

# Generic Innovation and Social Change: The American Thriller in the 1970s

by

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# Volume I

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## **Abstract**

The following thesis explores the relationship between generic innovation and social change. It identifies a number of approaches to genre whose common feature is a theory of genre according to which the generic text is a relatively stable entity whose main internal features are empirically identifiable and subject to little change. The thesis will address the problems entailed in such approaches, particularly two central deficiencies: firstly, the inability to give an account of innovation within a generic framework; secondly, the difficulties that arise in analysing the role of readership when genre is theorized as a static structure. It will be argued that generic texts - and innovations across generic texts - are characterized by readings rather than by internal textual characteristics. It will also be argued that the predominance of text-based definitions of genre has had a long-term effect on the constitution of generic corpuses.

The alternative model of genre proposed by this thesis focusses on the means by which generic texts might be thought to embody innovations at certain moments in history. This will be demonstrated in a case study of a specific period during which the political character of the thriller seems to have fundamentally changed in a hitherto unprecedented way. The thesis will concentrate on the American thriller in the 1970s, attending to the connection between readings of thrillers and crucial political events such as Watergate. Following a survey of what might be thought to be the key discursive features of the history of the 1970s, the thriller in the period will be approached in two ways: in relation to its historical existence, and in relation to its existence in a particular 'regime of reading'. The thesis will seek to establish, therefore, what determines the relationship of contemporary discourses regarding social change in 1970s America and potential readings of thrillers in the period.

Throughout its history the thriller has often been found to be made up of a number of subgenres; it will be argued that readings of these subgenres are determined in a historically specific manner. The thesis will consider some of the chief examples of thriller subgenres in the 1970s in terms of potential contemporary readings of them and in relation to previous theoretical approaches.

## Note on the Text

I should briefly mention a few details regarding the layout of this thesis which may make it slightly easier to read.

There are numerous occasions when I have cited articles in newspapers or magazines which do not have an identified author. In the 'References' section I have collected all these anonymous articles at the beginning.

In addition, there are a number of articles from collections which I have cited; in order not to create any confusion, particularly with regard to the historical location of such articles or essays, I have cited the collection from which the piece comes. For example, a collection which is published in the 1980s, but which contains articles from other decades, arranged historically, is the one edited by Grant (1986). When I cite an article from this collection it will appear, for example, thus:

**(Gallagher in Grant 1986)**

or when the identity of the author of the article is clear from the text,

**(in Grant 1986).**

There will still be a listing in the 'References' section for both the collection and the individual essay; for example

**Gallagher, Tag. 'Shoot-Out at the Genre Corral: Patterns in the Evolution of the Western' in Grant (1986)**

and

**Grant, Barry Keith 1986. *Film Genre Reader* Austin: University of Texas Press**

# Introduction

A lion hunt begins with the hypothesis of a lion - a roar in the night - a boy gone or a bullock - an enormous spoor in the path where the women walk - a fumet out beyond the thornbushes speculatively examined by the old men.

So with the pursuit of poetry. One begins by assuming that there is something called poetry to be found.

But whereas one knows in advance what a lion will look like when one catches up with him, the whole purpose of the pursuit of poetry is to discover, by running it down, what a poem is.

The principle difficulty of the undertaking stands therefore at the outset. The pursuit of poetry must begin more or less where it hopes to end - with a report of the quarry. And the danger is precisely there. For if you start with the wrong report you will end up with the wrong phoenix or the wrong unicorn - or whatever the fabulous creature turns out to be.

What one needs is a reliable scout, a man who has unquestionably been there and come back . . .  
(MacLeish 1965 p. 13).

## Introduction

This thesis is mainly about two things: the American thriller in the 1970s and the reconstitution of some dimensions of its audience. It is thus about a genre or, in other words, a set of qualities shared by a large group of texts, and it is about the relationship between these qualities of textuality and the readings of individual texts by readers. It is also about the *concept* of genre, the theory which asserts that texts fall into certain classifications and that this has fundamental effects upon their reading. Specifically it will seek to problematize the relationship between genre considered as a synchronic, taxonomic category and the phenomenon of innovation within and across generic boundaries.

The theoretical means by which we will discuss these possibilities will be laid out in the first four chapters of the thesis which will attempt to reformulate genre theory in such a way as to accommodate a more flexible conception of generic innovation. Most theories of genre have failed to address the question of innovation adequately and have proposed models of genre which are 'static' in character. Where this thesis marks a departure from previous formulations on the nature of genre is in its proceeding from the question of what contemporary readings accrued to generic texts. Understandably, this will involve us in the utilization of a number of general theoretical concepts as well as some more specific ones which will be discussed at more length in the following individual chapters. In order to illustrate the general grounds for our ensuing arguments we will briefly make clear our understanding of some of the key terms and issues which will be of use to us in our analysis.



## The Breadth of Popular Fiction

The first thing for which we must account is the breadth of popular fiction. One of the ways in which previous studies have managed the corpus of works that they have addressed has been by severely limiting its range. For the purposes of analysis it is obviously quite clear that an attempt to assess a large amount of fiction is unfeasible: close readings of large numbers of works would take far too long to execute. By the same token, though, a tendency to disregard the breadth of a generic corpus and its relation to other broad corpuses can have detrimental effects on an analysis. Palmer's work (1978) suffers from an excessive reliance on a model of thrillers derived from only Spillane, Chandler and Fleming, a fact to which he admits (p. 40); the same kind of reliance on a core of key texts can be said to also hinder the analyses of numerous others in the same way: Harper (1969), Symons (1974), Mandel (1984), etc. We discuss this at greater length in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, the latter of which is almost wholly concerned with the issue. However, we mention the issue now because the reconceptualization of genre which takes place in the following pages requires that the breadth of the thriller genre be built into the analysis in a manner different from the narrow focus admitted by Palmer. (The issue also has a bearing on the length of this thesis).

Although we will discuss only a drastically reduced corpus from the whole of the 1970s thriller, the texts which we consider must in no way be thought of as divorced from the concerns of their neighbouring generic texts. Moreover, the exact status of both the generic texts that we discuss, and those that we do not, can never be entirely clear (see, for example, Appendix 1). What will become apparent in subsequent chapters is that, not only is the breadth of popular fiction very great and therefore difficult to analyse, but it is also active in the readings of the texts which *are* chosen for analysis. This will hopefully be manifest throughout our discussion of the 1970s

American thriller; what it immediately entails, however, is that we offer a few words about the general process of categorization which will take place in this thesis.

## The Thriller

So far, we have referred to the corpus of texts that will be discussed as 'thrillers'. As we will proceed to problematize generic categories, especially in Chapter 2, the use of the term 'thriller' must be explained. Jerry Palmer uses the term as the title of his book, adding

Everything written in these pages has been based on an unstated assumption: that 'thrillers' are a single entity, in other words that there is something in them that justifies placing them all in the same category; correlatively, that this something is central to them, not an accidental or marginal feature (1978 p. 136).

Our reason for using the term is virtually the opposite of this. Before explaining our understanding of it the first thing that must be said is that the term 'thriller' is often used to designate a specific corpus of texts centred around a combination of themes to do with espionage and adventure (see, for example, Merry 1977). In addition, there are those who believe that there are distinct genres which make up the corpuses of 'detective fiction', 'hard-boiled stories', 'crime novels', 'spy stories', 'police procedurals', 'spy stories', and so on (see, for example, Symons 1974). These are reasonably straightforward taxonomies based on what the theorist believes to be common to all the texts s/he discusses.

However, where these commentators delineate the thriller simply in terms of an ensemble of textual features, Palmer extends the principle. In both cases, what such approaches to the thriller rely on is some kind of formal or relatively informal "formula-based analysis" of texts, as Palmer calls it (1978 p. 2). But this is only one point of departure for Palmer's analysis. Two major points which distinguish his work and serve the purpose of moving the analysis of the thriller onto a different terrain will be of

central concern to this thesis. The first is that Palmer insists on an understanding of the thriller genre in terms of its *formal organization* of elements. Rather than simply defining texts in the thriller genre in terms of their narration of such phenomena as criminality, mystery and so on, Palmer makes it clear that it is the way that these elements are arranged which characterizes the genre. We can summarize this first point about Palmer's analysis by introducing a linguistic metaphor: those features of generic texts which have some reference to the real world and which traditional theories hold to be common to all texts within that genre can be designated the 'semantic' aspect of the text; the highly formal organization of such elements - a more rigorous understanding of the concept of 'formula' - which Palmer identifies as the characteristic of thrillers can be designated the 'syntactic' aspect of the text. Palmer's definition of the thriller is made, therefore, on the grounds of its *syntax*. In Chapter 1 we will begin to discuss at greater length the distinction between the two aspects of genre (and the difficulties involved in making such a distinction); as a whole, the issue will be crucial to this thesis.

The second point about Palmer's analysis is that the identification of a rigorous formula or syntax for thriller texts is, in his case, based on a reference to the texts' historical genesis. This also has significant consequences for the analysis that we will conduct in this thesis. Palmer argues that the thriller is "logically related to an ideological field" (1978 p. 204); for Palmer, the potentially "addictive" (p. 3) nature of the thriller formula is thoroughly political in its orientation. The syntax of the thriller (what others might call 'formula', but what Palmer often calls 'structure') is found by him to be homologous to two key features of emergent capitalism: these are the notions of competitive individualism and conspiracy, particularly as they were understood in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Palmer's argument aims to demonstrate, therefore, that competitive individualism is embodied and given legitimacy in the actions of the thriller hero, and that conspiracy is embodied in the nature of the danger that the special qualities of the hero are called upon to avert. So, if the thriller is characterized by an



unchanging syntax or 'structure', then the ideological imperatives at work in the initial conception of this structure are crucial. As Palmer puts it, this relationship between the syntax of the thriller conceived as a literary entity and the ideological field of late nineteenth century capitalism becomes possible

when the demands that the hero incarnates can be felt to be the demands of the social order in general . . . (p. 204)

What is important about Palmer's analysis, however, is not just that he is able to identify the relation of the thriller's structure to an ideological field, but that he theorizes the continuance of that relationship beyond texts produced in the second part of the nineteenth century. The relationship - or, put another way, the capitalist ideology of the thriller's specificity - will, for Palmer, prove to be active within all thrillers.

Throughout this thesis we will implicitly challenge the rigidity of such a conception of genre's functioning and the challenge will take place on two fronts. In challenging the notion of the constancy of the thriller text's 'structure' we also address the question of the structure's ideological nature. This is because Palmer's structural analysis not only conceives of the thriller's syntax as a literary phenomenon but also as a *politically* and *ideologically* implicated phenomenon. Such a duality will be particularly important with regard to questions of the thriller's referential status: that is to say, the crucial references to the real world in the thriller and the relation of these to the rethinking of such concepts as 'history', 'ideology' and 'narrative'. In addition to Palmer's book, many studies of the relations between the social world and, particularly generic, fictional texts have relied on a number of fixed categories to describe the fictional and social realms. The manner in which the 'fictional' and the 'social' have been made to interact in such studies therefore largely involves a constant mechanism which allows movement between each realm. For example, distinct regions of knowledge such as 'history', 'ideology' and 'narrative' have been posited, movement between which is subject to specific distortions when crossing from one realm to another. We will attempt to rethink such models in this thesis beginning with a reconceptualization of the term



'genre' and a reformulation of the notion of an 'internal' history of generic corpuses. We will also reconceptualize the interaction of the realm of 'history' with generic texts.

The rigidity of generic taxonomies in Palmer's analysis is a major problem. In short, the formal characteristics of the whole group of texts which Palmer 'objectively' identifies and analyses are a matter for contestation. A brief example may suffice to illustrate this point: it is usual for one to see in average-size bookshops many supposedly distinct genres located in a specific area under a specific category; but where, for instance, would we place a novel such as William Hjörtsberg's *Falling Angel* (1980; originally 1978) upon which the 1987 film *Angel Heart* was based? Does its hero and its movement towards resolution by means of the competitive individualism of the professional make it a 'thriller' or, more specifically, a private detective story? Or do its overwhelming problematization of the role and identity of the hero and its occult theme justify its placing in the 'horror' section of the bookshop? Or, should it be placed in the science fiction section with Hjörtsberg's other famous work, *Gray Matters* (1974; originally 1971)? I have seen *Falling Angel* in all of these sections in different bookshops. This does not conclusively prove anything, of course, but it does demonstrate the general difficulty with making strict, formally based classifications and it is the point from which we will proceed.

That there are difficulties involved in constructing taxonomies, however, does not prevent them being constructed. In a facile way, this is one reason for retaining the designation 'thriller'. Yet the question of such taxonomies requires far more examination and this will be central to the thesis. What will be at issue is that the narratives that we discuss may not be linked solely by virtue of incorporating 'thrills' but by virtue of the fact that they are often *presented* in terms of their potential to offer thrills. We will examine in this thesis the possibility of understanding the thriller genre not so much as an assembly of texts all sharing certain 'objective', empirically verifiable features but as a fluid set of texts which might be *presented* as such. Clearly

there is a need for a theory of genre which accommodates the notion of innovation and which breaks the synchrony of previous definitions by foregrounding the diachronic dimension without abolishing the fundamental role of a genre's syntax. Before proceeding we need to indicate the grounds where this may be possible.

## **The Role of Extra-Textual Discourses in the Constitution of Generic Texts**

Recent discussions of genre have elaborated a more flexible approach to understanding what constitutes a generic text. Where previous theorists of genre have attempted to identify what constitutes the characteristic formula *within* generic texts more recent approaches have been concerned with raising the possibility that some process takes place which lends texts a generic character. Where previous theorists have assumed that the generic text-reader interaction is one where that which can be said to be 'generic' emanates from the texts, recent approaches have emphasized more strongly the role of the reader in producing the notion of genre. Neale, for example, points out that genres are not simply bodies of work or groups of films, however classified, labelled and defined (1990 p. 46).

Instead, focussing specifically on film, Neale suggests that genres are systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films during the viewing process. This is clearly very important: from this standpoint, genre does not reside solely in the text; moreover, if genres are to be recognized as at least partly generated by readers' expectations then any political meaning of generic fiction must also be considered as at least partly produced by the same.

If we extend this principle further it soon becomes clear that not only is the textual base of genre brought into question but also its political complexion. The conception of text-

reader interaction discussed by Neale and others constitutes a manifest challenge to Palmer's formulation of genre's relation to the social world which, as we have seen, is based on an analysis of conditions at the thriller's inception. Commenting on the possibility that genres can, contra Palmer, take on different functions in differing social contexts, Bennett writes

if this is so, as it patently is, the series of equations on which the sociology of genres depends - commonality of conditions equals commonality of form which supports commonality of function - is called into question. And in its place there emerges a more complex set of possibilities for articulating the relations between form and function, between synchronic and diachronic analysis. Forms of analysis, for instance, in which the question of function is not tied to the analysis of originating conditions but which may instead be related to the weave of determinations structuring particular relations of reception (1990 pp. 80-81).

What Bennett suggests here is that the ideological and political meaning of generic texts is not simply latent in the genre's originary structure; instead, the meaning of generic texts is produced in a different way every time such texts are embedded in new relations of reception. This "weave of determinations", as Bennett puts it, in which generic texts might be found, is very complex. It must be said at the outset, therefore, that no matter how closely this weave of determinations is examined it is not possible to offer definitive, individual instances of reception. However, it is possible to delineate *the grounds upon which receptions of generic texts might take place at a given time* if this idea of determination is taken seriously.

In order to make matters clear, then, what Bennett identifies as a weave of determinations is what gives rise to those systems of expectation and hypothesis that Neale suggests are at play in the text-reader interaction. What this would entail is that a reader's understanding or experience of a text as belonging to a genre relies on determinations from outside the text. In attempting to identify these determinations, Neale focusses on

theoretical terms, on the one hand, and industrial and institutional terms, on the other . . . (1990 p. 45).

We will follow Neale's lead in this thesis; but, so as to extend our analysis onto the terrain of an historical understanding of our corpus of generic texts, we will also



consider the role of 'history'. The point to be made immediately, then, is that our apprehension of the weave of determinations which provides the grounds for potential expectations on the part of readers at a given moment revolves around a consideration of secondary, or 'extra-textual' discourses. We will argue that the complex interplay of secondary discourses which can be said to 'precede' a reader's interaction with the 'primary' generic text are responsible for constituting a genre. This must be understood only as a provisional formulation which will be developed during the course of the thesis because, as we will argue, the generic text cannot be considered as 'primary' or 'pure', in that it will be saturated with the traces of secondary texts which will relate to it; likewise, these secondary texts cannot be said to wholly 'precede' the generic text in that they will be realized often 'within' a reading of a generic text. It would be an almost impossible task to discuss all the possible secondary discourses which might play a role in constituting a generic text at a given moment; specifically, therefore, there will be three main areas upon which, for practical as well as theoretical reasons, we will focus. The first is 'history' as it may have been apprehended through such contemporary discourses as news which, in turn, might be incorporated into generic texts. The second main area will be reviews which, on many occasions will be found to overlap with a third area: that of 'publicity'. We will consider the possibility that, in tandem with historical/factual discourses, these last two might work to orientate specific readings of generic texts. The potential magnitude of influence and the proliferation of these 'extra-textual' discourses must not be underestimated; this thesis will therefore give detailed consideration to the role of such discourses in contemporary readings of 1970s thrillers.

The most obvious consequence of a consideration of extra-textual discourses lies in the danger of adopting a position where the generic text disappears and becomes nothing but a sum of extra-textual discourses. In such a formulation the text may have as many meanings as there are readers or extra-textual discourses related to it; in effect, it might become almost impossible to comment on generic texts and analysis would be reduced



to a consideration only of a generic text's relations of reception. Put another way, it might be said that, if a text can only have a 'structure' insofar as this is shaped by extra-textual discourses then analysis cannot focus on what might be perceived to be 'inside' the text. This is a fallacious argument which must be laid to rest at once: Jacques Derrida anticipates such an argument when he responds to Julia Kristeva's comments on the topic by saying

The case of the concept of structure, that you also bring up, is certainly more ambiguous. Everything depends upon how one sets it to work. Like the concept of the sign - and therefore of semiology - it can simultaneously confirm and shake logocentric and ethnocentric assuredness. It is not a question of junking these concepts, nor do we have the means to do so. Doubtless it is more necessary, from within semiology, to transform concepts, to displace them, to turn them against their presuppositions, to reinscribe them in other chains, and little by little to modify the terrain of our work and thereby produce new configurations; I do not believe in decisive ruptures; in an unequivocal 'epistemological break', as it is called today. Breaks are always, and fatally, reinscribed in an old cloth that must continually, interminably be undone. This interminability is not an accident or contingency; it is essential, systematic, and theoretical. And this in no way minimizes the necessity and relative importance of certain breaks, of the appearance and definition of new structures . . . (Derrida 1981 p. 24).

Translated into our own terms, what Derrida says here is that the process of bringing the concept of the text as a unitary, fixed, closed system into question does not necessarily entail abandonment of the concept of the text's structure. The task is to demonstrate that the text is not a stable entity, that it is subject to change brought about by the interplay of extra-textual forces. Nor does this mean that the interplay of extra-textual forces should be considered as interminable. What we will attempt in this thesis is to focus on the extra-textual mechanisms which both allow a plurality of meanings to texts but which also often act to *fix* and *make stable* the meanings of generic texts. As Frow puts it,

The boundary of the text and its mode of signification are socially imposed . . . It is made up of different modes and levels of intertextuality, each with a specific degree of cognitive privilege which is also socially ascribed. To say this is not to discard the concepts of text and of a specifically literary mode of discourse, nor does it involve a rejection of operations of evaluation. Rather, it means taking the structured field of evaluations and the critical concepts used to produce them as objects of analysis, and thereby integrating them into the textual process. Such a deconstruction of 'the text' should lead us to focus on the interplay between text and system and on the social determinants of this process (1986 p. 206).

In this thesis it will therefore be necessary to consider the possible stability of meaning imputed to a text by extra-textual forces. So, at numerous stages of our argument we

will actually engage in an analysis of what might be apprehended as the narratives of thrillers and examine their relationship with extra-textual discourses.

The specific instances of extra-textual discourses' importance in the constitution of generic texts will become manifest at each stage of the thesis. In addition, the lack of stability of the generic text as a result of the play of secondary discourses militates in favour of a general designation for groups of texts. Our reason for adopting the designation of the thriller, therefore, is because it is a category which allows a great deal of diversity within its flexible boundaries. In this way, our use of the term 'thrillers', particularly after our prolonged questioning of the validity of generic categories in Chapter 2, will be based precisely on the assumption that the genre exists even if the exact meaning of the term 'exist' in this context is unclear; and, that its boundaries are very fluid and cannot be apprehended 'objectively' as stable fixed entities. The main reason, it will now be clear, that we suggest that there is a difficulty in apprehending the genre's boundaries objectively is that our analysis will proceed not from an attempted identification of formal characteristics but from potential text-reader interactions.

The question of flexible genre boundaries, the possibility of multiple readings of genre texts, and the role of extra-textual discourses are inextricably linked. We will argue from a general position which holds that a genre's characteristics are not to be found in the text alone; moreover, we will argue that generic innovation is not just to be considered as a textual mutation, but a mutation of the *receptions* of generic texts. In order to propose such an argument it is necessary to seriously examine the configuration of forces which might be at work at a given historical moment to organize receptions of generic texts. In short, to assess the extent to which the thriller responds to social change and allows for innovation we need to posit a range of possible receptions of texts and ascertain what extra-textual determinations might give rise to

such receptions. We have chosen to do this on the basis of a thorough case study from a given historical period, namely the 1970s.

## The American Thriller in the 1970s

Although it would be feasible to arbitrarily take almost any period of history in which to conduct an analysis of the kind that follows, there are considered reasons to do with the moment during which this thesis is written for selecting 1970s America as a case study of thrillers.<sup>1</sup> Jerry Palmer (1978), concludes his study of the origins, structure and development of the thriller with a consideration of the "anti-thriller"; like many other theorists of the genre, therefore, he posits the decline of the thriller in the time that he is writing (see Chapter 2, below). The present thesis deals with a period that ended only thirteen years ago; unlike Palmer and others we will be unable to suggest anything remotely like the demise of the thriller genre. The 1980s and early 1990s have seen the success of such films as *48 Hours* (1982), *Gorky Park* (1983) *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), *Jagged Edge* (1985), *Prizzi's Honor* (1985), *Salvador* (1986), *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *The Untouchables* (1987), *The Big Easy* (1987), *Robocop* (1988), *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Basic Instinct* (1992); such TV programmes as *Miami Vice*, *The A-Team*, *Hill Street Blues*, *Cagney and Lacey*, and *Magnum, P.I.*; such novelists as Tom Clancy, Loren Estleman, James Ellroy, Thomas Harris, Jonathan Kellerman, Sara Paretsky, Scott Turow and Andrew Vacchs; as well as the continued success of such seventies novelists as Lawrence Sanders, George V. Higgins, Elmore Leonard, Robert B. Parker, Robert Ludlum and Joseph Wambaugh. Like any other period of the thriller's existence, the 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a great deal of diversity within

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<sup>1</sup> This case study of the 1970s involves the study of thrillers which were published in America at any time after 1 January 1970 and before 31 December 1979. Such an arbitrary choice of case study boundaries was purposely made in order to provide an almost 'random' corpus of generic texts and to attempt to avoid discussing thrillers solely by reference to their 'theme'. There are, however, a few occasions in the thesis when thrillers from 1969 and 1980 are discussed - the reasons for this will be explained in the body of the thesis.



the thriller genre. It is this diversity which has largely been responsible for providing the strength of parts which contribute to the genre's whole. These parts have often individually manifested a response to the changing social situation of the thriller, addressing prominent changes in the contemporary social formation in tandem with the characteristics which might be thought to constitute the fictional specificity of the thriller text. As such, therefore, they have been the location of innovation within the genre as a whole, in a manner which has been effected by the action of history as it is disseminated through a series of discourses outside the generic text. It might be possible, therefore, to identify the ways in which texts from the thriller genre may have certain meanings at certain historical moments.

In light of this we can say that there are a number of reasons for selecting the 1970s as a case study of thrillers and these are inextricably linked to the need to focus on the *American* thriller rather than, say, the British or French thriller. One reason regards the unprecedented way in which political readings of thrillers might possibly be arranged in the period: events in American politics during the 1970s seemed to resemble, in a manner that they never had before, the events that are often thought to characterize thriller narratives. We will discuss this in slightly more depth shortly and at greater length throughout the thesis, specifically with reference to the way in which 'liberalism' might be argued to characterize contemporary understandings of the 1970s American thriller. The initial two reasons for the case study are, firstly, that the proximity of the 1970s to our own time emphasizes the thriller's continuing strength and the consolidation of its past; secondly, this strength is frequently manifested through the sum of the thriller's parts. As a result, the issue within the study of genre that must arise whenever a case study of texts is proposed is the notion of 'sub-genre'. As we mentioned earlier, there are theorists who believe that there is a case to be made for recognizing the importance of certain sub-sections of the thriller genre such as the 'police procedural' or the 'spy story'. These are seen to be distinct kinds of texts which are joined by their common adherence to at least some of the strictures from the set



thought to make up the thriller genre. Clearly, the notion of subgenre is very important for the theory of genre as a whole as it entails thinking genre in terms of its ability to embrace a multiplicity of different texts and textualities which might invite the allegiances of different audiences. In addition, it allows flexibility within genre: certain sub-genres may experience a relative upsurge or decline in popularity at various stages in the history of the thriller generally. It is this fact which therefore makes it possible to consider a particular configuration of sub-genres as constituting what might be called, generally, the 1970s thriller. Moreover, it could be argued that such a fact does not necessarily entail that the larger, embracing, genre simply degenerates into an ensemble of localized sub-genres. On the contrary, the thriller's longevity has often been enhanced by the popularity of one or more of its sub-genres in a given historical period, for example, the 'Mayhem Parva' school of British 'whodunits' in the years between the First and Second World Wars (see Palmer 1978 pp. 93 ff). The specific historical meanings of sub-genres in a like way, coupled with their abundant proliferation in the period, make the 1970s very apposite for a case study of the thriller.

The thriller's resilience, specificities and ability to incorporate a wide range of very different texts is very suitably demonstrated by the specific sub-genres of the American thriller in the 1970s that this thesis examines. The non-fiction thriller which demonstrates an overlap between fictional and non-fictional narrative and assists in effecting the spillage of the non-fictional into the realm of the thriller genre, has particular determinants rooted in the period. Some of these determinants are concerned with the contemporary currency of what was called the 'New Journalism' and 'documentary fiction' or 'faction' in the mainstream American novel; more importantly, what was perceived as one of the most momentous political events of the period - Watergate - and the incremental unfolding of its narrative, came to be embodied in a non-fiction thriller. With regard to the 'Blockbuster' texts it is clear that some feature of them was very new: this was that they were embedded in previously unconsidered publicity strategies. The waves of publicity and advance marketing that accompanied

the 'Blockbuster' texts that we will discuss became almost commonplace in the post-seventies period; however, as we will see, the construction of the notion of the 'Blockbuster' was something that had not occurred in such a way before our period of discussion. The other four sub-genres that we will consider can also be seen to be specific phenomena of the 1970s and, once more, intimately tied to political events of the decade. The hard-boiled story had, to an extent, been a mainstay of the American thriller genre since the late 1920s; but why should it experience the resurgence that it underwent in the 1970s? We need in this thesis to examine the ways in which the hard-boiled story may have been seen to articulate specific contemporary political issues that may not have been explored so extensively in other sub-genres of the thriller. For example, gender and the role of the family have frequently been central to the hard-boiled story; but, in the 1970s, imperatives to do with these topics became particularly prevalent outside the fictional texts. The 'crime story' is a similar case in point: narratives concerned with the acts of criminals had arguably constituted the thriller from its inception. However, in the 1970s, the American crime story seemed to take on distinctive features which contemporary commentators characterized in terms of violence, amorality, 'realism' and fragmented points of view. We need to question such significant mutations of the genre and why they took place at this time by considering the extent to which they were determined by the contemporary social formation.

What we call the 'paranoid narratives' could be seen to be the most important texts of all as a reference point for understanding popular fiction of the period. Palmer (1978) demonstrates that the notion of conspiracy is fundamental to the thriller and this argument may also be said to be incorporated into common sense appraisals of the genre. As a putatively dominant feature of the thriller, conspiracy might be responsible for organizing perceptions of what thriller texts depict in their narratives. However, the notion of conspiracy saturated not just thrillers, but also news discourses about the real world in 1970s America; and this saturation possibly fuelled paranoid fears which were not dissimilar to those thought to be narrated in thrillers. What is notable was that these



paranoid fears as they were framed by news discourses were 'liberal' in character and often constructed in opposition to the bureaucracy, secrecy and surveillance measures of the government. The significance of this is a key to understanding the reasons for studying the 1970s thriller: never before had the concept of paranoia been as synonymous with liberal concerns in America as it was during this period. So, paranoia and the fear of conspiracy, while they might be considered as general unchanging principles of the thriller, represent a specific and powerful current in the period under discussion. Also, the way in which this configuration of forces in the 1970s acts to fundamentally transform conceptions of the thriller - and, specifically, the paranoid text - cannot be underestimated. Such recent films as *Sneakers* (1992) and *Bob Roberts* (1992), can be read as paranoid texts where the political complexion of the paranoia is definitively forged by developments in the 1970s thriller, namely the equation of paranoia with liberal fears over abuses carried out by right-wing authorities. That such a fundamental transformation of the meaning of the supposed distinctive feature of a genre can take place and can be historically situated, seems to me a very important basis for developing genre theory. As we will see, this kind of conception of generic innovation envisages more frequent transformations of this kind and a greater fluidity of meaning within genre.

The final subgenre that we consider, the 'revenge' text, can tell us a great deal about the relation of genre fiction and history. Once again, revenge can be seen as a textual feature of many pre- and post-seventies texts. But what those texts from the seventies that we discuss can be actually said to depict is a very historically specific conception of what revenge might mean. In addition, they also depict political overdetermination by focussing on such seemingly diverse features of the 1970s American social formation as the fate of the Vietnam veteran, inner-city crime and a backlash (associated with the New Right) against a perceived liberal consensus. Recent popular films such as *Universal Soldier* (1992) and *Falling Down* (1993) can be said to cover ground which is similar to the revenge narratives discussed in this thesis; what our discussion will



seek in part to demonstrate implicitly, therefore, is that features of many American thrillers in the seventies and post-seventies period can actually be shown to be determined in a manner which has implications for the reading of later thrillers. So, on the one hand, possible meanings accruing to features of subsequent thriller texts may have their roots in meanings which were forged by a specifically 1970s configuration; on the other, they may be the result of a subtle transformation of the features' 1970s meanings.

As we mentioned earlier, another period of the thriller's existence might be amenable to the same kind of analysis that we conduct in this thesis: the relationship between readings of the American thriller and such phenomena as McCarthyism in the 1950s, for example, might yield similar theoretical results to those contained in this thesis. However, a discussion of the possible contemporary readings of the *1970s thriller* has the added advantage to the present analysis of demonstrating the genre's *political* flexibility. As we will see, the analyses of Palmer (1978), Mandel (1984) and others are generally concerned with the thriller genre as a capitalist 'container' for narratives; what our case study of the 1970s seeks to demonstrate is that readings of the contemporary thriller were by no means exclusively orientated ultimately to bourgeois values of competitive individualism as formulated by Palmer, but, on occasion, might have actively embodied some kind of protest, even if only reformist in nature. The specific sub-genres that we discuss all represent the possibility of identifying the thriller's political aspect, particularly in terms of general political trends - such as a liberal consensus - which might be perceived to have existed in the American social formation of the 1970s. We will attempt to show, therefore, through the use of the 1970s thriller as a case study, that innovation in genre may have a variable, rather than a static, political character

We have now identified a number of principal issues that this thesis must address - text-reader interaction, non-static theories of genre, generic innovation, the work of

extra-textual discourses and the relation of history to texts. The difficulty involved in discussing these individually complex areas is exacerbated by the need to consider their points of overlap and the way they shift in relation to each other. As a result, we will need to employ a core of highly specialized theoretical terms, the meaning of which will be outlined now.

## Investment

What will be of increasing importance for us in the assessment of the thriller in its contemporary reading is the potential that the text allows for readers' 'investments'. A few words are in order, then, regarding what we will understand by the use of the term 'investment', and these must be preceded by a brief note about the evolution of the concept.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud writes of dream ideas as being "Charged with psychical energy" (1976 p. 263 n. 1). This notion of a charge, as numerous authorities attest, is derived from neurological conceptions of the transmission of impulses (see, for example, Laplanche and Pontalis 1988 pp. 62 ff and Strachey in Freud 1976 pp. 40 ff); Freud, however, does not elaborate at great length on the meaning or definition of the term in psychoanalysis despite its centrality to Chapter VII of the dream book and works such as *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (in Freud 1979). Freud may have felt that detailed definitions of the term were unnecessary: the English translation of Freud's word for this psychical charge was the quasi-scientific term, 'cathexis'; Freud, on the other hand, in his original texts employed the German word *besetzung* to describe the phenomenon. Where the two differ is in the fact that *besetzung* is in everyday usage in the German language. It is well-known that Freud was unhappy with the English translation of the term (see Laplanche and Pontalis 1988 p. 65), and his German usage of *besetzen* was meant to convey the sense of the verb 'to occupy' in the



context of a military occupation of a town or territory. An alternative proposed translation for the term is 'investment' (ibid. p. 65), and this is the one that it is appropriate for us to adopt in subsequent discussion of the term.

The concept of *besetzung* will be the basis of our understanding of *readers'* investments. Rather than just a psychical charge, we will operate from the hypothesis that a reader's investment involves a *social* charge which focusses on those aspects of the text which connect in some way with aspects of the reader's existence in the social world. In this way it is necessary for us to retain the sense of 'occupation' in describing the text-reader interaction. What we will suggest is that the reader is involved in a process of bringing specific social meanings to the text and thoroughly imbuing the narrative with them, a process which will be examined in more detail in Chapter 4. The reader, as a great deal of the reader-response criticism that we will discuss attests, does not passively 'receive' fictional texts; instead, s/he is involved in creating the meaning of narratives. This does not entail merely assisting in the construction of the narrative but also the rendering of it in terms of any social meaning it might be made to possess.

This is all that needs to be stated specifically about investments at this stage. In order for us to understand how the reader is able to make the jump in his/her construction of meaning from the realm of social life to the realm of a generic text, however, we will have to theorize the operation of narrative in both domains.

### **The Realm of the 'Always Already Narrativized'**

In Chapters 3-6 especially it will become clear how categories of narrative are important in readers' understanding of the social world and their understanding of generic texts. We will delay detailed discussion until then but it is worth mentioning the concept that is central to all these chapters, that of the 'always already narrativized'. The first



observation that must be made about the relation of the fictional text to the real world is a commonplace, but important, one; Iser puts it thus

The world repeated in the text is obviously different from the one it refers to, if only because, as a repetition, it must differ from its extratextual existence, and this holds equally true of all types of discourse, textual or otherwise, since no rendering can *be* that which it renders (1989 p. 251).

As Iser states, the text cannot be the real world, and we will follow him in asserting that the realms of the text and the world operate under different rules. However, we will not adhere to the notion that the world can be readily apprehended; our reasons for this will become clear in Chapter 4. As a preliminary, though, we must state that understanding of the real world is taken in this thesis to be an understanding of an entity which is thoroughly mediated. When we discuss the history of 1970s America, there will be no pretence to a revelation of the truth of what 'really happened' in the United States in the period; instead, there can only be an examination of how key documents might have promoted a certain kind of understanding of contemporary events. History, in this sense, will be understood as a set of possible readings which are made by citizens in the contemporary period and historians after major events of the period have been reported. The ideas of *reports* and possible *readings of them* are therefore crucial to us in assessing the realm of history. This entails that we understand the history of the period in terms of texts; moreover, we will posit that these texts are dominated by a narrative mode. What we are suggesting, in effect, is that events in the real world are not apprehended in a direct way; in fact, they are largely available only in mediated ways or, put another way, they are apprehended by human agents as always already narrativized. This position owes a great deal to the historiographer, Hayden White; for example, he writes

The older distinction between fiction and history, in which fiction is conceived as the representation of the imaginable and history as the representation of the actual, must give place to the recognition that we only know the *actual* by contrasting it with or likening it to the *imaginable*. As thus conceived, historical narratives are complex structures in which a world of experience is imagined to exist under at least two modes, one of which is encoded as 'real', the other of which is 'revealed' to have been illusory in the course of the narrative. Of course, it is a fiction of the historian that the various states of affairs which he constitutes as the beginning, the middle, and the end of a course of development are all 'actual' or 'real' and that he has merely recorded 'what happened' in the transition from the inaugural to the terminal phase. But both the beginning state of affairs and the ending one are inevitably poetic constructions, and as such, dependent on the modality of the figurative language used to give them the aspect of coherence. This implies that all narrative is not simply a recording of 'what happened' in the transition from one state of affairs to another, but a progressive redescription of sets of



events in such a way as to dismantle a structure encoded in one verbal mode in the beginning so as to justify a recoding of it in another mode at the end. This is what the middle of all narratives consist of (1987 p. 98).

White's rethinking of the relations between 'history' and 'fiction' will be crucial to this thesis. What it is important to note is that White shows that the 'facts' of history are not simply pure entities which become available; they actually already have a narrative form. We might qualify this somewhat by saying that this is not just the case for the historian but also for contemporary understanding of events, especially those which are not witnessed directly. This may not be an important observation on its own but when it is applied to the movement between fictional and non-fictional modes its relevance is clear. If 'historical facts' are always already narrativized - that is to say they are always available in a narrative form - then they can theoretically appear in a number of texts. However, the understanding of them as 'historical facts' rather than any other kind of narrative entity will depend on how their manifestation is designated, or presented to be read.

Barbara Herrnstein Smith's analysis (to which we will return in Chapter 8) makes a similar point in its emphasis on the 'purposes' of narrative; she writes that

in seeking to account for either the forms and features of individual narratives or the similarities and differences among sets of narratives, we might profitably direct our attention to the major variables involved in those transactions: that is to, to the particular motives and interests of narrators and audiences and to the particular social and circumstantial conditions that elicit and constrain the behaviour of each of them (in Mitchell 1981 p. 229).

Although Herrnstein Smith's conclusions seem to have been influenced by speech act theory, the general principles that she outlines have some affinity with those suggested by White's work. For now we will note that the world of the generic text and the real world are not distinct by virtue of the latter being a realm of ineluctable facts but that both are heavily dominated by narrative in the generation of meaning within their realms. In addition, it must not be assumed that narrative form severely limits the complexity of either historical or fictional material; on the contrary, as White points out with regard to the topic of interpretation in history

[The historian] in his efforts to reconstruct 'what happened' in any given period of history, the historian inevitably must include in his narrative an account of some event or complex of events for which the facts that would permit a plausible explanation of its occurrence are lacking. And this means that the

historian must 'interpret' his materials by filling in the gaps in his information on inferential or speculative grounds. A historical narrative is thus necessarily a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts, at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative (1987 p. 51).

The importance of narrative and its potential polysemy in the realms of the fictional and the non-fictional has far reaching consequences for the study of genre.

These principles will become clearer, however, as the thesis progresses. What we must also mention here is the manner in which it is possible for specific configurations of narratives in the non-fictional realm to exist at certain moments in history. Implicit in the following chapters will be a precise understanding of two problematic terms: ideology and hegemony.

## **Ideology and Hegemony**

Because we have suggested that there is a realm of narrative in which the 'real' or 'history' is mediated, this might give the impression that we are positing a theory of the mediated realm as analogous to (or the same as) ideology understood as an 'illusion'. In such a theory the 'real' or 'history' would be unknowable. This issue has been the focus for heated debate in the last twenty years or so; without assuming to provide a comprehensive overview of the main arguments we must at least mention what was mainly held to be at stake in those debates and what issues are particularly pertinent for our analysis.

The Algerian born philosopher, Althusser, was one of the most severe critics of those theories of ideology in which history is 'unknowable'; this can be witnessed in his arguments against Marx and Engels' *The German Ideology* (see Althusser 1984 pp. 33 ff). For Althusser ideology is virtually the opposite of scientific knowledge which, he asserts, will yield details of objective conditions of human existence. Although we can



identify specific institutional ideologies, for Althusser all humans are inside a general realm of ideology. Following this there are two grounds of criticism of Althusser's project which are important for us. Firstly, despite the complexity of the way in which he says ideology is determined, Althusser insists that ideology and the institutions pertaining to ideology are determined "in the last instance" by the economic base (ibid. p. 9). Secondly, he asserts that ideology is vested in concrete institutions ('Ideological State Apparatuses' or 'ISAs') which act to 'interpellate' individuals as always already subjects (of ideology) (ibid. p. 45). These theories have been criticized by numerous diverse writers on the topic of ideology and the 'moment of Althusser' (see, for example, Benton 1984; Clarke et al 1980; Smith 1984; and Forgacs 1988). What is crucial for us, however, is the idea that the arena of ideology that Althusser identifies constitutes the whole of human subjectivity; it is here that ideological struggle must take place and on its terms rather than in terms of an ideal realm 'outside' ideology which can only be apprehended by an unproblematized 'scientific knowledge'. Althusser's claim that Marxism-Leninism enables a scientific vision of the 'true' conditions of existence has been challenged by some of the critics mentioned. In short, they ask "How can we be sure?" Bocock puts it another way:

Such a view as that held by Althusser appeared to many to be over-dogmatic, difficult to state in a coherent form, and potentially totalitarian (1986 p. 15).

Secondly, and connected to this, is the question of the extent to which human agents can effect ideological struggle given the dominance of the ISAs.<sup>2</sup> What concerns us is that, in the realm of interpretation of certain discourses or narratives by which the social world is made available to its subjects there must be room for formulations made not only by some of the institutions responsible for the circulation of discourses (for example, media organizations), but also those made by subjects as well.

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<sup>2</sup> It has become fashionable in the last ten years or so to summarily dismiss the work of Althusser in a fashion not dissimilar to that of my brief discussion, above. This caricature of his position with regard to ideology is offered in this case only as a means of delineating our areas of interest in subsequent chapters. It is clear that there is further study to be done on Althusser's work as witnessed in Elliott (1987); on the topic of ideological struggle, Benton (in Appignanesi 1989 p. 102) points out that Althusser's battles with the PCF often revolved around the former's insistence on the importance of the "powers of imagination and inventiveness of the masses" (c.f. Pêcheux 1982 especially pp. 212 ff).

This is not to suggest that ideological struggle takes place only in a textual realm; it would be clearly wrong to abandon Althusser's fundamental thesis that ideology is embodied in material practices other than those concerned with the dissemination of 'factual' information. He writes that, for the subject,

his ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject (ibid. p. 43; c.f. Althusser 1977 pp. 232 ff).

This is one area in which the work of Althusser, as well as that of Foucault, has demonstrated how ideology is vested in the practices that derive from institutions. Even if we abandon the mechanistic notion of interpellation, in the discussion of the thriller's relation to history the fact of the material existence of ideology must not be lost: the means by which knowledge of the contemporary world is thoroughly mediated - that is, through discourses about the social formation - cannot exist without an institutional basis. News discourses, for example, or publicity discourses, are all organized according to a set of procedures specific to the institutions whence they are disseminated. They are therefore imbued with a specific set of imperatives which exist before the subject. Whereas Althusser's conception of ideology is based on the belief that such discourses *constitute* the subject, following Pêcheux (1982) et al., we will proceed from a different point. Pêcheux' reformulation of the Althusserian problematic is based on a questioning of the possibility of a realm of scientific knowledge. He demonstrates the fundamentally untenable circularity of the process of interpellation, the central problem of which lies in the fact that, as Hirst points out (1979 p. 65), in order for a subject to be interpellated s/he must always already be a subject, must already have a cognitive capacity which allows him/her to participate in subjecthood. Although Pêcheux does not develop this he does focus on those parts of Althusser's work which suggest that ideological domination of subjects necessarily entails ideological resistance and struggle (see especially pp. 214 ff). The way in which Pêcheux addresses this in a preliminary way is to suggest that the unevenness of ideological institutions gives rise to the slips or gashes in the fabric of ideology in general (p. 99). This leads him to posit



the importance of an 'ideological' or 'discursive formation' in which certain possibilities of subjecthood are delineated:

Henceforth I shall call a *discursive formation* that which in a given ideological formation, i.e., from a given position in a given conjuncture determined by the state of the class struggle, determines '*what can and should be said* (articulated in the form of a speech, a sermon, a pamphlet, a report, a programme, etc.)' . . . (p. 111).

What is useful for us with regard to this formulation is the way in which it delineates a social formation in terms of its incorporation of a configuration of pre-designated discourses whose meaning relies not on the intrinsic structure of those discourses but on their function in an ideological/discursive formation. Mark Cousins points out that, for Pêcheux

Meaning is neither more nor less than a particular effect on a subject. The material character of the meaning of words and utterances lies not in the words and utterances themselves; there are no elementary lexical and syntactic units of meaning. The analysis of meaning in language should, properly speaking, be re-posed as an analysis of meaning effects upon subjects within discourse. This is altogether counter-intuitive; it goes against the 'evidence' of daily experience that words have a meaning, and name things. But this very fact, that it flies in the face of what is evidently the case, is a token, for Pêcheux, that it is on the right track. For within such arguments . . . philosophical theories and mundane experiences are at one in Ideology in effacing the real mechanisms of determination (1985 p. 105).

It will become clear why this point about meaning is important for our analysis of the relation of thrillers to the historical moment in which they appear. However, where Pêcheux' arguments are lacking is in their inability to escape from a model of ideology and meaning which ultimately *constitutes* the subject, and in their failure to theorize the role of subjects in social change.

Various analysts have circumvented the theoretical impasse posed by the above questions by introducing the Gramscian notion of 'hegemony' into debates about ideology. As Bocock writes,

Gramscian Marxism contains both the notion that classes are constituted by the dominant mode of production and that groups other than classes may become potential agents of change, that is, able to aim at constituting their economic and political world. National-popular movements were a specific example Gramsci gave of such non-class-based agents of historical and political change (1986 p. 16).

This is a useful summary of the way ideology reformulated in terms of hegemony will be implicit in our consideration of thrillers. It offers us the possibility of theorizing a momentarily dominant configuration of discourses as well as a conceptualization of the



subject as more than the passive receptacle of either ideology or narrative structures. In his 'Notes on Italian History' (in Gramsci 1971 pp. 52 ff) Gramsci states that hegemony exists in the fact that a coalition of forces or classes can exercise power over subordinate classes by means of coercion and/or consent. (These roughly correspond to Althusser's concepts of Repressive State Apparatuses [RSAs] and Ideological State Apparatuses [ISAs] respectively; see Althusser 1984 pp. 16 ff.) Hegemony is concerned with the latter of these, being the designation of the complex achievement and maintenance of power by groups and/or classes in society. Boggs summarises hegemony thus:

By hegemony Gramsci meant the permeation through civil society - including a whole range of structures and activities like trade unions, schools, the churches, and the family - of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs, morality, etc. that is in one way or another supportive of the established order and the class interests that dominate it. Hegemony in this sense might be defined as an 'organizing principle', or world-view (or combination of such world-views), that is diffused by agencies of ideological control and socialization into every area of daily life. To the extent that this prevailing consciousness is internalized by the broad masses, it becomes part of 'common sense'; as all ruling elites seek to perpetuate their power, wealth and status, they necessarily attempt to popularize their own philosophy, culture, morality, etc. and render them unchallengeable, part of the natural order of things. For hegemony to assert itself successfully in any society, therefore, it must operate in a dualistic manner: as a 'general conception of life' for the masses, and as a 'scholastic programme' or set of principles which is advanced by a sector of the intellectuals (1976 p. 39).

What such an understanding of hegemony clearly plays down is Gramsci's insistence on the relationship of hegemony to ideology through thoroughly material practices (see Gramsci 1971 pp. 326 ff; Simon p. 25, pp. 58 ff). Boggs concentrates here more on the notion of consciousness. However, this does suggest that hegemony is to be thought within realms other than those which might be materially observed. Terry Eagleton qualifies this:

Hegemony, then, is not just some successful kind of ideology, but may be discriminated into its various ideological, cultural, political and economic aspects. Ideology refers specifically to the way power-struggles are fought out at the level of signification; and though such signification is involved in all hegemonic processes, it is not in all cases the dominant level by which rule is sustained. Singing the National Anthem comes as close to a 'purely' ideological activity as one could imagine; it would certainly seem to fulfil no other purpose, aside perhaps from annoying the neighbours. Religion, similarly, is probably the most purely ideological of the various institutions of civil society. But hegemony is also carried in cultural, political and economic forms - in non-discursive practices as well as rhetorical utterances (1991 p. 113).

Eagleton is at pains to point out that, although hegemonic struggle may often manifest itself most readily in the realm of signification, what lies behind signification are



material practices and concrete institutions, and these often involve non-discursive practices. Nevertheless, it is clear from Eagleton's understanding of the term that signification within a social formation - those processes where meaning is assigned to discourses - is crucial to the concept of hegemony. Moreover, it is crucial for our analysis: when we come to discuss the specific configurations within which a version of historical events becomes the dominant one, or where certain modes of reading texts might be promoted in favour of others which are not offered as options within the configuration, this concept of hegemony will be implicit in our analysis. Although our discussion may seem to be concerned with entities which are textual through and through, we must remember that they co-exist and often rest upon a series of material practices which may be non-discursive in nature.

What is also important to us in the concept of hegemony is the role played by the subject. The subject for Gramsci is not simply the *product* of a given hegemony and ideology. Despite the fact that he does not state it in these terms, it seems that human subjectivity for Gramsci rests upon the problems which are inherent in the notion of 'interpellation', especially given that the subject to be constituted is always already a subject. He writes

That man cannot be conceived other than living in society is a commonplace. But not all the necessary consequences have been drawn from this, even on an individual level. That a specific human society presupposes a specific 'society of things', and that human society is possible only in so far as there exists a specific society of things, is also a commonplace. It is true that up to now the significance attributed to these supra-individual organisms (both the *societas hominum* and the *societas rerum*) has been mechanistic and determinist: hence the reaction against it. It is necessary to elaborate a doctrine in which these relations are seen as active and in movement, establishing quite clearly that the source of this activity is the consciousness of the individual man who knows, wishes, admires, creates, (in so far as he does know, wish, admire, create, etc.) and conceives himself not as isolated but rich in the possibilities offered him by other men and by the society of things of which he cannot help having a certain knowledge (1971 pp. 353-354).

This does not simply entail the return of the 'humanist' subject that Althusser wished to banish by means of 'theoretical anti-humanism' (see especially Althusser 1977 pp. 219 ff). Gramsci effectively repudiates traditional conceptions of human nature when he writes



That 'human nature' is the 'complex of social relations' is the most satisfactory answer, because it includes the idea of becoming (man 'becomes', he changes continuously with the changing of social relations) and because it denies 'man in general'. Indeed social relations are expressed by various groups of men which each presuppose the others and whose unity is dialectical, not formal. Man is aristocratic in so far as man is a serf, etc. One could also say that the nature of man is 'history' (and, in this sense, given history as equal to spirit, that the nature of man is spirit if one gives to history precisely the significance of 'becoming' which takes place in a '*concordia discors*' [discordant concord] which does not start in unity but contains in itself the reasons for a possible unity). For this reason 'human nature' cannot be located in any man but in the entire history of the human species (and the fact that we use the word 'species', which is a naturalistic word, is itself significant) while in each single individual there are to be found characteristics which are put in relief by being in contradiction with the characteristics of others. Both the conception of 'spirit' found in traditional philosophy and that of 'human nature' found in biology should be explained as 'scientific utopias' which took the place of the greater utopia of a human nature to be sought for in God (and in men as sons of God) and they serve to indicate the continual travail of history, an aspiration of a rational and sentimental kind, etc. It is also true that both the religions which affirm the quality of man as the sons of God and the philosophies which affirm the equality of man as the participants in the faculty of reason have been expressions of complex revolutionary movements (respectively the transformation of the classical world and the transformation of the medieval world) which laid the most powerful links of the chain of historical development (1971 p. 356).

Even though this passage is taken up with an implicit discussion of Hegel what Gramsci seems to be suggesting is that the subject can be operative in a social formation in an oppositional way and that this oppositionality is constructed from, and on the terrain of, social relations and ideology. Roger Simon summarises these ideas thus:

It is through common sense that the workers, trying to live their lives under capitalism, have organised their experience. Common sense is the site on which the dominant ideology is constructed, but it is also the site of resistance and challenge to this ideology. Gramsci stresses that the consent which is secured by hegemony of the bourgeoisie is an active consent, not a passive submission. It is not imposed; rather, it is 'negotiated' by unequal forces in a complex process through which the subordination and the resistance of the workers are created and recreated (1982 p. 64).

Clearly, Gramsci does not play down the forceful role of ideology and hegemony in human subjectivity. Nor, however, does he suggest that they are omnipotent. Instead, the ideological formation - constituted, as Pêcheux suggests, by potential gaps and splits - constantly allows resistance to its prescribed forms. The subject whose complex constitution takes place on this ground is therefore also characterized by the potential of resistance to the hegemony of a given ideological formation. This also entails potential resistance to, or acceptance of, the specific designations of discourses and assignation of meaning which might exist in a hegemonic ideological formation.

The way in which this understanding of hegemony and ideology is implicit in the following discussion of the 1970s American thriller will gradually become manifest as



our argument progresses. In Chapter 3, particularly, we will return to the concept of hegemony explicitly and slightly extend it. However, our use of the term will consist mainly of attempts to identify specific hegemonic configurations within which certain readings of texts may be said to be more historically 'valid'. It is texts in their different (historical) readings which we have suggested will be central to this discussion; in turn, this makes Gramsci's conception of the 'active' subject in relation to hegemony so pertinent to our analysis. The specific manner in which meaning is not simply a one-way process with regard to the realms of history and the generic text will be manifested in the chapters that follow.

## The Chapters

The following chapters consider a diversity of topics from numerous disciplines, not all of which are by any means traditionally assumed to be the realm of textual analysis. A short breakdown of the chapters will therefore provide preliminary assistance in reading the links between discussions of large and varied bodies of work.

In Chapter 1 we will examine modern genre theory in order to pose the question of what the concept of 'genre' actually entails. In addition to posing a challenge to those theories of genre which can be described as 'static', or lacking a means for the accommodation of genre's relationship to social change, we will posit areas for further discussion and elaboration which must be undertaken in order to establish a 'dynamic' model of genre. This will revolve around the consideration of the role of audiences or readers. Chapter 2 will therefore deal with the most urgent topic in delineating an area for the study of genre: the constitution of a generic corpus. This chapter will be specifically concerned with the ways in which histories of the thriller have largely been based on overly subjective principles and/or faulty conceptions of the history of the real

world in its relation to generic texts. In both cases, the central problem will be identified in terms of the difficulties which result from a disregard for the role of readers.

Chapter 3 therefore seeks to present a history of the period in which our corpus of thrillers exist in terms of an understanding of history which is far different from those discussed in Chapter 2. We will consider the American social formation in the 1970s, not exhaustively but with reference to some discourses of the period which are, perhaps, particularly pertinent to a discussion of the contemporary thriller. This will involve an examination of the Watergate scandal and issues to do with the Vietnam war as well as such topics as concern over the status of the family and conceptions of law in the period.

In Chapter 4 we will be concerned with discussing how 'history' might be thought to exist or be represented in the generic text. In order to do this we will first need to examine existing theories of reading and formulate our own; then we must challenge traditional conceptions of what constitutes the identity of non-fictional (or historical) texts in opposition to fictional ones, and how readers negotiate this putative difference. We will posit a theory of reading generic texts which we will put to the test in the chapters that follow. So, in Chapter 5, there is a discussion of the non-fiction thriller. This, we will argue, is a crucial subgenre of the thriller as a whole because it possesses the capacity to influence the readings of other thrillers of the period. Following on from this argument we will discuss a range of non-fiction thrillers which roughly correspond in their general theme or designation to the sub-genres of fictional thrillers that we discuss later. In Chapter 6 we will discuss another corpus of - in this case, fictional - texts which possess the capacity of influencing readings of thrillers. The 'Blockbusters' - massive-selling cinematic and print texts of the period - can potentially be incorporated into the thriller genre as their generic identity is by no means fixed and they are occasionally designated 'thrillers' by publicity discourses. Our discussion will account



for this and attempt to map out the grounds of their influence on the reading of seemingly less problematically designated thrillers of the period.

In Chapter 7 we will discuss a genre which underwent a specific resurgence in the seventies, the hard-boiled story. In addition to assessing its importance in the period we will also discuss the texts in terms of possible reader interaction with them. Hard-boiled stories are traditionally thought to be characterized by a style and a concomitant narrative dynamic which potentially limits the range of readings of them. We will challenge this notion by discussing the hard-boiled story with close attention to its style and the action of the hero. In Chapter 8 we will continue the same line of investigation while also considering the contemporary crime story. This subgenre has been regarded by critics as marking an advance in realism associated with its use of 'vision' in the narrative. The notion that this necessarily entails that the text is to be read in a unitary way is one that we will scrutinize at length here. We will also consider the ways in which crime in the narratives might be understood in the period.

Chapters 9 and 10 deal with sub-genres whose themes and mechanisms allow specifically political readings in the period. In the first of these two chapters we consider the 'paranoid text' which is related to the Watergate scandal, but in a complex rather than an entirely unproblematic way. We will discuss how the category of 'conspiracy' in these texts undergoes a transformation of its political complexion as it is read in the period. In Chapter 10 we will consider a number of thrillers which can be thought of as primarily concerned with the meaning of revenge. Finally, we will suggest that the political implications of revenge as it was arranged to be understood by the contemporary audience represents a site of acute contradiction in the fragile hegemony of the period.

As we have mentioned already, the topic of even the *1970s American* thriller is far too vast for a work of this size to do it justice. Those areas of the genre in the period which



we have not been able to discuss have been paid lip service in Appendix 1. Similarly, the breadth of determinants of possible readings can only ever feasibly *suggested* in what follows. This thesis should therefore be considered as merely a preliminary glance at the grounds for assessing a genre historically.

# CHAPTER 1

## What is Genre?

It's a trap this matter of definition, and I can't think of a more boring academic subject. Like endless discussions of breath units in modern poetry or the possible intrusiveness of some punctuation in the short story, it is really a discussion of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, and not really interesting unless those involved in the discussion are drunk or graduate students - two states of roughly similar incompetence (King 1982 pp. 30-31).

Since there is no end to the genre distinctions that might be made, there is no point in making more of them than the critical end in view requires (Fowler 1982 p. 130).

## Introduction

The initial problem that exists when one considers the concept of genre is that it is used in different ways by the analyst and the consumer of popular fictional forms. The two quotes above are small testimonies to this fact. Stephen King, writing as a user and consumer of popular fiction, pays little attention to the need for theoretical distinctions between, in his case, sci-fi and fantasy. Alastair Fowler, as theorist of genre, takes up a similar stance but is distinguished from 'users' of genre because, for him, genre distinctions have a theoretical significance. It is a problem that theorists are quick to point out:

One reason genre is so intriguing a concept is that it is related both to very specialized technical issues and to very broad human ones (Dubrow 1982 p. 2).

For years [genre] provided a crudely useful way of delineating the American cinema. The literature abounds with references to the 'Western', 'Gangster' movie or 'Horror' film, all of which are loosely thought of as *genre*. On occasions it also becomes almost the end point of the critical process to fit a film into such a category, much as it once made a film 'intelligible' to fit it into, say, the French 'nouvelle vague'. To call a film a 'Western' is thought of as somehow saying something interesting and important about it. To fit it into a class of films about which we presumably have some general knowledge (Tudor 1970 p. 34; c.f., for example, Tudor 1976 p. 119).

The concept of genre is split between a common sense usage in which moviegoers, novel readers, TV viewers and others see it as a shorthand for textual classification and an academic usage where theorists search for textual organization and patterns of (often social) meaning. In other words, a lover of romances, for example, will look to certain signs about the text before choosing to read it, deciding whether it is 'something for me'. An academic comes to a corpus of texts and interrogates them on the basis of some perceived common characteristics that those texts seem to share.

This need not necessarily present a difficulty in some disciplines: a lover of roses may be very fond of the perfume given off by a number of different breeds of rose, in preference to that of other flowers; the scientist can also categorize all roses according to a range of shared botanical tendencies. The scientist and rose lover need have no knowledge of each other's relation to the flower in question. In the analysis of texts by reference to genre, matters are different; in most cases academic classifications of texts,



particularly popular texts, have to feed off prior classifications made by audiences, the industry responsible for the production of a given text, the set of discourses associated with the publicity attached to texts (including reviews, interviews, film posters, publishers' notices etc.). The genre theorist, unlike the botanist, does not have an object that is unproblematically available, objectively 'there'. The inherent difficulty for theorists entailed in such a situation was stated economically by Buscombe in 1970 when he said that

if we want to know what a Western is we must look at certain kinds of films. But how do we know which films to look at until we know what a Western is? (p. 35).

*Film Noir* is one example of a classification of popular texts which originated in academic circles. A number of American films from the 1940s were taken to constitute a set by post-war French critics. These critics had quite cogent reasons - based on textual analysis of style - for creating their taxonomy, despite the fact that the original audience for these films, not to mention the industry that created them, had not put this body of films into a generic category (Krutnik 1991 p. 15).

However, as a rule, genre theorists have to deal with objects that in many cases have been pre-designated as genres by other groups and discourses. Such theorists generally wish to analyse texts far more deeply than the prescriptions of the producers would allow, and seek to discover connections between a body of texts within their own terms of analysis rather than accepting the commercial nomenclature. So a film set in the American West featuring horses, gunplay etc. and marketed as a 'Western' by the film's producers, does not, for many genre analysts, necessarily entail that the film is a Western and belongs with a series of similar texts. For the genre theorist, industry terminology can often be a trap: it promotes certain aspects of the text's structure and pays less attention to others. In fact, in so ignoring aspects of a text's composition, genre ascription by the industry may even *repress* aspects of the text. The genre theorist, rather than falling into the position where s/he accepts the industry definition often attempts to break free and describe what lies beyond the genre label. Adopting

industry criteria (e.g. that of Hollywood) was a 'trap' precisely because the culture industry could create commodities and categorize them as they wished. One possible antidote to this was to employ a theoretical rigour in the interrogation of genre texts and to bracket industry classifications which seemed inappropriate.

## Modern Genre Theory

Tzvetan Todorov's famous formulation may have served as a spur to genre theorists who wished to distance their discussion of genre from common sense and industry uses of the term. In *The Fantastic*, Todorov performs a dichotomous separation of all genres:

In order to avoid all ambiguity, we should posit, on the one hand, *historical genres*; on the other *theoretical genres*. The first would result from an observation of literary reality; the second from a deduction of a theoretical order. What we learn in school about genres always relates to historical genres: we are told about classical tragedy because there have been, in France, works which manifested their relation to this literary form. We find examples of theoretical genres, on the other hand, in works of the ancient writers on poetics . . . There are a certain number of genres not because more have not been observed, but because the principle of the system imposes that number. It is therefore necessary to deduce all the possible combinations from the categories chosen. We might even say that if one of these combinations had in fact never been manifested, we should describe it even more deliberately . . . (1973 pp. 13-14).

Put briefly, Todorov suggests that a certain number of genres already exist and have existed in the past but the role of the academic is also to study the fundamental principles of these - in a similar way to that of Frye (1957)<sup>1</sup> - and envision possible developments of genres.

One can see how Todorov's formulation seeks to bifurcate the concept of genre, placing academic study of the topic within a framework inherited from classical poetics. In literary theory and classical studies genre has had quite a long history(see, among

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that Frye's archetypal criticism is so often cited by literary theorists is testimony to its importance for mainstream criticism. However, it is so concerned with canonical fiction, and based on a conventional view of literary history, that it is inappropriate for a discussion such as the present one which covers, and attempts to reconcile, genre theories concerned with audio-visual as well as print fiction. This chapter therefore locates modern genre criticism in the theoretical spaces commonly designated by critics as structuralism and post-structuralism.



others, Dubrow op. cit. especially pp. 4-94 and Sobchak in Grant 1986). For our purposes it is worth noting that from the classical period until the twentieth century genre had a normative complexion. That is, it presented a set of rules for the ideal text to obey, for example the obliviousness to the laws of fate of the protagonist in tragedy. If the text did not obey these rules it was not a tragedy. In the twentieth century the category of genre takes on a generative existence, as a set of conditions to assist in the production of a text but not as conditions which *must* be met to prevent the text falling outside the genre category. So, for example, the tragedies of Sophocles fall within the norms set out by Aristotle, while those of Arthur Miller use some of those norms to generate quite different drama. The latter, however, we still consider tragedy.

Modern genre theory has developed most rapidly since the 1970s. It is clear that the genre theory most applicable to the enormous breadth of popular culture has been explored within the realm of film studies, a discipline which has confronted issues to do with industrial production, aesthetics and large corpuses of texts. Other modes of approaching genre critically have in-built limitations: Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* deals with a very small number of existing and possible texts within the canon, a fact which, before taking into account further limitations, marks it as unsuitable for large scale genre criticism of popular texts. As Palmer (1991a) points out,

All popular narrative is produced in quantities which make it unamenable to extensive analysis - soap opera especially is produced far faster than anyone can analyse it, and thus the more one analyses, the further one gets behind (p. 2).

To a great extent, the genre analysis carried out by film theorists recognized these factors. The seminal essay on film genre is often taken to be that of Warshow (1945) but the work which seems to have had quite an important influence on contemporary theories of genre was published in the early 1970s. A series of articles in *Screen* during 1970, by Ryall, Buscombe, Collins and Tudor as well as Kitses' *Horizons West* (1969) explored some of the key issues still current in genre theory today. These included whether the Western, for example, was constituted by visual elements, or by stock situations, or by plot determinants; whether the industry repeated formulas by



audience fiat, and whether 'auteurs' were responsible for the construction of meaning in genre films. In a sense, these articles took up Todorov's imperative of *theoretically* exploring genre, paying close attention to how genre texts function. And such approaches, when taken up in other areas, bore fruit, allowing theorists to map out the structure of, for example, thrillers (Palmer 1978), Westerns (Wright 1975) and adventure, mystery and melodrama texts (Cawelti 1976).

Before considering some of the theoretical gains of this work and how they have been developed over the last twenty years it is worth offering some criticism. At the risk of lumping these diverse studies together I would suggest that they tend to suffer from a number of shared deficiencies. Jim Kitses in *Horizons West* quite clearly treads a path between cinematic auteur theories and genre, stressing the formulas and patterns of meaning to be found in the Western, and is at pains to stress that genre is not merely an "empty vessel" into which auteurship can be poured (p. 25). Despite these claims, treating genre as a vessel is precisely what the 1970s theorists seem to be doing whether they embark from an auteurist position or from a formalist one. Many realize that genre, in its very organizing principles, carries some meaning; but they assume that that meaning is constant, unchanged by the extra-textual and unmoved by a text's content. Cawelti, for instance puts heavy emphasis on the notion that the 'formulas' of popular narrative are the key expressions of cultural groups' desires:

formulas become collective cultural products because they successfully articulate a pattern of fantasy that is at least acceptable if not preferred by the cultural groups that enjoy them (1976 p. 34).

In Palmer's very different approach to genre (1978) we can still see a crucial similarity. Considering the ideological issues of heroism, competition and conspiracy he concludes that

it is important to remember that what is specific to the thriller - what it is that attracts the thriller reader, critical or otherwise - is the view of the world the thriller proposes (p. 81).

What these approaches have in common is their reliance on the explanatory power of factors internal to the texts to define the genre. Formal properties of the texts themselves - structure, plot, character, setting - are relied upon by the 1970s theorists to

constitute the genre on their own without sufficient recourse to further determinants. Film theorists had the advantage of the paramount importance of the visual in their object of study; as a result, analyses of cinematic narrative genres often take into account generic elements beyond those of plot and structure - most obviously, 'iconography', those visual elements that mark the presence of a genre text e.g. the outfit of a cowboy in a Western. (Buscombe op. cit. lays particular stress on this). For film theorists at this time, stressing the notion of iconography, a fact so specific to film, was one way of delimiting their critical space. Similarly, those studies that concerned themselves with print genres often pointed out the diversity of content in the genre under study. Palmer, for instance amasses an impressive amount of sociological detail to examine "the denser and more complex . . . fictional representation of the world" offered by some thrillers (1978 p. 81).

Despite much of the attention to detail in genre studies of the 1970s many of them seem to be at least implicitly indebted to Propp (1968) as well as to Todorov. (The English translation of Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* had been available since 1958 and appeared in book form ten years later.) It is difficult to overestimate the influence that Propp has had on textual analysis and if we take his notion of character as an example we can see its importance for genre theorists. For Propp, character is merely a function of the text and he reduces character in the Russian folktale to just seven functions or spheres of action (1968 pp. 79-83). Fictional protagonists are therefore subordinate to story structure. So, in this way, the hero in detective fiction can be recognized as a function of suspense across a certain body of texts; the villain acts in a sphere of action associated with conflict; the heroine in romantic fiction is marked as the site of awakening sexuality in a different corpus of texts, and so on. These principles seem to have been embraced by genre theorists and are not without value. However, at the level of character in texts it can be argued conclusively that Propp is not entirely correct in his assumptions at all. There are various audience investments in characters which take



characters beyond the threshold of spheres of action. (I will return to this point later. See also Cobley forthcoming).

What Propp lends the genre theorists, in short, is the idea that some texts have a structure that can be repeated time and again with different contents and generally carry the same meaning. This, of course, is similar to an empty vessel and what it implies is that genre is objectively 'there', like a botanical specimen with its own immanent and observable structures. Taken this way one could say that such a conception of genre was inherently 'monologic' relying only on itself for its own existence. And this would be a caricature. It is, in fact, the case that many of these studies rely heavily on some kind of dialogue. Cawelti especially plays up his own notion of audience feedback of its aspirations to the producers of popular culture (1976 pp. 20-36; see also Cawelti 1970 and 1979) But Palmer and Wright also conduct implicitly dialogical studies. What *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* and *Sixguns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* have in common has been stated by Tony Bennett in his comments on the sociology of genres. Such analyses, and Marxist ones in particular, focus on

the common social conditions obtaining whenever and wherever genres make their first and subsequent appearances, seeking in these their real foundations and supports (1990 p.78).

The key problem with such approaches is that they cannot deal with the transience of genres. They cannot explain adequately why genres die out or why certain genres experience revivals. In addition concentration on the genesis of a genre, as we will see later, presupposes ongoing social conditions for the duration of a genre's existence while failing to appreciate the significance of a given genre's mutations. However, by stressing some kind of homology between social and fictional structures, these studies can be seen to be, to some extent at least, dialogic. (We will return to the question of this homology when we consider [aesthetic] domination, innovation and the issue of social change).

However, for now we can conclude that genre theorists in the 1970s were not *sufficiently* dialogic in their approaches. Curiously, in following Todorov's imperative, genre theorists pulled away from the very determinants of genres' existence - the audience and the industry. Rick Altman confronts this issue directly and it is worth quoting him at length:

In spite of the repeated pronouncements of Todorov and others, there is no place outside of history from which purely 'theoretical' definitions of genre might be made. In substituting his so-called 'theoretical' definition of the fantastic for a series of historical categories (fairy tale, ghost story, gothic novel, etc.), Todorov is only substituting a *current historical* understanding of literature (heavily dependent on contemporary fashions of psychoanalysis and formal analysis) for a *former historical* definition of literature (referring instead to literature's mimetic function and thus dependent on content paradigms). Reading *The Fantastic* less than a generation after its publication, we already recognize its vocabulary, its methodological tools, and its compartmentalization of literature as marked by a particular period which only recently was the present, which may once have appeared not-yet-historical, but which we now identify with structuralism. The 'fantastic' as defined by Todorov is already (*was always already*) a historical genre. 'Theoretical', when it is opposed to 'historical', defines a utopian space, a 'no place' from which the critic may seemingly justify blindness to his/her own historicity (1987 p. 6).

As Altman goes on to explain, this does not necessarily entail that the theorist must embrace all the categories that a society traditionally recognizes. However, I would add that the logic which dictates that theorists feed off prior classifications made elsewhere cannot be effaced and that such a relation has implicated the discourses I mentioned above in the determination of genres. As well as placing the analyst outside history I would also suggest that Todorov's notion of the 'theoretical' served to push theorists away from the bulk of genres' key determinants.

More decisively, perhaps, Todorov's bisection of genre depended on an enunciative evaluation, derived from Plato and Diomedes, which divided all works into three possible abstract categories: those in which only the narrator speaks; those in which only the characters speak; and those in which both speak (Todorov 1973 p. 14). By relying on such a reduction, especially one that failed to take into account the full implications of the term 'enunciation', the theory of genres became very one-sided.

Jerry Palmer has summarized the problems inherent in distinguishing genres enunciatively.

Firstly, such distinctions are limited unless we include non-fiction in the field of analysis: fictional genres distinguishable on the basis of enunciation would be drama, film, TV, lyric, verbal narrative (e.g. the novel, the epic: Plato's 'mixed' genre). Non-fictional verbal genres extend the list enormously



... but not the non-verbal list (documentary, news, games). Secondly, it is difficult to distinguish between genre, defined enunciatively, and 'medium'. Media are usually distinguished not on enunciative grounds, but technically and institutionally. If we separate genre distinctions from media distinctions, fictional genres defined enunciatively are few in number. Thirdly, it is arguable that analysing genre at the level of enunciation tells us little about those features of text that are of most interest: to say that *Oedipus the King* and *No Sex Please, We're British* are both drama is a true statement, but perhaps of low information value (1991a p. 5).

That is not to say that there is no point in utilizing enunciative categories. But to do so productively in genre theory, as Palmer points out (1991a p. 5), one must recognize the illocutionary force of enunciative mechanisms. The inscription of the reader in certain enunciations could be said to be the key analytical element that genre theorists of the 1970s left out.

Before exploring some of the issues outstanding in contemporary genre theory, then, we must consider some aspects of work on reading processes and reception which have effectively transformed the field.

## Genre and its Audience

Work on the communication process and reception of literary texts in the last twenty years, especially that of Iser and Jauss, has permeated almost every issue in the theory of genre. Although this is not the place to give a summary of the fortunes of reception theory - in any case this has already been executed competently by Holub (1984) - it is worth looking at a few consequences that reception theory has for the study of genre.

Given that many studies characterized genre as existing in some kind of 'structure of the text', we can see that this may carry certain implications. The most important of these is that such a view of genre causes the depreciation, or even dismissal, of the reader's role in imputing meaning to texts. Very briefly, this movement can be seen in an essay from the 1970s by Judith Hess Wright. Among a number of comments on genre in a more general sense she also offers her insights on the gangster film:

In fact, the gangster film implicitly upholds capitalism by making the gangster an essentially tragic figure (Hess Wright in Grant 1986 p. 48).

So, Hess Wright takes an element that she considers to be central to the structure of the text - the hero - presents him as an unproblematic entity - an essence - and reads off from this element an ideological significance. Basically, she attributes all signification in the genre - ideological or otherwise - to the way the gangster film is organized.

Understandably, such an argument taken to its logical conclusion, has specific assumptions to make about a given genre's audience:

Viewers are encouraged to cease examining themselves and their surroundings, and to take refuge in fantasy from their only real alternative - to rise up against the injustices perpetrated by the present system upon its members (Hess Wright in Grant 1986 p. 49).

Without even considering Hess Wright's simplistic revolutionary prescription, it can be seen that she considers genre to be a one-way process. Genre texts, in her formulation, are organized in such a way that audiences are steam-rolled into accepting any ideological imperatives contained in such texts. The difficulty with this schema is that it is simply untrue. Firstly, Hess Wright has an unproblematic conception of audiences as blank sheets, uncritically accepting what *she* finds in genre texts. Secondly, and inextricably connected, her understanding of what goes on in the interaction of audience and text in the reading process of a genre production is very shallow. Clearly, such a conception of genre lacks a sufficient awareness of the role that readers play in effecting texts' meanings.

Because of the myriad of issues involved, academic work on the complexity of the reading process and audience/text relations is currently flourishing in the study of genres in TV, film, written fiction and so on.<sup>2</sup> Some of the central issues for genre in the reading process, however, have been discussed in a very straightforward way by Wolfgang Iser (1974; 1978; 1989). As one among a number of critics has noticed, what separates traditional literary analysts from reception theorists such as Iser is that, for the latter,

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Ang (1984; 1991); Seiter et al (1989); Liebes and Katz (1986); Radway (1984); Lull (1990) etc



A work is not an object to be studied as if from a distance but is part of a dynamic process, a mutual creation of readers and works (Butterfield 1990 p. 184).

Iser takes this further and suggests that, in the fictional text there are two poles - the artistic and the aesthetic. The former is the text that is created by an author while the latter is the *realization* of that text by the reader in the act of reading. A fictional work cannot be completely identical with the text or with a realization of the text. For Iser the work lies somewhere between the two. (1974 p. 274) To this we might add Iser's astronomical analogy on the possible ways in which a reader may read aspects of a text's structure:

The 'stars' in a literary text are fixed; the lines that join them are variable (1974 p. 282).

This is only a short summary of a very small part of Iser's work on reception but we can begin to see its fecundity for genre theory. Concerning the notion that a fictional work - even a generic one - has only one possible structure with which a reader can interact, Iser stresses that there are a number of ways this structure can be read. The reader can make connections between different parts of the text and these are the work of the reader him/herself, not the text (1974 p. 278). In addition, as there are always gaps in a fictional text - especially written ones - a reader is pretty much left to make his/her own interpretations as to what occurs in these gaps. So, for instance, the reader can imagine the physical appearance of protagonists if they are not narrated, what goes on in between scenes if it is not narrated, and so on.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the complexity of reading strategies, one of the most important aspects of the reception theory of fictional texts is stated by Jauss:

The literary work is conditioned by 'alterity', that is, in relation to another, an understanding consciousness (1982 p. 79).

At the lowest level Iser takes up the idea that fictional works are abstractly addressed to someone in a communication process by utilizing the concept of 'intentional sentence

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<sup>3</sup> Hypotheses about what a text allows a reader to do in filling these gaps - particularly, the activities of 'protension' and 'retention' - are central to Iser's work. See Iser (1978 pp.110-112) and my discussions of aesthetic domination in this chapter and Chapter 4 (below) for a summary of these processes.

correlatives' from Husserl. Sentences in a text are seen to have an intentional aspect; inscribed within their boundaries is the presence of a reader. Implicitly, fictional sentences are addressed to some receiver who will understand what the enunciator says. A collection of such sentences assembled into a fictional work will therefore have an 'implied reader' (Iser 1974 p. 278; xii).

For genre, this is of immense importance. It means that a given organization of textual elements does not necessarily have sovereignty over a reader's interaction with it. In fact, in order for a text to have any interaction with the reader, considerable creative *activity* - rather than *passivity* - on the part of the latter is required. Moving one step further, Iser's initial speculations on the reading process also make clear that such ideological significations that Hess Wright and others find in a group of texts do not automatically govern the reading of that set of texts or foster the reproduction of the said ideology in social life. The reader's role in realizing the text - including the text's ideological implications - is crucial in enacting a text's signification. Even where there is an 'implied reader', a preferred way of reading a text constructed by intentional inscriptions on the part of the enunciator, the real reader can choose to read differently.

So where does this leave the genre analyst? Does this mean that there are as many genres as there are individual readings of texts? Iser's work on the interaction of text and reader has qualified repercussions:

Central to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient. Therefore an exclusive concentration on either the author's techniques or the reader's psychology will tell us little about the reading process itself. This is not to deny the vital importance of each of the two poles, yet separate analysis would only be conclusive if the relationship were that of transmitter and receiver, for this would presuppose a common code, ensuring accurate communication since the message would only be travelling one way. In literary works, however, the message is transmitted in two ways, in that the reader 'receives' it by composing it. There is no common code; at best one could say that a common code may arise in the course of the process (Iser 1989 p. 31).

Here, Iser points to certain constraints placed on the message during the flow of communication from text to reader. In the 'literary' works that he often considers Iser believes that it takes time to build up a common code between reader and enunciator.



This could take place during the process of reading a text or, perhaps, over the course of reading a number of texts. In genre, however, to a degree one could say that a code always already exists between an enunciator and a reader, and it is effected by one or more mechanisms. This code will allow for a reasonably specific reading of the message. To begin with, a genre text may have the internal textual organization that theorists have discerned, displaying key elements such as a hero, problem-solving etc.; and certain lines may be established between these fixed 'stars' as the reader fills in all those gaps between them. But the manner in which these gaps are filled by the reader will depend on a code that exists for the duration of the reading, in the text, and that the reader not only recognizes but, to a great extent has imported him/herself. Put very generally, those mechanisms that effect the presence of a code of reading in a genre text are extra-textual. A minimal example will serve to underline the importance of such extra-textual determinants of a text's code:

It is not always possible to have much confidence in defining the pitch of normality in (or outside) a text. A celebrated example of modern scholarly embarrassment over just this issue concerns the anonymous English song 'Maiden in the mor lay'. It survives on a small parchment strip written in an early fourteenth-century hand. The lack of signals (at least for modern interpreters) allowed some to pronounce it clearly secular, and some definitely sacred. There seemed no way of adjudicating between these two commentaries on the basis of the text's internal evidence. However, two pieces of external evidence subsequently came to light, both of which indicate that a contemporary audience viewed the poem as secular. The appearance of such evidence was quite fortuitous, but without it, this text was internally unreadable (Butterfield 1990 p. 186).

This little parable illustrates a well-known issue: how to account for different readings of the same text in different historical periods. In addition, though, it points to those factors bearing on present readings of genre texts. Detective fiction, romance, sci fi and other genres are not constituted solely by a specific textual pattern but also by an array of reading strategies and codes employed by readers, and with sources outside the text being read. As Steve Neale puts it with regard to the cinema,

Genres do not consist only of films: they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema, and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process (Neale 1990 p. 46).

These systems that spectators bring with them to the cinema include general cultural knowledge, contemporary historical knowledge, knowledge of discourses surrounding generic products and knowledge of genre products themselves. In fact, these materials

of social life are in most cases the very things that Todorov exhorted fellow academics to distance themselves from in the search for 'theoretical genres'. Naturally, such systems constitute a staggering array of empirical and theoretical material. For now, however, I wish to subsume this material under the category of 'horizon of expectations', a concept central to the reception theory of Hans Robert Jauss.

Given that reception theory has transformed the study of genre in such a decisive way, it remains to explore the evolution of key issues involved in any consideration of genre output. One fact that studies of reception have underlined is the way that these genre issues are continuously overlapping with each other, entering the domains of each other's categories in vital ways. However, for the purposes of exposition I will attempt to separate them out where possible. The categories that follow are verisimilitude, genre as contract, syntactic/semantic aspects, 'ritual' versus 'ideological' approaches, horizon of expectations and aesthetic domination.

## Verisimilitude

The concept of verisimilitude is omnipresent in genre. Todorov finds a reason for this in the fact of enunciation:

... verisimilitude lies in wait for us at every turn, and we cannot escape it - any more than the murder-mystery writer can. The constitutive law of our discourse binds us to it. If I speak, my utterance will obey a certain law and participate in a verisimilitude I cannot make explicit and reject without thereby utilizing another utterance whose law will be *implicit*. Being an act and not only an utterance, my discourse will always participate in *some* verisimilitude; a speech-act cannot, by definition, be made altogether explicit: if I speak of it, I am no longer speaking of its utterance, which is an act in its turn and one which I cannot utter (1977 p. 87).

As quite succinctly stated here, it is more accurate to consider verisimilitude as a principle of textual coherence rather than an area in which there exists some relation between the fictional and the real world. That is to say, verisimilitude does not designate how 'true to life' a fictional text may be; rather it is a law of discourse, obeying its own specific internal consistency. Yet, at the same time, verisimilitude



relies on some reference to another discourse (or utterance) for its existence, as we will see.

The internal consistency of verisimilitude carries with it certain conditions, chief among which is the invisibility of its enunciation. By not advertizing their enunciative mechanisms (i.e. the fact that they *are* enunciated) many texts create the illusion that they are direct statements about the world. For example, it is not uncommon in studies of genre to come across such statements about specific genres as

an essence of the art of photography is its ability to make a viewer believe that he or she is watching something in undirected time and space (Kaminsky 1985 p. 15).

This is a comment on the effacement of enunciation, and verisimilitude relies largely on the fact that a message has an internal consistency, a consistency which is fragile and can be broken by the intrusion of the enunciator. An example from a text which frequently shatters this consistency will suffice to illustrate the functioning of verisimilitude. The novel from which the following extract is taken was published in 1969 but its main events are set in 1867; generally, the novel is narrated in the standards of verisimilitude set by the 'realism' of the Victorian novel, but occasionally, as here, this verisimilitude is contravened:

Slowly and carefully she lifted out one after the other a row of wrapped objects and placed them on the green cloth. Then she put the basket on the floor, and started to unwrap her purchases.

She began with a Staffordshire teapot with a pretty coloured transfer of a cottage by a stream and a pair of lovers (she looked closely at the lovers); and then a Toby jug, not one of those garish-coloured monstrosities of Victorian manufacture, but a delicate little thing in a pale mauve and primrose-yellow, the jolly man's features charmingly lacquered by a soft blue glaze (ceramic experts may recognize a Ralph Leigh). Those two purchases had cost Sarah ninepence in an old china shop; the Toby was cracked, and was to be re-cracked in the course of time, as I can testify, having bought it myself a year or two ago for a good deal more than the three pennies Sarah was charged. But unlike her, I fell for the Ralph Leigh part of it. She fell for the smile (Fowles 1977; originally 1969 p. 241).

If the reader looks closely, there are varying degrees of narratorial intrusion in this passage. The initial reference to ceramic experts, for instance, appears to take place in the present.. However, when the narrator starts to talk about himself and his own purchases using the pronoun 'I', the previous regime of verisimilitude is virtually forgotten. The narrator, by talking about himself in the course of narration has overtly designated himself as enunciator, as if to say "It is I that narrates". This effectively

shows that the assumed neutrality of the narration of the unwrapping of the objects is not neutral at all; it is carried out by an enunciating subject.

This is not to say that the novel now dissolves; in fact, it continues on for many more pages and, in the real world, became a bestseller. My point is merely that a regime of verisimilitude can be seen quite clearly when it is momentarily broken. This has become a well-rehearsed academic topic since Benveniste drew the distinction between narrations that efface their enunciation - *histoire* - and those (like the novel discussed above) that do not - *discours* (1970 p. 206-209). The debates in this area were centred around the issue of 'realism', an important topic which I will discuss in more detail later (see section on hard-boiled fiction).

The first thing to remember about the verisimilar, then, is that it is a relation *in* discourse and *between* discourses. But what are those relations? Here is Todorov again:

If we study the discussions bequeathed us by the past, we realize that a work is said to have verisimilitude in relation to two chief kinds of norms. The first is what we call the *rules of the genre*: for a work to be said to have verisimilitude, it must conform to these rules. In certain periods, a comedy is judged 'probable' only if, in the last act, the characters are discovered to be near relations. A sentimental novel will be probable if its outcome consists in the marriage of hero and heroine, if virtue is rewarded and vice punished. Verisimilitude, taken in this sense, designates the work's relation to literary discourse: more exactly, to certain of the latter's subdivisions, which form a genre.

But there exists another verisimilitude, which has been taken even more frequently for a relation with reality. Aristotle, however, had already perceived that the verisimilar is not a relation between discourse and its referent (the relation of truth), but between discourse and what readers believe is true. The relation is here established between the work and a scattered discourse that in part belongs to each of the individuals of a society but of which none may claim ownership; in other words, to *public opinion*. The latter is of course not 'reality' but merely a further discourse, independent of the work. Public opinion therefore functions as a rule of genre that relates to all genres.

The opposition between these two types of verisimilitude is irreducible only at first glance. Once we adopt the historical viewpoint, what we find is something quite different: the successive diversity of the rules of genre. Public opinion is only one genre which claims to prevail over all the others; the actual genres admit, on the contrary, diversity and co-existence (1981 pp. 18-19).

Taking Todorov as our starting point, moving beyond internal consistency as a precondition for the verisimilar, we can see that there are two more types of verisimilitude. Firstly there is verisimilitude by reference to public opinion or *doxa*, and this has its own consequences for the reading of genre texts. The *doxa* has an existence



outside of the generic text and yet the text's verisimilitude is partly constructed with reference to the *doxa*.<sup>4</sup> If we recast this in reception theory terms, the *doxa*, or public opinion, is one important member of the repertoire that makes up the 'horizon of expectations' of a text. We will discuss this shortly, but the point to note here is that public opinion serves as an encouragement to the reader to join the text's fixed stars by specific lines. Public opinion fills in the gaps left open in a text to accommodate a potential verisimilitude of this kind.

Secondly, there exists a verisimilitude which exists by agreement. A reader will accept a genre text's consistency on the basis of at least two conditions; an internal consistency whereby the text does not contravene any of its own principles (even this, we will see, is expendable); and a consistency whereby the text has some kind of relation to associated genre output (which will constitute part of a general horizon of expectations for a number of readers, or a more localized one for individual readers). This kind of verisimilitude is tied closely to a genre's specificity: as Neale explains, if somebody bursts into song during a film, the spectator is likely to conclude that the film is a musical (op. cit. p. 46). This will encourage the spectator to recognize that the text has verisimilitude specific to it, and s/he will, if familiar with the genre, anticipate further diegetic music.<sup>5</sup> Put in another way, this second regime of verisimilitude is where a 'contract' between the sender and receiver of genre messages may be said to exist. This idea has long been implicit in genre theory and it is this to which we now turn.

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<sup>4</sup> Generic knowledge can sometimes be tested in the public sphere and has a role to play in the *doxa*. See my comments on aesthetic domination (below) and Chapter 5 (below).

<sup>5</sup> By referring to 'diegetic' and 'non-diegetic' music I am merely drawing on a consensual distinction made by film theorists (see, for example, Altman 1987 pp. 65-67). The latter is all that music in a film which is not considered to be part of the story for the characters but is certainly part of the narrative e.g. the music which plays over a film's titles or mood music which appears on the soundtrack to emphasize points of the story to the audience only. The former is all that music in the film which has direct, conscious significance to the characters, whether it be a love song sung by one person to another to punctuate the romance or music in a more formal setting which somehow has relevance for the protagonists of the film e.g. Sally Bowles' songs in *Cabaret* (1969).

## Genre as a Contract

The idea that genre involves a contract between 'author' and 'reader' is one that has been shared by writers, readers and theorists of genre. John Dickson Carr, for example, in his 1946 essay, 'The Grandest Game in the World', characterises the detective story as "a duel between author and reader" (Carr in Nevins 1970 p. 230). In fact, reading practitioners' rules for the writing of detective and mystery stories one almost feels that they are informed by a familiarity with Iser's work. This seems to be a result of the kind of imperative reiterated by H. R. F. Keating in 1986:

There must be 'fair play' as between writer and reader (p. 4).

Writers in the thriller genre make clear that they are writing for a particular audience about whose desires they are confident to speculate. Detective stories, they believe, have an implied reader. S. S. Van Dine's rule for detective fiction written in 1928 envisage a quite specific outcome in terms of the reader's response:

1. The reader must have equal opportunity with the detective of solving the mystery. All clues must be plainly stated and described. [ . . . . ]
8. The problem of the crime must be solved by strictly naturalistic means. Such methods for learning the truth as slate writing, ouija boards, mind-reading, spiritualistic seances, crystal gazing and the like are taboo. A reader has a chance when matching his wits with a rationalistic detective, but if he must compete with the world of spirits and go chasing about the fourth dimension of metaphysics, he is defeated *ab initio* (Van Dine in Haycraft 1974 pp. 189-190).

Similarly, Ronald Knox's famous prescriptions of 1929 are equally concerned with the reader's response. For example,

Any writer can make a mystery by telling us that at this point the great Picklock Holes suddenly bent down and picked up from the ground an object that he refused to let his friend see. He whispers "Ha!" and his face goes grave - all that is illegitimate mystery-making. The skill of the detective author consists in being able to produce his clues and flourish them defiantly in our faces: "There!" he says, "what do you make of that?" and we make nothing (Knox in *ibid.* p. 196).

The way Knox and others characterize this contract is rather direct. They are dealing with a message transmitted from one place to another, where the message's meaning is restricted by some kind of implicit agreement or code between addresser and addressee. However, Knox and co. make traditional assumptions about the participants in this process, designating them as 'author' and 'reader'. One adjunct of this is that there is a bias towards the part of the 'author' in creating meaning. However, craftsmen like



Knox are not alone in falling for this assumption; literary analysts draw similar conclusions. Heather Dubrow, for instance, considers the issue in quite traditional terms, focussing on the author:

He [sic] is in effect telling us the name and rules of his code, rules that affect not only how he should write the work but also how we should read it . . . . He in effect agrees that he will follow at least some of the patterns and conventions we associate with the genre or genres in which he is writing, and we in turn agree that we will pay close attention to certain aspects of his work while realizing that others, because of the nature of genre, are likely to be far less important (op. cit. p. 31).

Although she is not exactly treating genre as an empty vessel - instead, it is recognized as an influential code - Dubrow, in the first part of her statement, affords the author some degree of autonomy in the construction of meaning. Both author and reader, in Dubrow's account, will decide how many of the generic rules to follow. For her, these are the factors that must be taken into consideration in order to allow the analyst to be able to interpret what is contained in the message.

And, at this point, it is worth mentioning that Dubrow's book on genre seems to be heavily influenced by Hirsch's work on interpretation (1967). Of particular importance, it would appear, is Hirsch's conclusion on the concept of genre:

All valid interpretation of every sort is founded on the re-cognition of what an author meant (p.126). Taken on its own, this statement seems to be a plea for traditional criticism in reaction to the New Critics' abolition of the 'intentional fallacy'.<sup>6</sup> While this is partly true, and critics like Dubrow appear to have embraced such a stress on the author's role in assisting interpretation, Hirsch does not have an entirely unproblematic conception of the author. First of all, Hirsch has his own notion of the power of generic constraints over enunciators:

. . . types of meaning are always necessarily wedded to types of usage, and this entire, complex system of shared experiences, usage traits, and meaning expectations which the speaker relies on is the generic conception which controls his utterance. Understanding can occur only if the interpreter proceeds under the same system of expectations, and this shared generic conception, constitutive both of meaning and of understanding, is the intrinsic genre of the utterance (ibid. p. 80).

