

DOKTORI (PHD) ÉRTEKEZÉS

**CRIME GENRES AND
THE MODERN–POSTMODERN TURN:
CANONS, GENDER, MEDIA**

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Canons, Gender, Media

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"Én, Virginás Andrea teljes felelősségem tudatában kijelentem, hogy a benyújtott értekezés a szerzői jog nemzetközi normáinak tiszteletben tartásával készült. Jelen értekezést korábban más intézményben nem nyújtottam be és azt nem utasították el."

.....

University of Debrecen
Doctoral Program in British and American Studies

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Dissertation

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„What have I always told you? Everything must be taken into account! If the fact will not fit the theory – let the theory go.“

(Poirot in Christie, Styles 63)

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1. The field of research

The *grand narrative* of the turn from the modern to the postmodern has profoundly shaped Anglo-American thought on art history, literary and film history in the last three decades. The identification of postmodern qualities – contrasted with the canonized modern features – has set the agenda for Ihab Hassan, Fredric Jameson, Brian McHale or even Arthur C. Danto, to name but a few critics. Postmodernism has often been seen as the process whereby modernist high artistic and mass cultural practices are being analyzed, mimicked, and ironized, thus becoming the material of self-conscious artistic preoccupations in different media.

Curiously, the phenomenon of the *change* itself, the modern–postmodern turn – or to formulate it differently: the elaboration of the bases of comparison between the two formations did not receive the attention it might have had. In this respect, Dutch social historian Nico Wilterdink seems to be right when he writes that “[f]or all those art forms a transition from modernism to postmodernism was noted, though not always for the same reasons” (Wilterdink 196). Noted and put aside, we may add, as most surveys tend not to go beyond declarations of the historical turn having taken place, thus classifying certain literary or filmic examples as belonging to before or after the period boundary. What has been obscured to a certain degree is the idea of a gradual, perceptible and dynamic process of the *turn* from (the) modern(ism) to (the) postmodern(ism) – an elision literally (and cognitively) illustrated by the widespread use of the term “the modern–postmodern *divide*”. Besides weakening the possibility of noticing hybrid cultural examples that display modernist and postmodernist characteristics alike, this dominant narrative “ends” in two monolithic canons – constructed on temporal and poetical foundations –, thus foreclosing an understanding of the modern–postmodern turn as a process.

A perspective adhering to the idea of a process is present, for instance, in Crook, Pakulski and Waters’ *Postmodernization*: they refrain from considering modernity and postmodernity as two distinct periods, and opt for their conceptualization as (perhaps parallel) processes – “[t]herefore we concentrate on the processes of change which produce postmodern social forms, the processes of postmodernization rather than a vision of the new society” (Crook, Pakulski and Waters 2). I propose to analyse similar processes of change

with reference to literary and filmic examples, processes which generate/create the need of employing the critical narrative of the modern–postmodern turn when trying to position them. Strictly defined social phenomena fall outside the scope of my work, yet I hope to assert the mentality represented by Wilterdink or Cook, Pakulski and Waters – this time in reading aesthetic/artistic objects.

2. Theses

This dissertation starts from the observation that there are two aspects of the shift that look underrepresented in the discourse about the turn from the modern to the postmodern. First, provided that (the) modern(ism) and (the) postmodern(ism) are two interrelated art historical periods, the particular cases of the two paradigms' simultaneous presence seem to be ignored in the literature consulted. At the same time, although the terrain of the formalized crime genre offers itself as a field where modern(ist) and postmodern(ist) crime (poetics) could be easily and systematically analyzed, this hasn't been done yet. The chapters that follow offer joint readings of crime texts – verbal and visual – belonging to the historically defined periods of modernity and postmodernity, with the intent of proving that

1. it is much more fruitful to discuss these paradigms jointly than to accept their being separated by a terminal boundary (be that a temporal or a poetic one);

2. besides the “modernism and postmodernism” binarity the influence of other “artistic cultures” – mass culture or realism – needs to be theorized when speaking about the modern–postmodern turn¹.

The genre researched here sharply exposes one of the most frequently discussed differences between modernism and postmodernism, as well as modernity and postmodernity: the blurring or disappearance of the canonical boundaries between high art and mass culture. Since modernism is also a certain way of conceiving the relationship between high art and mass culture, one must be careful when speaking about, for example, “modernist crime”. To further clarify this statement I quote Anne Friedberg's formulation with reference to Andreas Huyssen's model:

Modernism, Huyssen maintains, was constituted “through a conscious strategy of exclusion, an anxiety of contamination by its other: an increasingly consuming and engulfing mass culture.” (...) Once one endorses the concept of such a divide, it is no

¹As a matter of fact, the complicated designation I am employing to identify my subject – “(the) modern(ism/ist), (the) postmodern(ism/ist)” is meant to signal this need for differentiation, argued for in detail below.

longer useful to trace a singular history of high art; one must, instead, examine the bifurcated lineage of art and its relations to mass culture. (Friedberg 165)

Therefore a more complex perspective on the canonical rearrangements between the modern and the postmodern, high art and mass culture will be argued for in my dissertation, with the final claim that the modern–postmodern turn in crime and detection genres has meant a flow of modern mass cultural elements into postmodern high artistic canons. One should only think of the position of Martin Amis or Paul Auster in contemporary prose canons compared to that of Elmore Leonard or Philip K. Dick (who nevertheless have a certain “relevance”). I must advance that I share the view of Hans Bertens or Jim Collins concerning the non-disappearance of the boundaries between high art and mass culture with the advent of the modern–postmodern turn. Accordingly, the postmodernist incorporation of (mainly) mass cultural forms traceable back to modernity has enriched the (high) artistic and theoretical fields, but did not erase the demarcation lines between art and mass (or, as it is frequently renamed nowadays: media) culture:

(...) [I]n spite of all claims that the barrier between high and low culture has disappeared, [it] is still recognizably high culture (...). The erosion of the barrier between high and low culture has in practically all cases led to more high culture, although now decked out with low elements. (Bertens, *Idea* 247-48)

Influenced thus by the experience of practical criticism, I argue that the widely researched poetical differences between modern(ist) and postmodern(ist) crime genres must be complemented not only with such questions of canonisation, but also with other perspectives, including those of the gender(ing) strategies involved, since the main examined paradigm-shift from the modern to the postmodern is a multi-layered phenomenon. The modern–postmodern turn must be seen not only as aesthetic or poetical, but also as a phenomenon that is deeply involved both with issues of gender and with institutional matters. Conceptual corrections in this respect have been provided by feminist criticism unearthing the gender dichotomy that profoundly determines high art as “masculine” and mass culture as “feminine” in an Anglo-American modernist context. However, the gendering strategies do not “disappear” at this point, and one possible direction of their analysis is also pursued in the thesis. Borrowing the words of Jim Collins:

Patrice Petro, in her brilliant study of Weimar cinema, makes the crucial point that distinctions between the popular and the avant-garde have been consistently linked to gender difference. «Mass culture is itself commonly personified as ‘feminine’, having the capacity to induce passivity, vulnerability, even corruption. And as mass culture’s opposite, modernism was often construed as masculine, as providing an active and productive alternative to the pleasure of mass cultural entertainment». (Collins, *Appropriating* 212)

By paying attention to interactions and influences between (high) art and mass culture in the period canonized as modernity, and consequently that of postmodernity, the possibility of reflecting on processes of (post)modernization in the crime genre emerges, especially if completed with an analysis of changes in gender representations and poetical-medial alterations surfacing in written/filmed crime and detection.

Thus, on a narrower scale I have also wished to see whether the well-known commonplace theoretical insights about the essence of (the) (post)modern(ism) may be or may be not identified in the works interpreted – in the form of various poetical elements. As a preliminary conclusion and within the genre examined I suggest that of all the (post)modern characteristics what seems to be the most widespread in 20th century crime fictions analyzed here is the idea that (the process of human) representation achieved through media technologies is of a “deadly” nature. It is therefore by no means accidental that the genre of crime fiction is full of medially (self)-conscious moments, segments and story lines, as these are potential “exits” towards murders and crimes to be committed.

The intersection of different representational media with the process of crime and detection constitutes therefore one major concern of my dissertation. In order to avoid circular logic, I must (also) reverse the argument: the turn from (the) modern(ism) to (the) postmodern(ism) – at least in the field of crime fiction and film – is best grasped if attention is paid to how representation, murder and detection interact with each other in the fictions analyzed. To hint at the issue with a most suggestive quotation from Emma Tennant’s mystic crime novel, *Woman Beware Woman*: “But for that second I knew what it was to have her power, to hold the world in a frame and freeze it dead” (Tennant 174).

The attention devoted to “medial matters” in the crime fictions (verbal or visual) analyzed is divided between different themes, which may seem unconnected at first sight, yet on a deeper level they are closely related. Thus the contemporary crime novels are interrogated from the perspective of the dissolution of stable, perceivable identities, a line of thought which reappears in its “full-blown beauty” during the interpretation of contemporary

crime films. These seem to be obsessed with the idea that someone's self, memory or possibility of identification might be deposited in/to pictures, their trajectory being influenced by the "anticipation of what they are going to look as images" (Lury, *Stylization* 78). This obsession is closely linked to our everyday paranoia that networks, screens, and softwares have managed to define us.

In the analyzed fictional universe it is narratives and photographs which are adequate elements in re-thinking the epistemological paradigm of detection, and furthermore, letters and moving images are also capable of re-directing the possible goal in a (formalized) search. Due to their apparent transparency, these can serve as traces and clues in postmodern(ist) detection – which in the end will lead to the identification of the medium, instead of the perpetrator of the criminal act.

3. Methods

I consider it of paramount importance to demonstrate that the axioms of theories concerning the modern–postmodern turn may be actualized and shown to be effective in various cultural products. This is an endeavour the necessity of which appears now and then in the vast literature under the keyword "the postmodern", yet not as frequently and persistently as one would expect. Douwe Fokkema, in one of the essay collections he edited, hints at it in the concluding paper of the volume when he states that "[w]e need empirical research for being able to judge the merits of the various constructions of Postmodernism" (Fokkema 238). Within the disciplinary confines of the humanities, practical interpretative criticism would count as "empirical" and this possibility is openly acknowledged by Linda Hutcheon in the epilogue written for the 2002 (second) edition of *The Politics of Postmodernism*². Although I am far from the position occupied either by Hutcheon or Fokkema in the vast field of "postmodernism research", their words express adequately the basic direction I have been intending to take with my inquiries.

I also recognized my impulse and saw it formulated in the method described by Nico Wilterdink at the end of his article on the sociogenesis of postmodernism – "[t]he analysis followed here was, in this sense, a non-postmodernist approach to postmodernism" (Wilterdink 214) – since my work was also guided by careful practical and textual analysis, and the need for hierarchies and differentiations pointed at as well.

A further perspective on the methods and principles I tried to follow is offered by a particularly illuminating observation of Noël Carroll, who differentiates between the

²She mentions a cause for her work that is curiously echoing Fokkema's "gap" with reference to empirical research: "[i]t was precisely the lack of fit between this kind of anti-worldly theory and very worldly artistic practice that in fact drove me to write about postmodernism in the first place" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 180).

preoccupations of “film theory” and “film interpretation”, the second path being the one pursued in my thesis:

There are no grounds for thinking that film theory must have anything to do with film interpretation in every case. (...) Film theory speaks of the general case, whereas film interpretation deals with problematic or puzzling cases, or with the highly distinctive cases of cinematic masterworks. Film theory tracks the regularity and the norm, while film interpretation finds its natural calling in dealing with the deviation, with what violates the norm or with what exceeds it or what re-imagines it. (Carroll, *Prospects* 43)

The above mentioned epilogue by Linda Hutcheon is a retrospective “grounding” for the volume *The Politics of Postmodernism* conceived a decade earlier, where Hutcheon defends the choices made and the answers given then, at the time when the “soothing” development which befell the postmodern(ist) trend in the 21st century – namely, extinction – was not yet visible. In her 2002 epilogue she states: “Let’s just say: it’s over” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 166). That is, time has shown us that postmodernism is an art historical category after all, a category that is related to the previous modernist paradigm, a category that is followed by something electronic, global and even more subversive, a “Net aesthetic” in Hutcheon’s formulation (181). This development is helpful for the analysis that follows, which does not really enter the “electronic debate” even if it is engaged in interpreting late 20th century phenomena: but if Hutcheon and others are right, that is a different period and paradigm already.

It is here that I need to mention Nico Wilterdink’s sociological summary, where he traces the development of the discourse on postmodernism from the literary and architectural fields on to the academy and finally to public-intellectual spheres. Having first appeared in art, from there it migrated to the academic sphere, where it still finds its home: “[I]t was in connection to the arts (in the broad sense) that postmodernism first became trendy and it was in the same field that it subsequently lost its appeal. Its penetration into the academic field, on the other hand, was slower and more durable” (Wilterdink 214). It is the durability of academic interest in postmodernism that informs my work as well, in a moment when artistic innovation and development are no longer preoccupied with it. However, the finality of the modern(ism)-postmodern(ism) debate, the fact that this is a phenomenon of the past allows for that temporal distance which is helpful in critical work.

4. Terminology: a question

Another, seemingly difficult knot that one must address in this field is the question of “names”: the modern/the postmodern, modernism/postmodernism, modernity/postmodernity are terms that often surface carelessly, without sufficient methodological precision. Following Miriam Hansen and her 1995 article, “America, Paris, The Alps: Kracauer (and Benjamin) on Cinema and Modernity”, I differentiate between modernism and modernity. She defines modernism as “the articulated intellectual, artistic, political responses to modernity”, while “modernity comprises the material conditions of living (regardless of what intellectuals thought about them) as well as the general social horizon of experience” (Hansen 390, footnote 6). I consider this difference valid with regard to postmodernism and postmodernity as well, all the more so as I have the solid basis offered by Linda Hutcheon in her criticism regarding Fredric Jameson’s mixing of these names/terms³. She writes that “[m]uch of the confusion surrounding the usage of the term postmodernism is due to the conflation of the cultural notion of postmodernism (and its inherent relationship to modernism) and postmodernity as the designation of a social and philosophical period or ‘condition’ (...)” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 23).

Throughout my thesis I employ the designations “modernity” and “postmodernity” for the respective social-historical periods (“regardless of what intellectuals thought of them”, as Hansen remarks), while “modernism” and “postmodernism” will refer to the specific artistic canons of cultural and symbolic representations and institutions characteristic of those periods⁴ (which, obviously, are not independent from what intellectuals and cultural producers thought about them⁵). In this line of thought the designations “the modern” and “the postmodern” will be employed as referring to the respective discourses which should comprise both the symbolic and the material features.

Obviously, modernism and postmodernism, as canonical formations, are not the only possible cultural and symbolic articulations of these periods: mass culture, realism or the

³“The slippage from postmodernity to postmodernism is constant and deliberate in Jameson’s work (...). Yet what is confusing is that Jameson retains the word postmodernism for both the socio-economic periodization and the cultural designation. (...) My exhortation to keep the two separate is conditioned by my desire to show that critique is as important as complicity in the response of cultural postmodernism to the philosophical and socio-economic realities of postmodernity: postmodernism here is not so much what Jameson sees as a systemic form of capitalism as the name given to cultural practices which acknowledge their inevitable implication in capitalism, without relinquishing the power or will to intervene critically in it” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 25).

⁴The need to differentiate between “modernism” and “modernity” does not mean that I think of “modernism” as the unique artistic “articulation” of the period of modernity, since mass culture or realism were also open possibilities, a question elaborated in detail in the next chapter.

⁵A good number of theorists and researchers tend to draw attention to the importance of cultural workers and producers in generating the whole trend of postmodernism. According to Hutcheon “[t]here is little doubt that a certain kind of theory supported and even created a certain kind of art and that the academy, art institutions, and the publishing industry have, in part, *constructed* postmodernism” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 18).

avantgarde have offered different “answers” to similar “questions”. Actually, an important result of my research has been the recognition that a detailed analysis of texts and films “taken from” the temporal boxes of modernity and postmodernity cannot and finally must not be performed unless the limitations of modernism and postmodernism as artistic formations are recognized and complemented with (at least) such other symbolic constructions as mass culture or realism.

As Crook, Pakulski and Waters show, it is difficult to align social-historical processes (i.e. modernity and postmodernity) with each other or even to demonstrate that there is a historical causality governing their appearance. Yet, this is a premise that seems to be at work in artistic and fictional works: here modernist and postmodernist strategies are dependent on – or at least related to – each other. A typical opinion in this respect is that of Brian Caraher:

The postmodern might be posited as that state of modernity in which one feels the need to treat modernity as itself already over, behind, past, classic, intellectually completed, fully represented and reified. Postmodern discourse replays in a new register, then a formative dilemma of the discourse of modernity. (Caraher 63)

Therefore, my vested interest lays in a generic, literary and film historical examination concerning modernism and postmodernism in epistemological and crime detection fictions. As I go along I need to pay attention to developments in the “real world” (modernity and postmodernity), yet to a much lesser degree. In his monograph on British writer Martin Amis, James Diedrick speaks in detail about Amis’ involvement with postmodernism and postmodernity/postmodernization, and I hope that a similar balance informs my thesis as well:

Calling Amis’s fiction “postmodern”, then, involves far more than stylistic analysis, since his style is inseparable from, and embodies, his larger social outlook. It is important to remember that aesthetic postmodernism can never be separated from, is always already implicated in, political postmodernity. While the roots of the postmodern may be found in Enlightenment thinking, recent historical developments have definitively shaped the postmodern concerns of writers like Amis. (Diedrick 11)

5. The organization of the analyzed material

My dissertation – primarily concerned with the generic matrix of literary and filmic detection and crime – wishes to join the ongoing debate about the modern and the postmodern through an analysis of crime and detection examples belonging both to the genre’s –

temporally defined – modern(ist) and postmodern(it) canons. This mass cultural genre and its particular literary or filmic instances – examined in a historical perspective and in the context of modern crime/detection being replaced by its postmodern counterpart – will function as evidence, hopefully supporting the claims of my thesis.

To examine the interrelations between modernism, femininity/masculinity and crime/mass culture, I have deliberately chosen: a) female authors, writers of classical detective (and gothic) fiction, emblematic representatives of “modernism’s popular feminine other” (Huysen 44-5); b) examples of Hollywood film noir, with scripts based on hardboiled “men’s crime fiction”⁶. Texts by Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers and Daphne du Maurier are analysed from the joint perspective of modernism/modernity as a cultural condition, the existence of mass cultural canons, and the prevalence of the patriarchal gender dichotomy. I also engage with the modernist and mass cultural “men’s sphere” through working with movies belonging to the film noir canon: *Rebecca* (1940, dir. Alfred Hitchcock), *The Maltese Falcon* (1941, dir. John Huston), *Mildred Pierce* (1945, dir. Michael Curtiz), *Gilda* (1946, dir. Charles Vidor)⁷, and *The Big Sleep* (1946, dir. Howard Hawks). Original crime novels, such as *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett (1930), *Mildred Pierce* by James M. Cain (1941), and *The Big Sleep* by Raymond Chandler (1939) will be also examined. These interpretations will hopefully allow me to formulate a specifically modern(ist) poetics/understanding of crime and detection, abiding to patriarchal gender dichotomy.

Postmodern(ist) examples to be analysed are: the English writer Martin Amis’ novel *Other People: A Mystery Story* (1981), Scottish Emma Tennant’s *Woman Beware Woman* (1983), American writer Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1996) and Scottish Louise Welsh’s noir bestseller, *The Cutting Room* (2002). What I hope to demonstrate by my analyses of these cultural “packets” is the presence of high artistic re-appropriations of a mass poetics of crime – dating from the period of modernity, as well as the different vision on patriarchal gender dichotomy.

With reference to postmodern(ist) crime and detection film: given the extreme proliferation of the genre, priority has been given to five films that challenge in a radical manner the set of three variables analyzed – detection poetics, gender dichotomy and the canonization of authorial names – and also revitalize the modernist film noir. These are: *A*

⁶ “From the beginning this new development in narrative style was always described in terms associated with masculinity (...). Of *The Maltese Falcon*, one reviewer thought Hammett’s writing ‘better than Hemingway; since it conceals not softness but hardness’” (Worpole 41).

⁷ David Glover writes extensively about the gendering strategies involved in the reception and representation of the crime genre, basically founded on the dichotomy English/countryhouse/women versus American/streets/men, or Christie against Hammett: “This masculinization of crime fiction effectively repositioned women both as readers and as fictional characters, while excluding them as writers, and forms the sub-text to Chandler’s ‘The simple art of murder’ which sought to elevate the hard-boiled thriller to cultural respectability (...)” (Glover 74).

Pure Formality (1994) directed by Giuseppe Tornatore, *The Crying Game* (1994) directed by Neil Jordan, *Fight Club* (1999) by David Fincher, *Memento* (2000), directed by Christopher Nolan, and *Mullholland Drive* (2001), by David Lynch. Secondary additions to this corpus are Alan J. Pakula's 1971 *Klute*, Curtis Hanson's 1997 *L.A. Confidential*, Joel Schumacher's 1999 *8 MM*, and Brian de Palma's 2000 *Femme Fatale*.

Further films considered in developing the argumentation referring to the medial aspects of the turn from modern(ist) crime to postmodern(ist) crime are: Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960), *Blow Up* (1966) directed by Michelangelo Antonioni, Nicholas Roeg's 1973 *Don't Look Now*, *Blade Runner* (1982), directed by Ridley Scott, and finally *Smoke* (1995), directed by Wayne Wang.

Working with the historical-poetical dichotomy mentioned above has also demonstrated the existence of numerous intermediary forms, including texts and films which disrupt the neat categorization. Two further points must be clarified concerning the treatment of the primary material:

1. Given the larger aim of the dissertation, no exhaustive or total interpretation and understanding of the texts, authors, films and directors selected is intended: the texts will be interrogated only from the angles that are relevant to the concerns of the dissertation.

2. The objects of analysis are literary and filmic examples without the medial differences critically reflected upon. The only excuse for this "blurring of boundaries" might be the need to advance my theses which are already too daring and general. Thus the critical treatment of the differences between a filmed and a written crime story will be ignored because the focus of inquiry is constituted by the generic markers of the crime discourse.

Thus the structure of the dissertation is the following: it proceeds from verbal/textual analyses to the interpretation of filmic examples. It must be mentioned that the interrogation of the literary texts from the perspective of the modern–postmodern turn did not yield results as fruitful and interesting as when I applied the same perspective to examples taken from (crime) films. In this manner I was capable of identifying some shifting characteristics of how we possibly make sense of the "modern" and the "postmodern", a thing that would not have been possible if I had remained in the literary terrain. Therefore the dissertation also performs a "medial opening" which seems to have been characteristic of literary studies as such, as argued by the editors of the 2005 volume of studies in Hungarian, [*Institutionality and Cultural Mediation*]: "This research has been formulated as a part of and at the same time a reflection on the nowadays frequently asserted general disciplinary turn which attempts to

reconsider the traditional arsenal of philology and literary studies from the direction of new cultural experiences and the technological media”⁸.

