a family. The detective genre is not infinitely able to absorb new readings.

What else might occupy this blank space in the field? Mirror opposites of the familiar genre variants, perhaps? In the way of matter and anti-matter, which must be kept apart lest they annihilate each other? And we have yet to account for the Modern Metaphysical.

At once it is obvious why these variants – Metaphysical and the anti-forms – are hard to fit into the familiar detective genre. They occupy not single regions but three-dimensional areas within the cube of knowledge and power. The Modern Metaphysical, for example, on the knowledge plane is firmly anchored to the lower left corner. The knowledge in these stories is unique to individuals and cannot be explicated, so that to others the use of such knowledge appears to be magic. But on the power plane the story is anchored both at the lower right – given the construction of knowledge, no individual could wield power – and also at the upper left. Power, not under personal control, appears to be highly malleable in its effects. On its face, these arrangements would seem to invalidate a detective plot, but as we have seen, ways have been found to accommodate them.

What would then be the perfect opposite to the neo-Classic? First, the social environment would be totally conspiratorial and the detective would be fatally compromised. The process of detection would be entirely magic; that is, as inscrutable to us as to the detective, seeming to be a matter of luck or the actions of a hidden hand. There would be no hope for the detective to succeed, and in any case he would not act on his own initiative. Circumstances being what they are, the detective would be likely to bear the consequences of failure entirely alone: a goat.

Are there any novels or movies like this? If there were one it would be inexpressibly black. *Chinatown* has some of these elements, as does *Blade Runner*, especially if Deckard more resembled the degenerate police official (Holden) who recruits him to the job, or rather blackmails him into it. On the whole this does not seem a promising line of development. Not many writers are going to pitch scripts like this.

Thrillers, by contrast with the modern classic, tend to have mobs of bad guys backed by an infinity of supporters. Like the Classic, the hero always succeeds and enjoys substantial moral support (not always apparent at first) which generates valuable help at crucial moments. On the plane of power the thriller falls on the lower right rather than left. On the plane of knowledge the intellectual thriller and the modern classic are not much distinguished, both moving toward a common center. This analysis shows why it was so easy to transfer the cultural work of the Classic to the thriller once the grip of noir was loosened. They are much alike.

The perfect anti-thriller, then, would differ from the perfect anti-Classic mostly in that the detective, such as he is,

would not survive to take the goat's role. This seems marginally less black than the anti-Classic, being a little more cosmic and impersonal in its outcome. For that reason the anti-thriller is even more improbable. At least the anti-classic offers the solace of a malicious god, much more acceptable to most of us than an indifferent one.

The anti-metaphysical would seem still more unlikely. Either no one would have a clue and nothing would ever happen, or that man who is always bleating that "it's an open and shut case" would be right.

We ought also to consider the reversal of the detective's role. In the anti-metaphysical plot the detective is the oppressor, the man of superior knowledge who uses it as the representative of an illegitimate ideology of sin and expiation, an oppressor to whom is opposed ... who? Who is to take the role of criminal? Why would this criminal fight a battle he is sure to lose, with insufficient information and lacking the knowledge to say what it all means? In the universe of ordinary matter the criminal is after power or money or revenge and is crippled by a hubris that prevents him from realizing his deficiencies. In the dystopian universe on the other side of the mirror it would seem that we common folk are the criminals, and the story which best exemplifies all this might be *Soylent Green*

### Conclusions

What shall we make of this excursion through the history of the detective genre which we undertook so as to better understand the peculiar cultural authority of the figure of the Detective? Let us hope that this has been accomplished.

More uncomfortable is the analysis in the final two chapters of the present state of the genre. These chapters

project a world of blithe Eloi living in the sun on the surface while underground live the dark and threatening Elohim of the Metaphysical. Can this be so?

Unfortunately, that may be. But it may also be that the same pattern can be found in all the arts. It seems to be the way we live now.

But one possibility has been left unexplored. Since the early 80s claims have been made that the digital media will create new art forms with new purposes differently positioned in society. Thirty years on, these claims are beginning to seem plausible but no one has produced an authoritative example.

Outside the arts this is not quite so. The success of such publications as *Slate*, which has grown from a trivial toy to a journal of authority and reputation, is a case in point. We have hints of how other former print publications might find equally viable strategies. We also have the example of bloggers who have emerged from a culture of opinionated vituperation and solipsistic inconsequence to become genuine observers, reporters, and analysts of the social and political worlds. There is no reason to believe artists cannot do likewise. We can point to the music of Philip Glass, some clever individual works of mixed media, and the films we have examined. But in verbal art we have only crude transfers of print forms to websites and handheld readers which relate to their originals as does a ditto machine to a modern scanner.

Given the complete opaqueness of the future of storytelling (since it is one of the oldest and most indispensable human activities we can assume it *has* a future) it would be impossible to predict a future for the Detective. So many of the conditions for the genre could change, as our

exploration of the planes of knowledge and power shows, that we will cease to have detective stories at all. Some other story form will arise about the getting and deployment of knowledge. This succession of genres is common, after all, and as natural as the succession of forest trees of which Thoreau wrote so wonderfully. Where we come from gives no guidance as to where we are going. The best that might be said is that when we get somewhere new we will look back down a clear path we took to get there. We can hope that the trip will be as enjoyable as it has been so far.