A code of this sort would fit in quite comfortably with the rules drawn up for detective fiction by Knox and others. However, theirs, and Dubrow's, notion of the author is

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<sup>6</sup> See Lentricchia (1980 pp. 256-280) for a discussion of issues related to this topic.

more simple than Hirsch's. The latter is moving towards a less corporeal apprehension of the term; Hirsch seems to suggest that an author is not necessarily the real person in the real world responsible for inscribing the words of a narrative on paper. He goes on,

Validity requires a norm - a meaning that is stable and determinate no matter how broad its range of implication and application. A stable and determinate meaning requires an author's determining will, and it is sometimes important, therefore, to decide which author is the one being interpreted when we confront texts that have been spoken and respoken (op. cit. p. 126).

In a footnote to this passage Hirsch also briefly discusses such notions as that the text may be the work of God, or the work of the muse rather than the poet. It is clear that he recognises other sources of generic meaning beyond the human author, although he is unwilling to warrant them any real importance in the process of interpretation. As we have witnessed, the way Hirsch designates these influences is highly unrigorous and inexact.<sup>7</sup>

A more rigorous way to think the relation between addressers and addressees in a narrative fiction is set out by Rimmon-Kenan (1983 pp. 86ff). In this schema we can observe a movement between different levels of speaking and reception in the text. If we start with a *Real Author* and a *Real Reader* at each pole of the communication process (sending and receiving, respectively) we can observe the following mediators in a narrative fictional message such as a novel:

*Real Author, Implied Author, Narrator, (Narratee), Implied Reader, Real Reader* (Rimmon-Kenan p. 86 [slightly adjusted]; c.f. Gibson in Tompkins 1980).

If we take the *Real Author* and *Real Reader* as empirical givens, as human entities in the real world, we are left with four mediators in the text: two 'senders' and two 'receivers'. The *Implied Author* I understand to be the organizing principle of the text, the guiding star responsible for the presentation of the text's materials in a specific way, e.g. the ordering of scenes, the narration of certain objects and events and the non-narration of others, the structure of the plot and so forth. In a genre text the *Implied Author* can be said to be what Todorov calls (above) the *rules of the genre*. The *Narrator* is the narrative's 'voice' so often theorized in traditional literary criticism and

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<sup>7</sup> His notion of 'norm', however, we will encounter later when discussing aesthetic domination.



narratology; it is that voice in a narrative which tells the story in the first or third person, for example.<sup>8</sup> The next category, *Narratee*, I have bracketed; theoretically, the *Narratee* is that ideal entity to whom the text is narrated, an entity that will accept uncritically all that the text has to offer and the way that it is offered. However, in the case of the majority of thrillers, narrated in a fashion derived from the model of realism to be found in the nineteenth century novel, it seems to me that the *Narratee* and the *Implied Reader* are one and the same. In Iser's terms, as I pointed out earlier, the *Implied Reader* is the structure of the text: it is a fixed set of lines between the text's 'stars' which a *Real Reader* can choose to accept or substitute for his or her own set of lines. In this way, the *Implied Reader* and *Narratee* are, for practical purposes, identical in the bulk of realist fiction.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of genre, these distinctions are crucial and I will return to them again throughout my discussion of thrillers. The *Implied Author* is, of course, indispensable to those who wish to set out rules for operating within a given genre; the *Implied Author* is responsible for the rules, or code, which govern an ideal reading of the genre text. Similarly, the text as set out to be read with reference to the rubric of such a code is the domain occupied by the *Implied Reader*. It is in these two textual entities, rather

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<sup>8</sup> For a summary of the role of the *Narrator* see Rimmon-Kenan (op. cit. pp. 86-116).

<sup>9</sup> There are important exceptions to the rule: the eighteenth century novel and the postmodern novel both employ enunciative mechanisms which, in order to be understood, require the presence of a narratee distinct from an implied reader. This is also true of the epistolary novel. Taking an example from the late nineteenth century we can begin to see how these mechanisms work. Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) relies on the juxtaposition of a number of documents for its narration, and on the very first page a narrator poses as an implied author to explain the text's principles:

How these papers have been placed in sequence will be made manifest in the reading of them. All needless matters have been eliminated, so that a history almost at variance with the possibilities of latter-day belief may stand forth as simple fact. There is throughout no statement of past things wherein memory may err, for all the records chosen are exactly contemporary, given from the standpoints and within the range of knowledge of those who made them (Stoker in Haining 1979 p. 239).

The novel plays on the different enunciative mechanisms used by the narrators and the differences between the characters to whom the messages are narrated. So the extracts from the clinical diary of Dr Seward, narrated in a reasonably detached manner for those who might be interested in the case of his patient, Renfield, are in contrast to his panic-stricken telegrams to Van Helsing (ibid. p. 318).

Thrillers, however, rely on a model of verisimilitude which entails the effacement of such mechanisms although the narratee remains as a theoretical possibility. (c.f. Prince in Tompkins 1980).

than a direct relationship between a *Real Author* and a *Real Reader*, that we can see a 'contract' in the functioning of genre.

At this stage one may wonder what is required for both parties in a transaction to fulfil the terms of a 'contract'. When this question is asked it becomes clear that a generic contract bears little relation to a legal contract in the real world. There are no terms which are binding: the *Real Reader* can stop reading or choose only to observe certain aspects of the *Implied Readership* e. g. the wisecracks in hard-boiled fiction rather than the descriptions of characters' physical appearances. At most we can say a generic contract is a region of potentiality between *Real* and *Implied Readers*; an area where the number of signs mobilized depends on the specific investments on the part of the *Real Reader*. This, in effect, is a further qualification of the *Implied Reader* as the structure of the text; as such, it would seem to be less than absolute, allowing instead for different levels of interaction with the *Real Reader*. We will return to this point briefly in a moment, although it is clear that the interaction of *Implied* and *Real Reader* facilitates the operation of a generic contract as a multi-layered *potentiality*.

However, there are other sources for a generic contract. When Knox and others draw up their rules for the writing of detective fiction they assume that everyone knows where such rules come from and how they are defined. In the section of Haycraft's *The Art of the Mystery Story* which deals with 'The Rules of the Game', there is a tongue-in-cheek presentation of the Detection Club's oath. The Ruler asks the Candidate such questions as the following:

Do you promise to observe a seemly moderation in the use of Gangs, Conspiracies, Death-Rays, Ghosts, Hypnotism, Trapdoors, Chinamen, Super-Criminals and Lunatics; and utterly and for ever to forswear Mysterious Poisons unknown to Science? (p. 198).

This is an attempt to establish a contractual obligation to a norm of verisimilitude. But implicit in the question is an awareness that, somewhere, and at some time, these rules have been broken. When the rules have been observed it is possible to ascertain who those rule-keepers are; introducing his own set of rules, S. S. Van Dine says,



Herewith, then, is a sort of Credo based partly on the practice of all great writers of detective stories and partly on the promptings of the honest author's inner conscience (ibid. p. 189).

Van Dine is privileging the *Real Author*, whether "honest author" refers to a category or merely to himself. Yet, his reference to great writers indicates another source for a contract in genre: it is the set of generic expectations derived not internally from the text, but from a tradition of genre production into which a particular genre text falls. In addition, knowledge of a genre and its tradition, and the expectations that it produces, is allied to at least a minimal knowledge of those texts that fall outside the genre in question. This is implicit in the Detection Club's oath: not only are there texts that are outside of the detective fiction genre, but there are also texts within it that are unsatisfactory. In her study of the romance, Janice Radway devotes a key chapter to discussing romances that the group of romance readers she is studying consider to be failures. The *Real Readers* are unwilling to take up the *Implied Reader* positions offered by such texts (1984 pp. 157-185). This is one piece of evidence indicating that the generic contract is subject to a set of generic expectations which are defined to a large part by what a genre is *not* expected to be. These expectations are inculcated by the *Implied Author* although they initially exist outside the text. Also, as they are part of a larger extra-textual 'horizon of expectations' they will continue to exist and be subject to change, (for example when histories of a genre are rewritten), and pay attention to new aspects of past texts. Pateman's comments on 'genre assignment' are helpful here:

It is often argued that a text or image must possess certain 'formal' properties in order to count as belonging to a particular genre - say haiku or limerick. However, even if necessary, such formal properties are not significant to classify a text in a genre, for one can have 'accidental' haikus and limericks because the formal properties of a text can be mapped into genre regardless of authorial intention or activity type. More radically, it can be argued that it is only because of the genre assignment that we pick out certain formal properties as the *relevant* properties which then confirm or disconfirm our initial genre assignment (Pateman in Davis and Walton 1983 p. 190).

A large part of this 'genre assignment' that Pateman talks about is a result of the 'horizon of expectations', and generic expectations in particular. They form the fundamental subscription to verisimilitude anticipated by *Real Readers*. These expectations act, like a contract, to restrict the number of meanings that can be derived from a text and they are tied to how a given audience reads and what it will accept as

part of that contract. We will consider this in due course, but before doing so we must examine what aspects of a text are worthy of appearance in a generic contract.

## Semantic/Syntactic Aspects of Genre

In the debates over the Western in the early 1970s, differences occurred between theorists as to what constituted the rules or structure of a genre. For Buscombe, commenting on film,

The major defining characteristics of genres will be visual (op. cit. p. 41).

That is to say, what prompts recognition of a genre - in this case, the cinematic Western - are all those visual elements that mark the story as taking place in the American West in the nineteenth century. These will include, for example, stetson hats, horses, six-guns, saloon bars with slatted half double-doors, a vast landscape, tumbleweeds (especially for ghost towns), and so on. Richard Collins, on the other hand maintained

that if genre exists as a distinct quantity it is in terms of a repertoire of stock situations, selected from the events of the American frontier, that are themselves unspecific, ambiguous and intrinsically without meaning (1970 p. 74).

Ryall claims that

the Western is concerned basically with the westward drive across the American continent, the pushing westwards of the frontier, the establishment of a civilized society in the wild west - the conversion of the desert into the garden (1970 p. 27).

In a similar vein, Kitses, in his book on Western auteurs, chooses to categorize the genre according to methods similar to those of Levi-Strauss' examination of myths.

Thus he sets up a series of binary oppositions - Wilderness and Civilization, Individual and Community, East and West, Nature and Culture etc. - which exist in the Western to generate further texts (op. cit. p.11). Beyond these classifications, Vernet sees the Western as "subject to a precise referent" (the American West 1840-1900) but also in how the referent is coded, in terms of, for example, decor ("pro-filmic") or in such elements as shots and lighting ("filmic") (1978 pp. 13-15). That such taxonomies could



never be binding was often apparent; Tudor, for example pointed out the rulebreaking in the following Westerns : *Ride the High Country* (policemen and motor cars appear), *Major Dundee* (the cavalry charges the French Army and not the Indians) and *The Wild Bunch* (set in the 1900s and in which cars play a significant role) (1976 p. 122). If we return to the rules of detective fiction set out in the 1920s we can see that such imperatives have continually been broken and the most notorious breach occurred almost contemporaneously with the writing of the rules: Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926).

Those aspects of a genre invested with expectations are not, therefore, strict rules. It is practically impossible to make the idea of a generic essence stick. However, those features internal to genre texts that theorists in the 1970s set out to explore can serve as a starting point for a discussion of the possible sites of investment for a reader. The visual element in cinematic texts - the iconography - had an obvious significance because of its prominence in films. Yet theorists also stressed the importance of the organization of visual elements. Possibly because iconography is preeminently associated with film, print genre theorists tended to downplay its importance, opting, as we have seen for an emphasis on textual organization.

In this light, it is helpful that Rick Altman has recast the terms of this argument. He considers two fundamental constituents of genre: its 'building blocks' and the 'structure in which they are arranged'. He calls these, respectively, genre's *semantic* and *syntactic* aspects:

We can as a whole distinguish between generic definitions that depend on a list of common-traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets and the like - thus stressing the semantic elements that make up the genre - and definitions that play up instead certain constitutive relationships between undesignated and variable place-holders - relationships that might be called the genre's fundamental syntax (Altman in Grant 1986 p. 30).

The liberating thing about Altman's new framework is that it allows for a consideration of the semantic (formerly iconographical) in print genres. Put very briefly, there have always been potential semantic investments in the reading of print genres. One can

speculate that a roughly equal number of the present day audience for Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories may give priority to their evocation of the late-Victorian milieu as those who give priority to the structure of the deduction as the reason for reading them. As Altman is at pains to point out,

It has been a cliché of the last two decades to insist that structure carries meaning, while the choice of structural elements is largely negligible in the process of signification (ibid. p. 39).

What constitutes the semantic, of course, is not just the object being depicted. In addition, the semantic aspect of genre includes the methods of realizing the 'building blocks'. In film this will include lighting, shots, set design and so on; similarly, in writing, this will include all those narrative strategies specific to a text and specific to a given set of genre texts. A number of writers on *Film Noir* have seized on the semantic aspect of texts in order to prove a different point: Paul Schrader's famous essay emphasizes that *Film Noir* is a matter of style, particularly night-for-night lighting, oblique and vertical lines, water, movement of the camera round the character rather than physical action, etc. (Schrader in Grant 1986 p. 175-177). In this way, Schrader is very much privileging the 'filmic' (Vernet op. cit), all those features of a film's appearance which rely on cinematography, as opposed to the 'pro-filmic', that which precedes cinematic techniques, such as locations, decor, the positions of the actors and so forth. He goes on to declare that, because *Film Noir* is constituted primarily by these purely semantic features, it is not a genre, but a style. Concentration on these admittedly salient features of *Film Noir* results in a neglect of all those factors associated with the horizon of expectations in a reading of *Film Noir*. Because the films in question have, since their production and initial release, been allocated a place in a category named by French critics, some contemporary readings of them are likely to be made with quite a direct reference to this categorization. This, of course, will depend on an audience's knowledge of the category and its implications but sufficient knowledge will also be enough to constitute that corpus as a genre. In spite of his disregard for this possibility, Schrader helpfully underlines for us the importance of the methods of rendering the 'building blocks' in the semantic aspect of a generic text, whether these



be devices such as camera work in the cinema or style in written fiction. The centrality of narrative devices is clear and my discussion of the thriller will therefore pay close attention to the most important of these.

Altman's work serves to recover the balance that genre theory seems to have lost not only in film studies but, also and especially, in those major studies that privilege 'formula' in its various manifestations (Cawelti 1976; Palmer 1978; Wright 1975). The organizing principles, the syntax of a generic text, do not hold a position of absolute primacy, despite the

resolutely synchronic attempts of Propp, Levi-Strauss, Todorov, and many another influential genre analyst (Altman 1987 p. 93).

Nor do semantic principles:

Tautological semantic definitions, with their goal of broad applicability, outline a large genre of semantically similar texts, while syntactic definitions, intent as they are on explaining the genre, stress a narrow range of texts that privilege specific syntactic relationships. To insist on one of these approaches to the exclusion of the other is to turn a blind eye on *the necessarily dual nature of any generic corpus*. For every film that participates actively in the elaboration of a genre's syntax there are numerous others content to deploy in no particular relationship the elements traditionally associated with the genre. We need to recognize that not all genre films relate to their genre in the same way or to the same extent. By simultaneously accepting semantic and syntactic notions of genre we avail ourselves of a possible way to deal with differing levels of genericity (ibid. p. 97).

A heavy bias in analysis towards the semantic or the syntactic carries its own special problems. Collins, in his debate with Buscombe in the seventies, points to the perils of too much emphasis on the semantic. Randolph Scott and John Wayne, he says, wear the right clothes but there is a world of difference in their 'meaning' (op. cit. p. 68). In the same way, overemphasizing the syntax prevents analysts from assessing a genre's full import. In detective fiction, Donna Bennett claims,

Secondary characters are determined either by the needs of the problem (there must be other characters in the narrative that can be suspected of the crime) or the needs of the solution (characters may be needed to render the detective aid or furnish him with assistance) (1979 p. 239).

Bennett is selling characters short by at least half. It is very often the case that characters are bearers of functions in texts. But, I have already indicated that characters are prone to heavy personal investment by readers and, additionally, they may also be socially invested, as representatives of, for example, feminism (see my section on hard-boiled fiction, below). Importantly, when the semantic aspect is so invested, the

investment arises as a result of expectations imported from outside the text, from other genres, media, and social life. As Altman continues,

a dual approach permits a far more accurate description of the numerous inter-generic connections typically suppressed by single-minded approaches. It is simply not possible to describe Hollywood cinema accurately without the ability to account for the numerous films that innovate by combining the syntax of one genre with the semantics of another. In fact, it is only when we begin to take up problems of genre history that the full value of the semantic/syntactic approach becomes obvious (Altman op. cit. p. 97).<sup>10</sup>

The recognition of genre's dual nature enables the analyst to map a definite terrain where the interaction of text and reader is likely to take place.<sup>11</sup> What is crucial to this terrain is that the syntactic and the semantic aspects of genre can never be considered as separate, except in the abstract. Whenever a change in the semantic aspect of a text takes place it will forge a concomitant transformation in the syntactic aspect as a result of the potential investment by the reader in the given semantic element and the subsequent effect this has on the reading of the connected syntax. We will return to this again and again in the following chapters and the principle will become clearer.

One further thing that we should stress about the semantic/syntactic distinction is that it is a purely heuristic one. On numerous occasions we will find that the distinction dissolves: the hero is the most notable place where this occurs (see 'Aesthetic Domination', this chapter, below), but it also takes place in the realm of some of cinema's 'iconographic' aspects, for instance. Therefore it would be misguided to consider the semantic and the syntactic as textual entities; instead they are analytic

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<sup>10</sup> A vexed question which is directly related to the dual approach, but which I will consider in more depth in the Chapter 2, is the model of evolution imposed by genre critics. A number of theorists, including Bazin and Braudy, have been criticised for their unbalanced surface readings of Western texts. A discussion of the issues and a very sharp critique of evolutionary models can be found in Gallagher (in Grant 1986). See also Chapter 2 (below).

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, in his seminal essay on melodrama in film, is one of the few analysts to recognize the importance of these factors of balance before Altman set them out so rigorously. Elsaesser maps out the syntactic element of family melodrama in terms of "emotional pattern" and insists on the way it is complemented by the use of interiors (pro-filmic semantic) and the way they are shot (filmic semantic):

Melodrama is iconographically fixed by the claustrophobic atmosphere of the bourgeois home and/or the small-town setting: its emotional pattern is that of panic and latent hysteria, reinforced stylistically by a complex handling of space in interiors (Sirk, Ray, and Losey particularly excel in this) to the point where the world seems totally pre-determined and pervaded by 'meaning' and interpretable signs (in Grant 1986 p. 300).



conveniences. Their inseparability - indeed, their overlapping - means that generic innovation can never be mechanism which is simple to identify. What a recognition of the inseparability of the semantic and syntactic offers analyses of genre, is the possibility of movement from an exploration of the place of isolated reader investments to a consideration in a more general sense of what genre does in providing a space for text/reader interaction. The relationship between the semantic and the syntactic constitutes the very site of negotiation between Hollywood and its audience, and thus between ritual and ideological uses of genre (Altman *ibid.* p. 99).

Following Altman's cue I will now consider the main ways in which theorists have framed the function of genre.

## **'Ritual' and 'Ideological' Approaches to Genre**

Many of the issues that we have touched on already in the assessment of genre criticism in the 1970s have been implicitly related to whether genre is a mere encoding of ideology or whether it caters to the desires of an audience. The theories associated with such preconceptions about genre have become known as the 'ideological' and 'ritual' approaches, and I will briefly discuss their development.

The ritual approach is most often attributed to John Cawelti who, as we have seen, discusses genre primarily in terms of its embodiment of certain formulas. For Cawelti, the importance of formula lies in its relation to myth; in this way, formula is discussed on two levels. Firstly, in its structural similarity to myth; secondly in terms of the 'cultural function' that myth and the formulas of popular narrative are said to share.

Here, Cawelti has four preliminary hypotheses:

1. Formula stories affirm existing interests and attitudes by presenting an imaginary world that is aligned with these interests and attitudes. Thus westerns and hard-boiled fiction affirm the view that true justice depends on the individual rather than the law by showing the helplessness and inefficiency of the machinery of the law when confronted with evil and lawless men . . . .

2. Formulas resolve tensions and ambiguities resulting from the conflicting interests of different groups within the culture or from ambiguous attitudes toward particular values. The action of a formula story will tend to move from an expression of tension of this sort to a harmonization of these conflicts . . . .
3. Formulas enable the audience to explore in fantasy the boundary between the permitted and the forbidden and to experience in a carefully controlled way the possibility of stepping across this boundary . . . .
4. Finally, literary formulas assist in the process of assimilating changes in values to traditional imaginative constructs (1976 pp. 35-36).

Cawelti's theory is quite a conventional one. Briefly, he considers generic fiction to be attuned to the ideology of its audience and able to settle any conflicts that exist in that ideology by means of a fictional depiction of these conflicts which concludes with an imaginary resolution to them. He states in point 3 the vicarious nature of a formula: his example is the desire amongst members of the nineteenth century fiction audience to commit miscegenation, a desire that could only really be explored in a story. And lastly, he treats formula more or less as an empty vessel: new values can be poured into formulas but the basic meaning of the latter will remain intact.

What is most important in this set of principles is the *function* they are said to allow genre to perform. This becomes clearer when we consider the comments of Thomas Schatz on the theory of genre:

Considering the genre film as a popular folk-tale assigns to it a mythic function that generates its unique structure, whose function is the ritualization of collective ideals, the celebration of temporarily resolved social and cultural conflicts, and the concealment of disturbing cultural conflicts behind the guise of entertainment . . . (Schatz in Grant 1986 p. 97).

If genre texts are framed in such mythic terms the corollary taken up by Schatz (p. 98) is that the audience offers a certain amount of feedback to the producer of the text. If an audience has collective interests then, according to this theory, they will be reflected back to the audience in an acceptable way by those responsible for genre output. For example, a film which achieves huge box office receipts will have its formula repeated by Hollywood. Steve Neale points out a number of flaws in this functional perspective on genre:

Quite apart from the doubtful assumption that consumer decision-making can be considered a form of 'cultural expression', and quite apart from the tendency of such an approach to conflate the multiplicity of reasons for consumer 'choices' and a multiplicity of readings of these 'choices', the 'ritual' theory of genres is open to question on other grounds. Principal among these is that it ignores the role of institutional determinations and decisions, by-passing the industry and the sphere of production in an



equation between market availability, consumer choice, consumer preference, and broader social and cultural values and beliefs. This is an equation open to challenge on its own grounds. During the studio era, for instance, Westerns were regularly produced in large numbers, despite the fact that, as Garth Jowett has shown, such market research as was conducted at this time indicated that the genre was popular only with young adolescent boys and sectors of America's rural population, and that it was actively disliked more than it was liked by the viewing population as a whole (op. cit. p. 64).

To this I would add that Neale's point about the institutional determinations is connected to my point about the nature of a generic contract. The ritual approach is quintessentially a contract-based view of genre, but it is one that views that contract in too unproblematic a way. Even if it is possible to tap into an audience's collective desires, there are so many levels through which an expression of that collectivity has to filter that the likelihood of retaining an essence of the kind of myth typical of so-called primitive cultures is very slim indeed.

As a model of transmission and feedback the ritual approach is inadequate. Apart from the fact that, as Neale points out, there is little firm evidence to suggest that such communication takes place in such a direct unhindered manner, and there is evidence to suggest the contrary, the ritual approach pays too little attention to those factors which act upon a message to shape its meaning. It fails to come to terms with the significant character of the semantic aspect of texts, which is strange in one sense because, as we have seen, investment in semantic elements of a genre text necessitates its own kind of contract, albeit different from that implicated in the ritual approach. Additionally adherence to a ritual scheme of genre pre-supposes a relation between *Real Readers* and *Real Authors* unmediated by an *Implied Reader* whose positions the *Real Reader* may or may not wish to occupy. For the ritual approach, the *Real Reader* is the *Implied Reader*. This is grave enough, but when all the burdens of an industry and its network of institutional affiliations for the production of genre texts is implicated in the mediations of a textual message, then the ritual approach is quite obviously lacking.

Curiously enough, broadly the same set of problems are responsible for the inadequacy of ritual's 'opposite', the ideological approach. As indicated earlier when I discussed

some preliminary shortcomings of theories of genre in the 1970s, the problem with both approaches are that they are too syntactical. They rely too much on 'structure' to carry 'meaning'. The ideological approach, however, uses this in a different way. It does not rely on structure to carry the meaning of an audience's desires; on the contrary, it posits that the audience's true desires are always masked and usually unavailable to them. What is constantly available to them in this formulation is ideology, a set of distorted beliefs about the world and a lived relation to social life.<sup>12</sup> In order to reproduce the social relations of production various texts function as mere mirrors of ideology. It is often difficult to follow the logic of ideological approaches although they often rely on a common sense vision of the relation between text and reader, and social world and text; for example the idea that violence in a text necessarily begets violence in real life. The following extract may best illustrate the assumed relation of world to text. Considering the 'slasher' movies of the early 1980s, Charles Derry has this to say:

Indeed, these films' presentation of punishment for teenage promiscuity seems especially relevant to a society that has gone beyond the early exhilaration of the sexual revolution to the anxiety associated with the disturbing record outbreak of a variety of venereal diseases. The recent horror-of-personality films seem to reflect as well a disturbing hostility toward women, which seems a direct response to the feminist movement; consequently it is hard to respond to or praise very many of these films enthusiastically, without also feeling or expressing reservations (Derry in Waller 1987 p. 165)

To give credit to Derry, he has at least (if only for the purposes of his ideological argument) registered an amount of ambiguity over whether women are syntactic elements in these films (bearers of the function 'to be killed') or whether they are semantic elements (invested with the characteristics attributed to the female at the time of the reading). However, the way he deals with their social meaning is faulty. To say that the murder of adolescents in a film is directly related to an epidemic of V. D. or that the killing of women is a direct response to the feminist movement is absurd. There are a number of possible responses to feminism but Derry seems to forget that the highly

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<sup>12</sup> I am aware that this is a ridiculously oversimplified discussion of a very complex topic. Such brevity is hopefully excusable for the purposes of this particular exposition. See Introduction (above) for a summary of the issues involved in the theory of ideology; 'ideological' approaches draw selectively from these issues for their arguments.



mediated responses that might be found in a narrative film can never be judged on identical political grounds to those upon which most feminist struggle takes place.

Implicit throughout this study of thrillers will be a simple principle that is of acute relevance here: the imposition of narrative form always entails some kind of distortion. Even the narration of 'true' events will involve ordering, omission and the employment of narrative devices such as digression, reported speech etc. As if this was not enough, one must bear in mind that narrative can never refer to a basic text; the events of a story, untainted by narrative devices, do not exist as 'original' artefacts: they are invariably ordered in a manner related to how we perceive and read them. This will entail minor local differences in perception between individuals as well as larger-scale differences between cultures possessing diverse modes of reading (see Introduction, above, and Chapter 8, below). In this way, the 'raw material' of narrative can be said to be *always already narrativized*. This fundamental fact of narrative fiction is often played down by the ideological approach.

A further consequence of the ideological approach taken to its extreme concerns the 'effect' of genre texts on their audience. Judith Hess Wright's discussion of the relation of text and reader serves as the most blatant example of the ideological approach:

Viewers are encouraged to cease examining themselves and their surroundings, and to take refuge in fantasy from their only real alternative - to rise up against the injustices perpetrated by the present system upon its members (op. cit. p. 49).

Once again, we witness a lack of respect for the relationship that can exist between *Real* and *Implied Readers*. It is not necessarily the case that readers will take up the ideological positions offered to them and it is not, therefore, the case that a genre text need have any ideological 'effect'.

A question that may be considered here is whether the ideological approach presupposes a notion of generic contract. I would conclude that it does, although in such a model the reader is supposedly unaware of it. In fact, one could say that the only real

difference that exists between the ritual and ideological approaches when stripped to their essentials is that the latter envisages the desires of the audience as false consciousness. One reason for Hess Wright and others to assume that genre will have the effect of reinforcing ideology is that the film industry (to operate within Hess Wright's rubric) is part of the system of capitalism. Such reasoning is fallacious; Neale states this succinctly:

The ideological significance of any text - or any genre - is always to be sought in a context-specific analysis. It cannot simply be deduced from the nature of the institution responsible for its production and circulation, nor can it ever be known in advance (op. cit. p. 65).

I would strongly concur with this. However, the means of achieving a context-specific analysis can be quite daunting. The first steps towards this can be made by considering in greater depth the issue that I have been endlessly deferring in the course of this discussion.

## Horizon of Expectations

As we have seen, genre is such an intricate topic that to separate the major issues for discussion is a hazardous enterprise. The issues are constantly overlapping and operating simultaneously in the reading of a genre text. We have seen some of the consequences of generic expectations, yet the breadth of a given horizon of expectations is virtually unassimilable in a theoretical discourse. So much so that while various commentators have felt obliged to pay lip service to the issue most have not been able to incorporate it fully in their arguments. Dubrow, for instance, gives just two examples of generic expectations: our knowledge of the age, and expectations centred on knowledge about the author (op. cit. p.108). Todorov is more circumspect; in a collection of essays which appeared in French in 1978 he asks

Where do genres come from? Quite simply from other genres (1990 p. 15).

This idea of the heritage of previous genres was encountered earlier when we considered the 'rules of the genre', especially those formally written up by exponents



of crime fiction. Moreover, there are theoretical illustrations of such a heritage. In a monograph completed in 1980 Todorov emphasizes that

In every period, a certain number of literary types become so familiar to the public that the public uses them as keys (in the musical sense) for the interpretation of works . . . (1981 p. 62).

The formalization of the concept of generic systems as described here owes a great deal to the work of Jauss, and Todorov acknowledges this. He stresses the importance of the generic system as an internalization process for writers which provides them with a 'model of writing' (ibid. p. 62), an idea which seems to be borne out by my discussion of crime fiction rules. Jauss states the principle in more detail, explaining that the

horizon of the expectable is constituted for the reader out of a tradition or series of previously known works, and from a specific attitude, mediated by one (or more) genre and dissolved through new works. Just as there is no act of verbal communication that is not related to a generally, socially or situationally conditioned norm or convention, it is also unimaginable that a literary work set itself in an informational vacuum, without indicating a specific situation of understanding. To this extent, every work belongs to a genre - whereby I mean neither more nor less than that for each work a preconstituted horizon of expectations must be ready at hand . . . to orient the reader's (public's) understanding and to enable a qualifying reception (op. cit. p. 79).

Jauss' exegesis of the horizon of the expectable makes clear that, in generic systems where these expectations operate, the generic text is subject to a *limited* set of readings. One way of understanding the consequences of this limiting is by returning to Iser's metaphor of the fictional text as a set of stars.

It will be remembered that there are a potentially large number of variable lines to be drawn between the set of 'stars' that make up a fictional work. That is to say that a *Real Reader*, confronting a text, has a limited, but still very large number of diverse possibilities for constructing meanings from that text. When a text operates within a generic system these possibilities are further limited or, put another way, the sequence of interpretations is "short-circuited", to use Altman's phrase (1987 p. 4). Expectations derived from knowledge of the generic system in which the text is placed will shut out other possible interpretations. When Gary Cooper, towards the end of *High Noon* (1952), has the option to either marry Grace Kelly quietly and live peaceably or go out and meet the villains, the viewer familiar with other Westerns will expect him to choose the latter option and will most probably have read the previous portions of the text as a

deferment of this moment. Such readers will be aware that numerous Westerns reach their climax with a gunfight. The viewer unfamiliar with Westerns may expect a different outcome and may have read other portions of the text in the expectation that Cooper would take the more immediately pacifist option, irrespective of how many intratextual cues the text may make to suggest that a gunfight may ensue. The gunfight might therefore take on different connotations as a result.

The horizon of expectations is therefore a limiting factor on the potential list of interpretations of a text. Those collections of signs mobilized in discourse which constitute a text have the capacity to generate numerous connotations and interpretations. Generic systems, however, limit this polysemy. But the network of expectations that results from knowledge of specific genres represents only part of the horizon. In his earlier work, Todorov points in passing to a very problematic area of study when he mentions the determinations of generic systems:

criticism, schools, the book distribution system, or simply by hearsay; however [readers] do not need to be conscious of this system (1990 p. 19).

One can see why Todorov is reluctant to enter into too detailed a discussion of these determinations as they are far from accessible entities to be studied by poetics. Even Jauss is reluctant to venture into such a problematic area and, like Dubrow and Todorov, insists on the primacy of aesthetic knowledge in the act of reading:

The interpretative reception of a text always presupposes the context of experience of aesthetic perception: the question of the subjectivity of the interpretation and of the taste of different readers or levels of readers can be asked meaningfully only when one has first clarified which transsubjective horizon of understanding conditions the influence of the text (1982 p. 23).

One might almost imagine that statements like this which attribute such a high degree of priority to the aesthetic dimension of reader expectations are avoiding the question. Generic systems are a key factor in limiting the possible readings of a text but there are others of equal importance.

Altman addresses the matter of limiting factors in readings of genre texts but this only results in closing off the route of his own argument. Adopting the notion of



'interpretive community' from Stanley Fish (Fish's spelling, see Fish 1980; see also Tompkins 1980), Altman maps out his theory of the limitation of messages involved in a generic communication:

An author transmits a text to an audience participating in a larger community. How is it that such a text acquires meaning? If meaning, as I believe, is fundamentally dependent on the relationships which the audience perceives in the text, then we may say that the process of making meaning is the process of constricting audience perception to certain quite specific (and limited) types of relationship. When we hear a language entirely unknown to us, say Mandarin Chinese or Bantu, we are free to play up any aspect we want, to stress whatever relationships we want, to appreciate sounds independently of the sense they might make for a native speaker . . . [In our native language we] could pay attention to any kind of sound relationship, but we don't, because years of familiarity with the sounds in question have taught us to stress certain connections over others. The making of meaning begins with this restriction of relationships. To put it in more technical terms, meaning can arise only in a context of finite commutability, of restricted semiosis - however temporary that restriction may be . . . . The interpretive community may thus be defined in part as a *context* in which the text is to be interpreted; the interpretive community names the *intertexts* that will control the interpretation of a given text. As in the case of listening to Bantu or English, meaning again appears to be a restriction of possible perceptions to a specific, limited set of relationships (1987 p. 3-4).

All this seems quite straightforward: an interpretive community is an audience whose readings of a given text are guided by a number of prominent discourses outside the text. But when Altman comes to consider film genres there is a transformation of this model:

The difference between interpretation of a single text and a generic system arises from the obvious fact that a genre already provides a specific set of intertexts (the other films *identified by the industry* [my emphasis] as belonging to the same genre), and thus a self-contained equivalent of an interpretive community. The constitution of a genre thus short-circuits the 'normal' sequence of interpretation. Text after text is generated from the same mold, thus highlighting certain relationships, repressing others, and eventually limiting the field of play of the interpretive community. The function of the interpretive community is usurped by the genre, thus rendering the human interpretive community all but vestigial in the meaning making process (ibid. p. 4).

It seems that Altman has overstated his case. Basically, he wishes to stress that genres are still "agents of a quite specific and effective ideological project" (p. 4). Focussing on this aspect of Altman's argument, it is difficult to see a real difference between him and the adherents of the ideological approach. Instead of emphasizing the role of the structure of the text in reproducing the structure of ideology he has located this mechanism in the generic system as a whole. For Altman, this aspect of genres makes them

autocratic monarchs dictating a single standard of allegiance for all subjects . . . . they are ideological constructs masquerading as neutral categories . . . .By prejudicing us toward one set of intertexts rather than another (and thus toward a particular set of patterns), they provide and enforce a pre-reading of the text at hand (p. 5).



In spite of the reference to expectations engendered by the generic system, this is a very one-sided view of the production of meaning in genre. A corollary of this is that it once more privileges the text over its possible readings, giving primacy in the production of meanings not to a single genre text, but to a text in its relation to a set of other texts. Moreover, as I emphasized in the quote above, the relation is forged, in Altman's view, by the producer of the text: the industry.

I would suggest that Altman arrives at this position by dint of a misconception of 'intertext' and 'interpretive community'. Firstly, intertexts cannot control the interpretation of a given text as Altman claims, although they are likely to influence interpretations. Steve Neale, following Lukow and Ricci (1984), marks off all those discourses which surround a genre text - the most obvious example is publicity - by giving them the name of "inter-textual relay".

This relay performs an additional, generic function: not only does it define and circulate narrative images for individual films, beginning the immediate narrative process of expectation and anticipation, it also helps to define and circulate, in combination with the films themselves, what one might call 'generic images', providing a set of labels, terms, and expectations which will come to characterize the genre as a whole (op. cit. p. 49).

What is crucial, and what does not appear in Altman's assessment of the issue, is that, even with a generic text, the audience is not forced to take up all the imperatives of the inter-textual relay. What if a number of people go to see a film having not read the reviews? Furthermore, these discourses that make up the relay are, for Altman, secondary; what is primary in genre, he seems to be saying along with Jauss, is the aesthetic dimension, the corpus of texts in which a given text lies. Neale warns against such a hierarchy:

The danger lies not only in the devaluation of industrial/journalistic discourses, but in the separation of genre analysis from a number of the features which define its public circulation. These features include the fact that genres always exist *in excess* of a corpus of works; the fact that genres comprise expectations and audience knowledge as well as films; and the fact that these expectations and the knowledge they entail are public in status (ibid. p. 51).

This brings us back to the discourse by which a genre text measures its own verisimilitude: the *doxa*. The fact that the *doxa* comprises so many different discourses about the world and is constantly in flux, does not validate the explanation of the



limitation of meaning in genre messages by reference to a generic system alone. The terrain of the extra-textual is where so many of the determinations of generic meaning are situated; these include political discourses, journalistic discourses outside the domain of genres (e. g. documentaries), discourses about other parts of the fiction industry beyond that of a given genre, and so on.

So, secondly, and very much tied up with this, is the question of the space where readings take place. Altman's conception of the interpretive community is one which sees genre as a considerably greater limitation to the flow of interpretation than the interpretive community itself. In failing to see the role of the interpretive community itself in the limiting of polysemy, Altman puts far too great an onus on generic expectations, thus unbalancing his argument. By doing this he has fallen into a position not dissimilar to that of Iser and reception theory in general. Critics have pointed out that mere nods to the presence of the reader while granting primacy to the realm of the text - more specifically, in Iser's case, the reading process and, in Altman's case, the expectations engendered by the generic system - fail to recognize fully the reader's role in the production of meaning. The practices of empirical or *Real Readers* require much more attention than such approaches are able to afford them (Holub 1984 p. 99; see also Bennett and Woollacott 1987 p. 62). What I think is wrong with Altman's concept of interpretive community is that, although he points out a small role for it in the limitation of meaning (his example is the need for national languages to signify p. 3), he treats the interpretive community as a mere epiphenomenon of a text's polysemy. Despite the interpretive community's ability to name intertexts, Altman's conception is far too close to that of the transhistorical subject or reader as 'blank sheet'. As a result, it is hardly surprising that the onus of meaning production falls on the generic system. A historical analysis of possible reader interpretations would take notice of the fact that interpretive communities already carry with them a range of expectations and reading strategies derived from knowledge of discourses about the real world *in addition* to those expectations encouraged by a generic system.

Bennett and Woollacott, in their study of the James Bond phenomenon, extend the concept of interpretive community by considering instead a space of reading which they call a 'reading formation':

It refers, specifically, to the inter-textual relations which prevail in a particular context, thereby activating a given body of texts by ordering the relations between them in a specific way such that their reading is always-already cued in specific directions that are not given by those 'texts themselves' as entities separable from such relations (1987 p. 64).

The notion of interpretive community used by Altman does not emphasize the role of ideological structures outside genre which may assist in limiting readings within a generic system. To do this is to countenance the possibility, not discussed by Altman, that interpretive communities may, at given times and places, have quite specific readings of non-genre texts. Bennett and Woollacott therefore stress the importance of a number of discursive practices that operate on readers before, and simultaneous with, a generic system. In this way a reading formation is

the product of definite social and ideological relations of reading composed, in the main, of those apparatuses - schools, the press, critical reviews, fanzines - within and between which the socially dominant forms for the superintendence of reading are both constructed and contested (p. 65-66).

Although Bennett and Woollacott are dealing with a set of expectations in a loose sense it is worth pointing out how the concept of reading formation marks a departure from previous formulations of a similar kind: in a note, they add

It is in . . . its material supports that the concept of 'reading formation' differs from the concept of 'horizon of expectations' associated with the work of H. R. Jauss. For Jauss, 'horizon of expectations' refers to the subjective associations which inform the reading practices of any individual reader. The concept of reading formation, by contrast, specifies a set of objective determinations which mould and structure the terrain of the text-reader encounter (p. 299).

The knowledge of generic systems, of how genres are organized, and their relations with other texts is largely a knowledge of institutions - the film industry, publishing, broadcasting. Similarly, the 'inter-textual relay' relies on the relations between the advertizing industry, the press and broadcasting for its dissemination of information about generic texts. A low level of understanding of these relations is required for an audience to realize, for example, that an actor is giving an interview on a chat-show at a given moment in time because his/her latest film is currently on general release. Thus,



the relations responsible for engendering such expectations can be considered to be members of a set of objective determinations.

Similarly, that which does not seem institutionally determined is often equally a member of such a set. In a famous essay, Foucault traces the history of the author as a nodal point for the fixing of meaning (as well as those times when the author is not) and describes the institutionalization of author/reader relations. Literary criticism, for example, as an institutionalized practice, emphasizes the deep psychology of an author in the manner of Christian exegesis (Foucault in Rabinow 1986 p. 110). This is a view of the author taught in schools and colleges, but disseminated more widely in Sunday supplements and reviews which often point out the similarities of novels and the biographical facts of an author's life. This has a similar effect to that of the short-circuiting of interpretations by genre. Foucault adds,

The author is the principle of thrift in the proliferation of meaning . . . the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition and recomposition of fiction (ibid. p. 119).

Bennett and Woollacott acknowledge this area of expectation and extend it. They show that Ian Fleming - the original, but merely one of a number of Bond authors - exists not as a *Real Author* but as the nodal point of a number of biographical accounts. Their conclusion is that

the figure of the author is a variable which may be constructed so as to support a variety of exchanges between 'author' and reader . . . Outside the academy, the figure of Fleming has more typically functioned as merely one more site for the incarnation and expanded reproduction of the figure of Bond. Various fragments of Fleming's biography have assisted greatly in this. His coverage of the Moscow show trials for Reuters in 1933; his wartime service as deputy to the Director of Naval Intelligence; the assistance he is said to have rendered American Secretary of State Dulles in establishing the CIA - these associations with the real world of espionage have greatly facilitated the construction of Bond as a quasi-real person. Biographies and reminiscences of Fleming have thus, as it were, 'Bondianised' his life in order that the figure of Bond might thus, in being 'Flemingised', be constructed on a real-life support (pp. 89-90).

This example of the guiding of readings in a reading formation is, of course, subject to change, as Bennett and Woollacott point out. Fleming is only one of a number of authors to 'write' Bond; Robert Markham (Kingsley Amis) and John Gardner are

others. As Gardner's output exceeds Fleming's there is even the possibility that some future readers will pay little heed to the biography of Fleming.

Moreover, other strategies of reading the Bond texts in the 1950s were very active, besides that of reading by reference to the author's biography. Bennett and Woollacott consider the different national strategies for reading the Bond texts within the frameworks of other genres. One method of identifying these frameworks is through reviews; so they note that

When *Dr. No* opened in New York, for example, the review of the film in the *New York Times* opened as follows: 'If you haven't yet made the acquaintance of Ian Fleming's suave detective, James Bond, in the author's fertile series of mystery thrillers akin to the yarns of Mickey Spillane, here is your chance to correct that misfortune in one quick and painful stroke' (p. 83).

Of course, Bond is a secret agent, not a detective; but if readings of the texts were organized in such a way then the idea of generic essences or the meaning of genre residing solely in the structure of the text is invalid. Bennett and Woollacott conclude, 'There is little doubt, then, that the hard-boiled detective novel did provide the relevant genre framework against which the Bond novels and, indeed, films were initially read/viewed in the United States (p. 83). In Britain, however, they show that hard-boiled novels, while popular in the late 1950s, did not become a point of genre reference for the reading of the Bond novels but were

eclipsed by the earlier traditions of the 'imperialist spy-thriller' which provide by far and away the most influential textual backdrop against which the novels were initially read (p. 83).

The novels of Le Queux, 'Sapper' and Buchan, a tradition of fictional conspiracies planned by foreigners and foiled by aristocratic British spies, had enjoyed a prominent place in British popular fiction for at least fifty years before the Bond novels were published.<sup>13</sup> It is worth pointing out, though, that what Bennett and Woollacott have discovered about the organization of reading of the Bond novels operates at a specific level. Palmer (1978) bases his study of the thriller on both Fleming's and Spillane's novels, where he finds a shared structure. Bennett and Woollacott consider the texts of the two novelists different enough for them to fall into distinct national generic

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<sup>13</sup> See Denning (1987a pp. 15 ff; pp. 37 ff) and Usborne (1983).



traditions. I would suggest that Palmer is correct: the syntactic aspects of the texts in question are similar enough for them to be members of the same category. However, the semantic aspects of these texts will be very different, based as they are on specific national and generic reader investments. The British reader may invest Bond with some of the characteristics of Buchan's Richard Hannay, for example, on the basis of details present in the text and cues from the reading formation; American readers may be more likely to invest Bond with characteristics derived from Spillane's Mike Hammer.

This does not seem to have moved very far from the idea of the generic system as chief cue in reading texts. The key point to be noted, however, is that Bennett and Woollacott, in a manner distinct from that of Jauss (as they have attested, above), are discussing the *national* determinants of reading as much as the generic ones. The reading formation contains much more than just discourses on generic fiction; as we have seen, it implicates discourses about the real world. David Cairns and Shaun Richards have demonstrated this to good effect in their essay on the 'riots' that accompanied the first performance of J.M. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*, an occasion when reader-response was reasonably clear. As well as discussing familiar contemporary modes of portraying the peasant, Cairns and Richards focus on the discourses that made up contemporary ideology:

Thus, in terms of the reading formation of that small portion of the potential Irish audience who attended the first night of Synge's *Playboy* on Saturday, 27 January 1907, we can suggest that the most influential lines of discourse which would comprise their matrices of expectation, and which would provide the parameters within which a new text would be productively activated were, firstly, the derogatory Anglo-Saxonist discourse of the English press and of the formal texts of the only recently reformed Elementary and Intermediate education systems, and secondly, the essentially oppositional discourses of the Davisites and the more hard-line Irish-Ireland groups in which the symbol of the peasant on the one hand stood for the antiquity, dignity, resource and distinctiveness of the Irish race - and simultaneously the subservient status of the peasant woman stood as guarantee for the masculinity of the Irish race and the durability of the Irish tenant's accommodations with his social and economic situation (1987 p. 31).

Although we cannot know the motives of all the *Real Readers* or how they constructed meanings individually, the usefulness of this approach in setting out the parameters in which expectations might be at play is quite clear. If many discourses about the real world exist for groups of readers in history it would be wrong to overlook their role in

readers' productions of meanings in interaction with a text. This is especially relevant when discourses about the real world resemble structurally, or have similar content as, generic texts. This is a topic I will return to on a number of occasions throughout my discussion of thrillers.

The concept of reading formation is one that I consider crucial to discussion of those expectations that are involved in reading a genre text. In delineating a space in which those extra-textual discourses which determine genre can be put under a certain amount of scrutiny, it allows the analyst to consider texts, as Bennett and Woollacott explain, as 'texts in history' and 'texts in use'; that is, as texts that are subject to particular readings rather than as entities with immanent qualities. It also allows for a reassessment of the status of 'reading', an activity which can no longer be considered merely as the realization of textual meanings but as the exercise of ideological imperatives. There is a great deal of work to be done in this area, although Michael Denning's study of the dime novel illustrates one fruitful way of considering strategies of reading and why they might be activated at a certain time. Regarding the dime novel audience he explains,

Reading novelistically is a relatively new form, a central part of the bourgeois cultural revolution, tied to the conceptions of possessive individualism. By the middle of the nineteenth century, novels had reshaped bourgeois reading fairly thoroughly, and stories began to be told of those 'naive' readers who read novels literally, believing that the characters existed, like those boys held captive by dime novels. But the other form of resistance to bourgeois reading modes, allegorical reading, also persisted. The popular understanding of the sensational plots of the cheap stories drew on the survival of the allegorical modes of popular reading, particularly *The Pilgrims Progress*, as well as fairy tales (1987b p. 73).

Denning illustrates quite clearly that reading strategies are tied to a range of affiliations and loyalties which include discourses about the real world, generic knowledge and social class. Janice Radway finds similar affiliations in her study of *Real Readers*; in short, they fail to read novels according to the prescriptions of literary criticism (op. cit. especially pp. 87-118)



The reading formation, then, is the site of a complex matrix of expectations bearing on the reading of a text. These comprise expectations about genre and general ideological expectations which are inextricably tied to each other in a relation of overdetermination. That is to say, these expectations all act to determine each other and each is multiply determined by others. In a given formation in history, one or more of these expectations will appear to dominate the others as a result of social change. However, the complex relationships that exist in a reading formation will mitigate against any straightforward rendering of new meanings to genre texts in accordance with the new and transient dominance of a specific level of expectation. Put another way, social change will not necessarily promote an ideological expectation in a reading formation, which in turn will create new readings based solely on that social change. Overdetermination entails instead that other expectations will still have an effectivity because they are always in play. However, before these expectations can be said to be properly in play they must be activated by a text, and the possibility that generic texts have a dominant procedure that activates expectations in the co-production of meaning is a topic that has recently been re-explored by genre theorists.

## **Aesthetic Domination**

Robin Wood sees the horror film as consisting of one basic formula:

Normality is threatened by the Monster . . . . It covers the entire range of horror films, being applicable whether the Monster is a vampire, a giant gorilla, an extraterrestrial invader, an amorphous gooey mass, or a child possessed by the Devil, and this makes it possible to connect the most seemingly heterogeneous movies (Wood in Nichols 1985 p. 203-204).

For Wood, then, the outstanding feature of this corpus of films can be said to be contained in this crucial mechanism. One might say, therefore, that he has identified a dominant procedure, the characteristic feature of a given set of texts. Following the Russian Formalists, Easthope has conveniently phrased this dominant with regard to his object of study, poetry, as

that which specifically makes it what it is (1983 p. 24).

We can see, as a result, how the idea of a dominant procedure or basic formula would be important to those genre theorists operating in the 1970s who insisted that structure carries meaning. Thus Palmer explains why the thriller endures long after its genesis:

The answer lies in the uniqueness of the procedure that constitutes the genre. Although the two elements that are brought together to form it are tied to particular, temporary circumstances (since both *laissez-faire* political economy and the fear of 'dangerous classes' are by and large a thing of the past), the genre which has sprung from them is not: the resolution of ideological contradiction that it permits is of wider significance. So much so, indeed, that the thriller formula itself becomes a starting point for interpreting the world, and the original material out of which it was constituted can be discarded and another analogous set substituted, provided that it offers the same possibilities of a fictitious resolution of the contradiction between individuality and sociality (1978 p. 204).

It is clear that for those theorists who wish to reduce genre to 'formula' the notion of a dominant is useful;<sup>14</sup> it is less clear how useful this would be for contemporary analysts cognizant of the key role played by readers in producing text's meanings.

Steve Neale's recent article on genre draws to its conclusion by considering the question of aesthetic domination:

Approaches to individual genres - and to individual genre films - that draw centrally on the notion of a generic dominant are few and far between. However, it could be argued, for example, that the epic is marked by a dominance of spectacle; that the thriller and the detective genre, especially as discussed by Dennis Porter and Kristin Thompson, are dominated by the devices of suspense, narrative digression, and hermeneutic delay; and that, as the Russian Formalists themselves have argued, melodrama involves the subordination of all other elements 'to one overriding aesthetic goal: the calling forth of "pure", "vivid" emotions. In doing so, however, emphasis again must be placed on the fact that dominant elements are not necessarily exclusive elements, elements that occur only in the genre concerned. Clearly, spectacle, digression, suspense and the generation of passion and emotion are properties common to all Hollywood films (op. cit. p. 66).

Neale is calling here for a reconsideration of a genre text's specificity: that which makes it specifically what it is. If we extend this idea a little, along the lines of its originators, its relation to genre becomes clearer:

Since a system is not an equal interaction of all elements but places a group of elements in the foreground - 'the dominant' - and thus involves the deformation of the remaining elements, a work enters into the literature and takes on its literary function through this dominant (Tynyanov in Matejka and Pomorska 1971 p. 72).

The dominant, then, is some element in the text's procedure - suspense, for example - to which other elements in the text find themselves subordinate. In the sociology of

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<sup>14</sup> This applies to Wood also: in the essay cited he explains that the Monster can have a different shape but the same function in a different corpus of texts e. g. Indians in the Western.



genres this is quite pertinent: not only does structure carry meaning, but at the moment of a genre's genesis the dominant procedure in that structure will be isomorphically linked to a social dominant. Palmer, for instance (above), is able to account for generic durability in this manner. More succinctly, Tony Bennett states it as the principle in which

the generic dominant finds its social support in social relations which are held to be constitutive of a particular type of society, thus enabling the continuing presence of the genre to be accounted for in terms of the continuing presence of the social relations which characterise that society. (1990 p. 85-86)

So, for Palmer, the specific social relations present at a genre's inception - *laissez-faire* political economy and the fear of dangerous classes - can disappear without taking the genre with them, because what really characterizes social relations is the ideological resolution of the split between individuality and sociality. Put even more succinctly, then, we can say that this is a model where the generic dominant relies on a social dominant.

One of the most obvious aims of studies such as Palmer's is to account for the survival of genres. For him, and other theorists working within a problematic of aesthetic domination and pre-eminence of the syntactic, there are problems in the conceptualization of generic endurance. Firstly, if genre is tied to a historical moment, there is the difficulty of explaining a genre's survival through historical change. Secondly, given once again that genre is in some way intimate with history, it is a hard task to explain how massive social change does not entail concomitant generic change. If the last point were true, and genre consisted of syntactic features only, then genres would all be transient. Palmer here relies on the notion of the dominant procedure in the *syntactic* dimension to represent the constant of genre, while the area of supposedly less importance, the semantic, can carry historical and social investment on the part of the audience. Following Altman, we have already found such a model to be invalid; the semantic cannot really be considered separate from the syntactic. The main problem is, of course, that relying on the syntactic as the sole bearer of meaning is to say that the thriller basically means the same forever. Yet, the idea of historically specific readings

does not bear this out. To begin with, thrillers are read for different reasons by different audiences; the fact that some are excluded from canons of generic texts and some are included at a later date strongly suggests that genre texts can be more than just new wine in old bottles. This is not to say that the production of generic texts has no relation with history; in a complex way, generic innovation is virtually inseparable in most cases from social change and we will begin to discuss this in depth in the next chapter. But, we must register for now, that the main drawback of formulating genres with reference to an historically specific dominant procedure is the ensuing inability to account for generic innovation.

Further problems associated with the dominant have been encountered on numerous occasions in this chapter with regard to synchronic analyses of genre. As I pointed out, the dominance of any one given factor in a reading formation is mitigated by the presence and overdetermination of the the others, so an unproblematic relation of social formation and genre text is untenable. We have seen that the presence of a dominant is posited on the basis of those synchronic analyses that concentrate on the syntactic aspect of genre. So, Bennett notes, detective fiction is often defined in terms of what Barthes calls the hermeneutic code (ibid. p. 99); likewise, Cawelti (1976; especially pp. 42-44 ) subsumes detective fiction under the procedure of finding out secrets; while Palmer sees the dominant procedure of thrillers centred around conspiracy, competition and the hero. (1978) As Neale points out, these elements are not peculiar to the specific genre in question but also appear in others:

*Exclusive definitions, list of exclusive characteristics, are particularly hard to produce. At what point do Westerns become musicals like *Oklahoma!* (1955) or *Paint Your Wagon* (1969) or *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954)? At what point do Singing Westerns become musicals? At what point do comedies with songs (like *A Night at the Opera* (1935)) become musical comedies. And so on (op. cit. p. 57).*

Like Jameson (1982), Derrida (in Mitchell 1981) and others, Neale is pointing out what the users of genre have known for years: that genres are continually overlapping. What the synchronic analysts wish to show is that although certain procedures are shared in common across a range of genres, a specific procedure will dominate in one genre to



make that genre what it is. Hirsch, when he says that validity requires a norm, is putting forth an almost identical argument, relying instead on the notion of authorial intention rather than a generic dominant to illustrate what a genre text specifically is. Yet, as I have noted above, theorists are divided as to what constitutes the dominant procedure in a given genre. Neale's own assessment of what constitutes the thriller genre is conveniently based on the findings of just two critics. This, I believe, is chiefly the result of two connected issues: the downplaying of the semantic aspect of genre and the lack of emphasis put on potential reading processes.

If we take the figure of the hero, central to thrillers, it can be conclusively demonstrated that he constitutes a significant part of the syntactic dimension of such genre texts. Both Palmer (1978), and later myself (see section on hard-boiled fiction), see the hero as the progression principle through whose professionalism the events of the story will race towards narrative resolution. Yet, even Palmer has to view the hero, in at least a minimal sense, as more than an exclusively syntactic component; hence, the hero is described as 'Alone, Sexy, Competitive' (1978 p. 24). Palmer adds,

Sexual encounter is not a necessary part of the thriller: Ross Macdonald's Lew Archer series are practically devoid of it, and are still immensely good thrillers. And it is not the case that the structure of representation of sexuality that I have outlined is 'thriller sex', in the sense that it belongs in the thriller and nowhere else; celebration of the brief encounter, isolation and male domination could turn up in any kind of novel, and are certainly found outside the thriller, in Harold Robbins, for instance (p. 38) .

This facet of the thriller hero's character, the need for brief encounters, as described here is a prime example of Altman's idea that semantic cues can activate connections with a syntax outside that of the thriller. In fact, the semantic aspect of the hero has been played down very well in Palmer's study but, in passages like these, it unavoidably rears its head. The hero is a semantic element of genre at the same time as he is a syntactic element; he is required to be and do certain things integral to a generic contract; and if he fulfils the bulk of these he is an aspect of a genre text's verisimilitude. As I have stressed throughout this chapter, following Altman's call for a dual approach to genre, *syntactic* elements are very often also crucial *semantic*

elements, the sites of reader investment. As a result, *Real Readers* cannot be relied upon to read according to a dominant procedure. For example, the group of readers in Radway's study of the romance demonstrated that they were very concerned with narrative resolution in their reading matter (1984 p. 67); however, when considering why they read romances they predominantly gave reasons to do with relaxation and social life, but also, and third on the list, 'To learn about far away places and times'. (p. 61) Problematic though this data is, it is significant that none of the *Real Readers* chose to articulate their preference for romance reading in terms of the generic dominant.

As Radway's work indicates, investment in the semantic aspect of a text is very much tied up with strategies of reading in a reading formation. Although I and others have criticized Iser for speculating without considering the strategies of empirical readers, his remarks on the reading process are suggestive when considering the grounds for readers' dissent from a theoretical generic dominant. He explains that when texts take objects from the real world, they are divorcing them from their frame of reference. This means that the signs in the text are no longer denotative, but exist in a new frame of reference. So

In this way, the reader is given no chance to detach himself, as he would have if the text were purely denotative. Instead of finding whether the text gives an accurate or inaccurate description of the object, he has to build up the object for himself - often in a manner running counter to the familiar world evoked by the text (1978 p.109).

To this I would add that the determinants of the way this building up of the object will take place are the imperatives that exist in the reading formation.

Iser's theory of the reading process rests upon a number of different concepts, all of which seem to be places where the reader can interact and fill in the 'gaps' of a text. From Ingarden he takes the term 'intentional sentence correlatives', all those sentences that collectively make up a work but do not manifest their connection except in subtle ways. Iser explains:



How is one to conceive the connection between the correlatives? It marks those points at which the reader is able to 'climb aboard' the text. He has to accept given perspectives, but in doing so he inevitably causes them to interact . . . the sentence does not consist solely of a statement - which, after all, would be absurd, as one can only make statements about things that exist - but aims at something beyond what it actually says. This is true of all sentences in literary works, and it is through the interaction of these sentences that their common aim is fulfilled (1974 p. 277).

A further way in which the reader interacts with the text arises from the text's 'indeterminacy'; this is a slippery concept which is difficult to summarise. Iser begins by saying that

If a piece of writing describes an object that exists with equal determinacy outside it, then the text is simply an exposition of the object. In Austin's terms, it is a 'constative utterance', as opposed to a 'performative utterance', which actually creates its object. It goes without saying that literary texts belong to the second category (1989 p. 6).

As Holub points out (op. cit. p. 93), it is difficult to find a precise definition of the concept of indeterminacy in Iser's work although one can observe its different levels of complexity. On one level, indeterminacy can be explained by the fact that the novel, *Tom Jones*, has a greater degree of indeterminacy than the film version; the latter provides the reader with all the visual components that reading the novel would require s/he to provide him/herself (Iser 1974 p. 283). On another level, indeterminacy is bound up with the 'wandering viewpoint'. This is crucial to Iser's view of the reading process and very suggestive if one bears in mind the importance of a dual semantic/syntactic approach to genre. Once again utilizing the 'stars' metaphor, it is worth considering that even if a dominant procedure can be identified in a text, the potential routes between the co-ordinates of that procedure are many. Iser explains:

The semantic pointers of individual sentences always imply an expectation of some kind - Husserl calls these expectations 'protensions'. As this structure is inherent in *all* intentional sentence correlatives, it follows that their interplay will lead not so much to the fulfilment of expectations as to their continual modification. Now herein lies a basic structure of the wandering viewpoint. The reader's position in the text is at the point of intersection between retention and protension. Each individual sentence correlate prefigures a particular horizon, but this is immediately transformed into the background for the next correlate and must therefore necessarily be modified. Since each sentence correlate aims at things to come, the prefigured horizon will offer a view which - however concrete it may be - must contain indeterminacies, and so arouse expectations as to the manner in which these are to be resolved (1978 p. 111).

This offers preliminary grounds for discussing strategies of reading. Its importance for genre, I would suggest, lies in its provision of a space where reader investments - the pouring of one's own constructions into those semantic elements resting on a text's indeterminacy - can function.



On the basis of this it is worth mentioning what Hirsch has to say in a slightly different context:

The description of the genre-bound character of understanding is, of course, a version of the hermeneutic circle, which in its classical formulation has been described as the interdependence of part and whole: the whole can be understood only through its parts, but the parts can only be understood through the whole (op. cit. p. 76).

By introducing these comments I do not mean to suggest that the parts are merely semantic elements of a whole syntax, the latter in its entirety constituting a complete generic dominant or organizing principle for the semantic elements. On the contrary; the process of reading semantic parts finds its most important description when Iser says

It is clear, then, that throughout the reading process there is a continual interplay between modified expectations and transformed memories. However, the text itself does not formulate expectations or their modification; nor does it specify how the connectability of memories is to be implemented. This is the province of the reader himself, and so here we have a first insight into how the synthesizing activity of the reader enables the text to be translated and transferred to his own mind. This process of translation also shows up the basic hermeneutic structure of reading. Each sentence correlate contains what one might call a hollow section, which looks forward to the next correlate, and a retrospective section which answers the expectations of the preceding sentence (now part of the remembered background). Thus every moment of reading is a dialectic of protension and retention, conveying a future horizon yet to be occupied, along with a past (and continually fading) horizon already filled; the wandering viewpoint carves its passage through both at the same time and leaves them to merge together in its wake. There is no escaping this process, for - as has already been pointed out - the text cannot at any one moment be grasped as a whole. But what may at first sight have seemed like a disadvantage, in comparison with our normal modes of perception, may now seem to offer distinct advantages so far as it permits a process through which the aesthetic object is constantly being structured and restructured. As there is no definite frame of reference to regulate this process, successful communication must ultimately depend on the reader's creative activity (1978 p. 111-112).

Such a view of the reading process, then, may be a starting point for hypothesizing specific readings of given genre texts. Genres may depend on their own parts for appeal to readers: semantic elements of the text made manifest outside of it - by the inter-textual relay, for example - have a crucial role in determining for readers whether a text is 'something for me'. The most obvious example of this is the importance attached by audiences to film stars; as Dyer (1979) shows, stars are always already signifiers. Their place as preconstituted and culturally activated entities in a sense *prior* to a text indicates that readers' investments in them are not created wholly by a genre text's dominant procedure. The same could be said of characters and what they signify over a range of texts over a given period of time; in its approach, Bennett and Woollacott's study of the Bond phenomenon is continually considering this very fact. Reading a



genre text is often a process of specifically investing certain areas according to particular preferences. As such, a reader's creative activity will therefore be shaped by the forces prominent in a reading formation: learned reading strategies, inter-textual relays, generic systems, discourses about the real world and so forth.

The fact that there is such a viable alternative to the concept of the generic dominant leads Palmer in his later work to identify two general approaches to genre:

In one version, genre is a loose assemblage of themes and readings, a horizon of expectations infinitely renegotiable by reading publics; in the other it is a definite (if infinitely extendable) list of texts unified by a common procedure which is responsible for the internal organisation of each constituent text (1991b p. 124-125).

But, in addition to this, Palmer puts an interesting case for the dominant manifesting itself in terms of a 'hierarchy of discourses'. This is a term that is connected to the idea of genre as a contract and the idea of generic verisimilitude. In short, it is the mode of narration of a text which encourages a reader to attribute a more important role to one aspect of the text in upholding the principle of verisimilitude than to others.

For example: in a film, A is talking to B, shown in the shot/reverse shot process . . . It is an emotional confrontation, and as the camera moves between shots the participants' faces show us the range of emotions they are experiencing. If we feel the same emotions as we impute to one of the participants, we 'adopt their point of view'; or we may feel neutral in the encounter, sorry only that the two people should tear each other apart (for example). Either way, our attitude depends upon our assumption that the camera is revealing the truth of the occasion. Each participant sees the encounter in his or her way, but the camera sees it objectively, we implicitly believe: if we see the face of a participant register rage, we believe that the character feels rage, even though we may not feel it ourselves (ibid. p. 81).

In the realist mode of narration common to most thrillers such a procedure, as we have seen, relies on the effacement of enunciation for its verisimilitude. This hierarchy of discourses, in which one particular discourse is privileged in its relation to the verisimilar is seen by Palmer as the key to the analysis of genre. Thus he holds that

where it is possible to show that a given group of texts does have a dominating procedure in common, then we are in the presence of a genre; where no dominating procedure is involved, then the mere fact of some common elements should not be taken to indicate genre - or at least it should be recognized that the word genre is being used in two different senses, where one sense is much stronger than the other, which may be regarded as heuristic convenience, or as an indication of some form of 'horizon of expectations' on the part of the audience. Where genre is used in the strong sense, it is probably the case that many texts will not belong to any genre at all; where it is used in the weaker sense of a horizon of expectations, it is likely that all texts will be traversed by some level of genre-based expectations (p. 126-127).

This argument is interesting because it posits two opposed versions of genre theory; the 'strong' seems to be a syntactic analysis, whereas the 'weak' deals with 'common elements', presumably semantic ones. Thus, in the modern crime novel

it becomes clear that the writing about crime in the framework of popular genre fiction implies subordinating other meanings to the connotations produced by the category crime. More exactly, it is clear that the sheer act of writing fiction containing crime does not imply anything of the sort: texts as various as Dickens' *Little Dorrit*, Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* or Antonioni's *Blow Up* indicate that descriptions of crime can be incorporated into quite different fictional textures. What constitutes crime fiction as such is that the presentation of crime comes to dominate the fictional structure by taking a particular place in the hierarchy of discourses that constitute the texts (ibid. p141-142).

Despite their suggestiveness these statements need to be qualified somewhat. Firstly, while I would agree that genre texts do contain hierarchies of discourse, it is not necessarily true to claim that the discourse at the head of such a hierarchy constitutes the text's dominant procedure. As I will show later, what seems to characterize the hard-boiled novel is its tough style and its hero; these constituents seem to occupy the pole position across a range of potential discourses in such texts. The hero in a thriller, as we have seen, is a semantic and syntactic component; similarly, tough style is forward-thrusting yet digressive (making it syntactic) but also part of the narrative and used by its protagonists in speech (making it semantic). Moreover, style is a narrative device in the same way that the lighting and camera positioning in *Film Noir* are filmic devices; as such, then, style is overwhelmingly semantic. Given that this is the case, there exist a considerable amount of points of investment for the reader in such semantic aspects. Who is to say, therefore, that the reader will choose the syntactic component of a discourse at the head of a text's hierarchy and interpret it as the dominant procedure of that text?

This brings us to my second point. If certain intra-textual discourses characterize a given corpus of texts at a given moment in time, this is because the arrangement of the reading of those discourses is determined historically. Neither the text nor the reader is a transhistorical entity and commentaries which purport to describe texts in terms of what they objectively 'are' or what they objectively 'do' without reference to the



imperatives of a reading formation are implicitly placing themselves in a non-existent position outside history. It is therefore possible that the valorized texts that Palmer marks off from genre fiction may be reconstituted at a given time as generic depictions of crime in a specific reading formation. This view of the interface between texts and history, as we have seen, is not one of isomorphism or homology but based quite firmly on reading practices. As Bennett points out, genre must be viewed as

being inter-textually constituted - that is, as being constituted in the particular socially organised sets of relations between texts, and between texts and readers, which obtain in particular circumstances in view of the reading formations and reading technologies which govern relations between texts and readers . . . Rather than being literary kinds that are to be accounted for socio-genetically . . . genres are more appropriately regarded as themselves directly sets of social relations which, in structuring the sphere of reading practices, serve also to condition writing practices (1990 p. 105).

One further area where a generic dominant may be located is in the realm of enunciation. On the one hand, there is a level where distinguishing between genres according to processes of enunciation yields little information, as we have seen. But on another level, as Palmer iterates

it is not difficult to find examples where the enunciative mechanism is responsible for aspects of impact; for example sitcom, where it is commonplace that those that do not watch large numbers of episodes of a series simply miss half the jokes - here the enunciative mechanism of broadcast seriality produces a special form of impact. In general, broadcast serial forms produce levels and types of protensive activity on the part of the audience which are not known elsewhere, thus permitting a use of irony which is rarely equalled . . . [It] is commonly the case that texts use many different enunciative mechanisms, and application of them is intrinsic to understanding such fictional structures: examples would be the epistolary novel, 'voice-over' in film and TV, etc. Many modernist novels are incomprehensible without reader sensitivity to a range of enunciative devices: Calvino's *If on a Winter's Day a Traveller* uses a range of parodic devices combined with a narrator whose reliability is extremely variable; Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot* features a narrator whose presence constantly changes in value as what he narrates appears increasingly obsessive (1991a p. 5).

These mechanisms or modes of discursivity are obviously important in the discussion of genres and worthy of study. The wisecracks in hard-boiled fiction or the street patois of the modern crime novel, both of which rely ideally on a specific competence in dealing with them as discourse, all have the potential to become recognized as enunciative mechanisms over a number of readings. Neale is very much concerned with this when he says

while it may be the case that Hollywood genres are in most instances best considered as sub-genres of 'narrative film', and while these sub-genres may not be marked by the kinds of apparent discursive peculiarities that tend to differentiate the narrative film from documentary or the structuralist avant-garde, there is still a great deal of scope for the investigation of specific discursive characteristics (op. cit. p. 65).



In considering this I would qualify it by saying that such investigations need to take into account the historical dimensions of the discursive characteristics and their potential activation by readers as well as the breadth of their space for reader investment. In such a way, the positing of a generic dominant becomes more problematic.

Neale's statement, however, allows us to draw further conclusions on the possibility of defining genre enunciatively. By dividing up film into three main enunciative categories - documentary, avant-garde, and narrative - Neale points to certain consequences. All of these root mechanisms, in a sense, overlap: narrative films inculcate aspects of the avant garde (for example, the once revolutionary editing techniques of Eisenstein); the avant-garde draws on conventional narrative (Alain-Robbe Grillet novels, for instance, use detective fiction); documentary film has trod an uneasy path between narrative and avant-garde technical developments since the time of the Lumiere brothers; and so on. However, they may exist as distinct categories in a given reading formation, having an effectivity beyond their putative domain. Considering the way in which literature has been conventionally seen as shaped by social pressures Bennett says

It is this formulation of the matter, of course, that gives rise to the famous problem of mediations; that is, how to theorize the connection between, while also retaining the separateness of, literature and society. Yet, no matter how complex and nuanced the role accorded such mediations, this way of posing the problems implies a definite order of priorities in which society comes first and literature follows on - however indirectly - as its determined effect . . . Thus conceived, literature's role in society is always a reactive one consisting in the modifications to already determined social relations which might be expected to flow on from its effects on the always already-determined subjectivities of social agents (1990 p. 107-108).

Now, if we take the term narrative, rather than the more ideologically charged 'literature', in the light of these comments there are certain implications. Bennett foresees a view in which

literature is regarded as itself directly a field of social relationships in its own right and one which interacts with other fields in which social relationships are organised and constituted in the same way as they interact with it and on the same level. Thus viewed, it emerges not as mediated reflection or refraction of society, nor as a semiotic production of ideology - as if society or ideology had clearly defined existences which could be described independently of the operations of the literary sphere - but as a distinctive sphere of action that is centrally implicated in and imbricated with the constitution and functioning of political and ideological relations of power and its contestation (ibid. p. 106).

In terms of narrative, these conclusions suggest that narrative's pre-eminence in fiction, and specifically genre, exists in excess of this domain. In fact, areas of social life,



especially those in close proximity to a genre in terms of 'subject matter' at a given time, could be said to be in a relation of dual determination with narrative. Aspects of the real world in this way are narrativized - generally, by the enunciative mechanism of narrative that exists across a set of discourses, and specifically by the action of a particular generic narrative determined by, yet feeding back to, the expectations that exist in a reading formation. For Bennett, genre theory should be concerned with

the ways in which forms of writing which are culturally recognised as generically distinct in the contexts under investigation function within the 'forms of life' - the specific modes of organised sociality - of which they form a part. Its purpose, moreover, is to examine what genres do within and as parts of such modes of sociality rather than to reveal how their determined conditions speak through them (p. 109).

In such a genre theory it is clear that the concept of narrative as a fundamental enunciative mechanism has a key role to play. As a general organizing principle in generic discourses as well as social discourses such as news, journalism, history, medical case histories, and so forth, narrative can be described as *the* dominant mode of enunciation in the interface between text and social life. This principle, which informs my discussion of the American thrillers of the 1970s, will become clearer throughout the following chapters.

In the next chapter I will discuss how commentaries on the history of thrillers have augmented the claims of very different theories of genre to the one proposed above.

## CHAPTER 2

# Histories of the Thriller

Ever since the eighteenth century we have tended to see European history, from the Renaissance onwards, as the history of progress, and that progress has seemed to be constant. There may have been local variations, local obstacles, occasional setbacks, but the general pattern is one of persistent advance. The light continually, if irregularly, gains at the expense of darkness. Renaissance, Reformation, Scientific Revolution mark the stages of our emancipation from medieval restraints. This is natural enough. When we look back through history we naturally see first those men, those ideas, that point forward to us. But when we look deeper, how much more complex the pattern seems! Neither the Renaissance nor the Reformation nor the Scientific Revolution are, in our terms, purely or necessarily progressive. Each has a Janus-face. Each is compounded both of light and of darkness (Trevor-Roper 1969 p. 11).

One senses that historians, having made a good *hors d'oeuvre* of Poe, are straining at the leash to sink their teeth into the meat of Holmes (Stewart 1980 p. 227).



## Introduction

The fact that it is very difficult to establish a firm consensus about what the concept of genre means - let alone what constitutes individual genres - has not prevented writers on the subject from constructing histories of their corpus. Brian Aldiss, writing on the history of science fiction, states the facts of this impulse quite succinctly:

My objective in writing this first history of the genre is to put it in perspective. A lot of excitement is going on at present. But science fiction was exciting from the word 'Go' - it's just that nobody until now has been too sure who shouted the word 'Go!' (1975 p. 2)

Putting a genre in perspective is a short-hand way of saying that a genre has a history within its own body of texts as well as a history in relation to history in the real world.

In addition, as we have seen in the previous chapter, there is the task of relating the way this 'history in the real world' is mediated - by narration, reportage, representation. The second part of Aldiss' statement describes equally well the impetus of much writing on the history of the thriller: the search for origins to chart the genre's progress completely. This, as we will see, is often complemented by genre historians with the search for an 'end' point to the genre in the commentator's present time.

Historians of the thrillers have tried to constitute their object of study according to certain principles. These have been formulated in periods contemporary to their writing and as a tool by which to decide which texts are appropriate to the corpus which constitutes the genre and which texts must be despatched from it. From the contemporary period they have looked back over the texts that fall within the boundaries of the thriller genre as they understand it. So if the thriller is believed to consist of a specific textual configuration then those texts not conforming to it are not included; if it is believed to consist of certain characters, paraphernalia, milieux and so on, then those not conforming to this are similarly dismissed. In addition, the belief in what constitutes a thriller might be supplemented by the historian's preference for discussing only those thriller texts from the past which seem relevant to the contemporary period, or those texts which most resemble the formal attributes of the

corpus of texts called literature, or those which appear to have something to say about the social formation in which they first appeared. It is clear that any history of fictional texts has such a wealth of material to wade through that constituting the corpus which is of historical importance involves, also, *not* considering a huge number of texts.

However, in order to do this, the criteria for inclusion into, and exclusion from, a corpus must be well worked out if the history is not to be prescriptive. Because of the nature of the critical enterprise which sifts out the unwanted texts according to principles of corpus building and supplementary principles of the same, there is a point where constituting the corpus becomes the construction of a canon. As we will see, thriller histories written by advocates of the genre aware of its lowly status frequently opt for this last manoeuvre to validate their object of study for this and a number of other reasons.

One problem entailed in a historical overview of fictional works is the survival of texts through different generations. Commenting specifically on the gangster film, but in a manner which could be applied to other genres, Gabree claims

If a film is truly great, it probably doesn't matter if you saw it at a neighbourhood theatre in 1942 or at the Brattle theatre in 1962, except of course for the very different points of view brought by each of these audiences (1973 p. 90).

Recourse to the unqualified, and timeless category of the 'truly great' is coupled with the more historical notion of specific audiences' responses. However, Gabree's statement plays down the issue of historically situated audience investment for the popularity of a text by positing the idea of a work that has an essence of greatness. This manoeuvre is one that will become familiar as we consider historians of the thriller genre.

In the majority of thriller histories it is possible to draw up a general chart of the material to be covered: origins of the thriller (in antiquity or in more recent models of fiction); Poe; (Vidocq and Gaboriau); Sherlock Holmes; the Golden Age of detective fiction; the hard-boiled detective; (the imperialist spy thriller); and the post-war period



in which there is variously seen 'degeneration' (e.g. Spillane), disintegration (e.g. police procedural, crime novel, spy novel), parody (e.g. superspies), and so on. Those items in brackets indicate the less frequent but nevertheless recurrent components of the history of the thriller. The question is: is such an overview of the genre inevitable? An Olympian view of tendencies in genre history is given by Jauss:

Literary history of the most convenient forms tries to escape from the dilemma of a mere annal-like lining up of the facts by arraying its material according to general tendencies, genres and what-have-you, in order then to treat within these rubrics the individual works in chronological series. In the form of an excursus, the authors' biography and the evaluation of their *œuvre* pop up in some accidental spot here, in the manner of an occasional aside. Or this literary history arranges its material unilinearly, according to the chronology of great authors, and evaluates them in accordance with the schema of 'life and works'; the lesser authors are here overlooked (they are settled in interstices) and the development of genres must thereby also unavoidably be dismembered. The second form is more appropriate to the canon of authors of the classics; the first is found more often in the modern literatures that have to struggle with the difficulty - growing up to and in the present - of making a selection from a scarcely surveyable list of authors (1982 p. 4).

The dichotomy that Jauss sets up for genre history is a pertinent one for the thriller because most thriller histories take one or both of the routes he outlines. A glance at my preliminary chart above suggests why this is the case: on the one hand, the corpus seems to be clustered round a few key authors - Poe, Doyle and the Golden Age writers; on the other, a strict chronology of authors cannot explain why, for example, the imperialist spy thriller overlaps with the Golden Age 'whodunit'. These factors inevitably lead to their own specific local issues - of definition, canon and history. In order to identify and question those we must examine the work of a handful of critics of the genre.

## Mapping the territory and constituting the corpus

One way to confront the problems of genres and their proliferation of subgenres is to take a broad approach to the texts in question. As outlined in my introduction (above), the main advantage of such a measure is the avoidance of the minutiae of the debates carried out by the aficionados and fans of the genre (see, for example, Winn 1977 and 1981). Following Palmer, I would say that

There is no fundamental difference between the modern thriller and the traditional detective story.

(1978 p. 106)

Before considering the implications of this kind of categorization we must consider what avenues of investigation are closed off by writers of thriller histories when they make their definitions. Gabree, for instance, immediately makes his definition of the gangster film in terms of its semantic elements: clothes, cars, guns, telephones, the city, the players, the roles, sex (1973 pp. 17-21). By stressing the importance of this iconography he is able to root such films in the 1930s and apply the appropriate criticism when texts do not conform to the pattern. This is quite a transparent application of the procedure for defining bodies of text by reference to the semantic, yet it is not fundamentally removed from some approaches to written detective fiction. Binyon (1989), for instance, centres his study of the genre around the figure of the detective, in the same way that Craig and Cadogan (1986) concentrate exclusively on female detectives and spies.

A further method of delineating the margins of a genre is to weigh its proposed texts against the entirety of a few core texts. Hossent is one commentator who adopts this strategy when dealing with a genre that is ripe for it, the gangster film:

*Little Caesar* began the cycle, to be followed by *Public Enemy* and *Scarface*. These are the three most important gangster films of all time because they set the pattern for the true gangster movie, just as John Huston's version of *The Maltese Falcon* was the mould for all private eye pictures, and John Ford's *Stagecoach* stylized the screen Western (1974 p. 14).

The method of delineating the gangster film with reference to a few films that appeared in quick succession to each other and which seem to share almost identical characteristics is an expedient way of constituting a historical corpus. Not only does it give the critic a body of texts to discuss and to discuss other texts in relation to, it creates a canon of crucial films and historically situates them, assuming their appearance at that moment to be related to developments in the real world. Such a classification is used with other genres, for example the hard-boiled story (see below).

One of the most influential histories of the thriller, *Bloody Murder* (1974; originally 1972) by Julian Symons, is much more circumspect about how classifications of the



corpus are to be made. At the beginning of the book an attempt is made to rule out judgments by reference to a small core of texts. Commenting on the 'rules' of detective fiction set out by Ronald Knox et al. that we discussed in the last chapter, Symons writes

. . . few books actually conform to them. Indeed the lines so carefully drawn are crossed by the critics themselves as soon as they begin to make those lists of 'The Hundred Best' which are such an entertaining parlour game. Haycraft, for instance is briskly dismissive about Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* which was, he says, 'a mystery rather than a detective novel', and so need not concern him. But then, what are Eric Ambler's *The Mask of Dimitrios*, Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, Francis Iles's *Before the Fact* and Mrs. Belloc Lowndes's *The Lodger* doing in his list of 'Detective Story Cornerstones'? Most people would call the first of these thrillers, the third a crime novel and the fourth a sensational murder story. Certainly none contains a detective puzzle to be solved. Auden specifically excludes *Malice Aforethought* from the canon, another critic refuses to consider *The Lodger*. Ellery Queen's *Queen's Quorum*, which offers a choice of the most important 'Detective-Crime' short stories, contains such books as *Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford* and O. Henry's *The Gentle Grafters*. These are not even what most people think of as crime stories, let alone having any association with detection (p. 9).

Symons recognizes that there is a problem in adopting and utilizing categories but it is worth following his argument to see how he qualifies this, particularly on the issue of 'drawing the line':

Spy stories, and thrillers in general, do stand apart from books that pose a puzzle to the reader. The latter kind of books asks questions about Who or Why or How, sometimes about all three put together, where the thriller or spy story frequently tells us How. But all deal with violent ends in a sensational way, and although spy stories and thrillers have been discussed separately, it would not have been right to ignore them . . . . That a line should be drawn is a matter of common sense, but its precise placing is a matter of individual taste (pp. 10-11).

Symons' reference to 'common sense' here is a rhetorical device, whether conscious or unconscious. The notion that individual taste should dictate where the line is drawn represses the fact that lines are more often drawn by the marketing strategies of publishers, booksellers, reviewers and other purveyors of classifications. In fact, drawing the line is most often a task that falls within the domain of the critic rather than the consumer, a significant point to which we will return.

A crucial measure associated with drawing lines in any genre history is to establish origins which will demarcate the genre from its forebears and antecedents. As stated above, many commentators begin with Poe; but there are other tendencies as well. Panek will serve as an example:

Given the requisite, slightly tipsy mood, one can argue that God was the first detective, discerning man's felonious intent and punishing it . . . (1987 p. 1).<sup>1</sup>

Apart from such comments, it can be understood why theorists wish to find the roots of a genre; having found the roots, the theorist is in a position to say what follows.

Moreover, specifying the originary text(s) of a genre necessarily implies historical questions, particularly "Why did that text appear at that time and not before?" Or, "What were the specific historical and cultural conditions that allowed this genre to have its inaugural moment?" Symons opposes two approaches to the origins of the detective story: one which relies on the key process of deduction as an almost timeless phenomenon and another which relies on detection used by the police as a fact of social life.

Historians of the detective story are divided between those who say that there could be no detective stories until organized police and detective forces existed, and those who find examples of rational deduction in sources as various as the Bible and Voltaire, and suggest that these were early puzzles in detection. For the first group the detective story begins with Edgar Allan Poe, for the second its roots are in the beginnings of recorded history (1974 p. 23; see also, for example, Panek 1987 p.24)

For Symons, what matters is whether a purely historical connection between social life and the text is applicable in the case of Poe's rarely disputed paternity of the detective story. 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', 'The Mystery of Marie Roget' and 'The Purloined Letter' were all written

before a Detective Office had been established at Scotland Yard, and at a time when few American cities had any kind of police system. [Yet h]e is the undisputed father of the detective story . . . (Symons p. 33).<sup>2</sup>

One therefore feels that Symons is, to an extent, forced into the position of accepting the multiple determinations of the thriller:

The truth is that the detective story, along with the police story, the spy story and the thriller, makes up part of the hybrid creature we call sensational literature. This hybrid has produced a few masterpieces, many good books, and an enormous mass of more or less entertaining rubbish (p. 10).

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<sup>1</sup> Merry (1977), for example, finds origins of the spy thriller in the *Iliad*; c.f. Sayers (in Winks 1980 p. 53) and Hill (in Keating 1982) - just two interesting examples of a plethora of writers who take up the question of origins of the detective story before Poe.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, there are occasions when the search for origins are more or less gratuitous. Rahn, for instance (in Rader and Zetler 1988 pp. 48-61), finds, with very few implications, Seeley Regester to be the first author of an American detective novel (1867).



Even when one accepts that there are multiple determinants working on the development of the thriller this does not prevent theorists from trying to draw a line on their corpus. It is significant that Symons is willing to accept that his object of study is a 'hybrid' and therefore subject to a number of influences from a number of sources and yet, in his statement it is possible to see the germ of a qualification. What Symons avoids in the course of his history is the "enormous mass of more or less entertaining rubbish". In some degree, this is excusable: the volume of popular fiction that has been produced is almost unmanageable. However, ignoring this fact or even excluding it from one's calculations, ignoring its influence on a potential canon - no matter how that canon is constructed - will have certain implications regarding that which is taken to constitute a genre. This occurs time and time again in the literature of thriller criticism with a succession of writers accepting a consensus on a central corpus of texts and their relevance to the history of the genre. In some cases, this is forgivable in that much of the material is often physically inaccessible to study. In other cases, such an explanation does not apply. An example of this is hard-boiled fiction, which, in terms of serious study, has become almost an industry since the 1970s. Symons' words on the subject are constantly echoed by a diversity of writers, the bulk of whom probably realize that Symons draws on an already constituted consensus on the topic:

There were a great many pulp magazines, but much the most notable was *Black Mask* during the reign of Capt. Joseph T. Shaw from 1920 to 1936 (p. 141).

As well as other writers, many of the historians of the thriller that are mentioned here make exactly the same point (c.f. Panek 1987 p. 149; Binyon 1989 p. 38; Mandel 1984 [quoted below]). Moreover, they all seem to owe a considerable amount to an essay of 1970 by George Grella which grounds the category of hard-boiled fiction in terms of American archetypes (see Grella in Winks 1980 pp. 103-20). The majority of considerations of the hard-boiled story hold up the examples of Hammett, Chandler and Macdonald but there is no reason that this should be the case from the 1970s or after. Sources have existed for a broader perspective on the genre for some time (see, for example, Goulart 1965, Ruhm 1979, Ruehlmann 1974, Kittredge and Krauzer 1978)

and enterprising critics have stressed the breadth of the corpus against those who would restrict it to a canon (see Geherin 1985, Baker and Nietzel 1985 and the range of essays in Madden 1968). The impetus to canonize a number of writers in terms of their stylistic similarities has not been without its ambiguities. James M. Cain, for example, is often cited as a hard-boiled writer along with his detective fiction writing contemporaries, yet he is reputed to have said in partial repudiation of this:

I have read less than twenty pages of Mr. Dashiell Hammett in my whole life (quoted in O'Brien 1981 p. 72)

The placing of given texts within a specific genre is more often the work of the critic than the writer, but this does not preclude the fallibility of the critical enterprise and that the responsibility for the placing may reside elsewhere.

Before we consider this last possibility, let us question the activity of the thriller historian more generally. Symons suggests that the would-be historian of genre bear the following caveat in mind:

One has to be careful to discover, and not to impose a pattern in the shape of any sort of literature (p. 96).

In short, one should have an open mind when considering texts from the past for inclusion in a corpus that reaches to the present. Fowler discusses such tendencies in more general terms:

Two particular cross-sections of a genre's time-worm [sic] mainly interest critics. These are: (1) the original generic state when the work in question was written; and (2) the state in the critic's own time. Intentionalists maybe concerned to reconstruct 1; but every critic inevitably relates the work to 2, the genre he knows (1982 p. 51).

Without accepting the inevitability of Fowler's second thesis, those who have read histories of detective fiction will recognize the phenomena to which he refers. In a book which, among other things, is implicitly an extended critique of Symons, R. F. Stewart shows how

critics have taken the features they see as distinguishing modern detective fiction and looked for these features in earlier works, usually by 'good' or recognized authors, in order to give their second-rate genre an aura of respectability. *The Moonstone*, backed by Collins' reputation as an author of at least minor classics, is the obvious example. *Bleak House* is manna in the apparent desert. But Miss Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* contains as much detection as *The Moonstone* and more similarities with later detective fiction, yet there are no erudite discussions of it (1980 pp. 118-119).



One need not search far for a blatant example of what Stewart points out. Here is Gavin Lambert writing in 1975:

the first map of the country was made halfway through the nineteenth century by Wilkie Collins. Although he didn't invent the detective or the mystery novel, he was the first to grasp its expressive possibilities. The genre became personal with *The Woman in White* and mechanical soon afterwards. But a few genuine explorers persisted, of whom Greene, Simenon, Eric Ambler, and Hitchcock's films, still survive (ix).<sup>3</sup>

For Stewart, not only do such critics assess historical texts in terms of an empty value judgment but they often work backwards to canonize only those works which display the mechanics of the contemporary texts. Thus,

histories and commentaries have been written against the background and from the viewpoint of the Golden Age . . . Instead of taking preconceived ideas about detective fiction as produced in the 1920s and 30s and seeing how earlier works conform to them, we should be taking sensation fiction of Victorian times and comparing detective fiction of the later period with it (Stewart p. 119).

There is often a specific reason for the recategorizing process that Stewart discerns: texts may be very successful at the time of their first publication but the conceptual apparatus for discussing their success does not yet exist. Jauss discusses this with regard to *Madame Bovary* which only became a world wide success after a small circle of connoisseurs recognized its worth and acted as cultural midwives (Jauss 1982 p. 27-28; see below). A more appropriate example is provided by Jerry Palmer:

When Erskine Childers published *The Riddle of the Sands* in 1903, it was difficult to say what kind of a novel it was - except that it was an immensely successful novel. Was it a yachting novel? Most of the first third is about sailing. Was it a political novel? Politicians were certainly influenced by it, and when Childers entered the Navy in 1914 his first assignment was to draw up a contingency plan based on the novel. Was it a spy novel? Not only is it about spying, but the Foreign Office man is even called Carruthers! Nowadays it is clearly a spy novel - the first properly speaking. But in 1903 things were by no means so clear, for most of the modern fictional 'formulae' were far from established (Palmer in Keating 1982 p. 61).

*The Riddle of the Sands* became a thriller when the conceptual apparatus necessary for recognizing a thriller became available.

A further implication of Stewart's comments is less easily dismissed. First of all, there is the question of the critic's existence in history. The critic is tied to his/her own system of knowledge, unable to predict the future with any exactness and largely unable to utilize systems of investigation that go beyond the paradigms that exist in

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<sup>3</sup> Significantly the chapters of his book are on Collins, Doyle and Chesterton, Buchan and Ambler, Greene, Simenon, Chandler, Hitchcock.

his/her own time. For Fowler, as we have seen, this is inevitable, and a necessary corollary is that the critic will relate past works to genres that the critic knows in his/her contemporary position. A good example of this is also one of the most famous examples of thriller criticism. In 'The Guilty Vicarage', W. H. Auden states from the outset what kind of detective fiction *he* likes:

For me, as for many others, the reading of detective fiction is an addiction like tobacco or alcohol. The symptoms of this are: firstly, the intensity of the craving - if I have any work to do, I must be careful not to get hold of a detective story for, once I begin one I cannot work or sleep until I have finished it. Secondly, its specificity - the story must conform to certain formulas [sic] (I find it very difficult to read one that is not set in rural England) (1963 p. 146).