Besides proceeding from literary and textual readings on to filmic versions (in many cases, actually, adaptations), the dissertation also tries to employ a temporal logic, yet not always a linear chronological one. All the examples that have been processed by the machine of interpretation were consciously chosen from either the period when modernity and specifically the modernist canon are considered to have been prevalent, or from the later period when postmodernity and the postmodernist trend had emerged. However, the different medial formations – written crime, filmed crime, or even: photographed crime – as well as artistic canons – high artistic, mass or media cultural – have conditioned a rather complex structure, in the case of which the modern and the postmodern may be attached to various periods, and the interpretations had to take into account this type of discrepancy as well.

What I hope to have achieved with this work is a small correction to critical narratives about the turn from modernity/modernism to postmodernity/postmodernism – by stressing the importance of gender(ed) and medial differences, and of an eagerness for changing canonical positions (that is, influences and replacements which take place between mass cultural and high cultural segments in a broadly conceived sphere of the English-language crime corpus). Thus the postmodernization of the crime and detection genre in the context of this thesis equals a growing sensitivity for differently positioned cultural canons, a developing eagerness to (de)construct gendered identities, and finally an intensifying attention paid to mediation and the functioning of (mass) technologies enabling it. Nevertheless, this narrative is as much a characteristic of my critical perspective as an inherent feature of the analyzed material arranged in chronological order, as the interpretations will demonstrate. Therefore my situation is similar to some of the detectives quoted, the search basically revealing the methods employed along the search.

⁸„E kutatás azon, manapság sokat hangoztatott általános diszciplináris fordulat részeként és egyben reflexiójaként fogalmazódott meg, amely a filológia és az irodalomtudomány hagyományos eszköztárát az új kulturális tapasztalatok és technológiai médiumok felől igyekszik újragondolni.” (Bónus et al. 7) *Translation mine*.

6. A feminine touch

Before proceeding further, I need to emphasize the relation that I conceive of as existing between postmodernism (the cultural/symbolic representations and institutions characteristic of postmodernity as a social-historical period) and feminist (academic) practice. If we could use postmodernity as an umbrella term for the largely defined canonical and gender realignments we were witnessing in the second half of the 20th century, feminist discourses must be seen as provoking and inciting these realignments, as well as being essential components of them. Andreas Huyssen is one critic who explicitly relates feminist art, mass culture and what is called “the postmodern”:

[I] do not intend here to add yet another definition to what the postmodern *really* is, but it seems clear to me that both mass culture and women’s (feminist) art are emphatically implicated in any attempt to map the specificity of contemporary culture and thus to gauge this culture’s distance from high modernism. (Huyssen 59)

In his exhaustive analysis of feminist artists, Craig Owens offers a somewhat different perspective, although one which also urges for a consideration of postmodernism and feminism alike in the debate about the crisis in Western cultural representational systems. Thus he advocates the need “to introduce the issue of sexual difference into the modernism/postmodernism debate—a debate which has until now been scandalously indifferent” (Owens, *Others* 59). He also sees the two regimes of thought as turning on each other at least from one point of view: “women’s insistence on difference and incommensurability may not only be compatible with, but also an instance of postmodern thought” (Owens, *Others* 62).

Without wanting to transform feminist thought, as well as related gender criticism and cultural studies with its insistence on different cultural channels available in society into sub-chapters of postmodernism⁹, I wish to emphasize that the meaning of postmodernism becomes more definite and concrete if we align it with these divergent discursive practices. Thus I think that for the sake of particular analyses, as well as for “introducing sexual difference in the modern–postmodern turn”, the conceptualization of feminism and cultural studies alike as sources and symptoms of postmodernism is beneficial.

⁹ A possibility not considered by Linda Hutcheon either: “But, without those feminisms, the story would be a rather different one, for I would want to argue for the powerful impact of feminist practices on postmodernism – though not for the conflation of the two” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 138).

Nevertheless, we need to point to the important difference between postmodernism as a cultural trend and feminism (or any other identity movement of the second half of the 20th century): their opposing attitudes towards direct, pragmatic political action. As Linda Hutcheon argues: “we have seen that postmodernism is politically ambivalent for it is doubly coded – both complicitous with and contesting of the cultural dominants within which it operates; but on the other side, feminisms have distinct, unambiguous political agendas of resistance” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 138). However, as my work is hardly engaged in setting out plans for action, this difference will perhaps be obscured by the reciprocal influences that the two currents have had on each other. The similarities signaled by Hutcheon – “[w]hat these various forms of identity politics share with the postmodern is a focus on difference and ex-centricity, an interest in the hybrid, the heterogeneous, and the local, and an interrogative and deconstructing mode of analysis.” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 166) – are supposed to legitimize the following interpretations.

Canons, texts, and gender

Chapter 2

A CULTURAL PLAYGROUND

CANONS, GENRE, DOUBLE-CODING, MARKET

1. The *grand narrative*

The idea of differently positioned cultural canons, as well as the changes happening between them is a central one concerning the analyzed paradigm-shift, as mentioned in the introduction. This chapter is dedicated to the elaboration of this question, also in order to create an adequate interpretational context for the criminal text readings to follow in chapters three and four.

Returning to the proposed sketch of the modern–postmodern turn as seen in the literature consulted, I will proceed with a brief discussion of the terms. The artistic formations of the last phase of modernity – and mainly modernist art – are referred to generally as having been on the scene in the period 1880-1930, or even until 1940-45. (Brooker 4, DeKoven)¹⁰ The various periodisations one encounters attest the different constructions of modernism(s), depending on the historical moment of their inception, on the geographical locations and cultural media emphasized.

In this situation specifying the exact meaning I attribute to the “modern” is a fundamental need – and for the time being this is the one proposed by literary historian Matei Calinescu in his much acclaimed *Five Faces of Modernity*¹¹. In a section dedicated to Charles Baudelaire’s conception of modernity, Calinescu makes reference to one of his essays written in 1863, “The Painter of Modern Life”: “[i]n this essay, modernity’s most striking feature is its tendency toward some sort of immediacy, its attempt to identify with a sensuous present grasped in its very transitoriness and opposed, by its spontaneous nature, to a past hardened in frozen traditions” (Calinescu 48). This is, according to Calinescu, a relatively new dimension

¹⁰ It must be mentioned that the avantgarde, the classical/realist or the corresponding mass cultural canons were also active in the same period, and certainly were influencing each other, as well as modernism.

¹¹ Arbitrary as such a gesture may seem, it is nevertheless a necessary one if we wish to proceed in the spirit already outlined, e.g. an analysis of the „modern” nature of the crime and detective genre in order to examine the (its) possible turn to the „postmodern”. Most examiners are aware of this shortcoming in the field: “Whereas a political theorist may situate the origin of modernity in the seventeenth century and in the work of Hobbes, a literary critic is just as likely to claim that modernity has its birth in the mid or nineteenth century. Rather than a precise historical periodization, modernity thus comprises a constantly shifting set of temporal coordinates” (Felski 12).

associated with the concept of modernity – a deep concern for temporality and a documentation of change. It is useful to add Rita Felski's definition of the background French period-concept, as it is in this context and looking for these "vested interests" (urban culture, fashion, consumerism, and constant innovation) that I propose to interpret the mentioned crime novels and films in one of the subsequent chapters:

The French term *modernité*, while also concerned with a distinctively modern sense of dislocation and ambiguity, locates it in the more general experience of the aestheticization of everyday life, as exemplified in the ephemeral and transitory qualities of an urban culture shaped by the imperatives of fashion, consumerism and constant innovation. (Felski 13)

Beginning with the postwar years up to the early 1970s a paradoxical thing had happened in the English-language Euro-American context, certainly only on a thin, yet dominant mainstream level. This is what most critics refer to as the "freezing of canons" in educational curricula and critical discourse, a process which – besides other contributing factors – led to the emptying out of most forms of cultural (literary and artistic) modernism of avant-garde, revolutionary and counter-canonical impulses – if they ever had such qualities – (see Brooker, Rainey). Although this development had been taking place over a long period of time, retrospectively is seen by most critics as intensifying in the postwar years in the Anglo-American cultural context.

The secure position of most subversive modernists in educational curricula and cultural criticism has allowed for their circulating as marketable cultural commodities, in Lawrence Rainey's words: "[m]odernism turned to the university, welcoming its direct support (...) or assenting to its canonization, so guaranteeing a new market of pliant students, rather than unruly general readers" (Rainey 62). The discursive formations of conservative political thinking and canonical modernism have been challenged by diverse forms of social and cultural unrest, like the 1968 movements or the emergence of cultural critics suspicious of a sustained divide between 'high art' and 'unworthy mass culture'¹². The hegemonic appropriation of these counter-canonical propositions by (more) dominant discourses, like the

¹²"Ranged against this combined *angst* and nostalgia (...) William Hamilton, Susan Sontag, Leslie Fiedler, Norman O. Brown, Herbert Marcuse and Marshall McLuhan argued in different ways for a positive acceptance of the energies of mass culture, for an aesthetics of kitsch, happenings, and random composition, for popular American literature to replace the cloistral modernist canon and for the tribal hedonism of the new 'underground' " (Brooker 10-1).

newly formed field of ‘theory’¹³ or a mass culture differentiating into ‘self-conscious’, e.g. ‘elite’, and ‘traditional’ (non-reflexive) variants began with the late 1970s.

In such a narrative, postmodernism could be regarded as the very process of such incorporations and appropriations. In his introduction to the anthology *Modernism/Postmodernism*, Peter Brooker mentions the French critic Alex Callinicos who “views postmodernism as the culture of the new compulsively consumerist middle class (the ‘Yuppies’ of the eighties), and an expression of the disillusionment of Left intellectuals after the defeats of 1968” (Brooker 24). Seemingly, Brooker shares a similar perspective when he summarizes the modern–postmodern turn in terms of (postmodern) counter-reactions to certain canonized names and works of the earlier modernist period¹⁴. Nico Wilterdink, in an article referring to the sociogenesis of the “postmodern(ism)” phenomenon, acutely suggests the mutations the term and its uses “suffered”:

Postmodernism is not over, but it has existed long enough to be viewed with a certain detachment as a historical phenomenon: a cultural movement which took off in the 1960s, broadened its scope and impact in the 1970s, became popular and fashionable in the 1980s and was routinized and academized. (Wilterdink 190)

2. The canon question

The appropriation by postmodernist high aesthetics of earlier or simultaneous mass cultural techniques and icons in constructing its own identity can be seen as the mirror image of the phenomenon also described in this thesis – that of the emergence of a ‘self-referential’ mass cultural canon in postmodernity. This process of influences between differently positioned cultural canons is not a distinct property of postmodernism as an (art) historical period. However, the difference of attitudes summarized by Brian McHale – “where the modernists repudiated and sought to camouflage their reliance on popular art-models, the postmodernists have tended openly to advertise theirs” (McHale, *Constructing* 226) – seems to distinguish both high art and differentiated mass culture in postmodernity. In what follows I question the frequently suggested scenario about the disappearance of the distinctions

¹³“Today, increasingly, we have a kind of writing simply called ‘theory’ which is all or none of those things at once. This new kind of discourse, generally associated with France and so-called French theory, is becoming widespread and marks as the end of philosophy as such. (...) (...) I will suggest that such ‘theoretical discourse’ is also to be numbered among the manifestations of postmodernism” (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 1962).

¹⁴ “[W]e need to see how postmodernism is first of all a name for the series of social and cultural tendencies provoking the definition of modernism. (...). The more usual understanding that postmodernism came into being as a reaction to an institutionalized modernism follows from this (...)” (Brooker 3).

between high art and mass culture in this (art) historical period, a disappearance attributed to the democratic, tolerant and parasitic nature of postmodernist thinking.¹⁵

To cite one of the initiating moments back in the early 1960s:

(Leslie) Fiedler had it in mind to challenge the elitism of the high modernist tradition in the name of popular culture. I wanted to explore the impulse of self-unmaking which is part of the literary tradition of silence. Pop and silence, or mass culture and deconstruction, or Superman and Godot (...) may all be aspects of the postmodern universe. (Hassan 86)

writes Ihab Hassan in *The Postmodern Turn*. This broad gesture of incorporation constructs a useful and necessary touchstone for the emerging new art, that of the elitist (rationalist, liberal humanist, rule-breaking, thus hermetic) modernist practice¹⁶. According to a simplified “dominant narrative”, postmodernist practice broke the limits, closed the gap – as a reaction to the rigid modernist canons – and not only because of counter-cultural, revolutionary, playful urgencies. This would have happened anyway, given the nature of multiplying media representations that coincided temporally with the emergence of postmodernist styles. Celia Lury draws attention to other, equally important and interrelated developments that caused the questioning of the high art–mass culture divide: she speaks about “the re-evaluation of consumption” and the challenges to the opposition between the ‘original’ and the ‘reproduction’ (Lury, *Stylization* 58). Dominic Strinati continues this line of thought:

If popular cultural signs and media images are taking over in defining our sense of reality for us, and if this means that style takes precedence over content, then it becomes more difficult to maintain a meaningful distinction between art and popular culture. There are no longer any agreed and inviolable criteria which can serve to differentiate art from popular culture. (Strinati 225)

¹⁵ For example: “Against the modernist canons, postmodernist texts and practices subvert the modernist separation of high and low cultural forms (...)” (Kellner 294).

¹⁶ “By defining itself in contradiction to modernism, postmodernism suggested that the modernist era is over, the era in which radical progress-oriented avant-gardes caused a permanent artistic revolution in their oppositions to predecessors, conventional bourgeois culture and mass culture at the same time” (Wilterdink 204).

Yet the conditional mode of this sentence as well as the formulation of McHale who speaks about the “alleged collapse of hierarchical distinctions between high and low art”¹⁷ suggest that although postmodernist high artistic practices clearly manifest an interest in and perform some sort of incorporation of mass cultural forms, genres, and icons, the collapse of high art and theory into mass media-circulated, market-oriented popular culture might not have entirely taken place. So I totally agree with Hans Bertens who suggests that the incorporation of popular cultural forms has enriched the high (elite) artistic and theoretical fields, but did not erase the demarcation lines between art and mass culture: “in spite of all claims that the barrier between high and low culture has disappeared, [it] is still recognizably high culture (...). The erosion of the barrier between high and low culture has in practically all cases led to more high culture, although now decked out with low elements” (Bertens, *Idea* 247-8). This standpoint may be also supported by quoting an earlier analyst of historical cultural categories, Matei Calinescu, who approaches the “function” of modernism, postmodernism, high art and mass culture from a different angle: “As for the truly great artists that represent the spirit of postmodernism – for instance, Beckett or even Pynchon – they are by no means more “popular” and accessible to the public at large than were the most sophisticated among the modernists or the avant-gardists” (Calinescu 144).

Finally, to briefly illustrate the fact that canon differentiating practices are still at work, I refer to the introductory text in the canon-building volume of essays, *Detecting Texts. The Metaphysical Detective Story from Poe to Postmodernism*. The editors, Patricia Merivale and Elisabeth Sweeney position the metaphysical detective story within the growing family of postmodernist prose poetics, decisively distinguishing this body of texts from the haunting tradition of the dime-a-dozen, pulp detective and hardboiled fiction and positing Edgar Allan Poe as the absolute founding father. Thus the position of Poe in the romantic American prose-canon is enforced, the metaphysical detective story is given an honourable ancestry and the “poor provincial relative” is radically pushed out of the bright postmodern canon:

By now, in fact, this quirky, bookish, decidedly highbrow genre may be ready for a mainstream audience – or, indeed, the mainstream audience may be ready for it. Brian McHale, discussing cyberpunk (that is, postmodernist science fiction)...points

¹⁷ See: “Larry McCaffery, author of the chapter on “The Fictions of the Present” in the *Columbia Literary History*, explains SF’s new legitimacy in terms of the alleged collapse of hierarchical distinctions between high and low art, between “official” high culture and popular or mass culture, in the postmodern period. This is one of the most potent myths of postmodernist culture and cultural critique (see Jameson 1983, 1991a:2-3, Huyssen 1986), and the postmodernist writers themselves (including SF writers) seem to find it irresistibly attractive” (McHale, *Constructing* 225).

out that sophisticated and erudite fictional genres reciprocally invade and are invaded by more popular ones. Accordingly, elements of the metaphysical detective story may be seeping back into the popular mystery genre (...). (Merivale-Sweeney 5)¹⁸

3. The role of genre

Discussions of postmodernism in film reveal that generic conventions are important touchstones for any type of re-interpretation, a phenomenon that has been continuously happening since the 1970s in the very center of genre movies – Hollywood and the studio-world –, let alone European-based or independent productions. In its commonsense-style entry on postmodernism, the 2001 *Arnold Film Studies Dictionary* concludes that “[g]enre is a key concept for postmodern film-making. It is mainly through genre that important patterns of recognition take place and that a film can relate to its audience’s prior understanding of the medium” (Blanford et al. 183).

Assessing the role of popular genres in the postmodern paradigm of literary writing, Theo D’haen chooses to explain their frequent use by the fact that generic constructions in language (or film, we may add) have never aspired to effects of realism and humanism. That is why in the linguistic or media-centered universe of the postmodern “popular (sub)genres (...) are better (...) “objective correlatives” to the post-humanist world-view than the serious novel”, which is by definition realist and humanist (D’haen 164)¹⁹.

The case when genres are adhered to with the aim of decomposing their “texture” is also discussed by Noël Carroll in his 1982 article, “The Future of Allusion: Hollywood in the Seventies (and Beyond)”. Offering a vast panorama of the film-making activity of 1970s Hollywood directors canonized today as “the New Hollywood” (Martin Scorsese, Brian de Palma, Francis Ford Coppola, Robert Altman), Carroll devotes particular attention to film-historical and generic allusions present in their movies. Indeed, he isolates this practice as the specificity of the period and place of production analysed, although with a rare theoretical generosity he defines as *allusion* almost anything that might remind one of already existing filmic examples:

[a]llusion, specifically allusion to film history, has become a major expressive device, that is, a means that directors use to make comments on the fictional worlds of their films. *Allusion*, as I am using it, is an umbrella term covering a mixed lot of

¹⁸I must thank Tamás Bényei for mentioning the similar pattern of thought governing the argumentation of John T. Irwin’s book-length study on Borges and Poe as detective and crime fiction writers.

¹⁹ Although one may argue that many examples of high modernist novel-writing – William Faulkner’s or James Joyce’s works – are not realist or humanist in the classical sense of the word either, yet – if compared to generic fiction – a greater trust in human individuality, in the perceptual realism of one’s life emerge as key-values.

practices including quotations, the memorialization of past genres, the reworking of past genres, *homages*, and the recreation of “classic scenes”, shots, plot motifs, lines of dialogue, themes, gestures (...). (52)²⁰

The “dismantling of the horizon of expectations”, the re-working of recognizable conventions of genre, style or form is a curious and interesting process since it is responsible for the redrawing and/or questioning of canon boundaries. As my focus of analysis is a mass cultural genre existing in different media, this feature of the change of paradigms must be considered more closely. Yet my standpoint is far from arguing for the revolutionary or critical nature of such generic re-workings, in the vein done by most theorists of the postmodern, even Linda Hutcheon, who tends to separate subversive postmodern parody from simple rock-video allusions. She writes that “the subversion is still there: the politics of postmodern parodic representation is not the same as that of most rock videos’ use of allusions to standard film genres or texts. This is what should be pastiche, according to Jameson’s definition” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 102). Pastiche or parody, subversion or status quo: in my understanding the use of a genre panel is about accessibility (even if conditioned by the entrance on a mass market), and thus about the inclusion of a larger audience in a book’s possible readership or the camp of a film’s potential viewers. And in a world more and more defined by strong political and administrative borders, this is no little heroism, I suppose²¹, a statement hopefully demonstrated by the analyses that follow.

4. Double coding: out on the market

The then young British writer Martin Amis began to publish fiction in the 1970s. One of his early novels has the title *Other People: a Mystery Story*. The book received plenty of critical attention, like the other fictional texts under the name of Martin Amis. First the narrow literary niche – book supplements, prizes, public appearances – confirms the growing coefficient of success in relation to the name of this author, and then other domains of reading – public libraries, bookstands and our cousin’s bookshelf – begin to enter the game of recognition. This frame of reference is, in turn, re-appropriated as a reading strategy of the critical machinery:

²⁰Carroll’s observations and methodology are a major inspiration for my discussion, given the prominence in his argumentation of the identification and interpretation of allusions to a film noir universe or to classical detection, a direction pursued in the present thesis as well.

²¹“[T]he postmodern may offer art as the site of political struggle by its posing of multiple and deconstructing questions, but it does not seem able to make the move into political agency” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 153).

The self-reflexiveness of *Money* takes on especially interesting dimensions as we consider the high public profile Martin Amis has maintained in Britain since emerging as a novelist of some stature as early as 1975, while still in his mid-twenties. (...) [He] has not only had no difficulty in achieving notoriety but has seemed actively to court it, and it has proved hard for London's literary establishment to speak rationally of his work and personality. (Todd 131)

Other People: A Mystery Story was first published by the British company, Jonathan Cape, the hardback variant with a minimalist dust jacket, blue and wine-red, thin and elegant letters on the cover. The story of the amnesiac girl who sometimes calls herself (or is called) Mary Lamb is mysterious by all means – starting with her getaway from the hospital and continuing with her unconscious adventures – but this type of mystery is not the same as those in the long tradition of mystery and detection or crime fiction. We may classify it within the type of fiction concerned with the eternal unknowability of human existence, and as for its poetics, Amis' novel reminds one of French nouveaux romans rather than the formalized trajectories of crime mysteries. Yet the subtitle, "a mystery story", remains, and we may easily envisage a situation when this tiny mimicry, this concession to successful (market) mechanisms leads to a growing number of readers – eager to discover one more secret.

This simulational strategy has been perfected by Amis over the years, reaching its peak in the 1997 edition of the novel *Night Train*: with Vintage as a publisher (that is, in the company of upcoming or trendy names presented to a global English-language market), the book had left behind the modest, but sober abstract (avant-garde?) atmosphere. On the cover is the profile of a revolver projected in neon-green on a black and red-wine background. Our feeling that *Night Train* belongs to a different stylistic (and market) register than *Other People* did in its time is confirmed by the advertising slogans on the back cover, sending one to the movie *Seven* (1996, dir. David Fincher) as a possible atmospheric relation. It is a long way from the closed blue universe of the 1981 novel to one of the big hits of contemporary visual (mass) crime; it took 16 years to cover it. And who knows, perhaps on the internet movie database, on the page referring to David Fincher's film we may even find an allusion to Amis' *Night Train*, in which case success, as a yardstick for accessibility, is really enhanced.²²

²² This short analysis of covers and designs unfortunately ignores the significant differences that are to be discerned between hardback and paperback editions, not to speak about "British" and "American" audiences. The only, perhaps acceptable reason for such an omission is the actual focus of the research, compared to which this argument is but a secondary one.

Night Train differs from *Other People* in its narrative methods: it is a first-person narrative, the story of a detective and of a crime that is absolutely unsolvable, since it is a traceless suicide. Mimicry almost accomplished, *Night Train* ranks high among search-and-destroy crime novels, yet we ought not fully ignore the metaphysical (philosophical-existential) surplus²³ that makes its ending open. However, if someone chooses the book as a good read during a travel or a flight, s/he may be deceived even by the first sentences (“I am a police. That may sound like an unusual statement—or an unusual construction. But it’s a parlance we have.”), and could read the entire text – without lamenting on the cryptic mode or the pathetic language and the anti-realism²⁴ of contemporary literature. Comparing the two novels of Martin Amis we may conclude that one road to success leads through imitating the features of genres that are popular and mass-consumed by definition, in this case those of written crime. The accessibility of *Mystery Train* is heightened by accepting the criminal conventions, since even in library search engines this novel has great chances to appear under not only its author’s name but also under generic headings – which may not have happened to *Other People* in 1984.

This simple, but greatly rewarding solution is to be met at the start of another writer’s carrier: I mean American novelist Paul Auster and his *New York Trilogy*, first published between 1985–1987. The 1988 Faber and Faber (e.g. British) edition of this work visually recalls the stylistic register seen on the dust jacket of the Jonathan Cape *Other People*, but the highlighted names, titles and subtitles easily construct the crime and detection zone of reference. By their laconic nature (*City of Glass*, *Ghosts*, *The Locked Room*) they send one to the rich American crime fiction tradition. The voice, the narrative technique and the characters of the novels contribute significantly to a sense of the mimicry, and the superficial similarity to pedestrian crime literature may be even stronger than in Amis’ case. *The Locked Room*, for example, if read quickly and not too critically, will create the impression of a sad and slightly unresolved crime novel, the “metaphysical surplus” not as visible as in the case of *Night Train*. While the design and dust jacket of the Amis novel are coded as dime-a-dozen written crime, a horizon of expectation not fully satisfied by the novel, in Auster’s writing we may discover a different strategy: here the crime generic elements appear now and then in the text, though not on the book as object, yet the feeling of having read a weak crime pulp is stronger. However, both writers experiment with a type of mimicry when they consciously

²³ According to Tamás Bényei, in the list that detective Mike Hoolihan makes about the possible causes of Jenny Rockwell’s death “the most “beautiful”, nonetheless most gratuitous element is division c. of point 5., ‘metaphysical disorder’, since crimes or suicides committed for metaphysical reasons appear mainly in (the) literary tradition (...)” (Bényei, *Rend* 11-12). *Translation mine*.

²⁴ Here we may fill in any adjective usually and sarcastically associated with contemporary literature.

recreate the signs of a mass literary genre in texts that are basically considered “literature as art”, providing clear examples of double-coding with an eye on the (bigger) market²⁵.

Perhaps their situation can be more accurately described by quoting Paul Crowther’s analysis about postmodernist visual artists: “[m]uch art practice of the late 1980s involves a kind of ironic deconstruction that recognizes and internalises its own inevitable assimilation by the market” (Crowther 189). By adapting this observation to Amis’ and Auster’s case, a different algorithm of what is happening in the famous postmodernist double-coding process may emerge. As the market inevitably swallows every cultural product, this crime mimicry betrays the preliminary “recognition” and perhaps even the ironic highlighting of the phenomenon. This convergence of the methods and processes in the different media – literature and the visual arts – attests once again to the meta-medial position of the postmodernist trend, to its being a “problematic” and not just a “style”²⁶. Thanks to this characteristic we may introduce the example of postmodernist architecture or even film in order to further discuss the importance of double-coding and attention paid to the market for the phenomenon of the paradigmatic turn analysed.

In his already cited important article, American film scholar Noël Carroll speaks about the “two-tiered communication” of movies reworking generic conventions and (also) making use of film historical allusions. His point is similar to the semiotic (Charles) Jencksian idea referring to the double-coded existence of postmodern architecture, at once elitist/universal and user-friendly/local²⁷. Carroll operates with the categories of “art films” embedded in “genre films”, paying attention to the way audiences (have) related to such movies: generic conventions (have) appealed to one audience segment and their decomposition to a different, more sophisticated one. By tolerating anomalies – too complicated puzzle-solving or, on the contrary, excessively formulaic elements – these audience segments, in numerous cases, “cooperated” towards the box-office successes of movies which were neither generic, nor

²⁵ A research pursued by film theorists David Bordwell and Stephen Neale about the differences between classical (Hollywood) genre cinema and (European) art movies is illuminating for my argumentation. They describe art cinema as a genre and a “mode of production”, where instead of generic markers and identifiable stars it is the name of the author which becomes the principal element of marketing. “The name of the author can function as a ‘brand name’, a means of labelling and selling a film and of orienting expectation and channelling meaning and pleasure in the absence of generic boundaries and categories” (Neale 104).

²⁶ “The postmodern is seemingly not so much a concept as a problematic” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 15), Linda Hutcheon writes on the introductory pages of her *Politics*, correcting it later and calling it “a crisis in cultural authority” (138).

²⁷ “Thus the agenda of post-modern architects – and by extension post-modern writers, urbanists and artists – is to challenge monolithic elitism, to bridge the gaps that divide high and low cultures, elite and mass, specialist and non-professional, or most generally put – one discourse and interpretive community from another. (...) Double-coding, to put it abstractly, is a strategy of affirming and denying the existing power structures at the same time, inscribing and challenging differing tastes and opposite forms of discourse” (Jencks 13).

artistic enough²⁸. This seems to be the case with some of my examples, such as *Memento* or *Fight Club*. Films that communicate in the “two-tiered” way described above could be called postmodernist in the oldest sense of the word, that of architectural “double-codedness”, in the spirit of Charles Jencks.

Double-coding in cultural texts – that can be seen as performing in some sense the paradigmatic turn from modernism to postmodernism – means an opening towards a (mass) market (even if only in the form of acknowledging the force of it), but also a serious commitment towards such elite practices as deconstructing seemingly natural categories, in this case crime generic conventions. This is a truth long known, yet cases and percentages of the different possibilities of fulfillment might need further investigation, a task this thesis attempts to fulfill. For the situation described by “combatant” Terry Eagleton is perhaps only one side of the coin: “[w]ith modernism, the language of art begins to diverge radically from the language of everyday life, in a way that George Eliot would no doubt have found surprising. (...) With postmodernism, however, the two idioms are drawn closer together: the language of the media and a good deal of culture is once again the language of everyday life (...)” (Eagleton 78-9).

5. Genre and high art: a third canon?

In one of his remarks quoted earlier, Peter Brooker proposes to understand postmodernism as the set of practices which made modernism and its two dominant canons – high art and mass culture – visible and open to criticism. Yet I am inclined to think that what happens due to the turn from modernism to postmodernism is not a ‘truer’ picture of modernism itself, but rather a sign of practices of canonical differentiation (widespread) in postmodernism²⁹. Therefore, continuing the argument advanced – namely that mass/popular culture and high art remain visibly different channels for cultural production even with the onset of postmodernism – I want to present a proposal concerning the canonical status of artistic works mixing the markers of both canons. The interpretations presented in the dissertation are intended to support the idea of a third canonical environment emerging, an

²⁸ “At many late-seventies premieres, one frequently had the feeling of watching two films simultaneously. There was the genre film pure and simple, and there was also the art film in the genre film (...). (...) It seems that popular cinema wants to remain popular by developing a two-tiered system of communication which sends an action/drama/fantasy-packed message to a segment of the audience and an additional, hermetic, camouflaged, and recondite one to another” (Carroll, *Allusion* 56).

²⁹ Crook, Pakulski and Waters also speak about differentiation as a key component of postmodernization processes: “Postmodernization of culture is best understood as an extension and intensification of differentiation, rationalization and commodification which dissolves the regional stability of modern culture and reverses its priorities. Value-spheres become hyperdifferentiated, that is, their internal boundaries multiply to the point of fragmentation” (Crook, Pakulski and Waters 36).

environment which may be conceived as a field where the blending of mass cultural and high artistic markers is not only permitted, but is a basic criterion.

Derek Longhurst (via Fredric Jameson) claims that “genres (...) are ‘literary institutions’, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public” (Longhurst 51), inevitably revealing the social grounding and basis of any given fictional piece³⁰. It is this feature that Linda Hutcheon seems to stress in her search for the essential core of postmodernism when she writes that “[p]ostmodern artists and their art are implicated in a very particular historical and ideological context – which they are more than willing to signal” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 119). Thus we may affirm that the postmodernist re-thinking and re-working of generic conventions betrays a consciousness of the social context of artistic production, the silent “pact” that is accepted by both artist and audience, clearly visible in any genre’s mechanical standards and formulas or modes of reception. Linda Hutcheon traces this development back to the ambivalent relationship that postmodernist fictional poetics has with literary (and, we may add, artistic) modernism: a reliance on the incontestably innovative, avant-garde practices and a dismissal of the myth of the independent artist. She also mentions the challenges that both modernism and postmodernism posed to classic systems of representations, such as mimetic realism:

[o]n the one hand, the postmodern obviously was made possible by the self-referentiality, irony, ambiguity and parody that characterize much of the art of modernism, as well as by its explorations of language and its challenges to the classic realist system of representation; on the other hand, postmodern fiction has come to contest the modernist ideology of artistic autonomy, individual expression, and the deliberate separation of art from mass culture and everyday life (Huysen 1986: 53-4).” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 15)

The broadly defined detective story/thriller/film noir set of conventions, or the crime genre has been called the “par excellence” modernist one by Brian McHale basically because of its epistemological interest contrasted with the ontological dominant in postmodernist prose fiction³¹. However, the widespread use of the literary and cinema detective-thriller

³⁰ Another possible direction of what genres may signify in social world is suggested by Linda Hutcheon when she is writing about Francis Ford Coppola’s *Cotton Club* and a pair of light-skinned and darker humans: “[g]enre boundaries [in this specific case fiction and reality/history] are structurally analogous to social borders (here racially defined) and both are called to account” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 111). This is an idea worthy of further inquiries, but unfortunately not pursued in this thesis.

³¹ That McHale does not pay attention to the fact of different cultural canons governing the production and distribution of crime fiction and/or high artistic prose is yet another proof that an endeavour like the one proposed in this thesis is not fully aimless.

conventions in works identified as postmodern signals that the opposition seen by McHale intensifies rather than prevents the links between them. This particular and frequently self-reflexive mix of detection-thriller and postmodern techniques in a number of cases achieves a double success: names like Paul Auster, Umberto Eco or Quentin Tarantino have resonance in academic (professional) interpretative communities and in amateur, more mainstream spheres of reception as well. Albeit their popularity is not the same as that of dominant pieces defining the postmodern(ist) trend, it usually exceeds the popularity of postmodern avant-garde “connoisseur” art movies or writings.

A clear example of the changing gendering and canonical status of mass cultural elements due to the modern–postmodern turn might be the re-appearance of the classical Hollywood film noir conventions in postmodern thrillers and parodies of crime genres.³² The re-appropriation certainly must have been facilitated by the anti-mimetic poetics already present in the classical film noir corpus. Film noir and the musical, both classical Hollywood film genres, have been seen by critics as sites for the generic re-working of high artistic “solutions” and their transmission to mass audiences and products (as well as the reverse process). Frank Krutnik presents classical film noir as occupying such an in-between position, a cinematic genre effective in the period of late modernity, which transfers the specific features of high modernism (in this case Expressionism) into an “accessible” mass culture:

The forms of aesthetic differentiation later referred to as the ‘*noir* style’ were firmly associated with a mode of quality cinema represented most emphatically by ‘German Expressionism’. There is evidence that the Expressionistic *noir* stylistics had a general association with art strategies during this period. These stylistics seem to have functioned as a conventionalised means of upgrading the status of productions, operating as a language of stylistic differentiation which was as standardised in many ways as the classical norms. (Krutnik 21-2)

Jane Feuer also advances the view of a self-reflexive canon performing appropriations, but with reference to another classical Hollywood genre, a contemporary of the film noirs, the musical. In Patrice Petro’s summary, her work “traces the quotation and erasure of high art intertexts as central to the development of the musical as a genre. The elision of the boundaries between popular and elite forms, Feuer emphasizes, is by no means an invention of the last several decades, nor the mark of our postmodern, despairing condition” (Petro

³²“The public self and its masks are increasingly defined by a media-oriented mass culture in which youth, health and sexuality have taken on premium values. The popular culture of the past, especially film (*film noir*, grade B films) and pop music (1950s and 1960s rock), now define the present” (Denzin 5).

589). Again, one might wonder whether the habit of paying attention to musical's harsh irony directed at high artistic forms like the ballet or stage-acting, or to the numerous re-workings of these elements into mass entertainment has not come into being thanks to postmodern 'theory', rather than having always been there in the MGM studios. Jane Feuer's 1977 article "The self-reflexive musical..." is an original analysis of panels of meta-levels in 1930s-1940s Hollywood musicals and it provides a perspective from which the ideological nature of interpreting postmodernist self-reflexivity as radical or innovative might become clear to the reader. Her position is an "external" confirmation of the point I am making here:

[W]e tend to associate reflexivity with the notion of deconstruction within film-making practice. The MGM musical, however, uses reflexivity to perpetuate rather than to deconstruct the codes of the genre. Self-reflexive musicals are conservative texts in every sense. (Feuer 497)

The corpus of film noir movies analyzed by Frank Krutnik, but also the type of "quality television" Jim Collins is speaking about³³, and practically my whole proposition of a third canonical possibility appear to perform a certain well defined role. This is a process described in Feuer's analysis: the appropriation, redefinition and narrowing down of 'high artistic' methods and stylistics to/within generic boundaries, thus processing high art into "proper" mass culture. I argue that what results from this type of appropriation of either crime fiction or film noir conventions should be understood neither as postmodern high art, nor as on-living pulp. Rather the idea of a third canonical channel should be envisaged, a proposition modeled after the critical view on classical film noir elaborated in the last decades: the genre (corpus?) has been interpreted as a cultural site transmitting between the two sides of the "great divide". As Frank Krutnik summarizes: "[t]here are some grounds, also, for seeing the so-called 'noir style' as emerging initially in the context of the B-film, becoming normalized within the crime film, and subsequently being taken up by the more prestigious A-thrillers of the 1940s" (Krutnik 23)³⁴.

What is very important and is noted by Jim Collins as well is the fact that this segment belonging to both high art and mass culture differentiates itself – and is differentiated in

³³ See Collins, *Television* 758-773.

³⁴ It is here that I need to mention the "inevitable" intrusion of the gender thematic into my analysis: classical film noir is seen as enacting in the 1940s Hollywood context the role of a genre weary of patriarchy and stereotypical male-female behavior, therefore no wonder that its (more) contemporary variant, the neo noir corpus seems to be even more permissive towards questionings of the institution of heterosexuality, whence results its link with queer gendered identities. I suggest that this trajectory may be valid for the "third, mezo-level canon" effective along the modernity-postmodernity axis, an idea touched upon in one of the subsequent chapters.

criticism as well – from earlier postmodernist high practices: “[I]n the ‘meta-pop’ texts that we now find on television, on newsstands, on the radio, or on grocery store book racks, we encounter not avant-gardists who give ‘genuine significance’ to the merely mass cultural, but a hyperconscious rearticulation of media culture by media culture” (Collins, *Television* 763). Although such a phenomenon may appear as yet another instance of entertainment – this time of the kind when markers of high culture reappear (and are recreated) in mass cultural texts – I would emphasize the quality of “being in progress” with reference to the conscious, often self-reflexive blending of the elements originally created in different “artistic formations” or canons. In my view this “progressive quality”, or rather the gesture of assuming the importance of such a quality – a gesture more than present in detective novels dating from the period of modernity, in postmodernist crime fiction or even in classical film noir examples – may entitle one to argue for a “third” canonical possibility besides high culture and mass culture proper. However, without further analysis pursued, the “third canon” remains but a proposal – and still, a useful conceptual framework which helps to situate the critical work and the texts examined in this thesis.

6. Turning points

Thus a possible script of how the turn from modernism to postmodernism happened – at least in some fields – could be reformulated as follows. In spite of modernity and postmodernity bordering on each other as two adjacent temporal and social-political formations (and here I am obviously indebted to the Jamesonian view), modernism and postmodernism might not and should not be equated seamlessly as the corresponding “super-structural” happenings to the “base-structure” of the narrative. At the same time, the cultural-artistic examples – in this case belonging to the crime genre – clearly prove that links exist between mass/generic culture from the period of modernity, modernist (e.g. high artistic) tendencies in both literature and cinema, creations canonized as postmodernist (e.g. high artistic) and the further category of “the third, mezo-level canon”, coming into its own thanks to developments in postmodernity.

Therefore (perhaps) we should accept – based on the body of evidence that the practical analyses of this thesis constitute – that a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon simply labeled “the modern–postmodern turn” detects the presence of two processes. One of them is the better known and more frequently analyzed change of paradigms: the replacement of (high) modernism by (high) postmodernism, for example

Martin Amis reworking Samuel Beckett's or Alain Robbe-Grillet's³⁵ fictional worlds in *Other People*. The other process – which is by no means independent and separated from the first one – signals the existence of an uninterrupted change and conscious interaction between high art and mass culture, which I have proposed to call “the third canon”, as effective in modernity as during postmodernity. This may be exemplified by the Shakespearean intertext in Agatha Christie's *Curtain* or the noir and neo noir film corpus, alternatively attached to “art cinema” canons and/or the hybrid category of “arthouse thrillers”, a denomination that clearly shows the indecision in matters of canonical allegiance³⁶.

A basis for this proposition should be constituted not only by the practical examinations included in this thesis, but also by scholarly texts belonging to the field of cultural or genre theory. I have already mentioned the rich and inspiring argumentations presented by Stephen Neale and David Bordwell in their respective studies on art cinema as a channel of discourse and marketing available for filmmakers³⁷, a perspective that implicitly and necessarily supposes the existence of generic and commercial films. James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger – scholars with rewarding forays into the field of film history and/or theory – propose an even more colourful picture as far as different canonical possibilities in any cultural period are concerned. As a matter of fact, this standpoint had been previously elaborated on by Matei Calinescu in his *Five Faces of Modernity*, yet the study of Naremore and Brantlinger, “Six Artistic Cultures”, has the merit of brevity and simplicity, also thanks to their decision not to include examples of practical analyses in their argumentation.

Simplicity and brevity as routine qualities associated with considering the differences between (high) art and mass culture are hinted at by the two authors when they point to the possibility of narrowing their field of six artistic cultures to the “familiar high/low opposition”: “[w]e could have reduced this list of six cultures to a familiar high/low opposition: the first three categories are the domain of those who have what Bourdieu calls “cultural capital”, whereas the last three are accessible to the general population” (Naremore–Brantlinger 13). Fortunately, the simple and brief nature of their model referring to the functioning of culture lies elsewhere, as Naremore and Brantlinger – besides elaborating on the specificities of the six cultural canons – also pay attention to the possible connections and

³⁵I am aware that there exist critical views according to which both Beckett and Robbe-Grillet should be linked to an early postmodernism rather than a classical, “full-blown” phase of modernism. Not wishing to engage into this debate, I accept by and large the boundaries drawn by Matei Calinescu in his study *Five Faces of Modernity*, where he definitely considers for example Beckett's works as essential in understanding a (late) modernist poetics and worldview.

³⁶A case summarized by Naremore and Brantlinger as well: “[i]ndeed the very objects Macdonald derides—including such things as the novels of Dashiell Hammett and the films of classic Hollywood—have now become canonical works or cultural treasures guarded by preservationists” (Naremore–Brantlinger 16).

³⁷Bordwell *The Art Cinema*, Neale *Art Cinema*.

mutual influences that we may suppose to exist between these canons. Thus their work implicitly supports the perspective of my thesis, namely that the nature of cultural paradigmatic changes is to be explained – in the tradition of the Russian formalist school – diachronically and by referring to different cultural canons existing simultaneously.

The starting point of their cultural model is located in “the early decades of the twentieth century” (8), a date which largely corresponds to the critical views cited in the introduction of this chapter. It is then that Western society’s cultural activities were divided into six artistic cultures, “each producing different kinds of images, stories, and music, and what Carl Schorske calls ‘intellectual objects’” (Naremore–Brantlinger 8). The six cultures are: high art, modernist art, avant-garde art, folk art, popular art and mass art.

High art constitutes the “highest end” of the scale, its nature being defined by the cultural and material capital always abundantly at the disposal of those authorized to enter and play in this field. Its binary opposite – correctly, in my view – in this discourse is folk art, which is “agrarian or pre-industrial, belonging chiefly to peasants” (11). Both high art and folk art have their own, particular adversaries among the remaining four artistic cultures. Thus modernist art, although linked with many ties to high art, is also characterized as “sharply critical, even deconstructive, of certain high-culture values” (9). Its further traits are the following ones: “Aggressively individualistic, contemptuous of bourgeois realism, and sometimes nostalgic for pre-industrial society, [it] seemed at once reactionary and new” (10)³⁸.

Folk art’s characteristics are emphasized by its opposition to what Naremore and Brantlinger define as popular art, on the basis of work done by British cultural studies scholars Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel: “In a study of early British music halls, Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel have argued that popular art differs from folk art in depending on a star system and a professionalized type of performance; in other words, popular art transforms the folk «community» into an urban «audience»” (12). Thus modernist art differs from high art in not accepting bourgeois realism and conventions, but also in feeling nostalgia for pre-industrial life and culture, while popular art is the “urbanized” folk art of people living in cities rather than the country.

³⁸The quotation continues thus: “In English literature, for example, the quintessential modernist texts are Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Eliot’s *The Waste Land*—both of them “experimental” montages, mixing the artifacts of urban mass culture with fragments of classical literature, encouraging belief in the transcendent value of their own sophisticated craft. (...) meanwhile, in the academy, the works of the first generation of modernists provided the conceptual basis for the most influential postwar developments in literary theory, including such apparently different movements as the new criticism and post-structuralism” (Naremore–Brantlinger 10).

To finish the presentation of Naremore and Brantlinger's model of cultural functions I need to position the remaining categories of avant-garde art and mass culture vis-à-vis the already summarized ones of high art, modernist art, folk art and popular art. The authors create a demarcation line between modernist and avant-garde art: although both are oppositional in terms of their relation to exclusive high art, what differentiates them is their attitude towards the last artistic formation in Naremore and Brantlinger's system, mass culture (or mass art, as they interchangeably use the two terms). Since mass culture is a fundamental term in my analysis as well, it is useful to offer a longer quotation in order to clarify the sense attributed to it in this dissertation:

Capital-intensive and assembled according to complex divisions of labour, it [mass art/culture] was usually rationalized by its producers as entertainment rather than as art. (...) Despite its industrial basis, however, twentieth-century mass art has allowed and selectively encouraged certain kinds of experiment. In its relatively brief history, it has absorbed material from all five of the cultural categories listed above, and has employed the finest artists from every sphere. (Naremore–Brantlinger 12-3)

While avant-garde movements accepted, and moreover, celebrated the technologies and media of mass communication and production at work in the rationalized and industrialized production of mass art, creators we may label “modernist” were suspicious and ironical regarding the influence of these technologies: “Generally speaking, whereas modernism tended to be critical of industrial society, the avant-garde welcomed machines and celebrated their utopian potential” (Naremore–Brantlinger 10).