Framed as a confession, the repeated use of personal pronouns makes this seem a very individual view of detective fiction. But, of course, the personal pronouns only serve to efface the historicity of Auden's viewpoint. It may *seem* that, following Symons (methodologically if not temporally), Auden is allowing personal taste to assist in drawing a line of demarcation between texts; however, the final part of the quote, in brackets, is the key constituent. In 1948, when this essay was first published, the Golden Age stories which were invariably set in rural England were still at the peak of their popularity. The hard-boiled stories that Auden makes reference to later in the essay were not to become popular in some circles in Britain for a few years (see Worpole 1983 p. 35). The Golden Age stories are taken by Auden as his starting point for an exclusive categorization, working back from his own historical position to Aristotle. This is not all that could be said about 'The Guilty Vicarage': we could also comment on the role of Auden's intellectual and class standing on his categorization. But this simple example is primarily concerned with showing how critics take a prejudiced look back over history to find the texts that fit the thesis. Whether this is inevitable or not is open to question, but if the genre historian can question his/her own historicity, it is possible that the task of constituting a corpus can become less prone to bias.

The second implication of Stewart's comments is that critics tend to wield their categories insensitively, pulling texts from the arms of their original progenitors. In his case, the prior category is Victorian 'sensation fiction'. The point is that to reclassify a



small number of historical texts by reference to a contemporary paradigm is akin to dragging them from their natural habitat. Whilst one must acknowledge that this is in large part the task of the critic one can also argue that the original habitat was where a text may have had its greatest effectivity and currency before being acted upon by subsequent critics. Furthermore, there is the problem in such a procedure of divorcing a given text from those texts around it and against which a contemporary reading may have operated. In short, the tendency to subjugate texts for contemporary purposes, whether intentional or not, is ever-present. If we look at Altman's study of the musical, it is evident that his ambivalence about the categories of Hollywood prevent him from negotiating this stumbling-block successfully:

The broadest possible corpus implied by the industrial/journalistic term is taken as the critic's *preliminary* corpus . . . . the broad amorphous corpus thus borrowed is then subjected to diverse modes of analysis . . . . Once a method of analysis has been established . . . it becomes possible to constitute a revised corpus . . . . Just as the Linnaean system, in its desire to stress social and bodily functioning, rather than habitat alone, removes the whale from the corpus of fish, so we must entertain the possibility that a systematic study of the musical will redistribute generic texts and borders (Altman 1987 pp.13-14).

Altman's need to distance theory from the discourses of the industry here, force him into a position similar to the one that he criticizes: in constituting his corpus as outlined above his work now embodies the 'theoretical' side of Todorov's theoretical/historical genres distinction. The theoretical genres to which Todorov refers are those for which a number of enunciative possibilities exist and can be realized. But the problem with this is that it is a synchronic view of genre as a system and cannot take into account possible historical situations in which an enunciative possibility realized will have almost countless differing potential existences. This may have been deduced from the fact that Altman's analogy with the whale is faulty. A fish and a mammal *may* differ *biologically*; but consumers tend to care little for biology. What does it matter? If the mammal looks like a fish, inhabits the same environment and tastes like a fish when cooked with the same ingredients, then to all intents and purposes, it may as well be a fish. Recast in textual terms, my criticism of Altman is that, in spite of his attempts to the contrary, his work tends to rely too heavily on the abstraction of elements *within*

texts to constitute a corpus and erect a genre theory. Some vital ingredients are missing.

Jauss points to one of these when he states that

To see the work in *its* history, that is, comprehended within the literary history defined as the 'succession of systems', is however not yet the same as to see the work of art in *history*, that is, in the historical horizon of its origination, social function and historical influence. The historicity of literature does not end with the succession of aesthetic-formal systems: the evolution of literature, like that of language, is to be determined not only immanently through its own unique relationship of diachrony and synchrony, but also through its relationship to the general process of history (1982 p. 18).

And it is a factor with which overviews of the thriller genre and its subgenres have often tried to come to terms.

## The Thriller and History: Some Models

A number of works have taken aspects of the Victorian period as a crucial area for the development of the thriller. In the latter part of the nineteenth century literacy rates, subscription libraries, cheap editions of novels, railway travel, bookstalls, new magazines and so on, transformed reading habits in a manner that has been well documented (see James 1973 [originally 1963] and Altick 1957; see also 'Dissenters', this chapter, below). As a source of explanation for the vicissitudes of fiction this material has served thriller historians well. Regarding readership, Symons notes

This, then, was what Collins called the Unknown Public: a new generation of readers possessing some literacy and some leisure, and with a vague but pressing need to read books for amusement which would in some degree confirm the permanence of their own newly won position in society (p. 45).

Further into *Bloody Murder* he returns to the composition of turn-of-the-century magazine readership to speculate on the reasons for the popularity of the Sherlock Holmes stories (p. 66-7) and later still he narrates the decline of the short story in the post-1930 period by reference to editorial decisions taken in a number of magazines (pp. 171-2). Another historian of the genre who uses such material to good advantage is Colin Watson. In *Snobbery with Violence* (1979) he puts forth, in parts, a convincing profile of the audiences for Golden Age detective stories and the imperialist spy thriller, giving details of library development and possible reading habits (see



especially pp. 28 ff). The possibility of sliding from one mode of dealing with a historical context for thriller production is demonstrated by Panek:

Whereas in the late 1860s popular fiction and 'best sellers' hardly existed, in the 1880s and 1890s they reshaped the world of publishing and the reading habits of millions. Add to this the facts that in the late 1880s Jack the Ripper was painting Whitechapel red and the Fenians were planting bombs even at Scotland Yard, and it was easy to see why the public asked not, why do we need snooping policemen, but why aren't the police doing anything? Late in the 1880s the public was ready for a new variety detective story and the editors were ready to publish anything which caught the public's fancy. It was, therefore, lucky that few people in Southsea chose to avail themselves of the medical services of young Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) (1987 pp. 76-7).

Panek first makes a statement about the fiction market and its moulding of reading habits, but then justifies this with a reference to historical circumstances which have created a specific view about the police force which was appropriate for fiction. Finally, this allows a space for the introduction of a new way of thinking, to be provided by one of the classics of detective fiction. Panek's deft moves almost carry conviction about the nature of the relation between detective fiction and its contemporary history if only because they resemble the approach of Symons. For example,

It is said that 11,000 murders were committed in Britain every year during the early part of the century, and although this figure is conjectural it remains appallingly high even if it is halved. Certain areas of London, as of New York and other big cities, were practically immune from visits by the police, and the detection of crime was in the hands of the Bow Street Runners, who were in effect private detectives operating partly for private reward, and widely thought to be susceptible to bribery. Even when a professional paid police force came into existence after the Metropolitan Police Act of 1829, the Bow Street Runners survived for another ten years. They were replaced in 1842 by the Detective Department, which consisted of two inspectors and six sergeants. The first head of the Department had distinguished himself two years before its foundation by what was then an unusual piece of detective work, when he noticed that apparent marks of forcible entry into a house had been faked, and that what appeared to be an 'outside' crime was really an 'inside' one.

It is impossible to understand the romantic aura which spread around detective departments and bureaus, without realising the thankfulness felt by the middle class at their existence. As they grew, the second strand in crime writing, represented by Godwin, Lytton and Balzac, in which the criminal was often considered romantic and the policeman stupid or corrupt, almost disappeared, although it could still be found in the penny dreadful. The detective, as the protector of established society, gradually replaced the criminal hero (Symons p. 46).

This mediating factor between fictional representation and history embodied in the aura and mystique of the police is also attested to at great length in Stewart's work (see Ch. 7). Even so, as a model of dealing with the relation of fiction and history it is lacking despite the attempt to introduce a discussion of mediation between the fictional and non-fictional. Watson's comments on the inter-war period illustrate the pratfalls attendant on a simplistic model of mediation:

[Bulldog] Drummond's preference for the upper-cut as an effective and proper argument was by no means inconsistent with contemporary relief at the return of peace. The 'Hun' had been fairly beaten, if not by precisely the same mode of assault, at least in the same spirit. The feeling of a great number of ordinary people was that the subsequent tiresome complications at home and abroad could have been avoided by the delivery of a few extra 'biffs' for good measure (p. 70).

This statement, of course, is at once too general and too specific. The "feeling of a great number of people" is not supported by any evidence, empirical or otherwise; if a feeling of some kind did exist on imperialist matters, there is no reason to insist that it would be manifested in such a way. While the temptation to make such links is understandable on the part of the critic, their lack of rigour and untestability can have dangerous consequences for analysis.

The difficulties for historians of the genre are centred around the need to put texts in their historical context, as we saw earlier, to attempt to explain why a body of texts exists at a given moment and not another. In this way, thriller historians have been involved with problematics of 'reflection' and 'mediation', often in a far from convincing manner. Rather than discuss the whole range of histories I will concentrate on three theorists who exemplify some of the difficulties entailed in discussing thrillers' relation to the real world.

## Carlos Clarens

Clarens' book, *Crime Movies* appeared in 1980. As an 'Illustrated History', its appearance resembles that of a coffee-table book; this belies the significant fact that the volume contains a massive amount of material on a huge corpus of films. This, in turn, is supplemented by considerable relevant details of theatre productions, especially during the twenties and thirties. At the beginning of the study Clarens is keen to assert the historical nature of his work:

Not long ago a critic or film historian could be laughed out of the field for asserting one or more of the following propositions: that American films reflected a sense of American history; that film art and the social experience of filmmakers were inseparably bound together; that film genre should be acknowledged



as the one concept to take into consideration the artist, the industry, and the society that encompasses them (p. 11).

In fact, Clarens' call for a reconsideration of the centrality of history in criticizing a corpus is not that far removed from the position held by some traditional methods which attempt the same in literary criticism. In *The Dickens World* (1960; originally 1941), for instance, House treats Dickens' texts as, essentially, pieces of journalism which have a great deal to tell us about the real world in which they were published. In this way, the real world, for House, is always somewhere available in the text. By making this assumption, such an approach can be fruitful within certain limits because it does not have to deal with too many of the complexities of aesthetic mediation of social facts. However, House acknowledges that the nature of cultural production - on at least one level - distorts (see especially pp. 215-224), but the approach, by concentrating on signs that appear in the text and in the real world in a broadly similar way (e.g. railways), avoids becoming enmeshed in the details of aesthetic mediation.

Clarens' method is often similar to this. By playing down the dimension of fantasy involved in fiction in order to emphasize the historical specificity of certain texts he is able to discern links between texts and the social world which may hitherto have been disregarded by other critics. In assessing the work of some influential commentators he says

To these critics [in the 1930s and 1940s], particularly Paul Rotha in England, Georges Sadoul in France, and James Agee in this country, Americans went to the movies to escape reality (p. 11)

Such an emphasis on escape is too much for Clarens; for him there is always a social and historical determinant acting on the means and content of such an escape. So he stresses that

Three events that left a permanent imprint on the American consciousness of the 1920s were Prohibition, the onset of Depression, and the arrival of sound in the motion pictures (p. 40).

If we look more closely at Clarens' discussion of a text it may serve as a more illustrative example of his method. Writing on the origins and development of a particular film he has this to say:

The murder of Alfred 'Jake' Lingle provided Warner Brothers with the criminal event of 1930. Lingle, a reporter for the Chicago Tribune, was shot in a crowded pedestrian tunnel at noon on June 9, the day before he was to meet with federal agents investigating Al Capone's finances . . . the movies could not possibly ask for a better story, and Warner Brothers immediately set W. R. Burnett and John Monk Saunders to write a moral into a story that patently lacked one . . . To evade possible legal action by Lingle's widow, Lingle was rechristened Breckenridge Lee and made into a Southern hick with ambitions of becoming an ace reporter in the big city (p. 66).

The final result was the film *The Finger Points* (1931), directed by John Francis Dillon.

The above quote shows that an historical event, and narratives associated with it, undergo an explicit formal transformation for a number of reasons as they traverse the route from real world to text.

Clarens makes this mechanism - i.e. the mechanism by which history is distorted in its re-presentation in accordance with the exigencies of the industry - a central feature of his work. However, it is not a method peculiar to his survey; one need only point to other works that we have considered to see its partial utilization. In this case, Panek incorporates the method, showing how extra-textual characterizations become textual ones:

If the depression made no contribution to the birth of the hard-boiled story, Prohibition did. Between 1920 and 1933, the hard-boiled story gained its maturity alongside the bootleggers and rumrunners. From Prohibition, the hard-boiled story got some obvious things - the figure of the bootlegger, as well as all of the usable background material on the illegal manufacture, distribution, and dispensing of alcohol (1987 p. 160).

In order to test the fact that Clarens' approach can be applied to later eras one need only read further into the book. Commenting on a film made in the 1970s, Clarens emphasizes the historical material that it uses:

In *Badlands*, [director Terence Mallick] denied himself and the viewer any facile explanation for the murder spree of a young couple, obviously based on the Charles Starkweather and Carol Ann Fugate who had killed ten people in Nebraska and Wyoming during the Winter of 1957-58 (p. 267).

In one way, concentration on the mechanisms of re-presentation as they exist in the real world makes Clarens' work similar in some respects to that of Watson, Symons et al.

More explicitly one can say that the comments made by thriller historians on magazines, editorial decisions and their influence on the development of the corpus of written crime fiction is analogous to Clarens' assessment of such factors as the Hays code - a set of guidelines proposed for maintaining propriety in American films in the 1930s, which



became MPAA law in 1933 (see Clarens p. 115). Like editorial requirements, they affected the form of fictional texts:

A film such as *Alibi* (1929), like the stage play *Nightstick* (1927) that inspired it, seems now to exist solely to support two vivid and rather repellent third-degree sequences . . . The third degree continued to appear in films - in *The Vice Squad*, *Paid*, *The Secret Six*, *Beast of the City*, *Penthouse*, to mention a few - until section 9 of the Production Code of 1933 specifically laid down the law, calling for 'discretion and restraint' and the depiction of such methods 'within the careful limits of good taste' (p. 73).

The ideological construct, 'good taste', intrudes therefore on the realistic depiction of fictional and non fictional-events.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the importance of ideological constructs in effecting re-presentation of textual content, it must be borne in mind that Clarens' method relies heavily on historical events being inculcated into texts in a still reasonably unproblematic way. If Panek can say, in Clarens mode

[In the 1930s Hoover ] inflated the image of his bureau establishing the G. Man as incorruptible, tough, scientific and dogged, an image never before associated with public law enforcement. The trouble was, that to do this also meant building up the images of the bureau's antagonists; it meant inflating mean, pathetic, and sometimes petty bank bandits into premier Public Enemies [which] not only distorted the true picture of crime and criminals in the United States, but every so often it backfired and romanticised the criminal.

In the process of romanticising the criminal, the American cinema industry played no small part (1990 p. 102)

then it is not difficult for Clarens to follow up with an assumption that reveals little about mechanisms that force re-presentation but is taken as almost given. For example,

By 1940, the attention of the FBI was monopolized by the threat of foreign agents on American soil (p. 138)

In fact, if we examine such statements more closely, then the shortcomings of the method are thrown into relief. What Clarens is saying here is almost identical to what Panek implies when he declares that

The police novel did not prosper during the period [1917-1940] mainly because the police of the period did not prosper (1990 p.114)

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<sup>4</sup> The political character of the distortion pointed up by such methods as Clarens' will be encountered later in my discussion of the hard-boiled story, particularly the comments of Hoffman on Robert B. Parker (see Chapter 7, below).

The police novel, a fictional form, in this formulation, relies for its prosperity on the prosperity of the police in the real world. This is similar to saying that the proliferation of private detectives in fiction was directly proportional to the growth of private detection in the real world. In short, it is a mechanistic model. The conditions within a text *cannot* rely solely and in such a direct manner for their existence on concomitant conditions outside the text. For every crime movie whose content has a direct correlative in the real world there will be a mass of texts that cannot be related to real events so simply. Probably the most effective way to assess Clarens' approach as a model of relating genre to history is to contest its effectivity for other genres. As a means of discussing the historical development of science fiction and horror, for example, its limits can be clearly seen.

Although the idea of history and its distortion when textually re-presented can be fruitful to an extent, and can serve as a basis for generalizations over a small range of texts, it is ultimately untenable. This is mainly a result of the lack of attention paid to mediations between the text and history, particularly ideology. However, there are other historians of the genre who have paid close heed to this factor.

## Jack Shadoian

Shadoian's *Dreams and Dead Ends* was one of a number of theoretically informed texts on genre that were published in the 1970s and which took concepts of ideology to be crucial to its thesis. The first obvious neighbour in this paradigm set would be Palmer's *Thrillers*. What places Shadoian apart from other theorists is that he starts from and foregrounds notions of fantasy and investment. In the first pages of the book, the following statements appear:

The gangster film was generated by the historical appearance of the gangster, but it rapidly became a metaphor . . . If there is a problem the society is worried about or a fantasy it is ready to support, odds are it can be located in the gangster (p. 4).



The theme of success is perhaps the most insistent in American cinema, a cinema that reflects, whether it means to or not, this crucial dilemma of a capitalist democracy (p. 5).

Ideological anxieties are transferred to emotional/dramatic planes and then prevented from leading to a logical criticism (p. 6).

Of course, Shadoian is not unique in falling back on the notion of fantasy to assist in explaining the appeal of a genre. It is an idea that is in common currency; for example

At some time or another, most of us have wanted to be tough cops or snarling gunmen or laconic private detectives . . . just so long as we did not have to face the realities that accompany those roles. Fantasy, if you like. But it explains the continued popularity of the thriller, from Bulldog Drummond to James Bond (Hossent, 1974 p. 7).

Also, as we have seen, Clarens distinguishes his project from that of Agee et al. precisely on these grounds. But if we compare *Dreams and Dead Ends* with the work of Mandel - who we will look at in more depth later - the decisive ingredients in Shadoian's method are thrown into relief. Mandel, like many others before him, at various stages in his work on crime fiction relies on a series of pat Freudianisms about the nature of psychological disorders in the individual author which bring about a realm of fantasy within fictional texts (see Mandel pp. 48-49).<sup>5</sup>

Shadoian's method is different; as we can see from the quotes above, the nature of fantasy that he utilizes is social rather than personal. The gangster film is first a metaphor and not a strict representation of social life. It is the place where certain social anxieties and investments are worked out. The gangster is like an arena where the conflicting forces in social life can congregate to work through their vicissitudes. One of the forces in American social life is the ideology of 'success'; in Shadoian's formula, anxieties about success are embodied in the figure of the gangster, but instead of being worked out on a social, political and economic plane they are recast in the emotional and individual plane of the fictional protagonist. At once we can see that this conception of fantasy is far removed and altogether more sophisticated than a simple one to one correspondence of the individual audience member's yearning with the fate of a leading character.

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<sup>5</sup> See also Cobley (forthcoming) for a summary of this issue.

What are the implications of this? For our purposes, the key consequence is that the socio-political character of such a conception of fantasy entails two possible options: on the one hand, a definition of the gangster as a purely syntactic phenomenon embodying some unchanging fact about the capitalist system as a whole; or, on the other, a definition which stresses the semantic dimension of the gangster, connecting the character with smaller scale social change. Put another way, there is one definition which will rely on the actions of the gangster in propelling the narrative forward; these will be the genre's dominant procedure which mirrors a fact about capitalism as a whole such as the ideology of competitive individualism. The other definition relies on the gangster embodying social change on a small scale, for example as a Communist thief in the 1950s, a social bandit in the 1960s and so on. Shadoian leans heavily towards the second option:

The history of the genre I am most concerned with is the history of the uses to which the gangster figure, and his medium, have been put . . . How the gangster has been conceived, or what he wants, varies from film to film and corresponds to what the culture needs to have expressed at any given time (p. 14).

So Shadoian has a mediating factor which enables him to draw conclusions about texts in historical periods; in the 1930s, he writes

the gangster was uplifting, awe-inspiring, and grand even in death. Movies created dreams and fantasies that made a hard life bearable. By 1939, the depression was over . . . (p. 59)

What an audience sees on the screen is not a depiction of real life but a depiction of fantasies about real life. Recognition of such an area of mediation between history and the text allows the critic to be far more circumspect on the topic, and works towards the prevention of grand assumptions and speculations which cannot be theoretically justified. To take an alternative approach, discussing the demise of the Golden Age story which he dates precisely at 1939, Panek attributes it unequivocally to the war:

After 1939, nothing remained the same. The war changed the rules of the game, and master criminals without sane motives loosed mass destruction on humanity. This seemed more real than the murder at the garden party (1987 p. 142)

One might ask, to whom did this existence of master criminals seem more real? Why is it that the rural country house murder story cannot continue once war has started and



dictators have implemented policies of genocide? Panek does not elaborate; he merely takes it as given that history will change generic expectations without a dimension of fantasy mediating between text and social life.

A further consequence of fantasy which serves as a comparison with Shadoian's approach is its influence on formal mutations of a genre. O'Brien makes the startling observation that fantasy from one genre can be naturalized by way of the social to appear without difficulty in another genre.

The Thirties pulp hero in a mask and cape, battling the Purple Menace or the Green Menace, has by 1947 become a down-to-earth Mike Hammer battling the Red Menace. Fantasy has become reality (p. 94).

The effortless but unqualified elision from fantasy in the text - across genre, via the social - to another text is an extreme version of the relation between the political and fantasy realms. Moreover, it privileges the hard-boiled story by stressing its solid relation to history (in that the signs connected with the Red Menace exist in history and in Spillane's novels) in contradistinction to the seemingly non-existent relation of history and science fiction. The Green or Purple Menaces do not exist as signs in the real world, so O'Brien plays down their existence in sci-fi texts as pure fantasy rather than historically related. He even assumes that the actions of Mike Hammer constitute reality. The chasing of menaces is a syntactic feature of texts; but O'Brien has imputed a new meaning to this syntactic feature by imputing meaning in the semantic dimension.

The essential paradox contained in this example of the use of fantasy is that if you play down the semantic and play up the syntactic then the expression/reflection model of text and history - whether mediated by fantasy or not - cannot work. Relatively short term social changes do not effect changes in the syntactic structure of generic texts; if this were the case, then genres would be very transient and would proliferate on a massive scale. One need only look at the thriller to see that this is not the case. O'Brien's comments above are an attempt to make fantasy, as a syntactic feature, cross from one genre to another. As we see, the movement fails when Mike Hammer is assessed,

instead, as a semantic entity. Shadoian's work is sustained by the fact that he concentrates heavily on semantic mutations in genre as an area reflecting social change.

For instance, a statement such as

*High Sierra* seems to use the gangster as a means to explore America's wartime uncertainties about itself (p. 65).

is straightforward enough. When such comments about textual figures are backed up by social-psychological details the analysis moves onto another level. So, with regard to films like *Gun Crazy* (1949), Shadoian writes,

The quality of postwar life was profoundly changed by the dropping of the bomb in 1945. By 1949, fears, guilts and anxieties had achieved over four years' time a psychologically ruinous density and momentum . . . (p. 167).

Yet, *Dreams and Dead Ends*, despite the productivity engendered by its sophisticated approach, basically treats the relationship of text and real life as a relation between genre's semantic aspect and historical changes. Altman's criticism of this approach, which we considered earlier, concludes with a call for a syntactic/semantic criticism, i.e. an analysis combining the two dimensions. The example by O'Brien cited above does this by default and fails to be convincing. Shadoian's analysis has its own ramifications. Firstly, while

The [gangster/crime] genre remains a viable framework for getting things said (p. 1)  
it also shows that

its basic themes and patterns can withstand a battery of innovations (p. 324)

In one sense, then, it is almost possible to say that, if this model is an accurate description of what takes place between text and history, then the genre is not worth studying as it merely reflects historical currents within its own rigid framework.

Secondly, and not unconnected with the previous point, Shadoian's method implies a fairly strict model of evolution with texts evolving semantically in tandem with anxieties and wishes that exist in the world. So, for example, there is talk of 'Modernism' in the crime film:

I use the term to signify, in the main, an articulate and consciously conceived nonillusionistic cinema. The genre from the late sixties on is marked by films that prevent the audience from nursing the illusion that they are watching a real world (p. 285).



One purpose of this tendency is to question the audience's 'involvement' with the text; an example of this would be the lack of 'bad' or 'good' shadings in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) or that Robert Aldrich gives the audience a "slobbering cretin to identify with" (p. 286) in *The Grissom Gang* (1971). Something in the presentation of texts in this period is different from the way it was before:

To go from A to C you have to go through B . . . . From 1945 on the audience was carried gradually to the point where it was ready to 'see' a film like *Bonnie and Clyde* (p. 286).

This formulation, acceptable as logic, makes the whole process of evolution seem inevitable, almost like a teleological view of history with the crime genre reaching its 'end' when the right historical conditions apply. More important than this, though, is the manner in which Shadoian's model entails a *chronological* and *parallel* evolution in our period. The syntactic structure of the crime film is seen as fixed; semantic changes incorporate aspects of the real world; but this does not take place until those aspects have been thoroughly filtered through the distorting lens of a mediator such as fantasy.

Originally, we introduced Shadoian's book as an analysis that adds the category of ideology to the equation of history and genre; but the term 'ideology' has subsequently been avoided in favour of a broad based view of fantasy as a mediator. The reasons for this prevarication about the terms will now seem clear. Shadoian's concept of ideology is very straightforward and seemingly unproblematic. He believes it to be a false consciousness which prevents subjects from acquiring a true view of the objective conditions in which they live and work. It is a monolithic entity in this formulation but has localized outbreaks such as the 'ideology of success', which can be easily incorporated into fictional texts. It is not a conception of ideology which has been worked out with reference to developments in theory since the 1960s; Palmer's (1978) almost contemporary study of genre, on the other hand, pays close attention to such problematics. If genre texts evolve in tandem with social change as Shadoian suggests, and if social facts pass through ideology before entering the text, then the pattern of relations between genre and the world is far more complex than Shadoian allows.

Referring to my remarks on ideology in the introduction, above, the most strikingly relevant feature of modern theories of ideology for this examination of Shadoian is Althusser's discussion of the Leninist notion, 'uneven development'. The fact that ideology, cultural products and history all have their specificities entails that their developments must take into account internal exigencies as well as relations between each other. Palmer notes the following with regard to the thriller:

Ideology is not a single entity. It is a group of practices, each with its own specificity: legal, political, religious, artistic: and each with its own institutions. Thus when we ask if the specific unity that constitutes the thriller is rooted in ideology what we are asking is if this particular form can be mapped onto another or others. In the case of the dominant procedure it is not: everything that can be said about the symbiotic relationship between the hero and the conspiracy can only be said about that relationship. It does not apply anywhere outside. To that extent the thriller is an autonomous entity (p. 203).

Of course, Palmer is offering this knowledge to shore up a view of the thriller relying predominantly on discussion of the syntactic dimension, but his comments are still applicable to semantic elements.

The question of evolution has been an area for some debate in genre theory and we will return to it shortly. In the meantime, we will consider an approach to thriller history which makes ideology a central category but within a leftist mass culture theory approach.

## Ernest Mandel

It was to be expected that a Marxist economic historian and theorist of 'late capitalism', would, in his book on crime fiction, pay close attention to the historical dimension of the genre's development. This he does, but the superficial neatness of *Delightful Murder* (1984) represents only a thin veneer covering the confusedness of its discussion of genre's relation to history. It is as if Mandel has embraced the organizing features of Clarens' and Shadoian's methods but has only been able to combine them in



a crude and mechanistic fashion. For example, there is a hint that the syntactic aspect of crime fiction is paramount:

Disorder being brought into order, order falling back into disorder; irrationality upsetting rationality, rationality restored after irrational upheavals: that is what the ideology of the crime novel is about (p. 44).

Yet equally fundamental are the protagonists, in the realm of the semantic:

The modern detective story stems from popular literature about 'good bandits' . . . (p. 1)

As a basis for discussing the genre these starting points seem quite sound, implying a dialectic of both aspects as grounds for the nature of crime fiction. Unfortunately, this is not the route that Mandel's discussion takes.

The detective story for Mandel *stems* from "popular literature" about good bandits; but it is not popular literature anymore. Presumably this link with the past can only be discerned by historians of the genre and, for the consumers of genre fiction, those halcyon days are gone forever. Detective fiction is not "popular"; instead it is something else:

Conventionalized and formalized 'trivial' literature, like conventionalized and formalized forms of art in general, are not supposed to reflect reality at all. They are intended to satisfy subjective needs, thus performing an objective function: to reconcile the upset, bored and anxious individual member of the middle-class with the inevitability and permanence of bourgeois society. The subjective need to be filled by the classical detective story of the inter-war years was that of nostalgia [for the pre-war years] (p. 29).

This statement bears some examination. Firstly, "conventionalized and formalized" forms of art and literature, in order to be posited as such, must exist in relation to 'unconventionalized and unformalized' forms of art and literature. Mandel is thus implying that "trivial" literature, unlike the other form, is conventionalized; so he is clumsily effacing a massive corpus of analytical writing which stresses all language and literature as forms *ruled* by convention. Secondly, "conventionalized" literature is not supposed to reflect reality, implying a) that 'non-conventionalized' literature *is*, and b) that conventionalized literature does *something else*. These unqualified assumptions are questionable enough in themselves but Mandel goes on to claim that detective fiction (as "conventionalized" literature) satisfies "subjective" needs. This is the crux of the whole

problem, and which, from the outset, jeopardizes Mandel's thesis; as I will show, his use of a combination of similar problematics to those of Shadoian and Clarens - albeit for different purposes - results in a crudely functionalist reflection model of the relation between genre and history.

To begin with, Mandel's stress on "subjective" needs and "reflection" constitutes a self-contradiction as his discussion goes on to suggest at some length that the two are not mutually exclusive. The importing of violence into the crime story so that its implications can be worked out and fictionally resolved he attributes to factors of history and verisimilitude:

The coming of age of organized crime tolled the death knell of the drawing-room detective story. It is impossible to imagine Hercule Poirot, not to mention Lord Peter Wimsey or Father Brown, battling against the Mafia. Even the formidable Nero Wolfe takes fright when he finds himself confronting Zeck, the mysterious figure of organized crime. This is not to say that the crime stories began to deal with the syndicate from the early '30s onwards: that would come later. But mass consciousness about the nature of criminal activities had caught up with the violence of the St. Valentine's Day type early enough to make drawing-room murders appear increasingly atypical, if not improbable.

The mass consciousness first came to the surface in the so-called pulp magazine, which developed more or less simultaneously with the rise of organized crime. Their prototype was the *Black Mask* series . . . (p. 34)

Apart from anything else, this statement is false: we might guess so by observing Mandel's repeat of the conventional wisdom about the influence of *Black Mask*, but the notion that the hard-boiled story *follows* the Golden Age is an untruth derived from a false model of evolution (see below). Yet the main thrust of this passage is to suggest that a "mass consciousness" is responsible for the entry of certain elements into the crime story. The possibility that an undifferentiated, homogeneous "mass consciousness" may not exist is not raised; what is implied is that if a prominent historical fact usable by crime fiction exists, then it will be incorporated into the genre. So,

Social corruption, especially among the rich, now moves into the centre of the plots, along with brutality, a reflection of both the change in value brought about by the first world war and the impact of organized gangsterism (p. 35).

This is to say that brutality is purely an incorporation of the historical rather than, perhaps, a development from the dime novel, say, or American literary naturalism. It



seems that Mandel is only too ready to use the term 'reflection' rather than to countenance other possible or supplementary determinants. A Marxist reading *Delightful Murder* might find this extremely curious, especially in the light of Lenin's comments on the topic (1967 ; originally 1908-11) and Macherey's well-known discussion of Lenin's comments (1978 pp. 106-133) and the problems of 'reflection' (1976). Both repudiate the idea, Lenin especially relying on the metaphor of 'refraction' in his discussion of Tolstoy. Yet Mandel's whole discussion relies on the notion that texts 'reflect' history.

It is worth scrutinizing the specific uses to which this notion is put. In his discussion of the differences of the hard-boiled and Golden Age stories Mandel claims that they originate in the specificity of bourgeois society in the United States.

Nevertheless, the common ideology of the original and classical detective story in Britain, the United States, and the countries of the European continent remains quintessentially bourgeois (p. 47).

So, in short, the sub-genres are specific to the national formations in which they develop but the larger genre is a phenomenon of capitalism as whole. This is not dissimilar to Palmer's (1978) thesis, except that Palmer backs it up by discussing textual mechanisms and ideology in much greater depth. However, apart from its lack of detail, Mandel's argument lacks rigour as a result of its one-sided attribution of all the vicissitudes of the detective story to the essential nature of capitalism alone rather than its institutions. One does not even need to compare Mandel on the topic to Palmer; here is Panek covering the same area:

The American detective story is, in fact, a unique manifestation of the genre. Just as the detective story in Britain and France grew out of specific backgrounds, the history of police and crime as well as American popular fiction have shaped our detective stories. That American detective fiction gravitates to unmasking corruption and hypocrisy in high persons and places goes back to the mysteries and miseries of the 1840s. That American detective uses more realistic crime than the artificial problems of British fiction goes back to the story papers of the 1870s and 1880s. That there is a tension between public and private detectives is not simply a literary convention but a response to the way things were in nineteenth century America (1990 p. 9).

Panek here hints at the complexity of relations between the crime novels and other institutions within capitalist society with which it may have intricate relations. Mandel

does not do this except on a very simplistic level. So, for example, he comments on the police:

With the advent of organized crime on a large scale, a commensurate change in the detection and combating of crime in real life had to occur. During the thirties, the law-enforcement establishment grew massively throughout the Western world. A similar development in literature dealing with crime was inevitable too . . . A new type of crime story was born, the 'police procedural' (p. 53).

Throughout his study, Mandel seems to stick to the rule that historical developments are soon taken up by genre but only after a lapse. On at least one occasion he is very explicit about this:

Chronology is not really a problem here. It is true that monopoly capitalism made its appearance in about 1885 or 1890, well before the turn of the century. But the mental structures that determine basic ideology generally lag behind objective reality by at least two generations - as does popular behind avant-garde literature. So we should expect the thriller and the spy story to emerge as separate genres derived from the original detective novel with a broad popular market, in the late thirties. And this is indeed what occurred (pp. 85-86).

Once again this statement bears some examination. In traditional Marxist terms, Mandel is dealing with a strict hierarchy of 'base' and 'superstructure'. The 'base' - history, objective reality or in this case an economic base proper, monopoly capitalism - appears and leads to an epiphenomenon, the detective novel, which is part of the 'superstructure'. Included in this superstructure is avant-garde literature (and presumably the oxymoron, "non-conventionalized" art) which is somehow 'ahead' of genre fiction. Mandel does not explain in what ways or why detective fiction lags behind avant-garde literature. Nor does he explain in full the workings of those "mental structures" that "determine basic ideology". Put bluntly, this is a very confused passage which is all the more disturbing because it is characteristic of the book as a whole. Firstly, Mandel is wrong in dating the heyday of the spy thriller in the late thirties: the two novels often taken as pinnacles of the genre, Buchan's *The Thirty-nine Steps* and *Greenmantle*, appeared in 1915 and 1916 respectively; among others, Denning (1987a) and Watson (1979) would disagree with Mandel (p. 86) in crediting Marquand with the spy story. Secondly, there is absolutely no reason why the appearance of monopoly capitalism should inevitably lead to a specific subgenre of thrillers forty years later. Mandel simply fails to take into account all the other mediating phenomena of monopoly capitalism and institutional determinations acting on genre fiction.



The thesis that Mandel holds with regard to crime fiction is discernible almost from the outset, but he states it uncompromisingly during his discussion of the spy thriller in relation to the old style of ratiocinative detective fiction:

The relative decline of pure intellect, pure *ratio*, in the detective story is a striking reflection of the relative decline of rationalism in bourgeois ideology, and of the rational (or allegedly rational) behaviour of *homo oeconomicus* under mature and late capitalism (p. 85).

This leads him into making his fateful self-contradiction later in the book. After having faithfully adhered to the theory that the base determines the superstructure he turns to a discussion of the post-war *série noire* and comics. Adopting a very traditional, moralistic view, he notes how the putatively increased violence of the post-war world has its "corresponding expression" in the sadism contained in the new material in genre (pp. 93-96). Although questionable, this does not deviate from the main thesis; but on the contemporary period (1984) he says,

Specialists in the science of communication are increasingly coming to argue that the replacement of written texts by images, of transparent linearity by opaque space, almost inevitably leads to more primitive content, acts regressively upon the content of communication itself. (Thus the information that there are now more video shops in Britain than bookshops - *Sunday Times*, 8 August 1982 - is disturbing.) Mental structures themselves become involved in the change. Historical thought; deductive and dialectical thought; inductive, causal and scientific thought; all are structurally linked to the written word. A reversal to non-written language, to what are essentially more primitive forms of communication, must stimulate pre-logical, ahistorical, and indeed anti-historical, more and more primitive forms of thinking as well. The regression represented by the *série noire* and its comic-strip heirs, suffused as they are with an inhuman sadism and preoccupied with the most repellent forms of human behaviour, strikingly bears out the correctness of this thesis (p. 96).

Even for Mandel, this is a sweeping statement. One may note that, in a very unrigorous way, he invokes the knowledge of experts yet he does not cite them. It is symptomatic, also, that he cites a Sunday newspaper: this kind of information is more suited to the transience of such a form, rather than a 'Social History of the Crime Story'. The prevarication in the use of "almost inevitably" in the first sentence tends to emphasize the ridiculousness of the unproven hypothesis that Mandel is so keen to embrace. Yet, the proliferation of video shops is a phenomenon he finds disturbing. The statistic actually tells us very little; it certainly does not yield the evidence that Mandel implies: i.e. that erstwhile readers are being converted in droves to the dubious (and "primitive") pleasures of video. If graphic representation constitutes a more primitive mode than the



written form, and therefore contains primitive violence, one wonders what Mandel would make of Giotto, Leonardo, Michaelangelo etc. And he presents no theoretical foundation for the assertion that "non-written" language is necessarily "anti-historical". Above all, the most striking contradiction is that Mandel now attributes developments in human communication to primarily superstructural mutations - changes in language, if one considers language part of the superstructure - rather than changes in the base. This is been a move he has been unwilling to make throughout the rest of his study.

Such contradictions are to be expected in a theory which relies on an over-arching explanatory principle. At all times *Delightful Murder* roots out 'bourgeois ideology' but does not question its own. The similarities between Mandel's book and Symons' is quite striking: the development they outline and the authors they discuss are often identical. But the main implicit points of their theses are that the thriller is in decline since the war and that there actually was a 'Golden Age' in the inter-war period. Earlier, I mentioned that Mandel's work on the thriller was a leftist mass culture approach and it is worth scrutinizing this a little. Without going into detail about mass culture theory, the words of Alan Swingewood on this topic can be fruitfully used to illustrate Mandel's position. Utilizing Gramsci's theory of a 'civil society' of institutions outside the direct power of the state, Swingewood criticizes mass culture theory as a whole on the grounds that

capitalist economy and technology and capitalist culture far, from degenerating into 'barbaric meaninglessness' (Adorno and Horkheimer) and irreversible decline, have achieved new pinnacles of economic and cultural richness and diversity on a scale unparalleled in human history: as there is no 'final crisis' in capitalist economy so there is no final crisis in its culture. Far from it: the development of the capitalist mode of production has served to augment, not destroy, civil society. It has created a more complex and autonomous social structure in which the key institutions of trade unions, political parties, occupational associations and the communications and cultural media are not dominated by a massive and all-powerful state apparatus but exercise a greater mediating influence than was ever possible during the 'progressive' phase of capitalist evolution. Capitalism has succeeded in building up and strengthening the social relations of production and working-class organizations so much that a far more delicate balance of forces is now capitalism's most characteristic feature. Yet for those Marxists working in the shadow of the Frankfurt School or a dogmatic Trotskyism, contemporary capitalism is a society in which a totalitarian state intervenes decisively in the management of economic affairs by controlling the independence of the labour movement through a mixture of welfare programmes and the involvement of trade unions in governmental administration . . . . It is not only the Marxists, however, who have argued for the collapse of civil society and thus cultural vitality: in the writings of T. S. Eliot and F. R. Leavis, a nostalgic longing for a pre-industrial, non-capitalist society functions as a moral touchstone for their critique of modern industrial capitalism. For these writers, as with the



Frankfurt School, the bourgeoisie is incapable of creating cultural vitality: it is incapable of creating only a pallid, mechanical 'life-denying' civilisation - society and its culture are in rapid decline (1977 ix-xi).

It is quite easy to recognize Mandel's position in the constellation that Swingewood describes. It is also easy to understand the historical events that underpin his ideological stance in the year *Delightful Murder* was published: two years after Britain's involvement in an imperialist 'conflict' in the South Atlantic, a massive Tory landslide in the General Election in 1983, four million unemployed, the left in disarray and even the scare over video 'nasties'.<sup>6</sup> The point about an ideological position that sees the present as an age of decline and sees the past as a halcyon era -whether in a 'Golden Age' or in a time when "popular literature about 'good bandits'" was still current - is that it does not recognize its historicity.

One way to efface one's theoretical position in a the writing of a critical history is to employ rhetorical strategies. Mandel's attempts to cover the tracks of this historicity are quite evident, even in the few quotes I have given. Munchausen-like, he always tries to conclude arguments with 'thesis proved' as if mentioning a point was enough to make it stand on thin air foundations. In this way, the final sentences of his book are quite telling:

Thus the evolution of the crime story does indeed reflect, as if in a mirror, the evolution of bourgeois ideology, of social relations in a bourgeois society, perhaps even of the capitalist mode of production itself . . . The history of the crime story is a social history, for it appears intertwined with the history of bourgeois society itself. If the question is asked why it should be reflected in the history of a specific literary genre, the answer is because the history of bourgeois society is also that of property and the he negation of property, in other words, crime; because the history of bourgeois society is also growing, explosive contradiction between individual needs or passions and mechanically imposed patterns of social conformism; because bourgeois society in and of itself breeds crime, originates in crime, and leads to crime; perhaps because bourgeois society is, when all is said and done, a criminal society? (pp. 134-5)

At the last minute an aside about property is dropped in six years after Palmer spends about fifty pages discussing the topic and its implications for the thriller (1978 pp. 151-205). Yet Palmer and Mandel share a resemblance in their final chapters. Both attempt to round off their corpus: the last chapter of *Delightful Murder* is called 'Closing the

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<sup>6</sup> See Martin Barker ed., *The Video Nasties: Freedom and Censorship in the Media*. This, like Mandel's book, was published in 1984 by the left wing press, Pluto, and if nothing else, proves that there were more than just reductionist varieties of Marxism about in the 1980s.

Circle?'; *Thrillers* ends with 'The Anti-Thriller'. Both chapters are understandable in terms of the desire for symmetry but like many accounts of the genre they require a Copernican announcement to inform them that the thriller does not end, like history, with their analysis. The main problems, of course, with Mandel's account of the thriller's development is that it is reductionist (relying on one monolithic cause); functionalist (subsuming all developments in the genre under the exigencies of the monolithic cause); and as a result, it falls back on a reflectionist model of text and history, in which the former is a more or less direct and unmediated expression of the latter. In this way *Delightful Murder* is an extreme example of the theoretical difficulties entailed by taking aspects of Clarens' and Shadoian's problematics to their logical limits. But what Mandel's study also shares with those of Clarens and Shadoian, as well as the bulk of other thriller histories, is this move towards pronouncing an 'end' to the thriller, or its 'disintegration'. Such conclusions to thriller histories imply a relation between genre and history which produces, as we have seen on a number of brief occasions, a theory of evolution. Jauss very concisely states this problem insisting that it must be

possible to place the 'literary series' and the nonliterary series into a relation that comprehends the relationship between literature and history without forcing literature, at the expense of its character as art, into a function of mere copying or commentary . . . (1982 p. 18)

In order to work towards the alternative that Jauss suggests it is necessary, first, to look at models of evolution which all try to force genre into this very function of copying or commentary.

## Evolution

At first glance it seems that the idea of evolution in genre is identical to that of generic innovation and social change. Both foreground the role of history and both posit some kind of mutation associated with a corpus of texts. The differences between my idea of generic innovation and social change and the theory of the genre's evolution to be



found in thriller histories will become clear during the following discussion. If we take Shadoian, who, as we have seen, ends his study with a discussion of *Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Godfather*, the comments he offers on the development of the genre are quite explicit

*Little Caesar* (1930) - rigid, reserved, formally elegant - and *The Public Enemy* (1931) - more seasoned, slightly warmer, less severely constructed, more tonally flexible - epitomize the spectrum of the early classicism. The genre then turns lyrical, romantic, and sentimental with films like *The Roaring Twenties* (1939) and *High Sierra* (1941) (op. cit. p.12).

Shadoian simply adopts the language of conventional literary criticism and transposes it onto a body of generic texts. There are two connected corollaries of this: the patterns of generic fiction are shown to imitate the conventional histories of valorized literature, and they are shown to do so in a condensed way, many years after. That is to say that Shadoian subscribes to Mandel's idea that there is a time-lag between 'literature' and popular fiction. So, as he states with regard to *Bonnie and Clyde* (above), ideology - or a 'mass consciousness', as Mandel would have it - has to be in place before the generic text can develop in tandem with history.

There are, of course, a number of ways in which a pattern of evolution can be imposed by utilizing the category of history in such a way. Hammond(1974), for instance, stresses that a largely syntactic textual mechanism, suspense, is the characteristic of the thriller and that it is now in a state of degeneration. So, he starts his discussion of thriller movies as early as possible:

The first 'fiction' film of which I can find record - Louis Lumière's *L'Arroseur Arrosé*, which flickered into history in 1895 - featured a gardener peering down the nozzle of a hose and wondering why it was not working. The audience knew the reason was that a boy was standing on the hose. Instant suspense - will he, won't he, when will he? - until the boy moves off and the water jerks out and hits the gardener.

In that primitive moment Lumière hit upon the first rule of suspense: tell the audience all the facts (p. 20).

He then takes a key moment in the conventional history of the cinema, and reinforces it by quoting D. W. Griffith (1921)

"I adopted the flashback to build suspense, which until then had been a missing quality in picture dramas. Instead of showing a continuous view of a girl floating downstream in a barrel, I cut into the film by flashing back to incidents that contributed to the scene and explained it" (p. 25).

Finally, he brings his argument up to the present day to illustrate the declining fortunes of the thriller:

Suspense is a question, and the question now is: "what is happening to suspense films in the Seventies?"

The answer is not a happy one. They are being joked, sexed, bashed and bloodied out of being (p. 144).

And what may be the cause of the thriller's decline? Not that the 'timeless' mechanism of suspense has changed, but that it has been disregarded, and actually swamped by semantic factors:

It often seems that suspense in the classic mould is being drowned in the fashionable flood of sex and brutality, blood and machine-made gimmickry (p.153).

Hammond's is not the only view of this kind. If we examine other comments on the development of the thriller, it becomes clear that what such thriller historians are mourning is not the decline of the genre but the death of old social mores. Davis (1973), for instance, reiterates that models of generic evolution are inextricably entwined with models of social history:

The anarchic world of these [contemporary] thrillers is terrifying in its implications, arguably pornographic. But it is alluring, in its devious way, as the innocent world of the forties romantic thriller where virtue inexorably triumphed. A sign of the times? Art reflecting life? It's the obvious conclusion to draw, and it says remarkably little for the times (p. 154).

The parallels with Mandel's messianic world view and nostalgic romanticism are quite clear.

The discussion of political currents in popular fiction is a very problematic area and most writers on the topic have been loath to posit the idea that such fiction can be progressive. So, on the one hand, Sutherland (1981) is similar to Mandel in his stance on this issue:

Even where they touch on 'real' social problems in an 'enlightened' frame of mind, the tendency is for bestsellers to be safely behind the times. The muck they rake is never fresh, the causes they espouse never genuinely new. Thus a work like Marilyn French's *The Woman's Room* [sic] comes in, fists flailing, when the fight for female emancipation has moved to other arenas (p. 246).

Shadoian, on the other hand, sees incorporation of political philosophy slightly more directly and characterizes generic texts in given decades almost as he would characterize the political life of those decades:



The politics of the genre is a very murky area that needs precise investigation. Roughly speaking, I find that the bias of the thirties is toward the left, of the fifties towards the right, and that the contemporary period, after a brief flourish of new idealism in the late sixties, is by and large conservative . . . These distinctions must be understood as vague indeed; more explicit studies may, in fact, find them totally wrongheaded (op. cit. p. 10).

So genre fiction is almost always taken as a whole to be behind the current of the times in some way. Writers on the topic are very reluctant to countenance the idea that genre fiction can in any way be 'ahead of the times' or even contemporary with them, having an effectivity of their own. We will return to this point later.

As well as pointing out generic decline in the contemporary period, and, in fact, to make the argument about generic decline carry more weight, thriller historians have manoeuvred their material round the idea of a halcyon age. The favourite texts of the gangster movie critics occur in the early 1930s so, Hossent (1974), for example, comments

By 1934 the gangster film had temporarily run its course (p. 27).

The two reasons given for this are that people, Hossent claims, were tired of seeing variations on the *Little Caesar* theme and that the Hays Code imposed restrictions on what could be shown in the cinema. One might ask, therefore, why he continues to chart the gangster movie's evolution. Clearly, the discussion of the gangster film's degeneration since this period that follows serves to give the films of the early thirties that extra weight as classic texts. Davis, on the other hand, can say

By 1946, the screen gangster was virtually played out . . . (op. cit. p. 9)

and thus validate his object of study, the suspense film which, he claims, thrived because the gangster film declined at this time. It would appear that generic evolution is organized around a valuation of certain texts above others rather than in terms of their popularity, high sales or other non-critical criteria (but see also Sutherland, discussed below). And if certain texts are valued above others, then those that are devalued play a subsidiary role in any history. Panek, for instance, follows the conventional wisdom of Symons and others when he writes

The detective story at the turn of the century represents the term transitional in its fullest sense: the works look both backwards and to the future and are significant in themselves (1987 p. 119).

This is a false model of evolution - if one says the Golden Age and Sherlock Holmes stories are the most important within a body of texts, then anything that falls between is bound to be transitional. The logic is circular: the key texts are twenty or thirty years apart, anything in between is not crucial, therefore little examination of them is made, resulting in the conclusion that they do not bear much examination. Furthermore, Panek claims of the writers of the Golden Age and hard-boiled story that

Both groups reacted against Holmes and the turn-of-the-century detective story. Both maligned the thriller but appropriated its technique. Both wanted to vivify the language of the detective story. And both tried to move the detective story into the world of mainstream literature (1987 p. 144).

In which case, what did the writers in between do? If they followed the lead of the great Conan Doyle then surely some worthy writing ensued (Freeman, Bentley, Bramah, Chesterton and many others); if they prefigured the Golden Age story, then how? If neither of these, then they are worthy of discussion as a significant contribution to subgenres of the thriller. Moreover, if hard-boiled writers differed from their immediate ancestors in wanting to move the detective story into mainstream literature, then what were the reasons for their choice of publication in the pulps and their writing within a genre?

Thriller histories, in their striving for neat models of evolution fail to ask some of these fundamental questions. Symons is probably as guilty as anyone else of creating a false sense of evolution. Towards the end of *Bloody Murder*, he summarises the history of the genre:

The crime story as a literary form has developed alongside other fiction, in a way shaped largely by social events, and its course has been roughly like this:

- 1 Stories about crime as a form of radical social protest, in Godwin, Lytton, Balzac. The criminal is seen as a hero or as a victim of social injustice.
- 2 Stories about detectives as protectors of society, or as intellectual Supermen. These began with Poe and were developed by Collins and Gaboriau.
- 3 The idea that the Superman detective alone might operate above or outside the processes of the law, which began with Sherlock Holmes.
- 4 The commercially-dictated change from short story to novel and the emergence of women writers whose detectives followed the Holmes pattern, and whose work emphasized the importance of preserving the existing state of society. (It would be interesting to relate the invention of the 'rules' to this overriding social need).



5 The attempts to break the 'rules', partly on the ground that their literary products were so boring (Francis Iles), partly because they were so silly (Hammett and Chandler).

6 The development of crime novels, a bag of literary all sorts ranging from comedy to tragedy, from realistic portraits of a society to psychological investigation of an individual, together with the astonishing flowering of the spy story as a literary form (p. 252).

This is all very organized and clear. Yet, taking just point 5, the most prominent and often discussed juncture of the detective story, we find that Symons has propounded a fallacy for his own purposes of uncluttered evolution. If we place the inaugural moment of the Golden Age at 1920, when Christie published her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, which also introduced M. Hercule Poirot, then this in no way sets up a temporal evolution from subgenre to subgenre as Symons' schema seeks to do.

Haycraft (1979 pp. 112-180; originally 1941) dates the period of both subgenres from 1918-1930; there is no need to stress some kind of relation of reaction and transcendence on the part of the hard-boiled story. If one looks to *Black Mask* as an anchor for the hard-boiled school one finds that it was founded in 1920 by Nathan and Mencken and the first hard-boiled detective, Carroll John Daly's Race Williams appeared in 1923 (Ruhm op. cit. viii-ix). Nevertheless, Haycraft, writing only eighteen years later is so keen to credit Hammett that he overlooks Daly's paternity (1984 p. 169), introducing an evolutionary model of his own. But apart from any of all this, the crucial ingredient to which Symons is probably referring here is Chandler's vilification of the Golden Age story in his essay, 'The Simple Art of Murder', which did not appear in print until it was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1944 (Gardiner and Sorley Walker 1984 p. 14; see Chandler 1950). Critical assessments of the genre are often organized around a discussion of Chandler's fiction and his *raison d'être* for writing it. Stephen Knight has suggested why this may be the case: he states that Chandler deviates from his hard-boiled forebears in that he adopts an individual viewpoint,

breaks up the genuinely objective stance that Hammett worked for, and sees contemporary disorder from the position of a disgusted and disengaged persona, whose own values are defined by his rejection of a social world viewed as a hostile and corrupt unit.

If Chandler's work is examined in terms of its underlying ideology, reasons emerge why it has generated praise from university graduates in English and people of similar tastes and needs. The pressure of the form and the content suggests that an isolated, intelligent person, implicitly hostile to



others and basically uninterested in them, can verify his own superiority by intellectual means and create a defensive withdrawal. he can resolve apparently puzzling and personally threatening problems by thoughtful, passive inspection and so continue his lonely life - and earn a living in the process. A richly satisfying message is formulated for the alienated person of some education, and the natural audience has not failed to find Chandler comforting. This has given him considerable sales - though nothing like those gained by Christie or Gardner. But what Chandler's natural audience lacked in sheer numbers is made up in its hold on literary prestige and opinion-making; he has gained special status as the most literary, and so the most respectable of crime writers. Even Edmund Wilson, who despised the genre, attuned as he was to more sophisticated and roundabout systems of cultural self-validation, agreed that Chandler has merit, and *Farewell, My Lovely*, at least, was an interesting book (1980 p. 138).

Whether one agrees with everything in this statement or not, it is very suggestive.

Chandler's name does recur in many critical works and even allowing for the snowball effect achieved by subsequent critics returning to an already constituted corpus there seems to be a critical consensus about Chandler's literary worth. His career, therefore, comes to be of central importance as a nodal point for critics mapping out the history of the thriller. Once again, the thriller historian makes certain quasi-objective criteria - in this case, literary value - the touchstone for drawing up categories.

This is one procedure by which writers impose an evolutionary ideal. For what other reasons do thriller historians present such neat and ordered evolutionary models of the development of the genre? Gallagher's essay on evolution in the Western (in Grant 1986) provides some of the answers and is worth considering in some detail.

Answering those theorists that posit the decline of the Western in the 1970s Gallagher points out that

It is a curious testament to the continued vitality of the western that Warshow back in 1954 found differences between early-1950s and pre-war westerns almost identical to those which critics like Schatz and company detect a quarter of a century later between westerns of the 1970s and early 1950s (p. 203).

He assesses other critics' claims. Braudy, for instance, talks of the basics of the western as not yet worked out in 1939, yet Gallagher points out that about five thousand Westerns were made before the Second World War (p. 203). Wright, Gallagher notes, deals with the period 1931-72, thus excluding the first thirty-five years of cinema. Furthermore, he disqualifies any Western that did not gross \$4,000,000 or more, and, as a result of inflation, only three of the films in Wright's study come from the pre-1939 period (p. 203). The main point is that genre critics tend to give privilege to the moment in which they are writing. Warshow, Gallagher tells us,



tries to show how *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1943), *The Gunfighter* (1950) and *High Noon* (1952) transform the Western into a form for social criticism as opposed to naive archetypes e.g. *The Virginian* (1929); *Stagecoach* (1939), *My Darling Clementine* (1946) and *Shane* (1953) are all, for Warshow, stylizations and aestheticisations of the Western. Later genre critics on the other hand, regard the last three as 'classic' and see *Hour of the Gun* (1967), *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962), *Chisum* (1970) and *The Wild Bunch* (1969) as self-conscious. In the face of all this Gallagher holds that there is no evidence to suggest a growing self-consciousness in Westerns or any other sort of linear evolution (p. 204).

Gallagher's discussion continues at some length and in considerable detail but I will pick out a few elements that are particularly pertinent for the discussion of thriller histories. He points out that, in the period 1907-1915, there were probably more Westerns released each month than during the entire decade of the 1930s, and as a result, the Western was very much in the contemporary cinemagoer's consciousness (p. 205). An adjunct of this was that there were many subgenres:

Anything novel was seized upon and copied voraciously (p. 206).

So, in 1913, for instance, current event - labour actions, Balkan crises, female suffrage etc. - were zealously incorporated into Westerns and whatever genres were currently popular. One example which Gallagher uses serves to dispel the notion that the audience for Westerns in the teens was less sophisticated: referring to Hawks' *Rio Bravo* (1956) in which the villain's presence is betrayed by dripping blood from the floor above, he notes that when the same device was used in Ford's *The Scarlet Drop* (1918) it was contemptuously dismissed as "old hat" by *Exhibitor's Trade Review* (p. 206) (c.f. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* [1891]). This is one illustration of how the immense breadth of popular fiction mitigates against generalized models of evolution. If a generic corpus is constituted by a relatively small number of 'key' texts, one can never be sure that these texts represent an 'evolution' in the genre without taking into account all the potential evolutionary aspects of the texts which have been disregarded.

Another aspect of Gallagher's discussion which is important for us is suggested by the comment that

'Self-consciousness' is too readily assumed to have come to movies only in reaction against Hollywood's so-called 'classic codes' . . . (p. 208)

He holds instead that no such evolutionary process has occurred

in which, because audiences and film-makers demand variations, reexaminations, more complications and stylish embellishments, a form is first established and then elaborated upon (p. 207).

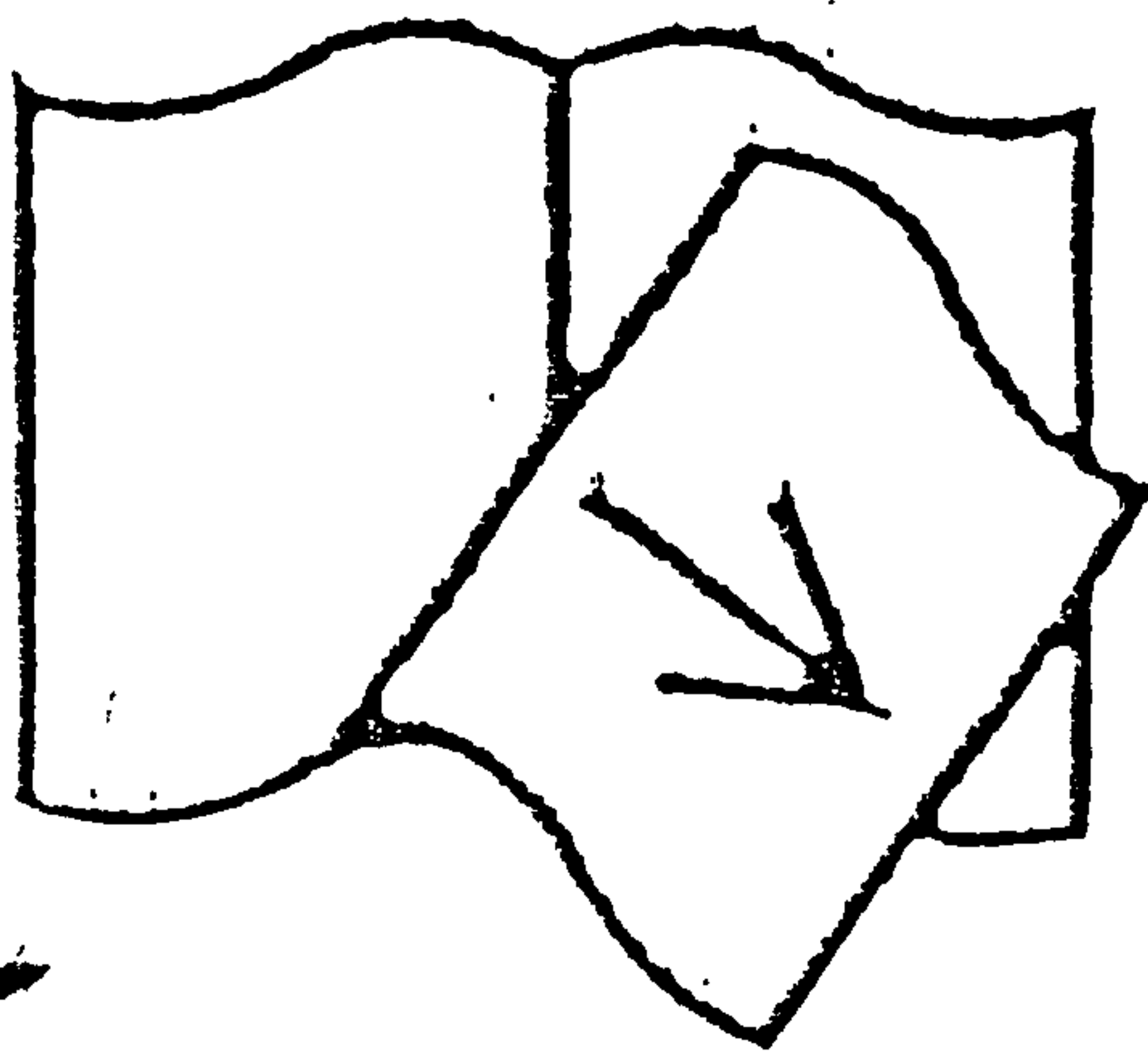
In fact, such theses tend to posit the 'mature' work of art that recognizes 'style', whereas it was not recognized in the past. Referring to films of the 1930s, Gallagher notes that style

far from being 'invisible', is so overwhelming. It is perhaps natural that people today, attuned to contemporary film styles and only vaguely acquainted with the past, should feel they are on to something when in an ostentatiously revisionist film by Robert Altman (*McCabe and Mrs. Miller*, 1971, or *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*, 1976) they perceive references to motifs and conventions from other westerns made twenty or thirty years earlier and thus cast forcibly into a 'straight man's' role for the revisionist's lampooning. But they forget that even such putatively naive classics as *Stagecoach* were similarly perceived by audiences in 1939; indeed, *Stagecoach* in particular is a virtual anthology of gags, motifs, conventions, scenes, situations, tricks, and characters drawn from past westerns, but each one pushed toward fresh intensities of mythic extremism, thus consciously revisiting not only the old West but old westerns as well, and reinterpreting at the same time these elements for modern minds (p. 208).

Put briefly Gallagher is calling for a consideration of audience investments. Stylizations and aestheticizations are not solely objective elements of a text to be prised out by the critic. They depend for their existence on an audience's recognition of them as such. The fact that the contemporary critic often fails to perceive qualities in an old text that might make it more sophisticated than it seems in the present bears this point out to some extent. In theories of evolution, the genre critic mapping out the corpus very often looks at past texts to find an evolution to the present position as an 'end', using criteria for evaluating texts that are, at worst, based on very personal preferences, or at best, on contemporary reading practices or theoretical premises. This is the tendency that Fowler (1982 p. 51; quoted above) believes to be inevitable amongst literary historians; if this is so, then genre historians will never reach a mode for constructing a corpus that is close to a more viable historical approach, assessing the specific effectivities of texts in the formations in which they have existed. Luckily, Fowler is incorrect; not all histories



Pages  
Missing  
not  
Available



aggressive and Americanised of the multiple stores to break into the market. They needed mass sales, above the bestseller threshold (13,000-17,000 was the initial break-even range; Lane calculated that he would need an annual volume sale of 2m; PW [*Publishers' Weekly*] 12.8.39). And they exploited a new, technologically transformed kind of book, the mass-market paperback, a phenomenon Mrs. Leavis does not anticipate in *Fiction and the Reading Public*. No-one would maintain that Penguin Books have aggravated the cultural condition. Yet Penguins could not have succeeded without the vulgar '3d and 6d' store which represented for the Leavises in 1933 some of the "worst effects of mass-production and standardisation" (F. R. Leavis and Denys Thompson, *Culture and Environment*, London, 1933, p. 33) (1978 x-xi).

One aspect of the Leavis' concern over the immense breadth of popular forms can be deduced from their own criticism which relies for much of its argument on a very small canon of writers (see especially F. R. Leavis 1972 [originally 1948]; F. R. Leavis 1973 [originally 1955]; and F. R. and Q. D. Leavis 1972 [originally 1970]). With the proliferation of reading matter, in some cases the importance of individual authors diminishes. Sutherland implies that this fact about popular fiction can be turned to the analyst's advantage:

One of the useful aspects of bestsellers is that we cannot see them as isolated texts with single minds behind them. We have to see them as books: things which are made and are successful in so far as they sell, not just things which are composed and are successful in so far as they are critically evaluated. Nor are bestsellers entirely made by their 'authors'; a whole string of agents, editors and salesmen could - if copyright law and literary convention allowed - claim 'credits' in an essentially corporate venture (1981 xii).

At the outset, it is worth noting that this, in one sense, is merely another means of delimiting one's object of study, stating a principle to which it must adhere, in order to make it more manageable. Yet, in another, it is a far more democratic way of ordering a potentially massive corpus as it deals with texts not in terms of those qualities that usually require an advanced education to be appreciated fully, but in terms of their currency in history. Bestsellers are popular texts for reasons which are historically specific and often difficult to determine. Critically appraised texts receive such appraisal on the basis of a relatively small set of criteria, they are enjoyed by relatively small numbers of readers and they gain their currency mainly for reasons to do with the institution of literary criticism. This is not to say that they have currency for ahistorical reasons - on the contrary, the literary critical enterprise is as historically determined as any other part of the social formation. However, the literary critical institution is so localised that its effect on wider reading habits has been relatively minimal over the years.



This is not to say that 'literature' cannot be included in lists of bestsellers. As

Sutherland notes

the bestseller is a very unpredictable thing. Anything can be on the list - even 'literature', so long as it sells. And with a change in market conditions the most stereotyped forms of popular literature can perform remarkable *volte faces*. Thus woman's romance, against all its aspirin traditions, becomes articulate, radical and sexually aggressive in the 1970s . . . (1981 p. 35)

Yet, the most significant part of this quote for our purpose is the reference to a change in market conditions. These are the institutional determinations which act upon texts to encourage strategies for reading them as well as encouraging the mere fact that they should be read. What Sutherland does in his work is to take texts out of the literary critical context in which they might - as 'successful' or 'unsuccessful' texts - reside. If present here, they were subject to categorization based on the prescriptions of criticism as an institution and practice. In 're-contextualizing' - at least for the reason that criticism has hitherto neglected to see works in terms of their bestsellerdom -

Sutherland does two things: he puts texts within the framework of their 'popularity, the fact that they are bought/read for a number of institutionally determined reasons; and he places these texts among others of the same group in history. That is to say that texts are reconsidered in terms of their immense popularity and in relation to other texts of almost equal popularity, and the fact that this takes place at a given historical moment suggests that there is a quite salient historical link between such texts. Sutherland, for his part, has been quite catholic in his embrace of 1970s texts: he therefore devotes chapters to *The Godfather*, Arthur Hailey, horror fiction featuring children as protagonists, *The Thorn Birds*, Erica Jong, bodice rippers, *Star Wars*, Alistair MacLean and (briefly) James Clavell, *Jaws*, Harold Robbins, Washington novels, *Death Wish*, new Westerns, war stories of secret deals and Nazi resurgence, hijack and corporate crime novels, holocaust fiction, medical thrillers, documentary thrillers, disaster narratives, and tales of 'If Britain Had Fallen' to the Nazis. His textual analysis is not very deep but he provides an insight into the breadth of fiction available on the market at a given time. This has been a move that conventional criticism of texts has

been reluctant to make and Sutherland indicates that it is an area that literary and genre historians cannot afford to ignore:

At least in America, cultural critics have got to the stage of setting up the board with a guide to research. In Britain, academic ignorance and incuriosity about bestsellers seems complete and self-willed. I have been surprised, for instance, to discover that the British Library, the major research facility of the nation, does not apparently exercise its copyright deposit options on many 'ephemeral' novels of the day (notably, as far as I can discern, on 'paperback originals'). One charitably assumes that this is an institutional form of Bagehot's benign 'stupidity'. But if prejudices change, much of the surrounding undergrowth of our current bestsellerdom will be very hard to come by in fifty years' time.

Prejudices will change, I think. Attention will surely be drawn to the bestseller if only because of the extraordinary commercial dynamism it has recently manifested. The gross increase in the consumption of novels, and the emergence of 10m. sellers in the US and 2m. sellers in the UK, indicate a new and rather terrifying mature phase of the paperback revolution. The sales apparatus of bestsellerdom (lists, hype, tie-ins) is now enormously rationalized. Bestsellers are produced with consummate efficiency, and on scales which we have never witnessed before. Such efficiency and magnitude will be hard to ignore for much longer (1981 p. 247).

To an extent, Sutherland has been proved correct. In the decade after his study was published there does seem to have been considerable interest in bestselling forms and methods for investigating them, for example Palmer (1991b). Yet, in the world of the thriller history, this area seems to have been subject to neglect. This leaves us with a number of questions about the rearrangement of the historical corpus of thriller texts.

## **Remapping the territory and reconstituting the corpus**

If we look briefly at an area of thriller history such as the hard-boiled story which, as I have indicated, has received a great deal of attention in recent years we can see that the corpus has widened somewhat as a result of this attention. Binyon (*op. cit.* pp. 137-142), for example, in his recent study gives quite a considerable amount of information on hard-boiled detectives especially when one considers the length of his book as a whole. Baker and Nietzel (1985) and Geherin (1985; 1980) are able to give even more information on a wider corpus of the subgenre by limiting their work to just this topic. O'Brien, as we have seen, adopts a method which necessitates constant acknowledgement of the breadth of popular fiction. Presenting his chronology of key works at the end of the book he comments



*A Finnegan's Wake* or a *Pilgrimage* may develop in relative isolation, but the novelists we are considering here were closer to the idea of fiction as an industrial phenomenon. Most of them worked fast in a highly competitive and innovative area, where each decisive success had its effects on the books that came afterwards. Spinoffs, fusions, copies abounded (p. 137; the chronology follows, pp. 137-142).

If we compare O'Brien's chronology with that of say, Haycraft's list of "Cornerstones" (1984 pp. 302-306) the diversity of the former is quite striking. Admittedly, Haycraft is writing forty years before O'Brien and a few years before the paperback revolution, and you could also say that the chronology and corpus of Binyon (pp. 134-145) are purposely limited as a result of their method. Yet it is also true that the corpuses of Palmer, Mandel, Panek et al. are similar in their limitations. Authors with massive sales whose work could very easily fall into a thriller corpus both in terms of its semantic and its syntactic element (supposing, of course, that these can be taken as separate entities) are systematically omitted from the field of study. Symons, for example, feels compelled to mention 'Big Producers and Big Sellers' (p. 213-233) and so has a section on Edgar Wallace, Leslie Charteris, John Creasey, Dennis Wheatley et al. Despite their inclusion in his book, Symons wittily despatches them from the corpus, especially Wheatley, whose enormous sales indicate how low is one literary level of popular success (p. 219).

This, of course, is how Symons snobbishly pays lip service to consumer choice.

One of the key questions to be addressed in questioning and criticizing the corpus as it stands is "Why aren't massive selling authors within the genre - such as Wheatley, Wallace, Alistair MacLean, Desmond Bagley, Wilbur Smith, Robert Ludlum - regularly taken as objects of study?" The elision of this question is one of the negative aspects of Symons' work, although there are also other grounds for criticism. As yet, aficionados of the genre have not attempted a thorough and theoretical reconstitution of the corpus, and so, to an extent the following comments can be considered speculative.<sup>7</sup> On the subject of critical histories of the thriller Jakubowski says that

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<sup>7</sup> The comments that follow are taken from interviews conducted by myself in April 1992 with Maxim Jakubowski and H. R. F. Keating. Jakubowski owns and runs the crime fiction bookshop, 'Murder



Basically there haven't really been any to the best of my knowledge, although there are a number of reference books of twentieth century crime writers which are obviously more encyclopaedic but don't offer any value judgments. And of the books that do offer judgments and critical opinions there are, of course, Julian Symons' *Bloody Murder* which is very good up to the 1950s but my personal view is, from the 1950s onwards, it's worth ignoring altogether.

Keating concurs with this view and adds that *Bloody Murder*

is essentially a justification of [Symons'] own writing . . .

There is simply too much [contemporary literature] for an academic to be able to do anything with. I once conceived the notion that, in reading a book, every three lines, say, produces a tiny fact that is relevant to your feeling about the whole book. So you can imagine how many facts there are in a seventy, eighty thousand word crime story. Multiply that by all the crime fiction that is poured out and you've got such a mass of facts that you can construct dozens of towers of achievement, each different, and who is to say that one is more valid than the other. So, for instance, a writer who is pretty well disregarded now, Arthur Thompson [Francis Clifford 1914-1975], when he died rather early, [and] when he was producing regularly, had achieved quite a substantial position in what you might call the hierarchy of adventure/crime. But he died and you hear no mention of him at all. This is the difficulty of attempting to do anything about contemporary writing.

[Symons'] thesis is fine but you could construct any number of other theses.

As Keating points out, we repeatedly have to face the problem that popular fiction is such a massive entity that pruning, narrowing and justifying a corpus for study is inevitable. The breadth of genre, and the proliferation of subgenres, then, can have its pros and cons for the critic. Jakubowski suggests what these might be:

A genre, whether it's crime and mystery . . . , even romance has sub-genres, science fiction and fantasy has sub-genres, so there are obviously a number of sub-genres and one can judge the field as a whole but one has to be able to appreciate and weigh the pros and cons of all the various sub-genres within to get an overall picture. And unfortunately, of the major critics or writers on crime and mystery fiction, very few have enough general knowledge or general culture of the genre to embrace the field as a whole and therefore to give critical opinions. *Within* some of the sub-genres there are some very good specialists. There are a lot of good commentators on the hard-boiled genre and there are a lot of very good specialists on what I would term the pre-war 'Cozy' [Golden Age whodunit] . . .

Taking a subgenre as a limited field of study, as Jakubowski shows, is a shrewd theoretical move as it cuts down the difficulties involved in negotiating cross-generic categories. So works such as Baker and Nietzel's *Private Eyes* (1985) can be quite successful on their own terms. Yet, as we have seen, there is an in-built problem with the usage of the concept of genre, a split between the theoretical and the consumer uses of it. As Jakubowski says, the difficulty of an academic overview of the field is often a result of the academic's inability to grasp the vastness of the general culture of crime fiction and he believes that a more general problem is entailed by writing on subgenres:

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One' in London and is the editor of Simon and Schuster's 'Blue Murder' series of crime fiction. Keating is an author and critic of crime fiction and the creator of the Indian detective, Inspector Ghote.



... it is a personal view that there really isn't that much. On the other hand, having also been involved for many many years in the science fiction field where, over the last ten to fifteen years or so there has been an explosion of critical writing,<sup>8</sup> mostly from academics who have come from academia; they've adopted the field as a fertile ground for basically writing away at leisure only to get tenure and get papers published, and basically come out with a whole load of rubbish. So even though I feel there's not enough being written about crime fiction, on the other hand, I'm rather worried that if more people come to it and start writing on it there'll be a lot of rubbish . . . But I do feel there's not enough writing on it now.

What I would add to this is that the perils of writing on a subgenre result from the fact that it is not easy to make generic taxonomies stick, and subgenres always operate with reference to other subgenres.

If Symons' is only one possible thesis on the genre as Keating says, then one must ask why it was so influential, and taken by subsequent writers on the topic (e.g. Panek) as a model. A preliminary answer might be that Symons was actually drawing on some already established wisdom on the topic: for thirty years Haycraft's two books and Auden's essay dominated the field with congruent theses to Symons'. Keating provides a writer's answer:

I've a feeling that a rather curious thing happened: because of the immense success of Sherlock Holmes, those stories were misread by other writers and such people that wrote about them; and there was very little thoughtful criticism in those days. They were seen as being puzzles - you were expected with Dr. Watson to follow Sherlock Holmes and Sherlock Holmes would lead you to the answer. Whereas, in fact, they were *tales* in the full meaning of the word, some of them with a puzzle element which was intended to lead you on through the story. Because of their immense success there sprang up the whodunit, Agatha Christie, pure puzzle games between the reader and the writer. And that distorted the whole of the scene so that in the thirties (Golden Age, so-called) the puzzle story was the yardstick. People veered away from it in various ways, but it wasn't until after the war, I suppose, that enough people veered away in enough similar directions for there to be so many subgenres . . .

Keating is saying two things here. Firstly, that many crime fiction writers read the Holmes stories in a very specific way, reproducing the ways in which they read in their own writing. So the lines between stars, as Iser would have it, were drawn with reference to the puzzle element. But, secondly, this sets up a certain organization of reading, a set of expectations orientated towards a puzzle; Keating adds

I think people still misread Holmes as being a puzzle . Possibly because they are so well-written that they grip and people then really don't think about them; they simply latch their own meaning onto them and that meaning almost always is partly a throwback from Agatha Christie. They say "Oh yes,

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<sup>8</sup> He also adds that

If one compared the amount of critical work written on science fiction and fantasy these days with critical work on crime and mystery, crime and mystery would probably be outweighed five to one.



Agatha Christie, the puzzle/whodunnit, I can get there first" and then they read Holmes stories in that light.

Dibdin (1992), although he perpetuates the myth of the early evolution of the detective story, would seem to concur strongly with Keating here. His criticism of Agatha Christie is that

If you're seriously concerned about the imaginative possibilities of crime fiction, as I am, then it's clear that Agatha Christie was a killer and that her victim was the crime British novel. Far from bringing the form to the acme of perfection, I believe the kind of detective stories that she wrote represents a gross perversion of the genre and has had a disastrous effect on the development of crime writing in this country . . . . Agatha Christie had only one aim in view: to fool her readers. To achieve this, she sacrificed everything else - character and setting, psychological or social detail, and the tension between terror and reassurance. All the characteristics that had characterized the work of her predecessors were ruthlessly eliminated - except for one. Like a chemist in a laboratory, Christie extracted the puzzle element which had been merely one aspect of the complex organic compound of crime fiction (*J'Accuse* Channel 4, Broadcast March 1992)

For Keating, there is not one fixed way to read a text and there are a numerous alternative ways in which the Holmes stories could be read. As I suggested in the last chapter, contemporary readers often take pleasure in the stories' evocation of the late Victorian milieu, but as Keating points out

The nostalgia factor absolutely wasn't there when the [early] Holmes stories were written.

What this suggests quite strongly is that past texts have been viewed through the refracting lens of a critical taxonomy. Symons and others have tended to read the earlier texts, then, in the same way as Christie and her colleagues in the puzzle story. As we have seen, Stewart accuses historians of creating this situation and Fowler resignedly deems it to be inevitable.

Given the flaws and biases promulgated by critical accounts of the history of crime fiction, one might ask what other factors are at play in the constitution of a corpus and with what result. If the corpus is too narrow as a result of critics singling out texts on the basis of literary works, then what importance can be attributed to those texts that receive little discussion and operate, seemingly, on the fringes of the 'key' texts?

Throughout his book Binyon gives examples of these: "Miscellaneous Female Amateurs" (pp. 70-72), private eyes operating in provincial America (pp. 45-46), "Foreign Policemen" (pp. 99-108) and so on. Such lateral innovations often go unmentioned because they do not count as new genres or subgenres, or they are often



marginalized in terms of the key texts. Jakubowski shows that this area of genre is where the conflation of authorial innovation and commercial interest is unavoidable:

I don't think those are really sub-genres. Those are basically 'hooks'; an author . . . is always writing within the context of commercial publishing and - having spent twenty years myself in publishing - [I know] unfortunately, publishers, because they have to sell the books, need a hook; therefore they need an angle. So it's very difficult for people to continue doing the same; even if they're doing it better they need a hook . . .

Keating agrees that such devices "cut across subgenre" but sees the phenomenon within a literary historical perspective:

I think this is something that came from Holmes and, I suppose from Poe. Writers got the notion that you had to have an idiosyncratic detective. Poirot is just a bundle of idiosyncrasies. You can more or less chase a great chain down of people trying to find someone new, someone different. And in the case of Ghote, curiously enough, I didn't sit down and say "What new detective can I possibly invent?" I, as it happened, wanted to write books that weren't set in this country; to please Americans; and I thought of writing about India and therefore had to have an Indian detective.

But there is still, this notion of "How can I be more idiosyncratic than the last?" And, of course, you've got, right from Holmes' day, a reaction against the idea . . .

Despite Keating's broad perspective he is honest enough to cite the commercial incentive in his own writing. Yet what is important in these two statements is that the historical and commercial dimensions are demonstrated to be inseparable.

Is it the case that such commercial influences have only existed since very recently? A purely historical view, freed from the constraints of the canonizing impulse, recognizes diversity, proliferation and sophistication - as discussed by Gallagher - not just in the present but throughout the history of crime fiction. Thus, Jakubowski observes that

Contemporary with the Ernest Bramah/Max Carrados stories you have Austin Freeman's Dr Thorndyke who's basically an amateur archaeologist and most of the cases are to do with the solving of clues and a knowledge of archaeology or history. Slightly later . . . you have Mason's Inspector Hallow . . . who's one of the early police procedurals . . . Or you have John Dickson Carr where you have, basically . . . gentleman detectives in the Poirot stream . . . but much more eccentric . . . Everything is very closely interlocked, so it's very difficult to have too many snap judgments.

Nevertheless, Jakubowski is mindful that this kind of innovation does not constitute evolution in a meaningful way:

Publishers are constantly saying "can we have more female detectives", "can we have more serial/sex killers"; that's the fashion.

Speaking as the editor of a quarterly publication providing an annotated guide to all the new fiction in the genre being published, Jakubowski stresses, moreover, that the



progression of the thriller is not simply a linear evolution encompassing fashionable types. The specificity of crime fiction is such that there is often little need to incorporate the latest trends in the real world:

There are people still writing excellent 'Cozies' as if, basically, we were still in the 1930s . . . And I must admit that, however much I am more in favour of the hard-boiled tradition, it can sometimes be as artificial as the country house tradition. There are not many country houses left today . . . Even in America, I have met a number of real private eyes or private eyes who actually write crime fiction and the first thing that appears is that private eyes in the 1990s are quite different from the people that used to roam down those mean streets that Chandler, and earlier Hammett, of course, brought to the fore.

Given the predilections of thriller historians and the logic of their analyses this is not a factor that one will often find discussed. The short-term social changes in the hard-boiled tradition that Jakubowski mentions, could be taken as purely semantic changes; however, we must consider the likelihood that the artificiality to which Jakubowski refers is lessened for the reader by the transformation in the syntactic aspect of the genre text which is concomitant with, and forged by, the change in the semantic.

The point that Keating and Jakubowski are making - not necessarily a unique one - is that the proliferation of subgenres throughout crime fiction's history has always been a matter of history in the real world operating in tandem with the requirements of the publishing industry in a more complex way than Clarens, say, would have it. So, as Jakubowski attests above, there is actually what such critics would see as either regression or lack of progression. Keating describes the many subgenres as partly dictated by fashion - literary fashion and what you might call sociological fashion . . .

There is bound to be evolution in any type of book that goes on being published. There are two strains: some writers will say "I will do the same thing as that successful book" and then there are other writers who will say "That book was successful, what can I do that is slightly different, slightly advanced". So the genre as a whole is going to evolve.

Because crime fiction is popular it will want to reflect the current society. Certainly in the Agatha Christie mould, it was important that everything should be as like outward reality as possible so that your tiny looking away at a clue or *the* clue stood out enough. I think that, in fiction, anything that grabs the popular imagination is also going to attract the writers of this sort of fiction: *The Towering Inferno* when huge buildings started to go on fire. You get Gulf War fiction beginning to come up. And, of course, the poor spy writers have had to go to the Far East and wherever to find their stuff.

What stands out here is that there is an amount of confusion on the exact role played by history in the shaping of texts. This is natural enough, given the vastness of the topic which has been addressed by a plethora of critics over the years, but the local problems



entailed in these alternative approaches to crime fiction are quite interesting. Keating gives a writer's answer in assessing what he sees as the verisimilitude of Agatha Christie's novels.<sup>9</sup>

So, on one side of the 'evolution question' there is the possibility that such an idea of linear progression has been imposed by critics reading past texts in light of present ones. By focussing on a restricted number, the emphasis has, in many cases, been on authorial inventiveness rather than the commercial determinants. On the other side, there is the question of a single subgenre's popularity which is decidedly not based on a new author's ingenuity employed in reaction to old, worn-out texts in the genre.

Jakubowski tells an interesting story of a publishing venture which happened over a decade ago:

With regards to Thompson and the American paperback original writers it's obviously something I am very closely involved in. In the late 1970s, I moved publishing houses and began running a publishing house called Zomba books which was financed by a music publishing company and I was in the happy position where they said the money was there and I could do what I wanted and I decided that obviously we had to make money so I did a number of computer books and keep-fit books which were the trend for those years. And I was also unfortunately responsible for the discovery of Paula Yates as we did *Rock Stars in their Underpants* which still features me in my underpants on the introduction page, sadly to say. And obviously, I did have carte blanche and what I wanted to do was rediscover fiction which had been out of print for some years and which was worth bringing to the attention of the public. At the time my initial idea was to do that for science fiction and after a few months' research I unfortunately came to the conclusion that a lot of the good science fiction was still in print. There wasn't enough which was out of print . . .

I'd been brought up in France and I'd worked in publishing in France for several years, and I was aware that in France one of the biggest genre imprints was the *Serie Noire* - which is a paperback publisher and produces six crime books a month and has been doing so since the mid-40s . . . sold like soap tablets. It's product rather than 'books'. So I started looking at *Serie Noire* and where they sell and found all these utterly obscure American authors who were absolutely huge in France . . . And I saw Cornell Woolrich, known in France as William Irish, Jim Thompson, David Goodis and quite a few others. So I picked up the books and I read them and I found them incredibly good and thought it made sense to republish them over here. It started a bit of a trend; I was the first to do it and there have been a number of people who have done it since and it still goes on to a small extent although some of the

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<sup>9</sup> c. f. his discussion of the Archer murder in *The Maltese Falcon* (Keating 1986 p. 39). It is also worth comparing Keating's judgment as a writer/craftsman on Christie's verisimilitude (or lack of it) with Symons and Smith. Asked why social events such as the General Strike leave no trace on Christie's work, Symons says

Such events have absolutely no place whatsoever in Golden Age crime stories. They were really something to be eliminated . . . [Christie] was typical, as the crime story is always typical - it echoes the period in which it was created - she was typical of the 1930s (in Dibdin 1992).

Joan Smith says Christie was "reflecting" such currents as xenophobia in the thirties

in a thoughtless kind of way and providing comfort to herself and to her readers in doing that (ibid.).



main ones have been rediscovered. I feel there's another half dozen good things worth republishing. I will be republishing them over the next couple of years in my Blue Murder imprint which follows on from Black Box.

It is worth mentioning that Keating is reasonably sceptical about the popularity of these titles and says

Although by publishing them they seemed to be alive, in fact, they were not widely read. They really have not contributed to the great flow of things . . . They are enormously unread, alas . . . Partly, because of the films, [Jim Thompson] has emerged; and rightly so, he's a very good writer. One reason for this is the ability to photoprint, in that, in the last fifteen years publishers have been publishing books from the past because they're cheap to do. There is no reason why commercial considerations shouldn't affect literature. This is a quite strong factor, much like the circulating libraries, the Boots libraries in their time . . .

Despite Keating's scepticism, the second part of his statement seems to be borne out quite convincingly. He even adds that

If [Symons] were writing today, I think he would go away and read Jim Thompson as he may never have done . . . and then he would alter his small history to a small extent to take into account a writer who has turned out to be good.

At present, besides publishers who occasionally reprint old thrillers (for example, Penguin, or Allison and Busby who reprint novels by Chester Himes, Ross Macdonald, Richard Stark and others) there are two imprints that have been in operation for a few years or so who publish virtually exclusively reprinted crime fiction. These are No Exit Press and the aforementioned Blue Murder.<sup>10</sup>

Publishing strategies are not the only reason for the potential popularity of texts from another decade. Roger Bromley notes that there are often political reasons for looking to the past even when such a look wears the most innocent aspect. One factor in the prominence of newly published forty year old crime novels in the 1980s can be explained to an extent by his comments:

The most prominent method for 'remembering' the past in this way is what, in French, is called 'la mode retro' - retrospective styling. Particular *forms* of re-articulation have come to dominate popular

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These two can almost be taken as a microcosm of approaches to history - reflectionist and mediated versions - with Keating putting forth the craftsman's view.

<sup>10</sup> Also, in the mid- 1980s, a small distributor called Airlift Book Company, which carried foreign titles on a variety of subjects began to import titles in the American 'Black Lizard' series. These included novels by Jim Thompson, Harry Whittington, David Goodis, Fredric Brown, Charles Willeford, Barry Gifford, and others. I was working in the book trade at the time and informally witnessed the popularity of these titles with their distinctively garish retro packaging.



cultural 'space'. Outgrown or outworn tendencies are nostalgically reaffirmed by a 'coded sentimentality', which seems direct and unmediated, but derives from a mode of producing memories using certain conventions and synthesizing different discourses. Such preferred memories, whereby the past becomes an event to be pictured, styled, and filmed, have a stabilizing and conciliating function. Even the most prominent modes of remembering are subject to implicit social direction based on the power exercised by existing dominant/popular cultural forms. So there are 'preferred' forms as well as simply 'preferred' memories. The colonizing of memory by popularized imagery is a complex process which is not simply a matter of personal recall (Bromley 1988 p. 4).

The newly found texts can now be contained within a system of memory that has, as Bromley says, a stabilizing and conciliatory function. As Keating noted, Symons would have to reincorporate Thompson as a 'good' writer into his thesis. Jakubowski, though, points out that not only do texts like Thompson's come from a different constituting formation - paperback publishing in the 1950s - than that of the critical impulse, but that the canonizing impulse can only function many years later:

What [is] wonderful about this period . . . [is that] when 250 books are being published every month there are writers out there and some of them are doing good work. It's only all these years later that one has actually discovered which were the good ones and which were the bad ones. The books were basically in the shops for four weeks and then disappeared altogether and never seen again because they were replaced by the following months' 150 titles.

In addition, Jakubowski illustrates the curious and bizarre beginning which had an effect on his own publishing project at Zomba books:

Basically what happened - and here again one has to go back to the structure of commercial publishing - Penguin started the paperback revolution in England. The paperback revolution in America started much later. Whereas Penguin started just before the war in England, in America the pulp magazine dominated and the paperback book didn't have much power. It's only after the war - and this is closely linked to World War 2 when the G.I.s coming back from the war were given the G.I. Bill which gave them enough money to study (they could study for two or three years and be paid by the government) - that there is a big explosion in literacy in America. The publishing industry responded by publishing more in paperback and there was a paperback revolution in America. And in order to feed this paperback revolution there were, at one time, probably 100 or 150 paperback publishers around, all publishing ten or fifteen books per month. Therefore, obviously, there was a huge market for writers - many writers would do a book a week or a book a month. They weren't paid very well purely because the market was like a monster that needed 200 new titles every month to go in the stores (all with garish covers). It's purely statistical that amongst all these writers who worked for the paperback original field there were some very good writers despite the fact they were only paid a few thousand dollars per book. In some cases they had to write the book from art work that was given to them: the publishing houses had already got all this art work and this is the story of *Pop. 1280*, the Jim Thompson book. Arnold Hano [was] the editor of this publishing house which had this piece of art work which he bought because he liked and because it was cheap, probably. Thompson came into the office saying I need some more money and I can let you have a book in two weeks and Arnold Hano said "I've got this piece of art work here" which was probably based on an Erskine Caldwell book of the Deep South with a woman in skimpy attire on a country road looking into a town and there was a little sign on the side of the road saying 'Pop. 1280'. He said, "Oh, can you write something that we can use this for the cover?" And *Pop. 1280* was written.

This is in stark contrast to essentialist accounts of cultural production. And Jakubowski adds



I'm sure there are still some surprises to come.<sup>11</sup>

All these comments point to similar conclusions we have drawn in looking at conventional histories of the thriller. The breadth of popular fiction is almost too wide to make very strict theoretical comments about it, and if a corpus is to be constituted and a generic theory created these are usually done in retrospect. It is usually the case that such retrospective judgments will shed very little light on the potential contemporary readings of the texts.

One of the key factors that we have seen historians ignore is suggested once more by the comment that

The critic is always interested in the microphenomenon rather than the macrophenomenon . . .  
(Jakubowski)

As we have witnessed, the critic is interested in the microphenomenon for a mixture of purely practical reasons as well as ideological ones. The critic cannot assess the whole cross section of a social formation in order to attain a historical reading of given texts. Similarly, the critic cannot take into account everything produced in the realm of popular fiction. Both are beyond the capabilities of the critical enterprise. But in order to suggest possible ways in which generic texts were read at a given time it is an act of negligence if one does not include some kind of assessment of prominent neighbours within that loose corpus. Generic texts do not exist in laboratory conditions suitable for an examination of their 'immanent' mechanisms. Keating acknowledges this but adds that writer-critics have their own biases:

I suppose if you look at the history of crime fiction in terms of what the public was reading year by year then obviously those writers [Bagley, Ludlum etc]. . . would have their tremendous weight. But because Julian [Symons] and other writers - me - are people who make judgments about books for better or worse, we tend to have a theory of what has happened based on what books we consider to be good. And on those terms Wheatley doesn't really come into the picture at all, or Ludlum or a good many others . . . Perhaps this is where writers themselves either should always establish the canon or shouldn't be allowed to establish it at all. We do have a different view of books because fundamentally any book of crime fiction that we read (or even of any fiction) we relate to our own work. And in that they seem similar we tend to promote them and in that they are wildly different we tend to ignore them. In that way, a canon built up by writer-critics is going to reflect what their writings *are*, whereas academic critics presumably bring other notions to them. Although I've done my share of reading

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<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, Jakubowski preferred for commercial reasons not to reveal to me the whereabouts of the half dozen authors he has rediscovered. However, he indicated that the publishing formation, the multiple-made-to-order nature of production that he describes with regard to Thompson, applies to them also.



literary history, I find it hard to put myself in the place of a purely academic critic. They tend to be nitpickers. That's my prejudice.