“Six Artistic Cultures” creates a homogenous picture of six divided canons, which is an opinion obviously challenged in the present work. However, in Naremore and Brantlinger's study there are two major ideas which were particularly helpful in clarifying my own standpoint: first, the opinion that “modernist art” may be conceived of as differing from “high art”, second, that the various “artistic cultures” have different attitudes towards technologies of mass communication. Thus, based on the above sketch, I would like to stress the antagonistic relationship that is seen to exist between high art, modernist art and avant-garde art on the one hand, and mass art and popular art on the other. The main dividing boundary between them needs to be emphasized: a differing attitude as regards technology and, in consequence, mass communication and reproduction. Suspicion or acceptance of the inevitable (mass) technologization of all areas in the cultural field becomes thus a trait which must be taken into account whenever speaking about the interaction of different cultural

canons. Besides the striking examples offered by the literary and filmic pieces to be analyzed, this perspective made possible by Naremore and Brantlinger's model of cultural functions also facilitates the formulation of the change of emphasis that has occurred during the working phase of this thesis – the need to consider medial aspects of the modern–postmodern turn, along alterations in detection poetics, gendering strategies and canonical positions.

Chapter 3

MAKING DIFFERENCE IN MODERNISM: HERMENEUTICS AND (CULTURAL) IDENTITIES IN THE COMPANY OF AGATHA CHRISTIE

As suggested in the previous chapters, it is paradoxical to speak about “modernist mass culture”, or “criminal modernism”, since the modernist paradigm confessed the need to draw an emphatic dividing line between what counts as “high art” and “culture for the masses”, respectively. However, and especially from the vantage point constituted by the questions of this dissertation, one cannot overlook the obvious presence and effect of crime and detective novels in a period when modernist poetics was highly prized, and that has been deemed since “the heydays of modernity”. One possibility to position reassuringly such diverse formations and authorial names is to narrow the gap between modernism and mass crime, trying to recover modernist signs in these generic fictions. Nevertheless, such an approach is questionable as I argue below, and it is not fully supported by my close readings of crime novels from the period of modernity either. Thus, true to the opinion presented in the introduction according to which “high art” and “mass culture” have not merged, not even with the onset of the turn from the modern to the postmodern, I propose to consider these crime fictions as belonging to “the modern” and modernity based on cultural, rather than on purely poetical-hermeneutical evidences.

1. Modernism/mass culture

The concept and paradigm of modernism is closely linked to the idea of high art, as suggested in the previous chapter. In what follows, nevertheless, I will consider the applicability of the idea of a “modern(ist), modern(izing) culture” to the mass literary genre of crime fiction by a joint reading of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, *Curtain* and *The Body in the Library* (Agatha Christie), *Mildred Pierce* (James M. Cain), *The Big Sleep* (Raymond Chandler), *The Maltese Falcon* (Dashiell Hammett) and *Whose Body?* (Dorothy L. Sayers). My intention is to probe the “commonplace” distance established between a narrow modernist cultural and literary canon and simultaneous developments belonging to mass culture. As Alison Light writes, in her exciting and important book, *Forever England*, with reference to

the inter-war period in Great Britain: what is dominant are “the endless attempts to find a canonical literature rather than allowing a wider or more generous view of literary pleasures and readerships” (Light x).

My project is by no means singular, as a good deal of recently published critical work tries to do justice to non-elite or mass cultural segments, understanding them as integral – or at least simultaneous – developments influencing the huge and complex paradigm of modernism. I allude to only some of these significant projects: Alison Light’s already quoted *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism between the Wars*, published in 1991 and Susan Rowland’s *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction*, published a decade later. Light speaks for me as well when she mentions the missing „Agatha Christie”, that is the possibility of reading her as a representative of popular/mass cultural modernism. “Christie’s kind of detective story –“, writes Light – “began life as one of many new varieties of a commercial culture whose expendability and temporality (such novels could be read at one sitting) offended those who preferred nineteenth-century forms. It is this Christie, whom I see as a popular modernist, who has gone missing” (Light 64).

However, and interestingly enough, critical imagination and the construction of a mass culture simultaneous and influenced by modernism and modernization (frequently) cannot or will not escape employing criteria of the elite literary and cultural canons. Alison Light succeeds in proving that Agatha Christie is nearly as good a modernist – on a purely poetical basis – as James Joyce or Samuel Beckett³⁹. She mentions such similarities as “the emptying of moral and social effects, the evacuating of notions of ‘character’, [and] the transparency of the prose” (Light 66)⁴⁰. Susan Rowland chooses to legitimate her choice of working with the life and texts of six 20th-century British women writers of crime fiction by arguing for the “literary” qualities of their novels. She asserts that

[a]ll six writers maintain their reputation because their novels are not only widely read but treasured and repeatedly reread. This suggests that the reader is engaged not so much by the ‘closure’ of these novels, the ‘whodunit’, but the ‘process, the *means* by which the criminal is finally identified out of many narrative

³⁹ Yet the opinion of Matei Calinescu describes more adequately the experience of millions of readers: “As for the truly great artists that represent the spirit of postmodernism (...) they are by no means more “popular” and accessible to the public at large than were the most sophisticated among the modernists or the avant-gardists” (Calinescu 144).

⁴⁰ “Once we consider the whodunit as a form of popular modernism, these apparent failings, the emptying of moral and social effects, the evacuating of notions of ‘character’, the transparency of the prose (...) appear in a different light” (Light 66).

possibilities. It is, in fact, the *literary* qualities of these crime fictions which sustain their popular and cultural significance (...). (Rowland viii)

A slightly different direction in the critical treatment of crime fiction is the one followed by Shoshana Felman in her seminal essay on Sebastian Japrisot's crime novel and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. She mentions a very similar, "high literary quality" that sets apart certain crime stories, making them a specific corpus, because they subvert such generic conventions as the opposition of the detective and the assassin:

What are these two remarkable texts doing if compared to the traditional structure of detective novels? On the one hand, they subvert all the conventions of the genre: the convention according to which the detective, by definition, cannot be the criminal; the convention which defines only by their *opposition* to each other, even by their radical *separation*, the diverse and multiple roles of the evil-doer and the victim, the witness and the prosecutor; the convention of a non-equivocal *closure* of the inquiry – of an ending (*dénouement*) which effectively resolves the mystery and delivers the key to/of truth, that is to say of a *guaranteed* *dénouement*, the justice or truthfulness of which cannot be doubted. However, on the other hand, the texts of Sophocles and Japrisot, by subverting all the security-providing conventions of the genre, in reality are not doing else but push to the extreme limits the narrative logic of the detective novel as far as this one, by definition, is the discourse of *displacing the enigmas*.⁴¹

Subversion of conventions, emptying of characters, ignorance of moral considerations, reading for artistic pleasure: these critical categories are historically contingent ones, belonging to the humanist critical edifice of a modernism which shares many characteristics with high art. One might wonder whether it is appropriate to look for their fulfillment in mass cultural, generic texts written simultaneously with modernism, and in the era of modernity.

⁴¹ "Par rapport à la structure traditionnelle du roman policier, que font, dès lors ces deux textes remarquables? D'une part, ils subvertissent, une à une, toutes les conventions du genre: la convention selon laquelle le détective, par définition, ne peut être le criminel; la convention qui ne définit que par leur *opposition* l'un à l'autre, voire par leur *séparation* radicale, les rôles divers et multiples du malfaiteur et de la victime, du témoin et de l'enquêteur; la convention d'une *clôture* non équivoque de l'enquête – d'un *dénouement* qui résout effectivement l'énigme et livre la clé de la vérité, c'est-à-dire, d'un *dénouement garanti* dont ni la justice ni la justesse ne peuvent être mises en doute. Cependant, en subvertissant de la sorte toutes les conventions sécurisantes du genre, les textes de Sophocle et Japrisot ne font, en réalité, que pousser à son extrême limite la logique narrative du roman policier en tant que celui-ci est, par définition, le récit même du *déplacement des énigmes*. Paradoxalement, c'est en subvertissant la loi du genre que Japrisot et Sophocle réalisent, de celui-ci, le potentiel maximal – tout à la fois dramatique, narratif, philosophique et analytique –, et dévoilent donc le génie de la forme." (Felman, *Sophocle* 39) (*Translation mine*.)

Rita Felski, the author of the well known *The Gender of Modernity* approaches the question from a different direction when she argues for the separation of the artistic current of modernism from all the other simultaneous developments in matters of art or entertainment – and the force of her argument is not weakened by the fact that her cultural historical standpoint is definitely in favour of a feminist methodology: “(...) to equate modernity with modernism, to assume that experimental art is necessarily the privileged cultural vehicle of a gender politics, is surely to ignore the implications of the feminist critique not just for methods but for objects of analysis” (Felski 28). Thus we could say that although the direction pursued by Light, Rowland, and Felman is significant because of increasing the symbolic value of the genre, Frank Kermode’s assessment of the detective story seems to be more appropriate in supporting the readings that follow:

[Thus, they admire] the detective story, in which the hermeneutic preoccupation is dominant at the expense of “depth”, in which “character” is unimportant, and in which there are necessarily present in the narrative sequence enigmas which, because they relate to a quite different and earlier series of events, check and make turbulent its temporal flow. (Kermode 185)

I think we must agree with this critical opinion as far as the inherent features of the detective story are considered: they are structural necessities and not traces (of the influence) of the modernist prose canon. This is an opinion which tallies with Rita Felski’s argumentation as well when she considers the “narrowness” of the modernist canon if a more ample picture of the respective period developments needs to be drawn:

It is surely more useful to retain the term [modernism] as a designation for those texts which display the formally self-conscious, experimental, antimimetic features described earlier, while simultaneously questioning the assumption that such texts are necessarily the most important or representative works of the modern period. (Felski 25)

2. The “hermeneutic” and the “cultural”

In his essay “Novel and Narrative” Frank Kermode refers to Bentley’s interpretation of one of C. K. Chesterton’s crime novels, emphasizing a specific preoccupation of the fictional text – an interest in creating difference by “othering” strategies – and a total blindness to it in Bentley’s analysis:

Bentley dedicated his book to Chesterton, who was capable of believing that Jewish financiers started the Boer War to induce youths to slaughter one another. As a reading of history this might be thought to fall short of competence, but taken together with what is known of the Edwardian Englishman's attitude to colonials it helps to explain a certain chauvinism in the tale, though Bentley presumably meant it to remain inexplicit. (...) The processing of hermeneutic material has entailed the provision of other matter from which we may infer an ideological system: American is to English as the first to the second term in each member of this series: rich-not rich, uneducated-educated, cruel-gentle, exploiter-paternalist, insensitive-sensitive, and so on, down to colored-white. So the hermeneutic spawns the cultural. (Kermode 184)

Kermode translates the opposition between the tight structural preoccupation of the detective genre and the "alien" material representing historical events as the dichotomy of the "hermeneutic" and the "cultural". My readings below are predicated upon this differentiation, since most of the Golden Age crime novels in question are hardly innovative from a poetical perspective, especially if compared to (high) modernist fiction, thus they offer little satisfaction to hermeneutic interest. Moreover, I consider that the "hermeneutic" potential of the crime and detective genre has been exhausted in a wide range of excellent treatises (and here I mention only the book written by Tamás Bényei), however, the fold of the "cultural" still deserves attention.

By analyzing the "cultural" surplus that these crime novels carry we are also offered the possibility to re-imagine the relationship between modernism, high art, modernity and the crime genre (which stands for mass culture in this configuration). Concerning the "cultural" in classical Golden Age crime novels my part consists in trying to concretize this field/dimension by downsizing it to configurations of identity on the gender range and also according to the archetypal dichotomy of "us" and "them"⁴² in the analysis of these novels. Therefore I intend to argue for the inclusion of the genre analyzed – crime and detective fiction (and film) – if not into the cultural fortress of (high artistic) modernism then (and at least) among the significant cultural events and manifestations of modernity.

Yet, one must be aware that the Kermodian dichotomy sets in motion two different algorithms and methods of interpretation, besides a simple highlighting of different aspects

⁴² Referring to modernist elite literature's similar preoccupations, Alison Light summarizes as follows: "[t]he instabilities which these popular murders set in motion bear a direct relationship to the existential crises which torment the writers of high culture: the obsession with unstable identities, the ultimate unknowability of others, the sense of guilt which accompanies civilisation (...)" (Light 88).

(and parts) of these crime texts when trying to understand their “hermeneutic”, or “cultural” ingredients. These methods, at least in my case, have succeeded each other as valid ones, thus I think that it would be unfaithful to the trajectory I have undergone during this research if only the temporally later (thus still valid) recognitions would be represented here. Hence the series is beginning with a truly “hermeneutically” engaged interpretation of Agatha Christie’s (fictionally) last Poirot novel, followed by readings whose “target” is divided between “hermeneutic” and “cultural” dimensions.

3. A “hermeneutic” analysis. *Curtain: Poirot’s Last Case*.

Curtain: Poirot’s Last Case is the last but one work of Agatha Christie’s published in her lifetime; it was launched for Christmas in 1975, and sold very well, increasing the profit of the already profitable Agatha Christie Ltd (Osborne 235). The novel occupies a peculiar position in Christie’s oeuvre due to two features: its subtitle (“Poirot’s Last Case”) and the moment of its birth, namely in the 1940s, during World War II. Christie seems to have been firmly determined to keep the novel locked away until after her death, yet publishers persuaded her to change her mind. During these 30 years – from the 1940s and until 1975 – Christie continued to devise stories starring the eccentric Belgian detective – in spite of his having already vanished. His death appears as thoroughly fictional or imaginary, not interfering with the detective’s narrative career, or the writing trajectory of Agatha Christie herself. Otherwise “the queen of crime” committing such a deed is not an accidental phenomenon if we consider the frame set by Franco Moretti: “Her hundred-odd books have only one message: the criminal can be *anyone*: the narrator, ‘the detective’, the entire group of suspects, the most suspicious, the least suspicious, the most doting of lovers, the most infamous of scoundrels. That is, Agatha Christie abolishes all paradigmatic restrictions” (Moretti 141).

Curtain, in a nearly kitschy symmetry, is the counterpart of the novel that has Poirot for the first time in its cast, the 1921 *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. It is at Styles that Poirot triumphs for the first time and it is here that he returns to fight the criminal strong and intelligent enough to make him retreat. The fictional time difference supposed to exist between the stories of the two Styles novels, as well as a constant evocation and comparison of things past with an unworthy present turn out to be the main “duties” assigned to the narrator, Captain Arthur Hastings. Thus *Curtain* manages to structurally create an all-

pervading atmosphere of nostalgia and melancholy in the readers themselves⁴³, by forcing us to slide back and forth in the chronology linking the two murder mysteries revealed by Poirot. The setting of the stories is the same in both cases: Captain Hastings is being invited to Styles, where he assists Poirot in investigating mysterious cases of murder.

Yet time has affected profoundly every corner of this narrative world: the once elegant and distinguished Styles castle reappears as a guest house run on a commercial basis, and, instead of the wealthy, illustrious Cavendishes and Inglethorps, more modest and mostly solitary persons have chosen to lodge there. Yet the life of the characters in the 1916 “mysterious” story has not stopped there and then, and the nostalgic voice of Hastings revoking the past is adequately balanced by Poirot’s critical and down-to-earth words. Characters in the second Styles novel also know about the previous violent and sad happenings in the castle, thus Hastings cannot totally indulge in golden age nostalgia, having to admit that “[m]y regret had been for the past as the past, not for the reality. For even then, in that far off time, there had been no happiness in Styles. (...) And now, again, no one here was happy. Styles was not a lucky house” (Christie, *Curtain* 70-1).

Once he arrives to Styles, Hastings is introduced into the crime series in progress by Poirot, who presents him with a draft, containing five descriptions of murders, thus the construction of hypotheses and establishing links between seemingly disparate cases start with the first encounter of detective and narrator. Apparently, every crime is a standard one: the motivation is clear, the identity of the suspect(s) unquestionable, judicial procedures have been smoothly conducted. It is precisely the easy decipherability and obvious mode of the crimes that become signs for Poirot, signs that need further “reading”. This is how the character of X is born, as a source of all these murders, even if a temporal or a spatial distance is constituted between him and the crimes committed:

There is a certain person – X. In none of these cases did X (apparently) have any motive in doing away with the victim. In one case, as far as I have been able to find out, X was actually two hundred miles away when the crime was committed. (...) X was on intimate terms with Etherington, X lived for a time in the same village as Riggs, X was acquainted with Mrs. Bradley. I have a snap of X and Freda Clay walking together in the street, and X was near the house when old Matthew Litchfield died. (Christie, *Curtain* 21)

⁴³ “Nostalgia thus emerges as a crucial product of modernization, because the strains and uncertainties of such rapid and large-scale change generates, especially in the intellectual classes, a nostalgia for the values of a more traditional society (...)” (Turner 7).

The criminal narrative in *Curtain* is literally made up by Poirot and Hastings, triggered by the aging detective's supposition that the secretive X is present in the Styles guesthouse, "one criminal being more than enough for a crime", as he sums up for Hastings. The well known detective story formula, when the victim and the crime are the known, with the perpetrator the unknown element(s), is inverted here: for Poirot the identity of the doer is not a secret, yet s/he can not be caught because of her indirect relation to murders. It is impossible to link X to a crime in a retrospective manner, since it is not he who pours the poison or pulls the trigger. Therefore the only method applicable is prevention before the act, a warning issued before the new crime is committed. Poirot, in his final journal-confession, uses the following metaphor:

[W]e have here a case of catalysis – a reaction between two substances that takes place only in the presence of a third substance, that third substance apparently taking no part in the reaction and remaining unchanged. That is the position. It means that where X was present, crimes took place – but X did not actively take part in these crimes. (Christie, *Curtain* 169)

This interpretation appears only at the very end of the novel; meanwhile Hastings and the reader come to understand the criminality of X in quite a literal manner. The narrator-assistant is supposed to help Poirot in determining the identity and position of the next victim, which would mean that he (Captain Hastings) adopts the perspective and thinking of the mysterious X. Tension is rising in Styles, while Captain Hastings engages in "casting" the guests in different – possibly criminal – schemes. The logic of the detective story, as described by Tamás Bényei, is fully at work: "Characters are placed in a given basic situation in crime stories – each of them having a well defined role. In that moment – exactly as in games – a process starts, which is not directed by the participants, but by the rules of the game, independent of them" (Bényei, *Rejtély* 23)⁴⁴. The captain is unable to discern the rules which govern the events, thus his narrative ends in two murder attempts (one of them related to Hastings) and three dead bodies. The last victim is Poirot himself, killed by a heart attack while his medicines are beyond reach. Hastings concludes: "In the duel between Poirot and X, X had won. It was now up to me." (Christie, *Curtain* 161)

Hastings is sure that none of the crimes are what they seem to be, that all have been committed by the shadowy X, so he must continue detecting, based on Poirot's notes. These notes, however, have gone missing with his friend's death, and Hastings is left with a cheap

⁴⁴ Translation mine.

edition of Shakespeare's *Othello* and the play of Christie's contemporary, St. John Ervine, *John Ferguson*. It is in these that the clues to the X murders lie, yet Hastings is unable to decipher or understand the most subtle allusions of Poirot.⁴⁵

If I claimed that decay and nostalgia pervade every segment of the *Curtain*-world, we must not forget to mention the figure of Poirot himself which perhaps has been affected by the most striking destruction:

My poor friend. I have described him many times. Now to convey to you the difference. Crippled with arthritis, he propelled himself about in a wheeled chair. His once plump frame had fallen in. He was a thin little man now. His face was lined and wrinkled. His moustache and hair, it is true, were still of a jet black colour, but candidly, though I would not for the world have hurt his feelings by saying so to him, this was a mistake. (Christie, *Curtain* 13)

Poirot's bodily inefficiency is in sharp contrast with the still youthful and energetic figure of Hastings, who is offered a role superior to his usual sniffing around, being "appointed" as the indispensable assistant to a detective unable to move and discuss freely (even if Poirot is not fully content with such a resolution)⁴⁶. Thus, parallel to the literal weakening of the detective figure, the narrator's role is gaining more prominence in the novel, with the detecting methods metamorphosing into rather detached modes of deciphering. According to the fictional agreement foregrounded by *Curtain*, the knowledge of the detecting figure is dependent upon the activities of the narrator, this latter being the one who directly communicates with the reader. With Poirot in a wheelchair, it is Hastings who has to procure "external" pieces of information which could advance the quest. So it happens that the reader

⁴⁵ A fact we should not find strange considering the most complex definition Franco Moretti offers with reference to signs: "Clues, whether defined as such or as 'symptoms' or 'traces', are not facts, but verbal procedures – more exactly, *rhetorical figures*. (...) As is to be expected, clues are more often metonymies: associations by contiguity (related to the past), for which the detective must furnish the missing term. The clue is, therefore, that particular element of the story in which the link between signifier and signified is altered. It is a signifier that always has several signifieds and thus produces *numerous* suspicions. (...) This is also part of the criminal's guilt: he has created a situation of semantic ambiguity, thus questioning the usual forms of human communication and human interaction. In this way, he has composed an audacious *poetic work*. The detective, on the other hand, must dispel the entropy, the cultural equiprobability that is produced by and is a relevant aspect of the crime: he will have to reinstate the univocal links between signifiers and signifieds. In this way, he must carry out a scientific operation" (Moretti 146).

⁴⁶ This model of detection is not singular in Christie's oeuvre. In *The Body in the Library* Conway Jefferson motivates his calling Sir Henry Clithering to Danemouth by the same reason that Hercule Poirot offers to Arthur Hastings when inviting him to Styles. Namely, that bodily invalidity (both Poirot and Jefferson need to lead their lives in a wheelchair) prevents the actual detectives from gathering information, therefore the secondary figures are supposed to go through the actual search. "I'm an invalid. I disguise the fact – refuse to face it – but now it comes home to me. I can't go about as much as I'd like to, asking questions, looking into things." [Jefferson] (...) "Do you mean you want me to be a kind of amateur sleuth?" [Clithering]" (Christie, *Body* 125).

may be entrusted with clues and traces even “sooner” than the detective, who must wait for the evening visits of Hastings to be fully informed.

The detective is distanced from the concrete and possibly criminal happenings as suggested by the different pieces of writing that are inserted in the narrative and which “come” from old Poirot. These are: his letter of invitation sent to Hastings, his little “*précis*” or draft referring to the crimes, and finally his journal-like confession, following the narration of Hastings, a confession which is supposed to enlighten us, à la library meetings. These texts by Poirot replace the active, examining detective, and may be seen as signs for his absence from the narrative – a characteristic that perhaps accounts for the peculiar, detached criminal Poirot is facing this time. Both the detective and the criminal are extremely distanced from the actual crimes, and a reconnection to the detecting process is practically impossible. Poirot may participate in the analysis only hypothetically, through his famous “grey cells”, therefore the criminal, a mirror image of the detective (even if a negative one) is supposed to enter a similar system of relations when he is linked to the crimes only on a hypothetical plane. Is it possible to suppose, or to elucidate a mystery if the relation to crime is diffuse, indirect, or hypothetical? This seems to be the central question that *Curtain* as a novel sets out to answer.

The apparently indirect detection of Poirot in *Curtain*, in its reliance on Hastings for information, is a mirror image of the criminal’s methods, and it allows for the narrator’s role becoming more emphasized. The Captain is decidedly critical concerning the detective’s methods, let alone his problems in accepting the X serial murders as real and true:

[I] asked myself if possibly Poirot had imagined the whole thing. After all, the dear old chap *was* an old man now and sadly broken in health. (...) His whole life had been spent in tracking down crime. Would it really be surprising if, in the end, he was to fancy crime where no crimes were? (...) Against that view (surely the common-sense one) I could only set my own inherent belief in Poirot’s acumen. (Christie, *Curtain* 28)

This “inherent belief” is a condition of the detective’s ability to kill the supposed indirect killer in such a manner that his surroundings will not suspect anything. This turn of events is an unfortunate and unexpected one, accompanied by a most unorthodox thing in a Golden Age whodunit, namely the death of the chief detecting figure. As a matter of fact, Poirot attempts several times to suggest that something negative or terrible will happen, because of either his severe illness or the unacceptable nature of truth at the end of all happenings: “But rest assured, my indications will lead you to the truth.” (...) ‘And perhaps,

then, you would wish that they had not led you so far. You would say instead: «Ring down the curtain»” (Christie, *Curtain* 153). The significance of these words is not to be revealed until the Postscript of the novel, when Poirot’s explanatory manuscript, completing the Captain’s narration, reaches the narrator and thus the reader as well.

According to his own confession, Poirot has been wearing a whole array of masks and playing roles along the story filtered through Hastings’ consciousness and narrated in his voice. With the aim of punishing the perfect murderer, X, Poirot only simulated invalidity and illness, soothing at once the suspicions of the murderer, but also those of his assistant. Poirot’s role-playing culminates in his becoming similar to the enemy⁴⁷: he commits two murders, annihilating the mysterious X and also himself. Poirot has no choice but to take upon him the burden of murder if he wants to stop X, whose guilt cannot be proved in a judicial system postulated upon perceivable traces and visible links to a murder. Poirot, thanks to his non-institutional position, is capable of attributing reality to a set of hypothetical statements, and therefore is able to punish the criminal, yet by committing murder (for this) he becomes a member of the camp he pursued all his life. His second murder – a suicidal one – contributes to the strengthening of Poirot’s new “identity” and makes him even more similar to the catalyzer-perpetrator of *Curtain*. The last naïve and pure character, Hastings, turns into a tool of the devilish detective as his unconditional and uppermost belief in Poirot’s genius and blamelessness is the fundamental guarantee of Poirot’s being able to kill without having to pay for it – otherwise than he himself has chosen to do it. “Do you see now why you were necessary to me at Styles? I had to have someone *who accepted what I said without question*” (Christie, *Curtain* 178). In order to sustain the fascinating shows of deduction, Poirot’s last case really should be hidden behind a *curtain*.

The murderer, X, can be linked – even by the great Poirot – to the disparate crimes only hypothetically, “he cannot support his theory”; the peculiarity of the case is best signaled by the reaction of good old Hastings. A representative of empirical common sense and “simple character”, the Captain cannot see such a strange criminal; he even considers the whole case to be a fancy of the aging detective. Murderers also perform authorial functions since they plan and perform the mysterious quiz for the detective and the reader as well, thus creating a route which leads to their own selves. Yet in *Curtain* we have a murderer working with Iago’s method, suggesting, yet not committing the murders Poirot attributes to him, a master of psychological influencing. Norton, the shadowy X murderer becomes unattainable, non-traceable: his indirect mode of operating recreates traces and signs at the same time as

⁴⁷“At the very least, detection often depends upon the detective’s imaginative ability to identify with his opponent, if only temporarily. (...) Toward the extreme—or the epitome—of the genre, detective and criminal approach very close to a shared identity” (Hodgson 312).

making him non-existent for a Poirot seeking for readable signs. The latter must leave behind his dichotomic system of yes or no, good or evil, if he wants to succeed in this case – a simple abandonment of the positive pole of the dichotomy would not be adequate enough.

As stated before, Poirot turns out to be similar to (or even identical with) the criminal he is pursuing: “I told you that I was at Styles for a purpose. I was there, I said, because a crime was going to be committed. You were surprised at my certainty on that point. But I was able to be certain – for the crime, you see, was to be committed *by myself*...” (Christie, *Curtain* 170). The words are not characteristic of a Poirot aristocratically detached from crime and physical activity, suggesting a detective deliberately tricking “his” narrator, a new stage on the way to become the perpetrator. Poirot is forced to dress and behave like Norton, the real criminal in order to make the others believe – based on the famous mystery of the locked room – that X committed suicide. A mask, a role, which, in the end, remains fixed on the great detective’s figure. Poirot tries to fight the disappearance of the “sign-signified” structure since this would lead to the melting away of his figure and of a genre founded on the interpretation of signs. Yet the detective senses that his attempt is futile, that is why he seems to overproduce acts of signification and relations of signs (to meaning): to hide the supposed end and at the same time to “rehearse” his new role of murderer and sign-creator. What is to happen to the detective in a world where interpretation is absolutely impossible⁴⁸?

Poirot’s journal-confession falls into the category of delayed solutions to a mystery: Hastings is delivered a package four months after his friend’s death, while the reader is to face it after the narrative of their common detection has ended, clearly suggesting that Hastings, alone, is doomed to fail. In this Postscript at the end of *Curtain* Poirot offers solutions to all of the crimes and murders, yet the *post*-ness and the delay succeed in hiding behind a curtain the ugly truth; moreover, the confession lets the story of Poirot’s criminality remain a mystery forever. If the great detective had not chosen to speak from death, his suicide committed at the end of *Curtain* would have closed once and for all the possibility of discovering the truth, perhaps even convincing Hastings (and the reader) that all must have been Poirot’s fancy. Yet in this Agatha Christie murder mystery the detective’s version remains terminally fictional, while his narrative credibility – which he badly needs as the journal only replaces him – is undermined by his credibility as a detective, a characteristic he wishes to sustain even within the context of a peculiar crime series. In his effort to stop the murders and thus maintain the

⁴⁸“At least as far as the traditional novel is concerned, reading involves following a plot as a detective follows the narrative of the criminal’s actions; signs must be read, clues picked up and remembered, characters assembled and judged on the basis of evidence. In an ‘ordinary’ novel, these activities are disguised by the realism of the text but they are nevertheless there as readerly function without which we could not make sense of the story, could not solve its mystery” (Shaw-Wanacker 6).

illusion/air of a successful detective, Poirot is forced to kill, in this way revoking the ethical, credible and true qualities to prevail in his final confession.

The two murders committed by Poirot are worthy counterparts of the criminal's Iago-type method: he does not commit crimes without traces, instead he leaves traces that do not, cannot lead to him, thus they confuse anyone who would want to detect (after) them. There's only one person who could correctly interpret Poirot the murderer's traces, and that is Poirot himself. Hastings cannot deduce anything from reading the two dramas mentioned (*Othello* and *John Ferguson*), Poirot's dead voice needs to be heard, and he does speak, thus signaling the transgression of detective/mystery novel conventions. The necessity of his gesture emerges from his interpreting a sequence in William Shakespeare's *Othello*:

For your great Shakespeare, my friend, had to deal with the dilemma that his own art had brought about. To unmask Iago he had to resort to the clumsiest of devices – the handkerchief – a piece of work not at all in keeping with Iago's general technique and a blunder of which one feels certain he would not have been guilty. (Christie, *Curtain* 169)

The fixed center allowing the system or the structure to function is revealed in both Iago's handkerchief and Poirot's need to kill, and by this revelation the integrity of the system of representation (e.g. the detective and crime genre) is being undermined at the same time. It is traces (even if fallible ones), which make punishment as well as the good-evil opposition function, and the moment when traces and signs disappear or cannot be interpreted, a system based on them collapses.

Poirot's murder shows the uselessness of the classical matrix of crime: when faced with a traceless murder, the logic of detection founded on the conventions of traces and truth cannot identify the true criminal. Operating according to rules of fiction, it only succeeds in defining the (guiltless) detective – who nevertheless accepts the discourse of truth. Poirot's Postscript reveals an unacceptable truth, which Hastings (and perhaps the reader as well) would want to hide behind a curtain: such knowledge is a burden enough. In which case the assertion of Hodgson is fully valid: "Dorothy Sayers (...) noted that the seasoned reader of detective stories, "instead of detecting the murderer....is engaged in detecting the writer" (Sayers 1946 [1929]: 108); (...)" (Hodgson 314).

I started the subchapter with the observation that *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* offers the possibility of a truly "hermeneutic" reading, presenting characteristics which would enable one to suggest that the novel's writer, Agatha Christie, was not totally unaware of

modernist prose poetics, perhaps even intent on adapting it to her chosen genre. The careful deconstruction of the classical detective story matrix, as demonstrated above, may be cited as a proof in this respect; nevertheless, the need for further corrections is also present. Thus we have to reflect on the limitations of our reading and interpretative strategies, that is why I continue with introducing further critical perspectives, this time urged by the wish to examine the “cultural” ingredients of Golden Age crime fiction, a contemporary of modernism in (high) art.

4. The “cultural”: masculine/feminine

In the spirit of the argumentation presented at the beginning of this chapter I propose that instead of exclusively looking for poetic innovation in trying to identify the whodunit’s cultural credentials as a text, we should pay attention to how these crime generic texts consider a central issue of modernity: gendered identity, or the recipe for having a functional masculinity and/or femininity. Instabilities concerning these aspects are very much present, and I would suggest that the meaning of “the modern” or “modernization” in crime fiction could be better understood as a re-working of accepted notions of gendered identification than as making use of high modernist poetical achievements.

Before proceeding to the actual readings, the present subchapter is meant to introduce modernism as “a historically specific enunciation of sexual difference” (Pollock 145), in the context of which mass culture could have been feminized⁴⁹, and where/when manifold links have been proved to exist between the high artistic canon and the ideal of patriarchal masculinity. An overview of the cultural market in the designated context and period might show that by the 1910’s “the polarization between “high” and “low” literature is firmly in place (...)” (Rainey 33). Lawrence Rainey demonstrates that modernism as a cultural discourse is already deeply engaged in the debate about the (aesthetic/commercial) status of cultural products as commodities, or on the contrary, categorized as art – a process also explained by Celia Lury. She interprets the tense relation between subversive and/or authentic artistic practice on the one, and the capitalist cultural market (and its influence on the commodification of true values⁵⁰) on the other hand as a necessary one in the process of “authentification” in the “art-culture system”⁵¹. Only works, persons, institutions that have undergone this might be considered as high, valuable art since

⁴⁹ In the historical process of gendering an Anglo-American cultural canon the influence of the first-wave feminist movement is essential (“The radical implications of the social-cultural changes feminism advocated produced in modernist writing an unprecedented preoccupation with gender, both thematically and formally” (DeKoven 174)), like the second-wave feminist academic criticism’s role in reflecting on it.

⁵⁰ A contrast particularly sharp(ened) in modernism.

⁵¹ She appropriates the terminology of James Clifford, for their elaboration see Lury, *Stylization* 55-60.

[O]ne of the ways in which popular culture was subordinated to high culture was through its association with (a particular understanding of *mass consumption*. (...)) [T]hrough the association of their meaning with this negative conception of consumption, the objects of popular culture were excluded from the preferred movements of authentication. (Lury, *Stylization* 57)

This complex constellation of changing cultural modes of production can be considered a strong factor, together with the emerging awareness of the role of gender, in generating the more and more frequent examples that represent the relation of cultural canons by connoting a patriarchal gender system. Marianne DeKoven summarizes Henry James' 1899 essay, *The Future of the Novel*, from this perspective: "James begins with the standard modernist attack on femininity. He links it with the social and aesthetic deterioration of standards connected to a debased, feminine/feminized popular culture (...)" (DeKoven 177). The dominant feminized imagery of commodity and market-orientation being established, the relationship to be built between masculinity and art of (simply) aesthetic value practically had no obstacles. This effort has been identified on several fronts, from representing the figure of the artist as masculine through imagining the subject matter's gender as feminine, on to building a high artistic canon consisting of mostly male artists. Janet Wolff emphasizes the "the discursive construction of the modernist artist as the heroic, asocial, masculine figure" (Wolff 35), and she also identifies the subterranean gendering of what valued cultural products sought to represent and speak about: "[t]he gender of modernism has also consisted in its typical subject- matter (...), the preoccupations with the female nude, with male virility and, often, misogyny, and with recurrent crises in masculinity (...)" (Wolff 35).

The androcentric nature of modernist poetics and canons has been identified in literary criticism and art history alike, a large array of analyses and interpretations offering a painstaking reading of the strategy (Wolff, Pollock, and DeKoven). Two further observations might be mentioned to illustrate both the sophistication of feminist analysis and the all-pervasiveness of the ideology of gendering as male the respected/valued, while feminizing its counterpart. Making a distinction between post/modernity and post/modernism, Janet Wolff calls attention to the curious phenomenon that the iconic figures of modernity (the social-historical process) appeared as masculine. Although one could oppose to "the *flâneur*, the dandy, the stranger" – identified by Wolff as such – the figure of the New Woman as an equally representative icon, the feminist ideological impulse to do so may not be so "strong" as historical evidence which attests the contrary. Besides, this correction would not change the

gendered logic according to which women-strangers or dandys, “any woman in these roles would have been likely to be taken for a prostitute or another ‘non-respectable’ female” (Wolff 37). To summarize this brief account on the relations between high art and masculinity on the one hand, and the exclusion of femininity from the dominant cultural imaginary on the other, let me refer now again to Griselda Pollock’s already quoted article. She argues that painting has been posited

as *the* most ambitious and significant art form in modernism because it metonymically recalls, through the traces of paint and bodily gestures, the persona of the artist, still the strongest guarantor of non-commodified, purely aesthetic artistic value. These features inscribe a subjectivity whose value is, by visual inference and cultural naming, masculinity. (Pollock 142)

5. 1. “Cultural” identities: everyday difference

The texts to be discussed here⁵² enjoy an uninterrupted popularity, not only as novels but also as filmed adaptations; they are being reread and referred to. Yet the perspective I chose here does not need a celebration of their literary or reasoning qualities, as I do not want to interpret them as peculiar, outstanding representatives of their genre. I do not think that these texts may be similar to any high modernist novel or would require the critical arsenal of reading high modernist texts; neither do I consider them particularly innovative⁵³. What I assume is that they are typical 1920s “golden age” whodunits and 1920s/1940s “hardboiled” novels respectively and I do not intend to augment their value by claiming that they subscribe to humanist aesthetic ideology’s “particularistic, specificity-seeking” ideal⁵⁴. What I wish to argue is that the texts interpreted below and the indications they give us concerning reading strategies and creating a historical context for them allow for one possible definition of what

⁵² *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, the first successful crime novel by Agatha Christie appeared in 1920, *Whose Body?* by Dorothy Sayers, in 1923. James M. Cain’s 1941 *Mildred Pierce* is a notorious cultural artifact, also thanks to the 1945 Michael Curtiz-directed Hollywood variant. Further texts considered: *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett (1930) and *The Big Sleep* by Raymond Chandler (1939).

⁵³ Alison Light’s verdict on *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* is illuminating in this respect: “Christie’s first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), is in many ways a stilted book, casually relying upon earlier narratorial shorthands. There is, as Christie later admitted, almost an embarrassment of riches. All the paraphernalia of an already well-worked genre are somewhat dutifully displayed – a map of the house, missing poison, disguise; the subplot of foreign espionage is singularly unoriginal (...). Captain Hastings, our narrator, speaks in the pre-war language of romance (...). [And the plot is] overloaded with material clues (...), reminiscent of Holmes (...)” (Light 66-67).

⁵⁴ The futility of such an endeavour can be deduced from Michael Holquist’s words as well: “Now it is precisely during the 20’s and 30’s of this century, when Modernism was in its deep-diving prime, achieving it most completely realized persons and its densest world, that the detective story had its golden age. It is a period when the two strands, experimental literature–high culture, on the one hand, and popular literature–the detective story, on the other, are more than ordinarily split in their techniques, basic assumptions and effect” (146).

modernism, modernity, modernization meant for crime fiction – in the spirit of Frank Kermode's introduced differentiation between the "hermeneutic" and the "cultural" aspects of this mass cultural genre. All the discussed novels and I suppose most of the crime fiction written in the first decades of the 20th century abound in interestingly gendered characters, and most passions or tensions originate in the modes in which (non-)normative gender identities are supposed to function. This is not interesting in itself, but it becomes so compared to postmodern(ist) crime fiction's figures: there, besides perverted, cruel sexuality, normative, heterosexual femininity or masculinity barely are allotted defining roles to play.

Speaking about othering and differentiating in the context of (classical) crime novels we must not ignore the simplest case: that of the accused murderer, the perpetrator of the act being "othered", presented as "not one of us". In Christie's novel *Dr. Alfred Inglethorp* is the one who has to bear the burden of such a stigmatization: to Captain Hastings he appears as coming „from nowhere“, he classifies him as „an absolute outsider“ (Christie, *Styles* 3-4). Moreover, Dr. Inglethorp is thoroughly artificial, in Hastings' words: „It struck me that he might look natural on a stage, but was strangely out of place in real life“ (6). We could say this is an existential foreignness, a difference that can be established between accepted and peripheral notions of humanness.

However, the crime novels analysed here place a particular emphasis on a more down-to-earth fact of not belonging, of pertaining to a foreign culture and ethnicity. Dorothy Sayers' *Whose Body?* is centered around a double criminal plot, with a known body missing and another unknown one reappearing in a downtown bathroom. Unsurprisingly, both of the victims turn out to be "Semitic looking strangers", and the primal cause of the sophisticated murder scheme may be reduced to the following equation of Lord Peter Wimsey, the amateur detective: "it isn't the girl Freke [the murderer] would bother about – it's having his aristocratic nose put out of joint by a little Jewish nobody" (Sayers 148).

Two of the suspects in Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* are overtly relegated to contrasting groups: that of the Jews⁵⁵ and the gypsies, respectively. In a discussion between John and Mary Cavendish, heirs of the murdered old lady, the figure of Dr. Bauerstein causes a disagreement, as Englishness is being contrasted with Jewishness: „A tinge of Jewish blood is not a bad thing. It leavens the (...) stolid stupidity of the ordinary Englishman.“ says Mary (Christie, *Styles* 107). An augmentation of the value of Jewishness comes from Poirot himself when he asserts, concerning the very same Dr. Bauerstein: „A very clever man – a Jew, of

⁵⁵ A related phenomenon is signaled by Ken Worpole: "The more exotic of the British novels of the period after Sherlock Holmes have been scrutinized by Claud Cockburn in his study, *Bestseller*. Apart from a general glorification of British imperialism, many of these novels contained a strong vein of anti-Semitism, often linked with the menace of Bolshevism, together with a portrayal of the working class as an atavistic mob battering down the park railings" (Worpole 33).

course” (117). And finally, it is Hastings who channels the cultural opinion when meeting the handsome Mrs. Raikes: „Has that piquant gypsy face been at the bottom of the crime, or was it the baser mainspring of money?” (Christie, *Styles* 66)

Everyday “othering”, differentiation between social segments – if only for narrative purposes – appears in the form of a further curious detail in Cain’s *Mildred Pierce*: I am referring to the coloured cards and drawers in Miss Turner’s employment agency office. The colours are shorthand indications that the respective employers do not want to hire Jews or married women – as we are in the period of the Economic Depression and every workplace is most precious.

5.2. Women, the raving beauties

The “feminine” aspect, surprisingly enough, is most emphasized in Cain’s *Mildred Pierce*. Set in the USA of the 1930s, the novel discloses a progressive view about women’s role in society, even if mothers in charge of holding the family together can be said to be the basic preoccupation of the text. *Mildred Pierce* recounts the adventures of a mother, living alone with her children, in the period of the Great Economic Depression. One of the title heroine’s female friends voices the following opinion: “Well, you’ve joined the biggest army on earth. You’re the great American institution that never gets mentioned on the Fourth of July – a grass widow with two small children to support” (Cain 13).

Mildred Pierce exemplifies the life of those women who married at a young age, not trained for any profession; therefore her efforts to secure a workplace prove to be extremely difficult. Miss Turner is one of the emancipated female characters in *Mildred Pierce*: “a little on the hard-boiled side. She smoked her cigarette in a long holder, with which she waved Mildred to a small desk (...)” (Cain 44). She may judge the main protagonist, Mildred, by virtue of her being an independent, working woman. She tells her: “I wouldn’t call you a raving beauty, but you’ve got an A-I shape and you say you cook fine and sleep fine. Why don’t you forget about a job, book yourself a man and get married again?” (Cain 47). Certain women are particularly nice to be married to, while the other – working – segment has the right to assert this.

Profession, marriage, and children: most commonplace alternatives for women, yet it must be mentioned that an independent career or life-style for women is more openly accepted in the male American writer’s 1941 novel, while it appears seldom in Christie’s or Sayers’ early 1920s whodunits. In fact it is the women writers who voice the most stereotypical views about women’s place, behaviour or task in life. Christie and Sayers manage to create a “wonderful” gallery of women sanctioned in their gendered conduct and

activities precisely by their femininities situated far from an ideal prototype. Not all women are equipped with the shape to become wives or have enough money to live on their own. These “seriously disadvantaged” categories are thoroughly considered in both Christie’s and Sayers’ novel, while hardly a trace of them appears in Cain’s text, which is engaged in pursuing women who taste success in different spheres.

In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* a most memorable partner to a murder, Miss Howard, appears to the friendly narrator, Captain Hastings in the following manner:

Miss Howard shook hands with a hearty, almost painful, grip. I had an impression of very blue eyes in a sunburnt face. She was a pleasant-looking woman of about forty, with a deep voice, almost manly in its stentorian tones, and had a large sensible square body, with feet to match – these last encased in good thick boots. Her conversation, I soon found out, was couched in the telegraphic style. (Christie, *Styles* 5)

To augment the effect, let us listen to Poirot’s remark about Miss Howard: “There is a woman with a head and a heart too, Hastings. Though the good God gave her no beauty!” (Christie, *Styles* 53) It is her type – and we could say the category of Miss Turners and Mildred Pierces – whom the good old maidservant, Dorcas, is jeering at when complaining about the reduction in the number of gardeners. She says: „[o]nly three [gardeners] now, sir. Five, we had, before the war, when it was kept as a gentleman’s place should be. (...) But now there’s only old Manning, and young William, and a new-fashioned woman gardener in breeches and suchlike. Ah, these are dreadful times!” (Christie, *Styles* 37)

In a conversation between the faithful Hastings and the manly Miss Howard we hear the following: [Miss Howard] „I’d feel it in my fingertips if he [that is the murderer] came near me.” [Hastings] It might be a she”, I suggested. [H] „Might... But murder’s a violent crime. Associate it more with a man.” [Mary Cavendish] „not in case of poisoning” (Christie, *Styles* 8), adds to the discussion the beautiful and mysterious Mary Cavendish, one of the temporary suspects. Ugliness and morality, beauty and crime go hand in hand.