Keating is remarkably honest here about what factors are involved in the constitution of the generic corpus by writer critics. What he laconically testifies to bears out some of the conclusions that we have reached in discussing thriller histories.

From the outset, Symons seems aware that the history of the thriller is all about drawing lines; but the size and ideological nature of the project of drawing lines seems lost on him. Fowler and Stewart both show that the drawing of lines is an intricate process prone to duplicating the biases of the critic's institutional, ideological and historical position. The two main consequences of this that we have discussed are the neglect of contextualizing strategies and the imposition of a false model of evolution. The first does not allow for the effectivity of texts in its relation to overdeterminations in its own formation and hence the determinants of different readings accruing to those texts. The second complements the first in terms of providing a theory of linear progression based on a set of principles which will make the texts cohere as a whole. These are principles which are abstracted from the texts and are supposedly 'neutral' categories that exist irrespective of context and readings of the texts. In this way the critic looks back from a historical position and incorporates those texts which fit the model, excludes those texts that do not, or moulds certain texts so that they seem to fit it, a process that effects incorporation of new texts into the corpus in tandem with their dates of publication, not some considerable time later. Moreover, these principles are erected sometimes according to a process of valorization along the lines of 'literary value'; sometimes in order to analytically limit the field of study; sometimes, as Keating attests, in relation to the practice of the writer-critic as crime fiction author; and often, a combination of all these. It is very rare that such delineations of a generic corpus are pure manifestations of these tendencies. Tony Hilfer (1990), for instance, tries very hard to isolate the crime novel from the mainstream thriller by stressing the former's textual dissonance from the latter. Yet his corpus is constituted only by texts that do not "accredit the status quo" (p. 152), thus forcing the glaring omission of a discussion of

*No Orchids for Miss Blandish* (1938) from his book. Vera Dika (1990), in her book on the early 1980s 'Stalker' cycle in horror films is a good example of how to construct an analytically limited field. She discusses just nine films related to and including *Halloween* (1978), which are linked primarily by virtue of an unseen killer, point-of-view shot and a specific plot formula. Her procedure exemplifies the rigour of a solely analytic method of constituting a corpus, but, like Hilfer, she omits related texts. *He Knows You're Alone* (1980), *When a Stranger Calls* (1979) and *My Bloody Valentine* (1981) are all despatched from her corpus for technical reasons despite their temporal and seemingly generic proximity to her object of study (p. 123-126). Like many histories of genre, what both leave out of their consideration is the idea of conditions of reading. In the work on genre by Sutherland, Stewart, O'Brien and Gallagher, it is notable that the idea of a historically situated concept of reading is central to their analyses. Sutherland's focus on the bestseller emphasizes that there is a wealth of points of textual reference for the reading of popular fiction although sales figures and surveys alone cannot yield the final answer to the question of how readers construct meanings. Sauerberg notes

It is very difficult to get a complete picture of literature as a commodity. Some sources are based on book production, some on library lending, and some on readers' interests. There are no standard investigation procedures, and the lack of a shared terminology often makes comparison misleading. Differences in geography and time are further complications (op. cit. p. 94).

He goes on to consider the *Book Promotion Feasibility Study Report*, the *Euromonitor Book Readership Survey*, *Sunday Times*, W. H. Smith's and the *Bookseller* (pp. 95-104). He concludes

the lack of standardisation in the investigations about reading habits, etc. makes it impossible to reach definite and absolute conclusions. However, general tendencies, like the popularity of the thriller, can be substantiated from interview investigations . . . as well as from best seller lists . . . (p. 105)

As Sauerberg suggests, there are obvious perils in drawing conclusions from the reports of the commercial publishing industry. However, the perils of overlooking bestsellerdom are probably worse for those who require to understand the determinants of a historical reading.



It is evident that there *are* other theses that can be written on the history of the thriller as Keating suggests. Also, it would appear that the bulk of hitherto existing material on thriller history has simply failed to come to terms with the nature of genre fiction's continued appeal as well as the link between this and history in the real world. New problematics concerning the relations between fiction and the real world have recast some of the terms of argument upon which some thriller histories draw. It is evident that genre and history are not the fixed entities that critics often assume and that the extra-textual dimension deserves a great deal of consideration when assessing the intra-textual dimension. Many of these theoretical findings are indispensable to the theory of generic innovation that I intend to outline.

## **Generic Innovation and Social Change**

Alastair Fowler draws up a repertoire of means in which generic transformations can be effected, all of which seem to work as well in the realms of canonical and non-canonical fiction. They are: 'Combination' (combining a number of features of previous forms); 'Aggregation' (collection and ordering of short forms); 'Change of Scale' (expansion or shrinking of elements within the text); 'Change of Function' (use of certain forms for purposes other than those originally intended); 'Counterstatement' (the production of a text antithetical to a particular genre); 'Inclusion' (including genres within a text which belongs to a different genre overall); 'Generic Mixture' (inclusion of different genres within a text which does not belong to one overall genre); 'Hybrids' (a generic mixture in which all the differing generic elements are of more or less equal weight); and 'Satire' (parody of one or more genres) (1982 pp. 170-190). Most of these classifications seem to be straightforward.

Fowler's repertoire poses a problem, however. Although its demonstrable existence might testify to the fact that there is no such thing as a pure, undiluted generic essence

for a generic text which we might be analysing now, Fowler's repertoire implies that there is a stock of generic essences waiting to be implemented in a generic text. This, of course, is tantamount to positing an origin for genre. The point is dealt with by Aldiss and Wingrove (1988) in their speculations on the origins of science fiction: they state that "no genre is pure" (p. 19) and demonstrate the multiple determinants and literary forebears of science fiction. In attempting to show how Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* can be said to mark a beginning, they also constantly return to the many determinants of that text and the literary residues to be found in it (pp. 29 ff). Aldiss and Wingrove's focus on *Frankenstein* is, therefore, a purely heuristic one which recognizes that the beginning of the genre could be almost anywhere in literary history and that any attempt to posit a 'beginning' will reveal the untenability of generic essences. These kinds of categories or generic essences are, however, often used by historians of genre and it is this that Fowler is relying upon here. However, as we have mentioned, these categories have a preliminary heuristic use for analysis. One category, 'Satire', of course, we have encountered with regard to the topic of evolution. I have skimmed over these other categories because the most crucial one that Fowler puts forward and which I have not mentioned is 'Topical Invention'. He writes

Genres change when new topics are added to their repertoires. Sometimes the topics are entirely novel, as when the photograph was first introduced into the poem about a painting . . . More often, as we have seen, it is a matter of specialization: of developing a topic already within the repertoire. Student life was a well-established minor topic of the novel (Thackeray; the *Bildungsroman*) long before the university novel subgenre. Such topical innovations seem to characterize most new literary movements. Perhaps this is because they involve a turning from interest in form to interest in matter (p. 170).

This statement contains three important springboards for the consideration of generic innovation. First, there is the implication that changes in 'matter' are changes in the syntactic and semantic aspects of a genre taken as inseparable entities, as opposed to changes in 'form' (or enunciative dimension). Secondly, that if the 'Invention' is 'Topical', it is connected with some extra-discursive, historical dimension. And, thirdly, if some 'topical invention' consists of the re-use of a topic already within the repertoire then it suggests that such generic innovation relies heavily on reader investment for its status. For example Jakubowski comments on the psycho-thriller



genre exemplified by Thomas Harris' *Red Dragon* (1989; originally 1981) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (1990; originally 1988),

There were serial killers in the thirties, there were serial killers long before Jack the Ripper . . . <sup>12</sup>

Some social fact and some fact about readers' investments has changed to cause the serial killer novel to become popular and proliferate into a significant subgenre at a given time. In short, what we have found, and what we must discuss, is that generic innovation cannot reside in the text alone; it results from sometimes minimal textual mutation - that is, the presence of putatively new semantic and/or syntactic elements - in operation with new readings of texts.

These readings are determined by influences outside the realm of the text considered as an independent entity. In fact, to speak of the role of the audience and the arrangement of reading is to speak about them in history. In this way, it can be seen that the roots of the notion that there can be a crucial relation between generic innovation and social change are quite deep, particularly in Marxist criticism. To approach the question is, in effect, to embark on a reconsideration, in the field of genre, of those couplets integral to Marxist literary theory: history/literature or base/ superstructure. As Bennett explains

It matters little in this regard whether the terms proposed for such calculations are those of reflection theory or whether, as in Althusserian formulations, literary texts are regarded as subjecting history to a distinctive semiotic transformation via their work on the intermediate categories of ideology. In both cases, the political effects and value of literary texts are assessed on the basis of the position accorded them in relation to the independently known history which is assigned the status of their ultimate referent (Bennett 1990 p. 42; c.f. Shadoian, Clarens and Mandel)

The ultimate failure of such approaches, Bennett is suggesting, derives from a conception of history as a constant, knowable last instance by which the text is determined. As Bennett adds,

Within the hermeneutic project of a Lukács or a Jameson, for example, history functions as an interpretive device for deciphering the meaning of texts - individually, and in the order of their succession (Bennett 1990 p. 41)

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<sup>12</sup> Among many possible examples see the novel by Dorothy B. Hughes, *In a Lonely Place* (1947), reissued in 1990 with the blurb: "Considered one of the best ever portraits of a psychopathic serial killer . . ." (Harpenden: No Exit Press).

The majority of thriller histories operate in precisely this way. History, for them, is assumed to be a definite, knowable entity which will validate the constitution of a corpus of texts. It is worth briefly considering the latter of these two critics mentioned by Bennett to gain a rough idea of the kind of thinking on the problems of the couplet over the last decade.

Fredric Jameson's influential book, *The Political Unconscious* (1981), contains a substantial discussion of genre criticism in which Jameson professes to enact a "historicizing" (p. 109) or "dialectical restructuration" (p. 110) of the field. Presenting what he considers an extension of the structuralist method of analyzing genre he writes,

The structural approach also knows its own specific opening onto history, which now must be described. We have already observed the play of structural norm and textual deviation which characterizes such analysis at its best; but we have not yet observed that this analytical operation is not a two- but rather a three-term process, and that its greater complexity makes of structural analysis something quite different from the conventional systems of norm and deviation (as, for instance, in a host of theories of poetic language, or, in the area of the psychic, in theories of transgression). What is dialectical about this more complete structural model is that the third term is always absent, or, more properly, that it is nonrepresentable. Neither the manifest text, nor the deep structure, tangibly mapped out before us in a spatial hieroglyph, the third variable in such an analysis is necessarily history itself, as an absent cause (Jameson pp. 145-146).

What Jameson appears to be saying is that structuralist approaches have a hidden agenda - history - which plays little manifest part in their analysis. Presumably, the job of dialectical restructuration is to make this hitherto absent cause manifest in the analysis. Yet, if we consider a text from the heyday of high structuralism, written in 1965, it is possible to see that Jameson's view of such approaches is a caricature:

. . . it is history, in conjunction with sociology and semiology, which will enable the analyst to break the circle of timeless confrontation, where it is never known (as a pseudo-dialogue unfolds between the critic and the work) whether the critic is a faithful observer or the unconscious animator of a play which he acts out for himself (Lévi-Strauss 1978 p. 276).

This passage merely confronts the question of history as a last instance from the point of view of the analyst's immediate task. In fact, we need not look to Levi-Strauss; Palmer (1978), in what could be called a broadly structuralist analysis of the thriller genre, puts history very high on the manifest agenda. But Jameson qualifies his extension of the structural approach and modifies it to an extent; it is worth quoting at some length the passage where he does this:



The relationship between these three variables may be formulated as a permutational scheme or *combinatoire*, in which the systematic modification or commutation of any single term - by generating determinate variations in the other two - allows us to read the articulate relationships that make up the whole system. Thus, the deviation of the individual text from some deeper narrative structure directs our attention to those determinate changes in the historical situation which block a full manifestation or replication of the structure on the discursive level. On the other hand, the failure of a particular generic structure, such as epic, to reproduce itself not only encourages a search for those substitute textual formations that appear in its wake, but more particularly alerts us to the historical ground, now no longer existent, in which the original structure was meaningful. Finally, an a priori and experimental commutation of the historical term may stimulate our perceptions of the constitutive relationship of forms and text to their historical preconditions by producing artificial laboratory situations in which such forms or texts are rigorously inconceivable. Thus, paradoxically the ultimate model of such a *combinatoire* recalls the form of Hegel's reflections on epic ("our present-day machinery and factories together with the products they turn out . . . would . . . be out of tune with the background of life which the original epic requires"); save for the absence in Hegel's thought of the fundamental structural discovery, namely the twin variables of a deep structure and a manifest text.

What is paradoxical, of course, is that structural analysis should thus finally open out onto the third term of what I have elsewhere called "the logic of content": the semantic raw materials of social life and language, the constraints of determinant social contradictions, the conjunctions of social class, the historicity of structures of feeling and perception and ultimately of bodily experience, the constitution of the psyche or subject, and the dynamics and specific temporal rhythms of historicity. Where the interpretation of genre in terms of mode led us ultimately to the ideologeme, to the narrative paradigm, and to the sedimentation of various generic discourses - all essentially cultural or superstructural phenomena - structural analysis demands as its completion a kind of negative reconstruction, a postulation by implication and presupposition, of an absent or unrepresentable infrastructural limiting system . . . .

Still, some final word must be added about the nature of the relationship between text and context projected by the structural *combinatoire*, if only because some readers may overhastily assimilate this scheme to the mechanical Marxist notion of a determination of superstructure by base (where "determination" is read as simple causality). In the generic model outlined here, the "third term" or historical situation to the text is not construed as causal (however that might be imagined) but rather as one of a limiting situation; the historical moment is here understood to block off or shut down a certain number of formal possibilities available before, and to open up determinate new ones, which may or may not ever be realized in artistic practice. Thus, the *combinatoire* aims not at enumerating causes of a given text or form, but rather at mapping out its objective, a priori conditions of possibility, which is quite a different matter (Jameson 1981 pp. 145-148)

The shift that Jameson makes from high structuralism is in closing off the causal fallacy. For him, historical conditions do not cause concomitant textual conditions, yet they have a role to play in limiting any absolute freedom that the text may have. So for romance, the

ultimate condition of figuration . . . is to be found in a transitional moment in which two distinct modes of production, or moments of socioeconomic development, coexist. Their antagonism is not yet articulated in terms of the struggle of social classes, so that its resolution can be projected in the form of a nostalgic (or less often, a Utopian) harmony (p. 148).

In this way, Jameson has made the text relatively autonomous, operating in accordance with current artistic principles yet moored by a long rope that has at the other end the figure of history, ultimately limiting its movement. Yet what is deficient in this model of textual production is not the merely relative autonomy afforded to the realm of the



textual but the conception of history as a coherent, concrete explanatory principle.

Bennington comments on this:

Jameson is arguing that interpretation involves the allegorical "rewriting [of] a given text in terms of particular interpretive master code" [p. 10], and that the master codes of the rival methods can themselves be rewritten in terms of the conditions of possibility of its emergence, which "become visible, one would imagine, only when you begin to appreciate the extent of the psychic fragmentation since the beginnings of capitalism" [p. 62], and the "Language-itself" master code of structuralism becomes possible with language's "structural abstraction from concrete experience" [p. 63]. In this rewriting of rewritings, we might look for Jameson's own master code, and call it History. But Jameson cannot accept such a positioning of History as merely "one optional code among others" [p. 101]: that would be to limit him to polemics, to refuse the transcendental horizon. If that horizon is to be accepted, then History has to be placed outside and beyond textuality, as something which can, to be sure, only be approached through discourse, but which is, "in itself", not discursive. If through his own discursive approaches to History as "absent cause", Jameson is able to use it as a sort of code of codes, this is only insofar as its otherness blocks the possibility of further, infinite rewriting: History becomes the ground of all activities of writing and coding as such (1982 p. 25)

What Bennington is getting at here is that Jameson's formulation of history as a last instance requires, for its effectivity, the status of always being outside the text as a determinant. To consider history as one of a number of codes with a determining effect on a text without at all times outweighing the others is, in this formulation, untenable.

Yet, one need not only conceive of history as a concrete set of objective conditions.

Bennett notes that there are two senses in which writing on the literature/history couplet can conceive history: as discourse or as extra-textual real.

This results in formulations such as those suggested by Jameson in *The Political Unconscious*: history (sense one) is a narrative construct but it is history (sense two) which, in the last instance, determines the narrative orderings to which history (still sense two) subjects itself (Bennett 1990 p. 53)

It is because of the undialectical nature of this hierarchy that Bennett concludes

The historical study of literature is neither dependent on nor served by the development of general theories of the relations between literature and history (Bennett 1990 p. 47)

Anybody who has struggled over the ramifications of the concept of the frontier in American history or the manifold problems of the validity of the Fischer Thesis knows that history is a subject arranged around texts. As Bennett says

What is at issue in historical scholarship - and it's all that *can be* at issue - is what can be derived from the historical record or archive (1990 p. 49)

In fact, history as it is written changes from period to period: for instance, Taylor describes how the controversy over the new thesis in *The Origins of the Second World*



*War* (1962) subsided only to become the "new orthodoxy, much to my alarm" (Taylor 1984 pp. 297-298). There are countless examples like this one in the discipline of historical writing but it is only relatively recently that such knowledge has entered literary studies. Generally, Bennett notes, debates about history require as a condition of their intelligibility, the sense of a distinction between past and present and an orientation to historical record *as if* they comprised a referent. That this referent proves to be intra-discursive and so mutable does not disable the historical enterprise (1990 pp. 50-51)

This theoretical movement towards the reconsideration of history within a formation of textuality has become known as 'the New Historicism', a label which cuts across a number of disciplines but is mainly centred around literary theory.<sup>13</sup> Carolyn Porter refers to this when she concludes

As we all know by now, the relation between the literary and the historical has been radically reproblematicized. To put it far too simply, in trying to approach literature as a historically situated cultural phenomenon, we no longer regard 'history' as a given backdrop against which to see the literary text. Literature is neither something that springs forth from that backdrop, spotlighted by its transcendent expression of 'the human spirit', nor is it the result of the fellow working the lights, exposing it within a fixed, historically 'set' scene. Neither lamps nor mirrors will do anymore (Porter in Carroll 1990).

One might ask what implications this holds for genre theory and especially the notion of generic innovation.

Taken in a very general, even caricatural, sense, the New Historicism has two main perspectives on texts. Greenblatt, who coined the term New Historicism, recognizes some of the determinations of texts:

the work of art is not itself a pure flame that lives at the heart of our speculations. Rather the work of art is itself the product of a set of manipulations, some of them our own (most striking in the case of works that were not originally conceived as 'art' at all but rather as something else - votive objects, propaganda, prayer, and so on), many others undertaken in the construction of the original work. That is, the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator and a class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society. In order to achieve the negotiation, artists need to create a currency that is valid for a meaningful, mutually profitable exchange (Greenblatt in Veaser 1989).

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<sup>13</sup> See Veaser's introductory essay in Veaser (1989).

This is not actually that different from more conventional views on the topic which see creative writing as the transformation of an object by means of a process agreed by addressers and addressees; for instance, here is Freud, writing in 1908:

The writer softens the character of his egoistic day-dreams by altering it and disguising it, and he bribes us by the purely formal - that is, aesthetic - yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his phantasies (1985 p. 141).

The notion of 'bribe' in Freud and creating a 'currency' in Greenblatt, are not dissimilar, and have been mainstays of much literary criticism including generic criticism's discussion of a 'contract'. In one way, then, the New Historicism does not embody that great a departure. The New Historicism basically literarizes history and makes evident that the text of history is as full of lacunae as literary texts. So Bennett, for example, is in some ways quite dismissive:

post-structuralist perspectives on history . . . at root . . . amount to little more than transferring to the field of the past those rules governing the formation of objects within modern literary scholarship (Bennett 1990 p. 280)

One theoretical consequence of recognizing the textuality of history is that it no longer becomes a last court of appeal to settle arguments about readings of texts. Thus Bennington, partly in reference to Jameson again, observes that

You can't historicise the prescription which demands that you *always* historicise. This limitation seems to be a necessary qualification of any apparently radical historicising position if infinite regress is to be avoided. It is a version of this limitation that allows Althusser to claim that the concept of history is not itself historical (although his reasoning in support of that claim is more than dubious). It also seems reasonable to suppose that this primary prescription requires its transcendental or 'transhistorical' status if it is to ground anything like a *theory* (Bennington in Attridge et al. 1987 p20).

Porter makes essentially the same point which is contained also in her witty title, 'Are we being historical yet?' (in Carroll op. cit.; see especially p. 59). If history is no longer an explanatory principle outside the realm of textuality, then the next logical theoretical move is to consider history's effectivity as only part of the phenomenon of textuality as a whole. An adjunct of this is that all texts will have an in-built undecidability, subject to no anchoring mechanism which will elicit their meaning, including 'events in the real world' which are subsumed under the categories of specific rhetorics. This is not an inevitable process, however; Bennett, for one, believes that

Textualizing the past in such a way that it can be rendered permanently undecidable serves little purpose (1990 p. 281).



Instead, there can be an emphasis on the second general aspect of the New Historicism.

Commenting on Greenblatt, once more, Bennett teases out the radical potential of his writing:

historical inquiry should aim to recover the specific institutional strategies within which, at particular moments, literary texts are circumstantially embedded and from which - not forever and not for everyone, but for specific audiences and publics - they can be said to have functioned as the bearers of specific meanings and effects (Bennett 1990 p. 70)

This concentration on the institutional domain rescues analysis from the dead-end of undecidability that rendering the world as textuality entails. The idea that readers' meanings, particularly in the case of generic texts, can be jettisoned in favour of the academic's rooting out of rhetorical strategies is merely another way of saying that there is a 'truer' meaning to a text than those used by groups of readers. The study of how patterns of reading are shaped is, therefore, a crucial antidote to the prescriptions of an escalating textualism.

At the other extreme from a view in which all is textual, critics have wielded the category of history as a privileged tool operating on, but outside of, the discursive domain. Once again this has allowed for a reading that is somehow 'truer' to history conceived as a set of objective conditions. Frow suggests that

the production of a less normative theory entails stressing the constitutive function of language, and the refusal of an inherent epistemological privilege to any one discursive formation. The essentialist question of how literature appropriates the real is replaced by the question of knowledge effects historically generated by systems of literary discourse. These knowledge effects must be assumed to have no greater and no less 'truth' than those produced in other discourses, but they have different kinds of historical effectivity, and a particular (although perhaps contested) ranking in a hierarchical economy of discursive formations. An epistemological relativism of this kind is the very opposite of that 'scientific' detachment which results from the certainties of discursive mastery: on the contrary, it should make possible a process of political judgment of the knowledge effects produced, and therefore an avoidance of both a sterile historical cataloguing and an obliteration of the dynamics of textual activity in a sociologicistic reduction (1986 pp. 123-124).

This is not to say that there are no sets of historical conditions working on texts; Frow is arguing, instead, against attempts to read off the meaning of texts from those conditions alone. Bennett adds,

Literature - or what Frow calls the modern literary formation - is not something whose social underpinnings must be sought elsewhere; it *is* a set of social conditions and its analysis consists in identifying the effects of these conditions - on the uses and functioning of writings produced in earlier periods just as much as the uses and functioning of the forms of writing they support and call forth (1990 p. 284)



What this brings us to is the centrality of history as a determining feature of the formulation which we have discussed before as the 'horizon of expectations' of a genre. Like the social conditions to which Bennett refers genre will have, as *just one* of its determining factors, the weight of its own history bearing down. So he writes, *pace* Hindess and Hirst (1975),

In subjecting representations of the past to a disciplined regulation, in its elaboration of rules and procedures for the disciplined interrogation of evidences which allow new knowledges to emerge and transform the face of the past, history does indeed make a material difference to and within the present. So, too, does literary history. But not in any special way. Its particularity consists merely in the types of evidences with which it deals and the particular zones of the past within which its knowledges surface (1990 p. 77).

For genre especially, we have seen that history is not constituted *just* by present conditions but also by those that have already passed, insofar as they create generic expectations. Moreover, the weight of such history bears down on something specific: the interaction of reader and generic text, or as Jauss puts it in more conventional literary critical terms,

literature and art only obtain a history that has the character of a process when the succession of works is mediated not only through the producing subject but also through the consuming subject - through the interaction of author and public (1982 p. 15).

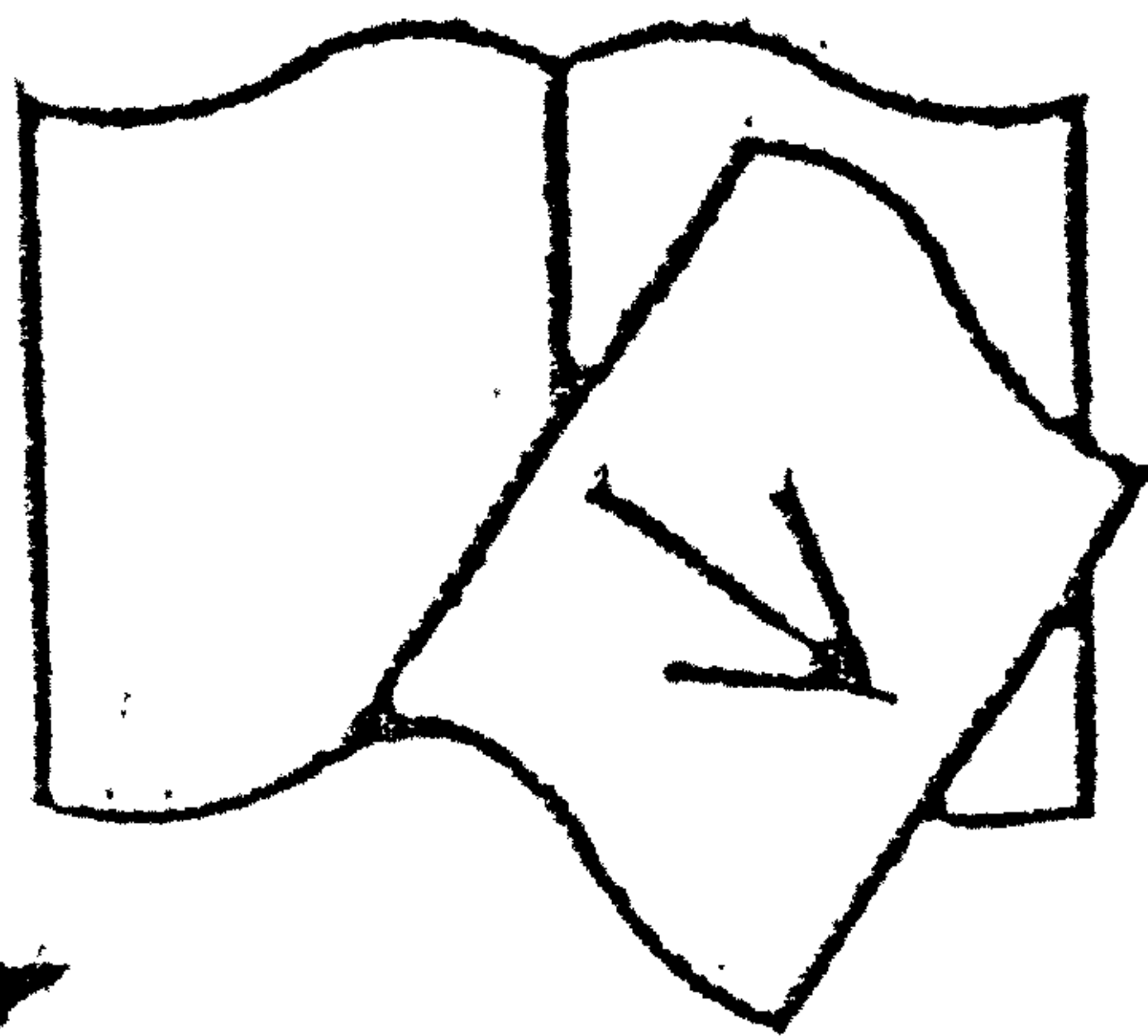
This is the locus for what is often seen as the historical development of genre fiction or, as we will see, generic innovation and social change.

In the last chapter we considered the idea of an horizon of expectations and its ramifications at some length. With regard to the topic of generic innovation it is worth briefly taking into account Frow's concept of the 'literary frame'. He writes,

Every aesthetic object or process has a frame or frames peculiar to it. Since the frame is not simply a material fact it can be multiple - the frame of a painting, for example, may be reinforced by the broader frame of the museum - and we could think of the 'edge' of the work as a series of concentric waves in which the aesthetic space is enclosed. Theatrical space is defined by the borders of the stage and by the theater situation (the relation of the auditorium to the stage and the convention that the space of the stage is a privileged space of illusion). Cinematic space is defined by the screen - by the darkness that surrounds the screen, by the projection apparatus, by the theater situation, and by advertisements and billings which have created expectations that this is a movie and that it is a particular kind of movie: but there is also an internal frame, the title sequence, which supplements and narrows down the predefinition of the kind of aesthetic space being presented. For a literary text the frame is particularly complex: it is made up, first of all, of the covers of a book or the lines enclosing a poem in a journal (or by recitation or reading situation): of the title pages, specifying genre expectations and the expectations created by the date, by the author's name, by dedicatory material, by the title, and perhaps by the publishing house (1982 pp. 25-26).



Pages  
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*Home* (1986) or Ben Elton's *Stark* (1989). John Sutherland describes an interesting example of this process that occurred in the 1970s and captures in miniature the concept of 'uneven development', where genre is ahead of history temporally, and where commercial exigencies become a determining factor in producing new contexts and new readings in a reading formation:

among the FBI's suspects for the abduction of Patty Hearst was the author of an obscene pornographic adventure story of a year before which predicted the main outline of the actual kidnap [of Hearst]. The novel was promptly reissued - as *Abduction* - and enjoyed some useful notoriety (1981 p. 186).

In the *Daily Mirror* coverage of the Jeffrey Dahmer case, a relay column contains pictures of Dahmer and Anthony Hopkins in the role of Hannibal Lecter with the caption:

When *Silence of the Lambs* came true (14 January 1992 p. 16)

Meanwhile, the *Sunday Express* announced

in a case that has shocked America 31-year old Jeffrey Dahmer of Milwaukee has been revealed as the real-life embodiment of Hannibal the Cannibal, the killer played by Anthony Hopkins in the film *The Silence of the Lambs* (5 January 1985)

This is not necessarily a case of life imitating art; cannibalistic serial killers have existed for hundreds of years before Thomas Harris wrote the Lecter saga, for example, Sawney Bean (see Wilson and Pitman 1984 p. 80-84). The point is that there are discourses which arrange other texts to be read, and to be read in such a way as to promote investment in specific areas. So when a news event in its very existence as such is arranged in terms of a fictional one, whether the event is entirely prefigured in a generic text or not - a possibility that we must not dismiss - it operates in a space where it determines and is determined by other texts.

Inevitably, we will encounter further examples of this phenomenon in the following study of 1970s texts. Before proceeding to do this it is worth considering the words of Jauss:

The reconstruction of the horizon of expectations, in the face of which a work was created and received in the past, enables one on the other hand to pose questions that the text gave an answer to, and thereby to discover how the contemporary reader could have viewed and understood the work. This approach corrects the mostly unrecognised norms of a classicist or modernising understanding of art, and avoids the circular recourse of a general 'spirit of the age'.



When the author of a work is unknown, his intent undeclared, and his relationship to sources and models only indirectly accessible, the philological question of how the text is 'properly - that is, "from its intention and time" - to be understood can best be answered if one foregrounds it against those works that the author explicitly or implicitly presupposed his contemporary audience to know (1982 p. 28).

Translating his words from the language of conventional literary criticism once more, we can see this passage as an exhortation to attend to the historical aspects of a work's effectivity. This will require a consideration of a horizon of expectations, the terrain where a text must effect a suitable mode of cohabitation with its fellow texts. In the case of generic texts from their "intention and time", it is more than reasonable to assume that the texts known by readers of thrillers in the 1970s would be news and 'non-fiction' discourses on contemporary events as well as the massive selling fictional texts and the publicity discourses that surrounded them during the decade.

## CHAPTER 3

# Writing the Space of the Seventies

Come on mothers throughout the land/ Pack your boys off to Vietnam/ Come on fathers and don't  
hesitate/ Send your sons off before it's too late/ And you can be the first ones in your block/ To have  
your boy come home in a box/

And it's one, two, three, what are we fighting for?/ Don't ask me, I don't give a damn,/ Next stop is  
Vietnam./ And it's five, six, seven, open up the pearly gates,/ Well, there ain't no time to wonder why/  
Whoopee, we're all going to die  
Country Joe and the Fish, 'I Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die' (1965).

He just can't get it through his thick skull/ Why the mighty USA has got to be the watchdog of the  
world/ Else that greedy USSR/ Will bury us from afar/ And he'll never see the missiles being hurled  
Jan Berry, 'The Universal Coward' (1965).

We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee/ We don't take our trips on LSD/ We don't burn our draft cards  
down on Main Street/ We like livin' right and being free/

We don't make a party out of lovin'/ But we like holding hands and pitchin' low/ We don't let our hair  
grow long and shaggy/ Like the hippies out in San Francisco do/

I'm proud to be an Okie from Muskogee/ A place where even squares can have a ball  
Merle Haggard, 'Okie from Muskogee' (1969)

It is easy to enunciate brittle profundities about Watergate. Americans who lived through over two  
years' worth of break-ins, cover-ups, hearings, resignations, and on- and off-camera debates know that  
this political trial of a president and his closest associates mattered. We know it proved something  
about Richard Nixon, presidential power, government in general and the laws upon which this nation is  
dependent. When it comes to being precise, however, eloquence often evaporates into knee-jerk phrases:  
'Nixon is a crook'; 'No-one is above the law'; 'Nixon got railroaded'; 'All politicians are out for  
themselves'; and so forth (McQuaid 1989 p. 167)

There's no question that the crisis is much bigger than Watergate . . . (Alexander in Harward 1974  
p.44)



## Introduction

In the chapter entitled 'Writing the Space of the Forties' in *Power and Paranoia* (1986), Dana Polan begins by considering the narrative strategies of the 1945 film, *Don Juan Quilligan*. Arguing against exponents of purely formal and statistical analysis such as Janet Staiger and Barry Salt, he holds that consideration of a Hollywood mode of production is insufficient to account for the narrative moves within a specific film. For Polan, the exigencies of history as they act upon *Don Juan Quilligan* - in this case war commitment - function in a way that *disturbs* rather than promotes classical styles of narration (p. 31). Yet this does not entail that the meaning of a narrative can be sought for in a notion of "total history". Instead, he says that

in talking about the forties, I don't mean to suggest that history occurs here as some kind of *punctual* event by which a previously stable logic suddenly and irrevocably becomes undone. Decades are no more than fictional constructs by which we cut a slice out of time to endow it with a human significance (p. 33).

Moving further away from a totalizing vision of the aesthetic realm which considers narrative as a reproduction of the economic base he suggests that we

treat narrative as a particular version of its moment, a particular shaping of available forms and available materials. Thus, in the following pages, the continued reference to nonfilm forties texts (for example, novels, prescriptive guides, the discourses of science, the symbolisms of the commodity) does not set out to suggest an inevitable or univocal influence of any one form on another but, rather, the complementary investments of a variety of discourses in their social moment (pp. 39-40).

It is to this 'moment' of the thriller in the 1970s that we turn now. Polan is careful to affirm that the relation between narrative and its moment can be problematic, displaying neither an "inevitable" or "univocal" influence. He also suggests that there is complementarity: history need not precede fictional narrative, the order is often reversed. But I would add that historical readings require that due respect be afforded to the importance of the 'moment' in its existence as a framework for the shaping of reader investments. (I will return to this subject in depth in the Chapters 4-6). This does not mean that all readings must be related directly to aspects of the social formation; rather that those readings that seem amenable to a historical explanation be reconstituted (as far as possible) in terms of the salient contemporary history, and not in the light of following events. It may be worth illustrating this with a brief example.

A consideration of social and political history in the period contemporaneous to the production of a given corpus of generic works may equally be a rewriting of the history in terms of the genre. We have seen how historians of genre constitute their corpus by, a) assimilating fiction to categories that exist in the period contemporary to the critic and b) disregarding those works that cannot be assimilated. The same manoeuvre can be made, however unwittingly, in constituting the historical field. For example, considerable media coverage of the killings by Bundy, Berkowitz and Manson occurred in the 1970s. As I write, one of the most popular genres within the field of the thriller/crime genre is the serial killer novel, which has reached a high level of box office success with the Jonathan Demme film, *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). A genre historian working on the 1980s serial killer novels of, say, Thomas Harris and James Ellroy would have a deceptively strong case for considering such works as Bugliosi (1975), Sanders (1989; originally 1972), Fawkes (1977) et al., as early chapters in the textual material that makes up the 'moment' of the serial killer subgenre. Similarly, a book such as Terry (1989), if analysed as a text informing a genre's moment, can be viewed from a number of angles: serial killing, satanic horror, police procedure, true crime, conspiracy, cover-up etc. depending on a specific critical orientation. To privilege any one of these angles utilising a surplus of knowledge from the present is a temptation, but it will invariably result in an ahistorical reading of the texts. Making the history fit the text as it would be read in the present takes away the text's historical dimension and makes history a cypher in a way that would incite protest from those who lived that history. When *The Collector* was published in 1963, there had been abductions and there followed celebrated cases of women kept in prolonged captivity, such as that of Cameron Hooker (see Wilson and Seaman 1990 p. 138 ff.) But Fowles' novel was not a story primarily concerned with abduction and murder and was probably not read as such. These events are constituents of its narrative but are not the elements which characterize and categorize it. A more ambiguous example might be the assimilation of work into an authorial corpus: apart



from the fact that serial killers were not named as such outside of immediate FBI circles, they were not sufficiently in public consciousness when Harris wrote *Black Sunday* (1975) to make the novel a serial killer story; terrorists and veterans, on the other hand, were. It would be far more feasible to discuss possible contemporary readings of this work in terms of the resonances generated by the constituents mentioned. Of course, subsequent readings of the novel can be ones which try to reassimilate it to current generic trends and the authorial corpus: the 1991 reprint of the book carries beneath Harris' name "The Author of *The Silence of the Lambs*" and beneath the title, the legend "A lunatic is on the loose . . ." If *Black Sunday* was said to be an early example of the serial killer genre such a pronouncement would not constitute a historical reading, relying as it does on a false emphasis placed upon certain aspects of the contemporary social formation. Hopefully, my analysis of the 1970s pays close attention the most salient aspects of the history of the period which would guide a reading at the time.

Having stated these preliminary points I would also add that it is not very difficult to discern the presence of, for example, Vietnam veterans in the historical world and in generic fiction at roughly the same time. The fact that certain aspects of society can be proved to have existed and then be proved to be depicted in contemporary fiction says very little. Therefore the historical reading that the following discussion of the early 1970s will attempt to assist will be based on an examination of those social and political factors that were most in the public eye, and factors that existed not in isolation, to be reconstituted by later historians as illustrative of this or that current, but as events that were to be understood with reference to other contemporary events. If one were to consider events and issues in the 1970s as isolated the question arises of the validity of sources. For our purposes, then, which is the most suitable account of the protest movement? Is it the section of Norman Mailer's book, *The Armies of the Night* (1968), labelled 'History as a Novel' or the one labelled 'The Novel as History'? Is it Searle's *The Campus War* (1972) or is it *Seize the Time* (1970) by Bobby Seale? Which is the

most fitting approximation of the Vietnam experience? Is it Stanley Karnow's one-volume history (1991) or is it Neil Sheehan's biography of John Paul Vann (1990)? Is it Michael Herr's memoir, *Dispatches* (1977) or novels such as *The 13th Valley* (1983) by John Del Vecchio and *Going After Cacciato* (1988) by Tim O'Brien? Not only is it impossible to answer these questions it would be foolish to attempt to do so. What I hope to do in the present chapter is to demonstrate, instead, that there exist various recognizable grounds in the early 1970s where a struggle of competing forces takes place. This will involve the usage of the Gramscian concept of hegemony outlined in my Introduction (above). However, with regard to events in the period this does not entail the outline of a solely ideological struggle; on many occasions the ideological struggle overlaps with real struggles on concrete ground - four real students *were* killed at Kent State, Nixon *did* order a cover-up and many single parents *did* suffer poverty.

Gwyn Williams suggests that, in using the term hegemony, Gramsci seems to mean

a sociopolitical situation, in his terminology a 'moment', in which the philosophy and practice of a society fuse or are in equilibrium; an order in which a certain way of life and thought is dominant, in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society in all its institutional and private manifestations, informing with its spirit all taste, morality, customs, religious and political principles, and all social relations, particularly in their intellectual and moral connotation (quoted in Showstack Sassoon 1982 p. 94).

In this period, the 'moment' is characterized by a distinct lack of equilibrium exemplified by the fact that 'political society', the realm of coercion, constantly spills over into 'civil society', the realm of social relations. There are numerous examples of coercion attempts during this period; so when I refer to the 'moment', I refer to the state of disequilibrium that exists when hegemony has not been procured. As a result there is no clear history of the 1970s which is simply incorporated into fiction. There are different areas of struggle between competing groups and there are events which create new struggles and add to existing ones, but as far as fiction goes, no thriller - even if it could do so successfully - attempts to accurately reflect the full complexity of the political configuration of early seventies America. The aspects of the social formation in this period that I discuss - the Vietnam War, veterans, Watergate, conspiracy and



deception, the family and the climate of expectations - all find their way into thrillers by some means. It is in the nature of fiction that none of them are incorporated in an unmediated way: some are presented in a semi-factual manner resembling the way they are presented in other discourses; some are distorted almost out of recognition to fulfil the exigencies of narrative fiction; some are presented in order that they may be resolved fictionally - or shown to be ultimately beyond resolution - where they have not been resolved in the social formation; some find their way into fiction in a mixture of these modes. What is certain is that where events are complexly interrelated in the real world they will be so in fiction, although not as explicitly so. One crucial frame of reference for reading thrillers, therefore, is the contemporary history which offers a guide to the investments that the reader may make.

Many important political events took place in the early seventies. The Strategic Arms Limitation talks (SALT 1) were concluded in Moscow in 1972; Nixon made a presidential trip to China for a whole week in 1972, the longest such visit ever made by an American President; the CIA destabilized the government of Allende in Chile leading directly to an extreme right-wing coup in 1973; in the same year, Secretary of State Kissinger became inextricably entangled in the crisis in the Middle East; an epiphenomenon of this drama was the subsequent fuel crisis which exacerbated the already high levels of unemployment and inflation in the United States; this was also the same year that Vice-President Spiro Agnew resigned over tax indiscretions similar to the President's own. Woven intricately into the fabric of all these events were the events of the last years of the Vietnam War and the scandal of Watergate. I will not even attempt to summarize the sequence of events entailed in these two moments of history; Shawcross (1986) and McQuaid (1989 pp.167 ff.) in his narrative history of the period, are among a number who have adequately fulfilled this task for each of these respectively already. Instead, I intend to examine the period in a manner which, hopefully, has due respect for the historical specificity and centrality of certain ideological currents and events of the time while also having a particular importance for

the body of thrillers that I discuss later. The 1970s were a time when the material of thrillers - conspiracy, espionage, secrecy, crime and so forth - was a prominent part of other discourses in the social formation in America. The most important item to recognize initially about the period was that it begins with no one clear political complexion; this is not unusual except for the fact that the early 1970s are often written about as if there *was* one dominant political stream. This political ambiguity entails that narrative motifs in, for example, news or fiction, are assimilable to more than one political or ideological project, and this project can be subject to change over a space of time. Moreover, it is a time when public opinion - where it can be gauged - changes *gradually* in response to an accumulation of events rather than suddenly in relation to a single event. The early 1970s in America was peculiar in that the mechanism of this accumulation became manifest. In this way, the role of certain discourses came to be regarded by the public as crucial when previously they had been taken for granted. And, as history does not reach a conclusion with certain key events, there are constant socio-political problems that are seen to be unresolved.

In order to begin to examine the socio-political complexion of the period as it might be inculcated into fictional works it is necessary to consider the idea of a late sixties/early seventies spirit.

## **The Sixties/Seventies Zeitgeist**

If one wished to posit and illustrate a particular zeitgeist existing at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s there would be ample material to choose from. Writers of popular texts on the topic of social and political change elected themselves as soothsayers for the immediate future. So, Jacobs and Landau (1967) reflected on the possible fortunes of those leftist orientated groups that made up 'The Movement' in the 1960s:



The new radicals may not succeed in achieving the fundamental change in American society that they and we feel is necessary. Instead, perhaps, their role will be the radicalizing of two generations, who are not afraid to build a larger Movement and who are able and willing to fight for political power (p. 91).

The feeling that the impact of the protest movements that coalesced around the anti-Vietnam War issue in the latter part of the sixties would have considerable radical ramifications is echoed in the comments of Ronald Segal (1970):

More and more, therefore, is opposition taking to the streets, proclaiming the system incapable of responding in any significant measure at all, to normal democratic pressures for fundamental change. Even labour, so long seemingly comfortable in the many mansions of the new capitalism, is stirring with violence, seldom noticed beyond its immediate neighborhood only because the corporate mind is directed to the greater violence of the war in Vietnam and the rioting in the ghettos (p. 300).

Charles Reich (1971), on the other hand, in a celebrated bestseller, projected an image of social change built on highly personal politics:

There is a revolution coming. It will not be like revolutions of the past. It will originate with the individual and with culture, and it will change the political structure only as its final act. It will not require violence to succeed, and it cannot be successfully resisted by violence. It is now spreading with amazing rapidity, and already our laws, institutions and social structure are changing in consequence. It promises a higher reason, a more human community and a new and liberated individual. Its ultimate creation will be a new and enduring wholeness and beauty - a renewed relationship of man to himself, to other men, to society, to nature, and to the land (p. 11).

All stressed the rapidity of political change as the catalyst for a far reaching development of human relations. Alvin Toffler (1971), however, went even further, suggesting that change itself is

a current so powerful today that it overturns institutions, shifts our values and shrivels our roots (p. 11).

On this evidence alone it is possible to detect the formulation of a messianic spirit generated by the events of the preceding years. In keeping with this, subsequent commentators on the period have sought to provide evidence to suggest why such a spirit might exist; thus Lang and Lang basically recast the words of the Doors song, 'Five to One', about the ratio of the young to the old in America, in their study of public opinion during Watergate:

The young are most subject to disillusionment by political events. They have limited political experience and their ties to the political system as well as belief in the legitimacy of institutions is more tenuous. The young people born in the 'baby boom' that followed World War II were highly visible critics of the society in the 1960s and 1970s. Their presence in unusually large numbers may explain the erosion of public confidence during those years, their volatile and skeptical attitudes spilled over to older cohorts who had been habituated to accepting with less questioning, the authority of political leaders (1983 pp. 243-244).



More recently, a historian and participant in protests during the period has reassessed the role of students and teachers, in terms of its contribution rather than its shortcomings, within the broad scheme of radicalism. He writes:

As the 1960s drew to a close the new education found a space within the institutions of higher education in America. New colleges and schools were founded 'on the belief that one can learn from the experiences of the past . . . to revise the pattern of society'. In assessing this phenomenon one has to take account of the major impact that the ferment of the 1960s had upon American culture. Open admissions policies, that were a result of a decade of Civil Rights struggles in the courts and in the streets, had resulted in an influx of a different type of student. Afro-American and White students from working-class backgrounds entered the groves of academe in increasing numbers, bringing with them a new set of experiences, interests and expectations. The new students - in the community colleges and the universities - often had some first-hand experience of both the Civil Rights movement and of opposition to the war. Some were Vietnam veterans, short-timers who, it must be remembered, often had little enthusiasm for the war and, as a result of searing experiences in Nam, were searching for explanations. Equally important, the new teachers were graduates of the movement and veterans of the struggle. As new faculty they often had the task of shaping the curriculum in the large first-year courses that were required for all entering students, courses designed to shape critical thinking. Their needs were met by mass market paperbacks that were distributed by some of the most prestigious publishers in the United States (Klein in Klein 1990 pp. 31-32).

While such facts are not to be ignored, they should also be given the appropriate emphasis. A tendency to overstress the existence of a radical or messianic spirit no doubt derives from our proximity to the period in question. The idea of an early seventies zeitgeist might exist in key texts, but how can we be sure that those texts are not subject to processes of valorization which separate them from how the period was experienced by the bulk of the population? So, in one of the most famous writings about the 1970s we are told that

Ordinary people in America were breaking off from conventional society, from family, neighborhood and community, and creating worlds of their own. This had no parallel in history, certainly considering the scale of it. The hippies were merely the most flamboyant example of it. The New Left students of the late 1960s were another. The New Lefters lived in communes much like the hippies' but with a slightly different emphasis. Dope, sex, nudity, costumes and vocabulary became symbols of defiance of bourgeois life. The costumes tended to be semi-military: non-com officers' shirts, combat boots, commando berets - worn in combination with blue jeans or a turtleneck jersey, however, to show that one wasn't a uniform freak (in Wolfe 1977 p. 123).

One wonders what percentage of "ordinary people" were, in fact, making the moves that Wolfe describes; the telling of such events has a mythic veracity but how far are these events representative of the majority of the population? Such statements are clearly and self-consciously couched in the terms of *belles lettres* rather than the discipline of history but they add to a myth of the period which, while it may have more than a kernel of truth, inevitably omits the wider context.



The problem of overstating an aspect of the social formation can beset historians in a number of ways. In Stephen Ambrose's overview of American foreign policy since 1938, he opens his chapter on the Nixon period by stating that half the population were 'doves' in 1968 and that they were given no choice in the election of that year as both candidates were 'hawks' (1983 pp. 309 ff). This is a perspective that can be given undue emphasis, suggesting a mood that dominates merely by virtue of embodying some outstanding and relatively localized change. It also unwittingly overlooks the possibility that a number of varieties of 'dovedom' existed including a substantial proportion of Nixon 'doves'. This is a small point, but it is taken up by other historians of the period. In one way, it is quite reasonable for Bradbury and Snowman to assert that

By the end of 1968, it seemed to many that there were two distinct American societies existing side by side - an 'official' America that had just elected as president, that throwback to yesteryear, Richard M. Nixon; and a 'counterculture' of hippies, yuppies, political activists, angry blacks, alienated youngsters, disenchanted parents (in Bradbury and Temperley 1981 p. 268).

Yet, on closer examination, this statement can be seen to be weighted in favour of one of the two societies mentioned. The counterculture is lodged firmly in the present while Nixon, who won the bulk of the vote in 1968, is cast as the dinosaur. While there is acknowledgement that two societies may have existed at the time, favour is given to the one which is of most interest to the historian; in the same way the accuracy of the picture of seventies society presented in Wolfe's essay (quoted above) is considered to be as impeccable as the style in which it is presented. The imperative

Stand back, folks, and watch Tom Wolfe fearlessly flagellate the '70s

appears on the blurb of *Mauve Gloves and Madmen, Clutter and Vine*. The implication is that the social critic can dissect the moment and identify a clear but transitory spirit which characterized the population as a whole at that time. A corollary of this is that the gains of the Movement in the 1960s can be seen to be almost an isolated incident ready for compartmentalization in the name of the decade and which represent the social formation as a whole rather than a small part of its complexity. Snowman suggests a more precise compartmentalization:

it was becoming clear by about 1970 that the frequency, intensity, and sheer volume of protests and riots were not quite as great as they had been. American society, a little worse for wear, would survive (1980 p. 179).

Specifically, he attributes the decline of protest to the hard line on dissent take by Nixon. And he is not alone in this view: Rather and Gates (1975), for example, hold that the 1960s values as they see them - the 'Kennedy Cult', the 'Great Society', 'Black Militancy', the 'New Left', the 'Counter-Culture' - were coming to an end. More subtly, then, for them, Nixon was a man of the times (pp. 16-19). This question opens out onto the idea of an ideological turning point which is often believed to exist around the early seventies:

In the 1960s, Americans had often found it easy to define the big issues and to identify the goodies and baddies, their causes and solutions; in the 1970s people were more inclined to stress their doubts and their inability to see clearly how best to deal with the problems that faced them (Snowman 1980 p. 191).

Whether this exists or not, such a turning point can only be considered to be sudden from a historical standpoint hundreds of years hence. Indeed, at the time of the revelations about Watergate and Vietnam historians and commentators were often aghast at the lack of speed with which public opinion turned.<sup>1</sup> Probably the main reason for the lack of widespread activism in this period renowned for its protests was the most banal:

much of America carried on its business in an orderly way. Most planes took off and landed on schedule, most schoolrooms managed to hold normal classes most of the time, and most politicians and most soldiers in Vietnam did what they were officially expected to do (Snowman and Bradbury op. cit. p. 268).

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<sup>1</sup>Jerry Voorhis (1973) *inter alia* writes that

it took revelations of this lurid kind to arouse the conscience and the alarm of the nation to what was happening to their government.

That conscience and that alarm should long since have been aroused to white heat. The personal decision of Mr. Nixon to invade Cambodia should have aroused us. Subservience of our government to the military industrial complex should have aroused us. The merciless bombing of Southeast Asia and the refusal to conclude an early peace should have aroused us. Mr. Nixon's vetos of every significant piece of Congressional legislation calculated to reduce welfare rolls and enable unemployed people to go back to work - this should surely have aroused us. So should his callous veto of the Child Care Center bill of 1971. The policy of mass arrest proclaimed by the President and attorney general and carried out in Washington in May 1971, with not one of 13,000 arrested being convicted of even a misdemeanor, should have caused us to wonder about the future of American civil liberties. The impoundment of billions of dollars of funds appropriated by Congress to meet outstanding needs of the people, \$12 billion in Mr. Nixon's first term, should have angered everyone who values, even respects, the nation's constitution. And the concentration of power in a secret, clandestine White House 'government' should have scared us to death (p. 339).

c. f. the statements in Dobrovir et al (1974 vii ff.) and Schnapper (1974).



By the same token, however, it would be strange if a proliferation of radical discourses as witnessed in the late sixties had disappeared altogether. Daily business went on but the agents of such business could not have been unaware of the protests that had taken place.

Although there may seem to be evidence to support the hypothesis of a zeitgeist characterized by protest and rapid political change, it soon becomes clear that it is far too generalized to be convincing. Political events, as they entered the public arena, were transformed. It can be argued that they were incorporated into mainstream sensibilities:

When phrases like 'power to the people' turned up in the advertising copy of the public utilities and black revolutionaries were invited onto the television chat show, it was clear that much of the radicalism of the counter culture of the 1960s was no longer considered as a serious threat by those who upheld more traditional standards and values that a practical *modus vivendi* was being worked out between them (Snowman 1980 p. 183).

It can be argued that they were marginalized or split off into single issues: a generalized protest Movement becomes a set of interest groups such as the Black Panthers, pro-choice (as against pro-life) groups, veteran organizations, and so on. Todd Gittlin notes

The vast and silent majority was appalled to watch SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] decompose into warring Marxist-Leninist sects (in Salisbury 1984 p. 76).

It can be argued that both of these things happened. But in order to take into account the fate of radical discourses one must consider the mode of their transmission. In order for political events that are seemingly divorced from everyday practice to become noticed they require that public notice be drawn to them. Commentators in the late sixties and early seventies have paid considerable attention to the role of the media in disseminating information in this period and the debate has been extended by historians. For these reasons alone it is necessary to take a further look at the debate; but, in addition, the media has a crucial role in the playing out of Watergate. The question to be addressed is not so much concerned with the extent of the 'effect' of media coverage, but public perceptions about its role and also its role in the light of arguments about its 'effect'.

## Media Coverage of Political Issues: The Tet Case

At a conference held in 1984 and designed to reconsider various aspects of the Vietnam War experience, a significant amount of the proceedings was devoted to the media.

Various aspects of the debate were represented quite explicitly; there was the view that the role of the media was of little real importance:

Television news is a medium capable of transmitting small slices of truth. It is not capable, even if the people running it had the will, of changing the course of history. The American experience in Vietnam probably would not have ended much sooner or much later if television had never been invented. Or if the U. S. had decided to censor the news (Fouhy in Salisbury 1984 p. 93).

At the other extreme was the view that the press assumed a highly personalised and over prominent role:

[Vietnam changed journalism] in advancing (and Watergate completed this process) the role of the journalist as star. Certain reporters came to take themselves as seriously as the story they were covering (Davis in *ibid.* p. 99).

A further viewpoint considered that any 'effect' would depend heavily on news management:

The significant point about the flush of stories in this period, attacking U. S. involvement, is not that they were written - that was inevitable - but that the U. S. provided the access and the freedom that enabled them to be written. Other democracies would have been much less tolerant. Look how Britain managed the news during the Falklands campaign (Knightley in *ibid.* p. 106).

One might add that controversies over news management have been further fuelled by the Grenada invasion and certainly the Gulf War. Implicit in the caution shown by reporting restrictions in such instances is that the media plays a crucial public role and this fact has been learned from the Vietnam experience. Also, the value of discourses designated news or, at the least, 'non-fiction' is clear. Michael Klein (*op. cit.* pp. 26-27) gives details of numerous radical films on the subject of Vietnam which were available in a variety of formats in the early seventies and which played a crucial role for protest groups. Thomas Novelli points out that, on the other hand,

between 1967 and 1973 . . . only two Hollywood narrative fiction films actually purported to take place in Vietnam (Novelli in Klein 1990 p. 116).

These are curious facts. Among other things they suggest that the events of the war were not assimilable in an explicit way at this stage to narrative fiction for some reason. But it is certain that there was a lot of news coverage of Vietnam which was to reach a peak in the last years of the 1960s. The role of this coverage in shaping public opinion



about the war is a fiercely contested issue in American history. Carpini suggests that, before 1968,

For the few Americans who had reservations about the war, it was possible to 'read between the lines' and find evidence and images that corroborated their doubts, but for most, there was no need to question the war (Carpini in *ibid.* p. 47).

Until 1968, he is claiming, any war criticism could not have been fuelled by media coverage whereas the post-Tet period offers the possibility of informational fuel to the flame of criticism. A more general feeling about the 'effects' of the media was voiced by President Johnson when he announced on 1 April 1968 that he would not be seeking re-election:

As I sat in my office last evening, waiting to speak, I thought of the many times each week when television brings the war into the American home (quoted in Carpini in *ibid.* p. 39).

Claims and counter-claims on the role of the media all take early 1968 to be the turning point in some respect. This was the time of the Tet offensive and the debate does not revolve around the success or otherwise of military strategy but around the ways in which news gatherers presented the war.

In 1985, the conservative Norman Podhoretz restated the conventional wisdom on the matter claiming that there was initial public support for the war and that

Only after the 1968 Tet offensive did that support begin to ebb as people felt the war was being lost, or was simply not winnable (1985 p. 125).

In a statement that, because it comes from a war correspondent, can perhaps, be considered more authoritative, Robert Elegant goes further:

During the latter half of the fifteen-year American involvement in Vietnam, the media became the primary battlefield (Elegant in Salisbury 1984 p. 145).

One way in which this took place, Podhoretz (p. 126) claims, is in the possibility that, because the media distrusted government-issued facts they went so far as to distort them during the war. Despite the laconic, conspiratorial nature of such a claim, the debate has had to pay attention to this area. A set of figures or conclusions derived from such figures would be understandably detrimental to home front morale when reported through the media:

Average Monthly Combat Deaths

<u>Year</u>	<u>US Forces</u>	<u>ARVN</u>
1965	114	937
1966	417	996
1967	782	1,060
1968	1,216	2,027
1969	785	1,578
1970	352	1,782

(cited in McQuaid op. cit. p. 93)

The upsurge of deaths during the Tet offensive is quite marked. These figures, of course, do not tell the whole story. Sixteen years after the events a high ranking officer in the American forces is at pains to point out that Tet was a stunning defeat for the Viet Cong but the press reported it very differently (Sidle in Salisbury 1984 p. 165). Peter Braestrup concurs:

In the end, Tet represented a severe military setback for Hanoi. But that was not the way the 1968 Tet offensive came across in the news media, then or later (Braestrup in *ibid.* p. 167).

Militarily speaking, Tet represented success for the United States forces but the media simply does not report it in these terms. Elegant takes this theory further:

I believe it can be said (surprising as it may still sound) that South Vietnamese and American forces actually won the limited military struggle. They virtually crushed the Viet Cong in the south, the 'native' guerrillas who were directed, reinforced, and equipped from Hanoi: and thereafter they threw back the invasion by regular North Vietnamese divisions. Nonetheless, the war was finally lost to the invaders *after* the United States' disengagement because the political pressures built up by the media had made it quite impossible for Washington to maintain even the minimal material and moral support that would have enabled the Saigon regime to continue effective resistance (Elegant in *ibid.* p. 146).

In this way Elegant is attributing a great deal of power to the media in its ability to lose the war for America. His claims have the effect of assuming a causal relationship between changes in public opinion and the output of the media.

Despite the difference between military strategy and the way it was reported, most commentators detect a definite shift in public opinion on the war after 1968. Carpini, for instance, notes

During this two month 'defeat' for the North, public opinion in the United States shifted dramatically. Between November 1967 and February 1968 those believing the US was making progress in the war dropped from 51 per cent to 32 per cent. By late March President Johnson's approval rating had fallen to 26 per cent, a 13-point drop since November. As the siege of Khe Sanh ended on 1 April, for the first time a majority of Americans opposed the war. Public agreement that the United States had made a



mistake in sending troops into Vietnam went from 39 per cent in 1967 to 52 per cent in 1969. (Carpini in Klein 1990 p. 38).

McQuaid puts it another way:

Tet made it appear that the emperors had no clothes, or far fewer than they claimed (McQuaid p 10).

While Powers (1974) agrees and adds:

The war didn't end in March, 1968, and neither did the opposition to the war. What ended was the American commitment to fight and win the war (p. 318).

Yet, to claim an automatic relation between media coverage and public opinion at this stage is to make a large assumption. One of the most noted critics of this speculation, Peter Braestrup, points out that, taken as a whole, the media coverage of the Tet offensive did have a recognizable unitary thrust:

That message, most simply put, was: DISASTER IN VIETNAM! (1983 xi)

In an expanded study he asks questions of the 'effects' of such a uniform message:

Did the reporting after Tet, particularly TV's portrayal, suddenly turn the American people against the war? This has long been the claim of both critics and champions of television news. This claim is highly speculative, it seems to me. No one has yet produced empirical evidence linking the content of news coverage to changes in public opinion; such links are simply assumed to exist. In any event, the polls did not show any drastic shifts in mass attitudes toward the war during February-March 1968, even as Lyndon Johnson's popularity ratings sank to new lows (and recovered a bit after his March 31 speech) (ibid. xiii).

Braestrup's work suggests that there are those who see media coverage as linked to public opinion in too simple a causal relation: that the media alone was responsible for public discontent with the war. For him, as well as embodying a false relation of causality, this is also a narrow view of history. While the general tone of reportage may have a role to play in public perceptions it is one that is subordinate to a wider context.

He writes:

It is plausible to argue that the media's 'disaster' image of events in Vietnam further aggravated dissatisfactions with the Johnson war policy on the part of both hawks and doves, adding to the McCarthy vote in New Hampshire. Interpreted as a dove show of strength, the primary results then helped push Johnson and his political advisers to make moves designed to placate the doves. But the media did not 'drive Johnson from office'. At Tet, as earlier in the war, the President was his own worst enemy. As it happened Lyndon Johnson temporarily calmed, but did not end, his own party's political crisis by withdrawing from the 1968 election. Some writers argue that Johnson might have been forced to 'abdicate' in 1968 even without Tet; he had neglected his own party organisation and lost the support, for diverse reasons, of major groups preoccupied with domestic issues. Indeed, Johnson in his own memoirs suggests that he felt well before Tet that he had spent much of his political capital. Tet hit LBJ when he was already in trouble (ibid. p. 506).

What the debate over the role of the press during the Tet offensive shows, is that the media does play an important part. Within the context of a larger historical perspective,

and in this case, the history of an administration that had been subject to criticism over a period of years, the media could - though not on its own - add to the force of public opinion and political change. In addition, though, such statements as those of President Johnson on withdrawing from the election, while failing to designate a new role for the media, foregrounded the importance of its existing roles. Continued statements by politicians and others on the role of the media at this time served to highlight the notion that the media was almost imperative in the shaping of public opinion. Such statements cannot be said to be true, nor were they testable. But they emphasized an aspect of the press that, while it was not hitherto unknown, became momentarily foregrounded. In short, Tet did not necessarily prove that the media shaped public opinion; but it assisted in putting the media in a spotlight, the arena where the hegemonic struggle for public opinion was believed to take place.

Curiously enough, following the Tet offensive, the next major event in the history of the home front of the war is considered by some to mark the decline, or last gasp, of protest rather than a continued broadening of it. It is possible that the reasons for this lie in a failure of commentators to take into account the breadth of political opinion that still existed and the role of what was known as 'the silent majority'.

## **The 'Silent Majority' and Kent State**

In many ways it is surprising that President Nixon's comments on campus radicals, although they elicited criticism, were not met with a massive furor. The comments, delivered off the cuff to a Nixon supporter were,

You know, you see these bums, you know, blowing up the campuses. Listen, the boys on the college campuses today are the luckiest people in the world - going to the greatest universities - and here they are burning up the books, storming around this issue. I mean, you name it. Get rid of the war and there'll be another one.

And then, out there, we got kids who are just doing their duty, and I've seen them: they stand tall and they're proud (Nixon quoted in the *Washington Post* 2 May 1970 A1).



Yet, in the same year, a magazine reporter concluded her investigation into young protestors by writing

for articulately leading the vocal majority of the nation to urge an end to the war, they are tagged 'effete snobs'; 'loud, marching, foolish and subversive dissenters'; or 'evil men' by the nation's leaders, who resent, as do evil men - by urging silence.

They are youth up against the war, and because they are, no one can silence them (Woodstone 1970 p. 33).

That this reporter devotes her study to such expressions of surprise at the sincerity of protestors suggests a readership for her work that is not yet entirely converted to her way of thinking. The implications are that there is a prominent group in American society who, through their actions, often appear in the news. Yet, their relatively small numbers make them a only a small voice in the groundswell of public opinion. On the basis of the newsworthiness of protest groups it would be possible to attribute too great a grass roots following as implied by Snowman's dual society thesis above. The bulk of the population was *not* radicalized and events such as those at the Democratic National Convention in 1968 did not provoke mass criticism of the ways in which the authorities dealt with protestors (see Mailer 1969 pp. 158-164; Royko 1972 pp. 179-182; O'Connor 1975 pp. 205-211). This explains, to an extent, the relatively muted response to Nixon's comments on protestors. If there were two societies during the years of the first Nixon administration, it is important to stress the greater size of the one outside the counterculture. The famous televised presidential speech of 3 November 1969 is a testimony of this:

And so tonight - to you, the great silent majority of my fellow Americans - I ask for your support . . .

Let us be united for peace. Let us also be united against defeat. Because let us understand: North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that (in Williams et al. 1985 p. 283).

This 'silent majority' comprised not only the citizens of Middle America but also a majority of voters in urban centres, in the South, and in the East. Public opinion at this time was not, it would seem, a serious threat to the Nixon administration.

However, at the same time, protest movements were not so ineffectual that they could be dismissed. Mankiewicz' partisan account of Nixon's career, written in 1973, holds that

One of the most curious ironies of the Watergate revelations is the emergence of a Nixon who is terrified by anti-war and student demonstrations (p. 167).

This is not so ironic in terms of Nixon's long association with the detection of subversion. The Subversive Activities Control Board, for example, was established in 1950 under a law derived from the Mundt-Nixon Bill of 1948 (Schlesinger p. 262; see also Barber 1977 pp. 347-442 on Nixon's career in this area). Looking back on the period Todd Gittlin suggests that right-wing perspectives have not changed noticeably:

The so-called conservatives, neo- and paleo- varieties, think that the country was seized in the sixties, more or less, by a 'new class' of intellectuals, students, and uppity minorities and women, who not only trashed standards, learning, language and the family, but broke the back of national security, levelled America's just position in the world, and cost us an achievable and noble victory in Vietnam (Gittlin in Salisbury 1984 p. 71).

On the issue of the purchase that the Movement may have had on the hearts and minds of the silent majority he adds,

There's no evidence that the movement directly affected public opinion. Public opinion did turn steadily against the war, but if anything, as the war became steadily less popular, so did the movement against it, maybe even faster (p. 73).

These are strong words, but even in the early seventies Godfrey Hodgson assessed the situation by claiming that

Most of those who disliked the war disliked the peace movement even more (quoted in McQuaid op. cit. p. 125).

On the basis of such pronouncements it is probable that what Nixon most feared - and it is implicit in his November 1969 speech - was not so much the student protests but the idea that they could become the catalyst for a much wider movement which embraced the participation of the silent majority. The draft in particular increased this potential;

Schlesinger writes

so long as the Americans killing and dying in Vietnam were sons of poor whites and poor blacks, the American middle-class remained generally uninvolved. It was only when the contraction of educational deferments in 1967 and 1968 exposed their own sons to the draft that they (and, in many cases, their sons too) first began to wonder whether the American interest was after all worth the sacrifice of American lives (1974 p. 199).



It must be remembered that although the Movement was made up of a broad range of dissenting groups, these were predominantly middle class and student-based. In fact, criticisms of the Movement are based on its vanguardism and self-conscious neglect of the broader grass roots potential of the population at large. Specifically, such criticism is aimed at the movement not because it failed to effect a revolution but because it never could while it remained divorced from the everyday interests of the bulk of the people.

One critic, from a historical perspective, believes that

In the Vietnam war, as in all other wars, workers made the greatest sacrifices, but the anti-Vietnam war movement did not succeed in building respect for itself among workers: it did not show full respect for the American worker in the way the American worker feels about political issues (Schrade in Salisbury 1984 p. 80).

Contemporary critics could be equally incisive:

It is to the victims of the military establishment - not only the urban poor but also blue and white collar workers - that the peace movement must learn to address itself if it is to build a real political base in this country. The chief obstacle to such an approach, of course, is that those who benefit least from the military spending are also those who are for good reason least optimistic about the possibility of effecting any significant change in American foreign policy. Unable to exercise even the slightest control over the basic conditions which determine their lives, the victims of the war see little chance of ending the war. As many in the peace movement have already discovered, there is little point in telling people about the connection between military spending and poverty unless one is also prepared to help give them some concrete experience of acting to eliminate both the one and the other (Wolfe in Fann and Hodges 1971 pp. 324-325; c. f. Buhle 1991 pp. 251-252).

The validity of these criticisms is beyond question; but they do refer to a period of political development that is relatively short. A massive turnaround in public opinion could not be effected with the speed supposed even by those of a messianic bent. Moreover, the sympathies of the public, if they were to be radicalized in any way, would most likely be manifest in the political forms known to them rather than in revolutionary action. For those who were, in the immediate temporal proximity, anxious for radical action, as well as for those who from a historical perspective see protest in its most visible form falling off by the 1970s, the shootings at Kent State and their repercussions represent somewhat of a damp squib. Yet while political ambiguity and the dual society split can be seen to exist throughout the reporting of the events, the coverage must be assessed in terms of contributions to a steadily growing tide rather than the last straw for impatient revolutionaries.

At the end of April 1970 Nixon was ready to announce the invasion of Cambodia and, on 1 May, the *New York Times* reported

Nixon Sends Combat Forces to Cambodia to Drive Communists From Staging Zone (p. 1)

In its editorial, however, it noted that

President Nixon's assurance in his address last night that his decision to send American troops against Communist sanctuaries in Cambodia will save lives has a familiar and wholly unconvincing ring (p. 34).

Much of the press, including *Newsweek* (11 May 1970) who had a special feature on it, covered the invasion and its supposed non-escalation in terms of previous administrations' similar policies and claims on Vietnam. It was on the following day, after the report of the invasion, that Nixon made his famous remarks about the protestors as 'bums'. Despite these facts the press did not condemn the invasion across the board<sup>2</sup> although there was mounting coverage of the wave of protest spreading over college campuses, especially those not renowned for their radicalism and positioned in Middle America. One fact the press was quick to seize on was that the decision on the Cambodian invasion was taken without consultation of Congress. As Schlesinger was to argue four years later

The enemy bases and the threat to American forces had existed in Cambodia for years; there was no sudden emergency in April 1970; indeed the enemy had already largely evacuated the sanctuary areas by the time the invasion began. There was ample time for congressional consultation (1974 p. 169).

At the time, the Senate Foreign Relations argued that

the Nixon Administration, by sending American troops into Cambodia without the consent or knowledge of Congress was usurping the war-making powers of Congress (*New York Times* 5 May 1970 p. 1).

The head of this committee was Senator J. William Fulbright whose influential 1966 book, *The Arrogance of Power* charged that current American foreign policy represented

the morality of absolute self assurance fired by the crusading spirit (1970 p. 235).

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<sup>2</sup> Editorial comments on the invasion were mixed - the *New York Post*: "Mr. Nixon has led the nation into another dead end road". *Newsday*: "it is all utterly pointless". *Detroit News*: "agrees with him". *Chicago Today*: "he should be commended". *Cleveland Plain Dealer*: "His maudlin appeal to patriotism was offensive". *Phoenix Gazette*: "We are grateful for a President who refuses to accept American defeat" (*New York Times* 2 May 1970 p. 10).



It can be seen, therefore, that there were grounds for interpreting the latest presidential measure as tyranny.

In this atmosphere, the killings at Kent State took place. The newspapers had been covering the growing dissent at provincial universities for the previous few weeks (see especially the features in *Time* 4 May 1970 p. 25; 11 May 1970 pp. 10-14) and although, as Shawcross notes, deposed Cambodian Head of State Sihanouk had recently been given a welcome at Kent after speaking formally to American students (1986 p. 153), the *Washington Post* was still able to report that

On a campus that throughout its history has symbolized the quietude of academic retreat, hundreds of guardsmen, armed with M-1 rifles, automatic weapons and shotguns, took up defensive positions (5 May 1970 A7).

As National Guardsmen opened fire on a student demonstration against the Cambodian invasion four students were killed and over eleven wounded. The coverage of the event continued in the media over the next week, particularly over the issue of who gave the instructions for the guardsmen to fire. Nixon's verbal reaction to Kent State was to suggest that the shootings

remind us once again, that when dissent turns to violence it invites tragedy . . . (*Washington Post* 5 May 1970 A5).

words which *Time* found "callously inadequate" (18 May 1970 p. 15). Sparked by these occurrences, the following weekend saw the biggest Vietnam demonstration of them all when 60,000 to 100,000 gathered at the Ellipse in Washington (*Washington Post* 10 May 1970 A1). The traumatic nature of these events and the mass response seem to mark this as a crucial period in the history of protest. However, there are commentators that pay little heed to the mass reactions elicited by Kent State. David Mairowitz (1976), for instance, claims that

The Cambodian demonstrations, far from being another great renewal of movement spirit as predicted, proved to be a signal of retreat (p. 255).

In a similar vein Paul Buhle (1991) states that this represented no new call to protest for the left:

By 1971, the New Left had come to a crashing halt (p. 249).

Such judgments can be made because of the social and political ambiguity that, as we have seen, characterizes this and other times and which prevents the neat compartmentalization of history, in this case the idea of a radical sixties versus a reactionary seventies. At the time, much coverage of the Kent State killings delineated it as a national tragedy or "Martyrdom that Shook the Country" (*Time* 18 May 1970 pp. 12-14). The famous photograph of a screaming woman looking into the camera with a body in a pool of blood at her feet adorned the cover of *Time* with the caption:

"Protest!" In the same issue:

With an almost manic abruptness, the nation seemed, as Yeats once wrote, 'all changed, changed utterly'. With the killing of four Kent State University students by Ohio National Guardsmen last week, dissent against the U. S. venture into Cambodia suddenly coalesced into a nationwide student strike (ibid. 18 May 1970 p. 6).

Yet the coverage was not uniform: on the night of the shootings ABC News put the Kent State events into a general story about campus unrest which was not the main news item on that evening (ABC News transcripts 4 May 1970). Moreover, it became known that there was a blue-collar anti-anti-war backlash over the next few days.

Construction workers, annoyed at the lowering of the flag over the mayor's office in New York City after the Kent State tragedy marched, with considerable support, in protest against the decision (see *inter alia* 'The Sudden Rising of the Hardhats' *Time* 25 May 1970 pp. 21-23). The protests against the Cambodian invasion, then, do not seem to immediately represent a consensus of grass roots opinion.

It is difficult to be conclusive over the effects of the coverage of the Kent State shootings and the Cambodian demonstrations. But what can be seen is that the coverage indicated the broadening of the debate. At the international level, the domestic affairs of the U. S. were more visible as a result of the invasion and its reception at home. Shawcross points out that

The United States Information Agency surveyed foreign opinion and concluded that the invasion had caused a 'traumatic reaction in the world at large' and a blow to American prestige (1986 p. 179).

At home, protest was visibly no longer confined to a few radicals or 'bums'. The father of Allison Krause, one of the Kent fatalities, in a much reported statement asked:



Is this dissent a crime? Is this a reason for killing her? Have we come to such a state in this country that a young girl has to be shot because she disagrees deeply with the actions of her government? (*Newsweek* 18 May 1970 p. 33).

*Newsweek* added:

The four young people shot down by the National Guard at Kent State last week were anything but militants. Children of the middle class, they were bright and concerned but cautious about their involvement in causes at a time when protest and violence has become a growing phenomenon on the American college scene (*ibid.* p. 34).

In addition, newspaper editorials and magazine features used the shootings and presidential statements about them as evidence of a growing gulf between Nixon decisions and the public's belief in them. Searle pays particular attention to this:

Notice that the events at Kent State and Jackson State are both logically and empirically unrelated to military operations in Cambodia; the Nixon Administration was rightly dismayed at being blamed for them, but somehow in these moments of great emotion, everything becomes mushed together, and the national government can get blamed for national policy - as well as police excesses (1972 p. 42).

On the one hand, concern about the situation in Vietnam was growing, according to the polls:

In May 1970, a special Harris survey conducted after the Cambodian incursion and the events at Kent State and Jackson State, found that 54 per cent favoured an end to the fighting in Vietnam and bringing American troops home as soon as possible (in Williams et al. *op. cit.* p. 290).

But on the other hand, recent events did not yet represent the straw that broke the camel's back: on 10 May, the *Washington Post* reported a Gallup Poll which still gave Nixon 57% support (A2). The potential damage of recent events seemed to have been deeply felt in the White House and Nixon set up a special inquiry. After all the media coverage about nervous Guardsmen and uncertainty about who gave the order to fire the Report of the President's Commission on campus unrest June/July 1970 found that

Of the casualties, two were shot in the front, seven from the side and four from the rear. All thirteen were students at Kent State University . . . (in Williams et al. *op. cit.* p. 289).

These findings were not enough on their own to determine the course of history; yet shooting unarmed students - in the front or the back - does not constitute good publicity. Where previous protests could be dismissed as the work of over-privileged students the shootings at Kent State, and at Jackson State a few days later, represented more strongly than ever what *Newsweek* called on its cover (18 May 1970), "Nixon's Home Front". Politics and social life were not changed immediately; but battles would

now be conducted quite clearly on native soil. In the midst of this turmoil *Time* claimed that

Much of Nixon's present trouble stems from not heeding his own warnings. Like Lyndon Johnson before him, he has tended to shut himself away even from many in his Administration and listen almost exclusively to [Attorney General] John Mitchell and White House Aides John Ehrlichman and Robert Haldeman. 'They encourage his anger,' says one disaffected White House staffer. 'They tell him he is right and everybody else is wrong' (18 May 1970 p. 10).

This is a very strong indication of how foreign policy issues would become transformed into domestic ones, mapping out a long and unbroken trail of secrecy, deception and conspiracy that was to accumulate in the public mind and have a far more detrimental effect than instances of apparently isolated corruption in different branches of government. Looking back over his White House years, Haldeman holds an almost identical view:

Kent State, in May 1970, marked a turning point for Nixon: a beginning of his downhill slide toward Watergate (Haldeman with di Mona 1978 p. 107).

When remembered in the light of forthcoming events, major incidents like those at Kent State - as well as episodes such as the My Lai cover-up (revealed in the *New York Times* only months before the Kent shootings - see Knightley 1975 pp. 390 ff.) which, as we will see, has its own specific implications - took on a significance in public opinion that they may not previously have assumed. This is true, of course, of the whole Vietnam experience, particularly with regard to secrecy and the home front.

## **Vietnam, Conspiracy and Deception in the Making of Watergate as an Event**

Obvious though it may be, the first thing to take into account about Watergate as an event - even as a media event - is that it consisted of a complex series of interrelated episodes. Lang and Lang make the point succinctly:

While - like almost everyone - we continue to speak of 'Watergate' as if it were one event, the term subsumes a series of events, few of them fully predictable. The immediate response of the public or of political actors to any one of these events can be understood only in the context of prior events, to which it was a delayed response (1983 xi).



To make matters more complicated, each episode has a history connected to the history of the Nixon administration as well as to the policies of previous administrations, other Federal agencies and developments in domestic and foreign politics. Without simplifying too much, however, it would be safe to suggest that the policies carried out with regard to what became known as the Watergate scandal, and the public responses to these, are directly related to the policies and responses that characterized the Vietnam War. This is true for a number of diverse commentators on the period; in his memoirs Henry Kissinger states his conviction that

Most of the voluminous literature of Watergate - a cottage industry - treats it as a personal aberration of Richard Nixon as if there had been no surrounding circumstances . . . Historians will misunderstand Watergate who neglect the destructive impact on American politics, spirit and unity of the war in Vietnam (1982 p. 81).

This is a deliberately ambiguous statement as the ex-Secretary of State does not then go on to explain in definite terms whether it was the public or the White House who experienced the sapping of their spirit. Haldeman, on the other hand, is more explicit:

I firmly believe that without the Vietnam War there would have been no Watergate. Without the Vietnam War, Richard Nixon might have had the most successful Presidency since Harry Truman's (Haldeman with di Mona 1978 p. 79).

The ex-White House aide believes the whole experience drove Nixon to order wiretapping operations. Herring, in his book on Vietnam, holds the same belief but with less personal sympathy:

More than any other single issue, Vietnam brought a premature end to the Nixon presidency. The extreme measures he took to defend his Vietnam policy against enemies real and imagined led directly to the Watergate scandal which would eventually force his resignation (1979 p. 251).

It is clear that the policies of secrecy which accompanied the Vietnam War were continued and soon visibly extended into domestic politics. When such policies became public knowledge it was inevitable that questions not just about the legitimacy, but also about the reasons for such measures would be asked.

One immediate and simple explanation for the policy of secrecy and covert operations derives from Kissinger's famous statement on Vietnam, that

We will not make the same old mistakes (quoted in *ibid.* p. 217).

As we have seen, the press coverage of the Cambodian invasion focussed on the repetition of the same mistakes made by Nixon's predecessors in their Vietnam policy while Nixon remained unrepentant. The *Washington Post* carried the following statement of his on the day the Cambodian invasion was announced:

I would rather be a one-term President and do what I believe is right than to be a two-term President at the cost of seeing America become a second-rate power and see this nation accept the first defeat in its proud 190-year history (1 May 1970 A1).

A number of historians have been careful to put the covert activities into a wider perspective on the operation of American politics. McQuaid, for example, emphasizes the legacy of Vietnam but also recognizes the importance of the personalities and short-term policies of two Presidents who thought they could control public opinion:

the Nixon administration's overuse of the feral attitudes spawned by Vietnam climaxed in Watergate, a twenty-seven-month legal and political struggle during which a president paid the price for his own and his immediate predecessor's assumptions (1989 p. 7).

Wise's study of deception in government (1973) is similarly scathing of the Nixon administration but his work is marked by its strong emphasis on lying as a long-term strategy in American politics. He writes:

Since the issue of government lying has been with us, in more or less recognizable form, since 1960, under four Presidents - two Democratic and two Republican - plainly it is not confined to any one party or administration. Rather it has emerged as a continuing condition with serious implications for the democratic system.

Government deception, and the resultant loss of public trust, is supported by a system of official secrecy. The publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 caused a sensation because the papers revealed in voluminous detail how much the people had *not* been told about the Vietnam war. Moreover, these papers demonstrated that the nation's policy makers, from the President on down, had often practiced conscious deception (p. 15).

Wise's account makes it clear that long-term deception had repercussions spreading beyond the executive branch. Its revelation allowed for a reassessment of recent political history, it exposed the duplicity of some politicians and it engendered the expectation that further revelations could be made. This, at its lowest level, seems to be the logic of Watergate.

Such a logic fed off the decline of faith in the efficacy of governmental institutions. On the issue of the impact of the protest movements on American life Arthur Schlesinger, in his famous book of 1968, went so far as to suggest that there existed a 'crisis of



confidence'. A large part of this crisis was associated with the rapidly growing unease over the policies pursued in the war; but a conference involving some of the leading players in the crisis held at Delaware University in the Fall of 1973 partly showed that this unease was compounded and exacerbated by the widespread secrecy and deception that accompanied it (see Harward 1974). As Wise puts it

nothing in our past has matched, in scale and quality, the grand deception of Vietnam (1973 p. 342).

On one level the deception was confined to details about the course of events in a foreign land 13,000 miles from the United States. So, McQuaid suggests

From 1965 to 1968, the U.S. leadership often consisted of proving the truth of the falsity that America was *winning* the Vietnam War; 1969 to 1973 was just as often spent creating the illusion that America was *not losing* a Vietnamese struggle it had made so largely and completely its own (1989 p. 104).

More importantly, however, the deception was not confined to the management of the war, and its necessary overspill was what largely contributed to a crisis in confidence:

By 1972 the politics of lying had changed the politics of America. In place of trust, there was widespread mistrust; in place of confidence, there was disbelief and doubt in the system and its leaders (Wise 1973 p. 18).

It is possible that such mistrust may never have grown if secrets had remained well-kept. There are those, including Elegant (op. cit.) and Podhoretz (op. cit.), who believe in the virtues of careful news management during wars and that this is in the public's best interests. However, there are times when war policy and domestic policy become indistinguishable and certain issues straddle the territories of both. One such instance is the case of the Pentagon Papers.

In June 1967, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara set up the 'Vietnam History Task Force', a group of historians, political analysts and military officials in the Pentagon who were to produce a major study of the history of American involvement in Vietnam. Almost four years to the day, and about two and a half years after its completion, the history, known as 'The Pentagon Papers' was published in the *New York Times*. Although they were an historical overview of past policy the papers were considered by the Nixon administration to be secret documents. As a result, when they

were leaked to the press by Daniel Ellsberg, a Pentagon employee, there were considerable misgivings.<sup>3</sup> Snowman puts it in stronger terms:

The Ellsberg case set off paroxysms of anger in the White House (1980 p. 197).

The official reassessment of the war that the Pentagon Papers embodied went hand in hand with a tissue of public lies. Speaking about the documents in 1973, Ellsberg said

the first lesson I learned from the Pentagon Papers was one that I did not learn until late in my own career and late in reading the Pentagon Papers, and that was that it had always been an American war. It had always been essentially the same war in its purposes and methods, and those purposes and methods were so obviously and ineradicably stained in their very origins that they could never become in any sense legitimate . . . . The second thing I learned was that the war was not ending as the American people were being led to believe. I learned that from the many contacts of mine who remained in the administration; I had been a consultant myself as recently as the spring of the year 1969 under this administration . . . . It was the same process of deception and escalation that I was familiar with from my own participation in a similar process in 1964 and 1965 under President Johnson (Ellsberg in Harward 1974 pp. 68-69).

Presumably, Ellsberg's reading took place before the Cambodian invasion and, as we have seen, the idea was then abroad that the Nixon administration was simply continuing the same old policies. The Pentagon Papers would be the official confirmation of this and the government's high profile attempts to prevent their publication (following a legal battle over their initial publication in the *New York Times* they eventually appeared in the *Washington Post*; see Ungar 1989 pp. 148ff.) would not stand in its favour. Put succinctly, the Pentagon Papers would confirm that government policy on Vietnam had been the same for some time and this administration's commitment to Vietnamization - placing the management of the war more firmly in the hands of the South Vietnamese, increasing use of machinery while bringing the boys home, general de-escalation - could be viewed as merely one more episode in a wider policy of gradually, and covertly, escalating the war.

The Pentagon Papers and the attempt to suppress them amounted to a virtual indictment of government duplicity. While Nixon talked of bringing the troops home, he seemed to be secretly caught in a policy of escalation. The government's attempts to prevent the

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<sup>3</sup> For a much fuller account of all these events see especially, Ungar (1989), the *New York Times* edited volume of *The Pentagon Papers* (1971) and the Sunday edition of the *New York Times* for 13 June 1971.



latter becoming manifest could amount to a virtual admission of guilt. This is a clear instance of deception. McQuaid writes

Illusion, therefore, is a key concept to keep in mind regarding all Vietnam War-related policy after the Tet offensive - not because Richard Nixon was a uniquely criminal leader who lied and was the embodiment of evil, but because the posturings, deceptions, self-deceptions, and political theater of post-Tet peacemaking, Vietnamization, and U.S. withdrawal were utterly bipartisan, and indeed almost universal, phenomena in official Washington (1989 p. 104).

Because Nixon was caught in what was often referred to as a 'quagmire' and, as McQuaid points out, this was bipartisan, it is possible that he was able to escape a number of brickbats relatively unscathed and his success in the 1972 election would seem to bear this out. However, as McQuaid shows, the policy pursued by the Nixon Administration was based on an escalating series of lies whose cumulative effect if revealed could be disastrous:

Once Richard Nixon took over, his initial proposals to end the war were a variation on established Democratic precedents.

First, Nixon maintained that the Vietnamese conflict was a foreign invasion and maintained that the separate nation of North Vietnam must cease its aggression (invasion) before peace would come.

Second, Nixon substituted Vietnamization (a gradual withdrawal of American *ground troops*) for the 'freeze' that the Democrats had already established.

Third, Nixon, like the Democrats, substituted high technology and air war for ground combat. Nixon accelerated this substitution approach as U.S. ground force levels started to be reduced significantly (in 1970).

Fourth, Nixon, like the Democrats, required that North Vietnam and the Vietcong recognize the legitimacy of South Vietnam and the Saigon regime.

Fifth, Nixon, again like the Democrats, argued that the United States maintained a full and complete right to continue to supply Saigon with arms, training, and money during and after the period of gradual withdrawal and Vietnamization.

Sixth, Nixon, in a variation on a previously established Democratic theme continued to leave the question of a possible postwar coalition government in the South securely suspended in midair. The Democrats had said zero about it, practically speaking. Nixon said the whole question should be left up to the Saigon regime's discretion.

Seventh, Nixon maintained the bombing halt of North Vietnam that the Democrats had begun on Election Eve, 1968.

Eight, Nixon kept on talking to the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong in Paris, again as per the Democrats.

From all this public activity, it is clear that Nixon wasn't doing anything - publicly - that the Democrats hadn't done except to Vietnamize the war, that is, to gradually withdraw U.S. ground troops and reduce U.S. casualty levels while buying time to allow the ARVN to take over this portion of the fighting.

Privately, however:

First, Nixon continued the cross-border spying, raiding and dirty-tricks attacks into Cambodia and Laos that had been going on throughout the Johnson presidency.

Second, Nixon promptly instituted a supersecret and very large-scale bombing of the Cambodian border regions to try to destroy insurgent forces using these areas as supply, training and rest-and-recovery bases, an initiative the Johnson White House had never undertaken.

Third, Nixon, by mid-1969, was threatening Hanoi with American use of tactical nuclear weapons in Indochina.

(ibid. pp. 106-107)

The pattern of deception detailed here with regard to Vietnam would merge almost imperceptibly with the deception that became known as Watergate. But more importantly, it could be perceived quite clearly *as* a pattern: for example, a psychological pattern,<sup>4</sup> or a pattern that betrayed the logic of conspiracy.

Before the Watergate affair reached its public conclusion in the resignation of the President, Mankiewicz could open his study of Nixon with the following words

This a book about Watergate. It is therefore a book about conspiracies, burglaries, and plans for kidnapping, prostitution and blackmail. it is about breaking and entering, wiretapping and unlawful disclosure of private wire communications. . . (1973 p. 13)

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<sup>4</sup> Inevitably, many of the commentaries on Nixon and Watergate have devoted considerable space to a discussion of psychology; for example the *Führerprinzip* is cited by Mankiewicz (p. 253), Snowman among others notes the strain of resentful populism that was so much a part of Nixon's political formation alongside likeminded characters in the late forties and early sixties (op. cit. p. 195), while the most famous study of presidential psychology, Barber (1977) charts Nixon's growth to being an 'active-negative' President (pp. 347-442). Rangell (1980) goes further and performs a psychoanalysis of the Watergate affair as a whole:

'The Watergate complex' is more than a group of apartment buildings in Washington. It is a complex, I suggest, in the mind of man. 'The Watergate' with its ramifications is as much a complex as 'the Oedipus' (pp. 21-22)

In a capsule formulation of a theoretical summary, the oedipal and Watergate complexes which I have been placing in apposition demonstrate two aspects of the father figure with which the children-subjects have to relate, with two consequent methods of 'solution'. In the Oedipus complex there is the killing of the father who is envied but who has been seen as strong and essentially good, therefore the guilt. In the Watergate complex (which without this designation has existed as long as the history of man) the subject-child sees the corrupt side of the father (p. 215).

Although depth psychology will not be discussed in any detail here, some psychological categories arise in my consideration of 'paranoid' narratives (below). As the examples taken from Rangell show, such categories, when taken too literally, can be unconvincing and are often used by commentators in the loosest of senses.



In fact, he continues in this vein for a page or more, detailing various crimes of the Nixon Administration. McQuaid agrees with the general import of these remarks, saying of Watergate that it

certainly wasn't the intellectualized government of political-science textbooks. It was a soap opera come to life, with a plot that was like the layers of an onion (1989 p. 168).

The onion metaphor is apposite as it illustrates the way in which each deception revealed a deception that it concealed. Similarly, the soap opera analogy emphasizes the seriality of the proceedings over the space of a number of years. However, this only considers one aspect of the form of Watergate. The overwhelming characteristic of the affair is that it is about conspiracy; it therefore shares the same crucial ingredient as thrillers. Palmer writes,

Conspiracy is absolutely central to the thriller . . . . To be more specific, the thriller locates the source of evil in criminal conspiracy, something that is inside the world the thriller portrays but not of it. Once the hero has successfully extirpated it the world returns to normal: the hero has refounded the state, the rule of law and the predictability of everyday life can resume (1978 p. 87).