Nowhere is this axiom more readily visible than in the two utterly hardboiled novels included in the analysis: in *The Big Sleep* and *The Maltese Falcon* most of the characters are involved in crime, therefore none of them is devoid of a certain degree of charm or intensely gendered beauty. Even if we know from popular literary history that Raymond Chandler had consciously modeled his language and narrative technique on Hammett’s earlier successful text, the similarities for example in the construction of female figures are nevertheless

striking. That's how Philip Marlowe in *The Big Sleep* describes his female counterpart in cheating and courage, Vivian Sternwood, after they leave Eddie's roulette salon: "We sipped our loaded coffee. I looked at Vivian's face in the mirror back of the coffee urn. It was taut, pale, beautiful and wild. Her lips were red and harsh" (Chandler, *Big* 105). Power, wildness and red lips are features which reappear with reference to the main grifter in Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, Brigid O'Shaughnessy, who succeeds in double-crossing and diverting the famous Sam Spade several times: "She was tall and pliantly slender, without angularity anywhere. Her body was erect and high-breasted, her legs long, her hands and feet narrow. She wore two shades of blue that have been selected because of her eyes. The hair curling from under her blue hat was darkly red, her full lips more brightly red" (Hammett 6).

The strength and power that conventionally ravishing heterosexual feminine appearance confers on women become even more emphasized if asserted and recognized not only by men, at whom these are basically directed, but by "less fortunate" women as well. One of the most honest female characters in the crime fiction gallery analyzed in this thesis is Effie Perine, Sam Spade's "boyish" secretary, who no doubt equals most of the male figures appearing in his boss' way. Actually, she is verbally turned into a man by Spade – the highest compliment a woman may receive in the masculine universe of chase after crime – in the most ardent moment of Captain Jacobi's death on the floor of Spade's detective agency room: "He took his hand from his chin and rubbed her cheek. "You're a damned good man, sister," he said and went out" (Hammett 165). With this circumstance also considered, the words of Effie Perine count twice as strongly versus all appearances and her fascination with Brigid seems to be one of the main reasons for Sam Spade's growing involvement in the search for the statuette of the Maltese falcon⁵⁶. In this context the opinion she voices about one of Spade's married mistresses, Iva Archer, is a forcefully valid statement referring to the value of female beauty in crime fiction: "You know I think she's a louse, but I'd be a louse too if it would give me a body like hers" (Hammett 29).

Immoral corruptness is not too high price for a good (female) body in Hammett's system of coordinates; however, this reappears as a serious obstacle in man and woman

⁵⁶ No better way to illustrate this statement than quoting a long conversation between Effie and Spade:

"You're an invaluable angel. How's your woman's intuition today?"

"Why?"

"What do you think of Wonderly?"

"I'm for her," the girl replied without hesitation.

"She's got too many names," Spade mused, "Wonderly, Leblanc, and she says the right one's O'Shaughnessy."

"I don't care if she's got all the names in the phone-book. That girl is all right, and you know it."

"I wonder." Spade blinked sleepily at Effie Perine. He chuckled. "Anyway, she's given up seven hundred smacks in two days, and that's all right."

Effie Perine sat up straight and said: "Sam, if that girl's in trouble and you let her down, or take advantage of it to bleed her, I'll never forgive you, never have any respect for you, as long as I live" (Hammett 44).

bonding in Chandler's more virtuous *The Big Sleep*. Carmen Sternwood, the younger daughter of Marlowe's client, could be characterized as the "Big Sleep louse", and she is offered what she deserves: scorn instead of light love affair with the detecting hero. During Carmen's naked visit in his apartment, while she is trying to turn the detective knight into her obedient servant, Marlowe wonders: "It's so hard for women – even nice women – to realize that their bodies are not irresistible. (...). The imprint of her head was still in the pillow, of her small corrupt body still on the sheets" (Chandler, *Big* 112-113). Female beauty and bodily charm, as feminist criticism argues, are double-edged weapons which at once impress men and disadvantage women, or to say it differently: the "feminine" is simultaneously (over)valued and devalued. Nevertheless, the sheer nature of rejection is rarely as pronounced as in Chandler's well known novel: "You can have a hangover from other things than alcohol. I had one from women. Women made me sick" (Chandler, *Big* 113).

The obvious and radical difference between Hammett's and Chandler's criminal universe constructed in gendered terms can be most elegantly highlighted if the outcomes of the quests are compared: Spade and Brigid remain "even", with the narratorial voice openly acknowledging that Miss O'Shaughnessy must pay since she is the most helpless and lonesome among Gutman's gang⁵⁷. Spade's decision to hand her over to the police confers an elegiac, sad tone on the ending, especially if we refer back to the final discussion between Effie and Spade:

He raised his head, grinned, and said mockingly: "So much for your woman's intuition."

Her voice was as queer as the expression on her face. "You did that, Sam, to her?"

He nodded. "Your Sam's a detective." He looked sharply at her. He put his arm around her waist, his hand on her hip. "She did kill Miles, angel," he said gently, "offhand, like that." (...)

She escaped from his arm as if it had hurt her. "Don't, please, don't touch me," she said brokenly. "I know – I know you're right. You're right. But don't touch me now – not now."

Spade's face became pale as his collar. (Hammett 225)

⁵⁷During the final meeting in Spade's apartment Brigid's described reactions enforce this appreciation: "The appearance of Gutman and his companions seemed to have robbed her of that freedom of personal movement and emotion that is animal, leaving her alive, conscious, but quiescent as a plant" (Hammett 178).

In contrast, in Chandler's *The Big Sleep* it is the least contoured one, Agnes, who wins the game from among the various female criminals, although at the price of authorial (narratorial) disapproval uttered in Marlowe's voice: "The sound of its motor died and, and with it blonde Agnes wiped herself off the slate for good, as far as I was concerned. Three men dead, Geiger, Brody, and Harry Jones, and the woman went riding off in the rain with my two hundred in her bag and not a mark on her" (Chandler, *Big* 129).

All these examples prove that these pieces of crime fiction may be fruitfully questioned for an interest in female behavior, not to mention the attention paid to "modern" women – no matter if their fashionable outlook or progressive views are considered. This finding supports the proposition advanced at the start of this subchapter: while it may prove futile to argue for the modernist nature of crime prose written simultaneously with this high artistic canon since the genre's "hermeneutic" ingredient has far too small a part in this respect, the "cultural" component concretized in gender relations and images is a rich mine which deserves our attention.

5.3. "My city, my game"⁵⁸: the men

The first victim in Christie's *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* is an old lady, Emily Inglethorp, who runs her household with an energetic hand, and it is in connection with her figure that the mysterious link between women and money is most boldly established. „Mrs. Cavendish, however, was a lady who liked to make her own plans, and expected other people to fall in with them, and in this case she certainly had the whip hand, namely: the purse strings" (Christie, *Styles* 3). In spite of her material inclination and pragmatic attitude, the current Mrs. Emily Inglethorp is not able to break free from another handicap in women's life, which Hastings summarizes in the following manner: „Ladies were not always very well versed in legal knowledges" (Christie, *Styles* 131). This feature also appears in connection with Mildred Pierce, which suggests that women figures in crime fiction in general suffer from this "legal deficiency", supporting Susan Rowland's argument referring to the genre itself:

Crime fiction is the *other* of the powers of legal institutions to *represent* crime to the culture. (...) There is always 'more to it' than legal institutions can represent, so crime fiction comes to answer that excessive desire by evolving an aesthetic form.

⁵⁸The words are uttered by Sam Spade to Gutman during their final meeting: "This is my city and my game" (Hammett 183).

(...) In this sense we could suggest that detective fiction is structurally gendered as feminine. (Rowland 17)

If crime fiction itself may be regarded as „structurally gendered feminine” in opposition to the “real world” masculine legal system, it is easily understood why men may enter this universe only at the risk of serious losses. We can think of the leading detective figures, but Cain’s *Mildred Pierce* also presents an array of financially, morally or psychically bankrupt men. Alison Light explains this characteristic of Golden Age crime fiction by referring „out” to the cruel existential experience of the First World War, and to the birth of aggressive masculinity as a possible role model. Susan Rowland rounds up the argument in the following manner: “Protagonists such as the spherical, obsessively neat Hercule Poirot (...) and hysterical Wimsey both seem feminised, creating an ambivalence about gender which moves away from pre-war styles of male heroism” (Rowland 19).

In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* the narrator, Captain Hastings is addressed as „our wounded hero” (5), while Hercule Poirot is described as “a funny little man, a great dandy, but wonderfully clever” (7). Lord Peter Wimsey, the aristocrat amateur sleuth appears for the first time in Sayers’ novel mentioned here and he resembles a star rather than a man of action: “presently Lord Peter roamed in, moist and verberna-scented, in a bath-robe cheerfully patterned with unnaturally variegated peacocks” (Sayers 63). Funny as Lord Peter might be in his peacock-patterned robe, he still seems to attract the attention of women around him – all the more as we already know that these surrounding women should be intent on marriage. “He was wealthy and could do as he chose, and it gave me a certain amount of sardonic entertainment to watch the efforts of post-war feminine London to capture him” (Sayers 189), says one of his uncles in the post-script to the novel. Ironically enough, it is again Lord Peter who utters one of the most fundamental truths about sex/sexuality governing criminal deeds: “hell know no fury like a woman scorned. (...) Sex is every man’s loco sport – you needn’t fidget, you know it’s true – he’ll take a disappointment, but not a humiliation” (Sayers 148). Simplistic and commonplace as this sentence may seem, it points to the fact that the crime genre (too) is heavily dependent on the game circumscribed by (mainly) heterosexual conduct, with a large amount of criminal deeds motivated by “sex”, besides money, hate or chance.

An even more convincing example of “disadvantaged” figures is another male character from Sayers’ novel: „Mr. Alfred Tipps was a small, nervous man, whose flaxen hair was beginning to abandon the unequal struggle with destiny” (Sayers 11). This “unequal struggle” with destiny ruins the life of male characters in crime fiction and gives space for

women to perform petty jobs, go on husband-hunting and have material success: “She [Mildred] had little to say about love, fidelity, or morals. She talked about money, and his failure to find work (...)” (Cain 7). It is not accidental that Mildred’s almost masculine reaction to her husband’s fall from business success could not have originated in a Golden Age classical whodunit but only in a 1940s hardboiled novel. After all, a difference of at least ten years is a long period for any type of writing intent on documenting change in society, besides recreating the genre’s severe structure. We must not ignore the difference between British and American “crime variants” either as an explanatory detail not considered fully here.

A further argument which supports the possibility and the need of separating the “hermeneutic” and the “cultural” ingredients in crime fiction is provided by Steven Marcus when he presents an observation linking Dashiell Hammett’s written hardboiled universe to (then) contemporary historical reality:

Yet for ten years he was able to do what almost no other writer in this genre has ever done so well—he was able to really write, to construct a vision of a world in words, to know that the writing was about the real world and referred to it and was part of it; and at the same time he was able to be self-consciously aware that the whole thing was problematical and about itself and “only” writing as well. (Marcus 209)

Thus texts by Sayers or Christie obviously obey different rules than those by Cain, Hammett or Chandler, which consciously opposed the “feminine”, “ladylike” atmosphere of the former. In *The Maltese Falcon* gang leader Gutman tells the (temporary) sacrificial lamb, Wilmer: “(...) if you lose a son it’s possible to get another – and there’s only one Maltese falcon.” (Hammett 201), summing up the perverse system of values which governs this (crime fictional) universe, so different from the always clear-cut morality present in the classical variants. *The Maltese Falcon* (and to a degree *The Big Sleep* as well) apparently has the same structure as a classical whodunit: in the first eighteen chapters we get a pure descriptive version of the events, while in the second part we are offered clues and explanations to the apparently illogical happenings. What is certainly different from a Poirot or Holmes-type of story is the epistemological validity of the chief detective’s knowledge: he, in this case Sam Spade, only has guesses about the true nature of events, and the more perfect version is offered by one of the perpetrators, Gutman himself. In this sense, in Hammett’s world, the detective cannot know more than those who actually committed the crimes – unless he succeeds in making the criminals confess.

In this crime world male behavior displays some patterns that are different from those that we have encountered in Sayers or Christie – while it is also true that it is hardboiled crime fiction which presents the least “manly” men, if men are to be defined by heterosexual fascination. Here we must mention the memorable character of Joel Cairo from Hammett’s novel, a “queer fairy” positioned in the conversation below in relation to Brigid and Spade, the two “staples” of gendered world in *The Maltese Falcon*:

“I know two men I’m afraid of and I’ve seen both of them tonight.”

“I can understand your being afraid of Cairo,” Spade said. “He’s out of your reach.”

“And you aren’t?”

“Not that way,” he said, and grinned. (Hammett 90)

We cannot close this analysis of gender representations in some of the most well known titles of both classical and hardboiled crime fiction without a sketchy portrait of two of the brave men out in the streets, Chandler’s Philip Marlowe and Hammett’s Sam Spade. Even if a clear differentiation between them is hard to perform due to their being impersonated most memorably on screen by Humphrey Bogart, an interesting detail perhaps is of great help in this respect, a detail which is obviously related to the two authors’ technique of writing and representation. While hardly any information is offered about Marlowe’s physical appearance and clothing – if we ignore his meeting with infantile Carmen Sternwood – Spade is portrayed with minute eagerness: “[Spade] He took off his pajamas. The smooth thickness of his arms, legs, and body, the sag of his big rounded shoulders, made his body like a bear’s. It was like a shaved bear’s: his chest was hairless. His skin was childishly soft and pink” (Hammett 14). Visibly not a beauty king, yet someone who is best in his job of observation and search as the below quotation attests, describing the night Spade, Cairo, Brigid, Dundy and Polhaus spend in Spade’s apartment: “[Brigid] looked at Spade again. He did not in any way respond to the appeal in her eyes. He leaned against the door-frame and observed the occupants of the room with the polite detached air of a disinterested spectator” (Hammett 77).

“Disinterested spectator” is an explicit mismatch for Philip Marlowe, as he becomes involved in every possible mode in and with the case he is researching in *The Big Sleep*. Let us consider one of his conversations with Vivian Sternwood:

‘(...) I don’t mind your ritzing me or drinking your lunch out of a Scotch bottle. I don’t mind your showing me your legs. They’re very swell legs and it’s a pleasure to make their acquaintance. I don’t mind if you don’t like my manners. (...)’

(...). I snicked a match on my thumbnail and for once it lit. I puffed smoke into the air and waited. 'I loathe masterful men,' she said. 'I simply loathe them.' (Chandler, *Big* 14)

Marlowe is both masterful and cruel⁵⁹, to be situated on the opposite pole of Hercule Poirot's or Lord Wimsey's sexless eccentricity.

5.4. A "Victorian sink"

When wishing to construct an alternative understanding of the "modern" in the mass cultural genre of crime and detective fiction by an analysis of gender(ed) models taken as examples of its "cultural" ingredient, one cannot ignore the figure of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. As Marion Shaw and Susan Wanacker demonstrate in their book about the elderly lady detective, Jane Marple's emergence as a literary character had an obvious historical/circumstantial reason: the growth of female population since the Victorian era, with the number of spinsters and widows constantly rising⁶⁰. Thus, Miss Marple is obviously a good example for the Kermodian "cultural" ingredient concerning the reaction of detective fiction to historical/social developments in the outer world. At the same time, she can also be seen as an outstanding negation of most conventions as far as the construction of female characters in detective fiction goes⁶¹. However, based on Christie's *The Body in the Library*, we can state that even this pioneer woman detective supports stereotypes of feminine behavior in crime fiction. Yet with a sensibility to changes in gendered conduct being present as well, we must be careful with progressive criticism aimed at Christie or detective fiction as such. This leaves us with the suggestion already made, namely that the mass cultural genre analyzed partakes of the great project of the "modern", even if in a mode that is different from the accepted and acclaimed anti-mimetic, anti-formalist modernist algorithm and poetics.

Miss Marple's share in detection is quite small in *The Body in the Library*, with several processes of investigation going on: Colonel Melchett and the police represent the official side, Sir Henry Clithering is the male amateur sleuth involved because one of the parties suspected solicits him, and finally the Dolly Bantry/ Jane Marple duo enter the game

⁵⁹See Vivian's words addressed to Marlowe, discussing the (previous) murders: "'That makes you just a killer at heart, like all cops.' 'Oh, nuts.' 'One of those dark deadly quiet men who have no more feelings than a butcher has for slaughtered meat. I knew it the first time I saw you'" (Chandler, *Big* 106).

⁶⁰"Christie's creation of Miss Marple must be seen against this background of social and literary concern with the spinster. Indeed, the whole range of Christie's detective fiction shows an astute awareness of the circumstances and range of spinster life and she includes many unmarried women in her novels apart from Miss Marple herself" (Shaw-Wanacker 41).

⁶¹"(...) Christie achieved this grand democratization of the genre by exploiting prejudices against women (that their lives are trivial) and against the old (that they are foolish and tiresome)" (Shaw-Wanacker 34).

totally at random, thanks to the famous body which appears one morning in the Bantrys' library room. Still, this randomness is to be expected as in the prefatory note to the novel the writer clearly defines her task, with the reader having nothing to do but follow her achievement: "I laid down for myself certain conditions. The library in question must be a highly orthodox and conventional library. The body, on the other hand, must be a wildly improbable and highly sensational body" (Christie, *Body* 7).

Convention and tradition versus sensation and change thus become the meta-themes of this novel, with the nice spinsterish Miss Marple confronting a half-naked, most provocative young female body⁶². The latter is connoted by such conventional markers of display and surface beauty as "elaborate hair curls", "heavily made up face", "mascara", and "blood-red finger and toe-nails", not to speak about the "satin dress" and the "silver sandals". Obviously, she is all wrong in the fully respectable context of a village family library, yet Miss Marple (and the voice of Agatha Christie through her) attributes this feature to another reason: "[t]he hands were wrong, somehow, and I couldn't at first think *why*. (...) The dress was [also] *all* wrong'" (Christie, *Body* 202). As it turns out in the course of detection, the fact that the nails have been clipped is a trace left by the careless murderers, as is the dress, which is an old, worn one instead of being a new, shiny piece of clothing. Thus Miss Marple's eager eyes qualify the dead girl not on moral, but on purely logical grounds⁶³, however the constant opposition between the lady detective's respectability and the degradation of young women is sustained throughout the novel. Referring to one of the suspect girls in the case, the "platinum-blond from London at Basil Blake's", Miss Marple declares: "[a]nd all these girls with their make-up and their hair and their nails look so alike'" (Christie, *Body* 29). One can hardly find a greater sin within the coordinates of detective and crime fiction than the serialized similarity of modern age commodification, especially in relation to the human body (and, by extension, to human identity).

By linking tweed-costumed Miss Marple to successful detection and satin-dressed defiant modern girls to murder and sin, Christie performs two of her tasks with one gesture: she recreates the stiff structure of her chosen narrative genre through a normative definition of gendered behaviour(s). Thus we cannot overlook the conservative stance concerning change

⁶² "The whole [library] room was dim and mellow and casual. It spoke of long occupation and familiar use and of links with tradition.

And across the old bearskin hearthrug there was sprawled something new and crude and melodramatic. The flamboyant figure of a girl. A girl with unnaturally fair hair dressed up off her face in elaborate curls and rings. Her thin body was dressed in a backless evening-dress of white spangled satin. The face was heavily made-up, the powder standing out grotesquely on its blue swollen surface, the mascara of the lashes lying thickly on the distorted cheeks, the scarlet of the lips looking like a gash. The finger-nails were enamelled in a deep blood—red and so were the toenails in their cheap silver sandal shoes. It was a cheap, tawdry, flamboyant figure — most incongruous in the solid old-fashioned comfort of Colonel Bantry's library" (Christie, *Body* 22).

⁶³ The "feminine" universe of bodily experience may be considered a facilitating element in this process.

in female fashion and appearance, a change conditioned by the process of Euro-American modernization. However, such a conscious appropriation of a contemporary social phenomenon attests the possibility of reading *The Body in the Library* in the spirit of Calinescu and Felski's understanding of the "modern" as a new attitude towards change and temporality. However, this is a double-edged method – as far as the representation of change in female roles is concerned – since the agreement with the phenomenon of change is not complete – in the spirit of Shaw and Wanacker's statement:

Cora Kaplan suggests that this fondness for the criminal woman is an aspect of Christie's anti-feminism; like the other Queens of Crime, she takes delight in a punitive portrayal of ambitious and sexually manipulative women as a major threat to the settled society the conservative ideology of the novels seeks to preserve. Women crime writers, Kaplan suggests, have in general been 'at worst explicitly anti-feminist and at best highly ambivalent about any disruption of traditional gender relations' (Kaplan, 1986: 18). (Shaw-Wanacker 81-2)

Similarly to the restriction of feminine role possibilities in the texts of women writers of detective fiction, the symbolic terrain of thinking and representation is also (deeply) gendered according to (a) patriarchal heterosexual matrix. Miss Marple's method of thinking and detection is an explicitly and utterly "feminized" one, not the least because it is constantly discussed and presented in the dialogue of Miss Marple's male counterparts in detection. Sir Henry Clithering and Mr. Jefferson, one of the parties involved in the case, have the following conversation:

'Downstairs in the lounge, by the third pillar from the left, there sits an old lady with a sweet, placid, spinsterish face, and a mind that has plumbed the depths of human iniquity and taken it as all in the day's work. (...)

'Woman's intuition, I suppose,' he [Jefferson] said skeptically.

'No, she doesn't call it that. Specialized knowledge is her claim.' (Christie, *Body* 125-6)

Miss Marple's mode of detection emerges as one worthy of appreciation, nevertheless inscribed in a sphere where the male observers seemingly don't have access. That criticism also sees the algorithm of Miss Marple's search as belonging to a "female" universe by token of her relying on gossip, trivia and analogies employed as metaphors (as opposed to

“masculine” thinking relying on causal-metonymic chains) further contributes to and enhances the gender-system devised by Agatha Christie.

At the end of novel and of the successful quest for the perpetrators Miss Marple characterizes herself in an interesting manner: “ [m]y nephew Raymond tells me (in fun, of course, and quite affectionately) that I have a mind like a *sink*. He says that most Victorians have. All I can say is that the Victorians knew a good deal about human nature” (Christie, *Body* 263). That Miss Marple herself constructs the qualities of “tradition/not changing” and “quick evolution” in relation to her person as a “Victorian sink”, respectively the chief suspect female character in *The Body in the Library* as a “girl who looks alike all the other ones” is again a successful pattern where depth and surface⁶⁴, or tradition and modern(ization) appear as the two poles of a latent dichotomy.

My proposition that mass culture and the crime genre could be attributed an alternative “modern” nature is thus enforced by the fact that Miss Marple’s mode of detection and comprehension is informed by a touch of modernization and a sense of change. And even if criticism uttered from a feminist standpoint has valid qualifications, we cannot and must not overlook those segments in *The Body in the Library* and Golden Age crime fiction in general which simultaneously attest an awareness of change and a reluctant acceptance of “modernité”⁶⁵. By arguing for such a differentiation we have also introduced a claim that is going to gain particular importance in one of the later chapters: namely that feminist criticism is an integral component of postmodernism/postmodernity, a next system of ideas and a period which has allowed for the deconstruction of the preceding paradigm of the “modern”.

Recurrent “obsessions” of these texts – the essence of true femininity/masculinity, the nature of foreignness – link them to mainstream literary historical modernism, yet poetical features signal a different allegiance. A relational attitude towards change(s) in gendered and ethnic identities is easily identified in these novels and I propose to consider them “modern” on this basis rather than trying to find high modernist poetical qualities in them. Pointing out the different features of these novels which may be considered “modern” is important not only in itself, but also because of the generic historical consequences: many postmodern(ist) crime novels and films reach back and relate themselves to this mass cultural variant in modernity rather than to the elitist discourse of modernism. This means that we have to

⁶⁴ Rita Felski’s formulation is even more explicit in this respect: “(...) a more general questioning of the authentic self within a culture increasingly shaped by the logic of technological reproduction and commodity aesthetics” (Felski 98).

⁶⁵ The words Marlowe utters in *The Big Sleep* with reference to the Cypress Club are particularly telling in this respect: “The room had been a ballroom once and Eddie Mars had changed it only as much as his business compelled him. No chromium glitter, no indirect lighting from behind angular cornices, no fused glass pictures, or chairs in violent leather and polished metal tubing, none of the pseudo-modernistic circus of the typical Hollywood night trap” (Chandler, *Big* 96).

account for a multi-channeled process of cultural and paradigm-change, generic works having their specific itinerary. As Alison Light writes of her exemplary methodology: “[r]ather than setting ‘highbrow’ against ‘lowbrow’, the serious against the merely escapist or trashy, I am drawn to look for what is shared and common across these forms in the inter-war years, and to see them all as historically meaningful” (Light x).

Chapter 4

MEANING AND MURDER IN A POSTMODERN SETTING

AMIS, TENNANT AND PALAHNIUK

Continuing the line of thought, I proceed with the analysis of what may count as “postmodernist” crime fiction, while also hoping to support two of the general claims summarized in the introductory chapter.

First, that mass literary genres effective in the period of modernity and simultaneously with the modernist canon are being reappropriated – to various ends – with the onset of the postmodernist poetics in prose fiction categorized as or bordering on high art. The formula and features of the detective and crime novel reappear in quite specific settings, thus we may say that the “dismantling” of readers’ expectations as far as the mystery and crime genre is concerned constitutes the overarching theme of this chapter. A particular case of canonical change between mass culture and its more valorized counterpart, this context also explains why these authorial names gained inclusion into the analyzed corpus. Martin Amis, Louise Welsh, Chuck Palahniuk and Emma Tennant are signifiers with resonance in professional and/or high artistic communities, while other contemporary crime writers, such as Elmore Leonard or James Ellroy hardly have succeeded (or even attempted to) in crossing the “great divide”. This statement is also true for the contemporary arthouse thrillers and their directors analyzed in subsequent chapters, as – in spite of all types of concessions made to mass cultural clichés – neither David Lynch nor Christopher Nolan may be apostrophized as mass cultural movie icons. This, perhaps annoyingly meticulous attention devoted to canonical allegiances, otherwise, is a must and a “blind spot” of the dissertation, postulated exactly upon the existence and the changes of the differently positioned cultural canons when arguing for “the postmodernization” of the crime genre.

The second claim the demonstration of which should also emerge as the chapter advances refers to the attention and space devoted to mediation and traces as such, a basic characteristic of the genre, but which evolves in a surprising direction along the axis linking the modernist to the postmodernist canons. This is the idea that I consider to be one of the major claims of the dissertation: namely, that the recognition that the represented is being

killed at once with its subjection to technologies of (mass) representation is intensifying as the crime genre undergoes the process of postmodernization. Verbal and oral mediation also become “suspect” besides pictorial and filmic variants, thus the analyses that follow are unearthing modes of the narratorial voices being destabilized in different phases of the detection and with the help of various representational technologies. To the larger theme of destabilizing oral mediation/narration we may relate the cases of fictional characters disappearing, dissolving from the processes of quest mostly activated by them, a question also considered in detail below.

Besides these two general claims, by including analyses of gendered identities in the readings, the chapter is meant to illustrate the statement that the analytical perspective of gender is a fundamentally necessary one if wishing to discern such historical differences as those between the modern and the postmodern.

1. 1. *Other People*: Reading Mary.

The interpretation of crime/detection novels and films along the time-line historically linking modernism to postmodernism has led to the insight that the hero in quest dissolves and becomes imperceptible to an increasing degree. It is as if the unwritten golden rule of detection – see and hear without being seen or heard – started to materialize, slowly but steadily. The different novels and films succeed in concretizing such an abstract idea in very different ways, and among them perhaps the most explicit and down-to-earth variant is that of Martin Amis: „ (...) it occurred to her exhaustedly that she could probably walk among them as she pleased (for what is was worth), that indeed she was condemned to move among the living without any notice at all” (23). These are the thoughts of Amy/Mary, uttered in the moment when – in a situation very similar to that of the dark heroine in *Mullholland Drive*, namely the occasion of her choosing the name of Rita Hayworth thanks to the film poster she sees in the bathroom – she decides to adopt the name “Mary Lamb”, having heard the nursery rhyme in the circle of the tramps. The reader can never be quite sure about the existential status of Mary: based on the broken discourse of the first-person narrator Prince, we could even classify her as a stubborn illusion, the shadow of a formerly vivid and aggressive woman who has been murdered by one of her lovers⁶⁶.

⁶⁶My interpretation is in many ways similar to the one advanced by Richard Todd :“*Other People* presents, in the awakening consciousness of the resonantly-named Mary Lamb (there are connotations of both nursery-rhyme innocence and the matricidal insanity of Charles Lamb’s twin sister), what may be a nightmarish afterworld in which she is a resurrected murder victim, named Amy Hide in a previous existence; however, in a characteristic surprise ending Amis makes it uncertain as to whether what we have experienced in *Other People* is an afterlife so much as a time-warp, reversal or simply hiccup, during which Amy has lost her reason and identity, and after which life begins as normal again. The problem is rendered still more complex by the presence of a clue-planting

Other People is founded on a writer's game, or more precisely an experiment of miming verbally and through the narrative technique the perfect state of having lost one's identity/subjectivity – namely amnesia –, then slowly re-gaining (re-giving) its contours as memory seeps back. The subject-object of the experiment is a dark-haired, beautiful woman by the pre/-post-amnesia name of Amy Hide and the amnesia-name of Mary Lamb, whose trajectory starts with an escape from the hospital and continues with the different lifestyles a penniless, meek female must go through until slowly being „given” back the memory she has been lacking all along.

Mary/Amy's adventures in a grim, unfriendly, metaphysical London are narrated by a third person, seemingly omniscient narrator, who frequently employs the method of free indirect speech – as if perpetrating over Mary, the verbal and narrative construct, the (same) acts of violence that she must bear from men around her in the story. This voice is assisted by a first-person, even more domineering narrator, who seems to be a direct representative of the authorial intention – judged by the degree of consciousness and clarity s/he manifests in relation to the story⁶⁷. At the end of chapter 11, when Mary has already known several human communities more or less open to her – the tramps at the city periphery, the alcoholic, unemployed Botham family, the asylum for (fallen) women and finally the squat of Alan and Russ – this bodiless, featureless voice declares: “I want Mary out of this. I want her out of this whole risk-area of clinks and clinics and shop-queues, of hostels and borstals and homes full of mad women” (Amis 106).

Several clues suggest that this first-person „voice” may be identified with the character called John Prince, who, interestingly, is always presented through the scattered prisms of Mary/Amy's consciousness, and seems to be the policeman investigating the case of the disappearing Amy Hide and of the appearance out of nowhere of „simple” Mary Lamb. John Prince is sensed by Mary/Amy as an all-knowing, all-encompassing, evil eye, yet the reader cannot dismiss his role as a rescuer who intervenes in our heroine's convoluted life-path exactly in the moments when (seemingly) there is not too much hope for her. From this perspective John Prince clearly has common features with that of the first person authorial voice, inasmuch as they are the ones who decide the next step in Amy/Mary's life⁶⁸.

detective, John Prince, who may or may not have been related to Amy Hide, and by the presence of a voice (is it the author's?) who begins the narrative with the words: “I didn't want to have to do it to her” (Amis 1981:9)” (Todd 132).

⁶⁷ “Even his [Martin Amis'] omniscient narrators are self-conscious, individualized characters aware of their roles as fiction-makers. Like his first-person narrators, they speak directly to the reader, implicate the reader in the imaginative process” (Diedrick 7-8).

⁶⁸ For example, it is difficult not to read the opening lines of chapter 2, “Everybody's Queer” as offering the meta-analysis of the first-order story we have been reading – besides conveying the thoughts of a guardian following Amy/Mary's running amok: “Of course, the initial stage is always the most difficult in a case like this.

Amis's novel responds to (at least) two interpretative keys, Mary being at once an amnesiac girl trying to come to terms with her damaged self-identity and a sign for the verbal construct – the novel itself. Thus every building block that adjusts Mary, the heroine to the lives she enters also attests to the functioning of the novelistic construct itself, giving the narrative of search a most noble aim, that of “assembling” the novel read: “Each word she recognized gave her the sense of being restored, minutely solidified, as if damaged tissue were being welded back on her like honey-cells” (Amis 40).

Mary/Amy's obsession with the complex world of other people, their houses, their ways of life and their choices generates a defamiliarizing, mock-childish or mock-savage point of view, yet effective in constituting a double quest. While Prince/the first-person narrator is chasing Amy/Mary – both in the “real” sense of a policeman pursuing an amnesiac girl possibly enmeshed in several criminal acts and the “imaginary” one of “an author in search of his/her character” –, the girl is detecting an entity much greater and harder to discern: the surrounding world as such. The introductory pages try to simulate the thinking of Mary Lamb, the way she – or any person recovering from a period of unconsciousness – perceives the world not in a pragmatic, abstract manner, but on the level of momentary flashes and unconnected impressions. Yet this does not mean that the narration is devoid of an authoritative focus and a „literary” style, rather the events in the life of poor Mary Lamb are intercalated into long passages of description – like the most illustrative one of the „six kinds of other people”. This one and a half page (16-7) can be considered the founding myth of Amis's novel, in so far as it constructs the basic dividing lines in the world, as well as the deep difference between Mary and all the other people outside, assembled in a Borges-like inventory:

People of the first kind were men. (...) People of the second kind were less worrying; they were shrunken, compacted – mysteriously lessened in some vital respect. (...) The third kind resembled the first kind quite closely except at the top and the bottom; their legs were often unprotected, and they skillfully tiptoed on the arched curves of their elaborated devices (I must be one of them, she thought ...). (Amis 17)

All the (everyday) abilities and skills that Amy/Mary discovers and can perform in spite of her apparent simplicity, not to say retarded nature – “Mary peered through the glass sheen and discovered she could read.” (31) – are symptoms of her identity beginning to

I'm pleased actually. No, I am. We've got phase one over with, and she has survived quite creditably. Between ourselves, this isn't my style at all really. The choice wasn't truly mine, although I naturally exercise a degree of control” (Amis 21).

function, whereas the help of Prince (and Sharon) will be useless if this is the case. As the text advances, Mary becomes more and more efficient in deciphering the system of reality around her, and this is also the success of the narration, of creating the “possible world”. Yet, paradoxically, this also means the inevitable end of the detecting process as such. In this sense *Other People: a Mystery Story* imposes upon the police procedural the purely epistemological (and, in some respects, even ontological) endeavour of getting to know and understand a shapeless and meaningless reality around us. Therefore it confuses the commonsense statement that narratives of detection and pursuing crime are among the purest models of the methods a society uses to construct their symbolic and imaginary systems– by arresting the otherwise so comfortable process of allegorization. Thus I agree with James Diedrick when he writes that

[t]he subtitle of *Other People* suggests a kinship with one of the most enduring popular genres, but fans of Agatha Christie and other conventional mystery writers are in for some surprises. The reader is the only detective at work in *Other People*, and the literal mystery of Mary Lamb’s identity and fate is finally less important than the philosophical puzzles the novel pursues. (Diedrick 53)

1.2. Readjustments, in a gendered mode

The story of Mary Lamb is that of a single woman in a male-dominated, patriarchal society, where powerful men assault women, the heroine herself being dragged in instances of rape⁶⁹. The narrative voices – both first and third person – are sympathetic towards her sufferings, as is obvious from the episodes at the Church-Army Hostel for Young Women, an asylum where only the fallen gain entrance. Yet the evolution of Amy/Mary as a subjectivity and as a textual construct is heading towards a more and more functional, shrewd and conquering womanhood. She is gradually learning the secrets of appearances/looks, the uses of her body, and she becomes aware of her influence over men around her, this process leading to the elimination of the amnesiac patch in her memory.

Others remember Mary Lamb’s original, Amy Hide, as a predatory femme fatale, and her odyssey through the novel is a self-enclosing circle, leading back to this strong female figure, which, in every respect, corresponds to male fantasies. That’s how Michael Shane, one of Amy’s former lovers, describes her: “‘She was tremendous to be near (...). Wild as hell, of

⁶⁹ This trajectory of Mary might be considered as a kind of Inferno in her existence, where/while she is being punished for her previously committed sins. However, punishment in the guise of repeated instances of rape and humiliation of womanhood could be “accepted” as just if the reader was presented with the tremendous fault(s) of beautiful, seductive Amy Hide. If the punishment was intended as a “metaphysical” one, it needn’t be so specifically centered on the protagonist’s feminine gender.

course. *Very* passionate. (...) There aren't really many ways for people to behave badly. It's quite a limited field really. They can taunt you and fuck other people and get drunk and vicious and so on. She did that a lot" (Amis 145)⁷⁰.

It is at the end of chapter 7 that the mysterious antecedents of Mary Lamb's life reveal themselves, in a letter she gets from John Prince while in the women's asylum. At this point the reader may rearrange the loose narrative discourse and the disparate elements thanks to the description below, as well as a photograph attached to it:

There were more words. They described a girl called Amy Hide (26, 5'7", Dark, Brit., None), who had recently become a missing person. The police thought she had been murdered, but they didn't seem to be absolutely sure. Mary picked up the top half of the letter. She turned it over. There was a photograph of a girl. It was Mary. (Amis 77)

This technique of withholding essential information from the reader and not communicating it until the hero/ine is in the position of discovering it creates a state of uncertainty and a loss of our "hermeneutic" orientation capacities, in a manner not unlike in the novel and film *Fight Club* or the movie *Memento*.

Even if Amis's novel does not indulge in exploiting the possibilities representational media offer for the crime genre, in the crucial moment of Mary's identity being assigned it is the visual sign of a photograph that emerges. Her obvious resemblance to the police "representation" is supported (for the reader, of course) by the recognition of Amy/Mary by several persons she meets, for example Augusta in Jamie's flat, or even Michael Shane, the television star, who does not claim that they are one and the same person, yet the differences he mentions are superficial and superfluous (or rather essentially relevant?) ones: "Ah—the hands are different. Amy had white hands, lazy hands. The eyes are different too. Colour's the same, but they're different" (143). Meanwhile the "missing person" photograph of Amy Hide serves as a touchstone for the awakening Mary, influencing the "faith" of the reader as well: "Mary's face—Mary believed, Mary liked to think—was a good face, the face of somebody good. But the face of the girl in the photograph (...)" (Amis 78). By this most literal construction of the split personality Amis inserts his novel into the series of Doppelgänger-

⁷⁰Gavin, the son of the Bothams, in whose house Mary finds shelter for the first time after entering the sphere of "other people" is an openly queer character, and a humorous one at the same time: "I know a man who's queerer than me. He only likes Spanish waiters" (Amis 54), he confesses to Mary. Yet his role in the narrative is far from central, and the capacity of such a figure for disrupting the oppressing institution of heterosexuality or macho masculinity – instances that we can see in *Fight Club* or *The Maltese Falcon* – remains unexplored in Amis's text.

stories, but he also differentiates it from this tradition since the motif is totally devoid of romantic wickedness and mysterious background – thanks to the simple-minded focalizer figure of Mary Lamb. “Mary looked for news in the mirror. She played the mirror game. Mary Lamb was getting to know Amy Hide quite well now” (Amis 80).

1.3. Connection by memory

One of the main preoccupations of Mary – as far as we can understand from the monologues “quoted” – is her relationship to an imaginary past, or rather the (im)possibility of her ever having a functional memory. This is a feature common with a large proportion of the generic texts analyzed: in the loosest sense the object and stake of the search is an eternally elusive past, and the detecting protagonists are activated only because they are blocked from their past. Amis’s *Other People* could be conceived as the novelistic representation of a temporary amnesia, ending simultaneously with the trouble’s disappearance “from” the heroine’s psychic system. Therefore the slices of a perhaps working sense of identity signal at once the inevitable ending of the text read: “It made sense, in a way, for the past to wait until you were asleep before sneaking up on you like that” (30).

One of the most interesting moments of direct narratorial address is the following one: “But Mary will gain ground fast now. (...) Ironically, she enjoys certain advantages over other people. Not yet stretched by time, her perceptions are without seriality: they are multiform, instantaneous and random, like the present itself” (Amis 55). This sequence could be easily compared to the visual and aural representation of Leonard Shelby’s malfunctioning memory in the movie *Memento*, especially those quick and short sequences where he remembers his wife in details such as the sunlit curve of her neck or a broken smile on her face. The eternal present tense in *Memento* is the attribute of a memory the object of which – Shelby’s wife – is dead, while the various forms of the past and the future signal existence as such.

Mary Lamb’s “instantaneous, random presents” could be seen in this same light and the supposition that the heroine is already dead – similarly to the writer Onoff in Tornatore’s movie, *A Pure Formality* – might be advanced. In this case *Other People* becomes a paradoxical novel of the victim instead of the criminal or the detective, as is conventionally the case in the genre. This idea is supported by a declaration of Prince, the policeman, during a conversation, when he is trying to come to terms with Mary’s missing identity by equating her with Amy Hide: “Usually we find a body and have to look for a murderer. With Amy Hide we find a murderer and have to look for a body” (Amis 121).

The several discussions between Mary and the self-assured, first person narratorial voice resemble instances like (for example) the nightlong interrogation of Onoff by the commissar in *A Pure Formality*. Both are constructed as moments of calling the detected/detecting heroes to account for illegal activities or crimes they committed: Onoff is suspected of having murdered somebody, while Mary seems to have done harm to Mr. Botham. The commissar and John Prince are clearly in positions of power, conducting the interrogation: “(...) Mary said ‘I’m not sure you’re allowed to talk to me like this.’ ‘Oh I am, I am. You ought to know that I am.’ ‘Why?’ ‘You’ve broken the law’” (Amis 65).

At the same time, because of parallels drawn previously, these discussions lend themselves to an understanding in metafictional terms, namely as encounters between creators and their fantasy creatures, the texts we read or watch. This characteristic is pertinently “solved” in Tornatore’s movie, where the commissar proves to be an avid reader of the writer’s – Onoff – books, starting to cite whole passages to demonstrate his allegiance. John Prince, the policeman, in his turn “has got a lot of time for Mary” and knows intimately the workings of her mind. The effect of these situations is a hallucinatory change in the planes of reference: just as Onoff emerges as a citation memorized by the commissar, Mary appears as a creature of John Prince (a surrogate author, I would say) in an even more obvious way.

2.1. *Woman Beware Woman: A Scottish Rebecca.*

This novel appears as another adequate terrain for the questioning of gendering strategies in the process of detection, while also offering the possibility to test the idea according to which (the) modern(ism) and (the) postmodern(ism) are deeply dependent upon each other. *Woman Beware Woman* communicates on several levels with a key text of “criminal modernity”, Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, as the reading below will demonstrate, also aiming to suggest that if one accepts the interdependence of the modern and the postmodern, such rewarding connections will be established – in spite of the fact that there are no obvious intertextual references linking Tennant’s and du Maurier’s novels.

Emma Tennant’s *Woman Beware Woman* is another first person, confessional crime narrative, in the Roger Ackroyd fashion: Minnie, the London mathematics tutor is summoned to Ireland because of the death of a family friend, the writer Hugo Pierce. Her figure is intricately and minutely created, with all the stereotypical features of a classical crime fiction perpetrator. Weakness and clumsiness are but some of the features which make her a copy of Edward Norton in Agatha Christie’s *Curtain* or indeed the clerk with a split personality in Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*. Minnie makes no lasting impression on the world, no wonder that she cannot recognize herself in the dreams and fictions that the world adores: “I didn’t see myself

in any of these books and saw the world, consequently, from a frightening angle (...)” (Tennant 23).

While leading us along the meanderings of family and rural tensions, representing them from the angle of a naïve, childish and slowly aging girl, she manages to cover her own traces. Taking upon herself the burden of avenging the killing of the writer “in the woods at Ardo”, on the last pages of the novel she describes her unfortunate criminal act, that of shooting the supposed killer of Hugo Pierce, together with the deceased person’s son, Minnie’s former fiancée, Philip. In one of her moments of distress, when after Hugo’s funeral the family members are gathering, but Minnie is left to stay in her room, she presents us with one of her fantasies, a dream that suggests that she would feel more at home in a love story or even a melodrama than in a gloomy and mysterious crime story: “It was quite dark suddenly – just a thin moon – and I saw myself as silly as a heroine in a romantic novel, standing in a nightdress by the window of an old house, looking out for a lover” (Tennant 64).

The reader is positioned as the outsider detective who may have a full view on the happenings and may intuit that the reasons of Minnie for committing the act have been abstract ones, the fear of losing places and memories of childhood. Thus the introductory sentences gain a paramount significance: “If I spent my life trying, I could never do justice to the beauties of Cliff Hold – and of Dunane generally. Perhaps it’s because I came here as a child that the pattern of lanes, stiff with fuchsia in summer and open to the sky in winter, seems unrepeatable, perfect (...)” (Tennant 11).