This is a useful definition as there certainly occurs the grounds for an irruption in perceptions of governmental duty in the early 1970s. Quite simply, it is impossible to write about the period without foregrounding the notion of conspiracy. As Mankiewicz testifies, the basic events consist of planned crimes. However, there are ambiguities in the notion of conspiracy that exist with regard to Watergate and they have implications for the reading of thrillers. As we will discover, the theory of conspiracy as an immutable textual structure that Palmer maps out is rendered untenable by the kind of conspiracy that Watergate represents. We will return to this later in this chapter and in the discussion of paranoid narratives (Chapter 9, below).

One thing that the conspiratorial nature of this part of American history does is to raise fundamental questions about the political system. When Watergate was at its high point, the famous journalist Jack Anderson suggested that American politics in its very essence was corrupt:

While power need not be corrupting, it is impossible to deny that the American political system invites corruption. Men must accumulate funds to campaign for office. Those who finance the campaigns expect a return on their investment. Those who are elected must listen to the special interest

while they preach about the public interest. To lead, they must follow men whose motives are self-serving (Anderson with Clifford 1974 p. 3).

Whether or not one considers this to be another of the knee-jerk reactions that McQuaid refers to in the quote at the beginning of this chapter, one has to concede that numerous administrations have had to negotiate the vagaries of campaign finance decisions.

Similarly, administrations have had to make decisions on what is to be deemed secret, especially in times of war. As Wise points out

[Lyndon] Johnson used classified material in a book that sold for a reported \$1.5 million. Daniel Ellsberg had used the same classified material and faced prison. The contrast raised obvious questions and the issue of the use of such documents in a Presidential memoir was discussed in the lead review of *The Vantage Point* that appeared in *The New York Times Book Review* of October 31, 1971 (1973 p. 92).

One victim of the Nixon policy on secrecy, the correspondent Daniel Schorr, alludes to a clear conspiratorial ideology that informed actions in the period:

what is the essence of Watergate and what makes it unique in American history? And the answer to that quite briefly is the word *enemy* as used by the Nixon administration (Schorr in Harward 1974 p. 81)

This is quite different from the kind of secrecy that exists putatively in the public interest during times of war. He goes on:

After they had won another election, then they would really take care of this country and its government. Therefore, those who presented the slightest threat were not opponents; they were enemies. They were as much enemies as an Arab and an Israeli may be enemies to each other. The enemy was the other party, of course, but the enemy was also the bureaucracy. Because the bureaucracy had been so long dominated by Democrats and because the bureaucracy stood in the way, constantly saying you can't do this or that because of regulations. And, yes, the enemy was also the press. The press was skeptical, out of step with this crusade as the press tends to be out of step with all crusades. You could be an enemy for contributing money to the other party; that could make you an enemy. You could be an enemy for demonstrating against the Vietnam war because that didn't make the president look good. But you could also be made an enemy for news reporting, for reporting what the administration didn't like to see reported, for analyzing its actions - that could also make you an enemy (ibid. p. 82).

In addition, of course, even if covert activity could be construed as 'patriotic' or 'in the public interest' then there is also an ethical question involved. This also failed to go unnoticed:

If the Nixon men were proud of their 'higher morality', then why did they commit their crimes in darkness, destroy the evidence, collect vast sums of money to persuade others to remain silent, and finally lie about what they had done? (Mankiewicz 1973 p. 17).

Such questions were on the agenda after the Watergate break-in on 17 June 1972 but, of course, their effects were slight. Nixon went on to a landslide victory in the election in November. It was only after the indictment and the conviction of the burglars that the scandal began to gain public prominence.



What was probably the most crucial factor in the public perception of conspiracy was the *accumulation* of lies and deception. Not only were fibs being told but also lies about lies. Commentators have noted that even a modest injection of honesty might have resulted in a different course of events. Barber says of Nixon:

At point after point he could well have been rescued by other accidents or easy efforts of his own . . . (op. cit. p. 459)

while Ehrlichman remarks in his memoirs

In retrospect it seems that most, if not all, of the President's problems would have evaporated had he stepped out, forthrightly, and told the American people everything he had known or suspected in February or March 1973 (1982 p. 303).

It can be convincingly argued that the continued lying by White House staff only increased suspicion. Far from quenching the public thirst for the truth, each revelation seemed to provoke conclusions and a connected demand for further information. For example, following John Dean's damning testimony (from 24 June to 29 June 1973) at the Senate Watergate Hearings - the basic thrust of the former counsel to the President's remarks being that Nixon had known about the break-in and its cover-up since September 1972 - a poll found that 8% of the public believed Nixon planned the break-in; 28% believed he knew about it; 31% believed he found out later and tried a cover-up (McQuaid 1989 p. 226). This was not just a case of an isolated fact suddenly being revealed: like a ready-made narrative successive items of information promised more and more.

Part of the dynamic of the continuing unravelling of hitherto secret events was the attempt to conceal them until it was simply no longer possible to do so. What often seemed to matter was not so much the lies as the *chutzpah* of the liars in thinking that they could pull the wool over the public's eyes and this assisted in making each successive stage of the proceedings seem like a bursting point. The trial and conviction of the Watergate burglars was widely reported on 30 January 1973. One of the key pieces of evidence in the case was the presence of a \$25,000 cheque originally meant

for the campaign to re-elect the President but now residing in the bank account of one of the burglars, Bernard Barker. In a story billed 'Trial Fails to Uncover Who Hired, Paid Watergate Spies', the *Washington Post* reported an exchange between Judge Sirica and Barker:

The judge later asked: 'Didn't you think it was strange that amount of money coming through the mail without anything being registered or anything?'

Barker responded: 'No, I don't think it is strange, your honor. Like I said, I have been involved in other operations which took the strangeness out of that as far as I was concerned'.

Later Sirica said, 'I don't believe you' when Barker said he got the money 'in the mail in a blank envelope' (30 January 1973 A15).

It is probably the case that Sirica was no more skeptical than the average reader and refused to accept the spy thriller scenario that was presented by the protagonists of the covert operation. We will discuss the aspect of the break-in which takes on the aspect of the thriller shortly. The point to be addressed now is that the stigma of duplicity resulting from unconvincing lies was soon placed tangibly on the President after all the suspicions.

When former Presidential Appointments secretary Alexander Butterfield revealed at the Senate Watergate hearings that Nixon had taped all his White House conversations the press capitalized on all the issues that arose from it. For instance, in addition to its regular reporting on the story, the *Washington Post* carried a four page special on the taping (17 July 1973 A16-20). The cover of *Time* (30 July 1973) read 'The Nixon Tapes: Playback Wanted' and the cover of a subsequent issue asked 'Can Trust Be Restored?' (20 August 1973). This question represents the spirit of the reporting of the issue: *Newsweek* quoted Senator Robert Byrd's view of the revelation:

'one more shovelful on the dungheap' (30 July 1973 p. 13)

and reported a Gallup Poll in which Nixon's popularity had reached an all-time low of 40% (ibid. p. 12). Speculating on the reason for Nixon's failure to reveal the existence of the tapes *Newsweek* offered the following:

*That the tapes are authentic - and are too damning to the President to see the light of day. This theory, by far the most prevalent, explains the President's resistance to yielding the tapes as a calculated risk - a gamble that he can live with suspicions more easily than with what the tapes may tell (ibid. p. 14).*



The *Washington Post* editorial followed the same tack, warning that withholding of the tapes

would only encourage the public to suspect yet a third possible reason for him to withhold the evidence - the possibility that the evidence does not in fact substantiate his case (17 July 1973).

When the tape transcripts were finally released at the end of April 1974 and published in the major newspapers and in book form there were general misgivings over the deletions that had been made during their preparation for the public. Numerous expletives were left out as well as other details. Despite this, the editor of the *New York Times* edition of the transcripts could conclude from the evidence,

Throughout the period of the Watergate affair the raw material of these recorded confidential conversations establishes that the President had no prior knowledge of the break-in and that he had no knowledge of any cover-up prior to March 21, 1973. In all of the thousands of words spoken, even though they often are unclear and ambiguous, not once does it appear that the President of the United States was engaged in a criminal plot to obstruct justice (1974 p. 54).

Similarly, in the President's address to the nation on 29 April 1974 Nixon asserted that

John Dean charged in sworn Senate testimony that I was fully aware of the cover-up at the time of our first meeting on September 15, 1972. These transcripts show clearly that I first learned of it when Mr. Dean himself told me about it in this office on March 21, some six months later (ibid. p. 15).

Although Nixon clung to this story throughout the affair, it was only a matter of time before it would be recognized as pure lies. The crucial tape of a Nixon-Haldeman conversation from 23 June 1972 was a notable absence from the released transcripts and it later became known by Watergate chroniclers as the 'smoking gun'. The tape, which proved Nixon had knowledge of the cover-up from the outset, was eventually released on 5 August 1974, three days before his resignation and nine days after impeachment proceedings had even officially started (see Kissinger 1982 p. 1198; Woodward and Bernstein 1977 pp. 398 ff.; Jaworski 1977 pp. 250 ff.). Apart from all other events during the Nixon presidency, it would be understandable if these particular ones were interpreted in terms of arrogance, audacity, and barefaced cheek. But if the release of the 23 June tape led to the reassessment of the release of the edited transcripts, like previous revelations it also demanded a thorough reassessment of all other past policies of the administration.

As fate would have it on the day when it was reported that Butterfield revealed that White House conversations were routinely taped, it was also officially announced that Cambodia had been secretly bombed by the U.S. on a massive scale since 1969. The *New York Times* actually broke the story a few days before the official announcement (having carried a story in May 1969 which intimated that heavy bombing of neutral Cambodia was taking place). Seymour Hersh, the reporter responsible for the original bombing story and the revelations in print about the My Lai cover-up wrote that

A former Air Force major has told the Senate Armed Services Committee that in early 1970 he participated in the widespread falsification of records to hide the fact that the United States B-52s were bombing Cambodia, Senate sources said today (15 July 1973 p. 1).

In actual fact, the story was eclipsed in most newspapers by the revelations about the tapes. *Newsweek*, in its first issue after Butterfield's revelations did not even address itself to the Cambodian bombing story. This was a busy time in the coverage of the conspiracy, not only with the news of the tapes but also with former Attorney General Mitchell's testimony to the hearings throughout July. In spite of the fact that the bombing story was outweighed by the tapes and it concerned a war now thought to be over it was of no small importance in the overall assessment of the Nixonian conspiracy. The tenor of such assessments was based on their conspiratorial character and their affront to the people. So Mankiewicz writes

Shortly after Nixon took office, he authorised the bombing of the so-called Cambodian 'sanctuaries', which were along the Cambodian border used by both sides in the Vietnam war for staging and resting. The bombing went on for more than one year until the invasion of Cambodia occurred in May 1970.

During all that time Nixon assured the American people that we were respecting Cambodia's neutrality. He was able to get away with that by using an elaborate double-entry system of reporting worked out with the Department of Defense and the White House, designed to report bombing of Vietnam which was actually the bombing of Cambodia. The enemy was not fooled; he could see the bombs falling, but it was necessary to deceive the Congress, which might not have approved or furnished the funds, and the people, who might have pressured Congress to correct the situation (1973 p. 139).

More directly, of course, Nixon was fooling Congress and acting unconstitutionally. In fact, the President had apparently let slip at a White House dinner for Vietnam veterans in November 1970 that air attacks had taken place in Son Tay (Wise 1973 p. 6).



The repercussions of this and the host of issues that the secrecy opened out onto may not have been so great in late 1970 as they were in the middle of 1973. Daniel Ellsberg enunciates the links between foreign policy, secrecy, surveillance and personal liberties:

Do you remember that the secret bombing of Cambodia (of which we now have been told by the president, four years later) began in March 1969? It was a story by the *New York Times* about that bombing in May of 1969 that led to the famous seventeen wiretaps requested by Henry Kissinger to stop such leaks. It was the Cambodia bombing that I learned about, among other things, from my Washington contacts in the same month that I finished reading the Pentagon Papers, September of 1969. The bombing of Cambodia was at that time intended by the White House to be little more than a warning, a warning meant to be heard and seen by the 'enemy' but to be absolutely unheard by the American public. It was meant to be a warning that if the enemy opposed the presence of the American troops who would be remaining in Vietnam through the United States election of 1972, then we would bomb more heavily than Lyndon Johnson had ever bombed. The reason that the Cambodian bombing was a good signal of Nixon's willingness to expand the war was that it did go beyond a line of restraint that even Johnson had observed. Likewise, we sent ground troops secretly into Laos and Cambodia - small scale relatively - but again it conveyed the clear message that we were ready to expand the war. Ultimately, the restriction against bombing of the North was removed (in Harward 1974 p. 69).

The Kissinger wiretaps are one more demonstration that a home front was considered to exist by the administration.. But these are the tip of the ice-berg. The first head of the Senate Watergate Committee notes that

More than 1,200 military intelligence agents in various parts of the U.S. were assigned the task of spying upon American citizens who were doing nothing whatever in most cases except exercising their rights under the First Amendment to freedom of speech and peaceably to assemble to petition government for a redress of their grievances in respect to the draft, the Vietnam war and other policies of the administration (Ervin in Harward 1974 p. 5).

At a pinch, one could argue that these were national security matters, once again necessitated by the exigencies of war. But it became clear that such measures were to mask further secrecy. Ungar details some of the foreign policy initiatives underway at the time of the Pentagon Papers' publication and the height of the Cambodian bombing.

The middle of June 1971 was perhaps the most sensitive period in American diplomacy in years. Unknown to the public, the Congress, and even some high officials, the White House, with the help of the Pakistani government was negotiating with the People's Republic of China for a confidential visit to Peking by Kissinger - with the eventual goal of arranging an invitation for President Nixon to visit China. Although the country would not learn about it until January 1972, Kissinger was also involved at that time, as he had been for two years, in top-secret Vietnam War negotiations with North Vietnamese officials in Paris; on his way back from his secret visit to Peking, in fact, he stopped off in Paris for one of those secret sessions (1989 p. 110).

Writing as early as January 1973 - six months before the official revelation of the secret bombing - Wise emphasized the extent of this covert activity:

Frequently, the 'enemy' knows what is going on, but the American public does not (1973 p. 344).



The volume of secrecy in foreign policy was so great that Kissinger felt obliged to make excuses in his speech accepting the appointment as Secretary of State on 23

August 1973:

In the first term of the Presidency many important and some revolutionary changes were made. These required, to a considerable extent, secret diplomacy and they were conducted on a rather restricted basis. But now we are in a different phase (quoted in Kalb and Kalb 1975 pp. 505-506).

It would not be difficult to imagine that a large proportion of the public at this date recognized some irony in the Secretary of State's espousing of a 'new' phase.

The point to be made about the secret bombing is that, although it seemed to receive only a small part of the media coverage in the face of Watergate news, and although it was (apart from being a crime against the Cambodian people) primarily an affront to Congress and secondarily a disdainful gesture to the American public, it was an issue that did not go away. In fact it returned to the grand arena of the debate through the statements of those Congressmen that called for impeachment in 1974, couched in forthright terms to do with law and professional ethics. Thus Drinan:

Can we condone the President and the Pentagon stonewalling the Congress? Here are but a few of the deceptive practices: 1: On April 16, 1970 Secretary of the Army Stanley Reser told a Senate sub-committee that there had been no military aid given to Cambodia since 1964, 2: On May 4, 1970 General Wheeler gave misleading if not false testimony to a committee of the House. 3: On May 31, 1971 Secretary of the Air Force Seamans reported to the Senate that no bombing strikes had occurred before May 1, 1970.

Those who assert that the President had the power to bomb Cambodia in the way in which he did it have the burden of justifying the deception of Congress, the falsification of documents and the defiance of clear law (in Schnapper 1974 p. 73).

Shortly after its revelation the secret bombing existed as one more aberration in a war that was considered as a national tragedy. However, before too long, it became part of a catalogue of "crimes" committed by Richard Nixon. Impeachment was considered by Congressmen on the strength of this issue alone but ultimately it was rejected (see White 1975 p. 394-397). The *accumulation* of evidence was the key factor in the reassessment of past actions.

If the administration did not have enough damning evidence against it, more shovels full of dung, as Byrd would put it, were ready to be piled on the heap. In early April



1974 the *Washington Post* devoted extensive space to the reporting of Nixon's tax returns. These involved a failure to declare income on the sale of some of his properties and Nixon very soon agreed to pay the money due to the IRS.<sup>5</sup> The payment seemed a desperate attempt to prevent more of Byrd's dung sticking. The futility of Nixon's situation was apparent; only months before the tax revelations the breadth of deceptive practices was beginning to be summed up:

Who, for example, in those days when they were clamoring for quiet on the campus and tranquility in the street, would ever have imagined that the president of the U.S. would soon be setting up his own squad of secret police, his own unit of plumbers, of fanatics armed with rubber gloves and burglars' tools and satchels full of \$100 bills and sending them out with a license to burglarize, to steal, to produce fake letters accusing Hubert Humphrey and Scoop Jackson of illicit sexual behaviour, to accuse Ed Muskie of making insults against the people of Maine, to fake telegrams accusing John F. Kennedy of being involved in the murder of President Diem of Vietnam? Well this is only a fragment of the meanness and madness perpetrated in the name of what Alex Hamilton called 'checking the unsteadiness of the people' (Rowan in Harward 1974 pp. 36-37).

Rowan's incredulity was a tame example of this summing up process. Before the end of 1973, the first edition of a bestselling paperback was on sale proclaiming itself a guide to Nixon's impeachable crimes. These included numerous scandals such as the ITT case which made far smaller media splashes than Watergate as well as accusations of fraud and embezzlement on the part of Nixon himself (see Dobrovir et al. 1974).<sup>6</sup> An array of detail and legal analysis, along with the celebratory plaudits on its cover, lent the book an air of having almost set the impeachment process in motion. Like many other texts that addressed the workings of the Nixon administration it implied a connection between disparate events whose initial primary link was their clandestine

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<sup>5</sup> See the *Washington Post* 3 April 1974 A1 and A6; see also *ibid.* 4 April 1974: 'Nixon Agrees to Pay Tax Debt of \$467,000 After IRS Ruling'

Rejecting advice from his lawyers that could make 'a very strong case' against the findings that he improperly deducted the gift of his vice-presidential papers to the National Archives and failed to list as income the proceeds from the sale and improvement of his residences, Mr. Nixon instructed payment of the \$432, 787.13 ruled due by the IRS (A1) (c. f. A8, A10, A11, A14, A16, A17).

<sup>6</sup> For details of the ITT case see Anderson with Clifford (1974 pp. 13ff). Its effects on Watergate is summarized thus:

As I write this, the Watergate volcano is still erupting with daily explosions. Enough has already spewed forth to show that the Watergate crimes and their prolonged cover-up were but an elaboration of the basic approach used during the ITT preliminaries. This approach, sprung on an unsuspecting audience conditioned to trust their highest officials, substantially succeeded in hiding much of the ITT scandal and the 1972 campaign finances grotesqueries. By the time of the Watergate cover-up the techniques of conspiracy, fraud and perjury had been systematized into an automatic Administration response (Anderson with Clifford 1974 p. 123).



nature. This, as I have suggested, was the fundamental logic of Watergate and its similarity to the logic of thrillers is not difficult to recognize. A final example will serve to emphasize this. The chapter of Theodore White's book on the fall of Nixon - a chapter suitably entitled 'The Underground: Crime and Conspiracy' - opens with the following

By the summer of 1970, after the spring violence, after the Huston heresy, an observant insider might have been able to detect a change not only in style but also in quality of the Nixon administration.

Large matters, where large and good men ran affairs, were shaking down - or at least shaping into reasonable, sometimes exciting plans. Though the Paris negotiations with the Communists of Hanoi seemed paralyzed, American troops were coming home - 115,500 had already come back by April 15th, with another 150,000 due home in the next twelve months [lists numerous policy successes of the administration for just under a page] . . . .

Many good men were working at hard problems and groping for real solutions - interpreting in their way the President's will at its best.

And yet, simultaneously, at the nerve center, all along King's Row, were others interpreting the President's will at its worst - the irregulars (1975 pp. 181-182).

This illustrates the general structural similarity between thrillers and Watergate as it is reported. Beneath the complex state of equilibrium that White describes in his first two paragraphs lurks the threat of an equally complex disequilibrium. Not only are the holders of civic power characterized by a split in their motives but the chief executive is described as a dual personality prone to overuse his prerogative to evil ends. White's use of the term 'King's Row' is telling not only in terms of connotations connected with the vulnerability of monarchs to false counsel but also the fact that Nixon employed a special police force with distinctive uniforms in the early years of his Presidency who patrolled the White House exterior and were known as the 'Palace Guard'. Similarly, 'irregulars' suggests the scruffy group of urchins that had order imposed on them whenever Sherlock Holmes required routine errands to be performed beyond Baker Street. What is omitted from this passage is the detail of the successes of the last years of Nixon's first term: White actually provides a strong argument to explain why Nixon was returned to power by a landslide victory in November 1972. For our purposes, however, the long period of gains that he describes only serves to make the subsequent revelations about corruption and secret bombing that much stronger in their impact.



The fear of conspiracy in this period does indeed stem from the fact that it is a "pathological irruption into an otherwise ordered world" as Palmer claims (1978 p. 201). Yet it is not a fear that simply replays the ideological relations that existed at its moment of inception, a moment located by Palmer for thrillers in the second half of the nineteenth century. As we will see, the fear of conspiracy has its own specificities and points of investment for each period of history.

### Aspects of the Fear of Conspiracy

To define conspiracy as an irruption into an ordered world is reasonably adequate for this period. It could be suggested that there was growing unease with government actions - a 'crisis of confidence' if one prefers - and that 'irruption' implies an illusory suddenness. Similarly, one could argue that the political complexity of the period that we have discussed implies a less than well-ordered world. However, 'irruption' in this case is a metaphor for the process of accumulated revelations over a number of years. The notion of a well-ordered society refers to the fact that government deceptions did not become immediately felt in the course of everyday life. What we can say is that the idea of a conspiracy in government in the 1970s manifested itself in a number of ways. In one sense, it will become clear that public opinion, on the whole, regarded the corrupt shenanigans as part and parcel of the alien world of 'Politics'. In another sense, the drama of government corruption was played out in a public sphere, through the media, and the tenor of that drama was that many of those in power were no longer fit to govern. In addition, the new high profile of the tactics of deception emphasized their targetting of the individual. It was not necessarily the case that the bulk of the population felt that it was under threat of investigation nor that it immediately felt the effects of government policies in a direct way. But contemporary accounts of

government activities, as we will see, often stress the dimension of individual covert activities against individuals rather than political subversion in the abstract.

Another episode of American history which is characterized by government operating in this way is embodied in the HUAC investigations of the early 1950s. These gained a high public profile and revealed the alleged subversive activities of individuals, many of whom were already in the public eye as a result of their position in the media. In this way, the era of McCarthyism is analogous to the era of Watergate: in the former case, officers of government acted to bring to book individuals they believed to be guilty of subversion; in the latter case, officers of government acted to bring to book individuals (who were often officers of government themselves) they believed to be guilty of subversion (often of the rights of other individuals). The complication in the analogy is that, in the second case, those brought to book had acted against *other* individuals in the belief that *they* were guilty of subversion. Despite the unrefined nature of this analogy, it illustrates the connections between the two periods in terms of the fear of conspiracy against American citizens and its playing out in the public sphere. In the case of Watergate, commentators made clear that many individuals - especially those who had been involved in protest - were under threat from covert government activities. One victim of such activities wrote in 1973

What was unique about Watergate and everything that went with it was that the government was to be transformed into an instrument of retaliation, every available lever of government to be used not to rebut arguments but to discredit people. Yes, they wanted Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatric file - not to convict him in court but to destroy him with the public. And the FBI investigation of me - what would they have done with the information if they had gotten it covertly and there was something adverse in it? How would that have been used by the president of the United States? There was Tony Ulasewicz, the ex-cop from New York, and his assignments of gathering dirt on people. Even the Watergate bugging itself - they told those poor [sic] Cubans that the aim for getting into the Watergate was to find out whether Castro was financing the McGovern campaign. But that is the thing you tell Cubans when you want to get them to do your dirty work. There is now evidence that they were really trying to get something on Larry O'Brien, the Democratic national chairman. That was the aim of it. It's always a person that they were after. It is typical of radical organizations that they war not against ideas but against persons. That is where the word *enemy* comes from. The essence of Watergate was a radical conspiracy. All who might oppose it or obstruct it were labelled as enemies because to these benighted people that's what everybody else was (Schorr in Harward 1974 p. 84).

The rhetoric of this statement is organized around the notion of the individual versus the collective and it is very telling that there is a recurrent use of a not too specific 'they'.



Any sense of radicalism in the events is attributed to the conspiratorial designs of the organizations referred to as 'they' while the rights of the citizen are upheld on behalf of those targetted by the conspiracy. In short, the rhetoric of the American democratic system is turned around on the system's chief users and abusers.

This process of strategically turning the tables is an integral part of conspiracy and covert activity: doing one thing while pretending to do another. Such a situation would, unsurprisingly lead to suspicions about the motives behind certain actions. Donner (1980), for example, describes part of government strategy at this time:

The Nixon administration sought to channel the energy of anti-communism into a *Kulturkampf* against an enemy who combined in one sinister stereotype all of the then prevalent varieties of protest and dissent. The objective was to associate political nonconformity - especially opposition to the Vietnam War - with forms of behaviour that touched the most exposed social nerves, and thus to encourage a grass roots conservative consensus while at the same time strengthening and expanding countersubversive intelligence agencies (p. 453).

The plot, if it existed as coherently as such, backfired. By overestimating the antipathy of the silent majority to the protest movement at the same time as evidence steadily accumulated which indicated the administration's duplicity, the plot found that the fear of subversion that it hoped to generate had landed on its own front doorstep. For our purposes there are two main consequences of this. Firstly, the fear of conspiracy could be seen to revolve around the fate of the individual: as early as 1970 *Newsweek* reported the discovery of a massive covert army surveillance operation focussed on 'political activists' (4 May 1970 p. 35); similarly, it became known in Washington at a later date that Nixon had compiled his own 'Enemies list' of "leftist" organizations that he intended to move against under the guise of the IRS (Dobrovir et al. 1974 pp. 23-27). At its most extreme, then, a significant proportion of the population were at risk from surveillance operators or could be perceived to be so. Secondly, as we have seen, accounts of government inspired conspiracies could utilize the very facts of plots against individuals to inform their rhetoric. Many of the contributors to the 1973 Delaware conference that I mentioned earlier, and from which I have quoted, assessed the whole period in terms of the rights of the individual and in terms of both American

political tradition generally and the constitution specifically. Even those who do not explicitly occupy these positions, such as Schorr, Donner, Wise et al., invoke an American sense of righteousness derived from the teaching of the founding fathers in their accounts of the period. In these cases, the fear of conspiracy can be recast as the fear of the disruption of the American way of life. This is not to say that such an entity can be proved to exist without doubt; however, as an ideological entity in which people lived their lives *as if* it existed, the term was flexible enough to accommodate the fear of government conspiracy. In fact, this very flexibility entailed that, as Donner points out, the Nixon administration could engage in a *kulturkampf*, or hegemonic struggle for meaning. For the reasons I have mentioned - chiefly, the revelation of accumulated deception - the administration failed to represent itself as the embodiment of the American way of life.

We will return to the more specific nature of the fears that government activities engendered and the way they are played out in fiction when we consider paranoid narratives of the seventies (below). A further aspect of the conspiracy - and particularly its reference to individuals - is worth considering briefly, however. Whilst it can be argued that the activities surrounding Vietnam and Watergate exhibited a serious threat to order, there was a sense in which it also did not, and this is not unrelated to a sub-genre of thrillers in the period. For many, the activities of the 'plumbers' - the White House team so called because they were set up to plug leaks - and particularly the Watergate break-in itself could be seen as humorous. In 1974, Schlesinger makes a casual reference to this aspect of the affair:

Americans regarded 'the Watergate caper' with indifference if not complacency till well into 1973 (p. 269).

His passing use of the term 'caper' illustrates not only that the early period of the affair was not viewed with great levity but also that the term had smoothly entered the vocabulary of Watergate exegesis. It would appear that the use of the word 'caper' quickly gained currency with reference to the break-in. Chapter 3 of the book by Lang



and Lang on public opinion during the period is called 'The Watergate Caper'; here they show that

The press gave big play to language that made the break-in seem frivolous, even foolish (op. cit. p. 38).

This did not just refer to the break-in but also many of the other revelations.

Mankiewicz reports that among the smear tactics utilized, the famous forgery of the Kennedy order to assassinate Diem was done by Howard Hunt

armed with nothing more than a typewriter, a Xerox machine, and a single-edged razor-blade (op. cit. p. 127).

Mankiewicz expresses his incredulity that Hunt could believe he would get away with it, while from the other side of the debate Haldeman was to recall later that the DNC break-in was such an obvious absurdity (Haldeman with di Mona 1978 p. 122).

Meanwhile, Jack Anderson, in a similar vein, refers to the four Cuban perpetrators of the break-in as a

Cuban *Mission Impossible* team (Anderson with Clifford 1974 p.129)

and there are understandable reasons for doing so. The reporting of the break-in in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* on 18 June 1972 obviously does not refer specifically to the then unknown links with the Nixon administration and refers to five men with bugging and surveillance devices burgling a political headquarters, and in the case of the latter newspaper the report appears as a minor criminal story inside the newspaper rather than on the front page (see, respectively A1, A22; p. 30). From the start, the burglary was a bungled effort and both newspapers report that the security man responsible for raising the alarm had found out that one of the burglars carried more than \$1,000 in \$100 bills on his person (A22; p. 30). It was this, the presence of James McCord who was in both the burglary crew and the campaign to re-elect the President (CREEP), and crudely disguised references to "W. H." and E. Howard Hunt in the notebooks of two of the Cubans, that led the investigation back to Liddy, Hunt and, ultimately, the White House (see 'Nixon Ex-Aides, 5 Others Indicted in Bugging Case' *Washington Post* A1, A10; c. f. also (Hunt 1975 pp. 239 ff). So, as Mankiewicz writes,

Worst of all, the 'professionals' violated one of the most basic rules of intelligence work: never have anything in your possession, even a laundry tag, that can trace you to your real controllers (1973 p. 189)

The affair can thus be seen as a caper both in terms of its ridiculous failure as well as the amateurism - and in some cases the absurdity - of its players.<sup>7</sup>

Nevertheless, the initial stages of Watergate did not take on the appearance of a caper without reason: a number of investments are at stake when the affair is presented in humorous terms. For Haldeman, the initial stages of Watergate are merely the curious and bizarre beginnings of something that got out of hand:

It was not planned ahead as a great conspiracy - it just grew one step at a time as people, believing they were acting in the best interest of the President, took steps to meet each problem as it arose (Haldeman with di Mona 1978 p. 322).

Explanation, here, is indistinguishable from a request for exoneration. For those hostile to the perpetrators of Watergate, the amateurism did not constitute an excuse but one more pejorative aspect of the whole sordid business, further proof that the administration could not even manage a small-scale burglary let alone a large-scale war and, moreover, it employed bunglers and weirdos. But in a more general way, the caper aspect of Watergate can be considered as a means for its spectators of coming to terms with the threat to individuals that the conspiracy embodied, the illegality of its proceedings and the irruption into ordered life that it represented. Almost like a joke writ large, the caper aspect of the break-in and its aftermath temporarily defused the serious implications that immediately arose. It is worth paying attention to this when one considers the existence of a number of caper novels in the 1970s. The capers in

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<sup>7</sup> Hunt's biographical details, especially, were given some coverage bearing in mind his authorship of thrillers, his employment by the CIA and his role in the Bay of Pigs fiasco (c. f. Fallows 1974; for sketches of Liddy and Hunt see the *New York Times* 16 September 1972 p. 10; also Hunt op. cit. and Liddy [1981]. For biographies of McCord and the Cuban four see Mankiewicz pp. 150-156). Probably the most bizarre episode in the whole business was Liddy's plot to kill Hunt while the latter was in gaol awaiting sentence (see Liddy op. cit. pp. 403-404). The most extensive discussion of the thriller aspect of the *uncovering* of the Watergate story is to be found in Cornfield (in Carey 1988). Unfortunately, both the current chapter of this thesis and a subsequent chapter's consideration of *All the President's Men* were completed before a discussion of Cornfield's article could be included. Although there are similarities between our general views on the role of journalism in the affair our ultimate conclusions differ, particularly with regard to Cornfield's 'minimalist' viewpoint (see, especially, Cornfield p. 181).



such novels are not necessarily Watergate-related in any explicit way; in fact, they draw on traditions that predate Watergate by some considerable time. However, their methods of defusing criminal acts are analogous to those in the coverage of covert government activities as we will witness (see Chapter 8 and Appendix 1, below).<sup>8</sup>

While it can be said that the fear of conspiracy as it involved individuals also embodied its other - mirth, and downplaying of the gravity of the offences - it must be noted that the conspiracy did not end at this issue. Kissinger, for instance, believes that, in the minds of the public, the break-in at the offices of Ellsberg's psychiatrist, the wiretapping, foreign policy decisions and so on all become inevitably linked with Watergate (op. cit. pp. 113 ff). His argument is that most of the covert activities were separate incidents often arranged with no link to other activities that may have been going on under the aegis of the White House at the time. Whether this is true or not, a number of commentators have pointed out that there were grounds for positing the existence of a wider conspiracy.<sup>9</sup> The intelligence services became embroiled in the affair on the basis of little evidence: as the CIA operates exclusively outside the United States it really should have been unconnected with the affair, yet the presence of Hunt and the Cuban burglars provided a link. As Ranelagh points out in his history of the 'Company' (1988),

although the CIA was not involved in the Watergate break-in, a great deal of information came out about it and 'other matters', some of which had nothing to do with Watergate, some of which was associated with Watergate, and all of which would lead to a massive public Senate investigation of the agency (p. 522).

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Bogdanovich's 1973 film, *What's Up Doc?*, while undoubtedly a (screwball) comedy rather than a thriller, has a significant sub-plot in which a young government worker is relentlessly pursued by a bungling intelligence operative who believes the government worker is in possession of classified information that he intends to leak to the press (c. f. Ellsberg and the 'plumbers').

<sup>9</sup> On a small point, contra Kissinger, Haldeman points out that

There is one wiretap, however, that is important in Watergate history because Nixon personally ordered it privately - by White House aides - not through the FBI. The tap was on influential columnist Joseph Kraft. John Ehrlichman has gotten the blame for that wiretap by historians - but that was a Nixon project all the way (Haldeman with di Mona 1978 p. 103)

Once again, this was the logic of Watergate at work. The fear of conspiracy meant that one after another secret was made public to supplement an accumulating body of evidence. Ranelagh adds,

As the assessment of what was known of the Nixon White House and the scandal of Watergate generated increasing fear and suspicion in Congress and the bureaucracy (a White House staffed with ruthless young men in the service of a President without honor), and as it became clear that Watergate was a symptom of the corruption that existed at all levels of government, more and more began to emerge about the activities of the CIA. The Vietnam War brought the first real press interest in the agency's secret activities. But it was in the 1970s that most of the secret stories were told (p. 533; for examples of these latter see Marchetti and Marks 1975; Sihanouk with Burchett 1973; Agee 1975; Ashman 1975; Copeland 1978 and Chapter 5, below).

So, although the fear of conspiracy revolved around its effects on individuals, particularly as victims of surveillance, there is also an aspect of the fear that spilled over into wholesale suspicion of those organizations most embroiled in the process of espionage. The White House itself, as Ranelagh points out, became the embodiment of a corrupt bureaucracy, and a reading of the memoirs of its staff reveals a picture of petty rivalries, loyalties, corruption, paranoia and fear. For example, Ehrlichman reassesses the organization of the illegal entry into the office of Ellsberg's psychiatrist:

In 1974 and 1975 I had testified that so far as I knew, President Nixon had not ordered the Fielding break-in. That is what I believed then. Now I believe he ordered it (1982 p. 401).

Although it takes him seven years to suggest in print that Nixon was guilty, this does illustrate the extent to which the White House was itself a source of uncertainty and economy of information. Ehrlichman's prolonged deliberation before reaching a decision is also in strong contrast to the speed with which the public came to recognize Presidential implication in a wide spectrum of conspiracy. Once again, we return to the fact of accumulating evidence promoting a lack of public confidence. Prosecutor Leon Jaworski notes

In the end, Nixon was forced to resign because the people had lost confidence in him. he had lied too often. The members of the House Judiciary Committee realized this, and that is why they concluded unanimously that he had been guilty of obstructing justice. Even some of his devotees were appalled at his brazen falsehoods when their accumulative weight broke through politically partisan barriers.

I learned that the real guardians of our institutions of government are the very citizens he held in contempt (1977 p. 334).

As we have seen, this process is of paramount importance in the fuelling of a fear of conspiracy. However, one might ask specifically how this evidence came to public



knowledge and how it was presented. Almost uniquely, the Watergate affair represents a period when the press unequivocally played a central role and where it can be said to have an 'effect', if not in the shaping of public opinion at least in the provision of more and more evidence of duplicity for the public to utilize in its own construction of opinion. Probably more than at any other time in American politics, investigative reporting became crucial to the process of assessing the credentials of a president and his administration.

## The Role of the Press

Although there is a debate over the extent to which the media had an 'effect' during the Vietnam War it is clear that the media was *perceived* to be playing a key role in the shaping of public opinion. As we have seen, the most prominent of commentators on events at the time, President Lyndon Johnson, made specific reference to the 'effect' he believed the media to have on feelings about the war at home. Whether the media did actually shape public opinion is open to question; however, it is clear that coverage of the war, especially following the Tet offensive, made the media a battleground where the fight for public opinion would take place. Government versions of events and their interpretations by the media would vie for prominence in the minds of the public. In the case of the Pentagon Papers in 1971 this is exactly what happened. The battle through the courts for the publication of the papers, first in the *New York Times* and then in the *Washington Post*, meant that the contents of the report became a secondary issue while the primary one was whether the newspapers should be obliged to publish it. As Ungar writes

Looked back upon from the end of the Reagan administration in the late 1980s, the early 1970s stand out as a time when the American press was under serious and genuine threat from the American government and when, perhaps as a result, the press was uniquely willing to stand up to authority (1989 vii).

In fact, one can go further than this and argue that, in this period, the press constituted a terrain where a struggle for hegemony over the rhetoric of American democracy was played out. In the battle for the Pentagon Papers the press seem to have been successful in reappropriating the rights to the fundamental political principles of the nation. One aspect of this is the tenor of the trial; Hentoff refers to the summing up by the judge in the case:

Justice Hugo Black emphasized that through the First Amendment, 'The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people. Only a free and *unrestrained* press can effectively oppose deception in government' (emphasis added) (in Gartner 1973 p. 232).

Ungar concurs with this and suggests that it was precisely the First Amendment that was at issue rather than matters of cash or circulation:

The lessons and the exciting confrontation with the government over the Pentagon Papers were expensive. The *Post* paid over \$70,000 for legal services during the two-week crisis in June 1971. At the *Times* legal fees to Alexander Bickel and the firm that worked with him ran up to \$150,000 - plus another \$50,000 in the fall and winter for preparatory legal work in case the newspaper or Neil Sheehan should be indicted on criminal charges in connection with disclosure of the Papers. Attorneys for Daniel Ellsberg estimated that his defense could cost as much as \$250,000, and they launched an urgent national fundraising campaign.

Contrary to popular belief, the newspapers gained very little of a material nature in return for the costs. The differences in circulation were insignificant . . . What the newspapers did gain was a new knowledge of and faith in the First Amendment as a fundamental principle of freedom that sets the United States apart from other countries (1989 pp. 306-307).

From the point of view of the media, it is therefore easy to see that there was a pressing concern around which their very existence was based in American life. This is not to say that the importance of capital did not play a part in the media's *raison d'être*; however, at this time, the short-term ideological configuration which characterized American political events thrust the First Amendment into the foreground of the hegemonic struggle.

One of the main causes of the struggle for public opinion being clothed in the garb of press controversies must be sought in the media policies of the Nixon administration. If one considers the informative value of the press then the fears of Nixon et al. can be seen to have an almost tangible root. Lang and Lang, for instance, in their survey of polls, find that



Public awareness of 'Watergate' had risen from 52 percent in late September 1972 to 83 percent by April 1973 (1983 p. 45).

This illustrates a significant jump. However, part of that public awareness was inevitably centred around the revelation of government covert activities and, ironically, many of these activities were planned with the express aim of attacking the media's right to freedom of reportage. The Nixon policy on the media consisted of two strands, the first of which was manipulation. Nixon's own long experience made him particularly alert to the power of TV: on the one side there is the success of the famous 'Checkers' speech; on the other, the disaster of the TV debates during the 1960 election race.<sup>10</sup> In addition, a 1970 bestseller by Joe McGinniss revealed to a huge number of readers the way in which the modern Presidential image was manufactured. This aspect of American politics was, of course, quite legitimate and could be construed as 'business as usual', although Spear (1984) believes that

Future historians of the presidential-press relationship will surely regard the decade of the 1970s as epochal. During this period the chief executives virtually mastered the media (p. 1).

The second strand of media policy was derived from pre-emptive strikes. This consisted of attempts to discredit in advance any investigations of government activities that were deemed to be unwelcome. In the case of the Pentagon Papers the court proceedings represented one aspect of this. In addition, though, the celebrated cases of such a policy are centred on prominent individuals once more. The leaking of the Pentagon Papers led to personal attacks on Daniel Ellsberg who, although not a journalist, chose to take his information to the *New York Times*. As well as the famous burglary of his psychiatrist's office that I have mentioned, it is worth noting that Chuck Colson, who was responsible for planning such activities recruited Howard Hunt with

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<sup>10</sup> There are many discussions of the 'Checkers' speech in general works on the American presidency and campaigns (e. g. Boller 1985 pp. 283-286), but for perspectives on it from the Watergate period see *inter alia* Voorhis pp. 19-21 and Mankiewicz pp. 87-90; on the TV debates of 1960 election campaign the definitive source is probably White (1961) pp. 335-354. On the topic of the Nixon Administration's media strategy it is interesting to note that Haldeman, without a trace of irony, claims

By presenting Nixon, or attempting to, as 100 percent pure and good, we were setting him up for a disastrous fall when it was demonstrated that he fell short of that absolute - as all humans must (Haldeman with di Mona 1978 p. 324).

the explicit brief to rubbish Ellsberg (see Hunt 1975 pp. 146 ff). Another journalist, referred to by Colson in his memoirs as

Jack Anderson, the relentless investigative reporter (1979 p. 221)

was singularly associated with the exposing of the ITT scandal (see Alexander with Clifford 1974). As a result, he became the focus of a campaign of covert activities; Spear informs us that

His name was scrawled on a blackboard in the basement sanctum occupied by the plumbers as Public Enemy Number One (1989 p. 134).

Another figure we have discussed, the CBS reporter Daniel Schorr, was the unwitting victim of a more subtle scheme. He was thoroughly investigated by the FBI on behalf of the Nixon administration on the entirely false grounds that the bureau wished to offer him a job. The details of this case are cited quite often in the literature as an example of the abuse of government agencies in the pursuit of a policy of harassment of the press (see *ibid.* pp. 148-50; Ungar 1989 p. 305; Hunt 1975 p. 183; Schorr in Harward 1974 p. 82). These examples are probably sufficient to suggest a substantial amount of fear of the media on the part of the administration. Years later, and following a thoroughgoing conversion to Christianity, Colson was still able to provide a view from the other side of the fence. Describing the day of his indictment he writes:

The uproar was predictable: the press all week had been overpowering. Newsweek's cover contained four large pen sketches of the heads of Haldeman, Ehrlichman, Mitchell and Colson. Across the top in bold letters larger than the masthead was stamped like a modern day scarlet letter the single word: INDICTED. Almost the entire evening TV network news was devoted to the story. AP ran a wirephoto of a smiling Daniel Ellsberg expressing his delight. Many press accounts were laden with condemnations. Indictment and conviction were without distinction; we were handy targets for fast moving public passions (1979 p. 223).

The passage is particularly apposite given Colson's role in covert operations against the media and the sense of persecution in his statement is quite marked. In answer to the question of whether the administration was justified in its fears of the media one would have to take into account the central part played by the press in uncovering Watergate and particularly the *Washington Post*.



As I have mentioned, in terms of information, the press was crucial to the process of providing the public with as full a picture as possible. I have also mentioned that there is virtually no other way of describing the affair except in terms of conspiracy. Given the episodic nature of Watergate events one might therefore ask how conspiratorial a tone was adopted by the coverage and whether this characterized the affair from the beginning or only when a relevant number of facts had been confirmed. To a great extent, the informative aspect of the coverage and the hints at conspiracy are inseparable. Schorr states this unself-consciously:

Well, just as I say that Watergate was unique, so I think the role of the press last year [1973] was unique. It wasn't just reporting any more. The first you heard about Haldeman being involved was in the *Washington Post*. The first time the public knew that Liddy and Hunt were in the Watergate that night was when I reported it on the Cronkite show. Names were being named by the press, people were being accused by the press, investigative work was being done by the press, and I must tell you that it was the help of investigative sources in the FBI, whose professionalism was such that they were appalled that the results of their investigation were not being adequately used. But with the help of such sources, we were doing what the justice people weren't doing. We were figuratively indicting, and in a sense, even convicting people in the eyes of the public before they had been indicted, arrested or tried. We did it because there was a vacuum of law enforcement. The press became more than just a reporting agency. It became a kind of new investigative and justice agency (Schorr in Harward 1974 p. 86).

Quite clearly, this is a very bold statement. However, it is possible to bear out much of what Schorr says. When the news of the burglary at the Watergate building broke on 18 June 1972, the open-endedness of the story was very much emphasized. NBC Nightly News finished their report on the break-in with the sound bite

I don't think that's the last we're going to hear of this story (quoted in Lang and Lang 1983 p. 29).

The same mode was adopted by other reporting of the incident. The *New York Times*, for whom, as I have noted earlier, the events were not worthy of front page coverage, reported that

Five men said to have been carrying cameras, electronic surveillance equipment and burglary tools, were arrested shortly after 2 A. M. today after a floor-by-floor search that led to the executive quarters of the National Democratic Committee here [the report comes from Washington]. The suspects were charged with second-degree burglary.

None of the suspects disclosed any objectives for entering the committee headquarters or affiliation with any political organization in the United States (18 June 1972 p. 30).

Given the subject matter, this is not too different from any other quality newspaper article. Although burglary is the only offence that can legitimately be mentioned in the article the reference to surveillance equipment allows the reader to make a guess at the

purpose of the break-in. The last sentence, though, is the crucial one. For those readers who may not associate the incident with political sabotage by groups hostile to the Democratic Party, the use of "objectives" and "affiliation" acts as a guide for questions about further implications of the break-in. The same can be said of the article on the front page of the *Washington Post*; rather than choosing to leave unsaid anything that does not have a purely factual basis, the article creates the grounds for speculation by identifying the very aspect of the incident about which they cannot give any further information:

There was no immediate explanation as to why the five suspects would want to bug the Democratic National Committee offices or whether or not they were working for other individuals or organisations (18 June 1972 A1).

The principle of reading upon which such passages of prose play is identified by Wolfgang Iser as 'indeterminacy'. We will consider this in more depth in the next chapter, but for now it is worth noting that this strategy, which characterizes the logic of Watergate reporting from its outset relies on presenting a text which clearly advertizes the fact that it does not supply all the details. In the reading of sentences the reader has to supply many of the details him/herself. For our purposes here, the crucial matter is that this process can be proved to be quite deliberate in many cases. On 18 June, Bob Woodward pursued details about the burglars and found out that James McCord had links with the White House. That evening, Woodward

typed out the first three paragraphs of a story identifying one of the Watergate burglars as a salaried security coordinator of the President's re-election committee and handed it to an editor on the city desk (Woodward and Bernstein 1974 p. 22).

The implications of this finding are not difficult to imagine; but when Woodward made a telephone call to Howard Hunt on Monday 19 July to ask him why his name was in the notebooks of two of the burglars and Hunt seemed shocked, it was then that Woodward thought he had a story (ibid. p. 24).

On Tuesday 20 July, as if in reaction to recent findings, Presidential press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler stated that

Certain elements may try to stretch this beyond what it is (quoted in ibid. p. 26).



Ziegler's statement, of course, confirms his worry that journalists may attempt to make a 'story' out of the details behind the event. Such an attempt would entail a series of episodic reports, pointing to some end point which is seemingly deferred for an indefinite period. In this case, the logic of the story would now be aligned with the uncovering of a complex conspiracy. This process is what, especially in the latter part of the Watergate affair, assisted the press in raising public awareness of the conspiracy to such high levels. After the indictment of Liddy, Hunt and the burglars the *New York Times* asked

Why was there an effort to get intelligence on the Democrats? To whom was the information conveyed? Where did the money for the operation come from? (16 September 1972 p. 10).

These questions would not be answered yet but the *Washington Post* provided a hint of a promise by way of the Attorney General:

Kleindienst said last night that 'cases are never really closed', but indicated the FBI and grand jury have completed their active investigation into the Watergate case (16 September 1972 A10).

Attorney General Kleindienst also added

We do have factual information that would tend to describe the nature and extent of the investigation, and people can draw their own conclusions (quoted in *ibid.* A10).

As we know, from the time of the convictions of the burglars in January through the Ervin Committee hearings the evidence accumulated and the expectations of further revelations of conspiracy were allowed to snowball. Yet it is evident that from the very start, when Watergate still consisted of, in Ziegler's words, "a third-rate burglary attempt" (Woodward and Bernstein 1974 p. 26), there was material for a grand conspiracy theory and the role of the press was to emphasize this as much as they could. The Watergate affair thrived on the convergence of the media's apparently rediscovered centrality with regard to the Constitution and the well-suited marriage of a government cover-up with the logic of a big 'story'.

One further adjunct of the role of the press at this time was the creation of folk-heroism for investigative reporters. There is no doubt that investigative reporting was of paramount importance to the creation of Watergate but the elision from the exigencies of

journalism to the realm of stardom could be very smooth as the following statement from Mankiewicz demonstrates:

Once the *Washington Post* team of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein began researching about the burglary at the Watergate on 17 June, all the [paranoid] fantasies became reality. The *Post* was accusing the Nixon team of crime, of concealing campaign cash, of sabotage and espionage - and worse - Woodward and Bernstein seemed to have whispering sources inside the government (op. cit. p. 190).

In this passage, there is a conflation of Woodward and Bernstein with the *Washington Post* which is made all the more subtle by the fact that Mankiewicz calls them a team.

As nearly all the accounts of Watergate testify, the affair required a massive number of dramatis personæ even in the area of investigation, a fact that it is often possible to forget. Ungar reports some of the consequences of this:

To be sure, the national media emerged from the Watergate period with new confidence in their power and with substantial, if grudging, popularity among the American public. The film version of *All The President's Men*, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's story of how they penetrated Richard Nixon's Watergate coverup as reporters for *The Washington Post*, made journalists into folk heroes - the true guardians of democratic values against the narrower self-interest of people elected or appointed to public office. Enrolments in schools of journalism and communication skyrocketed (op. cit. p. 309-310).

I have introduced the notion of the heroic element of investigative journalism at this point as it illustrates one way in which the hegemonic battle on media ground was conceived. It is true that journalists were instrumental in bringing facts to public attention, both in the Watergate affair and elsewhere, for example, the Karen Silkwood murder (see Hildyard 1983 pp. 1-23). It is also true that reporters of political events became recognizable figures: as well as the ones I have discussed I could also mention in this context the names of David Halberstam, Roger Hilsman, Neil Sheehan and Seymour Hersh.<sup>11</sup> However, it is possible that the individual images and exploits of journalists stood in for the media as a whole. In terms of a battle for public opinion between the government media relations machine and the media's autonomous actions, the latter could be represented as the domain of heroes. And, almost undoubtedly, heroic acts by journalists took place; but this is by no means the whole or even the

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<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the last of these journalists said in 1983

I do not think the press is very relevant at all.

He was referring to the Pentagon Papers, the Vietnam War and the fact that "all the horrors of the Nixon administration" were only learnt after the 1972 election (see Hersh in Salisbury [1984]).



dominant truth of the matter. Hentoff supplies us with a more mundane example of the hazards of investigative journalism:

In March 1973, with the *Boston Globe* engaged in an investigative series that could put a number of people on its staff in jail if the grand jury decides to subpoena them, two reporters refused to work on that series (in Gartner op. cit. p. 221).

Faced with the threat of time in a penitentiary it is probable that many reporters, like a great many people with family commitments and so on, would not attempt to emulate the protagonist of a thriller.

I have attempted to demonstrate some of the key implications of Watergate and Vietnam in American social life and their dissemination through the media. Chief among these has been conspiracy and the perceived centrality of the media in its various guises as a putative shaper of public opinion. Before we proceed to any general features of the climate that these factors may have produced there are some other issues which are worthy of discussion. These include the specific discourses on law that surrounded Watergate and some specific consequences, including legal ones, that the return of veterans contributed to American life. Lastly, I will briefly consider some discourses that existed in the period with regard to an aspect of daily life.

## **Vietnam, Watergate and the Law**

Amidst the Vietnam War, government covert activities and the protest movements it can easily be forgotten that America in the 1960s was suffering a crime wave as well as a great deal of domestic concern about it. The riots of the mid-sixties in Oakland or Watts could not be considered as purely political phenomena; there were clearly socio-economic determinants involved. In addition, the 'Great Society' project of Lyndon Johnson announced in the 1964 Presidential campaign (see Boller op. cit. pp. 308-14) was terminally undercut by the billions of dollars poured into the war in Southeast Asia. There are even commentators who have made the link between the war and inner

city deprivation by citing statistics which indicate the high proportion of working-class, black and Hispanic soldiers fought in Vietnam (see Treviso in Salisbury op. cit. and Walker in *ibid.*). The discrepancy between executive attention paid to the war and social programmes was expressed forcefully by J. William Fulbright in 1971; speaking on a survey compiled for the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, he said

The survey recalls our attention to 296,000 wounded Americans but it cannot document the psychological effects of the war in the two million who have returned physically intact . . . . It is ironic that the war which started, ostensibly as one to defend freedom and democracy in South Vietnam, may have the effect instead of seriously undermining democracy in the United States. In retrospect it is tragically clear that the almost \$200 billion estimated by this study to be the cost of the war accrued so far would have been better devoted to solving the problems of our own society, rather than in pursuit of a futile military adventure which has served only to exacerbate them (Fulbright in Williams et al. op. cit. p. 300).

It is more than probable that the chief problem to which Fulbright referred was the crime rate. For the majority of the public the offences which were most disturbing involved serious crime rather than the minor misdemeanors of the peace activists. Watts and Free preface their public opinion survey on the issue by saying

The 1960s were plagued by soaring crime rates which peaked in 1968 when serious crime rose 14 per cent above 1967. In 1969 the increase was 9 per cent. The year-to-year comparison advanced to 10 per cent in 1970, slowed to a 6 per cent increase the next year, and registered a welcome 4 per cent decline in 1972 (Watts and Free 1974 p. 95).

These figures alone do not guarantee that a belief in the erosion of law would inevitably ensue. As Goldstein et al. point out in a different context (i.e. the My Lai massacre and the trial of Lieutenant Calley):

The law does not fail when crimes are committed, for no law against crime - not even against murder - can prevent all crimes. The law fails when it does not seek to discover and hold responsible those who commit crime (1976 p. 14).

Nevertheless, the soaring crime rate did contribute to the construction of an arena of debate concerned precisely with the matter of the erosion of law. The primary reason for this probably resides in the Nixon Administration's initial high profile stance on the subject, but the debate was certainly accelerated when the government deceptions stemming from Vietnam and Watergate became known.



In a campaign address delivered on radio in October 1972 Nixon devoted a portion of his speech to the topic of crime. In retrospect, much of what he says is very ironic. He mentions, for instance, that

we have fought the frightening trend of crime and anarchy to a standstill. The campuses which erupted in riots so often in the late 1960s have become serious centers of learning once again. The cities which we saw in flames summer after summer a few years ago are now pursuing constructive change (quoted in Mankiewicz 1973 p. 259).

Apart from the insults to the families of the murdered students at Kent and Jackson State and to the residents of towns like Watts, Nixon simply recasts political and socio-economic matters in terms of law and order. Above all else, though, debates on crime, law and order were continually drawn towards the notion of double standards in the face of Watergate and the latter stages of the Vietnam War. As the revelations of government deception increased the process of reassessment that we have noted already began to be applied to questions of law. In 1973 Jerry Voorhis wrote

Despite official claims to the contrary, the crime wave was not abating as 1972 gave way to 1973. Indeed serious crimes, murder and forcible rape, were increasing at an alarming 20% a year. Homicides were greater in proportion to population in the United States than anywhere in the world except El Salvador. And a Gallup Poll revealed that one person out of every three in the inner cities had either been mugged or rolled in the proceeding [sic] 12 months . . . .

None disagreed with Mr. Nixon that it was high time for a vigorous drive against lawlessness, many agreed with his death penalty proposal.

The only trouble was that the President who spoke so sternly about punishment of draft evaders and criminals was the same one who was raining death and destruction on Southeast Asia, and himself violating the laws of the nation by arbitrarily ordering their suspension or refusing to fund their carrying out (pp. 325-326).

Voorhis points out that the early seventies did not constitute an anti-law consensus; on the contrary, the silent majority still existed. But he does indicate the preliminary grounds for a possible lack of confidence in the administration's faith in legal procedures. In a similar way, Mankiewicz holds to the conviction that

[Nixon] blamed the 'excesses of Watergate' on the 'excesses of the sixties' as if somehow Macgruder [sic] and Mitchell and Ehrlichman had taken their cues from Angela Davis, Jerry Rubin and Bobby Seale (1973 p. 122-123).

This very strange logic implies a belief that the law is a totally flexible entity, that events force those operations supposedly in the name of national interest outside of the law, or that desperate times call for desperate remedies. As Ellsberg comments

The attitudes of people in the present administration which are being exposed by the Ervin Committee amount very simply to the view that the President is the law, or is above the law (in Harward op. cit. p. 71).

Although the letter of the law is not so immovable that struggle to define its exact meaning cannot take place within the law's rubric, it is worth noting that the United States has a written Constitution. The rigidity that this lends to legal matters meant that the odds were stacked in favour of those who could prove that the government was acting at any time in a manner that did not allow a Constitutional interpretation.

Debates in Congress during the Watergate affair, as one would expect, paid particular attention to the principle of legality. As we have seen, the secret bombing, the activities of the 'plumbers', widespread surveillance of individuals and so on, was all informed by a definite ideological project. But as Frank Church pointed out, the legal imperative that tries to prevent such actions also embodies a quasi-ethical imperative:

When government officials go outside the law, they become, in the most literal sense, outlaw assailants of the national interest, regardless of how pure they believe their purpose or motive to be (in Harward op. cit. p. 95).

This is also to say that public servants elected to public office have a duty to adhere to the constitutional processes that allow their election. To go outside these is to commit (following the title of Theodore H. White's 1975 book) a severe breach of faith. So, as Schorr suggests,

History may well find that the most enduring damage of Watergate is the undermining of the concept of law by those whom we entrusted with the enforcing of the law (in Harward *ibid.* p. 85)

and Thornton:

There can be no national interest greater than the requirement that public servants must be bound by the laws that they administer (Thornton in Schnapper op. cit. p. 61).

These statements deal, to a degree, with general legal principles but the accumulated specificities of Watergate were what contributed directly to the issue of diminishing confidence. Opening a debate of Congressmenn on the grounds for impeaching the President, Schnapper put the matter in far stronger terms:

Day after day as the stench of the Watergate-related scandals spread across the nation, the faith of the American people in their leaders and in their government degenerated into a mixture of cynicism and outrage (in *ibid.* p. 1).



Clearly, the backlash against the Nixon administration after its general flagrant defiance of legal principles was expressed through a call for law to reign once more. Generally, this call can be attributed to the abuse of power witnessed in the conduct of the war and the vicissitudes of Watergate. Additionally, though, there were specific focusses for the debate on law.

Almost inevitably, the Constitution was invoked to provide a framework for addressing the question of law during Watergate. Fish pointed out that executive violation of the law has repercussions for an array of civic bodies in America whose role is, like the Presidency, embraced by the Constitution. Thus he urged impeachment:

Every member of this committee and the Congress must evaluate the facts in the light of adherence to the law, devotion to the Constitution and to the greater institutions of this land. If the evidence is clear, then our Constitutional duty is no less clear (in *ibid.* p. 19).

Thornton concurs that the contravening of laws has implications for a much wider field than the immediate one of politics:

We have before us a momentous and difficult decision. I have approached it as a matter of law because I have faith that the people of this country believe that a system of law to which all men are subject is a system that we want and must preserve (in *ibid.* p. 65).

What these statements do is to broaden the remit of the figurative prosecutors of Watergate and take it beyond the vulgar, removed world of politics. In an obvious sense the rhetoric of law serves the purpose of bolstering the task of bringing the President to book. On the grounds that no man is above the law Nixon stands accused in the eye of the law which exists for all citizens. As a general rhetorical principle this is straightforward and understandable. But it must not allow us to forget that Nixon's crimes were not restricted solely to violations of duty in the executive branch. The impeachment process was not merely analogous to dismissal from a job, but a prosecution of crimes. Brooks points out

This committee has heard evidence of governmental corruption unequalled in the history of the United States - the cover-up of crimes and obstructing the prosecution of criminals, surreptitious entries and wiretapping for political purposes, suspension of the civil liberties of every American, tax violations and personal enrichment at public expense, bribery and blackmail, flagrant misuse of the FBI, the CIA and the IRS (in *ibid.* 1974 p. 20).

As I have mentioned, a bestseller of winter 1973 was devoted to listing the impeachable *crimes* of Nixon and the *Washington Post* gave a great deal of space to details and reports of his tax evasion. One understandable reaction to this is a personalized one and it is no surprise to find among Congressional statements recommending impeachment the following:

Richard Nixon is humorless to the point of being inhumane. He is devious. He is vacillating. He is profane. He is willing to be led. He displays dismayingly gaps in knowledge. He is suspicious of his staff. His loyalty is minimal. His greatest concern is to create a record that will save him and his administration. The high dedication to grand principles that Americans have a right to expect from a President is missing from his transcript record (Hungate in *ibid.* p. 39).

Yet what this illustrates is that an office such as the Presidency is fraught with highly personal difficulties and the occupational and personal dimensions inevitably coincide.<sup>12</sup> This is one more argument in favour of an emphasis on law for those who would castigate the Nixon administration:

if we can use the law to show that all men are accountable - even the President - we will have started on the road back to self-respect, to the day when it will once again be a source of joy and delight to be an American (Mankiewicz 1973 p. 253).<sup>13</sup>

Once again the rhetoric of traditional American politics provided a space for the working through of problems derived from a conspiracy in public life. Of course, the problems arose from specifically political and legal crises and therefore it is reasonable to assume that those frameworks appropriate to legislating in such cases created their own discourses about the crises. However, a more strategic use of the same discourses was employed. For analysts of the period the task of deciding where strategic uses can be distinguished from 'legitimate' implementation of such discourses, and where they overlap, remains.

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<sup>12</sup> Nixon had already been subject to the due process of law in a dramatic way when he was subpoenaed for the release of the tapes by Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox. For a contemporary account of the legal niceties involved in this episode see Bickel (1973).

<sup>13</sup> If Mankiewicz is felt to be too partisan on questions personally relating to Richard Nixon, having been McGovern's campaign director in 1972, then it is worth noting that even those on the right of the political spectrum felt that Nixon had personally overstepped the bounds of legality inscribed in the Constitution:

Increasingly, it became evident that the Watergate break-in was only the tip of the iceberg of planned intrigue, illegal political espionage and dishonest practices carried on, as the editor of the conservative Republican Walla Walla, Washington *Union-Bulletin* put it 'in the name of the President of the United States' (Voorhis 1973 p. 329).



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This is probably scurrilous, certainly obvious and not entirely unconvincing in its logic. Once again it represents a stage in the history of America when political life had suffered such an accumulation of turmoil that it was unsurprising that a 'crisis of confidence' should be enunciated occasionally. The fate of law after Watergate was not yet adequately resolved, as we shall see. Another long-term event that failed to be resolved was the return of veterans from the war in Southeast Asia.

## Returning Veterans

As we know, there had been considerable protest against the war in Vietnam, especially since 1968. At the same time, there was political ambiguity and those against the war, including some who actively protested, could not be broadly described as radicals. A great proportion of the population simply wanted the boys brought home and the perception that this was happening under the Nixon administration is probably, as we have witnessed in White's account (above), the main determinant of Nixon's 1972 landslide election victory. But, since November 1969, it had become well-known that atrocities had been perpetrated by American soldiers in Vietnam, particularly at My Lai (see *Time* 5 December 1969; *Newsweek* 8 December 1969). Details of the story continued to be revealed until the commander of the soldiers involved in the massacre, Lieutenant William Calley, was convicted of premeditated murder at a court martial in spring 1971 despite Nixon's attempts to intervene on his behalf (see Dean 1977 p. 44; Safire 1975 pp. 298-299; Sheehan op. cit. pp. 689-690; see also Calley and Sack 1971 for the fullest account of Calley's role in the affair and First Tuesday 1989 for Calley's subsequent 18 year silence on the issue). In June 1971, weeks after the conviction of Calley and at the height of the Pentagon Papers controversy, veteran newscaster Walter Cronkite interviewed Daniel Ellsberg and asked if he could find any heroes in the history of the war. Ellsberg cited



only a sergeant who refused to fire at civilians during the massacre in the Vietnamese village of My Lai; he asserted that the American government 'bears major responsibility for every death in combat in Vietnam in the last twenty-five years - and that's one to two million people' (Ungar 1989 p. 239).

But the movement beyond zeal to genocide was not the only constituent of reports about soldiers from the front. Blum et al. point out that

By 1970 soldiers in Vietnam were wearing peace symbols and refusing to go into combat. The use of marijuana was general; and, according to estimates, 10 to 15 percent of the troops were addicted to heroin. 'Fragging' - the use of fragmentation grenades to kill unpopular officers was not unknown (1985 p. 845).

The soldiers in Vietnam therefore represented a large number of different things to different groups of people. One can imagine that returning veterans might be viewed as disorderly peaceniks; or as brutal sadists; or as pawns in a military process; or as witnesses of unspeakable horror; or as mentally unbalanced, and so on depending on one's prior orientation. The experience that veterans represented as a group was so diverse and so divorced from the mundane exigencies of everyday life that its very complexity prevented it from being incorporated in any simple form into the social formation of America in the 1970s.

One of the most direct and recognizable implications that the return of the veterans had for American citizens was as a source of first-hand accounts of war and what results American foreign policy had 13,000 miles away. In fact, Reedy goes so far as to say

The impetus for dissent came from the returning veterans and the prospective draftees - not from the daily journals, magazines and newscasts (in Salisbury 1984 p. 123).

Whatever angle one takes on the influence of the media Reedy's argument is a powerful one. Counter-arguments would have to be made on the degree of public interest and access to channels of communication for the dissemination of veterans' stories, although there are a number of collections of oral histories of the war as well as memoirs by ordinary soldiers.<sup>14</sup> However, one of the most public and most reported of statements by veterans in the period was the one John Kerry made on 23 April 1971 to the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations

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<sup>14</sup> See Lifton (1973), Santoli (1975) and Baker (1983); I consider some Vietnam memoirs in this and the next Chapter 5 (below).

150 honourably discharged, and many highly decorated, veterans testified to war crimes committed in Southeast Asia . . . They told stories that at times they had personally raped, cut off ears, cut off heads, taped wires from portable telephones to human genitals and turned up the power, cut off limbs, blown up bodies, randomly shot at civilians, razed villages in a fashion reminiscent of Genghis Khan, shot cattle and dogs for fun, poisoned food stocks, and generally ravaged the countryside of South Vietnam in addition to the normal ravage of war and the normal and very particular ravaging which is done by the applied bombing of this country (in Williams et al. op. cit. p. 293).

It is understandable from testimonies such as this that veterans might represent something unsavoury to the American public. In tandem, they carried with them the evidence that war is a far nastier business when viewed first-hand, and that the war as it was portrayed at home by politicians tried to suppress such aspects. As Swiers says,

We brought with us the awful suffocating truth of the war: that lies, though they be cleverly camouflaged, neatly packed and endorsed by the presidents, are *still* lies (in Salisbury 1984 p. 197).

The prime example of this, of course, was the massacre at My Lai, which some commentators believe may have remained secret for an even greater length of time. In the end, a returning veteran did the job; Lewy takes up the story:

The My Lai massacre was successfully concealed within all command levels of the American Division until a letter sent on 29 March 1969 by a serviceman not connected with the division, Ronald L. Ridenhour, who had heard stories of a massacre, brought the incident to the attention of the secretary of defense and other government officials (1978 p. 326; c.f. First Tuesday 1989).

One cannot say that the extreme nature of events at My Lai had little effect on public opinion. However, reactions to the news of the atrocities, one might assume, were exacerbated by the cover-up that officials enacted to conceal the news from the public.

Wise asserts that the cover-up

explains much about why the war in Vietnam contributed so greatly to the lack of belief by Americans in the word of their government (Wise op. cit. p.183).

We have seen that the process of disclosure followed by further disclosure characterized the logic of Watergate and it is at this point that Vietnam and Watergate overlap. But we have also seen that Watergate involved politicians and government officials in Washington. In this way, disdain for the protagonists of Watergate could feed on a populist rhetoric of the remoteness of the Eastern elite and the world of 'Politics'. We have witnessed the prevalence of terms such as 'them' in accounts of the period. What made the revelation of truth from the mouths of veterans more unpalatable, however much one blamed the government, was the fact that these were 'our boys', working-class men and other draftees. Veterans represented some facts that



had to be denied in order to make logical the demands of American imperialism and domestic contentment.

The range of possible reactions to Vietnam veterans that I have listed was meant to illustrate the complexity of the veterans' experience. However, I must emphasize that every one among the array of possible grounds for reaction embodied their own internal complexities and contradictions. If one were to castigate a veteran associated with the My Lai massacre how would it be done? The trouble with knee-jerk reactions is that they never have respect for context. Nobody would want to provide an excuse for the massacre but many believe that it had determinants beyond a notion of inherent human sadism. Varnado Simpson, former rifleman with the unit involved in the massacre, Charlie Company, later asked

Who is the enemy? You know they had little kids over there who would shoot you or stab you in the back when you walk away. Who is the enemy? How can you distinguish between the enemy, the good, or the bad? All of them look the same. That's why the war was so different. It wasn't like Germans over here, or Japanese over there. They all look alike, North and the South. So how can you tell? (First Tuesday 1989).

That this fact is so important as one mitigating factor in the conduct of the war is implied by the presence of a line in an exploitative pop song of the period by Terry Nelson and 'C' Company:

There's no other way to wage a war/ When the only one in sight that you're sure is not a VC/ Is your buddy on your right ('Battle Hymn of Lt. Calley' 1971).

There were also examinations of the situation which were more analytic than apologetic. In his 1973 memoir of the war, Tim O'Brien presents an account of the dialogue on the war's complexity between his commanding officer, Major Callicles, and other soldiers in the division:

'What do people want when they send me to fight out there?' he would ask, growling.

'To search out and destroy the enemy'.

'Yeah, yeah, I know that. But what do they want when the enemy is ten years old and has big tits - women and children, you know. What then? What if *they're* the enemy?'

'Well you kill them or you capture them. But you only do that when you're engaged in combat, sir. It's a civil war, in part, and even if some of them come down from North Vietnam, they look like the South Vietnamese. So you've got to assume -'

'Assume, bullshit! When you go into My Lai you assume the *worst*. When you go into My Lai, shit, you know - you assume - that they're all VC. Ol' Charlie with big tits and nice innocent, childlike eyes. Damn it, they're all VC, you should know that. You might own a diploma, for Christ's sake, but does that mean you can't trust your own eyes and not some lousy book? You've been there for Christ's sake!'

'But, sir, the law says killing civilians is wrong. We're taught that even by the army, for God's sake'.

'Of course killing civilians is wrong. But those so-called civilians are killers. Female warriors. Poppa-san out in the paddy spying'.

'But with that philosophy, you'd have to waste all the civilians in Vietnam, everyone. I mean, how do you know when this Poppa-san or that Poppa-san is VC? They look alike. They all dress in black pyjamas and work in the paddies and sell us Cokes. Hell, we might as well go down into Nouc Man, the little village down by the gate, and just kill them all'.

'That's ridiculous. You're just exaggerating the argument'.

'*Reductio ad absurdum*. Logical extension, sir'.

'Bullshit! Nouc Man sure as hell isn't My Lai 4, you know that. It isn't a goddamn mine field; kids in Nouc Man don't go around setting up booby traps and spying on us'.

'Now, that's quite an assumption. Who knows? The whole town might be VC. We'd be the last to know it. But the point is, sir, we can't say that those two-year-old kids were planting mines out at My Lai. Can't prove that *all* those dead women were spying on Lieutenant Calley. Go ahead, how do you prove it? Or don't you have to?'

'Look here', Callicles said, 'don't you see we're over here trying to win a war and go home? I want to go home, you want to go home, General Abrams wants to get his ass back to the world. But, Jesus, with the Communists doing things like at Hue - killing and doing extortion, stealing rice and taxing the shit out of everyone, when they're *living* in Pinkville - really living there, eating and sleeping and making mines - Christ, then you got to go after them. Show me a war . . . ' (1989 pp. 192-193).

I have quoted at length from the argument to show that there are positions which are almost irreconcilable; potentially, the argument could go on indefinitely. One could even posit that the interminability of the argument is mirrored in the seemingly interminable nature of the war. At the risk of being reductive, one could say that the relative complexity of Vietnam compared to say, World War II, derives from the fact that the latter was not a *guerrilla* war. This seems to be the crux of Major Callicles' difficulties.

I have risked this reductiveness about the war in Vietnam in the awareness that there are a plethora of arguments concerning the war's singularity. However, for our purposes, it offers an important ingredient in explaining the figure of the Vietnam veteran in this period. A psychologist renowned for his work with veterans writes,

Anti-war veterans generate a special kind of force, no less spiritual than political, as they publicly proclaim the endless series of criminal acts they have witnessed or participated in, contemptuously toss away their hard-won medals, reenact the Vietnam War by means of 'search-and-destroy-missions' in



various American towns and cities - or with bitterly ironic symbolism, occupy the Statue of Liberty or the Lincoln Memorial. Charles Oman, in his classic study of war, spoke of the veterans of the battles of the Middle Ages as the 'best of the soldiers while the war lasted . . . [but] a most dangerous and unruly race in times of truce or peace'. Can we say that war veterans have not changed? Or is there a new and significant quality in their 'unruliness' - a quality that has to do with transformation of the human spirit? (Lifton 1973 p. 31).

Lifton raises the question of difference, it seems, with specific reference to the activities of veterans "in various American towns and cities". Putting it euphemistically, these activities suggest that soldiers have not been sufficiently 'demobilized', where 'demobilized' refers to a physical state. However, such concepts in practice pay little heed to the psychological requirements of demobilization. Lifton continues:

There is something special about Vietnam veterans. Everyone who has contact with them seems to agree that they are different from veterans of other wars. A favorite word to describe them is 'alienated'. Veterans Administration reports stress their sensitivity to issues of authority and autonomy. This group of veterans is seen as having 'greater distrust of institutions and unwillingness to be awed by traditional authorities', so that they are less willing to be 'passive recipients of our wisdom'. (p. 35).

This 'alienation' need not necessarily derive from war experience alone; nor need it be purely psychological in origin. There are grounds for assuming that any alienation that a veteran might feel on returning home was compounded by the situation that greeted him. In his aptly titled *No Victory Parades*, Polner writes

Never before in American history have so many loyal and brave young men been as shabbily treated by the government that sent them to war; never before have so many of them questioned as much, as these veterans have, the essential rightness of what they were forced to do (1971 p. 165).

On the one hand, there is the fact that many veterans found themselves questioning their actions whilst still in Vietnam. On the other hand, there is undeserved treatment meted out on their return to the United States. Ron Kovic did not question the wider implications of his actions as a soldier in Vietnam. However, a bullet left him paralyzed from the waist down and he was sent to a Veteran's Administration hospital in the Bronx which he describes in his 1976 book, *Born on the Fourth of July*:

The wards are filthy. The men in the room throw their breadcrumbs under the radiator to keep the rats from chewing on our numb legs during the nights. We tuck our bodies in with the sheets wrapped around us. There are never enough aides to go around on the wards, and constantly there is complaining by the men. The most severely injured are dependent on the aids to turn them. They suffer the most and break down with sores. These are the voices that can be heard screaming in the night for the help that never comes. Urine bags are constantly overflowing onto the floors while the aides play poker on the toilet bowls in the enema room. The sheets are never changed enough and many of the men stink from not being properly bathed. It never makes any sense to us how the government can keep asking for money for weapons and leave us lying in our own filth (1990 pp. 31-32).

Kovic's book is a powerful document. Unlike other Vietnam memoirs - Tim O'Brien's *If I Should Die in a Combat Zone* or the reporter Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*



(1978) for instance - *Born on the Fourth of July* devotes the majority of its narration to the years immediately following the return from Vietnam. It is probably because of this that it offers a frank and human insight into some of the motivations of the Vietnam veteran.

What Kovic discusses is one of the possible options he feels was open to him in reconciling a few of the contradictions that characterized his accumulation of experience since joining the marines. Faced with people in his everyday life who had no chance of understanding the complex of emotions and insights with which he returned from the war Kovic is compelled to take action. In his Senate statement, John Kerry warned that other veterans would want to take action:

The country doesn't know it yet, but it has created a monster, a monster in the form of millions of men who have been taught to deal and to trade in violence, and who are given the chance to die for the biggest nothing in history; men who have returned with a sense of anger and a sense of betrayal which no one has yet grasped (Kerry in Williams et al. op. cit. p. 293).

For Kovic, this sense of anger and betrayal took on a specific form. It is worth quoting at length from a passage that is actually remarkably succinct in its enunciation:

I was in Vietnam when I first heard about the thousands of people protesting the war in the streets of America. I didn't want to believe it at first - people protesting against us when we were putting our lives on the line for our country. The men in my outfit used to talk about it a lot. How could they do this to us? Many of us would be coming back and many others would be wounded or maimed. We swore they would pay, the hippies and draftcard burners. They would pay if we ever ran into them.

But the hospital had changed all that. It was the end of whatever belief I'd still had in what I'd done in Vietnam. Now I wanted to know what I'd lost my legs for, why I and the others had gone at all. But it was still very hard for me to think of speaking out against the war, to think of joining those I'd once called traitors.

I settled back into my apartment again and went back to classes at the university. It was the spring of 1970. I still wore a tie and sweater every day to school and had a short haircut. I was very sensitive to people looking at me in my wheelchair. I buried myself in my books cutting myself off from the other students. It was as if they threatened me, particularly the activists, the radicals.

I was sitting alone in my apartment listening to the radio when I first heard the news about Kent State. Four students had just been shot in a demonstration against the invasion of Cambodia. For a moment there was a shock through my body. I felt like crying. The last time I had felt that way was the day Kennedy was killed. I remember saying to myself, The whole thing is coming down now. I wheeled out to my car. I didn't know where I was going but I had to find other people who felt the way I did. I drove down the street to the university. Students were congregating in small groups all over the place. The campus looked as if it were going to explode. Banners were going up and monitors with red armbands were walking up and down handing out leaflets. There was going to be a march and demonstration. I thought carefully for a moment or two, then decided to participate, driving my car past the hundreds of students marching down to the big parking lot where the rally was to be held. I honked my horn in support but I was still feeling a little hesitant. I stayed in my car all during the rally, shouting with the crowd. I was still acting like an observer. The last speaker was a woman who said



there would be a huge rally in Washington that Saturday and that it was hoped that everyone would make it down. I decided I would go (Kovic 1990 pp. 103-104).

Kovic, like many of his generation, is thus brought round to a position of protest - the difference is that he has actually *been* to Vietnam and suffered the ravages of war. The book makes it clear that for much of the time up to this moment he had hoped his injuries had been worthwhile. The most important part of the passage, though, is at the beginning when he speaks of making the hippies pay for their betrayal. It is apparent that he now chooses to channel his energies in a different direction although the sense of anger and betrayal remain.

Although Kovic was able to find a purpose and a means for channeling his energies this was not necessarily possible for all veterans. Another veteran expresses a sense of anger but leaves open the options on any further action with regard to this anger:

America made its myths about the war, just as it once needed lies. We are all of us convinced, though not all will yet admit to it, that Vietnam was a shameful abomination. *Someone* should be punished for it, indeed deserves to be stark-raving mad because of it. The myth of 2.5 million walking time-bombs tells us that someone, somewhere, in some way is paying the price for our national sin. Absolution is lent to all others. We can live with Vietnam, without ever having to look at it (Swiers in Salisbury 1984 p. 198).

The use of "someone, somewhere" in the fourth line of this quote refers here to the nameless veterans in the population, the 2.5 million walking time-bombs. Yet the construction of the passage suggests that *someone else, somewhere else* should be paying. The apparently directionless desire for revenge on the part of some vets was beyond comprehension to the regular citizens who had not experienced the effects of the war first-hand. But the link between the seemingly directionless anger of veterans in peaceful civilian communities and the experience in Vietnam is not apparent to the general public: as we have seen to a small extent, veterans' accounts of the war have had to stress that many military operations involved offensives against civilian towns. In short, for many soldiers in Vietnam, the war was fought in a thoroughly civilian context. Fisher suggests some of the reasons for the media distortions of veterans that we will return to in a Chapter 10 (below):

We have been portrayed as crazies, lunatics, hijackers, rapists, muggers, and what have you, because they do not want us to talk to others about those experiences. They saw what happened when we did -



when many of us came back and joined the anti-war movement and when we had the Winter Soldier investigation that revealed our role as pawns in the war (in Salisbury 1984 p. 210).

The distortions to which Fisher, writing in 1983, refers actually appeared in the media after the war. We will come back to this in a moment, but it is necessary to make a suggestion as to why a particular view of the Vietnam veteran might arise.

One aspect of media coverage of vets was in their role as protestors through such groups as Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Ron Kovic decided that he would become one of the veteran protestors; he writes.

I had been in California for about a month when one day there was big photo on the front page of the *L.A. Times* - a group of vets had gone to Washington and thrown away their medals. It was one of the most moving antiwar demonstrations there had been, I would have given anything to have been there with them. I read about it sitting by the pool of the Santa Monica Bay Club wearing a ridiculous Mickey Mouse shirt. Suddenly I knew my easy life could never be enough for me. The war had not ended. It was time for me to join forces with other vets (p. 111).

It is interesting that he says the war had not ended. One way to try and put into words what the return of veterans means is to say that the war does not end once they are outside of Vietnam. Whether the war for individual vets continued in terms of protest or whether it continued in other ways, the experience of the war had so much more profound an impact than everyday life that, without some massively co-ordinated formal means of concluding it, the war effectively continued. Moreover, the kinds of training required to fight in Vietnam were so thorough that they were difficult to forget. Lifton pays particular attention in his writing about 'rap groups' to My Lai and the account given of it by a soldier who was present:

During all this killing the men behaved in many ways *as if* they were in a combat situation. The My Lai survivor noted that they kneeled and crouched while shooting - 'like some kind of fire fight with somebody'. For, as he went on to explain:

If you're actually thinking in terms of a massacre of murder, of going in and shooting a bunch of defenseless people, why crouch? Why get down? Why do any of this? You must have something else on your mind. You must be thinking there's a possibility that you're going to get it yourself . . . that they pose some kind of threat to you . . .

He went even further in emphasizing the confused perceptions of the men (his continued use of the second person suggesting that he himself shared some of this confusion): 'Because your judgment is all screwed up . . . they actually look like the enemy, or what you think is the enemy' (op. cit. p. 50).

If one conflates Swiers' sense of anger and betrayal with Kovic's, plus the latter's notion that the war continues in some sense and add to it the fact that soldiers can react in extreme situations as if they were in combat then one has a pretty volatile cocktail. It



is also a mix which, for the average citizen, is difficult to understand and only part of a much larger experience that cannot be put into words adequately. It is therefore unsurprising that veterans should be referred to as alienated, as the few facts that we have discussed make it virtually impossible that an easy re-integration of such soldiers into American society in the 1970s could take place. If the Vietnam experience was not always assimilable into the reality of American life it may have been more assimilable into Hollywood - but not in anything like a pure form. Fisher points to all the cinematic distortions in the quote above, for example the idea of veterans as "crazies". The words of Frank Walker suggest one reason for this:

My father was a Marine. My uncle was a Marine. My grandfather was in the army. When they returned from their wars, they were heroes in my eyes. So when I returned home, talking about my problem, they did not understand. Well, hell, I didn't either. So I did like a lot of Vietnam veterans and headed toward the VA. That didn't help me. I have found since I have been working with the vet centers that 90 percent of the blacks or minorities discharged with a medical are classified as schizophrenic paranoids. That is the way they classified me. There must be a hell of a lot of s. p.'s in this world, then (in Salisbury 1984 p. 206).

Experiences gained in Vietnam, coupled with the combat training soldiers were given to meet such experiences were so thoroughgoing and removed from the general run of civilian life that the attempts of returning veterans to become re-assimilated into what they perceived was their original environment were often futile. The opposition between the needs of the soldier in the field and the requirements of civilian life could not be eradicated immediately, especially as military manoeuvres in Vietnam were so often conducted in civilian environments. The subsequent behaviour of veterans at home, adjusting to the latter following the immense impact of war experience, was therefore understandably alien to the standards of accepted social relations. The inability of the social formation to assimilate Vietnam veterans means that they are given classifications that are either inaccurate or ones which designate veterans as outsiders in the company of other groups who cannot be incorporated into the social formation. This is one way that distortions of the veteran experience in narrative fictions may occur, by the inculcation of ready-made labels or ready-made distortions which society has manufactured but which does not conform to the veterans' own recognition of their

experience. The other way in which the Vietnam veteran finds his way into narrative fiction will be considered in Chapter 10.

What one can say about the Vietnam veterans is that the implications of their presence in America during this period could not be readily resolved. This is not unusual in history, of course: many events are unresolved. However, in this case, the veterans represented a distinct and potent symbol of recent American policy and a nodal point for contemporary debates on certain issues. If this is true of the veterans it is certainly also true of the issue of the family in this period.

## **The American Family in the 1970s**

So far, our discussion of the 1970s has focussed on aspects of political and social life such as conspiracy and deception which could quite easily find a relatively unmediated place for themselves in thrillers. In this way, the following discussion of the family during the period may seem the odd man out. It is concerned with an issue that relates to the banal exigencies of everyday life rather than the world of thrills embodied in some fiction. However, I hope to show in subsequent chapters that the concerns with family life that became prominent in the 1970s are inflected, sometimes quite obliquely, but often recognizably, in the thrillers of the period. As part of the social formation, there is no real reason that discourses about the family - or anything else which is assimilable to fictional narrative - may not become lodged in fiction. Nevertheless, what we have discussed so far has been explicitly and directly related to political institutions. Polan shows that this need not be the sole domain for a scrutiny of those contemporary features which epitomize a text's moment. He writes:

To be sure, we *can* well posit the force and effect of institutions in the forties - both public ones and more hidden ones (like the Committee for Economic Development, a coalition of government and businessmen planning for a postwar monopolization of commodity production). But we also need to posit spaces and practices that exist outside the immediate sway of political institutions. This would not be to suggest that these spaces or practices would necessarily be subversive. Indeed, part of the



importance of the Foucauldian approach has been the ways it refines a theory of power away from the central authorities to acts of individual subjectivity; most recently, with the notion of "le souci de soi" (the care of the self), Foucault has argued that socialization frequently operates through a self-guided internalization by which one turns one's own body into a body politic to be governed through a complicated array of personal practices (op. cit. p. 43).

Taken in terms of a 'care of the self', what could be more fundamental than family life?

It is clear that the family has played a key socializing role in feudal and industrial societies and it is clear that there has been, for hundreds of years, sporadic speculation over the future of the family as an institution (see, for example, Lasch 1975a, 1975b, 1975c; Rapp in Thorne and Yalom 1982 p. 169). But the 1970s ushered in a string of social changes which, taken together, commentators believed to be a serious threat to the future of the family. There were changes in the rates of and laws regarding divorce; an increasing number of women in waged work; an increase in the number of single-parent families; and, tied in with these, an increased emphasis, leading to a change in the law, on the right of women to control reproduction.

One of the most immediately noticeable social changes was that marriage was being delayed in favour of careers; Degler (1980) points out that in 1960 28% of women between the ages of 20 and 24 were single; in 1974 this had risen to 40% (p. 445).

These details generated certain perceptions:

It is nowhere written out plainly that the single person is the new American ideal, but the message is nonetheless everywhere to be found, in novels, movies, in the world of fashion and celebrity (Epstein 1975 p. 307).

Accompanying this statistic is the fact that working mothers were on the increase. In 1975, in only about a third of families in which both spouses were present was the husband the sole breadwinner (Degler 1980 p. 452). Where families did not have the benefit of two wage-earners at their head through, for example, divorce or voluntary spinsterhood, there was a more disturbing statistic: 45% of all families identified as living in poverty in America in 1973 were headed by a woman (ibid p. 453). Drawing conclusions from such facts as these, one social worker wrote:

The disruptive quality of contemporary life has had its impact upon the viability of the American family (Setleis 1974 p. 562).

Furthermore, the most immediately damaging effect of such social change could be expected to be on children. He adds:

If life is to survive and continue, we have to act on the very thing we create - the child (ibid. pp. 564-565).

There were reasonable statistical grounds for this assumption. In 1974, a third of all schoolchildren were the children of divorce; a not unconnected statistic showed that the birthrate fell to an all time low in the same year (figures quoted in Friedan 1977 p. 413). A number of commentators noted such statistics and drew their conclusions on the institution that President Nixon called the keystone of our civilization (quoted in Epstein 1975 p. 305).

As Degler points out,

In our own time, despair over the the future of the family has spawned such a mass of lugubrious studies that in 1977 the president of the Carnegie Corporation asked in his introduction to a new study on the family, 'What happened and is happening to the American family?' (1980 p. 450).

Among these 'lugubrious studies' was one by the conservative social psychologist,

Urie Bronfenbrenner who wrote in 1972:

America's families and their children are in trouble. Trouble so deep and pervasive as to threaten the future of our nation (quoted in Epstein 1975 p. 305).

Other such studies included *inter alia* Farson (1969), Boyers (1973), Lasch (1977), Cooper (1971); but the field was divided. Some, like Bronfenbrenner, voiced warnings in order to save the family; Boyers' argument, for instance, embodies the call for a reaffirmation of the family in the face of the threat posed by feminism, in order that America may do better as a culture (p. 66). Others, such as Cooper, sought to illustrate the shortcomings of the family as an institution. The most prominent criticisms of the family came from radical psychiatrists, feminist theorists and socialists of the late 1960s; as Ronald Fletcher notes

The newly emerging criticisms were very different from - indeed diametrically opposed to - those of the past, and deserve the fullest and most careful consideration . . . [because, among other reasons] the most strident criticisms in the entire field of discussion - lending themselves more readily than others to sensationalist coverage by the media - came to dominate it throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and are dominant still (1988 pp. 8-9).

The combination of related social changes and their analysis by commentators critical of the family put the institution into a spotlight. In turn, though, other theorists sought to



redress the balance and stress the need to affirm the importance of the family as a force for good in social life. Once again, we can see the quite distinct lines which delineate an area of complex ideological struggle. It is therefore worth looking at some of the elements of the debate in a little more detail.

One of the crucial threats posed to traditional conceptions of the family came from the women's movement in the period. Most commentators believe that the women's movement was one of the most lasting and dynamic forces to come out of the post-war movement as a whole and the radicalism of some of its demands provokes Petchesky to declare that

Feminists are the 'communists' of the 1970s (1984 p. 246).

In connection with this, Lasch (1977) criticises the picture of an isolated family with despotic parents that some feminists portrayed and he asserts that many of them drew uncritically on the work and writings of Laing and Cooper (p. 147; p. 135). However, it can be argued that the key impetus of the feminist threat to traditional conceptions of the family derives from the work of Betty Friedan. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) she begins by criticising the conventional image of the housewife and the fact that wives are expected to commit time to unpaid housework. Starting from this point she develops a critique of the traditional family; Ronald Fletcher summarises thus

Betty Friedan's diagnosis was very straightforward. Women needed *more* than domesticity. Like men, they were individual persons, with natures, dimensions, talents, capabilities, which - besides their life within the family - could only find fulfilment in personally chosen work and in activities in shared responsible citizenship within the wider community of which they were members. The over-glamorisation of the role of the wife and mother in domesticity should be shed. The 'veil of over-glorification imposed by the feminine mystiques should be brushed aside' to make way for a more matter-of-fact realism. A 'dramatic re-shaping of the cultural image of femininity [sic]' was needed. Much housework was routine, monotonous, and (in itself) unrewarding. Women had grown beyond the confines of such a limited and limiting domestic role. They needed, in addition, wider self-actualising activities: to become 'fully grown' (1988 p. 98).

The success of the argument in *The Feminine Mystique* and its role in galvanizing the women's movement in the mid-sixties cannot be underestimated (see Degler 1980 p. 443). But as a call for the abolition of the family the book fell far short. As Fletcher points out,



[Friedan] made no destructive criticism of marriage and the family at all. On the contrary, what she wanted was an improvement and enrichment of them in the light of the promise contained in the full recognition of the new status and rights of women as members of society equal with men (1988 p. 104).

What Friedan did was to show that the most fundamental form of social organization carried with it in capitalist society the oppression of some of its members. *The Feminine Mystique* showed that the home and the family constituted the terrain where the first battle for women's emancipation must take place.

If one wished to order places in terms of priority for the women's movement the second location of the struggle would be work. Naturally, changes in work and its availability to women would have repercussions for the traditional family where women fulfilled roles as housewives and mothers. One prime example of the way in which aspects of feminism embodied long struggles between different interest groups is embodied in the battle for the Equal Rights Amendment. Carl Degler takes up the story:

The amendment had been around for half a century before most women's organizations took an interest in it . . . So hostile were most women leaders and groups like organized labor to the ERA that it was plausibly alleged that one of the reasons that President John F. Kennedy appointed his Commission on the Status of Women in 1961 was to head off the rising support for ERA in Congress. Both major parties had supported ERA in their platforms as early as 1944, and only the resistance of organized labor and most women's leaders prevented it from being the platforms of 1964 and 1968. To many women leaders, as Esther Peterson, the Head of the President's Commission on Women, later remarked, the ERA was 'a headache'. By endangering protective legislation for women it seemed only harmful to working women and of little use to professional women. It was for such reasons, too, that the Women's Bureau opposed the ERA throughout the 1960s. Then, under the leadership of Elizabeth B. Koontz, the first black woman to head the Bureau, a new turn was made. At Koontz's initiative, the Bureau in 1970 sponsored a conference on women which concluded with an endorsement of the ERA. That same year, the Department of Labor itself reversed its long-standing opposition to the amendment. By 1972 the two houses of Congress had passed the amendment and sent it to the states. At that point ratification seemed relatively easy to accomplish, especially as the legislature of several dozen states almost immediately voted for it. By the middle 1970s, however, one state legislature after another began to reject it, even though ratification lacked only a handful of states. By the summer of 1978 it became evident that the seven-year limit which had been placed upon the ratification period would expire before any of the remaining states would meet to act on the amendment. A quick campaign in behalf of extension of the time of ratification was successful, though not without acrimonious debate between proponents and opponents of the amendment. The opposition was measured in the limiting of the extension to only another three and one-half years (1980 p. 446).

As this illustrates, the movement towards new forms of organization at home and at work was met at all stages with complexly informed resistances. Equal Rights at work could also mean parity of men and women as breadwinners and thus have an effect on roles at home. The threat of feminism is therefore to be located not in a call for the abolition of traditional social organization but the re-orientation of its forms.



One of the manifestly direct factors in the re-orientation of the family was the increase in divorce. The first 'no-fault' divorce law was introduced in California in 1970 (see Weitzman 1985 x), and represented a move toward a relative and general ease of annulment of marriage. It also seems to have resulted from and fulfilled a certain social need: Weitzman points out that the divorce rate increased by 100% in the period 1963-1975 (ibid. xvii). Meanwhile, on the global stage

The United States has continued to have the highest divorce rates according to available data from the United Nations (Carter and Glick 1976 p. 390).

A number of divorce law reforms "swept through the United States in the 1970s and early 1980s" as Weitzman puts it, and during this period, as she points out, not only were more people getting divorced but it was becoming more socially acceptable (p. 51; xvii). Once again these facts were perceived to be tied in with family life, and particularly the birth rate for, if fewer children were being born then this might be a result of women concentrating on careers rather than childbearing or, worse, making too little effort to prevent existing families from breaking up. Betty Friedan, writing on 'The Crises of Divorce' sums up the worries that the subject engendered:

Are marriage and motherhood 'endangered species', as Columbia sociologist Amitai Etzioni warned in *Human Behaviour*, August 1974? (in Friedan 1977 pp. 412-413).

As she points out, one of the main villains in the destruction of the family is perceived to be women's emphasis on self-fulfilment, a fact to which Lasch pays close attention. Writing in 1979, he suggests that American society in the seventies is characterized by a 'culture of narcissism'; one example of this phenomenon he describes is a mother who visits a psychiatrist to discuss her dilemma over how to bring up her child. The dilemma was brought on by reading child development manuals:

She pursued such information, her psychiatrist reported, 'as if she were interested in passing some kind of examination or in producing a child that would win some contest' (1980 p. 169-170).

But if feminism and the self-fulfilment that it promoted constituted a threat to the future of the family, no specific issue within the discussion of the topic generated such passions as the right of women to control over reproduction.

It has been estimated that, from the 1930s through the 1950s, there were about 200,000 abortions per year in America (Davis 1985 p. 5). Yet, abortion was not legal until the early seventies in America. Among all the means of regulating pregnancy, abortion was the one which proved to be by far the most emotive when considered as an issue.

President Nixon, speaking, appropriately from the bosom of his home in San Clemente on 3 April 1971, gave his opinion:

From personal and religious beliefs I consider abortions an unacceptable form of population control. Furthermore, unrestricted abortion policies, or abortion on demand, I cannot square with my personal belief in the sanctity of human life - including the life of the yet unborn. For, surely, the unborn have rights also, recognized in law, recognized even in principles expounded by the United Nations (quoted in Roth 1972 p. 10).

Soon after this statement was made, it was to be mercilessly pilloried and satirised by Philip Roth who contrasted Nixon's views on the sanctity of life in these circumstances with his views on the same matter in the case of Lieutenant Calley (see 'Tricky Comforts a Citizen' in *ibid.* pp. 11-25). The outcome of the Roe vs Wade case of 1973 and the subsequent Supreme Court decision effectively legalized abortion in America but, as Petchesky points out, this was not the *cause* of rising abortion rates but an accomodation to social changes (*op. cit.* p. 103); the law had actually come into effect because so many women were defying old abortion laws (*ibid* p. 117). She draws attention to one case in particular:

at least one group of feminists set up an underground abortion clinic in Chicago that operated over a four year period (1969-73) practically under the eyes of the police, providing 11,000 illegal abortions (*ibid* p. 128).

If one compares these figures for Chicago with those cited for the whole of the United States in the thirties, forties, and fifties it can be seen that there was a considerable demand for abortion in the four years preceding the Roe vs Wade decision. It also adds significant weight to Petchesky's conclusion that the legalization of abortion by the Supreme Court was the result of social need, feminist activism, and populationist ideology coming together at a given moment (*ibid* p. 132). However, as Davis argues, the decision left things out (*op. cit.* p. 219); the decision led to a split among those activists who supported it and wanted it to go further and those who wanted abortion to



remain illegal. The debate and the struggle that resulted was soon to become organized around groups calling themselves 'pro-life' and 'pro-choice' (see Luker 1984 pp. 160 ff.). A Pro-life Affairs Committee declared that it would not accept the Supreme Court judgment and a National Right to Live Committee was formed in 1974-1975 (ibid. p. 252; p. 254). Then, in 1976, the Hyde Amendment forged the beginning of what was to become known as the right to life campaign, stressing the rights of the unborn foetus (ibid. p. 294). The legalization of abortion quite clearly resulted from a social demand generated in large part by other social changes and gains for the women's movement that we have discussed. Not all, but many, of the pro-choice adherents simply stood for women's right to abortion on demand. However, the opposition to abortion was fierce and effectively forged a coalition of diverse groups who shared Nixon's views on the 'sanctity of life'. Although the debate had a long history and continued in as fierce a manner as before - at the moment of writing, abortion is a central topic for discussion in the 1992 election campaign, with the Republican Party supporting a constitutional ban on abortion (see, for example, 'Quayle under fire for abortion gaffe' *Evening Standard* 24 July 1992 p. 23) - it was in the 1970s that the main lines of the battleground were drawn.

It is this 'battleground' feature of the debate on the family which gives it a specific relevance for the study of the 1970s American thriller. Like many of the issues we have discussed, the debate on the future of the family remained quite blatantly unresolved with warring factions maintaining its prominence into the eighties and beyond. Writing in 1982, Thorne asserts that

Within the last decade the family has emerged as a political issue. Some who claim that the family is in obvious crisis cite as evidence the high divorce rate, the increase in single-parent families and people living alone and the rising employment rates of married women, especially mothers of young children. There have been calls for new federal policies to 'strengthen' the family, while the New Right has played upon fears of family breakdown by using the term 'pro-family' to draw together opposition to the ERA, abortion and gay rights (Thorne in Thorne and Yalom 1982 p. 1).

Clearly the family was of crucial importance to the New Right.<sup>15</sup> First of all it is a fundamental feature of social life, especially in America. Secondly, those disturbing changes in the social formation, such as the feminist movement, appeared to threaten to disrupt traditional ways of life and most specific of these was the family. If this was the case, then the traditional base of electoral power was also under threat. This is not to say that conservatives cunningly and instrumentally employed fears regarding the family's decline to rally support among traditional voters, although it is more than likely that this happened in some cases. But the potency of the family as an issue was precisely that it appeared *apolitical* and appeared to cut across political loyalties. By appealing to a notion of family - be it a pro-life, anti-divorce or traditional nuclear family stance - certain groups could touch the most fundamental loyalties towards forms of social organization. An example from the late sixties illustrates this: following the urban riots in areas predominantly inhabited by blacks the government commissioned a report from the then 'liberal' Democrat, Daniel Patrick Moynihan on the causes of the disturbances. The basic conclusion of the report was that

At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family (Moynihan p. 5).

The Moynihan Report caused a storm of protest, especially from black people (see, for example Hill 1972; Rainwater and Yancey 1967 and the summary in Cobley 1986). For our purposes a comment by Christopher Jencks in the *New York Review of Books* sums up the report:

Moynihan's analysis is in the conservative tradition that guided the drafting of the poverty programme . . . the guiding assumption is that social pathology is caused less by basic defects in the social system than by defects in particular individuals or groups which prevent their adjusting to the system (quoted in Rainwater and Yancey p. 217).

In addition to this, it should not be assumed that the New Right stance on issues to do with the family necessarily represented a firm consensus. Jeffrey Weeks points out that

There is a curious feature of the rise of the new moral Right. Its success since the mid-1970s, in the United States and to a lesser extent Britain, in capturing the political initiative on sexual policy has been at a time when popular support for liberal attitudes continues to grow . . . . [D]espite abortion becoming one of the key issues in New Right mobilisation during the 1970s, popular support for abortion continued to grow. One survey in the United States suggested that apart from a sharp dip in

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<sup>15</sup> See Steinfels (1984 pp. 111 ff.); Peele (1984 pp. 93 ff.); Granberg (1978).



support in 1978, support for abortion increased steadily from 1965 to 1980. A newsday poll in February 1981 showed that 72 per cent of those questioned rejected the anti-abortion position (1989 p. 33).

Clearly, issues to do with the family in the 1970s represented a terrain of struggle. The importance of the family for conservatives, then, is that it is an area of fundamental social organization in which the cause of social ills can be attributed to the faults of individuals or small groups of individuals rather than the prevailing socio-economic determinants. During a period of political turbulence, in which there might even be a crisis of confidence, a concentration on the family reiterates life's basic facts in a realm other than that which is perceived to be purely political. In the same way, the rhetoric that can be used to describe this area is arranged around what is crucial to existence. Roth's satire of Nixon's mode of address tries to get at exactly this point: the sanctity of life cannot be suspended in the case of My Lai simply because it is 13,000 miles away and a 'political' matter. Because questions of family life are of utmost important to people in their everyday existence, Rapp suggests

The very poor have used their families to cement and patch tenuous relations to survival; out of their belief in 'family' they have invented networks capable of making next-to-nothing go a long way (in Thorne and Yalom 1982 p. 179).

At a grass roots level, the institution of the family has such potency as a symbolic means of experiencing change in the practice of everyday life that its suitability as a frame of reference for political arguments is almost to be expected. For analysts of the family, its efficacy and its intrinsic role in the capitalist social formation have informed their use of it in political formulations. This means that the family can be used as a symbol of social change in terms of outlooks from any end of the political spectrum. For the critic of capitalist structures the family is one more manifestation of the deleterious effects of the capitalism on humanity. So, in the 1970s Cooper can say that

The bourgeois nuclear family unit (to use something like the language of its agents - academic sociologists and political scientists) has become, in this century, the ultimately perfected form of non-meeting and therefore the ultimate denial of mourning, death, birth and the experiential realm that precedes birth and conception . . . . The power of the family resides in its social mediating function. It reinforces the effective power of the ruling class in any exploitative society by providing a highly controllable paradigmatic form replicated through the social structures of the factory, the union branch, the school (primary and secondary), the university, the business corporation, the church, political parties and governmental apparatus, the armed forces, general and mental hospitals and so on (1971 pp. 5-6).

At the same time, the family has been evaluated in terms of its inherent fostering of mutual aid and the meeting of humans in the face of capitalism. So, Degler is almost diametrically opposed to Cooper in his reasoning:

In the face of an individualistic market economy, the family has seemed the epitome of true humanity and interrelatedness. The very slogan of Communism - 'from each according to his needs' [sic] - is not only the antithesis of the market economy's conception of human relations, but the central principle of family life (1980 p. 472).

That such different and opposed analyses of the family can arise at roughly the same time suggests that the topic bears not an intrinsic political imprint, but a specific one imported from without at a given historical moment. One could therefore say that this is convincing evidence that the family is one - albeit an important one - among a number of political battlegrounds in the 1970s. In some way, debates from other areas of the social formation at the time have not only overflowed into the domain of family relations, but have done so in a manner which creates the illusion that the family is an intrinsically political matter. Grass roots 'concern', and the practice of family life must therefore bear a political complexion of some sort.

If we turn to the more specific conclusions of analysts of the family in the 1970s it is possible to see what they battled over. If there were worries about the rate of divorce, Degler is able to point out that there was a very high rate of re-marriage in the seventies (pp. 457 ff.). It is this which probably contributes to the fact that the United States in this period had the highest rate of remarriage:

11.0	per 1,000 head of population in 1972
10.5	1974
10.1	1975

(Carter and Glick 1976 p. 388)

Lasch says that the history of the decline of the family should in fact be the history of the decline of the extended family (1975a p. 33). Despite the fact that the family was soon observed to be in a reasonable state, the changes that had been perceived to have taken place wrought their incompatibilities. In different ways, assessments of the family testified to its durability while retaining surface differences which were the key



points of debates in the seventies. For Lasch, interpersonal relations between partners have been enhanced to the detriment of relations between children and parents:

As the family shrinks to the marital unit, it can be argued that men and women respond more readily to each other's emotional needs, instead of living vicariously through their offspring. The marriage contract having lost its binding character, couples now find it possible, according to many observers, to ground sexual relations in something more than legal compulsion. In short, the growing determination to live for the moment, whatever it may have done to the relations between parents and children, appears to have established the preconditions of a new intimacy between men and women (1980 p. 188).

The burgeoning of a new intimacy seems to be, for Lasch, an optimistic prospect which is almost unavoidable. In contrast, Setleis calls for

the concept of the family as a social institution anchored in a moral base (1978 p. 204).

Rather than trusting to the positive values of hedonism, Setleis insists on the requirement of moral rules and judgments. Recognizing, like Lasch, the irreversibility of social change, he adds,

People need to touch base with their origins, they are trying to go home again. Where there is no home, new arrangements are developing that satisfy the need for a family. At the same time divorce rates continue to climb; children are being born ostensibly to be loved for themselves without the presence or even identity of a father; celebrities appear on television and tout the meaninglessness of a marriage certificate; young couples are testing the validity of their relationships by living together to determine whether marriage is for them (ibid. p. 204).

Essentially, what both Lasch and Setleis are concluding is the irreversibility of that social change of which the family is a part. Setleis recommends traditional means to combat some of the deleterious effects of such change while Lasch, of a more messianic bent, chooses to pick out those aspects of social change which in this context can seem laudable. Both Setleis and Lasch were witnessing a specific mutation of the family as an institution rather than its abolition or its withering away. Perhaps the fact that criticisms of traditional notions of the family as an institution at the level of theory and at the level of everyday practice were considered to be messianic demonstrates defensiveness on the part of the traditionalists. Reassessing the debates of the early seventies Fletcher concludes:

What remains certain, however, is that when the whole range of the literature of Women's Liberation is taken into account, no damaging criticisms of marriage and the family emerge from it. No grounds at all are given for the abandonment of marriage or the abolition of the family: perhaps a surprising conclusion but nonetheless true (1988 p. 206).

What does come out of the debate over the family which became so heated in the early 1970s is that the 'crisis' of the family remained one more of a number of crises that went unresolved. As Fletcher implies, the feminist 'attacks' on the family were not so much calls for its abolition so much as criticisms designed to instigate reforms. The 1970s saw the beginnings of a crystallization of thought on issues to do with the family: pro-life groups were opposed to pro-choice groups while the battle for legislation on divorce and abortion continued in a number of states. Even if there were such a thing as a recognizable zeitgeist one would have to say that the early 1970s was characterized by political turbulence, conflicts of interest, hegemonic struggle and a lack, in fact, of any clear spirit of the age. In respect of the family, this was particularly true as the family did not dissolve and the debate over it did not go away. Clearly the institution of the family underwent some fundamental changes; but both the calls for change and the resistance to it ensured that there would be no peaceful transitions from one state of being to another in tandem with associated social changes. In this way, the family is one terrain where competing political ideologies could do battle in the 1970s under the guise of protecting grass roots interests.

## Climate of Expectations

The fact that it is difficult to posit a coherent zeitgeist in this period does not mean that the latter part of the decade lacked some kind of social and political agenda. Predictably, the mid-seventies had the political struggles of the early seventies woven into them. The lack of a resolution to some of the key questions raised by events in the early seventies meant that, although some issues continued to have significance in a relatively unchanged form, many issues in American life were transformed and the battles of differing interests continued in new ways. One prime mover in any transformation of political matters at this time was the changeover of presidencies, from Nixon to Ford in August 1974 and from Ford to Carter in January 1977. The Nixon resignation on 8



August has often been cited as the closing of a chapter in American history and the opening of a new one. This is the view taken by James Barber. In his book on presidential character he puts forth the notion of a 'climate of expectations' which immediately precedes a new presidency. The fusion of political science and depth psychology which he employs specifically refers to expectations of the new executive which arise as a result of the reign of the incumbent: quite simply, these are *reassurance, a sense of action and progress, and legitimacy* (Barber op. cit. pp. 8-9). The events of the previous years had been centred on the question of the presidency as an institution culminating in the enactment of impeachment proceedings in Congress. In the sense that there are a number of expectations centred around the elements identified by Barber, it is possible to say that those expectations had ramifications in other spheres of American life, in the same way that Watergate was not confined solely to a burglary and its aftermath. The reassurance, sense of action and progress, and legitimacy expected of the new President was not necessarily extended by the public onto all areas of social life; however, for a short time, it is possible to assess the American social formation in terms of the extent to which it responded to these expectations. This is not to re-posit a zeitgeist; but the concern over such matters as conspiracy and deception had become so closely associated with the presidency that it is not unreasonable to assume that hopes for their resolution were couched in the same terms as were set for expectations of the new Presidents. That is to say that the requirement of legitimacy, for example, applied as much to political life in general as to the President himself.

It is clear that if there was any time during the seventies when there was a recognizable surge of public opinion it occurred with the decline of the Nixon presidency. As Lang and Lang put it,

seldom except for national emergencies has there been a greater display of national unity than when Nixon took the unprecedented step of resigning the Presidency of the United States (op. cit. p. 1).

This was not a sudden surge, of course, but had been accumulating over months. In 1973, for instance, Nixon's rating in a Harris poll taken before the Ervin Committee hearings gave the President 57% support; immediately after the hearings, a further Harris poll found that his support rating had dropped to 32% (ibid. p. 64). If the Ervin Committee damaged Nixon then the events that came to be known in the literature as the 'Saturday Night Massacre' are disastrous. The central happening in the massacre was the President's removal of Archibald Cox from the role of prosecutor in the Watergate trial (see, especially, White op. cit. pp. 338-346). The deeds were done during a weekend in October 1973 and then:

an estimated 250,000 - 300,000 telegrams cascaded into Congress and the White House during the ten days following. The phone calls and letters to congressional offices on and after Monday, October 22nd, grabbed more attention. Such an outpouring of overwhelmingly negative opinion had never been seen before, even during the worst days of America's war in Vietnam. Western Union alone was carrying ten times its previous daily record of messages to government officials (McQuaid 1989 p. 244).

As we have seen, each successive event contributed to a decrease in the number of those favourably disposed to the Nixon Administration. Events such as the 'Saturday Night Massacre' cut across party lines and reeked of dishonesty. In the preface to a poll conducted in spring 1974, Watts and Free present the opinion of

A 27-year-old housewife living in a Michigan suburb who describes herself as a 'very conservative' Republican

who believed that

'Watergate's been bad. It makes you think that everything is crooked. But there are good politicians left. Other men are good; there must be some good men left'.  
(Watts and Free op. cit. p. 32).

This articulates a feeling that not only has the duplicity accumulated but that it is so widespread as to affect the confidence of the public in its elected officials. Put another way, a single corrupt act has not had an effect on public opinion on its own; rather, the very breadth of corruption allows it to be viewed as a characteristic of contemporary American life. Senator Ervin was moved to ask:

Why do we have a 'crisis in confidence'? In former times, the leaders and people of America had faith in America's commitment to freedom and were willing for all Americans to exercise the freedom guaranteed to them by the Constitution. Unfortunately, however, America has suffered during recent times from doubt and fear. As a consequence, many Americans, including numbers who occupy high government offices, have lost their faith in America's commitment to freedom, and while they profess to love our constitutional freedom, fear the exercise of those freedoms by others, especially those who disagree with them (Ervin in Harward 1974 p. 4).



As Arthur Schlesinger in his 1968 book and Lang and Lang suggest, there was a perceptible decline in public faith in the abilities of government.<sup>16</sup> Then from Nixon's landslide election victory to his resignation:

the transition would not have taken place so quietly - indeed, it might not have taken place at all - had it not been preceded by a dramatic reversal of public opinion (Lang and Lang op. cit. p. 2).

The source of the swing in public opinion cannot be precisely located. One event did not bring about an immediate change. However, insofar as series of events can be given names, as McQuaid points out,

Vietnam and Watergate *had* happened; and both events induced trauma and a sense of overwhelming crisis. This is why Watergate and Vietnam induced widespread popular mistrust of government, This is why national swagger was succeeded by national self-pity, and by an America often psychologically at war with itself (1989 pp. 307-308).

For our purposes it is of crucial importance to note that, by the time of Nixon's resignation, there existed what could be called a groundswell of public opinion. This could be also be said to be characterized, in part, as a "widespread popular mistrust of government" as McQuaid suggests. However, it is worth bearing in mind that even such an apparently unitary phenomenon could have its specificities.

One way in which the scandal of government deception was inflected in public opinion was, once again, in its interpretation as a 'Political' business. There seems to have been a perception abroad that Watergate simply represented 'business as usual', or the kind of activity in which politicians always indulge with the exception that, on this occasion, they were caught out and suffered the glare of publicity. Congressmen worried that this kind of view could damage politics as an institution; thus Brooks demands that

We must immediately put to rest the argument that the corruption we have witnessed in the last five years is only an extension of what has always been done (in Schnapper 1974 p. 21).

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<sup>16</sup> The latter suggest that,

Clearly a downward trend in public trust preceded the Watergate scandal. This can be seen in responses to questions, repeated at intervals from 1966 to 1980, by both Gallup and Harris . . . These attest to a progressive erosion of confidence in the executive branch and the White House only temporarily reversed when Carter replaced Ford as President (Lang and Lang 1983 p. 244).

Allied with the notion of the purely 'Political' was the view that Watergate could be the spur for some renewal in the sphere of the Presidency as a whole. Schlesinger most noticeably embodies this position:

Watergate was potentially the best thing to have happened to the Presidency in a long time. If the trails were followed to their end, many, many, years would pass before another White House staff would dare take the liberties with the Constitution and the laws the Nixon White House had taken (1974 pp. 417-418).

However, this concentration on the 'Political' dimension of Watergate could have detrimental effects in terms of the grass roots opposition to the Nixon Administration. Again and again Lang and Lang found that the polls of the period reflected a feeling that the ramifications of government deception did not immediately enter people's everyday lives. Moreover, they suggest that this may even have been a component of the administration's tactics:

In putting the emphasis on whether more people agreed than disagreed, reports of poll results probably reinforced the idea of Watergate as a purely political and partisan issue. To make it appear this way was an essential ingredient of the Nixon strategy, based on expectations that the public would tire of a political fight and put pressure on Congress and on the media to direct their attention to other, more pressing matters (Lang and Lang 1983 p. 134).

One major influence in such a view of politics is the existence of a strong populist ideology in American life, particularly among the working-class or blue-collar groups. One noted sociological participant observation study of a chemical plant in New Jersey in the late seventies/early eighties draws a similar conclusions. David Halle detected among workers a

widespread mistrust of politics and a widespread support for the political system . . . [explained by] the belief that the political system is sound but subverted by corrupt politicians; the belief that America offers freedom, if not democracy; the belief that America is too large to change (1984 p. 249).

Halle connects this to his argument that American working men are riven by racial consciousness. However, for our purposes, these explanations of populism show that although there was an increased mistrust of 'Politics' after Watergate it was not accompanied by a call for its abolition. The political system was not to be abandoned but rid of its more subversive elements; this would allow democracy the chance to thrive. So, although corruption in the period was seen to be located in government, it did not mean that this general discontent was reserved for a few individuals in Washington or that the system should go.



Following the key role of the press in exposing the Watergate affair and the continued adoption of the rhetoric of traditional American democracy, it is unsurprising that the reaffirmation of the system's value was articulated in terms of 'free speech', and the First Amendment. One media figure made such an observation in 1973 and supplemented it with a prediction:

I think the fall of Agnew and what I think will be the fall of Mr. Nixon, are, so to speak, by popular demand, and that tells us that speech has never been more free in my lifetime (Alexander in Harward 1974 p. 48).

As we have seen, there was an immense show of public opinion at the moment of Nixon's resignation, as she guessed. After Watergate the role of the media became intimately associated with the public demand for political trust and legitimacy; as Bradbury and Snowman point out,

The issue of integrity in government was a recurring refrain throughout the years succeeding Watergate, and a number of public figures were forced from office through the revelation of financial or sexual peccadilloes. 'Investigative Journalists' from Maine to California tried to dig into the doings of publicly appointed officials in the hope of unearthing - as Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the *Washington Post* had done - their own Watergate scandal (op. cit. p. 287).<sup>17</sup>

If anything, the press was now expected, it seemed, to play a 'fourth estate' role.

However, for those who we considered earlier to believe in a split between an idealistic sixties and cynical seventies, expectations of the press to expose corruption in the latter part of the decade, in one sense, provides strong evidence for their argument. Watts and Free conclude their book of opinion polls with the words,

No longer is there an unquestioning acceptance of the promise of constant progress. But there is continued optimism about the America of tomorrow. Perhaps what we see here is evidence of a new and healthy growth of realism, even maturity (1974 p. 316).

The American public may have been looking to the future after Watergate. It may also have believed that it was time and it was possible to resolve some loose ends from

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<sup>17</sup> Jack Anderson writes:

It is far more pleasant to write puffery about the powerful, of course, than it is to probe their perfidy (Anderson with Clifford 1974 p. 5).

If it is difficult to believe Anderson's argument at any time, it is certainly so after Watergate.

earlier in the decade. Gerald Ford had the opportunity to do this in an emphatically high profile manner.

Anyone who reads the memoirs of ex-President Ford will get an idea of how much of a personal and national dilemma the fate of Richard Nixon presented. As Ford says, the decision to pardon Nixon was taken after heavy deliberation; he adds

I wasn't motivated primarily by sympathy for his plight or by concern over the state of his health. It was the state of the *country's* health at home and around the world that worried me (1979 p. 160).

The most obvious alternative option open to Ford was some kind of legal and criminal proceeding against the ex-President. The new President felt that this would be detrimental to the public interest and would be so drawn out as to keep the affair alight for some time. In his speech of pardon he asserted that,

My conscience tells me clearly and certainly that I cannot prolong the bad dreams that continue to reopen a chapter that is closed. My conscience tells me that only I, as President, have the constitutional power to firmly shut and seal this book (ibid. pp. 177-178).

Yet there were those who thought that Ford's position as President gave him power which he ultimately misused on this occasion. Referring to his decision-making abilities, the key phrase to describe the new President, and also the title of a book on the topic,<sup>18</sup> was 'A Ford not a Lincoln'. John Dean, writing in his journal on 8 August 1974, the night of Nixon's resignation address, was outraged:

He never admitted a damn thing, I thought. He went out with a campaign speech (1977 p. 357).

Similar sentiments were voiced with regard to Ford's pardon. Reeves, for instance, complains that,

If Ford had understood, he would have realized that 'to close the book on Watergate', as he said he wanted to do with the Nixon pardon, he had to demand at the very least, a statement of guilt and contrition from the former President. Instead, the new President asked for nothing and Nixon volunteered a vague statement about the anguish over 'my mistakes'. Nixon did not make mistakes; he was a criminal who subverted the Constitution of the United States, our supreme article of faith and law (1976 pp. 171-172).

The call for contrition from various writers suggests that the pardon did not provide a closure of the affair. From this point of view, the fact that Nixon was allowed to go free was very much a case of the fellow Republican Ford leaving a hostage to fortune.

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<sup>18</sup> Reeves (1976).



However, Lang and Lang show that the polls did not reflect such a feeling. Instead, it appears that Ford was basically vindicated by the poll results; Lang and Lang suggest

Perhaps the pardon had a cathartic effect, allowing pent-up anger to be dissipated in one brief outburst, thus clearing the air. That it would raise a storm should have been predictable. But why did it abate so quickly? The best explanation: Few people after the drawn-out battle of Watergate were in any mood to question the integrity and honor of yet another President - not most of the people, nor most of the press, and certainly not most of Congress.

There was no disposition to open new wounds. The authority of the presidency had survived the 'wrongdoing' of one President but would it have survived a second 'Watergate' investigation? There was a tacit agreement not to pry too hard (1983 p. 225).

This is one surface interpretation of the polls. True, the pardon did end the whole sordid business but to what extent can it be said to be resolved? I would suggest that the affair was only officially resolved at this stage; psychologically, politically and socially it continued. The first evidence of this lies in the fact that the following election campaign was carefully steered in a particular direction by both parties. Lang and Lang note:

In the general election [of 1976], candidates chose to run image, rather than issue, campaigns. The key question was, 'Whom do you trust?' (ibid. p. 237).

The question was quite manifest throughout the run-up to the voting. As Witcover observes,

'In our mind', Ford's advertising man Doug Bailey said, 'the election was always going to turn on the question of trust'. Ford's positive advertising tried to emphasize how far he had brought the country to believing in its President again, after Nixon; his negative advertising simultaneously labored with great success to keep alive the public doubts about Carter's trustworthiness. And Carter, as he had done all year, tried to sell himself first and foremost as a different, unstained kind of politician of unshakable integrity and trustworthiness, the candidate who promised never to lie or mislead (1977 p. 646).

Probably more than anything the public pardon of Nixon by Ford had left part of Watergate unresolved and allowed some of the unanswered questions to fester for some time. Trust was one of these along with legitimacy and the related question of real action and commitment rather than artifice and subterfuge employed to create a veneer of commitment. These headed the political and social agenda for the next few years and, for our purposes, can be considered to constitute a precarious and almost illusory equilibrium in American life.

## The American Thriller and the History of the 1970s

This history of the American seventies could by no means claim to be definitive. Even as a history of some of the events I have considered it lacks an enormous amount of empirical material as well as a detailed consideration of the many ramifications of the actions of government in the period. As this chapter has suggested, and as Lang and Lang iterate,

for many Americans, Watergate had become a symbol with multiple meanings. The symbol gave form to a host of dissatisfactions and grievances (1983 p. 255).

What is unique about the early seventies in America and what has guided the writing of this 'history' is the aptness and suitability of many of its events and themes for incorporation into the genre I refer to broadly as the thriller. I have adopted the discovery of Palmer (1978) that fundamental to the structure of thriller is the threat and fear of conspiracy. The logic of the conspiracy that promotes a threat and fear in thrillers relies on a process of partial disclosure, delay, partial disclosure, delay, and so on until a final disclosure of some sort is made. In order to show the strength of this logic I will discuss disclosure and delay in greater depth when we come to a form of writing commonly believed to allow little or no delay: the hard-boiled story. If we accept that the logic of thrillers is organized around these elements it is not difficult to see how Watergate and other events during the period could, in some way, be represented in thrillers. This chapter has shown that the revelation of conspiracy, duplicity and deception in different levels of government was not sudden; in fact, it was far less sudden than in the reading of a thriller. Instead, it involved a process of *accumulating* revelations: detail after detail was uncovered about the Nixon administration until the evidence was overwhelming. It is this, I have argued, which played a role in the shaping of public opinion, not isolated events. But, also, this accumulation demonstrates that the logic of conspiracy in American life in the early 1970s is identical to the logic of conspiracy in thrillers, although the time taken for narration in the latter is obviously much shorter.



If conspiracy is the cornerstone of thrillers and a key characteristic in American political life in the period one might ask 'What does conspiracy mean?'. We have noted that, in the form of Watergate, it stands in for a number of diverse grievances, dissatisfactions and anxieties. At the beginning of the 1970s there was a political ambiguity in the composition of America: despite the unprecedented growth of protest groups it could not be said with faith that protest characterized America at this time. Instead, there existed disequilibrium and struggle for hegemony, and any notion of a zeitgeist is really untenable. Even where a spirit of protest exists it cannot be said to be pure: Stokeley Carmichael's notorious comment that the position of women in the black movement "should be prone" (see Staples 1978 p. 180) is a small testimony of this. The same can be said of the spirit of reform: Senator Sam Ervin, the forthright chairman of the Watergate hearings committee was also the author of the 1971 statement

Keep the law responsible where the good Lord put it, on the man to bear the burdens of support and on the women to bear the children (quoted in Degler 1980 p. 447).

Feminism, the black struggle, the anti-war movement and others were not allied in any formal sense during this period and they could often be said to offer separate perspectives on contemporary events. However, there are some writers who believe that the idea of 'conspiracy' is inherently or psychologically a right-wing one, that it is an immutable structure which, irrespective of its changing components, will always have the same general meaning. Palmer's variation on this conception, as we have seen, is more sophisticated: he points to the roots of the fear of conspiracy in a certain 'moment' of the development of capitalist society. Once again, though, this is an immutable structure. Such a static version of the thriller and of conspiracy, as we will see more than once, denies the specificity of historical and political readings of texts. For now, we must make the preliminary suggestion that the static conception of conspiracy does not hold water in this and demonstrably, other cases. The political ambiguity of the period suggests that, in terms of the construction of their meaning, the conspiracies of the period are not, in fact, unitary entities but are multifaceted. That is to

say that they offer spaces for specific investments and, possibly, a quite well defined one in the wake of Watergate and Ford's pardon. This will become clear during the discussion of conspiracy and paranoia in Chapter 9.

In addition to the task of illustrating how the history of the 1970s provides material and an organization of that material for contemporary thrillers, the preceding chapter has attempted to do two things. The first is to provide some historical grounds for the possible contemporary readings of thrillers: in short, not how they are may be read now but how they were read within the specific period of political turbulence which is their birthplace. This is a matter of sorting out which reader investments were likely to be activated by the text as a result of its position in history or, put another way, how thrillers were read in the light of the contemporary social and political scene. As the question of investments and their determinants is the subject of the next three chapters we will postpone a fuller discussion until then.

The second is to outline the events and ideological currents surrounding events that are in some way depicted in the body of thrillers that I will discuss. These can be mentioned in a general way now. For a start, aspects of the fear of conspiracy find their way into thrillers in different, but always heavily mediated ways. The public arena in which conspiracy is exposed plays a large part in paranoid thrillers, often as an absence and often connected to the lack of resolution to problems that arose in the real world in the 1970s. In addition, this allows some texts to speak not only about the contemporary period but of episodes in recent history, such as U. S. policy on Europe after the Second World War, the Cold War and particularly McCarthyism. Understandably, the concentration of covert activities on individuals is easy to incorporate into thrillers and the picture of surveillance operations that results is probably more powerful for this fact. But, on the other hand, individual operations can often go wrong with an amount of ensuing humour; this notion appears in some novels which we examine and which are concerned with amateur criminals. Another key aspect of conspiracy in the 1970s is



the role afforded to the press; we have witnessed the process by which the media assumed the identity of a public battleground for political matters and we will see that this crops up in quite an explicit way in thrillers, especially in those novels dealing with paranoia and cover-ups. Similarly, law; returning veterans and the family all have central roles to play in sub-genres of the thriller in this period. Law is obviously quite crucial to both the crime novel and fictional texts dealing with the police; it will be seen that Watergate and Vietnam have had their effects on the way law is viewed in such texts. The issue of returning vets is slightly more complex: it is the prime mover of the revenge narratives I consider but the most famous of these does not explicitly refer to Vietnam. However, the concerns of mourning, guilt, political ambiguity and the direction of violence signal its presence. Similarly, the family does not necessarily constitute the central focus of the hard-boiled novel, and even as a theme it can be said to transcend individual decades - Ross Macdonald's novels constantly employ family conflicts. But the potential investments in the theme are different in the 1970s, and hard-boiled novels of the time articulate family concerns in relation to contemporary subjects. These are just some of the major topics of my consideration of the period. Other topics such as political ambiguity and the climate of expectations run through contemporary thrillers in an almost seamless way while the topics I have mentioned can take on slightly different inflections.

This history, then, like the events of the period seemingly unconnected with Watergate (e. g. the Middle East crisis), does not so much function as a backdrop to the reading of thrillers in the 1970s. It is, in fact, woven into the very fabric of thrillers, and in certain readings is available for observation. However, readings of thrillers do not automatically exist as historical readings. They are partly dictated by the norms of narrative and the logic of conspiracy which make up part of what we have called generic expectations. Chapter 1 dealt at length with the idea of the 'horizon of expectations' which provides a framework for historical readings of generic texts, and it was suggested there that intra-textual mechanisms or a 'dominant procedure' were not

by any means solely responsible for the way in which a text was to be read. The history of a given period, as I have emphasized it in this chapter, will be a primary determinant of a given reading. But also of immense importance in shaping the readings of generic texts are other contemporary texts as well as the discourses surrounding them. The number of possible readings of a generic text is quite large and, as we noted at the end of the last chapter (above) there are a number of generic texts which are not recognizably generated by historical events. In fact, they may even appear to precede some events. In these cases contemporary events are not always evident in such texts and the reading of them in such terms becomes difficult. However, it is possible that they may be read with reference to other texts of the period. Both history and contemporary texts are responsible for *limiting* the range of possible readings of a generic text within a given reading formation. If the history of 1970s America is found to be embodied in those texts that make 'events' available - that is to say, as always already narrativized - then we can say that the struggle for hegemony in the history of the seventies is constituted by an establishing of 'proper versions' of events. As we have so far suggested, history takes place in the realm of textuality and the struggle to maintain the texts of history - for example, news - as 'valid' and 'true' continues almost invisibly. This maintenance involves the mobilization of a number of extra-textual discourses which will enhance the validity of the texts of history, and which will make the reporting of history seem more believable or non-fictional. One can therefore say that the struggle for hegemony in the 1970s, then, is largely a struggle over the assignation of meaning to texts. We have posited the idea that a whole series of events in American politics of the period can be - and were - read as conspiracy texts, for example. Yet these texts or 'versions of events' maintained their status and validity as news or history through the work of extra-textual discourses rather than from some intrinsic structure which differentiated them from fiction. The struggle for hegemony in this formulation is therefore a textual one and it raises questions of what tropological affinities different categories of texts share and what kinds of extra-textual determinants are responsible for their designations and their effectivity. This will be our preliminary



concern in the next chapter before we go on to discuss texts which are crucial to the reading formation of the 1970s American thriller.

The most important of the contemporary texts for our purposes will be the ones that share some kind of generic similarity with the texts to be studied and which, owing partly to the discourses surrounding them, have a considerable prominence in the reading formation with which we are concerned. This is the reason that I have spent less time on my discussion of Vietnam veterans and the family, above: the Vietnam experience was not widely assimilated in an easily recognizable way into fictional texts of the period; similarly, the family plays an important part in a number of 1970s thrillers but does not characterize them in the way that conspiracy can be said to do so. With regard to generic similarity, this is an issue that is crucial for us because it grounds the expectations engendered by generic texts and acts to incorporate them into the corpus under discussion; their prominence is also important as it serves to make such texts the 'prime examples' of the genre at the time - this, as well as a perceived purchase on contemporary events, will assist the process of locating investments in the reading of thrillers. There are a number of generic texts which have a very high profile in the period and there are a number of generic texts which purport to have a superior purchase on contemporary events: these are what I will call 'blockbusters' and the 'non-fiction thriller' respectively. The next three chapters will be concerned with establishing the means by which an analysis of such texts can be carried out in order to demonstrate their close relation to the thriller, a relation that can be said to incorporate them into the thriller genre itself.

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## CHAPTER 4

# Reading the Space of the Seventies

But perhaps more troublesome for Iser's enterprise is the fact that here and elsewhere freedom is granted to the reader only when it doesn't really count very much at all. If Tom Jones is a pound or two lighter, an inch or two taller, or if his eyes are a darker shade of blue are matters left to the reader. In these areas we are permitted to exercise a certain liberty in filling in the blanks. But when it comes to the meaning of sections of the novel or the work in its entirety, Iser leaves no room for deviating from 'the message'.

The indeterminate often seems to involve only the trivial and non-essential details; where meaning is produced, however, the reader either travels the predetermined path or misunderstands the text (Holub 1984 pp. 105-106).

We can review a movie 'descriptively' as if it were a novel we had batted out ourselves on our own trusty typewriters (This approach is ideal for the reader who would rather read the review than see the movie).

We can issue consumer reports studded with blurby or bilious adjectives (This approach is ideal for the reader who would rather patronize or pass up the movie without reading too much of the review) We can review a movie 'thematically' in terms of some burning question of the day. (This approach is ideal for readers who prefer writing letters to the editor than going to the movies). We can review a movie 'autobiographically' in terms of the psychological immersion of the reviewer in the spectacle (The film critic as Superstar). We can review the movie 'sociologically' in terms of audience reaction, observed, presumed or described (From Caligari to Kracauer).

The best critics, I suppose, draw a little bit of everything, and try not to repeat themselves too much as they balance the soul preserving obligations of enlightenment with the job preserving obligations of entertainment (Sarris 1973).

With increasing frequency film critics, myself included, appear to be slipping into the use of hyperbole, the syntax of the copywriter who, in the interests of commerce, makes a complex world comprehensible by reducing everything to good or bad. More and more these days film critics are giving up the honourable, temperate, middle-ground to occupy those polarized regions where everything's a hit or a flop, either the greatest thing since processed cheese or rotten bananas. It may be time that we attempted to retake the qualified middle . . . (Canby 1976).

## Introduction

In this chapter we will discuss, in a very general way, the grounds for an approach to a number of 1970s texts and, where applicable, aspects of their reception. Where the last chapter was taken up with a reading of the contemporary social and political situation of 1970s America the following two chapters will be concerned with those texts which seem to have a contiguous relationship with thrillers in the period and thus assume prominence in the reading formation of the time. While these texts can be read as thrillers without too much difficulty, they often have an ambiguous relationship to the corpus of thrillers as it is classified by either historians or the industries that produce the texts. The interrelationships that exist between these texts will be assessed in terms of a re-examination of Iser's concept of 'indeterminacy' in order to determine the extent to which readings of one set of texts is built into the readings of a different set. The bulk of this chapter will be taken up with a demarcation of a space where historical readings of a set of texts can be activated and have an influence elsewhere. Those texts which, as I have said, have a position of prominence in the relevant reading formation, I have placed in the loose categories of blockbuster and non-fiction thriller. At the risk of being too systematic I have chosen to discuss a selection of the latter in the next chapter which roughly correspond to the sub-genres of the thrillers I discuss: so there is a Watergate text and a text about intelligence agencies; a memoir of the Vietnam experience; a paranoid police story; memoirs of a private investigator; and a crime story. A few of them have a high profile in their own right through bestsellerdom and/or critical acclaim. In the case of the blockbusters all those I discuss were either bestselling novels and film adaptations of them, or films from an original screenplay; in each case, the texts were massively popular in terms of sales and box-office receipts or both in the 1970s.

Before continuing with the following chapters' analysis of texts in these categories a few general and preliminary words are necessary. Palmer (1991) suggests that bestsellers exist



in a space defined by relationships with other texts, but also defined by readers' experiences of the real world (p. 42).

This does not give a great deal of information about the differences between bestsellers and other texts unless we considerably expand the hints contained in the statement's two components. Taking the first part of the statement, for our purposes there is one set of texts that exist in a very close relation to the body of thrillers we will examine and yet they are not officially thrillers. The category of the 'non-fiction thriller' hints at a text which straddles the boundary of two different forms but what does this mean? The filing category on the back cover of my edition of *The Valachi Papers* (1970; originally 1968) reads 'Biography/Crime'. This is straightforward enough but the book was also made into a film in 1972 starring Charles Bronson; the author of the book is Peter Maas who wrote *Serpico* (1974; originally 1973) which was also made into a film starring Al Pacino and a television series starring David Birney. Furthermore, there are those such as Sutherland (1981 p. 42) who have drawn attention to the similarities between *The Valachi Papers* and Puzo's *The Godfather* (1970; originally 1969). Another interesting specimen is 'the Super Cops' who were immortalized in a book by L.H. Whittlemore (1974; originally 1973) and a film by Gordon Parks (1974). The two New York policemen whose exploits were detailed in these texts, Bob Hantz and Dave Greenberg, returned in a further book authored by the latter. Despite the fact that Whittlemore's text carried the subtitle 'The true story of the cops known as Batman and Robin' and despite Hantz' and Greenberg's brief appearances in the film, the two books were categorized as 'Fiction'. All of the aforementioned I will subsume under the category of 'non-fiction thrillers' with the exception of *The Godfather* - the latter is particularly interesting as Puzo has been at pains to respond to leading questions on the subject that he did not, in fact, know any gangsters (see Puzo 1973 p. 31). However, the foregoing comments were not made in order to suggest that contemporary readers were unable to ascertain whether narratives were designated fiction or non-fiction. As we have seen in previous chapters, verisimilitude is a key constituent of genres and the means by which such verisimilitude functions is specific to each different genre. Steve Neale points out that there are regimes of verisimilitude which apply to say, comedy or horror. He adds,



Certain genres appeal more directly and consistently to cultural verisimilitude. Gangster films, war films and police procedural thrillers, certainly, often mark that appeal by drawing on and quoting 'authentic' (and authenticating) discourses, artefacts and texts: maps, newspaper headlines, memoirs, archival documents, and so on. But other genres, such as science fiction, Gothic horror or slapstick comedy, make much less appeal to this kind of authenticity, and this is certainly one of the reasons why they tend to be despised, or at least 'misunderstood', by critics in the 'quality' press. For these critics, operating under an ideology of realism, adherence to cultural verisimilitude is a necessary condition of 'serious' film, television or literature (1991 pp. 47-48).

For the thriller, the relation between the non-fictional and the fictional is very close. I use the category 'non-fiction thriller' to suggest that there exist very few clear lines of demarcation between the thriller and 'non-fiction' discourses which utilize the same material. This will be the topic of the first part of the chapter and I will attempt to get at the root of the matter by considering the role of narrativity and mediation in the presentation of material from real life. This, then, refers to the first part of Palmer's statement: that generic texts exist in some relationship with other texts. The relation of the thriller and 'non-fiction thriller' is close by virtue of their similar - and sometimes identical - subject matter and modes of narration.

The second part of Palmer's statement is relevant to Chapter 6. This will be taken up with the discussion of some bestsellers which have a generic relationship to the body of thrillers I will examine in later chapters. The reason for the popularity of the bestselling texts that sell so much that they are actually 'blockbusters' is probably, as Palmer points out, connected to the entertainment industry's attempt to reproduce previous success but this must be done on the basis of "readers' experience of the real world". Sutherland has attempted to try and explain the phenomenon and failed, making multifaceted formulations but ultimately relying on speculation; for example,

Very largely speaking, the bestseller has two functions. The first is economic. It exists to sell the best and make money for its producers and merchandisers. The second, more flexible function is ideological. The bestseller expresses and feeds certain needs in the reading public. It consolidates prejudice, provides comfort, is therapy, offers vicarious reward or stimulus. In some socially controlled circumstances it may also indoctrinate or control a population's ideas on politically sensitive subjects. In other circumstances, especially where sexual mores are concerned, it may play a subversive social role, introducing new codes and licence (1981 p. 34).

This formulation is like Palmer's and it demarcates an interesting area for study.

However, it is not my intention to carry out such study; the purpose of my discussion of some bestsellers is to acknowledge their ideological function only in terms of its existence



as a reference for thrillers. That is to say that all those historical elements which may find their way into thrillers in some manner may often take a route through the 'non-fiction thriller' and, occasionally, through the bestseller. By this I do not mean to imply that 'history' and 'the thriller' are analogous to two parallel lines with a third parallel line, 'bestsellers and the non-fiction thriller' which simply mediates the flow of all elements from one to another. Instead, as we shall see, a more accurate analogy would be three lines that continually diverge, converge, intersect and bisect according to circumstances.

In this way, the bestseller can be seen as an entity which, at times, heightens a particular ideological current in such a manner that makes it an appropriate guide for the direction of readers' investments in other texts. Put in the bluntest and most unproblematic form, a reader will read a certain thriller in a certain way because a) it depicts aspects of the world with which s/he is familiar, as a result of knowledge gleaned from the real world, and of which s/he knows the outcome; b) it depicts events of a similar kind and in a similar way to other texts of which s/he has knowledge; c) it depicts events that are similar in some ways to those of the bestselling texts of the day, some of which belong to different genres. The first thing to point out about this formulation is that it is unlikely that a), b) and c) ever take place in such a recognizable undiluted form. Even my preliminary example of *The Valachi Papers* displays a mixture of all three. The second thing to say is that b) and c) are not simply what one might call generic expectations. One might make a case that they are if one stressed heavily the semantic aspect of genre: that the 'content' and 'stylistic devices' of a given blockbuster are what solely constitute genre and that they have these in common with generic texts. One might also say that the nature of generic overlap is such that certain facets of the structure of a blockbuster are identical to those in a designated generic text. (Let us not forget that being bestselling texts does not exclude them from generic status. For example, the movie of *The French Connection* (1971) - with \$26.3 million worth of rentals [Finler 1992 p. 480] - is still a classic thriller). I prefer to avoid the option of reducing these facts to generic expectations for two reasons. The first is that *The Exorcist*, for example, doesn't stop being a horror text

because it has elements that inform readings of thrillers. The second and related reason which I advocated in Chapter 1, is that distinct genres can still be said to exist even though they may be based on industry prescriptions; as long as reader investments are organized in tandem with the text, that genre will be seemingly quite distinct. Yet the horror of *The Exorcist* does not mark it off completely from other texts; its multiplicity entails that some thrillers can have points of intersection and investment in common with this text. To say that the knowledge of other texts brought to the reading of new texts must be bound within one genre is to say either that genre must be a unitary phenomenon once more (e. g. the horrific alone is what constitutes 'horror films'), or that if a text from one genre is similar in some respects to a thriller it must actually *be* a thriller. For our purposes, the two can be conceived of as different genres; what is crucial is that they are perceived as distinct genres within a reading formation.

The other way to think about this problem is, yet again, by referring to Iser's 'stars' metaphor. The text can be expected to provide the stars but the reader is expected to do the work of joining them up in their own way. But upon what is this line-drawing to be based? As we have noted before, a great deal of ethnographic work has assumed the task of answering this question within defined case-studies. Likewise, I have assumed such a task but my focus group has disappeared; in addition to currents in the history of the period, the long-term line-drawing that I attempt to reconstitute for the 1970s is therefore based on the texts I have assumed to be the most prominent and the most proximate to the corpus I will discuss. It is these which assist the reader in making decisions about how to join up the text's stars or to fill in what is left out in a narrative. Thrillers and other texts are characterized by their inability to narrate absolutely everything about their subject matter; they leave out details which the reader may choose to provide. This principle of texts is referred to by Iser as 'indeterminacy' and this chapter deals specifically with the means by which other texts are employed in certain readings to eliminate indeterminacy in the text being read. Despite the fact that I have mentioned this principle before, it is for this reason worth examining it in more detail.



## Indeterminacy

The literary text, for Iser, is defined by its indeterminacy. It is this indeterminacy which designates all those gaps which must be filled by some means or another by a reader and which are inescapable. In an essay from 1971 he puts it thus:

These gaps give the reader a chance to build his own bridges, relating the different aspects of the object which have thus far been revealed to him. In fact, the more a text tries to be precise (i. e. the more 'schematized views' it offers), the greater will be the number of gaps between the views (1989 p. 9).

Although this is a feature of texts themselves it allows Iser to emphasize the role of the reader whose activity is initiated by the existence of unfilled parts of texts. He notes that indeterminacy is the fundamental precondition for reader participation (1989 p. 10)

and that the text is 'realized' in some way by the reader. Because the text is theoretically unfinished or only partly written

This means that the reader fills in the remaining gaps. He removes them by a free play of meaning-projection and thus himself provides the unformulated connections between the particular views. This is borne out by the fact that a second reading of a piece of literature often produces a different impression from the first (1989 pp. 9-10).

If this was not clear enough Iser stresses that the reader and his/her activity is actually implicated in the existence of the text:

First of all, we can say that the indeterminate elements of literary prose - perhaps even of all literature - represent a vital link between text and reader. They are the switch that activates the reader into using his own ideas in order to fulfil the intention of the text. This means that they are the basis for a textual structure in which the reader's part is already incorporated (1989 p. 28).

However, at this stage Iser sought to emphasize both the role of the reader - which had hitherto been neglected in previous literary theory - and to relate it to trends in the literary corpus. As a result, Iser makes statements such as the following:

If one supposes that indeterminacy embodies an elementary condition for readers' reactions, then one must ask what its expansion, above all in modern literature, indicates. Without doubt it changes the relationship between text and reader. The more texts lose their determinacy, the more the reader is shifted into the full operation of their possible intentions (1989 p. 5).

This serves as a basis for the discussion of some of the imperatives working on the interaction of text and reader. Yet nowhere in his work does Iser directly broach the question of what extra-textual factors are at play in a given reading of a text.

Having demonstrated that indeterminacy characterizes the fictional text, the most pressing question to follow would be "How are the gaps in a text filled?" However, it must be recognized that imbricated with this question is also the matter of the difference of the fictional and non-fictional worlds. Put another way, we could, perhaps, call it a consideration of the specificity of the gap-filling mechanism. The issue becomes clearer if we look at and criticize Iser's understanding of it. Firstly, Iser implies that the attempt to eliminate indeterminacy is made in accordance with the aesthetic object/fictional text's requirement that it be whole:

Now if the 'places of indeterminacy' are sometimes to be filled in, sometimes to be left open, and sometimes to be passed over completely, the question arises as to what criteria are to determine this process. Ingarden gives no explicit answer, but there is one implied in his theory. The polyphonic harmony of the layered structure of the work must remain intact if it is to give rise to an aesthetic experience. This means that the indeterminacies must be removed, filled in or even glossed over, so that the different levels of the work may properly interlink and the aesthetically valid qualities be brought to the fore. The criterion, then, is harmony. But if we are to see more in this process than just the attempt to finalize the intentional object, and if despite their being subordinated to the 'original emotion' as the true propellant for concretization - the 'places of indeterminacy' are to be viewed as conditions for communication, these can only be the conditions that govern illusionism in art (1978 p. 175).

Apart from finalizing the intentional object the act of concretization (or protension or gap filling) is involved in communicating an illusion as Iser points out. Here we see initially how the issues of the fictional and concretization are woven together. However, Iser is keen to stress that neither the text nor the reader has sole responsibility for constituting the other. He points out that

the literary text cannot be fully identified either with the objects of the external world or with the experiences of the reader.

This lack of identification produces a degree of indeterminacy which normally the reader will counterbalance through the act of reading. Here, too there is scope for a wide variety of reactions on the part of the reader. The gaps of indeterminacy can be filled in by referring the text to the external, verifiable factors, in such a way that it appears to be nothing more than a mirror reflection of these factors. In this case its literary quality fades into reflection. Alternatively, the indeterminacy of a text may be so resistant to counterbalancing that any identification with the world we live in is impossible. Then the world of the text establishes itself as being in competition with the familiar world, a competition that must inevitably have some repercussions on the familiar one. In this case, the text may tend to function as a criticism of life (1989 pp. 7-8).

In this statement Iser seems to be saying that two characteristics of the text are its literariness and its representation of external factors. This is similar to the comments of Sauerberg (below) but Iser relies more insistently on the reader's activity with regard to the real world. Yet he fails to be specific about how the external world plays a role in the



interaction between text and reader while acknowledging both that it does, and that the text's fictionality resists this. So what is Iser's criteria of fictionality?

For Iser, fictionality resides in the basic fact that fiction is not identical to that which it depicts while purporting to be so. However, he does not leave it at this:

The literary text is like the world in so far as it outlines a rival world. But it differs from existing ideas of the world in that it cannot be completely deduced from prevailing concepts of reality. If criteria of fiction and reality consist in the extent to which they deal with the given, it will be seen that fiction is almost totally nongiven. It is a deficient medium and, indeed, a false one, because it possesses none of the criteria of reality and yet it pretends that it does. If fiction were to be classified only by those criteria that are valid in defining reality, it would be impossible for reality to be communicated through fiction. The literary text performs its function, not through a ruinous comparison with reality, but by communicating a reality which it has organized itself (1978 p. 181).

What Iser is delineating here is a realm of communication rather than 'pure' representation and we will return to this. In another passage he presses home the difference between the literary and external worlds:

the real world is perceivable through the senses whereas the literary text is only perceivable through the imagination - unless one believes that reading the words sunset, music, silk, wine, and scent is the same as seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling the same things. Second, all known experience suggests that the real world (uninterpreted) lives and functions independently of the individual observer, whereas the literary text does not. Third, our contact with the real world has immediate physical or social consequences, whereas our contact with the literary text need not, and indeed rarely does have any such consequences. It is precisely those restrictions of the literary text that make it an unsuitable metaphor for reality (1989 pp. 66).

Despite the fictional text's unsuitability as a metaphor for reality, as a text it is not alone in its 'distorted' rendering of the world. Other texts are responsible for representing flavours, for example, without physically coming into contact with the taste buds. As Iser suggests,

The world repeated in the text is obviously different from the one it refers to, if only because, as a repetition, it must differ from its extratextual existence, and this holds equally true of all types of discourse, textual or otherwise, since no rendering can be that which it renders (Iser 1989 p. 251).

This emphasizes that representation is actually a *re*-presentation of a pre-given reality and, if this is the case, then both 'fictional' and 'non-fictional' texts are implicated in the same class of activity. However, Iser wishes to claim for fiction a status beyond this. He believes that

The traditional notion of representation assumes that mimesis entails reference to a pre-given 'reality' that is meant to be represented in a text. A quite different conflicting view is possible, however, if author, text, and reader are thought of as interconnected in a relationship that is the ongoing process of producing something that did not previously exist . . . . Since the advent of the modern world there has been a clearly discernible tendency toward privileging the the performative aspect of the author-text-reader



relationship, whereby the pre-given is no longer viewed as an object of representation but rather as a material from which something new is fashioned. The new product, however, is not predetermined by the features, functions, and structures of the material referred to and encapsulated in the text (1989 p. 249).

The notion of communication is taken further once more. No longer is fiction a *re-*presentation of a pre-given reality which would place it in a league with a number of different discourses; nor is it a representation of an always-already mediated world. Instead, it is a world that creates itself in its very act of representation. If this seems paradoxical it is meant to be: in later works Iser characterizes fictional texts as games and suggests that textual meaning is a 'supplement' that exists only through play (1989 p. 252); or, to take the self-generation metaphor further, he posits the composition of the fictional world:

It can be said, then, that the recurrence of a particular world in the literary text has always taken place on the prior understanding that it is a mode of enacting what is not there (1989 p. 282).

This particular conception of the fictional text and the reader's role in it is quite a departure from the initial implications of Iser's hypothesis of the indeterminacy which engenders a reader's response. If one follows this conception through, then the self-generative nature of the fictional text tends to suggest that the interaction of text and reader is, at best, subordinate to an understanding of textual structures only rather than other sources of knowledge, and at worst, hermetically sealed from the influences of the outside world.

Iser has tried to mitigate this situation by presenting his terms quite loosely and affording parity to the participants in the interaction between text and reader. In *The Act of Reading*, for instance, he casually asserts that

What the language *says* is transcended by what it *uncovers*, and what it *uncovers* represents its true meaning. Thus the meaning of the literary work remains related to what the printed text says, but it requires the creative imagination of the reader to put it all together (1978 p. 142).

It is partly because of such casual assumptions that one critic in particular chose to take Iser to task in what Elizabeth Freund has dubbed

the somewhat rancorous debate between Stanley Fish and Wolfgang Iser (1987 p. 148).

The opening shot in the debate which took place in *diacritics* in 1981 came from Fish who struck at the very heart of the Iserian project:



the stars in a text are not fixed; they are just as variable as the lines that join them (Fish 1981 p. 7).

The 'stars' metaphor which we have witnessed on a number of occasions has been a convenient shorthand means of referring to the reader's attempt's to eradicate the effects of indeterminacy. However, Fish wishes to extend the notion and in order to understand his argument it is necessary to remember a fundamental aspect of semiotics which has often gone unstated. Barthes' early comments on the 'arbitrariness' of the linguistic sign illustrate a basic confusion on this issue; he writes,

We shall therefore say in general terms that in the language the link between signifier and signified is contractual in its principle, but that this contract is collective, inscribed in a long temporality (Saussure says that 'a language is always a legacy'), and that consequently it is, as it were, *naturalized*; in the same way, Levi-Strauss specified that the linguistic sign is arbitrary *a priori* but non-arbitrary *a posteriori*. This discussion leads us to keep two different terms, which will be useful during the semiological extension. We shall say that a system is arbitrary when its signs are founded not by convention, but by unilateral decision: the sign is not arbitrary in the language but it is in fashion; and we shall say that a sign is *motivated* when the relation between its signified and its signifier is analogical (Barthes 1967 p. 51).

What Barthes does here is to draw a distinction between the linguistic and the analogical (or iconic, in Peirce's terms) signs based upon the former's supposed arbitrariness and the latter's 'motivation'. What he fails to stress is that there are, of course, *levels* of motivation in the functioning of all signs; if a linguistic sign is to be recognized *qua* sign then it necessarily embodies a degree of motivation. That is to say that all processes of signification are thoroughly conventional and cultural and, as a result, they are thoroughly inculcated in their users to an extent that they seem, at one level, to act almost like an analogon. This, understandably, raises general questions about the nature of perception: if we learn to perceive the connection between a linguistic sign and that which it depicts such that, for example, the word 'tree' conjures up the conception of a tree almost immediately, then who is to say that our perception of objects other than linguistic signs is not similarly modelled? Naturally, the debate about what happens when humans perceive is a massive inter-disciplinary one and both Fish and Iser only manage to scrape its surface. Furthermore, it must be emphasized that neither Fish nor Iser says that the process of perception involved in recognizing real objects, linguistic signs and iconic signs is identical. However, on the topic of determinacy, Iser strongly implies that there is a distinction between all three which virtually eradicates all links. The syntagm of linguistic signs that make up a fictional text is characterized by indeterminacy, he claims;



the famous example of the film of *Tom Jones* (1974 p. 283) is an iconic syntagm in which indeterminacy is eradicated, according to Iser, so that the reader has to do no work in picturing the main character; and with regard to real objects, his implication is that they are determinate. This is open to criticism: the fact that there is *some* mechanism of perception involved in all three means that neither the real object, nor the highly motivated iconic sign, nor the lesser motivated linguistic sign, are either entirely available or entirely conventional in human experience. This is the crux of Fish's critique of Iser's categories; he writes,

It is only if the world - or 'reality' - is itself a determinate object, an object without gaps that can be grasped immediately, an object that can be perceived rather than read, that indeterminacy can be specified as a special feature of literary experience. Once, however, that move is made, it brings with it a set of interrelated assumptions: the assumption that looking at real objects is different from *imagining* objects in a poem or novel; the assumption that in the one activity the viewer simply and passively takes in an already formed reality, while in the other he must participate in the construction of a reality; the assumption that knowledge of real people is more direct and immediate than knowledge of characters or lyric speakers; and, finally, the assumption that these two kinds of experience come to us in two kinds of language, one that requires only that we check its structure against the already constituted structure it reproduces or describes, and the other that requires us to produce the objects, events and persons to which it (in a curious, even mysterious, literary way) refers (Fish 1981 p. 8).

In short, Fish is accusing Iser of privileging the literary work by over-emphasizing the work that the reader does to enact it; the reader, in Fish's view, does a similar amount of work in apprehending the real world. More succinctly, Fish states that

what must be supplied in literary experience must also be supplied in the real life experience to which it is, point for point, opposed (Fish 1981 p. 8).

He adds

perception itself *is* an act of ideation, if by ideation we mean the inferring of a world from a set of assumptions (antecedently held) about what it must be like. To put it another way, mediated access to the world is the only access we ever have; in face to face situations or in the act of reading of a novel, the properties of objects, person and situations emerge as a consequence of acts of construction that follow (and because they follow they are not, in any simple sense, free) from a prestructured understanding of the shapes any meaningful item could possibly have (Fish 1981 p. 10).

For Fish the distinction between the natural and the conventional character of perception has a direct bearing on the role of the reader. He points out that

one can agree with Iser that reading about sunsets, wine and silk is not the same as seeing, tasting and touching them without agreeing that seeing, touching and tasting are natural rather than conventional activities. What can be seen will be a function of the categories of vision that already inform perception, and those categories will be social and conventional and not imposed upon us by a natural world (Fish 1981 p. 11).

Yet he elaborates this in order to criticize Iser's ultimate downgrading of the role of the reader. In Fish's opinion, Iser's lack of emphasis on the perception process generally



entails that the reader's interaction with the text, like his/her interaction with the real world, is somehow an interaction with the pre-given. This is the implication when Fish writes:

It is only if it were possible to perceive independently of assumptions, of interpretive categories, that irresponsible or arbitrary perception would be a danger. If perception is always conventional - prestructured by categories (like the classroom or some notion of genre) that are public and communal rather than individual and unique - then perception can never be arbitrary, and the project, Iser's project, of explaining how arbitrariness or subjectivity is to be controlled loses its urgency (Fish 1981 p. 11).

So Fish is challenging Iser on the notion of the text as a pre-given and on the idea that the reader is *not* always-already caught up in a matrix of interpretations that will ultimately govern his/her interaction with the text.

Iser's response is to insist on the materiality of the text but in an unconvincing way. He says that Fish

creates a new hermeneutics by fusing interpretation and that which is to be interpreted into an indistinguishable whole, thus replacing the given by interpretation itself (Iser 1981 p. 84).

Although this is a caricature of Fish's position, he continues to stress the separation of subject and object. Referring to the text of Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Iser notes

The reader does not supply the name Allworthy . . . The term is given. The interpretation [of his character] is made by the reader, and once made is determinate (Iser 1981 p. 85).

Fish, it seems, would not contest this; his argument is rather that the reader is so caught up in the matrix of interpretations that the text comes to him/her as, in a sense, already partly determinate in its meaning:

the observer is never individual in the sense of unique or private, but is always the product of the categories of understanding that are his by virtue of his membership in a community of interpretation. It follows then that what that experience in turn produces is not open or free, but determinate, constrained by the possibilities that are built into a conventional system of intelligibility (Fish 1981 p. 11).

Iser's response, however, seems to oscillate between two poles: on the one hand he wishes to insist on the plurality of potential individual interpretations of the fictional text while, on the other, he seeks to retain a more limiting framework of validity in interpretation based on what the text as a material entity presents:

It is quite true that membership of the community helps to prevent arbitrary ideation, but if there is no subjectivist element in reading, how on earth does Professor Fish account for different interpretations of one and the same text? (The answer to that question is that he doesn't) (Iser 1981 p. 86).

What is at issue here is made clear by theorists outside this debate. Addressing the matter from a slightly different angle Tony Bennett writes:

There can, of course, be no doubting the materiality of the text, its physical existence as a set of written, material notations. Indeed, properly understood, it is the very materiality of the text which disables the view that the text can be fetishised as either the container of a meaning, single and irreducible, or the source of an effect (Bennett in Widdowson 1982 p. 226).

By underlining one of Iser's strict tenets this statement also severely disables his general argument: the materiality or 'givenness' of the text does not guarantee the limitation of interpretations; in fact, it is this very feature which allows its malleability and metamorphosis. But if the material text allows a plethora of interpretations is there a limiting factor? Holub has scrutinized the Fish/Iser debate and concluded that

The real question for Fish, of course - and Iser does not ask it - is what determinations *he* is determined by in his metacritical posture (1984 p. 104).

In Fish's most famous work he has insisted on the limiting effects on interpretation that an 'interpretive community' may have and he has attributed the constraints of such to its existence in an institution. However, the institution he refers to is usually a university English department (see Fish 1980 especially pp. 16-17, 112 ff, 320-321, 322 ff).

Bennett insists that the determinations of interpretive communities are far more diverse and politically orientated:

A condition of any text's continuing to exert long-term cultural effects within any society must be that it is constantly brought into connection or articulated with new texts, socially and politically mobilised in different ways within different class practices, differentially inscribed within the practices of educational, cultural and linguistic institutions and so on . . . [O]nly in the light of such historically concrete, variable and incessantly changing determinations - determinations which so press in upon the text as fundamentally to modify its very mode of being - [is it] possible to assess, at any given moment, the effects that might be attributed to any given text or set of texts (ibid. pp. 224-225).

So, as Bennett's statement partly illustrates, the Fish/Iser debate over the status of indeterminacy is, in many ways, a side issue to the real work at hand. While Fish qualifies the meaning of indeterminacy, concluding that it does not really exist as a given category he does not offer an overview of the matrix of interpretations that works to eliminate indeterminacy before it actually exists. Any consideration of the reading process must therefore take into account the *unfulfilled potential* of indeterminacy whilst positing the grounds of its unfulfilment.



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always immediately be filled by interpretations arising from these analogous mediations. If the text in question is non-fictional, then the reader's mediated knowledge of the objects to which it refers will always be already activated to fill the potential indeterminacies; if the text is fictional, then those signs which make up the text will be so similar to those signs which are used outside the realm of fictional texts to apprehend the external world that the difference between them will be negligible. Put another way, the reader has the capacity to bring to the reading of signs in a fictional text other signs, syntagms and texts which are thought to be analogous, connected in some way, and even seemingly identical. In addition, this takes place in such a way that the indeterminacies are already filled: that the text just seems to exist as an entity in the way it was read. If Iser believes that the 'literary' text does not refer to the external world and that the external world is not apprehended in a quasi-textual way then it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that his work rests on the belief that the only proper knowledge appropriate for the reading of such texts is literary knowledge, which in itself is an abstraction and necessarily tied to other knowledges. As Iser knows, there are numerous readings of texts determined predominantly by knowledge of the real world.

In Chapters I and 2 we discussed the concepts of horizon of expectations and Bennett's notion of a reading formation. If there is to be any examination of those items that immediately fill a text's *potential* indeterminacies at a given period in history, it must be centred around a discussion of the contemporary reading formation and what characterizes it. In the last chapter we outlined some of the aspects of the contemporary social and political situation as it was mediated in a number of ways and thus made available for incorporation into fictional texts by both the addresser of such fictional texts and the addressee or reader, who confronts the text's potential indeterminacies. In addition there are a range of other discourses often explicitly about a given text which arrange it as a text to be read. These discourses we will refer to as extra-textual cues; the workings of these in the shaping of contemporary readings will concern us in the next two chapters. In this way, the Fish/Iser debate is very instructive as it maps the terrain



where such extra-textual cues operate even though neither Fish nor Iser consider the workings of such cues in detail. The debate between Fish and Iser represents only a small contribution to a much wider issue of the relation between ideology and 'reality' or, put another way, textuality and its frame of reference. If we are to seriously address this wider issue we must consider the general realm of narrativity and the working of such factors as those extra-textual cues that Fish and Iser fail to specify. Readings are not anarchic and do not have random frames of reference. It is reasonable, therefore, to speculate on the prominence of cues to reading in the period's reading formation; we shall continue this line of argument by discussing 'non-fiction' discourses of the period in the context of their analogy with 'fictional' ones. As we have seen, Iser's conception of what is fictional breaks down when challenged by different theories of perception from his own. However, the distinction between the two kinds of text does not go away and this indicates that the Fish/Iser debate is merely part of the way in which a much wider debate may be read. The wider debate here is to do with how the categories of ideology and reality are made available to us: rather than presenting a division between the two categories, our discussion of Fish and Iser moves us into a realm of narrativity. By questioning the nature of the mediations involved in all kinds of perceptions we have made it possible to view the ideology/reality couplet in a new light, as a realm exclusively composed of signs. The implications of this will become clear as we progress but one obvious area where the question of mediations is of paramount importance is in the division of the 'fictional' from the 'non-fictional' in terms of an epistemological hierarchy; the next section will therefore be devoted to examining this distinction in more detail.

### **Indeterminacy, narrativity and non-fiction**

If there are two broad categories of writing designated by the terms 'non-fiction' and 'fiction' one might assume that they are fundamentally different. Fiction could be said to deal with imagined events while non-fiction takes as its raw material facts about the real

world. Yet even if this is correct, such a definition does not take into account the similarities involved in each mode's processing of its raw material. In America especially, in the period leading up to the 1970s, post-modernist writers challenged notions concerned with the status of the non-fictional. Novels by Norman Mailer, E.L. Doctorow, and William Styron among others dealt with documentary subjects in innovative ways. Similarly, less valorized texts such as Irving Stone's books or Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976) demonstrated the narrowness of the line between biography and novel. At the level of the actual discourse employed by fictional and non-fictional texts, these examples seem to suggest, there is the capacity for considerable overlap. There may be a difference between the raw material of the fictional and the non-fictional but, in the act of representation, the nature of the processing of this raw material is not significantly changed. This is of great importance when considering the thriller in the 1970s. Jameson believes that

Ours is, after all, a period and a public with an appetite for documentary fact, for the anecdotal, the *vécu*, the *fait divers*, the true story in all its sociological freshness and unpredictability. Not to go as far back as the abortive yet symptomatic 'non-fiction novel', nor even the undoubted primacy of non-fiction over fiction on the bestseller lists, we find particularly striking embodiments of this interest in a whole series of recent experiments on American television . . . (1979 p. 79).

But even if the non-fictional merely held a grip on the imagination equal to that of the fictional it would still be important as the veracity of many thrillers is thought by some to be dependent on a relationship with non-fictional texts. Sutherland, for instance, uses a couple of specific examples to underline the existence of what he believes is a comparatively widespread general symbiosis:

When Mountbatten was murdered by the IRA it was a main news item that the assassination had been prefigured in a bestseller of a year or so earlier. The implication was that, in some magical way, life had imitated fiction. In Britain in 1979-80 the whole Blunt affair melted miasmically into the bestseller ethos of the television of le Carré's immediately previous *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, so that one could hardly tell where headlines about moles finished and fiction started (1981 p. 138).

Although Sutherland tends to overstate matters here, the general phenomenon of a potential fictional/non-fictional overlap recurs too often for it to be ignored. This is especially apparent with regard to thrillers but it is closely connected to narrative as a whole.



Recently, Sauerberg has addressed the question of overlap by focussing on the genre of documentary realism. His argument seems to rest on the primacy of a 'realist' mode of narration manifested in a diverse body of texts and a number of hypotheses associated with this. Although he gives no empirical evidence for it, he asserts that

To most contemporary readers narrative fiction is still probably straightforwardly synonymous with realism (Sauerberg 1991 p. 18).

This realism is characterized by its belief in a reality outside of representation:

the greater part of 'serious'/'artistic'/'literary' fiction employs this pre-modernist narrative mode, which assumes that there is an extra-literary reality which may be verbally communicated, and that it is possible and indeed valid to create self-sustaining fictional universes existing on the basis of analogy with experiential reality (Sauerberg 1991 p. 1).

He also points out that the realist mode of narration has a currency that exceeds that of all other forms of writing. For Sauerberg realism

thrives, not only as the *gesunkenes Kulturgut* of 'entertainment fiction' which, thanks to the inertia of cultural reorientation, is always lagging considerably behind the contemporary intellectual climate, but also as critically acclaimed 'serious' writing, alongside the various kinds of self-conscious writing and fabulation so much in fashion since the mid-sixties (Sauerberg 1991 p. 17).

Noticeable here is the belief that popular fiction is behind the times; the reason for the retarded progression of 'entertainment fiction' is not clear from this passage, however. If it is because it remains, in the main, realist, then surely it is in vogue along with the 'serious' writing of which he speaks. This is a small point but it is the first indication that Sauerberg's analysis fails to go deep enough.

Further evidence that the divide between fictional and non-fictional is not simply bridged by realist narration can be found in his examples from late-nineteenth century realists. Specifically there is a reading from a Hardy text which is supposed to demonstrate some intrinsic qualities of this kind of narration. Sauerberg posits two codes of reading in realism: one where enough information is provided for the reader to complete a picture, and a literary code (pp. 30-32). He concludes,

We have seen in the examples from Gissing, Dreiser, and Hardy how the fact references [sic] are not really sufficient in themselves to evoke a full picture of a character or situation but serve as cues to the reader to reconstruct a fictional character or situation in accordance with his general experience. Part of the reader's general experience stems from his familiarity with literary texts which overlaps, is influenced by, and indeed influences his experience of 'real' reality . . . In the case of the Hardy extract it was suggested that the word 'swarthy' has a distinctly literary connotation which confirms and sums up our impression



of the character at this early point as predominantly a man of slightly menacing mystery (Sauerberg p. 32).

The conclusion of 'slightly menacing mystery' is presumptuous. Such a connection will be made only by the reader with sufficient literary training yet other 'non-literary' readings could be made without changing the status of the narration from a realist one.

What Sauerberg overlooks is that the literary is only one among other modes of reading - realist narration and a reading of a narrative as realist can still exist while completely ignoring 'the literary'. The fact that the 'literary' has a long history and is used by critics and teachers does not make it a timeless and immutable feature of a text. When dealing with those texts for which he has less respect Sauerberg, in contrast, emphasizes their mutability; so 'topicality' is one phenomenon which shapes a text's meaning at a given moment:

Nonfiction 'fiction', which in contrast to the historical text or document relies very much on topicality and current issues, tends to change status over time from nonfiction to historical fiction, even to traditional realism. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* must be assumed to have changed its fact-reference status since the time it was written. As the killing of the Clutters in Kansas in 1959 is erased from general memory, Capote's dramatized account reads more and more like a socio-psychological whodunit (Sauerberg 1991 p. 57).

This provides a basis for discussion but Sauerberg does not go on to explicitly demonstrate the distinction between the historical document and non-fiction fiction. It could equally be argued that there are occasions when the former partakes of topicality just as readily: a reading of the *White House Transcripts* could help create a socio-psychological whodunit to rival *In Cold Blood* and even some fictional narratives. Yet Sauerberg insists that the realist narration is exceptional,

And the dividing line between the real and the imagined becomes increasingly blurred with time. Only a contemporary audience will be in a position to appreciate the distinction, as in the case when a *roman à clef* is felt to have an offensive effect by introducing the reader to imaginative misrepresentations of something generally accepted as factual knowledge (ibid. p. 60).

This particular explanation of fictional and non-fictional overlap rests on too firm a belief in the immutability of certain textual structures. While it is true that the *roman à clef* may only be recognized as such at certain times Sauerberg does not extend such a principle of skepticism about the timeless meaning of texts into the realm of history itself. Instead, he relies on strict notions of the literary, the real, the imagined and the historical document offering a few surface examples without explaining the root principles behind fictional



and non-fictional overlap. The crux of the matter lies not with realism but with narrative itself.

As we witnessed in the last chapter it is a truism that the study of history is more appropriately to be considered as the study of historical documentation. This involves the consideration of contemporary imperatives acting upon the historian but also historiography in a more fundamental sense, questioning the very act of writing historical texts. This latter has been carried out in the last two decades by Hayden White; on a very basic level he propounds that

What should interest us in the discussion of the 'literature of fact' or, as I have chosen to call it, 'the fictions of factual representation' is the extent to which the discourse of the historian and that of the imaginative writer overlap, resemble or correspond with each other. Although historians and writers of fiction may be interested in different kinds of events, both the forms of their respective discourses and their aims in writing are often the same. In addition, in my view, the techniques or strategies that they use in the composition of their discourses can be shown to be substantially the same, however different they may appear on a purely surface, or dictional, level of their texts (1987 p. 121).

At root, White insists, history and fiction are related by virtue of the function of representation. Discourse, which includes fiction and history, is orientated towards the act of representation by means of invoking some kind of knowledge of the real world.

White continues,

Whether the events represented in a discourse are construed as atomic parts of a molar whole or as possible occurrences within a perceivable totality, the discourse taken in *its* totality as an image of some reality bears a relationship of correspondence to that *of which* it is an image. It is in these twin senses that all written discourse is cognitive in its aims and mimetic in its means. And this is true even of the most ludic and seemingly expressivist discourse, of poetry no less than of prose, and even of those forms of poetry which seem to illuminate only 'writing' itself. In this respect, history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation (1987 p. 122).

Historiographers from each end of the political spectrum agree that the writing of history always involves a complex interplay between 'analysis' and 'narrative' and that a necessary ordering of events in history inevitably takes place (see, for example, Carr 1961 pp. 29-30 and Elton 1969 pp. 160 ff). But White believes that his conflation of fiction and history will upset those who believe and

conventionally agree that history and fiction deal with distinct orders of experience and represent distinct, if not opposed, forms of discourse (p. 122).

Having said this, such a conflation is not without precedent in historiography; prior to the French revolution, fictionality was valid in history:

theorists from Bayle to Voltaire and De Mably recognized the inevitability of a recourse to fictive techniques in the representation of real events in the historical discourse (1987 p. 123).

However, in the nineteenth century White details some subtle developments as

History came to be set over against fiction and especially the novel, as the representation of the 'actual' to the representation of the 'possible' or only 'imaginable' (p. 123).<sup>1</sup>

Contra Iser, White then emphasizes the fundamental similarity of the categories of signs utilized in fiction and in discourses about the world outside of fiction. Taking the fact of the distortion involved in ordering facts which is well-known by historians White demonstrates that this is the first indication that the fiction/history division is posited on mere surface differences. He writes,

Novelists might be dealing only with imaginary events whereas historians are dealing with real ones, but the process of fusing events, whether imaginary or real, into a comprehensible totality capable of serving as the *object* of a representation is a poetic process. Here the historians must utilize precisely the same tropological strategies, the same modalities of representing relationships in words, that the poet or novelist uses. In the unprocessed historical record and in the chronicle of events which the historian extracts from the record, the facts exist only as congeries of contiguously related fragments. These fragments have to be put together to make a whole of a particular, not a general, kind. And they are put together in the same ways that novelists use to put together figments of their imaginations to display an ordered world, a cosmos, where only disorder or chaos might appear (p. 125).

It is clear that White's analysis goes further and has certain advantages over that of Sauerberg. Not only does White identify the use of a specific discourse in the relating of historical facts he emphasizes that all discourse involves basically the same mediating mechanisms. Even a principle of reciting random impressions does not escape the narrativizing process; thus White employs the terminology of fiction in the service of analysing history when he writes that

The plot structure of a historical narrative (*how* things turned out as they did) and the formal argument or explanation of *why* things happened or turned out as they did are *prefigured* by the original description (of the facts to be explained) in a given dominant modality of language use: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, or irony (p. 128).

By confronting the essential sameness of the principles involved in the process of narrativization White's project has, at one level, put the question of a fictional/non-fictional division to rest.

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<sup>1</sup> This argument is elaborated in White (1973).



A further qualification must be made, however, because White does not wish to imply that narrative is so intrinsic to events that it characterizes them. On the contrary:

Narrative becomes a *problem* only when we wish to give real events the form of story. It is because *real* events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult (White in Mitchell 1981 p. 4).

White holds that real events do not have a narrative form at all and that there have been attempts to represent them in so far as it is possible, in non-narrative form. One of these latter which he discusses is the annals form of recording history; however, he suggests that these can be subject to the demands of narrative

While annals represent historical reality *as if* real events did not display the form of story, the chronicle represents it *as if* real events appeared to human consciousness in the form of *unfinished* stories (in Mitchell 1981 p. 5).

He attributes the propensity for narrativization to some over-arching human desire for the imaginary (ibid. p. 4), but more importantly for our purposes he also describes the work of a basic narrative mechanism in the field of discourse. He asserts that

every narrative, however seemingly 'full', is constructed on the basis of a set of events which might have been included but were left out and this is true of imaginary as it is of realistic narratives (in Mitchell 1981 p. 10).

Fortunately, in the present study we do not have to identify the lowest level at which a discourse is transformed into a narrative as all the texts we will be dealing with have been self-evidently constituted by their narrativization. What is of most importance is how certain narrative forms justify their fictional or non-fictional status. As White puts it,

What is at issue here is not, What are the facts? but rather, How are the facts to be described in order to sanction one mode of explaining them rather than another? Some historians will insist that history cannot become a science until it finds the technical terminology adequate to the correct characterization of its objects of study, in the way that physics did in the calculus and chemistry did in the periodic tables. Such is the recommendation of Marxists, Positivists, Cliometricians, and so on. Others will continue to insist that the integrity of historiography depends on its use of ordinary language, in avoidance of jargon. These latter suppose that ordinary language is a safeguard against ideological deformations of the 'facts'. What they fail to recognize is that ordinary language itself has its own forms of terminological determinism, represented by the figures of speech without which discourse is impossible (1987 p. 134).

This is particularly pertinent to the topic of the non-fiction thriller: as I noted earlier, such texts use publicity and publisher's categories to dismiss any potential of skepticism regarding their authenticity. The language of non-fiction thrillers is also crucial and partakes of the same kind of self-justifying devices of generic verisimilitude that I discussed in Chapter 1. It is on these grounds that the conflation of the fictional and the



non-fictional takes place most readily for the casual reader rather than the analyst. In order to give a preliminary demonstration of the overlap that exists between non-fictional and fictional narrative especially in the area of depiction with which thrillers concern themselves I will briefly discuss the introductory pages of three texts which precede the period of thrillers that I will discuss.

The opening page of Irving Stone's 1949 book on one of the most famous lawyers in American history is as follows:

#### PROLOGUE

##### A LAWYER COMES OF AGE

His decision made, he stretched out his fingers before him on the mahogany desk, pushed upwards and rose: it was only a short distance down the hall from the legal department, with the roar of the elevated trains pouring in on a level keel from the open third-storey windows, and up two flights of stairs to the office of the president, but if he travelled those few steps they must prove the longest journey he had undertaken in his thirty-seven years. He could cite few sustaining precedents in the casebook of lawyers: he knew he was not the stuff of which martyrs are made; he was not even the possessor of a cause to lend him the courage of fanaticism. Yet his father had served as a Kinsman, Ohio, link of the Underground Railroad, and many a midnight the boy had been awakened to ride to the next village on top of a load of hay that concealed an escaping Negro slave (1966 p. 11).

Understandably, the first page is of paramount importance in shaping the reader's perceptions of the rest of the text; in fact, this page has actually been preceded by another in which the reader is directed to the back of the volume for a substantial bibliography and is also told that Stone had the full cooperation of the Darrow family in the writing of the present book. So expectations exist and indeterminacies are filled even before the first page is encountered; and this is without mentioning either the cover of the book, the situation of reading, prior publicity etc. Statements about the text's non-fictionality, then, have been made before the first page is encountered. All things being equal, there is the possibility that a reader will come to the first page with a firm impression of the text's 'factuality', although we could easily envisage a reader who encounters the same page immediately after having read a fictitious newspaper headline such as "Darrow book a hoax". A different impression would therefore ensue. I will acknowledge now that such readings may exist as possibilities. For example, the male person referred to in this opening paragraph could be anybody, but within the confines of certain parameters I



would suggest that it is actually Clarence Darrow. If we can leave this point for a moment I would suggest also that the narrator knows a great deal about the character referred to as 'he', including his decision-making, his movements at the precise time, the position of his office in relation to other departments, the kind of noise that emanates from outside the building, the man's feeling about the journey he has to make, his age, the breadth of his knowledge of legal precedents, and so on. Although it would be an incredible *tour de force* if it continued in this manner, it is remotely possible that all this knowledge of the man had been gained by the enunciator from extensive research. Moreover, a reader might speculate on the reasons why anybody beginning to narrate details about a person should commence with the thirty-seventh year of that person's life. Also, why relate details about his father and at this moment? Would it not be pertinent to narrate anecdotes about other relations either now or at a different stage in the narration? These are only the start of a barrage of questions that could be asked about this opening paragraph and each is concerned with the reasons for a particular ordering of knowledge on the part of the narrator. In turn, these are also questions about the text's veracity; surely such research is not possible and the narration should proceed with only knowable events? Despite such a question, there is absolutely no reason why a work of non-fiction may not be narrated in this manner, even if it is concerned with facts rather than conjecture. In fact, if we look closely at the opening lines of two works of non-fiction taken almost at random we can see that they are equally tempered with opinion, narration and description. For example,

It is a paradox that no important people or forces in France of 1789 wanted revolution. Revolutions may begin, as wars often begin, not because people positively want them. They happen because people want other things that, in a certain set of circumstances, implicate them in revolution or war (Thomson 1966 p. 24).

The governance of a modern society is an enormous task. In Great Britain, for example, half of the nation's national income flows through the hands of the government, and some 30 per cent of the labour force are employed in the state sector. Government is therefore, 'big business' (Byrne 1981 p. 17).

What both of these texts manifest is a conviction about the truth of their descriptions.

However, they are as open to challenge on this basis as much as Stone's text is.

Alternative writings might cite different figures or different opinions. The first text could quite easily be mistaken for a passage from a novel such as *Notes from Underground*, the

second from a dystopian sci-fi story. That they are not is conclusively proved by the fact that they carry on in this vein, with a continually sustained conviction about their factual status. This is not to say that it is conviction alone that characterizes non-fiction; fiction equally has its own conviction. But non-fiction, irrespective of the intrusion of opinion, is conventionally believed to reside in its conviction about what can be known. For example, the second of the two texts quoted gives details of the actions of various people but draws the line at speculation over their thoughts. In contrast, what seems jarring about the Clarence Darrow text is that it does not hesitate to give details which, if not the product of extensive research are the product of speculation. In short, certain modes of narration have historically been believed to appropriate the world of facts more successfully than others and the manner of narration in the text about Darrow seems to be closer to a fictional rather than a non-fictional account. We will return to this matter from a slightly different angle when we address the hard-boiled story.

The putative surface differences between fiction and non-fiction become clearer when we consider one of the most famous texts in the non-fiction thriller *œuvre*, *In Cold Blood* (1965). The acknowledgements signed by Truman Capote at the beginning of the book testify that the work is based throughout on official documents or interviews (1966 p. 9). The first page, in terms of its consideration of knowable facts, then starts in a manner very similar to those of Byrne and Thomson cited above:

The village of Holcomb stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas, a lonesome area that other Kansans call 'out there'. Some seventy miles east of the Colorado border, the countryside with its hard blue skies and desert-clear air, has an atmosphere that is rather more Far West than Middle West (p. 15).

At this stage the narration is similar to that of a Sunday supplement article or even some academic works of history. However, the text is filled with other diverse narrative strategies; for instance, the narrator is able to relate the thoughts of more than one character in the narrative:

Perry, still reclining under the blue umbrella, had observed the scene and realized Dick's purpose at once, and despised him for it; he had 'no respect for people who can't control themselves sexually', especially when the lack of control involved what he called 'pervertiness' - 'bothering kids', 'queer stuff', rape. And he thought he had made his views obvious to Dick (pp. 204-205).



'Deal me out, baby', Dick said. 'I'm a normal' And Dick meant what he said. He thought himself as balanced, as sane as anyone . . . (p. 116).

More telling even than the narration of detailed dialogue and thoughts of characters is when the narration shifts to a mode of free indirect discourse (FID) that Rimmon-Kenan (1983 p. 114) identifies as indirect interior monologue. For example

A thousand people! Perry was impressed. He wondered how much the funeral had cost. Money was greatly on his mind, though not as relentlessly as it had been earlier in the day - a day he had begun 'without the price of a cat's miaow'. The situation had improved since then; thanks to Dick, he and Dick now possessed a 'pretty fair stake' - enough to get them to Mexico.

Dick! Smooth. Smart. Yes, you had to hand it to him. Christ it was incredible how he could 'con a guy' (p. 194).

The narration here adopts the idiolect of a character's speech or thought. Such means of narrating events are commonplace in many kinds of texts designated fiction and we will discuss this mode of narration at more length in Chapter 8 (below). However, these narrative strategies were partly responsible for the negative critical reaction with which *In Cold Blood* was met and, as Sauerberg shows (1991 pp. 20 ff), critics felt that Capote had not been loyal to the objective standards of historical truth. It is very striking that such criticism was lodged at his literary embellishments rather than on the strength of any factual inaccuracies.

A further example of a non-fiction thriller will demonstrate the overlap with fictional techniques. *The Algiers Motel Incident*, which foregrounds a more 'journalistic' style of narration, opens with a scene which could quite satisfactorily be based on an observation of facts alone but is also similar to the narration of many fictional scenes in novels:

Part One  
The Odour of a Case

### 1. Do You Hate the Police?

#### 1. We'll Be Following You All the Way

The ordeal seemed to be drawing to a close.

One of the officers went into the room A-4 and told Michael Clark and Roderick Davis to get off the floor and go out into the hall (Hersey 1971 p. 15).

Although the passage is reminiscent of fiction it also has the capacity to be a narration of facts. It is worth noting that there are a few conventions here that bolster the factual status

of the sentences. Firstly, the reference to A-4 rather than just any old room could be a marker of factual research. Secondly, the headings and sub-headings are much different from anything that occurs in *In Cold Blood* and continue throughout the book. Although they draw attention to the fact that this is a constructed narrative the headings are more appropriate to a newspaper or even a theoretical work like the famous numbered paragraphs and locutions of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. In addition, the book contains pages where the dialogue between characters is presented as if in the text of a play, and series of pages devoted to solely to question and answer sessions. At times the research which informs the narrative is exposed; in the opening pages the words of one witness are reported:

'Michael called me', Carl's mother, Mrs. Margaret Gill told me . . . (p. 17).

In a fictional narrative, the appearance of the *second* pronoun 'me' in such a situation would mark the narrative as an example of what Benveniste calls *discours* (see Chapter 1, above) unless, of course, the narrator appears as a character in the text. In this case, however, the cues to the text's non-fictionality mean that the use of 'me' does not disturb the narration and, in fact, is to be expected. Moreover, the text's foregrounding of its status does not prevent speculation on the thoughts of its protagonists; for example,

Towards the end of his life, Aubrey began to feel that he was something of an outsider with his friends; they were using him as a fighter, they didn't really like him (p. 166).

Small facts such as these could, of course, have been gleaned as a result of research.

What this brief consideration of a very small cross-section of non-fictional texts shows is that in the realm of the non-fiction thriller it is very difficult to be precise about what constitutes fictionality in narration. The only possible test to determine the fictionality of a text like *In Cold Blood* would be to have a detailed independent knowledge of the events that it depicts, something that can only usually be expected of the specialist. In terms of narrative, there are so many different techniques involved in relating events - some of which cannot be isolated for examination - that their recurrence in both 'fictional' and 'non-fictional' texts is practically guaranteed. At one end of the spectrum, phenomena such as reported speech exist in everyday discourse, fictional and non-fictional texts; at



the other end, indirect interior monologue seems to be a purely fictional device as nobody can reproduce another person's thoughts in such detail and with such accuracy. Yet *In Cold Blood* uses the device on numerous occasions. These devices must be therefore considered as just that: a series of techniques used in narration irrespective of the factual existence of the object or event narrated and subject only to the exigencies of the text in question. In the case of the non-fiction thriller it is especially difficult to ascertain the veracity of the events by reference to some intrinsic quality of the narrative even though this may seem possible at a surface level in some historical texts, D.I.Y. manuals, tourist guides, etc. A book like *The Algiers Motel Incident* can employ intra-textual non-fictional devices as we have seen but the recognition of its status as non-fiction relies ultimately on extra-textual cues. This is a general principle that can be applied to all non-fiction thrillers: Sauerberg points out that *In Cold Blood* was transferred to the catalogue of *fiction* in the 1980s by its British publisher (1991 p. 20); it would be interesting to monitor the responses of that text's readers who had received only this cue to their reading. While it is demonstrable that 'fiction' and 'non-fiction' share a tropological affinity it must be remembered that the two categories which designate such texts are often crucial for readers. Not only do the categories assist readers in their assessments of the intentionality of texts, they also provide a framework for a wider set of investments, as we will see.

The following discussion of non-fiction thrillers of the 1970s will be based upon the principles I have outlined which demonstrate the inevitability of an overlap with fictional texts. Many of these texts consist of more than one text in that they were soon made into films; they also have a relation with fictional texts which narrate the same general classes of events and objects; and they have a very close relation with the publicity which surrounds them including other discourses about the events they narrate. We will therefore consider these texts in terms of how readings of them might be governed on the basis of their relationships with factors outside of themselves. That is to say that these relationships are responsible for a filling of the texts' potential indeterminacies. In turn, these texts are also active in the process of always already filling the potential

indeterminacies of the body of thriller texts that we will discuss later. I would stress this symbiosis here lest the exigencies of exposition obscure it in the midst of textual analysis. This will produce quite a specific reading; so while we must remain ever-vigilant to the fact that diverse readings of these texts are possible the analysis will try to describe the grounds for possible readings of them during this particular period of history and in the cultural climate of the 1970s. Rather than taking individual elements from texts and holding them up as symptoms of this or that aspect of the contemporary social formation I will attempt to demonstrate how readings of, for example, books, can be (re)orientated by film versions of that text, or reviews. It is impossible to be exhaustive with regard to a given text's range of potential extra-textual cues and so the following analyses can only really begin to ask the question. Reviews, for instance, do not represent the ultimate authority on the contemporary reading of a text: to begin with, it is questionable what percentage of the cinema-going public *reads* even one review of a film, let alone reads it in a uniform way or accepts its premises. We will therefore be concerned in our analyses with making a very preliminary foray into part of a reading formation. If we are to consider both novel and film versions of a text, this requires also that special attention be paid, where necessary, to the narrative as a whole rather than some abstracted part of it. Such analysis is especially pertinent in the section on the blockbuster texts where extremely critical reviews have not adversely affected the box-office success of a text. What follows, then, is an attempt to identify a space where the historical readings of these non-fictional and blockbuster texts might take place and be installed as a feature of readings of thrillers.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **The 'Non-Fiction' Thriller**

The book that the CIA tried to suppress. THE FIRST BOOK THAT THE U.S. GOVERNMENT EVER WENT TO COURT TO CENSOR BEFORE PUBLICATION. Published with spaces indicating the exact location and length of the 168 deletions demanded by the CIA.

From the cover of Marchetti and Marks (1974).

## *All the President's Men*

*All the President's Men* is famous for being the book by the two reporters from the *Washington Post* who pursued the Watergate story from its beginning. Published in 1974, its appearance before the resignation of Nixon guaranteed it an aura of topicality. This is not really something that can be said in the same way about its quasi-sequel, *The Final Days* (1976), which recounts details in a more historical mode. *All the President's Men* is very much a narrative of events from a limited perspective, based around the two journalist protagonists acting, in the main, as one. It proceeds in a series of unnamed chapters, retelling events chronologically where possible but seemingly only relating knowledge that was available to the reporters at the time. That is to say that the narration of events does not declare that any supplementary knowledge about them was acquired subsequently and fitted into the narration. In contrast, *The Final Days* proceeds with a series of chapters then a number of chronologically arranged sections all dealing with a specific date. It also presents itself as a chronicle of a period and, in this way, is more akin to the practice of history. Paradoxically, however, it contains numerous reproduced conversations and accounts of the thoughts of the participants involved in these conversations (e.g. Nixon and White House staff), details which could not have been directly witnessed by the authors.<sup>1</sup> The manner in which *All the President's Men* makes no bones about its limited perspective - indeed, it is its very selling point: by "The Washington Post reporters who first unearthed Watergate" proclaims the first British edition - could therefore emphasize its authenticity. On this point it is worth noting the first sentences of the narrative:

June 17, 1972. Nine o'clock Saturday morning. Early for the telephone. Woodward fumbled for the receiver and snapped awake (Woodward and Bernstein p. 13).

The content of the first two sentences is historical, factual and verifiable. The next sentence then introduces a character: there must be someone *for whom* the telephone call is early. However, concern over the earliness of a telephone call could be said to be an

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<sup>1</sup> In a note on page 9, Woodward and Bernstein attribute co-author status to Al Kamen and Scott Armstrong.



almost universal phenomenon and virtually lends the sentence the historical, factual, verifiable status of the previous two. This then allows the elision from a historical mode into a realm of character as Woodward becomes a part of the narrative. At this stage a reader may ask what is known of the character and, perhaps on the basis of extra-textual information, who narrates. An answer of sorts is offered in the first few pages when the scene shifts to the *Washington Post* offices where Woodward embarks on some work.

As Woodward began making phone calls, he noticed that Bernstein, one of the paper's two Virginia political reporters, was working on the burglary story, too.

Oh God, not Bernstein, Woodward thought, recalling several office tales about Bernstein's ability to push his way into a good story and get his byline on it.

That morning, Bernstein had Xeroxed copies of notes from reporters at the scene and informed the city editor that he would make some more checks. The city editor had shrugged his acceptance, and Bernstein had begun a series of phone calls to everybody at the Watergate he could reach - desk clerks, bellmen, maids in the housekeeping department, waiters in the restaurant.

Bernstein looked across the newsroom. There was a pillar between his desk and Woodward's, about 25 feet away. He stepped back several paces. It appeared that Woodward was also working on the story. That figured, Bernstein thought. Bob Woodward was a prima donna who played heavily at office politics (pp. 14-15).

The narrative in this passage shifts perspective from one character to another. Previously Woodward has been working on the story and the events narrated are ones in which he has been involved. It is therefore his impression of Bernstein which is offered first.

Then, for the first time, the narrative's perspective shifts and we get Bernstein's impression of Woodward. It is significant that this is achieved by an almost cinematic device: the narrative's initiation of Bernstein's perspective begins with a look to Woodward's side of the office, the space from where Woodward's look and assessment of Bernstein's character has just been made. For the reader, the point of all this at the level of narration, is to satisfy any questions about who narrates rather than the humour of their initial antagonism. An assumption could be made that each reporter narrates his part of the story and they co-narrate in some way the parts which involve them both.

However, it is interesting that a case could be made for this scene alone being the work of just one narrator out of the two: Woodward, in assessing Bernstein prior to the above quote, uses the phrase "That figured"; a paragraph or so later, Bernstein will use the same phrase. Barring coincidence, one might then assume that it is the work of one narrator. In

addition, the following pages are concerned with an elucidation of Bernstein's writing skills in contrast to Woodward's lack of such skills - perhaps, then, Bernstein did all the writing. An investigation of this kind could be carried on throughout the rest of the book; for our purposes it suffices to say firstly that what is significant is that the extra-textual cues in reading this text have the capacity to foster speculation of this kind and, secondly, that the narrative from the outset also allows for the reading of it as a narration by a unitary entity: Woodstein.

One of the consequences of the limited perspective of the narration is that, unlike the Olympian narration of *The Final Days*, it gives rise to a story revolving around a small group's battle against a larger world and its search for the knowledge that is hidden from it. As we have noted, *The Final Days*, because of its omniscient narration, gives a view of a wide range of conversations and even the thoughts of their participants. *All the President's Men* does not have such omniscience; however, the fact that it appears in mid-1974 for the first time suggests that a contemporary reading would impute such omniscience to the narrative in any case as readers would be aware of the key Watergate events up to this period including those that occurred outside the time-scale of the book and those that occurred within its time-scale. Another reading which this fact about the narration may encourage is the theme of hidden knowledge. This is stated most explicitly just under half way through the book: a national staff reporter at the *Washington Post*, Marilyn Berger, wrote a memo for Woodward and Bernstein; in it she gave details about a conversation she had had with Ken Clawson, an ex-*Post* reporter and now White House Deputy Director of Communications:

In the course of the discussion (I would say about the first ten minutes or so) we started talking about being a reporter and being a government official. He said we reporters knew only a fraction of what goes on. I asked him if, now that he was in the White House, he would be a better reporter when he left. He said he had covered the White House before, but could *really* cover it now (p. 138).

This hidden knowledge seems to be what *All the President's Men* is about. Not only does the book give the 'truth' and the 'inside' account of Watergate but it promises knowledge which has hitherto been unavailable to the public. As the public presumably knows a



certain amount about the affair, this book serves as a *fuller version*. At the same time, though, the narrative hints at a version that cannot yet be known. On the one hand, the events unfold from a narrative perspective that is slightly different from that of the reader; for instance, when Bernstein learns of a programme of political sabotage called "ratfucking" he pauses for thought:

For the first time he considered the possibility that the President of the United States was the head ratfucker (p. 129).

The contemporary reader will very probably have more knowledge than Bernstein the protagonist at this stage. However, the book leaves off before it can proceed to Watergate's quasi-conclusion in the resignation of Richard Nixon; despite the conclusiveness of much of the evidence presented the whole story is left unresolved. So the narrative of *All the President's Men* reveals those hidden details that it can. As we have noted in Chapter 3, the logic by which the details of Watergate were revealed in the period was based around a process of revelation followed by delay followed by revelation, and so on, that we will discuss in more detail in the Chapter 7. *All the President's Men* preserves the logic of such revelations in its own way by leaving out some details about the affair for various reasons. So, while its selling-point is that it might tell the reader about all those details that the reader might not have acquired with regard to a story s/he already knows, it also delays those details and shows itself unable to narrate other details, for example conversations between White House staff.

One of the consequences of the hidden knowledge theme that is thoroughly imbricated with the narrative is the mirroring of the incremental nature of the Watergate story and the mounting potential for 'paranoid' interpretations of events by some of its protagonists.

Referring to a *New York Times* article on Alfred Baldwin, a security guard of the Committee to Re-elect the President, the narrative says

The *Times*' interview with Baldwin had been the most vivid piece of journalism in the whole Watergate saga, definitively portraying the difference between a 'third-rate burglary attempt' and the brand of political gang warfare practiced by the President's men (p. 225).

This movement, by means of a long process of mounting revelations, from a bungled petty crime to wholesale corruption, engendered an atmosphere of continuing interpretation which the narrative tries to suggest. Howard Simons, the *Post's* Managing Editor puts it this way:

I had this nagging feeling that the Watergate might turn out like the Reichstag fire. You know, forty years from now people will still be asking did the guy set it and was he a German or just a crazy Dutchman? . . . I'll tell you, it's like being in a bathtub, where scientifically, you know, you turn the water a little bit hotter at a time and burn yourself to death without realizing it because the increments are so small that the body doesn't understand or feel. . . . That's the difference between Watergate and the Pentagon Papers. In the Pentagon Papers, damn, you had the lawyers involved the first day . . . getting advice, and Katharine actually making the decision to publish. Nothing like that happened with Watergate. We never called the lawyers and said, Are we okay, what's the legal view of this? I do think we did slip into it. It was incremental (p. 236).

Although one could make an analogy with a hot bath this would have to be tempered with a realization of the amount of fear generated among protagonists of the narrative. The space between revelations in the actual Watergate affair presumably allowed for speculations and interpretations to be made on the part of those for whom the revelations were made. In *All the President's Men* this is equally the case: not only is there the provision for interpretation but the character of that interpretation is based around the question of why full disclosures were not made and speculations about reasons for this, such as hostility. When Bernstein contacts former Attorney General and current Nixon Campaign Manager, John Mitchell, and informs him over the telephone that the *Post* intends to run a story on the secret fund he used to gather information on the Democrats he is met first by a reaction of extreme surprise followed by hostility:

For Bernstein, the only constant had been an adrenal feeling that began with Mitchell's first JEEEEEEEEESUS - some sort of primal scream. As the cry of JEEEEEEEEESUS was repeated, Bernstein had perceived the excruciating depth of Mitchell's hurt. For a moment, he had been afraid that Mitchell might die on the telephone and, for the first time Mitchell was flesh and blood, not Nixon's campaign manager, the shadow of Kent State, Carswell's keeper, the high sheriff of Law and Order, the jowled heavy of Watergate. Bernstein's skin felt prickly. Mitchell had escaped indictment by the grand jury, which would keep his secrets, but the reporters had said the words out loud. Though using the neutral language of a reporter's trade, they had called John Mitchell a crook. Bernstein did not savor the moment. Mitchell's tone was so filled with hate and loathing that Bernstein had felt threatened. Bernstein was shocked at his language, his ugliness. *Did the committee tell you to go ahead and publish that story? We're going to do a story on all of you.* Mitchell had said 'we'. Once the election was over they could do almost anything they damn well pleased. And get away with it (pp. 105-6).

Bernstein's interpretation of the word "we" is only further emphasized by the suspense-generating mention of what might happen after the election. If this wasn't enough then an



inspiration of fear by a colleague is more explicit. Executive Editor of the *Post*, Ben Bradlee, tells Woodward and Bernstein soon after the Mitchell article:

'I understated it before', he said. 'This is the hardest hardball that's ever been played in this town. We all have to be very careful, in the office and out. I don't want to know anything about your personal lives, that's your business'. But if the reporters were doing anything that they didn't want known, 'cut it out', Bradlee advised. Watch who you talk to, who you hang round with; be careful on the telephones; start saving receipts for income taxes and get a lawyer to handle any future tax matters; make sure nobody brings any dope into your house; be restrained in what you say to others about the President and the administration (p. 166).

Such statements encourage Woodward and Bernstein into a number of interpretations of hostility. Seemingly innocent situations suddenly become charged with meaning. For instance, Bernstein meets an FBI source in the innocent, clean and touristy atmosphere of the White House compound:

They turned north on East Executive Avenue, walking on the Treasury Department side of the street, directly across from the East Wing of the White House. The agent paused to tie his shoe, raising his foot onto the Treasury fence to balance himself. Bernstein looked around. There was a long line of tourists, many of them with cameras, waiting to enter the White House. The agent retied his other shoe. Maybe Bernstein was getting paranoid, but he was beginning to think the stop was intended to get his picture taken. It was the perfect place, all those tourists with their cameras; but why bother? Anybody could get his picture from the *Post* files. The agent's behavior hardly dissipated the paranoia. The G-man paused for another 30 seconds or so to ask additional questions about Mitchell, casually holding on to the fence with one hand. Finally, they resumed their walk toward Lafayette Square and sat chatting on a bench for a few minutes without parting (p. 176).

Although the scene may be perceived to have a double meaning it is significant that within the realm of the narrative tourists with cameras would seem to suggest possible surveillance by security forces. Whether this is a reading that is valid depends, of course, on other factors than the narrative alone, especially as an ultimate answer to the riddle is not provided. The other scenes of putative paranoia will depend partly on a knowledge of the Watergate affair for a reading of them as such.

One of the most celebrated revelations of *All the President's Men* concerned Woodward and Bernstein's sources who had usually remained anonymous in the actual newspaper reports that had cited them. However, with regard to the main source, it was a non-revelation. Woodward's key contact, dubbed Deep Throat by Howard Simons after a famous pornographic film of the period, remains unnamed, a fact that elicited various speculations. Haldeman, for instance, devotes a chapter of his memoirs to the question, quoting rumours that Bernstein withheld Deep Throat's identity in order to protect the

CIA but ultimately deciding that his true identity was Fred Fielding, John Dean's staff assistant (1978 pp. 135-137). On the set of the film of *All the President's Men*, actors Martin Balsam, Jack Warden and Jason Robards believed that

he was doubtless a she - possibly Rose Mary Woods or a fed-up Pat Nixon ('Watergate on Film' *Time* 29 March 1976 p. 43)

while one reviewer questioned what the film's narrative tried to suggest:

[Deep Throat is] cast as a man, so not Martha Mitchell. In reality, maybe even a group of people? Or someone in the F.B.I.? (Gilliatt 1976).

Clearly, the figure of Deep Throat provoked a lot of interest and not only does s/he lie at the heart of the narrative's logic of revelation and delay but s/he also embodies the story's paranoid motif. This is evident from the moment of Deep Throat's entry into the narrative; all those subsequent passages where the figure appears take on the paraphernalia of a spy story, utilising codes, secret rendezvous, the fear of surveillance, darkness and subterranean locations. The first meeting is set up as follows:

At first Woodward and Deep Throat had talked by telephone, but as the tensions of Watergate increased, Deep Throat's nervousness grew. He didn't want to talk on the telephone, but had said they could meet somewhere on occasion.

Deep Throat didn't want to use the phone even to set up the meetings. He suggested that Woodward open the drapes in his apartment as a signal. Deep Throat could check each day; if the drapes were open, the two would meet that night. But Woodward liked to let the sun in at times, and suggested another signal.

Several years earlier, Woodward had found a red cloth flag lying in the street. Barely one foot square, it was attached to a stick, the type of warning device used on the back of a truck carrying a projecting load. Woodward had taken the flag back to his apartment and one of his friends had stuck it into an old flowerpot on the balcony. It had stayed there.

When Woodward had an urgent inquiry to make, he would move the flower pot with the red flag to the rear of the balcony. During the day, Deep Throat would check to see if the pot had been moved. If it had, he and Woodward would meet at about 2:00 A.M. in a pre-designated underground parking garage. Woodward would leave his sixth-floor apartment and walk down the back stairs into an alley.

Walking and taking two or more taxis to the garage, he could be reasonably sure that no one had followed him. In the garage, the two could talk for an hour or more without being seen. If taxis were hard to find, as they often were late at night, it might take Woodward almost two hours to get there on foot. On two occasions, a meeting had been set and the man had not shown up - a depressing and frightening experience, as Woodward had waited for more than an hour, alone in an underground garage in the middle of the night. Once he had thought he was being followed - two well dressed men had stayed behind him for five or six blocks, but he had ducked into an alley and not seen them again.

If Deep Throat wanted a meeting - which was rare - there was a different procedure. Each morning, Woodward would check page 20 of his *New York Times*, delivered to his apartment house before 7:00 A.M. If a meeting was requested, the page number would be circled and the hands of a clock indicating the time of the rendezvous would appear in a lower corner of the page. Woodward did not know how Deep Throat got to his paper (p. 72).



The full elaboration of the procedure only contributes in a small way to the veracity of the overall account of the events; instead, the full details for the meetings seem to be present to actually foster and encourage the spy-novelistic interpretation of the clandestine rendezvous which took place. As both a figure in the real story and as a narrative device, Deep Throat serves the same general function. In order for Woodward and Bernstein's 'paranoid' interpretations about the Nixon administration to continue they require some kind of verification. Deep Throat provides confirmation of the suspicions resulting from prior research and encourages further research and conclusions. Most explicitly, Deep Throat coaxes Woodward into scrutinizing the wider picture:

'Check every lead', Deep Throat advised. 'It goes all over the map, and that is important. You could write stories from now until Christmas or well beyond that . . . Not one of the games [his term for undercover operations] was free-lance. This is important. Every one was tied in' (p. 132).

Considering the wider picture has its repercussions, however. The mounting interpretations, coupled with the clandestine nature of their liaisons provoke fear in Woodward:

Deep Throat rarely missed an appointment. In the dark, cold garage, Woodward began thinking the unthinkable. It would not have been difficult for Haldeman to learn that the reporters were making inquiries about him. Maybe Deep Throat had been spotted? Woodward followed? People crazy enough to hire Gordon Liddy and Howard Hunt were crazy enough to do other things. Woodward got mad at himself for becoming irrational, tried to put out of his head the vision of some goon squad terrorizing Deep Throat. Would it leave a black glove with a knife stuck through the palm in Deep Throat's car? What did a 1972 goon squad do, especially if it worked for the White House? Woodward went outside to look around, and then walked back down the ramp into the black. He spent another half-hour becoming more and more terrified - of exactly what he wasn't sure - and then ran from the garage and most of the way home. He told Bernstein later that day that Deep Throat had failed to show. There were a hundred possible explanations, but they both worried (p. 172).

Once again, this passage concludes that there were a hundred explanations, and the narrative later furnishes one, yet as Woodward and Bernstein worry, the reader with a knowledge of the Watergate affair, especially the reputations of Hunt and Liddy, and/or a knowledge of the conventions of spy fiction will posit that the two journalists fear terminal physical retribution. As if in confirmation of this, the next meeting witnesses a more explicit warning from Deep Throat:

The night of May 16, on the eve of the hearings, Woodward set out for a meeting with Deep Throat. It would be the first since Haldeman and Ehrlichman had resigned, and Woodward figured his friend would be in a good mood. At their last meeting, Deep Throat had told him they could meet earlier, say about 11:00 P.M.

Cabs were easier to find at that hour, and the trip did not take as long as usual, but Deep Throat was in the garage when Woodward arrived. He was pacing about nervously. His lower jaw seemed to quiver.

Deep Throat began talking, almost in a monologue. He had only a few minutes; he raced through a series of statements. Woodward listened obediently. It was clear that a transformation had come over his friends. Woodward had dozens of questions, but Deep Throat held up his hand.

'That's the situation', he said when he had finished. 'I must go this second. You can understand. Be - well, I'll say it - be cautious'.

He stepped away and hurried from the garage.

Woodward got out his notebook and wrote it all down. When he got back to his apartment a little after midnight, he called Bernstein.

Can you come over? Woodward asked.

Sure, Bernstein said. At Woodward's apartment building he rang the outside buzzer. Woodward met him at the elevator.

What's up? Bernstein asked.

Woodward put his finger over his lips to indicate silence.

Bernstein wondered if Woodward had gone crazy or if it was some gag. They walked down the hall to Woodward's apartment. Once inside, Woodward put on some music. A Rachmaninoff piano concerto. Bernstein noted what awful taste Woodward had in classical music. Woodward then drew the draperies over the large windows overlooking the city to the east. At his dining-room table, Woodward typed out a note and passed it to Bernstein.

*Everyone's life is in danger* (pp. 316-317).

What Deep Throat is referring to in this passage and what Woodward attempts to protect against, as the narrative subsequently implies, is electronic surveillance by the CIA.

Throughout the narrative, Deep Throat's information has been couched in very oblique terms and, logically, at a time when lives were in danger, this obliqueness would be bound to diminish. Yet the logic of the narrative demands that a full disclosure not take place immediately; this is dramatized at an earlier point:

Just once, Woodward wished, Deep Throat would really tell him what was up - everything, no questions asked, no tug of wills, a full status report. The reporters had speculated on the reason for Deep Throat's piecemeal approach; they had several theories. If he told everything he knew all at once, a good Plumber might be able to find the leak. By making the reporters go elsewhere to fill out his information, he minimized the risk. Perhaps (p. 243).

The "perhaps" at the end of this passage is very telling. The activities of the plumbers cannot be known, they can only remain a matter for speculation. This is the key to Deep Throat's role: ultimately anonymous, he embodies the promise of ultimate knowledge that the narrative cannot really fulfil. As a potent figure evoking spy fiction paradigms and as a real 'gap' in the narrative, being without a real name, Deep Throat is the pivot around which *All the President's Men* can be read. A focus on Deep Throat's role - which is



always possible as s/he draws the poles of the White House and the *Washington Post* together - produces a specific perspective on the Watergate affair.

Another perspective on Watergate which is historically very important and which is contained in the book is delineated by some of the affair's protagonists. This is the equation of the public exposure of political procedures in the 1970s with that of the 1950s. The prime example of an approach to politics by means of public trials is embodied in the connotations of the term 'McCarthyism'. Put in very general terms, the early 1950s could be seen to be a time of public exposure of politicians on the left; the early 1970s, then, would be a time of the same exposure and persecution of politicians from the right. This is certainly the view held by a number of protagonists in Watergate; for example, following the election, Colson attacks the *Post* for its 'witchhunt':

Assuring his audience that 'the First Amendment is alive and well in Washington', he accused the *Post* of McCarthyism and called Bradlee 'the self-appointed leader of what Boston's Teddy White once described as 'that tiny little fringe of arrogant elitists who affect the healthy mainstream of American journalism with their own peculiar view of the world'. . . (p. 205).

Similarly, another source sought to depict the swing of the pendulum of persecution from one end of the political spectrum to the other by invoking the 1950s; s/he says of Hunt's silence that

Howard is performing a heroic act. He's like a medieval monk who goes to meditate in a high place in the hope it will get him into heaven . . . Howard wants to become the Alger Hiss of the Right (p. 238).

The core of this equation is that there is one general strategy of exposing political matters to public view. This involves hyping such exposure until it can be identified as an 'affair'; according to this equation the strategy remains the same but the political label changes from McCarthyism to Watergate. *All the President's Men* allows this voice to be heard, although in terms of the narrative it is shown to be a fundamental misunderstanding of what went on during Watergate, mainly because the White House was found guilty of illegal practices on a large scale. (The equation with McCarthyism is a key topic of paranoid thrillers, see Chapter 9, below). The main reading of the affair that the narrative seems to suggest is different, therefore, from that of some of the narrative's subsidiary actors. This is a significant point: if the accusation of 'reverse

McCarthyism' is made by subsidiary actors in the narrative it is counterposed to the mainstream analysis of the narrative. *All the President's Men* is a very complex narrative; there is so much expected difficulty in working out who the actors *are* - apart from those who would be instantly recognizable to a contemporary American audience - that the book begins with a cast of characters and their roles. Nixon, for instance, had numerous aides in the White House who, themselves, had various aides working for them. In this way, the story is very much about the crises of delegation; as a result, the links between players such as Donald Segretti, an attorney in California, and Bernard Barker, a Cuban burglar, are difficult for the uninitiated to negotiate. The diffuse nature of the players in the narrative - particularly those who represent the Nixon camp - dictates that their exact political positions are never really clear, and their support of the Nixon administration is often tempered by internecine rivalries. As a result, such equations as 'reverse McCarthyism' are marginal and represent a conflict of voices. This necessitates that the narrative have some kind of core voice which makes sense of the diffuse strands of the conspiracy. If there is a conflict of voices within the narrative, what *Deep Throat* provides is a way of drawing all the strands of the story back to the White House in a quite definite way.

Clearly, *Deep Throat* provides the possibility of reading the narrative in such a way as to reduce its extraordinary complexity. Yet this is not the only way in which the complications of the narrative can be reduced: it is worth considering how the film of the book contributed to such a process. Within two years of the publication of *All the President's Men* a high profile film of the story had been released. In spite of this lag of time between the two texts, it could be argued that destinies of both the book and the film versions were intertwined from the outset and the enunciative dimension of the latter shaped the narrative of the former. Woodward explained later,

We conceived of the project as a book on Howard Hunt, Gordon Liddy and John Mitchell - what those three and some other people did connected with Watergate and the concealment (BFI Production Notes on *All the President's Men*. p. 4).



However, before he and Bernstein could embark on this project their path was deflected. Robert Redford became interested in their journalistic work and soon after meeting Woodward persuaded them that they had a filmable story. Woodward adds,

Then we realised we should tell it as a personal story, tell our corner of it. So we wrote the book as a personal narrative, to a certain extent on Redford's suggestion (BFI Production Notes p. 4).

Hence the limited perspective which we have discussed out of which a book geared toward cinematic representation was born. Nevertheless, the difference between cinematic modes of narration and print modes entails that there are significant differences between the two texts. These differences could lead to different readings of each text and the consequences of the events depicted. At one level, there is the difference caused by the amount of material that has to be negotiated by the film; one reviewer suggests that

Any film adaptation of a book as eventful and heavily populated as 'All the President's Men' is bound to involve a considerable amount of foreshortening and transposition (Arnold 1976b).

These comments of Gary Arnold, delivered appropriately enough in the *Washington Post*, were followed by an in-depth consideration of how the film differed from the book in terms of empirical details which the latter failed to incorporate owing to restrictions on length. However, the omission of details in a cinematic version can never be the only difference in such cases of adaptation; the very nature of the medium of film plays a crucial role.

As far as audiences were concerned the film of *All the President's Men* was most immediately notable because two of America's most famous film stars of the period played the lead roles. Dustin Hoffman played Bernstein and Robert Redford played Woodward. As we have seen, the latter was involved in the production from an early stage and he stated a preference for the allocation of the roles to two unknown actors in order to mirror the initial obscurity of the two journalists. The high bidding by companies wishing to make the film meant that Redford, who had purchased the rights to the story, would have to take a leading role in order to ensure that box-office receipts would give sufficient return on the investment (BFI Production Notes p. 5). In the case of *All the President's Men*, probably even more than the average Hollywood film, one cannot make

judgements on its construction of meaning without taking into account the role of its stars. Work such as that of Dyer (1979) has demonstrated the cultural and ideological baggage that stars always carry; but, in this film, in addition to such baggage Redford's presence had direct effects on the narrative. Apart from his role in the genesis of the project, Arnold points out that

Robert Redford's last movie, 'Three Days of the Condor', was a political espionage thriller that closed with an expression of faith in the integrity of the American press, symbolized by The New York Times. Or, to be precise, The New York Times *Building*. The tribute couldn't have been more sincere, but at least in Washington it struck audiences as inadvertently funny. Any hip moviegoer realized whose turn was next (Arnold 1976b).

Redford's liberal credentials were thus supplemented and possibly reinforced by his appearance in this taut paranoid thriller immediately before taking on the role of Woodward. The similarity between *All the President's Men* and *Three Days of the Condor*, and the latter's influence on the reading of the former was likely to be strengthened by the presence of Redford. Moreover, *All the President's Men* had the added cachet of its non-fictionality; that is to say, a prominent potential reading could be based around the adage that 'truth is stranger than fiction'. This is not solely the work of Redford, of course; the book had sold 2,750,000 copies by the end of 1975 and publications such as *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *Denver Post* had called it a "political thriller" and "one of the greatest detective stories ever told" (BFI Production Notes p. 5). It was widely reported that

Redford saw the film as a detective story not as a polemic against Nixon ('Watergate on Film' p. 42).

He added:

I was fascinated partly because it was a David and Goliath story (BFI Production Notes p. 5).

Inevitably, these comments were seized upon and used to draw parallels between the film's meaning and its star:

In short, he may have become a Goliath in his trade, but his heart belongs to the Davids ('Watergate on Film' p. 42).

It also became known that Redford's initial interest in the project was aroused in summer 1972 while he was on tour to promote his film, *The Candidate*, about an idealist who runs for the Senate. After the Watergate break-in he overheard a conversation between some reporters who were convinced that Nixon was directly responsible but were



indifferent because they knew it was difficult to prove. This story appeared in a number of reviews, yet one chose to supplement it with the following anecdote:

Back home in Van Nuys, Calif., when Redford, then 13, had won a tennis tournament, Senator Richard Nixon had awarded him the trophy. Young Bob was not impressed: 'I thought, what a non-person. This fake human' (ibid. p. 41).

The political story of Watergate is effectively transposed onto a personal one in this anecdote. In this context, Woodward and Bernstein/Redford and Hoffman could be said to be engaged in a battle in the name of good, against people who are not only corrupt but unpleasantly corrupt. This is very close, therefore, to the kind of knee-jerk reactions that all politicians are crooked or that Nixon was simply a crook. What this information does is to provide a space for possible readings of the texts of *All the President's Men*.

Following these cues a reading might be orientated towards the triumph of liberalism over despotism. In the light of the book's theme a detective story without a polemic against Nixon is an oxymoron: the narrative is continually homing in on the White House. The book, as we have seen, does offer the chance to lessen the effects of its great complexity via the figure of Deep Throat. The film is no less complex with a vast array of characters and a viewing time of approximately two and a half hours. Yet, while the film struggles against the impulse to compromise the complexity of the events in this sphere, extra-textual cues such as we have discussed might operate in this manner in tandem with the film's narrative.

Without subjecting the film to an overintensive scrutiny, it can be shown that the reading encouraged by some of the extra-textual cues is quite clearly available in a couple of the key parts of the film's narrative which depart from the book. The opening and the final scenes are good examples of features of the narrative which draw the reading back to a single solution. Unlike the book, the film opens with a scene involving the President; the spectator sees an extreme close up of typewriter keys striking paper and printing the words which fill the screen, "June 1, 1972" (16 days before the break-in). This is followed by film of Nixon in the summer of 1972 getting out of a landed helicopter in the grounds of the Capitol, Washington D.C. and then, in a swift cut to a new scene,

addressing both houses of Congress. This is accompanied by a voice-over describing the President's on-schedule arrival, his address to Congress and, finally, as his face is seen directly looking into the camera in close-up, the information that Nixon will now address the nation. There is then darkness. The film's titles follow this scene and while they run the film begins 'proper' with a scene which is set in the Watergate building as it is being burgled by the Cubans and McCord. The opening scene is directly related to the very final one in the film and they act together as a framing device. In the final scene there is a long shot of the *Washington Post* offices after Woodward and Bernstein have accumulated the bulk of their evidence in the affair and had it confirmed by sources. Woodward (Redford) and Bernstein (Hoffman) are in the middle distance, amidst the office desks, equipment, cabinets and other busy *Post* workers as they have been often during the scenes set in this office throughout the film. At the furthest back point of the foreground a television on an office table is pouring out a broadcast of the Presidential Inauguration on the 20 January 1973. The camera gradually and very slowly zooms in to focus on the TV until eventually the television screen occupies the left half of the cinema screen while the frantically typing Woodward and Bernstein are on the right. As it does this, various parts of the office are to be seen in the background such as Woodward busily typing while the sound of Nixon's oath-taking and pledging of allegiance is to be heard vying for prominence with the typing noise on the soundtrack. As the ceremonial guns are fired at the end of the inauguration broadcast there is a slow fade to the scene that has hitherto only occupied the right-hand side: Woodward and Bernstein. Then there is a sudden cut to a slightly less close-up shot of the typewriter key this time printing out the details of the rest of the Watergate affair in brief, including the the guilty pleas of Magruder, Colson, Ehrlichman et al., followed by Nixon's resignation and the swearing in of Gerald Ford "at noon today". Although this is theoretically a conclusion to the story, it was pointed out at the time that

The film stops well before the link to Nixon himself is established, leaving an odd sense of unfinished history ('Watergate on Film' pp. 40-41).



What this framing device seems to do, then, is to provide a potential reading of the text in which Nixon is the ultimate villain in the midst of the whole complexity of the evidence without anybody actually saying so. Woodward and Bernstein's investigations, the legwork involving interviews with people on the diminishing list of operatives of the Committee to Re-elect the President, requires that they continually ask leading questions of people who want to yield information but are psychologically unable to bring themselves to do so. The film's implication of Nixon is a bit like this. It opens and closes with the President; it strongly implicates him but does not focus on his resignation or exposed culpability. The final slow zoom of the camera towards the TV screen allows for the monumental irony of the high-flown rhetoric of the inauguration ceremony filling the soundtrack while the primacy of the visual assists in informing the spectator that the seeds of the President's downfall are being sown broadcast over the typewriters of the *Washington Post*.

A further area where the film's specificity can be seen to allow a reading aligned with this is in its lighting. The very first scene following the titles depicts the break-in; the titles have initially proceeded against a black background, then a light from a torch enters and there are dimly lit views of interiors including one of an underground car park which looks remarkably like the one that Deep Throat will use for his meetings with Woodward later in the film. In one corner of the car park a man opens a door and there is a cut to a close-up of the handle as he does so and the spectator can see that there is some tape on the door. The man is the Watergate security guard playing himself, re-enacting his alert to the police after his suspicion was aroused by the taped door. The following scenes with the arrival of the police and the capture of the burglars are all carried out in darkness or semi-darkness. It is therefore a stark contrast to see the interior of the *Washington Post* office. The reconstruction of the real *Post* offices for the film was said by Ben Bradlee and others to be exceedingly accurate when they visited it at Burbank studios in California. Costing \$450,000 ('Watergate on Film' p. 40), the chief feature was the concealed, but very bright lighting, that illuminated the offices and which is accentuated

by the continual use of low camera angles whenever a scene is set there. The constant noise of machinery also contrasts with the quiet and still scenes that take place outside the office. Most of the outdoor scenes, even those initial ones that take place in summer, are characterized by a half-light as though they were shot naturally at dusk. When Woodward first contacts Deep Throat it is from a callbox lit in this fashion. The actual meetings with Deep Throat are another matter: most of these took place at around 3 a.m. and all of them took place in an underground car park. There is enough indirect light in these scenes to recognize that Woodward's source is played by Hal Holbrook; but it is worth noting that the source of the light is usually to one side of the picture frame: it consists of a series of long but broad strips which are like a dim parody of the lighting in the *Post* office. The drama of the story if taken in these lighting terms is quite literally couched in terms of black and white: the burglars operate in murky darkness whereas the newspaper exists in the harsh light of truth. Deep Throat occupies an ambivalent position caught between two antagonists in the story and two lighting strategies. On the one hand he represents the light of information and his voluntary association with the *Washington Post*; on the other he is steeped in the dark aura of the White House and its activities. In the initial meetings Woodward is illuminated by two indirect lights, while Deep Throat is lit indirectly by one. In the final meeting the latter is very nervous and he warns Woodward of surveillance operations; he then disappears suddenly without a farewell, but up until this point in the meeting he has been in almost complete darkness. The possible reason for the implementation of such lighting techniques can be viewed as central to the film's project, promoting the same speculation about its meaning on the part of the reader as the inconclusiveness of the final scenes. In the scene where Woodward gets frightened and starts to run, he suddenly turns around as if to see what it was that was pursuing him: he sees a street partially illuminated by artificial light. The source of his fear is therefore not explicitly stated but can, perhaps, be gleaned from the way light has been previously used in the narrative: that is, as a contrast between legitimate and illegitimate activities.



Contemporary readings of *All the Presidents Men* fall between a number of competing determinants. Prior knowledge of current events and their short-term outcome is obviously important. However, the meaning of these events is caught up in the need to represent them in a nutshell. *All the President's Men* is a very complex narrative but is a thriller with a resolution and there are two consequences of this. Firstly, the combination of these two facts means that there is a familiar narrative way of reducing the difficulties of the events to a reasonably simple story revolving around the corruption of a handful of people and, ultimately, the President. Secondly, the combination of these two facts is affected by the non-fictionality of the events depicted: the thriller aspect of the narration provides coherence but the complexity of the events is actually sanctioned by their non-fictionality. That is to say, they fulfil the adage that truth is stranger than fiction. Added to this tension are the specifically cinematic aspects of the film version which encourage a reading of the story in a manner appropriate to its particular medium. In the book, the complicity of the President is continually mitigated by the importance of his aides, especially Ehrlichman and Haldeman. The film does not have the capacity to emphasize their role and in any case, it was well-known by 1976 that both had resigned and pleaded guilty. Instead, the film relies on a Nixon framing device to make the route to the President seem that much more direct without explicitly saying so. Lastly, the publicity that surrounded the film assisted in encouraging a similar reading; for instance, as we have seen, the narrative of the film, if scrutinized, concludes with Gerald Ford. This did not stop articles claiming that it stopped before Nixon's resignation.

*All the President's Men* is quite clearly an important non-fiction political thriller. It stands out in the 1970s as *the* text about Watergate, a text whose veracity is almost beyond question by virtue of the narrators' key role in the events depicted. As such, then, *All the President's Men* can be seen to be very close to the events. But if we look at this idea more closely, the events are only ever available insofar as they are mediated by signs and discourses. The interesting fact about *All the President's Men* is that it is difficult to separate the text as a category from those other discourses that present social and political

reality in the contemporary period. If one were to say that news discourses have primacy over a narrative published in book form one would have to take into account in this case the fact that the authors of this book were actually designated as the makers of the news by other texts. The topicality of the book was so great as to draw into question for some time the categories of news and non-fiction thriller as distinct entities. This is one demonstration that 'reality' - in this case, the key political event of the century - is not available directly as an unmediated entity but by means of discourse. As a result, the epistemological primacy of a given discourse can only be established from without, and in the case of *All the President's Men*, such an epistemological primacy of other discourses over it is difficult to maintain convincingly. The narrativity that characterizes a range of presentations of the world - a fact to which White (above) has done much to draw our attention - entails that within this realm there is the potential of slippage and overlap between discourses. The potential indeterminacies of narratives - be they news, non-fiction texts or generic narratives - all exist within a general realm of narrativity. As a result, narratives of all kinds are pre-eminently capable of allowing their potential indeterminacies to be always already filled by other narratives. That is to say that narratives will be read within a frame of reference of a limited set of other narratives within a reading formation, to an extent where a given narrative, in a given reading, can almost be said to *contain* those other narratives. The slippage and overlap between texts is what we are addressing in this chapter and, for the thriller, these phenomena take place in quite a specific manner. The means by which those other narratives in a reading formation are limited and the way in which they are *contained* will become clear throughout the rest of this chapter. Contemporary history as mediated by a range of texts, is therefore crucial and reader investment in *All the President's Men* must have been considerable given that Watergate was the political event of the decade. Yet Watergate did not exist in a vacuum and, as we have seen, one of the other major events of the decade concerned the war in Vietnam. Before actually moving on to a non-fiction narrative about Vietnam, it is worth pausing to consider briefly a work that approached one aspect of *All the President's Men* - the work of intelligence agencies - from a different perspective.



## *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence*

If *All the President's Men* promises to tell as much as it knows then *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* does not. As the quote at the beginning of this chapter suggests, the book is censored. The cover also points out that this is

THE FIRST BOOK IN AMERICAN HISTORY TO BE SUBJECT TO PRE-PUBLICATION CENSORSHIP.

Marchetti explains that the CIA

have secured an unwarranted and outrageous *permanent* injunction against me, requiring that anything I write or say, '*factual, fictional or otherwise*', on the subject of intelligence must first be censored by the CIA. Under risk of criminal court, I can speak only at my own peril and must allow the CIA thirty days to review, and excise, my writings - prior to submitting them to a publisher for consideration (1974 p. 13).

As a result of this situation 168 different details from the book have been deleted while some that were previously deleted and then allowed are printed in boldface type. For this reason alone the book is an interesting document. Not only does it contain potential indeterminacies but it actually has *real and tangible* gaps. Furthermore, the gaps are presented as the book's selling point. Ungar points out that the book received substantial publicity as a result of the deletions and went on to have considerable sales (1989 p. 311). If one follows the logic of Fish's argument and holds that texts have potential indeterminacies then it is possible that the readers and purchasers of Marchetti and Marks' book had a pre-determined opinion on what should fill the gaps. The tone of Marchetti's comment on the censorship (above) is characteristic not only of a country that has the First Amendment and does *not* have such things as an Official Secrets Act and D-notices, but also of a country which has gone through the trial of the Pentagon Papers, the My Lai cover-up and Watergate. As Melvin Wulf puts it in his introduction,

Nixon Administration lawyers could read the opinions as well as ACLU lawyers and they too saw that the decision in the Pentagon Papers Case was not a knockout punch. So only ten months after being beaten off by the New York Times, they were back in court trying the same thing again with Victor Marchetti (p. 22).

Also, there are more direct bearings on the case of Marchetti; he writes,

Disenchanted and disagreeing with many of the agency's policies and practices, and, for that matter, with those of the intelligence community and the U.S. government, I resigned from the CIA in late 1969. But having been thoroughly indoctrinated with the theology of 'national security' for so many years, I was

unable to speak out publicly. And, I must admit, I was still imbued with the mystique of the agency and the intelligence business in general, even retaining a certain affection for both. I therefore sought to put my thoughts - perhaps more accurately my feelings - in a fictional form. I wrote a novel, *The Rope Dancer*, in which I tried to describe for the reader what life was actually like in a secret agency such as the CIA, and what the differences were between myth and reality in this overly romanticized profession (p. 12).

Being an ex-CIA operative himself, it can be assumed that Marchetti's book wishes to expose the inner workings of the organization for which he worked, inner workings which have previously been unknown to his readers. It is a survey not only of the details of some CIA operations in recent history but also the rationalizations behind them and the beliefs that bolster a 'cult of intelligence'. The deletions therefore serve to actually reinforce the convergence of these two constituents of the book; they allow for a reading that relies on speculation about activities and their rationale not just in the deletions that appear in the book but also those that are not actually narrated.

Before going on to look at a couple of the deletions it is worth looking briefly at what the book does narrate. In his preface Marks, like Marchetti, is keen to stress the righteousness that leads to double standards; he writes

[In the State Department] I found the same kind of waste and inefficiency I had come to know in Vietnam and, even worse, the same sort of reasoning that had led the country into Vietnam in the first place. In the high councils of the intelligence community, there was no sense that intervention in the internal affairs of other countries was not the inherent right of the United States. 'Don't be an idealist; you have to live in the 'real' world' said the professionals. I found it increasingly difficult to agree (p. 14).

The most pernicious effect of such righteousness is that it erodes the very reason for the conduct of certain activities until those activities supersede their very *raison d'être*. As

Marchetti puts it:

It has been said that among the dangers faced by a democratic society in fighting totalitarian systems, such as fascism and communism, is that the democratic government runs the risk of imitating its enemies' methods and, thereby, destroying the very democracy that it is seeking to defend. I cannot help wondering if my government is more concerned with defending our democratic systems or more intent upon imitating the methods of totalitarian regimes in order to maintain its already inordinate power over the American people (p. 13).

The appearance of these statements in prefaces at the beginning of the text give them an authority in terms of the narrative as a whole. Whereas *All the President's Men* offered an 'inside' story by exposing the means by which Woodward and Bernstein had obtained their information - details that did not appear in their original articles for the *Washington Post* - *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* exposes the agency by means of a continual



supply of details about it delivered in the manner of a historical work. The main body of the text is therefore concerned with a recital of facts about CIA activities which is executed with conviction in the manner of an historical text using the third person and past tense. As a result, the prefaces by Marks and Marchetti, in tandem with all the extra-textual cues concerning the text's authenticity of detail, occupy a privileged position: they are the revelation of the ultimate sources and the research techniques that guarantee the veracity of the narrative. In this case the research is not made up of a series of formal information-gathering sessions but of years of experience of work that was not meant to be narrated at a later date. This is one way in which a reading of the text could revolve around its yield of knowledge in a period such as the mid-1970s. Yet, it must be noted that, in the case of government information, there is a big question over what is 'secret'; as Wulf points out in his introduction to the text the memoirs of government officials contain numerous 'secrets'; 'secrets' are regularly leaked to the press by government officers with the consent of their superiors (p. 24). Apart from the deletions, the text also foregrounds 'secrecy' explicitly by attributing a pseudo-psychological symptom to intelligence agencies. Marchetti and Marks write,

The 'clandestine mentality' is a mind-set that thrives on secrecy and deception. It encourages professional amorality - the belief that righteous goals can be achieved through the use of unprincipled and normally unacceptable means. Thus, the cult's leaders must tenaciously guard their official actions from public view. To do otherwise would restrict their ability to act independently; it would permit the American people to pass judgment on not only the utility of their policies, but the ethics of those policies as well (p. 31).

In couching the secrecy of the intelligence services in such terms Marchetti and Marks imply that double standards and covert activities have a mutually supportive relationship. In this way, the narration is saying something about itself: it is true because its narrators have been part of that mind-set but now, having escaped the clandestine mentality, they are able to expose the hypocrisy. One could almost, therefore, characterise the exigencies of national security as a disease afflicting a group of people.

A critique of the text in terms of its failure to combat the wider problem of the basis of imperialism would be futile. This is not to say that a reading of the text as a (failed)

critique of imperialism would not be eminently possible; however, a contemporary reading orientated around its deletions would seem to be more restricted. The following passage has a small amount censored and deals with a relatively minor figure in terms of the history of American foreign policy:

In Vietnam, enthusiastic officials of the U.S. embassy in Saigon were fond of saying during the late 1960s that Tran Ngoc Buu was the Samuel Gompers of the Vietnamese labor movement. They did not say - and most probably did not know -

**4 LINES DELETED (p. 71).**

In order to speculate over what was deleted one would not have to know who Tran Ngoc Buu was. However, the statement about him requires that a knowledge of its context, the war in Vietnam, be available. Also, it is necessary to know that Samuel Gompers was the moderate president of the American Federation of Labor for forty years from the 1880s onwards. The preceding paragraphs have been concerned with CIA sponsorship of labour organizations and so what the reader is not told about Tran Ngoc Buu is most likely connected with this. While it may not be the case that readers would speculate on possible crimes of, say violence, which he has committed, it is clear that something 'illegitimate' in a broad sense is concealed from the reader. As horror story writers know, it is often believed to be more effective to avoid describing the monster.<sup>2</sup> In this case, what we do not know about Tran Ngoc Buu may be a very innocent piece of information. However, in terms of both the narrative context, and history, it is likely that most contemporary readings would reject the assumption that the deletion merely concealed an innocent fact. Contemporary readers, for whom horrors such as My Lai have become manifest with regard to Vietnam, may read this passage in a very specific way. It is also worth noting that the bulk of the deletions are concerned not with Vietnam but with covert activities elsewhere, for example in Chile (see pp. 38 ff). Political news from Chile in the

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Brown in Boardman 1979:

There is a sweet little horror story that is only two sentences long:

*The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock at the door . . .*

Two sentences and an ellipsis of three dots. The horror, of course, isn't in the story at all; it's in the ellipsis, the implication: *what* knocked at the door. Faced with the unknown, the human mind supplies something vaguely horrible (p. 60).



early 1970s did not have nearly the same profile as that which came from Southeast Asia; as a result, it would be reasonable to assume that contemporary readings of deletions on this subject could be arranged around perceptions of such details of CIA activities in Vietnam.

In presenting the hitherto unknown role of American intelligence agencies, *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* takes on the task of explaining a plethora of complexities. The flow diagram of American intelligence agencies (pp. 98-99) shows thirty-two subdivisions of the government which are linked and operate in connection with each other in the processing and collecting of intelligence. This splintering of government departments in this area deserves a great deal of emphasis especially with regard to Watergate and its massive cast list. On the one hand, the text acknowledges this complexity; but for the purposes of exposition it also must reduce its focus to one agency. Thus,

agency directors and the CIA itself have managed to survive, and at times even flourish, in the secret bureaucratic jungle because of their one highly specialized contribution to the national intelligence effort. The CIA's primary task is not to coordinate the efforts of the U.S. intelligence or even to produce finished national intelligence for the policy-makers. Its job is, for better or worse, to conduct the government's covert foreign policy (pp. 118-119).

However, it must be noted that the flow diagram has at its head a space allocated for the President who links all the boxes together. As a result, the CIA is placed in an ambivalent relation with the executive branch:

it should be understood that when someone like Richard Helms publicly declares, as he did in 1971, 'We make no foreign policy', he may be technically correct in the sense that CIA officials must receive approval from the White House for their main programs; but he is absolutely incorrect in leaving the impression that the intelligence community, apart from supplying information, does not have a profound determinative effect on the formulation and carrying out of policy (p. 280).

It is in this realm that it is possible to detect a potential reading which will reduce the complexity of the bureaucratic minutiae. On the one hand, the text needs to emphasize that there are numerous agencies who have been delegated to carry out certain functions of the intelligence operation. For example, there are 62 departments of the CIA alone beneath its director (p. 84). This increasingly tends towards a picture of intelligence as a bureaucracy based, like all bureaucracies, on the accumulation and processing of paperwork. On the other hand, the text needs to maintain a vision of executive action

which results in the carrying out of covert foreign policy. As a result, the text sometimes oscillates between a necessary use of an unspecified "them" to refer to the activities and policy of the agency and a more specific reference to individuals, most notably, the President. For example,

The CIA has a momentum of its own, and its operatives continue to ply their trade behind their curtain of secrecy. They do not want to give up their covert activities, their dirty tricks. They believe in these methods and they rather enjoy the game. Of course, without a presidential mandate they would have to stop, but the country has not had a chief executive since the agency's inception who has not believed in the fundamental need and rightness of CIA intervention in the affairs of other nations. When a President has perceived American interests to be threatened in some faraway land, he has usually been willing to try to change the course of events by sending in the CIA. That these covert interventions often are ineffective, counterproductive, or damaging to the national interest has not prevented Presidents from attempting them.

#### 6 LINES DELETED

Kissinger and Nixon were concerned with what they believe to be a legitimate end - preventing a Marxist from being elected President of Chile - and the means employed mattered little to them as long as secrecy could be maintained (p. 349)

The narrative continually refers to "them" when it speaks of covert operations and dirty tricks. Understandably, there are so many operatives involved in carrying out dirty tricks that it is not feasible to name them directly. Apart from legal reasons, there are the exigencies of clarity and space. Yet, the movement from the use of them to a reference about a specific person is deceptively smooth: the details about dirty tricks are followed by a sentence on the subject of the chief executive's role, followed by a direct statement about the crucial role of the President in sanctioning and initiating CIA activities. After the deletions, direct reference is made to names: Kissinger and Nixon; and directly before the deletions it has been mentioned that executives have not ceased to institute interventions that have been counterproductive to the national interest. The specific principle here is that Nixon and Kissinger have been responsible for the activities of "them", most spectacularly in Vietnam. The more general principle of the narrative of agency operations lies in the space between the narrative requirements of identifying the motor of intelligence-gathering and covert foreign policy and retaining a vision of its complexity and multiple determination. A reading which focuses on this fundamental feature of the text, as the last example shows, would be particularly apt in the period contemporary to the book's publication.



The reasons for discussing *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* have been centred around its deletions. Firstly, the flagrant censorship of the text in this period of concern over conspiracies is worthy of note on its own. It demonstrates in a real way that government agencies take part in activities that they wish to remain covert. Secondly, and related to this, like *All the President's Men*, the book rests upon a promise to reveal details about the protagonists, the rationale and the unfolding of such covert activities. It presents this promise by utilizing different means and a different kind of narrative, however. On the surface, the bulk of the narrative consists of a straightforward recital of 'facts' about the CIA; the prefaces and the extra-textual details about the authors alone reinforce the opinions of the main text. Thirdly, as Marchetti notes (above), he fictionalized some of his experience of working for the CIA in a thriller novel called *The Rope Dancer*. This text and his non-fictional one co-authored with Marks are, therefore, obviously connected and we will discuss this novel in the chapter on paranoid narratives (below). The non-fictional text's narration, as Marchetti implies, is to an extent constructed in opposition to that of his novel; he wanted to put something other than "feelings" into the non-fictional text. Those features of *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* that we have discussed all have the supplementary function of upholding the text's non-fictionality in this context. Moreover, as we have seen, this is bolstered by many extra-textual cues as well as textual ones outside the main body of the narrative. The epigram from the Bible, which appears at the front of the book and is presented thus

AND YE SHALL KNOW THE TRUTH  
AND THE TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE  
John, vii: 32  
(inscribed on the marble wall of the  
main lobby at CIA headquarters,  
Langley, Virginia)

(p. 5)

represents an irony about the way in which the CIA conducts *covert* activities. CIA operatives probably do get to know details that the public does not. It also represents an ironic comment on the censorship of portions of the book: the CIA is concerned only

with *concealing* the truth. In both cases the epigram serves also to emphasize the non-fictionality of the narrative: it follows from these ironies that Marchetti and Marks, as ex-CIA operatives a) have been privy to the true and classified picture, and b) their exposure of this picture, contrary to the CIA's strategy, constitutes an accurate verification of its details and an attempt to give the reader access to freedom through it. Once again, the implication follows that, if the true picture is rarely available, then when it is exposed it is found to be very different from the one that it replaces: in short, truth is stranger than fiction.

## *Dispatches*

Michael Herr's Vietnam narrative, *Dispatches*, appeared first in instalments from 1968 to 1970, in *New American Review*, *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone* before being published in book form in 1977. There are a number of testimonials to the book's status; John Hellmann writes:

No other literary work to emerge from the Vietnam War has been as widely and enthusiastically acclaimed as Michael Herr's journalistic memoir *Dispatches*. Nominated in the nonfiction category for the 1978 National Book Award, *Dispatches* became a bestseller and was greeted by reviewers as both a literary masterpiece and a definitive portrait of the American involvement. Writing in *Harper's*, Michael Malone stated flatly that 'Herr has told the truth of the war in Vietnam, and asked us to face it'. William Plummer wrote in *Saturday Review* that '*Dispatches* is, hands down, *the* book about Americans in Vietnam, and in *Newsweek* Peter Prescott suggested that it 'may be the best book any American has written about any war'. Commentators suggested that Herr had journeyed beyond the old hawk-dove positions and political-historical explanations to probe something obscurely at the center of America's involvement in Vietnam. Favorably contrasting the ambiguity of *Dispatches* to Frances FitzGerald's confident historical analysis in *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (1973) Roger Sale asserted in the *New York Review of Books* that 'Herr at his best hurls one into the experience, insists an uninitiated reader be comforted with no politics, no certain morality, no clear outline of history'. In *Time* Paul Gray most succinctly stated the theme that critics were finding so persuasive: 'Deep in the heart of all the years of debate was the conflict itself, beyond the grasp of logic. Herr dared to travel to that irrational place and to come back with the worst imaginable news: war thrives because enough men still love it' (Hellman 1986 pp. 150-151).

It is partly this high profile of the text amongst the literature of Vietnam that makes it appropriate for discussion here. In addition, it is an outstanding statement about the unavailability of the war in Vietnam to conventional modes of narration. It is clear that the extra-textual cues to the text's narrative, such as the reviews above, preclude it from the



genre of the non-fiction thriller, although it might be argued that the narrative is about an attempt to uncover the facts about Vietnam in the way that *All the President's Men* and *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* are about the search for the facts about Watergate and the presentation of the truth of U.S intelligence operations respectively. The main differences between the texts in such a formulation, however, lies in the way *Dispatches* confronts the fact that its own narration does not reach the reality of the war, but only the reality of its status as narrative. An approach to the text could be made on the general grounds of the innovation entailed in its self-consciousness; but for our purposes, *Dispatches* is of note for its demonstration and dramatization of the difficulty of assimilating the Vietnam experience into narrative.

Approaching the text from the angle of its narration, Robert Elegant has said that *Dispatches* is

a basically deceptive book (Elegant in Salisbury p. 146).

The accusation is made on the grounds that the book is almost hermaphroditic, relying on its own mythic vision of the war as a point of reference. This is to say that the text did not employ its narrative to elucidate a situation outside itself in the manner of 'objective' observation; instead it concocted its own narrative version of the events which it narrated, like a plant that incorporates both organs required for regeneration within itself. He adds that

surrealistic reporting constantly fed on itself (p. 147).

Basically, Elegant accepts that conventional realistic narrative had to be abandoned in this account of Vietnam in favour of more impressionistic prose. He is not so naïve as to suggest that a truly objective account of events can be achieved. However, his complaint is that the process of hermaphroditic narrating has a snowballing effect in which the subsequent accounts of the war within *Dispatches* are not so much accounts of events but accounts of the events in accordance with the impressionistic framework that is already in place. We will return to the latter point in due course: the first point, about the difficulties

of writing in a conventional journalistic or realistic style has a number of determinants.

Robert Knightley reports that, during the Vietnam war,

Murray Sayle [of the *Sunday Times*] wrote to me saying: 'I arrived here as everyone else does, hoping to sum it all up in 1,000 crisp words. I wind up in the hotel on Friday nights trying to make some sense out of a great whirl of experience - the ghastly sights you see and your own feelings of fear and loneliness' (Knightley 1975 p. 404).

Yet the difficulties of writing about Vietnam were not merely confined to the strictures of time, energy and hard work; certain political realities made it different from say, World War II. Knightley adds,

Vietnam was a new kind of war and required a new kind of war correspondent. It was an interdisciplinary war, where complex political issues intruded on the military aspects, where battle success was necessary but where battle success alone was insufficient, a war where unwarranted optimism, propaganda, and news management could deeply obscure the issue. Ward Just of the *Washington Post*, a compassionate and conscientious correspondent, summed it up in this story: "'You will never be any more clear-headed than you are right now", an American major told a reporter driving in from Tansonnhut airport thirty minutes after his arrival in Vietnam. And the major, according to the reporter, has so far been right' (ibid p. 386).

In addition to the political influences working on correspondents, Knightley indicates the psychological ones:

Assessing the coverage of Vietnam, it seems clear that a primary requisite for this new war was for the correspondent to find some way of protecting his compassion. John Shaw [a *Time* correspondent] has said, 'Things which shocked you when you first went there, six weeks later shocked you no more. It became easier to let horrifying things slide over you. There was lots of cynicism and you could get hard after a while' (ibid. p. 386).

The requirement that the reporter 'tell it how it is' was therefore a tall order even before a narrative strategy could be selected. Potentially shocking events might seem less shocking after they had been witnessed a number of times and the narration of them would, as a result, be different on each occasion. Similarly, how can the reporting of one event and the non-reporting of another remain politically neutral, especially in the face of a myriad of different political interests and a plethora of politically charged events. These, of course, were just a few of the problems that face the Vietnam war correspondent. Reports which did find an adequate narrative mode were sometimes unable to find a space for publication: Martha Gellhorn, Philip Jones Griffiths were unable to get their work published in the U.S. because a number of potential publishers found it too shocking; Gellhorn, Griffiths and William Shawcross were subsequently refused visas to South Vietnam in the early 1970s (ibid. p. 390; p. 403). In addition, coverage of the war began to diminish in the early seventies; Knightley writes,



The amount of space and time devoted to [the war] began to decline. The number of correspondents accredited by MACV (Military Assistance Command, Vietnam) in Saigon provides some measure of this loss of interest. In 1968, at the height of the Tet offensive, there were 637 accredited correspondents; in 1969, 467; in 1970, 393; in 1971, 355; in 1972, 295. By mid-1974, only thirty-five correspondents remained, mostly American and Japanese (ibid. p. 398).

Whether the coverage had become less popular at home has not been verified; Knightley does make the point, though, that most of the war coverage was of land battles in the pre-1969 period and that after this date, the air war was escalated in tandem with Nixon's cover-up (p. 420). Perhaps partly as a result of the decline of reporting, Herr's became virtually the definitive correspondent's account of Vietnam.

In spite of the clear difficulties of reporting Vietnam, an argument could be made that there are a number of events and objects in the world that have resisted incorporation into written texts but have nevertheless been written about. The issue of the difficulty of reporting Vietnam revolved not so much around whether it could *ever* be reported but whether it could be reported in an old-fashioned journalistic style. One possibility at the level of narrative that Knightley discusses is the unsuitability of journalism as a framework for accounts of the war:

More than one correspondent felt that journalism was not the best medium for capturing the real war. Gavin Young, one of the best British reporters to cover the war, wrote: 'Correspondents are bound to be haunted by the feeling that there is probably only one way to work the various elusive aspects of the war into one wholly satisfactory picture. Apart from the aid programmes, the military operations, the political ups and downs, how can one depict the human facets of such a complete tragedy? What of the thoughts and feelings of the Vietnamese? How has the war affected their lives and art, their outlook on foreigners, and different culture? How, if at all, have the Americans been changed by contact with the Vietnamese?' (pp. 423-424).

In *Dispatches*, Herr constantly returns to the question of how to relate events and is so acutely aware of the question that the book *is*, in this sense, hermaphroditic and virtually a book about itself. Yet this is not too unusual and not necessarily a result of the subject matter. At the time that *Dispatches* was appearing in magazine instalments a host of American writers had adopted styles which could be labelled 'impressionistic' rather than 'objective'. The new modes of journalism and Herr's grappling with the problem of representation lead to

an intensely fragmented, self-absorbed work in the genre of literary reportage developed in the 1960s by Mailer, Hunter Thompson, and Joan Didion. Written in a highly wrought yet urgently spontaneous prose, *Dispatches* is less a book about Herr's journey in Vietnam than about his subsequent exploration

of that experience. Herr himself has called it 'a book about writing a book'. By focusing not on an objective portrayal of the people and events of Vietnam, but rather on the characters and images of Vietnam residing in his retrospective consciousness, Herr imaginatively embraces the multiplicity of the American experience there. Through this strategy, based on an unblinking willingness to face the idea that 'you were as responsible for everything you saw as you were for everything you did', Herr attempts in *Dispatches* to explore his own complicity in the war to discover its deepest meaning (Hellman p. 151).

Without wishing to reduce Hellman's statement on *Dispatches* too much, it could be suggested that Herr's book is like other non-fiction works we have discussed in that it wears a badge celebrating its own complexity. In this case, its complexity lies foremost in the fact that it is not a conventional piece of realistic journalism.

It is in the contradiction created by the promise of *Dispatches* to tell what the Vietnam war was like and its failure to do this in favour of talking about its own construction that the complexity of the text lies. The narrative therefore focuses on numerous contradictions which might confound expectations. A great deal had happened with regard to Vietnam in the time between the text's first appearance in 1968 and its ultimate presentation in book form nine years later. In fact, the text is therefore two texts with two contemporary readings in two different reading formations. From 1968 onwards, the horrors of Vietnam were just beginning to be made manifest; by 1977 the war was officially over. On a very general level, one could posit that an earlier reading of the text would be geared to negotiating the carnage with a higher degree of shock than the later reading. Rather than suggest any firm basis for either of the two readings and swinging from one to the other, I will settle in this case for a brief discussion of some places in the text where the potential indeterminacies might always-already be negotiated within the generality of the nine-year period.

After 1968 and the Tet offensive, one of the most famous contradictory statements about Vietnam had become widely reported and well-known. An American major commenting on an attack on a Vietnamese town said:

'We had to destroy Ben Tre in order to save it' (Herr p. 63; see also Knightley in Salisbury p. 106).

This kind of paradoxical statement could be read as either an error of judgment and/or a view on the crazy way that things are. It is notable in *Dispatches* that all the accounts of



the contradictions of the war can be construed as contradictory *perceptions*. An early example which is as ambiguous as the Ben Tre quote is the following:

Once we fanned over a little ville [sic] that had just been airstruck and the words of a song by Wingy Mangone that I'd heard when I was a few years old snapped into my head, 'Stop the War, Those Cats Is Killing Themselves'. Then we dropped, hovered, settled down into purple lz smoke, dozens of children broke from their hootches to run in towards the focus of our landing, the pilot laughing and saying, 'Vietnam, man. Bomb 'em and feed 'em, bomb 'em and feed 'em' (Herr 1978 pp. 16-17).

Is the pilot crazy? Are his orders paradoxical? Has he misperceived them? Has the narrator misperceived them? These are all possible questions for a reader who might have expected a conventional journalistic account of events. Moreover, they are part of the narrative's contribution to a discussion of the blurring of the lines between models of sanity:

From outside we say that crazy people think they hear voices, but of course inside they really hear them. (Who's crazy? Who's insane?) (Herr p. 61).

In the face of such uncertainty, Herr attempts to explain some of the reasons for his style of narration:

On a cold day in Hue our jeep turned into a soccer stadium where hundreds of North Vietnamese bodies had been collected, I saw them, but they don't have the force in my memory that a dog and a duck have who died together in a small terrorist explosion in Saigon (pp. 30-31).

In some ways, then, the narrative of *Dispatches* allows for a reading of it in terms of its essential veracity. If the actual events that take place in Vietnam are crazy then only a crazy narrative can do them justice. This does not simply apply to the depiction of human actions either; the following description of noises during a skirmish bears this out:

One night I woke up and heard the sounds of a firefight going on kilometres away, a 'skirmish' outside our perimeter, muffled by distance to sound like the noises made playing guns as children, KSSSHH KSSSHH; we knew it was more authentic than BANG BANG, it enriched the game and this game was the same, only way out of hand at last, too rich for all but a few serious players. The rules now were right and absolute, no arguing over who missed who and who was really dead; *No fair* was no good, *Why me?* the saddest question in the world (p. 51).

It would not be too speculative to say that most readers who had not been to a modern war zone would expect a different description to this one with loud raging guns and the fear of imminent loss of life an integral part of the narration. However, the narrative tends to upset preconceptions.

Clearly, it could be argued that *Dispatches* should not produce a jarring effect as a result of its unexpected content if the reader is always acting to fill its potential indeterminacies. However, if one examines a few of the book's extra-textual cues the role of the reader becomes manifest. On the cover of the first British edition of *Dispatches* there are a number of reviews:

Beyond politics, beyond rhetoric . . . its materials are fear and death, hallucination and the burning of souls. It is as if Dante had gone to hell with a cassette recording of Jimi Hendrix and a pocketful of pills: our first rock-and-roll war, stoned murder

says the *New York Times*.

Michael Herr dared to travel to that irrational place and to come back with the worst imaginable news: war thrives because enough men still love it

says *Time* while Hunter S. Thompson, a key representative of the 'new journalism' adds,

We have all spent ten years trying to explain what happened to our heads and our lives in the decade we finally survived - but Michael Herr's *Dispatches* puts all the rest of us in the shade.

This is enough to suggest that the extra-textual cues themselves encourage the reader to have his/her preconceptions challenged by a reading of the text. The very complexity of the narrative is proclaimed on its cover. The Thompson quote, bearing in mind its author's status as an unofficial figurehead for new styles of writing within journalism, constitutes the ultimate credential for the clarification of how the contents of the book 'should' be read. In addition, there are references to the need to read *Dispatches* in terms of bizarre juxtapositions of other texts: Dante and Hendrix are one; another review, from the *Washington Post*, says

In the great line of Crane, Orwell and Hemingway . . . He seems to have brought to this book the ear of a musician and the eye of a painter, Frank Zappa and Francis Bacon.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Monty Python lampooned these kinds of juxtaposition and this style of reviewing. They identified such a style as being exemplified in 1970s Britain by Clive James. Hence they produced the following:

'Rayner's Lane' is a movie you'd be well advised to miss. And you'd be wrong. Go and see it. You'll be surprised. It's terrible. It's definitely mutton dressed as Lady Caroline Lamb but I haven't had such an enjoyable time in the cinema since I spent four hours in a Sydney Drive-In and finally discovered it was a multi-storey car park. Ouch.

The same goes for 'The Con'. Don't miss it. Avoid it like the plague. But go anyway. You'll hate it. It's marvellous. It's Kafka in a sheep-dip, an example of the Protestant Work Ethic on Rollerskates with enough acres of fresh flesh to bring a boyish smile to the frozen features of a case-hardened Bushman at an outback cattle auction . . . (*The Brand New Monty Python Papperbok* n.d.)



Such cues serve to prepare readings of the text in terms of the reconstituting of phenomena within the framework of other texts. Clearly, the emphasis of such cues is not on the amount of research and information that the book has to reveal but on the book's style in relation to other media. *Dispatches* has numerous references to the medium and putative influence of film; for instance,

Life-as-movie, war-as-(war) movie, war-as-life; a complete process if you got to complete it, a distinct path to travel, but dark and hard, not any easier if you knew that you'd put your own foot on it yourself, deliberately and - most roughly speaking - consciously (Herr p. 58).

Yet, the contradiction of this is that, although Vietnam is explained in war-movie terms, the narrative also denies it:

Vietnam is awkward, everybody knows how awkward, and if people don't even want to hear about it, you know they're not going to pay money to sit there in the dark and have it brought up. (*The Green Berets* doesn't count. That wasn't really about Vietnam, it was about Santa Monica). So we have all been compelled to make our own movies, as many movies as there are correspondents, and this one is mine (Herr p. 153).

On a banal level, Herr's book is actually a printed text, not a film. In addition, the narrative actually seeks to discredit the version of war given by war movies; later, Herr writes,

I keep thinking about all the kids who got wiped out by seventeen years of war movies before coming to Vietnam to get wiped out for good. You don't know what a media freak is until you've seen the way a few of those grunts would run around during a fight when they knew that there was a television crew nearby; they were actually making war movies in their heads, doing little guts-and-glory Leatherneck tap dances under fire, getting their pimples shot off for the networks. They were insane, but the war hadn't done that to them. Most combat troops stopped thinking of the war as an adventure after their first few firefights, but there were always the ones that couldn't let go, these few who were up there doing numbers for the cameras (p. 169).

So, what is the narrative saying about the interaction of life and film? It is difficult to give an answer beyond a general explanation of it as a metaphorical way of posing the disorientation of perceptions in war and the way film is so woven into modern perceptions generally that it cannot be excluded from the war zone.

It is this gulf between perceptions which could be construed as the central topic of the book. For example the difference of combat perceptions of the war and those of the folks at home is dramatized in this passage:

Something was working on the young Marine, and Gunny knew what it was. In this war they called it 'acute environmental reaction', but Vietnam has spawned a jargon of such delicate locutions that it's often impossible to know even remotely the thing being described. Most Americans would rather be told that their son is undergoing acute environmental reaction than to hear that he is suffering from shell shock,

because they could no more cope with the fact of shell shock than they could with the reality of what had happened to this boy during his five months at Khe Sanh (Herr p. 78).

In this way, the book is able to make comments on the inexplicability of Vietnam while avoiding any direct commentary on it. Essentially, the last paragraph is a discussion of the vagaries of the military jargon; yet at the same time it is a dramatization of the gulf between views on the war. Similarly, comments on narrative processing maintain this same tension between different functions of the writing; for example,

Sometimes the stories were so fresh that the teller was in shock, sometimes they were long and complex, sometimes the whole thing was contained in a few words on a helmet or a wall, and sometimes they were hardly stories at all but sounds and gestures packed with so much urgency that they became more dramatic than a novel, men talking in short violent bursts as though they were afraid they might not get to finish, or saying it almost out of a dream, innocent, off-hand and mighty direct, 'oh you know, it was just a firefight, we killed some of them and they killed some of us'. A lot of what you heard, you heard all the time, men on tape, deceitful and counter-articulate, and some of it was low enough, guys whose range seemed to stop at 'Git some, git some, harharhar!' But once in a while you'd hear something fresh, and a couple of times you'd even hear something high, like the corpsman at Khe Sanh who said, 'If it ain't the fucking incoming it's the fucking outgoing. Only difference is who gets the fucking grease, and that ain't no fucking difference at all' (pp. 31-32).

All the difficulties of subjecting these details to a narrative form are described in this passage from the difficulty of sifting lies from truth to the padding out of concise statements. In the face of the opposite of all these reactions, a straightforward narrative of some linearly arranged events, the diversity of material in *Dispatches* once more proves the viability of the adage that truth is stranger than fiction.

If there is one feature about *Dispatches* that distinguishes it and would characterize its complexity it is its explicit views on war. In a period when it can be accurately stated that the American nation was becoming thoroughly disillusioned with the Vietnam war, *Dispatches* is jarringly at odds with a substantial majority of the population. The narrative highlights the unprecedented role played by journalists in Vietnam compared to other wars and emphasizes the breadth of possible journalistic opinion that was perceived to exist:

We were called thrill freaks, death-wishers, wound-seekers, war-lovers, hero-worshippers, closet queens, dope addicts, low-grade alcoholics, ghouls, communists, seditionists, more nasty things than I can remember. There were people in the military who never forgave General Westmoreland for not imposing restrictions against us when he'd had the chance in the early days (p. 183).



Yet, despite this diversity of opinion, the narrative works to one conclusion on the nature of war. This comes in the final paragraphs and it is significant that the views are spoken by the British photographer, Tim Page:

One day a letter came from a British publisher, asking [Page] to do a book whose working title would be 'Through with War' and whose purpose would be to once and for all 'take the glamour out of war'. Page couldn't get over it.

'Take the glamour out of war! I mean, how the bloody hell can you do *that*? Go and take the glamour out of a Huey, go take the glamour out of a Sheridan . . . Can *you* take the glamour out of a Cobra or getting stoned at China Beach? It's like taking the glamour out of an M-79, taking the glamour out of [war photographer, Sean] Flynn'. He pointed to a picture he'd taken, Flynn laughing maniacally. ('We're winning', he'd said), triumphantly. 'Nothing the matter with *that* boy, is there? Would you let your daughter marry that man? Ohhhh, war is *good* for you, you can't take the glamour out of that. It's like trying to take the glamour out of the Rolling Stones'. He was really speechless, working his hands up and down to emphasize the sheer insanity of it.

'I mean, you know that, it just *can't be done*!' We both shrugged and laughed, and Page looked very thoughtful for a moment. 'The very *idea*!' he said. 'Ohhh, what a laugh! Take the bloody *glamour* out of bloody *war*!' (Herr pp. 198-199).

The passage can very easily be made to act as a mouthpiece for the narrative as a whole although it is presented as the words of someone else. In fact, in some ways Page could be said to be the hero of the book with, to a lesser extent, the photographer Sean Flynn. At the same time, though, there is an option to read *Dispatches* as an attempt to 'objectively' depict certain horrors. One way in which a reading of the text would probably be affected were if the extra-textual cues did not emphasize that this is a memoir by a journalist rather than a veteran. Nora Ephron suggests that

Most of the Americans are in the Hemingway bag and they try to romanticize war, just as he did. Which is not surprising: unlike fighting in the war itself, unlike big-game hunting, working as a war correspondent is almost the only classic male endeavor left that provides physical danger and personal risk without public disapproval and the awful truth is that for correspondents, war is not hell. It is fun (quoted in Knightley p. 408).

It is easy to see how readings of *Dispatches* might make the same conclusion.

As Elegant implies, *Dispatches* relies for its account on a narrative framework which is hermaphroditic, which feeds in on itself. Yet, as we have seen, the narrative is not completely random in its processing of material nor is it solely a clinical treatise on the practice of writing. In speaking of the process of writing it actually comments obliquely on some features of the war and the way it is perceived. Its status as non-fiction is an unspoken feature of its narrative. It does not explicitly place itself in opposition to

'conventional' journalistic accounts of the war; but its oblique references to other texts which are somehow connected with the war and from which it differs - pop music, films - serve to underline its unconventionality. As a result, those insights are marked by this very unconventionality: this is the surrealistic frame of reference to which *Elegant* objects but it is also the realm where the unusual represents the 'truth as stranger than fiction' theme. Although the book is not properly a non-fiction thriller in the same way that *All the President's Men* is, they share not only an investigation of the key events in recent American history but also, in very different ways, a concern with establishing their own veracity. It must be remembered that Herr's book appeared in instalments in *Rolling Stone* and elsewhere in the early seventies. This is one other way in *Dispatches* and *All the President's Men* might be considered similar: both had firm origins among a set of discourses designated as news in the contemporary period. As such, both non-fiction books bear the imprint of a classification which enhances their claims to veracity. Their proximity to other sources of news, then, will allow for the kinds of slippage and filling of potential indeterminacies that we have mentioned that occur between narratives. In the face of a plethora of accounts of the war *Dispatches* seeks to establish the uniqueness and complexity of its own perspective. The complexity of the content of *Dispatches* as non-fiction is tempered only by the paradox of an the implied conclusion: it can be argued that it is unexpected, and therefore more complex, and yet reductionist, to state that war is fun rather than the expected hell.

## *Serpico*

In terms of diversity of experience it is possible that nothing could match war except the vision of life witnessed by a policeman. Probably, of the two, the police experience is the more diverse, especially in its dealings with so many aspects of the law. In fact, if one were to start at the most fundamental definition of a police force it would involve a



description of its operatives as the law's guardians. The story of Frank Serpico almost inverts this definition. Serpico was

the first officer in the history of the Police Department who not only reported corruption in its ranks, but voluntarily, on his own, stepped forward to testify about it in court. He did so after a lonely four-year odyssey in which he was repeatedly rebuffed in his efforts to get action from high police and political officials, continually risking discovery at any moment by the crooked cops he rubbed shoulders with every day, and finally, out of desperation, after he went to a newspaper with his story (Maas 1974 p. 11).

This is a fair synopsis of Maas' book *Serpico* (1974; originally 1973) and it occurs quite early in the book's narrative for the benefit of those who do not know the story already.

This early revelation of the plot eliminates some of the suspense and suggests that the book relies less on the lure of finding out what will happen to the endangered Serpico, so much as what it was that he actually did. This is not to say that the book does not have the potential for suspense; Serpico, as the main character, is often in potentially dangerous situations which may provoke a certain kind of anxiety for the reader.

However, the book is organized as a telling of the 'truth' of Serpico's experiences and it is partly the dramatization and the revelation of what is behind events that contributes to the narrative's status as a thriller. Similarly, Sidney Lumet's 1973 film of the Serpico story retains the flashback device of the book: it begins with the shooting of Serpico which puts him in hospital for a prolonged stay and which ultimately results in his leaving the force; it then traces his story chronologically until this moment. In addition, reviews of the film - especially those in New York magazines - stressed that the story was not only non-fictional but well-known. It must be stressed that this prior knowledge does not preclude the narrative from having the status of thriller. Other aspects of a reading which would designate Serpico as a thriller would include its focus on police work: there are passages which contain the attention to detail that characterizes the quasi-documentary aspects of fictional police procedural texts (see, especially pp. 43 ff). Also, its depiction of suspenseful pursuits and its ultimate exposure and conviction of the villains are similarly related to fictional versions of the same events.

From the outset the narration of the book makes clear that its central character will not meet a fateful end. Narrated in the present tense to underline the here and now, the book starts by stating

It is a warm September afternoon in New York as I watch Frank Serpico, age thirty-five, the son of a Neapolitan shoemaker, walk with the help of a cane toward the entrance of a fashionable Manhattan hotel (p. 5).

Only in these initial pages is there a use of the pronoun 'I' to refer to the narrator, and the narrator appears in this chapter quite explicitly as a real character who meets Serpico in order to interview him. Subsequently, the narrator does not appear in the narrative either as a character or a personal pronoun, although there are occasions when the narrator makes reference to their presence. What this device serves to do is to emphasize the amount of research that is required to narrate the story of Serpico while at the same time offering the chance of a reading which can overlook the text's mechanism of accumulating information. For example, throughout the narrative the narrator displays an encyclopædic knowledge of the material; the following passage is an illustration of this:

Serpico, who drinks sparingly, refuses a second Bloody Mary, and I decide to accompany him back downtown. On the way he lights up one of the three or four cigars he smokes each day. He gets his cigars in a little shop near the garment centre, hand-rolled on the spot for him. He has scouted places like this all over the city to satisfy his wants. In an era of plastic, pre-packed foods, for instance, he prizes the real thing and will travel extraordinary distances to obtain favoured delicacies - to an obscure street in Brooklyn, for a freshly made, spicy Polish sausage called kielbasa, still farther out in Brooklyn for the newly ground Turkish coffee he savours periodically, to an Italian butcher off Ninth Avenue in Manhattan who makes his own German salami, to a cheese store on the Lower East Side for mozzarella so fresh that the milk spurts from it at the touch of a knife (Maas pp. 7-8).

In addition to what this passage says about the authenticity of Frank Serpico as a person it also says something about itself: namely, that the narration is a seemingly effortless recounting of details which would ordinarily require time and effort to find out. The first point about the passage's commentary on Serpico is much more discernible for the casual reader than the second point about how the narrative is constructed; if it is the intention of the reading to find out the facts about Serpico's odyssey then more attention will be paid to what the narrative describes about him than what it demonstrates about itself. The narration of the details of Frank Serpico's life continues in this vein, offering huge amounts of information; it thus allows for a reading which can accept the information



without questioning its sources in the same way that one might not question the sources of fictional events while, at the same time, conceding the veracity of what is narrated.

Another way that this effect of unquestioned veracity is achieved is by inserting the narration of the text's events within the context of wider historical events. Chapter 8 of *Serpico* begins with details of the founding of the New York Police Department in 1844 and continues with a potted history of police corruption in America up to, and including, Frank Serpico's crusade against it (pp. 113 ff). On the one hand, this emphasizes that Serpico's fight against graft entails assuming the burden of history. On the other the narrative validates its non-fictional status by settling the tension between its ability to be read like a detailed fiction with an omniscient narrator - we will return to this in a moment - and the extra-textual cues (for example, quotes from *Newsweek* and the *New York Times* on the book's cover) which designate it as non-fiction, with a reference to history. That is to say that the kind of distancing from and conviction about 'facts' which can be said to characterize texts of academic history merges almost imperceptibly in this chapter into the rest of the book's narrative about Serpico. After detailing a number of celebrated nationwide cases of corruption the narrative states

In none of them was there a cop willing to blow the whistle on his own, and then step forward, as would be expected in any other criminal proceeding, and testify openly in court. In none of them was there a Frank Serpico (p. 115).

In spite of such features of the narrative as this, there are occasions when the research technique that informs the narration is more visible. As we have noted, the narrator of the story has so much knowledge that there is a temptation to apply the word omniscient. Apart from the brief historical section, however, one could say that the narrative does not present the thoughts of other characters of the story, it does not narrate events involving them, it sticks to narrating events in which Serpico was involved and it presents Serpico's own thoughts sparingly enough to suggest that they were volunteered by Serpico during part of the research to aid in constructing the narrative. The only time when one can claim that the narrative veers in the direction of omniscience is on an

occasion when it reveals again that it is based on research. Commenting on one of

Serpico's ex-girlfriends the narration states that

She has since married and moved out of the city and looks back on the time with sorrow and compassion and pain. She was simply not, she recalled, prepared to cope with the situation. 'He was so outgoing and full of fun, not that he didn't have his moments - like if every once in a while I smoked a little grass, he'd get very righteous about it. But when the corruption thing began, Frank changed completely. He became so moody and depressed and it affected everything we did' (p. 160).

At the very least, a reading of this passage would have to assume that the girlfriend had been interviewed if the information is to be accepted as non-fiction. In most other cases, however, this question of the narration does not arise. Like *All the President's Men*, the non-fictionality of the narration is partially guaranteed by its limited focus.

Having said that there is a limited focus in the tellings of the Serpico story, for a number of film critics - especially Pauline Kael (see below) - the film version is particularly guilty of avoiding the question of Serpico's motivation. This is also implicit in Sarris' noted review, although he accuses Maas' book as well (see below). Yet, the text of Maas' book could quite easily allow for a reading of it as a narrative revolving around Serpico's motivations. Chapter 3 starts with the first of a continuing series of depth accounts of Serpico's youthful experiences of which the following is the pivot:

[On one Sunday afternoon] when Frank was ten, he burst into the greenhouse crying because some kids had taunted him for wearing hand-me-down clothes. His father listened, and then told him a story about a prince who disguised himself in rags to see what the citizens of his kingdom were really like, only to be chased away by them. When the prince returned the next day dressed in full regalia, the townspeople who had hooted at him bowed and scraped, but he sent them packing, telling them they ought to be ashamed of themselves, that he was still the same person. 'So you see', his father concluded, 'it's not how a man looks. It's what he is inside that counts' (Maas pp. 25-26).

This brief passage and the parable that it recounts say a great deal about what will concern Serpico in his subsequent fight against corruption, dealing with the deceptiveness of appearances, the perils entailed by certain rules of respectability, the importance of class differences, the triumph of exposing duplicity, and so on. In this passage alone there is a hint at the deep roots of Serpico's motivation gleaned, presumably, from deep research and interviewing on the part of Maas. In a subsequent passage, however, the narration suggests how such disparate motivations became crystalised through certain notions about the role of the police force in society:



what he remembered most from his boyhood was a concept of the cop as 'good' - and beyond this that a cop was the personification of authority and prestige and respect. When a cop came down the sidewalk and said, 'Move along', one moved, and fast (Maas p. 39).

This is the beginning of *Serpico*'s story in a nutshell. As a youth, his conception of the police department's mission in society is fused with his vision of its individual operatives. If *Serpico* were to be considered as a *bildungsroman* in which the reader is traditionally assumed to receive some insights as a result of witnessing the personal development of the central character then readings of the book would concentrate more on this movement of the protagonist from naïvety and awe to distantiation and analysis. The narration continues, detailing Serpico's thoughts on the matter:

Perhaps he had expected too much. He would look back on it and think how ridiculously naïve he had been, how absurd to have accorded almost demigod rank to a man simply because he wore a uniform and a badge and carried a gun and a night stick. Still, it was a long while before his idealism faded (Maas p. 39).

It is worth adding that this movement from naïvety to analysis is strikingly similar to that of Ron Kovic. In the latter's *Born on the Fourth of July* which we considered briefly in the Chapter 3 (above) and which appeared a few years after *Serpico* in 1976, Kovic details how his extremely enthusiastic idealism with regard to America, the marines and the war in Vietnam were systematically eroded over a period of time. In fact, like *Serpico*, his acute idealism is presented as the cause of his subsequent analytical dissidence and anti-war fervour. One could say that, initially, both Kovic and *Serpico* so believed the hype about the righteousness of the war and the police respectively that their eventual loss of faith in them was total. As a result, their 'hippiedom' - symbolized most readily by long hair and moustaches/beard - represented the only possible vehicle for their idealism about what the system *should* be. Despite this possible reading, which is probably facilitated by an overview of the decades of the sixties and seventies, these aspects of *Serpico* were not emphasized by reviews of the film.

The other prominent feature of the narrative of *Serpico* concerns itself with the blurring of conventional morality and the complexity of imperatives in everyday life. Extra-textual cues were to pay more attention to this than to the book's structural homology with Vietnam narratives of awakening. In the book, *Serpico*'s very idealistic and quasi-

Catholic insistence on the necessary moral loftiness of the police slides comfortably into the theme of the almost cynical reality of police life and its essential similarity to the criminal life. Thus,

He never ceased to be amazed at the idea that he was a 'rat', a fink, an informer. It would have been different, he supposed, if he had sworn fealty to, say, even the Mafia, and then spilled its secrets. He could see that, in all of its variations. But the only oath he had taken as a cop was to uphold the law, and there was nothing in it that said that policemen had some special immunity. If anything, he thought, the opposite was true, that it was incumbent upon a cop to adhere to a stricter standard of conduct than the average citizen, to exemplify what society should be rather than reflect what it was. Perhaps that was asking too much, perhaps not; in this regard he could only answer for himself (p. 76).

Serpico's near ascetic attitude to law and order which precipitates his subsequent crusade vies for sovereignty in such passages with the theme of a world turned upside down; a world in which the police are too like the criminals. While the police department becomes (or already was) a closed system akin to that of the Mafia, Serpico's attitudes are re-aligned, this time with the residents of Greenwich Village, some of whose prosecutable acts he overlooks. For him, the spark results from the residents' complaints about the police:

at first he put down the complaints as radical talk. But he liked these people; as far as he could tell, they were by and large gentle and exceedingly law-abiding, except that many of them smoked marijuana, and although Serpico did not - he excused himself by saying, 'I trip on other things' - he had come to realize that marijuana was not exactly the road to perdition. As time went on, he tended more and more to side with them. His dress and appearance made him indistinguishable from most Village residents, and when he walked down the streets, some of them would smile and nod at him, and say, 'Peace, brother' (pp. 158-159).

In one way it can be said that Serpico's moral stance on dishonesty has remained intact; his idealism about what the police should be is essentially the same as it was in his childhood and adolescence. Yet one could also say that his morals are now fundamentally re-aligned to incorporate a liberal attitude to an illegal - but not necessarily dishonest - activity: dope-smoking. Also, he recognizes that his idealistic perspective on the police is not the only one, and it is different from the perspective of the Village residents. The narrative at this point is, in fact, striving to introduce the complexity of multiple perspectives on the police, while at the same time trying to stave off a mere inversion. A clear example of the latter is manifest in the recounting of one of Serpico's dreams of the period:

In the dream all the policemen in the city were hippies with beards and long hair and love beads. The hippie cops stood on Madison Avenue and watched a neatly trimmed man pass by, and one of them said



to the other 'How can a guy walk around with a haircut like that?' And another hippie cop stopped a well-dressed businessman driving through a red light. The businessman offered him a bribe, and the hippie cop said, 'You straight people are all alike. You think you can buy yourselves out of anything' (pp. 86-87).

Although the narrative presents these outstanding images it must be remembered that there is a possibility of an overall reading based on a far more complex view of the situation. One incident that stands out in the narration of Serpico's plain clothes career involves him apprehending on his own a number of suspects in a car; within moments, and unprompted by himself, he receives instant police backup:

Afterward he reflected on how he had been alone on the street, and how they had come at once, unquestioningly, thinking that he needed them, and the memory of that moment remained with him always, like the lost innocence of a child (p. 70).

Clearly there is the possibility of a reading of this passage which revolves around the parent and child relationship. Serpico is the idealistic youngster in the ambiguous position experienced by adolescents, wishing to break away from his parent(s) yet feeling pangs of helplessness without their support. This kind of proto-psychoanalytic reading could easily be transposed onto the youth counterculture of the period as a whole. The more immediate reading, though, is that Serpico is not simply a rebel who wishes to destroy the present system but a critic who has a considerable investment in that which he criticises. Thus the blurring of morality - acceptance of marijuana and so on - is not a result of Serpico embracing countercultural values uncritically so much as a re-alignment of his pre-existing moral imperatives about the police in countercultural terms.

The question of moral complexity is generated as much by the internal workings of the police force as by the honesty of the Greenwich Village residents. At a very early stage in the narrative a whole string of details of corrupt scams in which the police indulge are given (pp. 53 ff). Within these details there lurks the same kind of moral decisions as Serpico chooses to make about his neighbours. For instance,

Serpico heard all the rationalizations. They ranged from the cherished tenet that people were going to gamble anyway to one that held that a cop had a thankless job and was reaping a well-deserved reward by confiscating the money instead of turning it over to the city where it would wind up in the hands of welfare-chisellers. Many people might agree with Stanard that it was just gambling money and therefore 'clean'. These same people would throw up their hands in horror at the idea of similar payoffs in heroin traffic, although Serpico later found out that this philosophy of clean money was very flexible indeed (p. 138).

Corrupt police operatives appear throughout thriller narratives, especially in hard-boiled stories; one has only to look at a text like Hammett's *Red Harvest* (1978; originally 1929). In *Serpico*, however, police corruption is almost a way of life and it has countless determinations, not the least of which are to do with sustaining a family. It must be remembered that Serpico was single and the narrative gives instances of those police operatives who need the extra money gained from graft to maintain a certain standard of living plus, in one notable case, an instance of someone who for the same reasons cannot afford to assist Serpico in exposing corruption. Delise, Serpico's soulmate in his crusade within the police department, responds in the following way when Serpico asks for his assistance in approaching the *New York Times*:

Frank, I have twenty years or whatever in the department. I have a wife and two kids and I just bought a house and there's a mortgage on it, and if I had to leave the department I don't know what other field I could go into . . . (p. 204).

This kind of blurring of the issues of morality is in stark contrast to the stances taken by other heroes in thriller narratives from earlier periods. Eliot Ness, for example, who appears in a number of narratives about Al Capone, keeps secret his views on the Volstead Act but makes it very clear that he will do his utmost to uphold the law and to pursue the racketeers who violate it. Although this stance puts his family at risk it is ultimately designed to defend his and other families (see Ness and Fraley 1967 originally 1957; plus the 1960s TV series, *The Untouchables* and the 1987 Brian de Palma film of the same title). On the other hand, the ambivalent approach to issues of morality is the very substance of *The Godfather*, as we will see. Probably the most emphatic commentary on the issue of morality in *Serpico* results from the double narration of one specific event. Shortly before Serpico is shot in the face he finds himself in court for the trial of one of the felons he has recently arrested:

[The] white numbers operator that Serpico had arrested, Vincent Sausto, alias Mickey McGuire, turned to him in court and said, 'Hey, you know they're going to do a job on you', and when Serpico asked him who he had in mind, Sausto said, 'Your own kind', and Serpico asked, 'What do you mean my own kind, the Italians?' and Sausto replied, 'No, cops!' (p. 197; c. f. p. 13).

It is significant that a prediction of Serpico's fate within the police department should be made by a criminal. It is almost as if the criminal has a greater insight into the workings



of the police than the seemingly naïve Serpico. What is more important, though, is the double-cross motif that is articulated twice. Those who should be Serpico's allies are not what they seem. In this way, the narrative of police operations shares an affinity with *All the President's Men* - the clandestine and serpentine nature of Serpico's attempts to stem the tide of corruption in the New York Police Department draw him into a world where one can never be sure who is listening or who one's allies are. In a sense, Serpico is like a Deep Throat figure: both continue their legitimate police or White House duties while feeling that information should be fed to somebody in order to expose rampant duplicity. This is a process which involves fear and apprehensiveness. Deep Throat disseminates his information to fortuitously like-minded people; Serpico's information initially meets with a less enthusiastic response from those who receive his information.

Looking at these facts at the level of narrative it is clear that the figure of Serpico represents the meeting point between police and espionage genres. Secrecy, danger and corruption are at the heart of his crusade, despite the fact that he is a humble plain-clothes policeman. Deep Throat, on the other hand, is in the midst of Washington chicanery. Both represent a slightly further remove from Marchetti and Marks in that the latter do not explicitly appear as characters in the text; it is here that it is possible to see how the similarities between the aforementioned figures at the level of narrative are so easily transformed into similarities at the level of content of the story. Narratologically, Deep Throat, Serpico and Marchetti/Marks all serve the same function even though the latter are 'absent' from the narrative. But at the same time they also represent that part of the story's content which is to do with vindicating the comparative honesty of the media. There is, of course, an important difference with regard to Marchetti and Marks: they spill the beans when they are at what they think is a safe distance from their old employers. Nevertheless, the censorship of Marchetti and Marks' text implies that, even for them, there are perils in assuming that channels of information will be unblocked and straightforward. In this way, *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* is probably the text of the period which is most marked by its justifiable paranoia. As we have seen, the

Pentagon Papers were subject to a famous court case but Marchetti and Marks' book was actually censored. This tends to throw the unimpeachable aura of the media into some doubt. However, Serpico is unable to rely on the self-regulatory mechanisms of the NYPD and is forced into moving into a fresh domain. By taking his story to the *New York Times*, he is practically demonstrating that the only morality that can serve his cause is the muckspreading one that informs media exposés (pp. 204 ff). This is a fact evident even to Mayor Lindsay: when asked by a reporter why Serpico should go to a newspaper, Lindsay replied,

'If you've had as long and delicate a relationship with the thirty-two-thousand member Police Department as I have had', Lindsay said, 'you might understand' (p. 250-251).

While such exigencies are clear, it also occurs that bringing such a story into the public domain provides the grounds of counter-accusations of smear tactics. Police

Commissioner Leary takes up this very point:

While the first story in *The Times* did not identify any sources by name, Leary was perfectly aware that the bulk of it had been supplied by Serpico. Nonetheless, four days later, in charging smear tactics, 'McCarthyism all over again', he said that *The Times* had based its report on the word of 'prostitutes, narcotics addicts and gamblers, and disgruntled policemen' (pp. 210-211).

As we have seen, Colson reacted to the *Washington Post* in virtually an identical manner (above). Leary and Colson defend their positions by suggesting that any accusations of corruption come from witnesses who are not fit to testify by virtue of their non-possession of certain sterling values. Essentially they both imply that unwarranted hearsay has been escalated into a witch-hunt; but, as with Colson, it can be argued that such claims are designed to pejoratively associate the media with McCarthyism. Either way, it is clear that the notion of 'McCarthyism' became an area of struggle with regard to the issue of corruption and its exposure in the 1970s. We will return to this point in the Chapter 9.

It can be seen, then, that Maas' book, *Serpico*, allows for a reading of it not just as non-fiction or as non-fiction about the police, but as a narrative which, like *All the President's Men* and *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence*, seeks to expose the widespread corruption which exists amongst the guardians of public life. This is not to say that *Serpico* does not



narrate details of police life; clearly it does contain chases, arrests and authentic details about police procedure. The aforementioned texts show the duplicity of operations in government and intelligence agencies; *Serpico* does this for the police. In fact, there are strong grounds for reading the text as an exposure of corruption solely for missionary purposes to do with the explicating the ideal role of the police. Serpico's statement before the Knapp Commission hearings which appears at the climax of the book could be said to embody this in a microcosm:

Through my appearance here today I hope that police officers in the future will not experience the same frustration and anxiety that I was subjected to for the past five years at the hands of my superiors because of my attempt to report corruption . . . .

A policeman's first obligation is to be responsible to the needs of the community he serves.

The department must realize that an effective, continuing relationship between the police and the public is more important than an impressive arrest record (pp. 244-245).

This is also one way that the narrative can be said to be opting for a disavowal of closure.

The character Serpico certainly sees his long work as merely the beginning of a mission to reorientate the police department. Yet, at the same time, the narration of the story can be read as moving in the direction of closure: Serpico has left the police department and the narration comes to an end by assuming that it can sum up Serpico's character:

As he was walking out of Police headquarters with his papers, another cop came up to him, as many had done following the Knapp Commission hearings and said with great seriousness, 'Gee, Frank, do you think you really changed anything? do you think things are going to be different?'

'I don't know', Serpico replied, 'it's not up to me any more. I only did what I had to do'.

Serpico's leaving was a tragedy for the city, for the Police Department and for himself. All Frank Serpico ever wanted was to be a good cop. Perhaps that was the trouble; he wanted it too much (p. 252).

A reading of the text which separated the aims of the character and narrator in this way could be attuned to the ambiguities of the text's end. It can be argued that closure is not absolutely guaranteed. However, many extra-textual cues concerned with the film of this book tended toward the opposite view.

Reviews of the film of *Serpico*, especially those in publications based in New York, often displayed some knowledge of the case of Frank Serpico and what they took to be its implications. In the *New Yorker*, Pauline Kael called the film

A perfect modern movie (Kael 1973 p. 107).

Her reasons for this were centred around the way it inflected certain contemporary political currents without dealing directly in its narrative with the world of federal politics. Her summary statement of such concerns is a very powerful one and can almost be taken as representative of the period:

We have no word, as yet, for justifiable paranoia - that is, for the sane person's perception of a world become crazily menacing - and in terms of behaviour there may not be much difference between living in terror of actual enemies and living in terror of imaginary enemies, particularly if the natural enemies represent the whole system of authority (Kael 1973 p. 107).

Kael's words point to an important aspect of the narrative that we have already identified to do with the fear generated by corrupt authorities. As Silber attests, the film is

about as powerful an expose of police corruption than has ever appeared in the U.S. mass media (Silber in Nichols 1976 p. 79).

But, as Kael implies, the exposé of police corruption carries with it a social dimension which is very specific for contemporary readings. As we will see, the specific readings have much to do with what Kael says about justifiable paranoia, a phenomenon that cannot be viewed in terms of a unitary political or social complexion but as subject to certain influences which can be specified in this period. In a localized way, we must briefly deal with this issue now as reviews drew attention to what the narrative about *Serpico* was implying for American society as a whole. Kael puts it this way:

his situation is played not for the horror in the comedy but, rather for a put-down of the society (Kael 1973 p. 107).

Reviewers immediately broached similar questions. The fact that a film was drawing on the real-life experiences of a certain kind of policeman was unproblematically assumed by many to be a statement on society as a whole.

Clearly there are grounds in the *Serpico* story for making observations about the American social formation as a whole. One way reviewers were to address this was by identifying the film's 'attitude'. So Kael suggests,

Basically, the movie's attitude is like that of the people who think that there had to be something the matter with *Serpico* - who think he had to be crazy to be honest (Kael 1973 p. 108).

What Kael is referring to here consists of two points: that the film's narrative shows *Serpico* almost misinterpreting situations where corrupt practices were taking place as if



he was too naïve to recognize the ways of the world; and that the narrative goes to such lengths to depict the breadth of police corruption that, as an adjunct, it implies that corruption is insurmountable. Andrew Sarris in the *Village Voice* takes Kael's criticisms one step further. Taking the always-already signifying aspect of stardom and conflating it with the specific intertextuality between contemporary films he writes,

As the picture progresses, Pacino's *Serpico*, like Hoffman's Benjamin before him, becomes an increasingly facile figure of the counter-culture at war with the great sell-out middle-class (Sarris 1973b).

Put more simply, Sarris is here focussing on a specific aspect of film over written narrative, its use of recognizable stars. As we witnessed with the film of *All the President's Men*, Robert Redford potentially represented certain political ideas to the film's audience. During this period, Al Pacino (who plays Frank Serpico) was often considered to be one of a group of actors, including Dustin Hoffman, who combined youth, unconventional good looks, and a brand of method acting in star roles. In addition to these attributes, however, Hoffman's most famous film, *The Graduate* (1967) is widely considered to be a narrative of youth in conflict with the mediocrity of the middle-aged middle class. Moreover, Hoffman's off-screen persona complemented his on screen one; for instance, he displayed indifference at this time to the Oscar ceremonies where he was nominated for *The Graduate* and *Midnight Cowboy* (1969). Pacino's association with Hoffman, then, in this circuitous way, effectively lends him a similar identity to the character Hoffman plays in his first major film, and this can be said to be in place before Pacino even assumes the role of hippie policeman Serpico. If one follows this line of reasoning then both Serpico and Benjamin Braddock are characters who, in their own ways, stand against the establishment. Sarris' shorthand explication of this for contemporary readers allows him to proceed to his next question which is:

Is there a valid connection between honesty and non-conformism or is it merely a coincidence in Serpico's case? (Sarris 1973b).

Sarris' complaint is that the issue of police corruption is lost in the general celebration of countercultural values in competition with the establishment. He goes further, comparing the 'facts' of the Serpico story with the the products of the writer of the book, the two writers of the screenplay of the film and the film's director:

It would seem that *Serpico*, Maas, Salt, Wexler and Lumet have taken the line of least resistance in transforming a saga of corruption and persecution into special pleading for an alternate life style (Sarris 1973b).

Any complexities that either the texts of the book or the film allow is reduced by this feasible formulation. Before we go on to the consequences of this it is worth considering another way in which the 'attitude' of *Serpico* can be considered. A review by the Marxist critic Irwin Silber places *Serpico* firmly in an American tradition of 'muckraking', the most famous example of which among fictional texts is probably Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel, *The Jungle* (1965). Silber states that

Like all attempts at muckraking and social reform, *Serpico* is designed not to change the class relations of society but to correct a particular social abuse that, left untouched, jeopardizes the effectiveness of monopoly capitalism's police arm. This is the classical task of the bourgeois reformer - to cry out in alarm when a secondary contradiction such as police corruption threatens to get so out of hand that an even more serious social contradiction can develop.

Police corruption is a question that poses a paradox for the ruling classes. On the one hand, there is the need to maintain a strong police apparatus that will be a willing instrument of repression in the class struggle. At the same time, the ruling class knows that when police are themselves criminals, there is no law - thus threatening the fundamental social stability that monopoly capitalism requires to maintain the class structure as it exists.

It is out of this paradox that films like *Serpico* emerge. Because they reflect genuine social contradictions, they inevitably have political implications that go beyond their immediate focus. In this way, the capitalist system's own need for internal reform can be, at times, one breeding ground for revolutionary ideas (Silber in Nichols 1976 p. 80).

Silber also explains that the film purports to help social institutions to correct themselves and, in so doing, helps to provide an illusion that self-correction can exist and be effective. Even in this formulation there is a certain amount of ambiguity about the text. On the one hand, Silber's view is similar to that of Kael in that his article suggests that the enormity of wrongdoing in social institutions fosters attitudes of resignation. This is a way of distilling a particular reading of *Serpico*. On the other hand, it is difficult to accept Silber's comments without acknowledging that they suggest that *Serpico* is actually a text which does a great deal. While *Serpico* may not be designed to change the class relations of society it is difficult to imagine any text, including the plays of Brecht, which are designed for this purpose. Leaving this aside, if *Serpico* actually achieves just a few of the things that Silber identifies in the quote above, then without having to list all the other potential readings of areas of the text as a critique *within* capitalism, it has a multiplicity that the readings of Kael et al. do not allow.



It is quite evident from examples such as these that the multiplicity of meaning of genre texts can often be underestimated. Like other texts that we have discussed *Serpico* is a non-fiction thriller, part of whose non-fictionality is engendered by its complexity, its demonstration that truth is stranger than fiction. Yet at the same time, as a non-fictional text it also overlaps with the fictional generic texts to which it is clearly related. So, in addition to the topological homology possessed by fiction and non-fiction, the relation between the two is centred around the limitations imposed on readings of generic texts. That is to say that the extra-textual cues which might ordinarily limit or guide the readings of a generic text, also function to limit the readings of a non-fictional text in the same way. We will return to this again shortly but, for now, it suffices to say that *Serpico*, at the hands of contemporary reviewers could be said to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Put another way, the simplifications that extra-textual cues identified would, perhaps, create readings of this kind. Pauline Kael complains that

the people and issues are so simplified they seem exaggerated (Kael 1973 p. 107).

She also adds,

We don't get a clear view of *Serpico* as a rookie, to see in what ways he was different from the other rookies, and we are never brought to identify with his year-in-year-out doggedness (Kael 1973 p. 107).

On one level one could argue that this is simply untrue; as we have seen, Maas' book gives considerable attention to *Serpico*'s youth and rookie years in order to spell out his motivation. Similarly, a substantial part of the film narrates *Serpico*'s early years on the force. Moreover, it would be close to impossible to reflect with any great accuracy the diversity and drawn-out nature of police work. For our purposes, of course, this is beside the point: Kael is an influential source for readings of films in this period and these counter-readings are suggested from the standpoint of a Devil's advocate, to suggest that extra-textual cues reduce the multiplicity of the text. The same could be said of other of her complaints; one is that the film has a habit of

showing the corrupt police not as self-hating and miserable or as tormented by guilt and fear (why else would they be so down on *Serpico* for refusing to be like them?) but simply as crude, rotten villains (Kael 1973 p. 108).

One could argue that, in the film, we learn so little of the backgrounds of the corrupt police operatives that their motivations are open to a number of interpretations which are different from Kael's. In addition, her words might act as a cue for alternative interpretations. With regard to the character of Serpico reviewers identified grounds for similar reductive interpretations. Kael singles out the book, especially, in contrast to her personal knowledge of Frank Serpico:

the Maas book is a popularizing account of Serpico which practically deifies him . . . (Kael 1973 p. 108).

In the same vein, though no doubt inspired by Pacino's demeanour, Sarris encapsulates the depiction of Serpico in the film as

a doe-eyed Diogenes in a city on the take (Sarris 1973b).

The categorization of Serpico as some kind of saint was quick to catch on with reviewers such as John Simon in *Esquire* who took it to the extremes of caricature:

A sort of saint or hermit, who talks to his cockatoo as St. Francis did to the birds, and is followed by his sheep dog as St. Jerome was by his lion (Simon 1974a).

In spite of counter-arguments and criticisms of the limitations that such judgments imposed on the text, the most serious piece of information which would lend credibility to them regards the role of David Durk. Durk was a plain-clothes colleague of Serpico and they had known each other since training on a Criminal Investigation Course together. Both were about the same age, but Durk had joined the force four years later than Serpico having graduated from Amherst College. In the book, Serpico and Durk share the same concern over corruption and the same thirst for justice, making them confidants (see Maas pp. 107 ff). However, reviewers including Sarris, Hentoff and Simon feel that Durk gets a very rough deal in the book and especially the film, where he is known only as 'Bob Blair'. Writes Hentoff,

The movie, by the way, does Durk a serious injustice. He figured much more importantly in the exposure of police corruption than the movie - focusing on Al Pacino as the star - would have you believe (Hentoff 1974).

More serious than this for Sarris is how the omission of Durk's role from the narrative fits the film's general attitude. As Durk is an articulate graduate who dresses smartly and



utilizes aspects of the bureaucracy of police work in his stand against corruption, Sarris feels that this disqualifies him from the film's narrative:

How convenient it is that Serpico's enemies should be square and crooked at the same time! It is nothing less than a Nixonian happenstance. In this context, the downgrading of Durk makes a certain amount of mythic sense. The spectacle of two honest men cooperating in a crooked world does not provide as much paranoia for the armchair reformer in the audience as does the spectacle of one honest man all alone against the whole world (Sarris 1973b).

In this way, then, the limitations imposed on the reading of the film of *Serpico* also constitute an attack on its veracity. The excision of Durk's role is, in one sense, an act of narration but it also indicates to Sarris that the text is 'false' in relation to an empirical given; whether these processes of editing and narration are indigenous to only fictional texts is not mentioned by the critic. We will return to this issue shortly. The last criticism of Sarris', it must also be noted, is related to that of Silber, in that they both criticise the film for being an exercise in bourgeois individualism as opposed to collective action or class consciousness. That is not to say that these criticisms are not valid; however, they do manifest the tendency to distil the text's contents.

If one were to attempt to measure the veracity of the texts of *Serpico* then one possible course of action would necessarily involve recourse to the man himself. Naturally, this would entail editing and distortion of a similar kind to the book and film, but it is quite telling that Serpico's remarks in interviews seem to be at odds with the reductive notions about his career and motives which are emphasized in reviews of the film. He tells Kael, the police are always saying, 'It's not our fault, it's the public'. This has to be corrected. Cops don't have the right kind of training. The whole system of values has to be overhauled. You ought to be involved in how many people you can keep out of trouble, not how many you can arrest (Kael 1973 p. 108).

This is the crux of Kael's review: that *Serpico*'s story is actually muckraking with a purpose. Far from wishing to analyse the world *Serpico* actually wished to change it by making his story known. At this point, it is clear that the extra-textual cues constituted by Kael's and Sarris' reviews can have two effects: they can encourage readings of the film which are focused on the simple, supposedly generic aspects of the police and corruption story; or, in stressing the deficiency of this aspect and pointing to the non-fictional story

upon which the text is based, they can encourage readings focussed on the text's representation of a more complex story. Once again, the overlap of non-fiction and generic fiction is located in the space where complexity of the content of the narrative is in question. One brief demonstration of this principle - although as empirical evidence it is far from conclusive - involved a *Village Voice* article by Nat Hentoff. Having taken his young son to see the film, the son was so outraged by the injustices that he saw on screen that he was moved to write a personal letter to Frank Serpico. Serpico's reply takes great pains to stress that persecution of suspected corrupt police operatives is an unwise move, particularly because of the fact that

you can't be sure who the good guys are and you don't want to discourage them (Hentoff 1974).

On the one side this statement serves to problematize the film's 'villains' in the face of an empirical response by a real reader. On the other side it is worth mentioning Serpico's emphatic problematization of the 'hero':

I graduated from Boy Scout to Saint. Baloney! In terms of conventional morals I don't even qualify for a Sunday School prize (quoted in Gibbins 1974).

Even if this qualifies as false modesty, it demonstrates Serpico's awareness that the exigencies of the narrative - making him a hero, portraying a lone fight, etc. - are founded on a diminishing belief in conventional morals. Put another way, Serpico is so heroic because his decisions were so difficult and the forces against him so great. That the decisions should be viewed as so difficult is the idea that he is attempting to refute. Once again, this refuses a reading based on simple evaluations of heroes and villains.

A last point to make about the grounds for reduction of the Serpico story concerns his fate at the end of the texts. In the book, Serpico leaves the police department as we have seen. The film, on the other hand, takes this a step further: after he is shot in the face whilst on the narcotics job the film ends with a written caption indicating that Serpico left the force and went to live in Switzerland for his own safety. In the book, Serpico certainly goes on a secret vacation to Nova Scotia towards the end of the narrative and it is clear from other sources that he subsequently assumed quite an anonymous life in



Switzerland (see, for instance, Gibbins 1974). However, the finality of the film's information on Serpico's new Swiss home is negated somewhat by Kael's narration of their recent sharing of coffee together, Maas' interview at the beginning of his book and Hentoff's son's letter to Serpico in Greenwich Village. Clearly, Serpico's new location is not as anonymous as the film suggests and his visits back to New York are not made under extremely clandestine circumstances. The small point to be made from this is that, at the level of the narration, the non-fictionality of the Serpico story prevents the closure that the film is perceived to enact. So, even while the film can be said to bring the story to a close there are strong grounds for readings which leave it open. If this information is not sufficient to underpin possible readings where the Serpico narrative is left open then surely the continuation elsewhere of the narrative of his fight against corruption does contribute to such readings. In 1976 NBC began to broadcast episodes of the TV series, *Serpico*, which starred David Birney and ran for 14 episodes following a TV pilot-movie. The opening of each episode made it clear that this was the same Frank Serpico as in the Maas book and the Lumet film, and the pilot-movie was largely a re-working of the original film's plot. What is important for us, however, is that the TV series featured Serpico in the same kind of undercover work against criminals and police corruption as is recounted in the other texts. So, for example, in the episode entitled 'Trumpet of Time', Serpico addresses both these themes by delving into the career of a friend and colleague who he believes to have fallen into corrupt practices involving specific criminals; in 'The Indian' he poses as a corrupt cop in order to nail a drugs baron; and so on. The connection between the TV series and (the lack of) narrative closure in the Serpico story can be seen in a preliminary way from these examples. I do not intend to discuss the TV series any further as it ran for only one series from mid-1976 to early 1977 and did not attract the same level of attention as the book and the film. Clearly, though, we have touched on an area which is very important in the shaping of readings of texts; with television thriller series adjustments to the mode of analysis must be made to accommodate the kind of reader investments that are engendered by the phenomenon of

seriality. At the present we are concerned primarily with the influence of non-fiction and massive-selling texts on the possible contemporary readings of thrillers.

As we have seen, the *Serpico* story is a very apposite one because of its contemporary reading formation. Its affinity with generic narratives concerned with police work, although strong, is overshadowed by its relation to narratives of duplicity on the part of public officers. The incremental nature of the revelation of corruption in the police force is akin to the build-up of damning evidence in revelations about Vietnam and Watergate in contemporary news reports, and concerning Watergate only, the process of revelation in *All the President's Men*. *Serpico* shares with these a general suspicion, fear and paranoia about who can be trusted within the realms of public life. What *Serpico* also demonstrates is that the line between fiction and non-fiction is often drawn with considerations of 'complexity' in mind. Extra-textual cues reduce the range of readings of the narrative, for example to a lonely odyssey: one edition of Maas' book carries quotes from *Newsweek*, *Serpico* did all that one man could do - and more and the *New York Times*,

No one can come away from *Serpico* without admiration for one man's lonely integrity.

This is one way in which the narrative can be read. Admittedly, the book is named after the character who dominates its proceedings but, as we have seen, *Serpico* himself has tried to suggest that his story is about exposing corruption rather than about his own heroism. We have noted, then, that there is a degree of ambiguity in the reviews of the film which suggest that a reading of the text must be one which papers over the complexities of the story, while suggesting that the very non-fictionality of the story contains those complexities, intact but also invisible.

This is one way that the overlap of fiction and non-fiction is negotiated by extra-textual cues which reduce the multiplicity of the text; that is to say that fiction is opposed to non-fiction in light of the latter's putative greater grasp of the diversity of life. In the case of *Serpico*, this has even been taken a step further, to the point where the film and the



book's relation to generic fiction is counterposed with different versions of the *Serpico* story. The criticisms of Sarris et al. over the way the film and the book handle David Durk, for example, are tantamount to claims that the texts are falsified. It is here that the tropological similarities between the fictional and the non-fictional are exposed. If Sarris is to say that the narrative represses the role of a character he is implying that the text is generally non-fictional but 'misleading' in its version of the non-fictional material. Sarris could also say that a fictional narrative represses the role of a character; but to make the same accusation that the text is misleading would be a nonsense in such a case. The issue rests clearly on a notion of veracity which is not to be found in the text under question. Given that *Serpico* is *already* presented as a text to be read in terms of its non-fictionality Sarris's intervention takes place not on the mythical terrain of the text 'itself' nor in the realm of the negotiated real events. Instead, Sarris's comments can only make sense if they are couched within an analysis which operates from the premise that *Serpico* is a non-fictional text; to bemoan the treatment of the character of David Durk in the narrative is to discuss the text *as if* it were non-fiction. Nowhere does Sarris say that *Serpico* is pure fiction; at best he can say only that the veracity of the portrayal of Durk's role should be questioned. Equally he could make criticisms of the omission of extracts of dialogue that took place during *Serpico*'s career, omission of other characters or, in the film, the possibility of inaccurate reproductions of the clothes of the protagonists. In this way *Serpico* is an interesting case which demonstrates that the non-fictionality of a text is quite precarious and that non-fictionality can be seen to reside partly in relation to the fictional text's lack of an explicit narration of the full complexity of its details. Put another way, non-fiction is assumed to entail a greater complexity and a reduction of such narrative processes as editing which it can never really yield. This is not to say that texts which are thought to narrate a simple series of events in black and white terms lack complexity as an intrinsic attribute. As we have seen, the book of *Serpico* contains not just narration of events but also explicit statements of Frank *Serpico*'s aims and views about the exposure of corruption. But, working against this are the narrative of the film, the narrative of the film as it is explicated by influential voices like that of Kael, and the existence of different

texts of *Serpico* in the public domain (particularly in New York). So, the overlap of fiction and non-fiction is an area which is contested just as much as the special verisimilitude of fictional thriller texts. In the previous chapter, following the comments of Steve Neale, we have noted that thrillers are constituted by a strong reliance on verisimilitude in the depiction of their events. If that area of reliance is considered as a potential indeterminacy which is always-already filled in by a reading which imports knowledge into the text, then extra-textual designations of the text's status, of how it is to be read, have a role to play. The tension between fiction and non-fiction as two modes of designating texts is therefore crucial when considering a genre such as the thriller.

### *Jay J. Armes Investigator*

A very good example of the definition of non-fiction by constant direct reference to fictional versions of its subject matter is embodied in Frederick Nolan's book, *Jay J. Armes Investigator* (1978; originally 1976). In fact, there are grounds for a reading of this text orientated entirely around this feature of its narrative. Basically, the book is a straightforward narration of a series of episodes in the career of the legendary El Paso private security/investigations entrepreneur, Jay Armes. Yet the narrative constantly justifies itself by relating its events to those to be found in fictional narrations about private investigations. The chief way in which it does this is by allowing a number of italicized preambles by a narrator who refers to Armes in the the third person to punctuate the text. These offer commentary on the extraordinary or *outré* nature of Armes' exploits rather than letting their narration speak for itself. The bulk of the text's narrative, in plain font, refers to Armes in the first person and purports to be direct narration by the private investigator himself. The frontispiece of the book makes the situation a little clearer, stating the title and author:

Jay J. Armes as told to Frederick Nolan



### Jay J. Armes Investigator

The mode of narration, then, is one that is styled consciously on that of a series of magazine articles where an interview is presented as an unbroken monologue by the interviewee which may have actually been a series of responses to questions which are not manifest in the text. This is then prefaced by a few introductory sentences which are either unattributed or attributed to the credited interviewer. In this way, then, the text bears some of the marks of its research technique and self-advertized non-fictionality. In addition to this, it also bolsters its non-fictional status by reference to fictional texts in both aspects of the narration, the one purportedly by Nolan and the one purportedly by Armes. The necessity of such mechanisms is probably emphasized by the fact that Nolan is the author of such best selling thrillers as *The Mittenwald Syndicate* (1976) and *The Oshawa Project* (1974).

At the very outset, the Nolan narration invokes general and specific images of private investigators in fiction. This is not without its problems. The first paragraph of the text runs as follows:

*If you want to hire the world's greatest private investigator, the first thing you've got to do is discard all your preconceptions about the breed. Jay J. Armes isn't anything like Longstreet or Mannix or Cannon or Harry O or any of that kiss-kiss, bang-bang crowd of cardboard cutouts on television. You won't find his offices in any of the gilded watering places frequented by the international jet set; there is no deep piled, blond-wooded, tinted-windowed high-rise suite in New York or Los Angeles or London or Paris or Rome, no secretaries in St. Laurent casuals and Gucci pumps. Jay J. Armes, the world's most successful private detective, works out of El Paso, Texas (p. 3).*

The Nolan narration wishes to establish that the reality of Armes' career is very far removed from the gilded embellishments of fictional private investigation narratives. However, the examples the passage chooses to counterpose to Armes are unfortunate. The fictional character Harry Orwell, for instance, is notable because he has retired from the police force as a result of being shot in the back with a bullet which is permanently lodged against his spine; consequently, the TV series *Harry O* is characterized by its lack of high-power physical action. Orwell avoids fights, never runs and is prevented from becoming involved in car chases by virtue of the fact that his car is constantly in a garage being repaired. In fact, Orwell, with his house on the shore, seems just one step away

from being a beach bum. Cannon, in the Quinn Martin series named after him is equally representative of an emphasis on the ordinariness of private investigation. Cannon's only distinguishing features, if they can be called this, are that he is fat and middle-aged. Both of these programmes foregrounded the mundane nature of private detective work in the 1970s. Admittedly, routine work did not eclipse the thrills which the narratives contained; however, the emphasis in these series was on the 'realism' of the depiction of private investigations and this relied in turn on the foundation of a very ordinary detective.

Mannix, one of the other fictional detectives named in this passage, is the only one who could be accused of regularly indulging in fisticuffs. As played by Mike Connors, his sharp profile is mitigated by his advancing years. The last of the quartet is Longstreet, whose series ran for only one season in America from 1971-1972. As a result of the short-lived career of this character it is quite telling that the Nolan narration cites him. Longstreet's distinguishing feature is that he is blind. This establishes a link with Armes because, after the first few pages in which Armes' expertise is reported the reader is given the following information:

*He has no hands* (p. 6).

In the context of Nolan's narration, this is the trump card, delivered almost with a fanfare. The 1970s saw a proliferation of fictional private investigators with their own personal idiosyncrasies, to the extent where Harry Orwell's idiosyncrasy is his ordinariness. The common ground of Longstreet, Armes (and, to a lesser extent Harry O) is handicap; but it is worth pointing out that a blind private detective existed in the literature since the second decade of this century in the person of Ernest Bramah's Max Carrados (we touched on this in Chapter 2), and a private eye without a left arm, Dan Fortune, had been created by Michael Collins in 1967. The separation of the worlds of fictional and non-fictional private detectives can be seen to rest, to some extent, on an insufficiently convincing statement of their differences. The second part of the passage attempts to disavow the glamour of Armes' career and its fruits; however, it soon becomes clear in the narrative that Armes is a very rich man, and that he does lead a glamorous lifestyle suffused with gadgetry designed to enhance his standard of living.



The other point that these sentences are making is that, being based in El Paso, Texas, Armes is far removed from the international jet-set. This is at odds with the fact that he employs operatives in every major city in the world and is even willing in parts of the narrative to drop everything in order to make a transatlantic or cross-country flight. In addition, Armes' provincial location does not set him apart from his contemporary fictional counterparts. As Robin Winks demonstrates in an article entitled 'The Scene of the Crime: Detective Fiction Discovers America' (1985) the dominant fashion since the early seventies has been for regionalism. A number of thriller writers operating since this period - K.C. Constantine, Elmore Leonard, Michael Z. Lewin and Robert B. Parker among them - have set the events of their texts in locations removed from the traditional metropolises of American mystery fiction. There are numerous authors beside these whose texts rely on regional settings for their specificity, for example James Crumley and Montana. Nolan's narration attempts something similar by placing Armes' exploits within the larger history of El Paso, making Armes assume the burden of history as the town's most famous son in a similar way to the manner in which Maas' narrative places Serpico in the history of police corruption in America (Armes and Nolan pp. 3 ff). The device of differentiating the fictional from the non-fictional is simply a device. No convincing differences between Armes and his fictional counterparts are given and, if anything, in this dimension, the overlap between fiction and non-fiction is reinforced.

Looking more specifically at the complexity of Armes' career rather than at the contrivances of the narration it is clear that Armes' approach to his work differs from that of his fictional counterparts only on certain levels of detail. One aspect of his operations concerns his full use of gadgets and machinery; the Nolan narration even makes reference to fiction here by stating that some of Armes' equipment is better than that devised by Q for James Bond. Another aspect of Armes' expertise involves the avoidance of the kind of dramatic conclusions that might characterize fiction; rather than play up situations of danger Armes shows a willingness to countenance mundane assessments. When Armes is hired in the case of the kidnapping of Marlon Brando's son, the actor confesses his

fear that the abduction is connected to his recent role in *The Godfather*. Armes has other ideas:

That seemed unlikely to me, and I told him why. Gangland kidnappings are seldom for reprisals of the kind he feared. When the underworld decides someone is going to disappear, it's usually for good. If they want to punish someone for a transgression, they usually take it out on him directly. It's the small-time crooks and the amateurs who go in for the other kind of kidnapping, and even they rarely go after the children of celebrities anymore. There is too much press attention, which alerts too many people and makes it difficult to keep the victim hidden. Much easier to take the child of some wealthy businessman whose name means little outside his own home town. They are much easier marks, too (p. 16).

Armes' willingness to opt for the more mundane explanation serves to demonstrate a kind of refusal of drama in favour of more realistic assessments. It is on these grounds also that readings might make an assessment of Armes in thriller terms as a professional rather than an amateur. It is worth noting with regard to both of these points that a text which we will discuss in a Chapter 8 and which is praised for its realism, Elmore Leonard's *52 Pick-up*, involves exactly the kind of scenario that Armes delineates in the last two sentences of the above quote. It is in the perceived accuracy of Armes' assessments that readings of the text's non-fictionality lie. The narrative seems to allow for the overlap of the fictional with the non-fictional by maintaining a tension between reductionist tendencies in the narrative and statements which imply multiplicity, and a tension between aspects of the narrative that are very similar to fictional versions of private investigation and attempts to differentiate the narrative from these same fictions.

If readings during the period might be orientated towards an understanding of various social problems to do with say, the family, then there are parts of Armes' narrative which amply provide a terrain for the exercise of such readings. When Armes writes about runaway children he explains their motivations by stating that they simply are not receiving enough love at home (p. 44). Runaway children are a staple of the hard-boiled private eye story; one has only to consider the works of Ross Macdonald, or later, of Robert B. Parker. Such stories, put crudely, allow for the enactment of a quest and an exploration of family dysfunction. Armes is more laconic and attempts to make generalizations:



Boys often decide to take off just for the hell of it, seeking adventure, new sights, a new part of the country - or some other country. The girls are more likely to have run away with a boyfriend whom the parents disapproved of or did not know, and you find them cosied up in some apartment, playing Mr. and Mrs. (p. 110-111).

Once again, his words about the motivations for this kind of behaviour are very straightforward:

People - particularly young people - *will* do things they're not supposed to, once in a while, law or no law. That's why the Noble Experiment failed back in the twenties and that's why we have so many drug addicts today (p. 219).

The problem with this kind of reasoning in a text such as this is that it is in battle with a more varied view. Armes' wide experience - which his narration is attempting to convey - prevents him from making reductionist statements with any degree of conviction. In this respect the text contradicts itself. Although he says that (lack of) love is the answer the narrative also points out that,

One of the first rules you learn in my business is that there aren't any rules. You are dealing with infinitely variable factors - the human heart and mind - and it's as well not to try standardizing the approach to either. My rule is not to have a formula, and not to take one single thing for granted (p. 52)

In statements such as these the tension of reductionism and multiplicity is made manifest.

Armes claims to have the answer to a given question in a nutshell and that nutshell turns out to be one characterized by multiplicity. In other areas, too, the narrative cannot avoid stressing multiple determinants; this is true even of the narration itself:

*The Jay Armes story keeps developing faster than anyone can write it down and there are already enough cases in Jay's files to fill six books. So this book is really only part of the story of a most extraordinary man* (p. 224).

So the present narrative is offered as part of a network of more varied and larger narratives and its content is related to these. Armes himself relies not on personal idiosyncrasies such as flamboyant heroism or a love of poetry; his ongoing project of investigation relies on the more mundane constants in his line of work, such as technology. Thus,

*Jay Armes needs and owns such a bewildering array of sophisticated hardware. His kind of investigating requires the very best there is, and the very best there is costs thousands and thousands of dollars* (p. 69).

The narrative continues here, listing at great length a large number of items of gadgetry required in unspecified areas of investigation. This is one way of stressing that Armes' career is varied and continues beyond the confines of the narrative. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that the narrative also pays attention to the more human side of

investigation and the complexities it entails. For example, on the subject of killing, Armes remembers

I was a law-enforcement officer and I had been forced to kill in self-defense. But taking the life of another man is an enormously traumatizing experience. TV shows make it seem commonplace, an everyday event in the life of a law-enforcement officer, but it is not. When it happens you have to make a whole new set of adjustments to who you are and what you do. You have to learn to live with the fact that you have ended the life of another human being, no matter what the justification. It is not and never will be easy (p. 114).

Once again there is a reference to the difference between TV programmes and the reality of taking a life. These features of the text that I have discussed as representing reductionism and multiplicity are not necessarily impossible to assimilate into fictional narratives. In fact, it seems that the references to how TV is different from reality stem from a desire to clearly establish the non-fictionality of the text. Further features of the text show a similarly weak resistance to assimilation into fiction but they are notable for this resistance nevertheless.

When Armes mentions some of his employees and emphasizes their skills, one of his statements includes the following:

All my people are trained operatives, and well able to take care of themselves. Some of the girls can pull tricks that would make *Police Woman* Pepper Anderson's hair stand on end (p. 210).

This is yet another reference to TV but not an empty one. Armes is stressing the toughness of his female operatives by invoking Pepper Anderson. The latter was a fictional policewoman and the main character of a TV series that ran for four seasons from 1974 to 1978. Pepper Anderson was the first female undercover cop to be featured on TV and, on this level, represents a considerable innovation. That this is the only fictional point of reference for Armes to use in emphasizing the skills of his female operatives suggests that this reference to fiction is slightly different from his previous ones. Even though a range of idiosyncrasies among male detectives was to be found in TV fiction at this time, there were very few female detectives on TV, with or without idiosyncrasies. It could even be said that feminine gender was just one extra idiosyncrasy added to the stock of fictional detectives at this time. This is how the non-fictionality of Armes' text must therefore be assessed: in terms of its relative assimilability to detective



fiction of the period. Despite the dubious nature of some of the innovations mentioned at the beginning of our consideration of the text, there still remains the possibility of a reading focussed on these problematically assimilable aspects. Protestations about the lack of glamour involved in the job serve as a starting point; Armes states that

This is not a particularly glamorous job. You knock on a lot of doors, ask a lot of questions, pound a lot of pavement, use up a lot of shoe leather. Much of it is thankless and unrewarding, but if done properly, a neighborhood survey can paint you a picture of a subject that no amount of documentary evidence can provide (p. 17).

The shoe leather usage is difficult to represent accurately in fictional texts but similar devices to the one Armes uses in this passage can be employed by writers of fiction. The film of *All the President's Men* attempts in parts to represent this very aspect of a reporter's lot. Armes adds,

One of the lousiest parts of surveillance is the dull, endless hours of waiting. The subject you are watching is living his life, doing things, going places. You are his shadow, and you have about the same amount of fun as a real shadow does. You spend nights huddled up in a fogged-up car wondering why anyone would want to do a job like the one you do. You spend evenings in muzaked, half-empty restaurants, beginning to believe the United States is exclusively populated by plain girls with long dark hair and gold-rimmed glasses who are studying speech-therapy. It's the other side of the coin - not glamorous, not exciting, not really very interesting. But it's part of what you do so you do it (p. 230).

These comments on surveillance are similar to those on shoe leather. In fact, it is true to say that many private eye novels in the 1970s narrate the long waits involved in surveillance in an almost identical manner. This brings us to a further point about non-fictionality: such features of the text do not absolutely resist assimilation into generic fiction, but what they do is to map out an area for establishing the verisimilitude of a thriller text. Despite the ill-chosen fictional counterparts which I have mentioned, it is clear that the references to fictional counterparts represent a contestation of the verisimilitude to which some fictional texts adhere. In this way, *Jay J. Armes Investigator* is one factor which sets the agenda for hard-boiled fiction of the period. Any private eye story which fails to mention the tedium of the surveillance which it does not narrate runs the risk of seriously compromising its verisimilitude. At the same time, there are ways in which Armes' text allows less and less assimilability; it is not averse to deliberately leaving gaps. On the subject of surveillance again, although of a different kind, Armes states

We check out every job application, every item of information given. By the time we have finished, we know a great deal about each employee: where he lives, what his habits are, what his family life is like. We know what kind of car he drives, what kind of TV set he owns, what kind of bills are coming in, what kind of credit he has - and whether any of all these things match his earnings . . . . Then we check out their bank records and any other savings they may have, how much they have on deposit. Against all these figures we set their total earnings at present, and for the preceding year. We make careful notes of the size and number of checks they are writing, and most especially to whom. Don't ask me to go into too much detail about how we obtain this information: just let me observe that tellers are well named (p. 65).

The text promises to tell all, but there are things which it also refuses to narrate for good reasons. These reasons are to do with protecting the identity of certain informants. A fictional text would have no real recourse to such an excuse.

While there are aspects of the text which try to resist fictionality it must be mentioned that a great deal of the text embodies a self-consciously fictional approach. Armes, it seems, has courted this throughout his career, having initially gained success from a radio advertisement which deliberately copied the style of the famous TV detective series of the 1950s, *Dragnet* (p. 41). Similarly, the style of the narration of events in this text is related closely and consciously to that of the hard-boiled story. In the case of the kidnapping of Christian Brando Armes confronts one of the abductors who is naked in a tent. The narrative does not need to recount the dialogue at this point but it does:

'Out!' I snapped. 'With your hands on your head!'  
'What?' she squawked. 'Like this?'  
'Don't worry, lady', I said. 'You're not my type' (p. 25).

Weak though this wise-crack is, it resembles the kind of mechanism that fictional private investigators are renowned for using to deflate tense situations. The purpose it serves in the events is the same; at the level of the narrative, though, it is a self-conscious reference to the style of fictional private eyes. A slightly more problematic example of this phenomenon occurs later in the narrative. A seemingly distressed woman calls Armes late at night to beg his assistance immediately; it appears her 'little girl' has been raped. Armes later finds out that the 'little girl' is, in fact, a poodle, and the rapist is next door's mongrel (p. 128). Before this, however, Armes visits the woman's house and the following narration takes place:

She was about forty-five, her graying hair beautifully coiffed, her skin smooth, her figure good. She was wearing about \$10,000 worth of jewelry and a perfume that wouldn't sell at much less than \$70 an ounce. She looked about as upset as a melon (p. 127).



Anybody who has read fiction by Raymond Chandler - and it is safe to say that the reader of a book on a non-fictional private detective at this point in history is likely to have at least some knowledge of Chandler's style - will recognize that this is a very Chanderesque passage. The staccato, matter-of-fact recital of details; the understatement with regard to the perfume; the final simile - all of these are devices which characterize the prose of Raymond Chandler and there are countless parodies of such a style in existence throughout the media. It is at this stage that a close reading of the text might involve questioning whether the style of the prose is attributable to Nolan rather than Armes. Although the two narrations purporting to be by them are separated by the usage of the third and first person respectively, and italicized and plain fonts, the question arises as to why Armes, if he is so skilled in the handling of prose, did not dispense with Nolan altogether. Nolan is not renowned for hard-boiled fiction; the two texts I have mentioned by him belong to a quite different genre of the thriller concerning the legacy of Nazism (see Appendix 1 and Chapter 9, below). But he is a writer of thrillers, whereas Armes is not. Firstly, for a close reading of the text, this passage consists of one of those moments when the research technique of the book becomes manifest for a moment, when the reader might question the means by which the information was transformed if it was indeed written by Nolan. This may break the narrative for a moment and mark the events as non-fiction. Secondly, following from this, the link is also established with fiction, because Nolan's standing in the field of thriller novels is possibly imposed on the narrative of Armes. The aura of generic fictionality is regulated on this level by the greater or lesser presence of Nolan in the narration. This is to say that readings of the text might be orientated more readily to its non-fictionality if Nolan were not involved in the project. If this is true, it is a further demonstration that the difference between fiction and non-fiction is very much a surface one, organized in the main by extra-textual cues.

Contemporary publishers employ teams of editors in the preparation of a manuscript whose work is usually effaced; even the removal of Nolan's name would not make the text the sole intellectual property of Jay J. Armes. But the *appearance* of the text as Armes' alone might enhance its non-fictionality.

One final instance of the way in which the text tends toward the fictional by means of intertextual reference can be found in Armes' interest in missing persons. A reading informed by the classic texts of hard-boiled fiction will make specific conclusions about the following paragraph:

It was the missing persons cases that interested me most. I was always fascinated by the motivations of runaways, and they were always the hardest to psych out. My theory is that to understand your subject, you must try to think like him, ask yourself what he would do? Why is it that one Tuesday, for no apparent reason, John Doe just walks out of his home and never comes back? What is it that makes a wife who's never played around suddenly plunge into a passionate affair with some man she's met at a PTA meeting? What makes a teenager suddenly decide he or she's had it up to here with his parents and take off? How do we wound each other so subtly, so infinitesimally, that we never know what we have done until it is too late? Who gives the final push, says the deciding word? Who, finally, pulls the trigger? (pp. 43-44).

This kind of speculation is clearly related to the famous story of Flitcraft that Sam Spade tells to Brigid O'Shaughnessy in Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1975 pp. 57-60: originally serialized in *Black Mask* in 1929). As we will see (Chapter 7), the key attribute of hard-boiled prose is its attempt to narrate appearances only, without having recourse to the omniscient narration of some fiction. Armes' narration, in view of the non-fictionality of its subject matter ordinarily would adhere to a similar 'objective' narration; yet, because the narrative is so personal it also allows for a high level of subjective commentary. Almost paradoxically, Hammett's text has no recourse to this; the brand of speculation about missing persons which appears in *The Maltese Falcon*, instead, is embodied in Sam Spade's parable about Flitcraft's sudden disposal of his past life. On this issue, then, it seems that the separation of fiction and non-fiction can be organized not around a stable ideal of objectivity to which texts must aspire, but a localized concept of verisimilitude which sanctions some textual devices and prohibits others. Amidst the narration of Armes' text there can be inserted a great deal of subjective discourse on the part of the narration; in Hammett's text, on the other hand, verisimilitude relies on the prohibition of such subjective discourse. The irony here, of course, lies in the fact that there are substantial grounds for believing that the Flitcraft story might actually be based on real events: it is well-known that Hammett was an experienced Pinkerton operative



before beginning to write for the pulps (see Johnson 1984 pp. 17 ff; Layman 1981 pp. 10 ff; Nolan 1983 pp. 7 ff).

*Jay J. Armes Investigator* has numerous curious relationships with fictional texts which demonstrate various degrees of overlap. One interesting piece of information that problematizes the relationship between fiction and non-fiction is the knowledge that not only was Armes involved in the Mexican prison breakout which inspired the Charles Bronson film of 1975, also entitled *Breakout* (p. 178) but, that

This caper - based on fact - also has the distinction of having inspired a real-life jailbreak in Michigan two weeks ago ('A Rundown of Summer Thrillers' *Time* 23 June 1975 p. 34).

As we have suggested in Chapter 2, generic texts do not consist of mere reflections of life after the fact; to assert this is to dismiss the possibility that generic texts operate in a different dimension in addition to real life and can thus, in some way, 'precede' it. We have mentioned in Chapter 2 (above) that Sutherland identifies this possibility in the prefiguring of the Patty Hearst story in a novel published shortly before the real events took place. We will encounter further examples of this phenomenon in subsequent chapters. What appears to happen on such occasions, we argued in Chapter 2, is that events in the real world are (re)invested with meaning as a result of their prefiguration in fictional texts. A corollary of this is that generic texts are not just the object of a pre-defined history; in fact, they have their own effect on the world. The case of the Charles Bronson film demonstrates how the relation between fiction and historical reality can be very problematic; clearly, the writer of the *Time* article on the film has neglected to mention that the Bronson film was based on a real break-out and, indeed, that there have been numerous prison escapes in history. Nevertheless, in terms of the reading of the present break-out, it is clear that the fictional text provided a framework for conceiving of the meaning of the real event. Non-fictional texts which have a close relationship with generic ones have, perhaps, an even greater localized input into real life because certain aspects of them may be verified. For instance, the very first page of *Jay J. Armes Investigator*, the 'Author's Note' which is not so designated, gives the information that,

apart from Christian Brando, the names of the clients in the following cases have been changed. This may prompt a reading based around identifying the clients; and this would not be too difficult in some cases given the thin disguises. Armes tells at one stage of the greatest rock star of his age whose oriental wife is worried about their young son (p. 190); at another stage he has dealings with a reclusive millionaire who had been a young producer in Hollywood, a yacht designer and an aviator (p. 194). Contemporary readers would have little difficulty identifying such figures and it is conceivable that the text might actually serve as a very good advert for Armes' security business, hence having some tangible affect on the real world.

The point for us to note about *Jay J. Armes Investigator* concerns its curious relationship with fictional versions of its subject matter. As we have seen, it constantly maps out its non-fictionality with reference to fictional private eyes and this is often problematic. The chief reason for this is that the devices used to emphasize the verisimilitude of the non-fictional private eye are constantly in use already in hard-boiled fiction, especially in the contemporary period. As Chapter 7 will demonstrate, the hard-boiled prose is fundamental to private eye stories and is the starting point for the creation of its own special verisimilitude revolving around the 'objectivity' of the narration and the banishing of omniscience. In this way, Armes' text strives to present its contents as stranger than fiction; and in the places I have mentioned, this breaks through: the unexplained sources of information, the simple banality of investment in technology, the suggestions of multiple determinant of events. However, the text presents itself to be read by readers with a knowledge of certain hard-boiled conventions; as such, its influence can be construed not so much as shaping a new corpus of private eye texts in any dominant way so much as contributing to them. That is to say, in our terms, that *Jay J. Armes Investigator* does not provide one of the dominant non-fictional means of always already filling the indeterminacies of manifestly fictional hard-boiled texts; instead, it is more likely to exist alongside the contemporary corpus of such texts as one more roughly equal source from a 'stock' of verisimilitude. This may go some way to explaining why it has



received very little notice in the literature of the thriller and also why non-fictional private eyes did not have the same prominence as their fictional counterparts in the period.<sup>4</sup>

### *Dog Day Afternoon*

In contrast, the exploits of John Wojtowicz over the space of a few hours became one of the most celebrated media events of its kind in the decade. As a result, there are a number of texts which make up this event and create a matrix of readings of it. One British magazine reported the event thus:

In 1972 John Wojtowicz, a 27-year old Vietnam veteran, with two younger companions, Robert Westenberg and Salvatore Natuarale [sic], entered a branch bank in Brooklyn and grabbed 29,000 dollars. They were about to make their getaway when they were spotted, and the bank was surrounded by police. In a panic, the gang rounded up nine members of staff and held them hostage for 14 hours. The purpose of the robbery had been to obtain the money for Wojtowicz (a married man) to finance a sex-change operation for his homosexual 'wife' Ernest Aron. Negotiating for a plane to escape, Natuarale [sic] was shot dead and Wojtowicz was arrested at Kennedy Airport . . . (McCooey 1975 p. 57).

Apart from the mis-spelling of Sal Naturile's name this account can be said to be faulty in that it is the only one that refers to a 'gang': Westenberg ducked out of the whole operation well before Sal and John entered the bank according to the film. This is the first indication that there is a difficulty with ascertaining the meaning of possible narratives of the event. Although the attempted robbery took place and was covered on prime time television in New York the texts of the event we will be concerned with consist of a famous *Life* magazine article, a 'fictional' book of the story, a popular and critically acclaimed film and some of the reviews and features that this spawned. A few more of the difficulties involved in negotiating these different texts can be mentioned now. In the *Life* article, the names of the protagonists are John Wojtowicz and Sal Naturile; this article and other sources reveal that, in the Greenwich Village gay community, Wojtowicz was known as Littlejohn Basso (Kluge and Moore 1972 p. 68; Bell quoted in Holm 1976 p. 3); the book, *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975) by Patrick Mann, refers to him as Joe Nowicki, known in the gay community as Littlejoe, while his partner in crime is called

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<sup>4</sup> The only other major book-length study of a non-fictional detective in this period that I can think of is Pileggi (1976).

Sam; the film features Al Pacino in the main role, but this time the character is called Sonny. The film is called *Dog Day Afternoon* although its resemblance to the book of that name is superficial: as we have noted, the names of the protagonists are different, but the book focuses on the robbery as only part of its story. A large part of the book is about the grudges that Littlejoe has against banks and his first wife as well as his life in the gay community; the film, in contrast, attempts to adhere to the classical unities by having virtually all of the action occur in one space and by creating an illusion of continuous action while squeezing the events of twelve hours into about two and a half hours. Despite its name, the film's credits attest that it is based on the *Life* magazine article by Kluge and Moore, and the original working title for the film was the same as that of the article (see Holm 1976 p. 3). Finding the definitive text of the John Wojtowicz story, then, is a task fraught with difficulties, especially if one considers that news bulletins covered the story extensively.

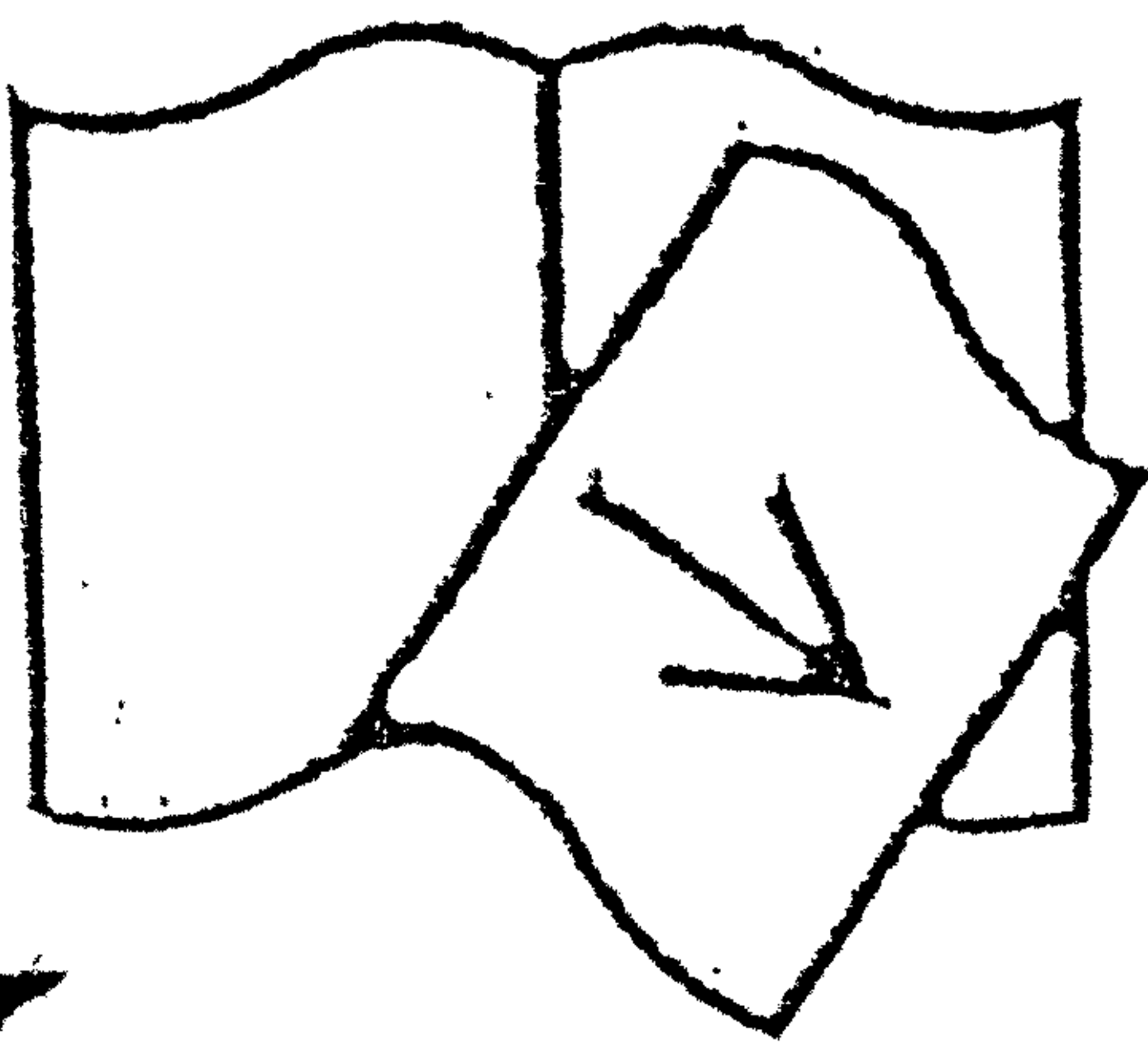
Looking first at the *Life* article, it is notable that Kluge and Moore have presented material on the bank siege as well as some coverage of Littlejohn's life. From the outset, however, the article toys with the cinematic aspect of the story: 'The Boys in the Bank', for instance, is almost definitely a reference to Mart Crowley's Broadway play, *The Boys in the Band*, which concentrates on nine gay men at a birthday party. This had been made into a popular film directed by William Friedkin and released only two years before Kluge and Moore's article appeared. Also, at the very beginning of the article, the narrative refers to

the second robber, John Wojtowicz, a dark, thin fellow with the broken-faced good looks of an Al Pacino or a Dustin Hoffman, heading into the tellers' area with an attaché case (p. 66).

The narrative thus charges the figure of Wojtowicz with some of Hoffman's (and Pacino's) persona, and, of course, the film version of the story featured Al Pacino in the role of Wojtowicz (Sonny). The other thing that characterizes the article is that it is not like a newspaper report which recounts the facts as they are available in a linear narrative, utilizing the past tense. Instead, the article is narrated in the present tense, perhaps giving



Pages  
Missing  
not  
Available



the putative rights and wrongs of the robbery. In the last paragraph Shirley Ball, the chief teller in the narrative, kisses the FBI operative who murders Sal. The fact that the narrative has to moralize in the way it does in the last quote, above, suggests that the moral ambiguity of the story is difficult to contain even when the kiss is reported. In this way, the story as presented in the *Life* article is still open to interpretation.

The book (Mann 1975) attempts to go much further than the article and the film by presenting thoughts, events and motives in the life of its protagonist, Joe Nowicki/Littlejoe. One way it manifests this difference is by its consideration of a possible conjunction of sex and revenge. After Joe is turned down for a job at a bank he begins to think in these terms:

He shifted from foot to foot as he waited for the elevator. Damned banks, everything slow, sleepy, dead. They didn't deserve him, not as an employee, the only way they deserved him was raping them with his two avenging cocks. Up the banks. Up all of them.

And that wasn't such a bad idea, either, he thought as the elevator doors opened slowly. They had all the time in the world, those doors. As the elevator crept down to the main floor, Joe considered the idea of raping a bank or two (1975 p. 17).

Apart from the connection between sex and bank robbery what is notable in this passage is the way in which it is narrated. The whole idea and its articulation clearly takes place in Joe's mind. In this way his thoughts are presented by indirect interior monologue; so, although he is referred to in the third person, the narrator can present these as Joe's thoughts, entailing a very specific and personal view of the world. Another passage demonstrates this:

They were all the same, anyway. Qualified or not, you didn't get the job. Veteran or not, no job. But nobody could say he didn't go through the motions. Tina couldn't fault him on that. He tried. He hauled his ass down here and smiled and the dumb cunt couldn't even remember his name for five minutes. Okay. Cool it (p. 17).

If this was a direct presentation of his thoughts then Joe would say, for example, "Tina couldn't fault me on that", rather than using the third person to refer to himself. Clearly, direct presentation of thoughts in such a manner creates a distance between the narrator and what the character thinks such that there is space for moralising passages of prose in the manner of the *Life* article. What the device of indirect interior monologue allows is the presentation of the character's thoughts without the need to comment on them. This does



not automatically entail a greater veracity for the text; but it does create the illusion that the text is presenting without comment 'the way things are'. We will return to this in more depth in Chapter 8. For now it is enough to note that the narration of the book of *Dog Day Afternoon* adopts such a technique and sees fit to make no editorial comments. Integral to the narrative is the fact that Joe simply exists and despite the insights the text might provide, he cannot be explained.

One of the reasons that Joe's character does not offer itself to easy explanation, of course, is because there is a more general blurring of morality which engulfs him. There are two ways of approaching this: one is through the organization of the generic elements of the text and another is through the almost flippant references to Vietnam in the text. If one considers the question of professionalism it is clear that, in one sense, the narrative presents Joe as an amateur. Before the robbery Joe speaks to an acquaintance in a bar:

'How come you know so much about what I haven't got?' Joe demanded.

Don flapped his hand at him in a don't-kid-me gesture. 'Because you're an amateur is why. An amateur can start a heist, but it takes a pro to follow through. There's a hell of a lot more goes on between the time you yell "Hey, this is a stickup" and the time you split the joint holding heavy bread. Don't even talk to me about amateurs. They're all alike (p. 22).

A reading of this as the voice of the genre speaking would not be too far from the mark. The bank job is subsequently bungled and the prediction of amateurism in this field vindicated. Yet at the same time the conception of the amateur must be more flexible than this. For instance, the narrative suggests that Joe is not without know-how when it comes to banks:

I know banks. Christ, I did time in plenty of them. I know the routine. I know where the warning buzzers are. I know what to do about the fucking overhead cameras. I know about the marked bills they always try to hand you for loot. I know the little signals like pulling a shade or not pulling a shade. I know the whole routine, baby. You're dealing with a real pro (p. 59).

The accusation of amateurism is based, it seems, on the lack of a ruthless authoritarian streak in Joe. Moreover, this cannot be attributed either to a lack of expertise or a deficiency in Joe's character alone. It must be seen in relation to a general erosion in respect for authority. At one stage in the robbery one of the tellers accuses Joe of incompetence and bad language which provokes the following amusing response:

'Jesus H. Christ!' Joe burst out at the top of his lungs. 'This is a gun, Marge. One more word out of you and the slug gets you right in the left tit. What the fuck is the world coming to? I hold a gun on this broad and she badmouths me to my face? What is that?' (p. 114).

This is a blatant example of a world where the expected paraphernalia of authority - in this case, a gun - no longer elicits the required response unless it is accompanied by a certain poise and a lack of warm-heartedness. In fact, Joe is like Serpico or Ron Kovic in this respect: he is an outsider not only by virtue of his sexuality but because of his incredulous response to the cynicism of the world around him. His Vietnam experience has assisted him in viewing American society within a new perspective; negotiating with the policeman in charge of the siege Joe says,

'I'm glad you don't think of me and Sam as a pair of high-strung Vietnam combat vets who learned mass killing from Uncle Sam. That would be the easy way to think of us, Detective Sergeant Moretti. That would be the cheap cop-out way. I'm glad you see us as responsible Americans, anxious to do the right thing'.

'You don't have to talk like that', Moretti muttered. 'Stop conning the people'.

'Me con the people? You got it backwards, Detective Sergeant Moretti. It's vets like Sam and me who were conned. We were the ones who were trained to kill slopes until we killed so many, a few more deaths don't make any difference to us (p. 154).

Joe's mock respect for the policeman who he addresses with his full title is tempered by the fact that he is attempting as best he can to explain that he can no longer pledge allegiance to a social system in which the sanctity of life is a flexible concept. For him, "conning" is the new state of being in America and he has suffered from it directly. In a sharper development of a related point, Joe, recalling Philip Roth's famous lampooning of Richard Nixon on the question of families which we discussed in the Chapter 3, explains to the bank manager why he elects to take a female hostage to the airport:

The ace-in-the-hole hostage ain't gonna be no middle aged bank hack. When the crunch comes, on the landing strip or in the plane, the FBI will chop you up like so much hamburger, Boyle. You're meat to them, same as Sam and me. You're expendable. You're a calculated risk. Shit, do I have to teach you this kindergarten stuff. You read the papers. But when I have a young chick who's a mother, it's different. The publicity's bad if they chill a mother. That they only do in Nam. There they waste mothers by the carload, and babies, too. Slopes don't count (p. 135).

This quote is characteristic of the book as a whole. The narrative continually presents a series of moral ambiguities and the sham formulations of the contemporary American social formation. The logic of Joe's statements continually lays bare the false ethical imperatives which purport to inform strictures about sexuality, crime and Vietnam. The



ideology of the sanctity of family life is shown to be a sham, or at best flexible; the threats to it are not located in the gay community or in the isolated actions of an armed robber but in the actions of America in Vietnam or even the ruthless FBI. Because Joe is the site of so many contradictions in American life by virtue of his own character and experiences, but also in his articulation of aspects of the social formation, it is fitting that the book should conclude with a word from the older generation. At the close of the text his mother, Flo, prepares for a television interview; but

All she could think about was what she could ever say about Littlejoe that would make sense, now or ever after (p. 222).

Joe represents the unassimilability of the Vietnam veteran into American society that we have discussed, but at the same time embodies a number of the acute contradictions of the American social formation at this time. Unlike the film, the book pays heed to some of the imperatives acting on Joe in his private life. In this way, it is more than likely that there can exist a reading of Flo's inability to understand as an emblem of pre-Vietnam America.

Where the film provides the sharpest contrast to the book is in its spatial and temporal arrangement of the narrative. As we have mentioned, the film has an almost theatrical structure in its use of a limited set of locations and scenes. The dialogue in the film is therefore heavily burdened with conveying meaning. In written narratives there can be a substantial amount of narration which does not contain dialogue; similarly, in most films there can be narration as a result of what the camera allows the spectator to see, and this too can take place without recourse to dialogue. *Dog Day Afternoon* is one of those films whose narration involves a great deal of concentration on the characters' dialogue in order to propel the narrative. The film has no recourse to written prose in order to delineate facets of Wojtowicz's life before the bank siege, and it does not choose to narrate it by cinematic means; as a result, the dialogue of characters is heavily charged with this task. On the one hand the dialogue seems to rely on a reader's prior knowledge of the events which are narrated; but this cannot be assumed in all cases, as the film purports to narrate

details which only the protagonists of the drama could possibly know. So, in order to maintain a level of credibility and verisimilitude, the dialogue makes reference, for example, to contemporary events without actually narrating them. Fredric Jameson has suggested that the story contains three novelties: the crowd's sympathy with Sal and Sonny (John Wojtowicz) particularly when the latter invokes the name of Attica; the fact that the bank robber is a homosexual who commits the robbery to finance a sex-change operation for his 'wife'; and that the siege turned into a media event which eclipsed the Nixon-Agnew nomination of the same day (Jameson 1979 p. 78). The means by which the film conveys these 'novelties' suggest a tension in the way that the narrative and the dialogue generate meaning. Early in the film, as the robbery turns into a siege, Sonny manically expresses his consternation about the police by mentioning the word 'Attica' to the bank manager; without any preamble, or any subsequent explanation of this word; the manager seems to understand exactly what Sonny means. A suitably informed contemporary audience would realize that 'Attica' refers to a massacre which took place only a short time before the events which are narrated in the film: it was a prison disturbance which was brutally suppressed by armed police, leading to numerous prisoner fatalities. Sonny is simply saying that the police are not to be trusted in a siege situation. Attica is one of the pivots of the film because when Sonny exits the bank in order to negotiate with Sgt. Moretti, he once more expresses his mistrust by repeatedly shouting "Attica!", which elicits cheers from the crowd gathered outside the bank. Sonny's mistrust of the police is not, therefore, merely a manifestation of his unco-operative nature, but a form of social criticism. Another example will illustrate this point: during other negotiations with Sgt. Moretti, an exchange takes place following the sergeant's promises of a light sentence for Sonny and Sal if they release the hostages. This takes place immediately after Sonny has released the bank's ailing security guard whom the police come close to shooting instinctively. Sonny speaks first:

"Kiss me".

"Huh?".

"Yeah. Kiss me. When I'm being fucked I like to get kissed a lot".



In a BBC transmission of the film in the 1980s the dialogue, which is suffused with a calculated use of 'obscene' language such as this throughout, was butchered; Sonny's last utterance in this exchange was overdubbed to eliminate putatively offensive words and thus transformed to:

"Yeah. Kiss me. I like to get kissed a lot".

Given that Sonny is homosexual, this tampering with the narrative could give the ridiculous impression that his subsequent relationship with Moretti is based on a homoerotic attraction rather than the antagonism rooted in social criticism which is explicit in the intact version of the exchange. In terms of a reading of the narrative, our general point is that, although there are general grounds for reading dialogue such as this as some kind of social dissidence from state apparatuses on the part of Sonny, there is also a more specific reading. For contemporary viewers of the film, Attica will have a far stronger resonance than it does for readers of the text in the 1990s. The extent to which it represents the notion that the police should not be trusted and also, in the narrative, that Sonny enjoys a quasi-heroic status, will be far greater for the original audience.

The third of Jameson's 'novelties', the media event which the siege became, is closely related to Sonny's status in the film. At numerous points, the film makes it clear that the media are in attendance as they point their cameras as ferociously as the police point their guns. Aerial shots of the bank are followed by shots of the helicopter containing a cameraman responsible for the previous shot. During the early part of the siege, Sonny speaks by telephone to a live TV audience and at each stage outwits the interviewer. The interviewer asks him why he is robbing a bank; he replies that the bank is where the money is. The interviewer asks him why he does not get a job; he refers to union restrictions and, to the bank tellers' delight, points out that their wages come to \$115 a week, which is insufficient to keep a wife and child. Finally, the interview asks why he does not give himself up; Sonny says he would rather not go to prison and asks the interviewer whether he has been to prison. When the interviewer replies in the negative then Sonny says

Well let's talk about something you fucking know about and the broadcast is immediately curtailed. (There is a measure of irony in the fact that the film actually narrates, and implicitly criticizes, the media's attitude to such issues as obscene language only to be subjected to the same attitude when the film is shown on TV.) In other ways, Sonny's standing as a media hero is implicitly represented in the narrative. At a later point, Sonny collects money from the bank and throws it into the assembled crowd; the narrating camera pulls back as the mob scramble for the money and Sonny's Robin Hood status is mitigated somewhat by the long-shot which offers a distanced and critical view of the crowd's violent competition for the banknotes. Also, a young man who delivers pizzas to the hostages treats Sonny as a celebrity whose aura rubs off on him as a result of their association. Once again, the fact that the events in the narrative take place on the day of the Nixon-Agnew nomination will only be recognized by an observant contemporary audience or historians. The film begins with a caption which states that the events which follow are true and took place on 22 August 1972. Any specific connection between the bank siege and politics in the Nixon period are to be made by the audience, although it is probably more well known that 1972 was the year that the Watergate affair began. The film therefore embodies in its treatment of the political climate a general depiction of changed perceptions about the role of the media in the modern era with a more specific depiction which requires knowledge that the showbiz of the Republican nomination ceremonies was eclipsed on that day by the showbiz of a branch bank siege in a Brooklyn back street.

The second aspect of the story that Jameson points out as a novelty is the homosexuality of the protagonist and his involvement in a sex-change operation for his 'wife'. We will discuss critical reactions to this in a moment, but it is worth pointing out that the film waits until at least halfway through its narrative before it introduces this feature. Whether the audience are aware of the story beforehand or not, the film attempts to build up a great deal of sympathy for Sonny in his present predicament; this takes place before any narration of his motivations for attempting the robbery. At the point when Leon



(Wojtowicz' 'wife', Ernest Aron) enters the narrative, the film could be read in such a way that Sonny has moved from being the hero rather than merely the protagonist of the film. In terms of the narrative, it is here more than at any point that the social criticism entailed in Sonny's mistrust of the police, the film's critique of the facile nature of the media and the status of homosexuality in modern society are crystallized and articulated. Leon is summoned to the scene of the siege by Sonny and is escorted from the psychiatric ward of the hospital where he has been since last seeing Sonny some days earlier. Looking very much like Ernest Aron as he appears in the *Life* article photographs, the character of Leon collapses in the film just as he is brought to the bank and is subsequently revived to speak with Sonny from a telephone situated in the barber shop across the street. In a scene acknowledged by numerous critics as sensitively acted, Sonny (Al Pacino) and Leon (Chris Sarandon) have a conversation which barely touches on the details of the robbery and siege but, in an oblique and mannered way, says something about their life and its relation to contemporary mores. Having established the grounds for the audience's sympathy with Sonny, followed by the brief but clear illustration in the phone call that Leon and Sonny have a relationship which transcends the jeers of the crowd and their cries of "faggot", the conversation comments on a possible reading of their story. In short, the conclusion is that

It's just a freak show to them

to which Sonny adds,

I'm a fuck-up and outcast and that's it.

It is quite telling, in one sense, that the real life Leon, Ernesto Aron later went on to sue the makers of *Dog Day Afternoon*. In 1977, under his new name and new sexual identity, Elizabeth Eden, she charged that the film had misrepresented her as a homosexual when in fact she had been a trans-sexual at this time of her life (see *Variety* 20 August 1977). This is just one reading of this particular sequence of the film although an understandably emotive one for Ms. Eden. It would be valid to suggest that the Sonny/Leon conversation makes a more general plea for a recognition of the humanity of 'freaks' everywhere. Even within the film provision is made for multiple readings of the

'deviance' it depicts. Sal, for instance, is the more introjected, less manic of the two would-be robbers; and the audience and the bank workers only have it on Sonny's word that he is a potential psychopath. He is visibly upset when the media suggest that he and Sonny are homosexuals and there is humour in his alleged psychopathic tendencies and his disgust at one of the tellers who he claims is committing suicide by beginning to smoke. Possibly the most resonant articulation of a coalition of social outcasts is contained in Sonny's early threat to the bank workers that

We're Vietnam veterans so killin' don't mean anything to us.

Here again the dialogue is burdened with explaining a number of features of the contemporary social formation. In the narrative this is merely a throwaway reference but, like the sequence referred to in the book (above) it is related to Sonny's later comments on women hostages. Thus, the experience of Vietnam in its complexity and contemporary concern with the sanctity of family life is concentrated into a short space of a larger narrative in a significant, though almost imperceptible way. It could be argued that odd references to aspects of the contemporary social formation do not, in themselves, designate the political character of texts or organize readings of the texts around such references. However, it is clear that there are so many features of the film's narrative which are implicitly homologous with Sonny's reading of contemporary mores that such a condensation of aspects of the social as we have identified would be at the foreground of readings of the film by its original audience. This is just one example of the kind of analysis that we have utilized before and will employ continually when considering thrillers. Snatches of dialogue cannot be wrenched from their narrative context and shown to meaningfully illustrate this or that aspect of the social formation; similarly, the narrative itself cannot be said to be the sole bearer of meaning. Readings depend on the existence of the two as well as determinants outside the text. Despite the strength of some readings with regard to the narrative of the film and its contents - for example, that of Fredric Jameson (1979) - no firm decisions on possible readings of them can take place without considering some extra-textual cues.



One of the concerns of film critics, it seems, was to question the generic status of *Dog Day Afternoon*. Like *Serpico* before it, the film was based on a well-known story; it was also about a subject which very much features in thriller texts. So, if one wished to be reductive about the thriller genre - reducing it to simply one mechanism such as suspense - it could be said that because the story was well-known, the suspense element was played down; however, the robbery and tension featuring in many thrillers was retained. This was not actually the argument utilized by influential critics in America. More tangentially, they focussed on the question of professionalism in the genre. One British critic expressed the matter thus:

The robber hero (Al Pacino) and his accomplice are such self-evident amateurs that their bungled crime (the police have the bank surrounded before they can even collect the money) and their equally maladroit handling of the ensuing siege (they hold the bank staff hostage until a bus is produced to drive them to Kennedy Airport and a waiting jet) elicit a fascinated incredulity rather than horror or dismay (Andrews 1975).

Clearly, the story is about bungled crimes on one level. When Sonny attempts to lock the tellers into the safe one of them insists that she must go to the bathroom and he relents. This is amateurism; but more importantly, perhaps, it illustrates a lack of ruthlessness on Sonny's part. Similarly, the lengthy siege which ensues could be construed as an amateurish attempt to circumvent a situation that should never have happened. Yet there must surely be grounds for a reading of the siege as pure professionalism on the part of Sonny and Sal. For more than twelve hours, under intense pressure, in a confined space, with numerous people they did not know, on one of the hottest days of the summer, and fully armed, the would-be robbers managed to stay in control without causing any fatalities to their hostages. Sonny and Sal's amateurism is not, therefore, as straightforward as it seems. It is in the last part of Andrews' statement that the key qualification lies: the reaction that this spectacle is taken by critics to elicit. Part of this is connected with genre; so, in the *New Yorker*, Penelope Gilliatt wrote

the first movie I know of about a bank robbery and an attempted hijacking to have been made as a farce (1975b).

For her, the kinds of approach she saw to crime in this film were not what she had come to expect of the thriller genre. She adds

they bungle things because they seem to think they are in a Neil Simon play (*ibid.*).

The point that Gilliatt makes is emphasized and made clear by Eric Holm, who suggests that many reactions to the film are based on a prior reading of it as the weird bank heist that really happened (Holm 1976 p. 3).

In fact, Holm goes on to compare *Dog Day Afternoon* to such films as *Bank Shot* (1974) and *Cops and Robbers* (1973). In short, what he refers to is the caper story. Gilliatt seems to suggest that the film cannot fit into the thriller category as it is too farcical and depicts the activities of amateurs. Holm, however, is implying that the film does belong in the thriller corpus because of its relation to recently identified films with similar themes. As we will see (Chapter 6 and Appendix 1) the kind of attitude toward crime depicted in *Dog Day Afternoon* is that which characterises a number of thrillers in the 1970s and is closely related to a recognizable sub-genre called the caper novel. The link will become clear when we consider such texts in more detail, but it is convenient that contemporary critics were making such links for the original audience.

The other part of possible reactions to *Dog Day Afternoon* is centred around its gay theme. Although Karyn Kay (1976) lambasts the movie for its attitude to gays and women, most critics who made this an issue were favourable to the film. The review in the British magazine *Gay Times* concluded that

The marvel of Lumet's film is that the gay situation manages to remain subsidiary to the larger theme of exploitation (Babuscio 1976 p. 8).

This seems to concur with the reading of the movie as a discussion of 'freaks' in general. However, American critics did not separate the gay theme from the issue of genre. The influential gay critic with the *Village Voice*, Arthur Bell, who seems to have primary knowledge of the real event, suggests that the film inverts traditional categories while leaving the genre more or less intact. He writes,

Obviously the whole reverse macho trip was part of the street excitement. Homosexuals are supposed to be victims. And here is a tough guy John Dillinger victor. Instead of demanding his Lady in Red, Littlejohn was asking for his transvestite in pajamas (quoted in Holm 1976 p. 3).

The implication here is that Wojtowicz fulfils the traditional central role of the gangster film sub-genre of the thriller in terms of his actantial function as gangster hero, but some



of his surface attributes have been transformed. Put into our terms as discussed in Chapter 1 (above), the hero of *Dog Day Afternoon* maintains his traditional syntactic function but his semantic dimension is not characterized by a set of traditional attributes. Instead, the audience learns some way into the film that he is overtly homosexual to the point of having a male 'wife' whom he married some time before in a 'bizarre' ceremony. It is worth pointing out also that Bell does Leon/Ernest Aron a disservice here: the latter is not a transvestite and is nowhere in the text presented as such; he is a trans-sexual. The general point about pouring semantic features into a pre-existing syntactic mould is made once more by Robin Wood:

The treatment of gayness in *Dog Day Afternoon* defines very precisely the ideological limits within which the contemporary American cinema operates. It is, I believe, the first American commercial movie in which the star/identification-figure turns out to be gay (a revelation cunningly withheld - in the terms in which the narrative is constructed, irrespective of factual foreknowledge - until the audience have been drawn into a qualified but sympathetic duplicity with him). It is also (and I am grateful to Lumet, Pacino and Chris Sarandon) one of the only films with gay characters that I can watch without anger . . . (Wood 1976 p. 35).

Wood's main point here is that the gay theme is "cunningly withheld" and this is central to his implicit argument that the film operates within the ideological limits of the traditional thriller. In other words, if the film were to reveal that Sonny was gay from the start then it would no longer be a thriller. It is notable that one of the few negative reviews of the film made a similar point. In *Rolling Stone*, Jon Landau says that the film's eschewal of traditional Hollywood categories has a specific result:

Almost by process of elimination, the film has no choice but to make it as a character study. It doesn't (Landau 1975).

This is an important point for our argument. In Chapter 1 we discussed how the hero is a prime example of the need to take a dual semantic *and* syntactic approach to understanding genre. As the site of reader investments Sonny is imbued with certain semantic characteristics; but these characteristics are not necessarily identical to characteristics in the real world. They have been placed within a different frame of reference, the context of the narrative. It is not sufficient to assert that Sonny's gayness remains in the text intact and the traditional thriller syntax accommodates it whilst undergoing no transformation of its own. Similarly, it is wrong to say that the limits of

the thriller are such that the introduction of non-macho protagonists must dissolve its status as thriller or must be cunningly contrived. Instead, it is a matter of reader investments in a variety of different aspects of the narrative including parts of Sonny's character. Sonny's gayness, therefore, is only part of his make-up which includes relations with features of his character and features of the narrative and its potential points of investment. These include his unconventional good looks (stressed by Al Pacino and all that the star as signifier represents), his Brooklyn humour, his lack of trust in the police, Attica, the contrast of his humanity with that of the FBI man (see below), the reactions of the crowd, the reactions of the bank staff, the conduct of the siege compared with that of other sieges (including such inter-textual references as, say, *The Desperate Hours* (1955) or extra-textual references such as the Munich Olympics siege, the latter of which was almost contemporaneous with the events of the film) and so on. The semantic and syntactic aspects of the genre text, as we have seen, do not exist in isolation but co-exist in such a way as to make certain modifications to each other and allow reader investments to take place, which are made neither solely in response to a supposed generic dominant procedure nor to a character as a pure embodiment of aspects of the social. Although this is a crucial point for our analysis, it is impossible to change the contemporary reviews of the film. However, as an extra-textual cue to reading it is clear that such concentration on the gayness of the protagonist did not promote a strict generic reading of the text as a thriller. In this way, the cues therefore foster a reading of the text which highlights its complexity, diversity, and even the strangeness of truth over fiction at the expense of a possible reading of it as a suspenseful linear narrative.

*Dog Day Afternoon*, in this context, is almost a quintessential example of generic innovation in this period. Incorporating such an amount of themes and material which, to reviewers, seemed extraneous to the thriller genre, the film actually generated extra-textual cues which problematized its reading as a genre text even though it can still be demonstrated to be a thriller. This was no doubt enhanced by its status as a non-fictional text. In fact, some critics even acknowledged that the film was so thoroughly imbued



with a sense of the import of social change in America that it expressed the commonplace nature rather than the 'weirdness' of the bank heist. Richard Schickel in *Time* magazine put it this way:

Superficially it is a typical story of New York life, maybe even a microcosm of the troubles besetting the city (Schickel 1975b).

In a similar way, Vincent Canby of the *New York Times* suggested that the themes of everyday life were present in the narrative and were facilitated and emphasized by the dialogue, whose importance we have already observed. He writes

'Dog Day Afternoon' is not cluttered with big themes that, more often than not, don't fit easily onto the movie screen. It's an action film in that almost everything it has to say grows spontaneously out of the characters prompted by one bizarre event . . . [Yet i]t's full of thoughts, feelings and questions about the quality of a certain kind of urban civilisation (Canby 1975).

Such critics' attention to the way they felt the film expressed aspects of the contemporary social formation was, understandably, not followed through within the confines of short reviews in newspapers or magazines. As cues to the social significance of the film, then, they are somewhat unfinished. However, some of the points made by Canby et al. are taken up by Fredric Jameson. Given that the amateurs are the protagonists of this text, Jameson suggests that the narrative requires a character version of the impersonality of post-industrial capitalism. Essentially, for Jameson, the social dissidence of the 'freaks' in the film is an embodiment of 1960's radicalism, protests against racism, sexism etc., which he insists is bourgeois in character because it is not class orientated (1979 p. 76).

As a result, the film depicts Sonny and Sal as the amateur, idiosyncratic human representatives of sixties protest while the FBI man in the film is, in contrast, a professional. In order to divert reader investments away from the figure of the professional the narrative renders him uncharismatic. Jameson writes,

It is clear that the figure of the FBI agent represents a narrative solution to this ideological contradiction, and the nature of the solution is underscored by the characterological styles of the FBI agent and the local police chief, whose impotent rages and passionate incompetence are there not so much to humanise him, as rather to set off the cool and technocratic expertise of his rival (Jameson p. 86).

It could be argued that Sgt. Moretti is actually an amateur in the same camp as Sonny and Sal, especially as played by Charles Durning whose star identity revolves around down-to-earth, folksy roles. However, Jameson's main point stands; he adds,

In *Dog Day Afternoon*, however, the organization man is neither vindictive nor paranoid; he is in this sense quite beyond the good and evil of conventional melodrama, and inaccessible to any of the psychologising stereotypes that are indulged in most of the commercial representations of the power of institutions; his anonymous features mark a chilling and unexpected insertion of the real into the otherwise relatively predictable framework of the fiction film . . . (Jameson p. 87).

It is possible that Jameson has articulated what the critics who recognized a social significance in the film were prevented from putting into their reviews. The power of this example derives from the fact that the FBI man is not simply assumed to be the representative of this or that aspect of the social formation, but is considered as such with detailed reference to the narrative. His late participation in the action means that he is quite likely to embody certain semantic and syntactic principles, as a character contrast to the humanity of Sonny, Sal, Moretti and the bank workers and as a means by which the narrative may come to a close. Whether audiences would recognize the competition of human warmth versus cool impersonality, grass roots protest versus the untrustworthy establishment or bourgeois dissidence against the aloofness of post-industrial capitalism depends on the depth of analysis. However, it seems that extra-textual cues about the film did not consider such general grounds for a reading of it.

The texts of the Wojtowicz bank siege produce a curious chimera composed of a story based on the specific exigencies of magazine articles, fictional books, star cast films and raw material that is already a media event as it happens. Bearing in mind all these mediations it is difficult to imagine that the story can have any non-fictional force or innovative power at all; but as Jameson points out critics may object

*a priori* that the immense costs of commercial films, which inevitably place their production under the control of multinational corporations, make any genuinely political content in them unlikely, and on the contrary insure commercial film's vocation as a vehicle for ideological manipulation. No doubt this is so, if we remain on the level of the intention of the individual film-maker, who is bound to be limited consciously or unconsciously by his or her objective situation. But it is to fail to reckon with the political content of daily life, with the political logic which is already inherent in the raw material with which the film-maker must work: such political logic will then not manifest itself as an overt political message, nor will it transform the film into an unambiguous political statement. But it will certainly make for the emergence of profound formal contradictions to which the public cannot but be sensitive, whether or not it yet possesses the conceptual instruments to understand what those contradictions mean (Jameson pp. 77-78).

In this way, the texts' verisimilitude is doubly enhanced: extra-textual cues regarding the fact that the events in the text really happened co-exist with the specific political resonance of the texts' contents. These latter revolve round the core of the crowd support, the theme



of homosexuality and the manifest manipulation of the moment by the media; and subsidiary features of the narrative such as Sonny's references to Vietnam or the wages of the bank tellers support the core themes. It is clear, then, that what characterizes both the non-fictionality and the generic status of the texts of the siege is its complexity, or more accurately, its profound journey through a terrain of contradictions. In particular, the texts allow for a reading of them as 'bizarre' or hitherto uncountenanced events within the contemporary social formation, and events which, as a result, indicate social and political change in their manifestation of diverse mores. If genre is taken to be a limitation of the range of readings that can be generated by a text and non-fictionality is to be characterized by its complexity and the strangeness of its truth over fiction then *Dog Day Afternoon*/*'The Boys in the Bank'* is a clear example of overlap. This is emphasized by the reactions of critics: most demonstrate an indecisiveness over the complexity of the text and its generic status. As a thriller, the extra-textual cues promote a reading of the film in terms of its complexity rather than as a pure gangster movie. The delineation of such a tension in the text is, in this way, an example of generic innovation. It is not simply that *Dog Day Afternoon* incorporates new aspects of the social formation, but that it is *seen to do so* to the extent that it is felt that the text is no longer a thriller. This is to say that the contractual verisimilitude seems almost to have been exceeded in the text's depiction of the diversity of everyday life or that the semantic dimension is 'too real' to be accommodated by the syntactic dimension of the genre. This is to underestimate the flexibility of the thriller: despite the fact that it relies on a specific ideological verisimilitude, it would be wrong to say that it cannot accommodate aspects of the social formation. In fact, to do so would be to suggest that contemporary features of the social formation could simply be poured, as semantic content, into a syntactic mould, leaving the possibility that overflow might occur. As we have argued, the semantic and syntactic dimensions of genre are not separable; any innovation in the semantic dimension will not necessarily entail an abolition of the syntactic dimension (e.g. when texts are said to, supposedly, "transcend the genre"); nor will it leave the syntactic dimension entirely intact. Instead, it will allow for a specific interaction which will involve the negotiation of

reader investment in semantic elements with reader expectations about the generic status of the text. This, in turn, is orientated from without by extra-textual cues to specific readings of given texts.

We will encounter this logic again in subsequent chapters. What must be said is that texts such as *Dog Day Afternoon* do not exist merely as new wine in old bottles. To say that they *do* is also to say that they do not have any social effect whatsoever, and this is clearly untrue. On a relatively lowly level *Dog Day Afternoon* effected a change in American law. In 1977, an advertisement in the *New York Times* explained that victims of a crime which was later to be depicted in a bestselling text would be eligible for a payment made from the profits gained by those responsible for such a text. The advertisement specifically named the Wojtowicz siege (see *Variety* 23 November 1977). It must be emphasized, however, that the texts so far discussed in this chapter have been designated as non-fiction in some way. As a result, the law on the depiction of crimes is rooted in the fact that *Dog Day Afternoon* was about events that did happen. As a whole, though, the above discussion of non-fiction has oscillated between concepts of 'non-fiction' and verisimilitude. Tropologically, we have suggested that fiction and non-fiction are not substantially different and when Iser is challenged on the question of the difference in perception required for the recognition of various artefacts his strict concept of indeterminacy begins to fall apart. At the level of texts the gulf between different kinds of perception is even smaller. As a result, what the reader brings to the text is not a real, pure and unsullied knowledge of that to which the text refers but an always already mediated knowledge, and in such a way that the text's potential indeterminacies are always already filled by mediated knowledge from outside the realms of the text. This knowledge comes most directly from the contemporary social formation: it is not difficult, therefore, for readers to make the connection between the corruption of the New York Police Department in *Serpico* and the corruption of the Nixon administration in its decision-making about Vietnam, and later in Watergate; it is not difficult for readers of *Dog Day Afternoon* to recognize the social dissidence of Sonny and Sal, including



Sonny's distrust of the police after Attica, and its possible relation to the protest movements of the sixties and their focus on the establishment which, among other things, waged war on Vietnam. This is not to make the facile equation, in this example, that Attica equals Vietnam; but it would not be impossible for a contemporary audience to draw analogies along the lines that both involved undue aggression by a superior armed force against rebels who were hopelessly ineradicable as a whole. In addition the text's potential indeterminacies are also immediately filled by a range of intertextual cues as we have seen. These range from the literary status of complexity afforded to Herr's *Dispatches*, for example, to the promise of the true story and the liberal connection of Robert Redford with the texts of *All the President's Men*.

In the case of most of these fictional texts, the arrangement of their possible readings by mechanisms which act to always already fill a text's potential indeterminacies has a by-product. The high profile of most of these texts is based on their depiction of those central events in the contemporary period which were available for narration in a certain form. In the case of *Dispatches*, the narration is more problematic; however, it still belongs with this group of texts because it is a text which actually exists as a text about Vietnam. In contrast, there is no real narrative in this period of one of the chief concerns of the time: inflation.<sup>5</sup> The by-product of these high profile texts is that, in their prominence, and in their 'non-fictionality' they provide the grounds for readings of other texts. Their similarity to texts straightforwardly designated as thrillers and the arrangements of their readings within the frame of reference of thrillers means that their readings, in turn, constitute the means by which the potential indeterminacies of other thriller texts are always already filled. Put another way, readings of texts which are unquestionably designated as thrillers (by extra-textual cues) will very often exist with reference to such 'non-fictional' versions of their subject matter as we have discussed.

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<sup>5</sup> Some fictional texts are concerned with inflation in this period although it could be argued that the financial aspect allows little room for concomitant investments and acts only as a background to intrigue (see Erdman 1974; 1975; 1977 and Tanous and Rubinstein 1977).

The more specific consequences of this will become clear shortly. However, if this principle is to be taken seriously with regard to the thriller in the 1970s then we must consider the possibility that there are other high profile texts in the period which may act on readings in the same way. These texts may have a strong but not necessarily direct relationship with the *genre* of the thriller, while also having an influence on how thrillers are read. Such texts, which are very much characteristic of trends in written and cinematic fiction of the 1970s, I have designated 'blockbusters'.