Minnie is a kin-soul of Daphne du Maurier’s nameless female narrator in *Rebecca* in many respects⁷¹, among these a strong and intense sense of place, of belonging (or not) to a castle-like house. But while the meek rival of Rebecca seems to be protected by her inability to integrate in Manderley’s world, protected from committing a crime in defense of this topographical ideal, Minnie in *Woman Beware Woman* is swept away by the destruction of the Dunane couleur locale, and she is ready to kill if that may re-integrate the shattered pieces. The absence of the mother is another trait that contributes to the similarity of these two narrators in a criminal plot: pseudo-Rebecca is an orphan, while Minnie is not loved or too much cared for by her mundane, superficial mother.

The antagonistic, black-haired female counterpart to the meek and naïve heroine is a further common element in Tennant’s and du Maurier’s novels: Rebecca, the ghost (or spirit)

⁷¹ The story can be seen as a negative mirror image of that of *Rebecca*, while Minnie’s life and trajectory a fictional variant of the young narrator’s, had the latter not been married by the magnificent Max de Winter. In Du Maurier’s novel we find the same closed and dull universe into which the proposal of the Manderley castle-owner erupts, but Minnie in *Woman Beware Woman* is not that kind of lucky person. Philip breaks their engagement and moves to America.

of the first wife is paralleled by the figure of Fran, Minnie's American sister-in-law. Just as Rebecca is supposed to have committed a shameful criminal act which is to lead to her own destruction, so is the revolver put in Fran's anorak at the end of *Woman Beware Woman* in an attempt to cast the suspicion on her. Minnie is visibly all that Fran is not⁷², and by creating this melodramatic pair of female characters, Tennant once again conforms to a well-known crime narrative pattern. Minnie is also involved in a female triangle of asymmetrical power relations, similarly to the nameless narrator in the earlier gothic novel. While Rebecca de Winter and Mrs. Denvers are the figures who dominate the life and thoughts of the second Mrs. De Winter, Moura and Fran perform the same role(s) in relation to Minnie. Both weak heroines try to copy one strong female character, yet they also have to fight another threatening woman figure. The following quotation supports not only my statement about the asymmetrical power-relation existing between Minnie and Fran, but it also shows that her character is perceived as weak and naïve by the outer world: "Fran whistled. 'Beware,' she said. 'Minnie, you're just as much of a dope as you always were. But you're still as sweet'" (Tennant 129).⁷³

2.2. Criminal representation, again

However, it is Fran's profession – she is a documentary filmmaker – which will induce the final crimes in the novel, as she sets out to interview local friends about Hugo Pierce and his unexpected death. Assuming a satirical attitude as a narrator is all that Minnie (and the widow Moura) is able to do in order to counterbalance Fran's effective search for an unpleasant truth.

The devaluation of technology and film-making when contrasted with traditional painting's force to capture what really matters in life is another subtle way of signaling Fran's incapacity to integrate into the magical Cliff-Hold world. Minnie relates Moura's words about her daughter-in-law, Fran's way of life and system of values: "The word films was said with absolute lack of interest. Only pictures counted for anything with Moura, of course. Especially Moura's pictures: sea, dry cliffs that looked as if they'd been scraped on the canvas with a palette knife" (Tennant 58). Since Moura is a positive center in the narrative world, her appreciation as well as her disapproval has a double impact in the diegetic, but also the in

⁷²"It was as if they [the men] knew a New Man was needed to partner this New Woman (for that is what Fran appeared to be – a member of a new species of a distant continent, a species that lacked masochism, dependence, vulnerability – woman's traditional ills)" (Tennant 28).

⁷³ Hans Bertens writes in his article about postmodern characterization that the dissolution of character boundaries reveals these figures as functions of the discourses that surround them, a description which would fit Minnie as well: "In such cases language reveals merely another language, or to use a broader term, discourse, beyond which there is nothing, no essence at all. And since discourse is by its nature public, such characters are, properly speaking, not subjects, but part of the language that surrounds them" (Bertens, *Postmodern* 148).

extra-diegetic system. Her valuing painting over film describes the relationship of two women, but it also constitutes an opposition between an authentically human and a rigidly mechanical mode of representing things around us⁷⁴.

Part Two of Tennant's novel is, unlike the direct narration of the First, a series of diary-entries written by Minnie in the first week of September. It is from here that we get acquainted with the circumstances of Hugo's death: his support for a young mother and his fight with the husband for a better way of life for the whole family make the local society and especially the Rooneys his enemies, and they duly punish him for his interference. The motif of mediation reappears at this point of the story: "I felt as if I were being sewn into a drama I had never suspected – into a moving tapestry" (Tennant 99), writes Minnie a propos of the hunting trip they make in the forests at Ardo. She is "sewn", or more suitably expressed, "sutured" in a drama that is not her own, yet she is forced to play a part in it.

The novel may be read as an intermedial texture that is being created between the wood scene tapestry in Minnie's guest room at Cliff Hold, and the Pierce family saga that our narrator scrutinizes from an external viewpoint. This mingling of verbal and "material" patterns emphasizes even more Minnie's (forced) passivity, her lack of means to take an internal or active part in the story: "Moura will be stalking him [Gareth, her son] – yes, she wants in some way to rope him in. And I'll be caught between the two – drawn into a tapestry where, when the hunt has run down its course, a man must fall in the leaves and die" (Tennant 112). This self-reflexive method situates the murder of a man in the woods within the story narrated – in the form of Hugo, the writer's death –, it recreates it, as an ekphrasis, on the tapestry, but it also plays an anaphoric role, suggesting the outcome of Minnie's own involvement.

The technological equipment of Fran initiates a different type of intermedial mixture in Tennant's novel, fragmenting the verbal story into fixed, visually coded images. While listening to Fran's out-of-place excitement about the beauties of Cliff Hold, Moura and Minnie start to imagine Hugo's death as a film, the set of moving images that Fran intends to create. The effect of this passage is that of slowing down the story, but a sense of inevitability and non-changeability also emerges:

⁷⁴ This is an idea that also appears in a classical, 1955 crime novel, Margery Allingham's *The Beckoning Lady*, also in relation to an (half-) amateur woman painter, this time called Minnie Cassands. Referring to four of her paintings exhibited in the Boston Art Gallery, Mrs. Cassands says to detecting Albert Campion: "It's marvellous. Four. Two flower pieces, Mrs. Emmerson and Westy. It's a queer mixture, isn't it, flowers and women and kids? And yet I suppose you can't really photograph them without either sentimentality or brutality, and mine's an essentially realistic approach, even if it is a bit individual" (Allingham 60). One more argument to support the claim I was developing so far: namely that the turn from modernism to postmodernism is accompanied by the intensification of attention paid to mediation (techniques) as such.

Moura and I looked out in absolute despondency at our beloved view from Cliff Hold. We saw it on an outsize TV, a set where the colours are Hawaiian-bright and dots dance in the sea and sky. We both saw it, I'm sure of that; the cameras tracking slowly to a wood. A man was walking, two men followed him. With the easy pointlessness of violence, Hugo fell and was dead. (Tennant 123)

The final section of the novel is again a 1st person monologue, but there are no diary entries any more. The most important segment of it is Minnie's delirious description of her deed, filming and killing at the same time, overwriting the burden of representation on a dying human body:

I was frightened at first, by the bang—but then I can film in any conditions. It's easy, really—as long as you learn to concentrate. (...) If it hadn't been for that bang of the bird gun, Moura, I'd never have found the courage to press on the trigger and kill. (...) It was over so quickly. First the big one fell. Then the smaller one, near him. It was lucky in the end, Moura, that I was the one who acted for you. Did you really think I would allow Fran to take the coat with the gun? (...) Anyway, would Fran shoot with a gun? She hasn't the nerve – even in self-defence. But for that second I knew what it was to have her power, to hold the world in a frame and freeze it dead. (Tennant 174)

The novel's most important feature is the creation of Minnie's figure and voice, since this governs our attention as readers and contributes to believing “our eyes” while reading. The fundamental trust of the fictional or actual reader is a predicament that all the analysed crime generic material rests upon: first-person, subjective and limited perspective narratives cannot function without the willingness and trust of the reader/viewer.

The experience of a crime film or novel narrated by a first-person, possibly criminal figure exposes the weak point of the crime genre, so well masked by the mimetic, realist conventions of classical crime fiction: that the safety of the reader is illusory. The impossibility of keeping or building a distance in relation to the unfolding criminal fiction is a claim that may be found valid in many of the visual and verbal texts analysed here. Besides confronting us with the incapacity of safely detaching ourselves from what we see, hear or read, this feature in crime fictions also makes us “maniacally” aware of the ways and modes of the flow, spread and processing of information. By achieving the recognition of these two altered modes of perception, the crime fiction analysed here “trains” us in postmodernism, as

if it were a lighter version of Jamesonian, Jencksian or Baudrillardian prophecies concerning sign-overproduction and double coding.

In line with the general argument about verbal mediation becoming suspect in the process of postmodernization in the crime genre, character-narrators also dissolve. The hidden fear of most of these crime hero/ines is that they do not matter in a “real” world; that they do not have any weight and importance there. Minnie in *Woman Beware Woman* is no exception from this rule: “But why should anyone in the street know me now? If they did recognize Minnie, the girl who nearly married Philip Pierce up at Cliff Hold, they wouldn’t find it particularly interesting: mine wasn’t a story of emigration, success. (...) I walked like a ghost in the Dunane main street” (Tennant 49). At the funeral party of the dead writer, Hugo Pierce, she compares herself to the widow, Moura, the “mother” she always wished for, but never had: “And I thought, she is the Spirit of Life, she remembers Hugo in life and celebrates his lifetime. She is right. I am nothing – if anything, the Spirit of Nullity” (Tennant 77). An even more enhanced degree of nothingness is to be seen in Patrick Modiano’s novel, which opens with the following lines: “I am but nothing. Nothing more than a clear silhouette, on the terrace of a café” (Modiano 11).⁷⁵ It is in the same paradigm of disappearance that we could inscribe the fight of the narrating clerk with his aggressive alter ego in *Fight Club*: while Minnie or Modiano’s amnesiac detective are at most nostalgic or sorrowful because of their lack of defining attributes and identity, Tyler Durden grotesquely takes to its limit the attempt to leave a trace in others’ minds.

3. 1. *Fight Club*. Put the blame on...?

In the closing paragraphs of his *Postscript to the Name of the Rose* (1983) Umberto Eco mentions the apparently only constellation that has not been considered by detective mystery writers: when the perpetrator is the reader him/herself. Chuck Palahniuk’s novel, *Fight Club*, does not perform this mental and narrative bravado either, but it succeeds in another complex task, that of creating the perfect detection situation – and not for the fictional Sherlock Holmes in service, but for the actual reader. Thus the reading and understanding of the novel is constituted like an actual hunt for innuendoes, allusions and traces, much more concrete in their effect than the universal hermeneutic situation facing each of us while reading. This concreteness originates from the mystery of the narrator’s identity, the voice and methods of whom we have to doubt from the very first lines. In this respect, Palahniuk’s novel is the par excellence illustration of the general claim about the growing importance of

⁷⁵ “Je ne suis rien. Rien qu’une silhouette claire, ce soir-là, à la terrasse d’un café” (Modiano 11).

traces and mediation along the modern–postmodern axis, in this case the analysis (and deconstruction) of verbal-oral mediation being in focus.

In the introductory monologue of the first chapter the reader is not supposed to know anything about the identity of the narrator and his friend, Tyler Durden. However, thanks to the preliminary effect of the David Fincher movie⁷⁶, only a small segment of the readers approach the novel without the anterior knowledge of the great mystery. Namely, that Tyler Durden has two personalities, and, consequently, leads a double life, a situation also “mirrored” in the novel’s 1st person narrative technique. Are there two, distinguishable narrative voices to support the fiction of a split/double personality? Stylistically and modally the text is a univocal entity, and therefore it is also a paradox, since it offers an “above and beyond” perspective on the activities of the Tyler-figure (the doubled ego) – while he never seems to get the upper hand, remaining the narrated, the object throughout. This problem⁷⁷ is tackled in a more “user-friendly” manner in the movie, which clearly designates a border between the two types of lifestyles, presenting the viewer with a formalized, rigid IKEA-world, opposed to the flashy, exhibitionist, anarchic mode of life on the abandoned Paper Street terrain.

The reading process of Palahniuk’s novel is transformed into a search for clues that would reveal the complicity of the protagonist (and narrator) “with” his psychic disorder, a disorder (supposedly) blocking the functioning of his memory and identity – a situation and pattern similar to the one met in Christopher Nolan’s movie, *Memento*, to be examined later. In spite of its even surface style, Palahniuk’s text is not fully devoid of stylistic (and ontological) markers that are capable of signaling to the “searching” reader the nature of the sphere s/he is reading through, if it’s the dimension of the real or the imagined Tyler Durden. One such element reporting (about) the transgression of the boundaries between the two personalities is the sleeping/insomnia problem, but the figure of Marla Singer also performs a similar role. Marla, or the woman is the blind spot of this narrative, too, and we may see this statement as illuminating to the situation in the most literal sense, since it is her voice and figure – as a narrator – that could have presented the falsity and illusory nature of fake-Tyler’s world, yet she is not allowed to speak. This must have been a conscious decision on the part of the writer, otherwise the self-enclosed paradox and impossibility, the circularity of what the fight (club) is really about would have been lost. Yet the reader (let alone the interpreter)

⁷⁶The movie adaptation closely followed the publishing of the novel.

⁷⁷A problem that we could also call that of the „unknowable” characters in postmodern fiction, resolved by Hans Bertens in a straightforward manner: “Postmodernist characterization explicitly refuses to commit itself to psychological causality and presents characters as unknowable” (Bertens, *Postmodern* 140). If so, then the “split personality” case is nothing more but a trope-trap, and my interpretation has been a victim of it.

could have got a firmer grip on Palahniuk's unidirectional, claustrophobic monologue, thus we may feel that it is this fatal "uniqueness" that makes this type of fiction at once amazing and repulsive.

The first time that an irresolute attempt to call the narrator by the name of Tyler Durden is made is linked to the visiting Marla Singer:

Marla yells, "Tyler. Can I come in? Are you home?"

I yell, Tyler's not home.

Marla yells, "Don't be mean". (Palahniuk 90)

Of course the question must be posed: why should we trust the narrator when he offers a new piece of information fostering our doubt? The argument has to be reformulated: exits from the claustrophobic first-person narration and answers to the personality riddle posed seem to multiply whenever Marla Singer makes her appearance in the text. This could be a tricky false lead placed by our split narrator, yet this is all we, readers have that can guide us through *Fight Club*. Therefore femininity, heterosexual relationship, or the acceptance of others may be seen as tropes or signs for that solution which is missing here.

My impression is that these types of ontological messing(s) and differentiation(s) are not so much symptoms of the narrator's (sometimes needless) talkativeness, not so much questions of "breath and style", but can be seen as red herrings put there for the attentive and sniffing reader. Marla is hinted at as a (possible) hallucination, a phantasmal creature, similarly to the doubts that the narrator shows concerning Tyler's existential status. Perhaps, and ironically, the famous Brian McHale axiom about the determining factors of modernist and postmodernist prose – the epistemological and the ontological dominant, the question of "what/how do we know" being replaced with the question "what/how do we exist" once the paradigms replace each other⁷⁸ – seems to be suitable for describing the functioning of Palahniuk's fictional world. For what is constantly reversed and parodied here are the most basic conventions of the stable narrating and narrated subjectivities, as well as the ontological primacy of the first over the second.

If we relate back to how the movie with the same title and directed by David Fincher resolves this existential (?), ontological (?) riddle, we discover a simple equation: Marla is a hysterical, cynical woman as if fallen from the moon, while the parasitic Tyler Durden is an aggressive, dominant male figure, this effect heightened by the similar media aura created around the actor, Brad Pitt. Thus, what in the novel seems to be another banana skin intended

⁷⁸ See McHale, *Modernist* 11.

to repeatedly destabilize the reader regarding the possible (mental) composition of the voices s/he listens to and the characters s/he “watches” while reading, grows “concrete” in the film, reappearing as the doomed liaison of a stereotypical male and female type.

3.2. Similarity accomplished

The unavoidable final outcome, the tragic end of a split personality is suggested by the next quotation: “Tyler and I were looking more and more like identical twins. Both of us had punched out cheekbones, and our skin had lost its memory, and forgot where to slide back after we were hit” (Palahniuk 114). Yet the question remains: is this concretization an organic consequence of events narrated so far in *Fight Club*, or rather a concession to the reader, the attention of whom tends to slacken by now?

Project Mayhem is a new phase in the negative development of the narrator-narrated ego, when the first impulse of self-destruction manifested in days-long insomnia and (imagined) bodily fights is transformed into a maniacal hallucination about the destruction of all that surrounds him (and us, for that matter). This is not a spontaneous falling apart, but an induced process that aims at “downsizing” the values and symbols of contemporary Western civilization: the Rockefeller Center, the Louvre, Mona Lisa and animal species threatened by extinction. Brutally governed by a heartless evolutionary logic that bespeaks the fall of the weak and old, Project Mayhem nevertheless may gain some sympathy in its effort to free our world from waste, trash and a conservative value-system. Yet the irony that someone already “under destruction” initiates all this cannot be ignored.

We have the narrator’s blind spot called Marla showing up again: while we listen to his laments about Tyler’s being absent, and we have him in direct quotation asking even Big Bob whether he has seen the master mind of Project Mayhem, the lady with breast lumps wants to enter the Paper Street House. Is the narrator not shrewd enough when he has to retell her question? After all, the reader-narrator hide-and-seek could go on forever, were it not for Marla Singer who says: “One evening, I hear Marla on the front porch, telling a space monkey, “I’m here to see Tyler. Tyler Durden. He lives here. I’m his friend” (Palahniuk 133). This is a most precise sign of the equivalence of the narrator and the macho alter ego, at least in the light of the information we have been offered so far. That is how, gradually, Palahniuk’s novel is transformed into an identity mystery in the fullest sense of the word, and the reader into an avid decipherer of the linguistic traces scattered in the text.

On the next page we have the full grown confession, dropped as if by chance, or due to the lack of attention and concentration of the narrator: “The reader stops when I walk in to make my sandwich, and all the space monkeys sit silent as if I were alone. I say, don’t bother.

I've already read it. I typed it" (Palahniuk 134). The edited text in question is the pathetic soliloquy addressed to the trained and working army of disillusioned clerks and waiters, disguised as a black army of determined soldiers. Some evidence gained, some evidence lost to the reader-detective: who and where is this Tyler Durden, after all? Or should we conceive of him as "the center of the structure" that is nil, yet necessary for the texture of the novel to come to life? Have we really seen and heard him, or was it an illusion all along, a trope of absence, a metaphor for nothingness? "Here, I'm not sure if Tyler is my dream. Or if I am Tyler's dream." (Palahniuk 138) says the narrating voice, suggesting the inevitable collapsing into each other of him and Tyler, enhanced by the disrupted dichotomy of dream and reality. If the readers accept the ontological paradox of a dream-creature being able to act and narrate, the novel appears in a new light, even if belatedly.

In the Raymond K. Hessel episode the assimilation is also performed at a bodily level: "This is what Tyler wants me to do. These are Tyler's words coming out of my mouth. I am Tyler's mouth. I am Tyler's hands. Everybody in Project Mayhem is part of Tyler Durden, and vice versa" (Palahniuk 155). And finally, in chapter 21 the nameless, faceless bartender in Seattle utters the magical words of identification: "Yeah, I say, it's a test. Has he ever met Tyler Durden? "You stopped in last week, Mr. Durden," he says. "Don't you remember?" (Palahniuk 158). The whole enigmatic scheme of the novel is compressed in this innocent question, and as such it sends us back to another similarly neutral discussion, this time between a detecting hero and a hotel assistant. You don't remember that we already met, says the bearded assistant to Leonard Shelby in *Memento*, while the malfunctioning of memory and the disappearance of identity emerge as the causes of the entire mystery in that case as well.

And if anyone should question the basic detective mystery structure of Palahniuk's novel, we must draw attention to the final confrontation scene when the narrator is identified as Tyler: "You have a birthmark, Mr. Durden," the bartender says. "On your foot. It's shaped like a dark red Australia with New Zealand next to it." Only Marla knows this. Marla and my father. Not even Tyler knows this" (Palahniuk 159). The perpetrator is found, and this essential bodily clue should have delighted even Sherlock Holmes.

In one of my earlier papers about the evolution of detective fiction in the light of the postulate of the turn from the modern to the postmodern I concluded that if positing Agatha Christie's novel, *Curtain*, written in the 1940s, as a starting point, then on to Paul Auster's 1980s *City of Glass* we may witness an unprecedented proliferation of signs in the course of

the detection process⁷⁹. The texts analysed in this chapter seem to confirm this finding, and even allow for its further extension: signs in postmodern detection are not capable of taking the hero to the signified, the object of detection, the most they can do is point to the medium that was used to create signs. An endorsement of the recognition that mediation through letters, drawings, photographs or film is associated with death, the death of the represented in this case is also very much present.

Traces, narratives, and photographs are successive to what had actually happened, yet the crime and detection genre is grounded in the impossibility of abolishing exactly this succession, motivated by the wish to reach “back” to the “real” thing. What these postmodernist crime texts seem to perform is appeasing the hysterical need for search by pointing to its ultimate futility, and directing the attention instead to what may be perceived by late coming detectives, namely the media through which the traces are made and, naturally, the traces themselves. This constellation, furthermore, is not independent of the gendered identities of the criminals, pursuers and bodies involved, as the interpretations have tried to show.

⁷⁹This is my BA-thesis written at The Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca (2000), fragments of which have appeared in *Virginás* 2001.

Representation, mediation, death

Chapter 5

A POSTMODERN MODERN(ISM): GENRE (AND GENDER) REWORKED

NOIR ALLUSIONS

1. A technological story

At this point the perspective of argumentation slightly shifts from an exclusive focus on such “cultural” features of the analyzed paradigm shift as the positioning of canons, the role of the genre, and the reworking of gendered identities to the development of the same (critical) narrative from the direction of mediating technologies which are involved in leaving and discovering traces. Therefore it seems necessary to sketch a background context for the idea according to which the “modern” and the “postmodern”, or better said the differences between the two paradigms (and periods) can be theorized with respect to dominant and/or accepted, valued media technologies.

The main sources in this respect are Vivian Sobchack’s article, which in turn is based on Fredric Jameson’s system of ideas. Sobchack sets out to situate the three dominant visual technologies of the last two centuries – the photographic, the cinematic and the electronic – with respect to the corresponding historical-social periods and the dominant representational artistic systems at work⁸⁰. In this endeavour she finds her starting point in Fredric Jameson’s discussion of three crucial historical moments in Euro-American cultural history, each of them defined by a “technological revolution within capital” and by an emerging “cultural logic” corresponding to each of them. The 1840s are identified by Jameson in his well known and often cited *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* as the first decade of market capitalism, followed in the 1890s by monopoly capitalism, and finally, in the 1940s, by multinational capitalism. These three epochs are dominated by the “cultural logics” of realism, modernism, and postmodernism, respectively (Sobchack 70). Sobchack’s

⁸⁰It is very important to mention that her frame of reference is an interesting mixture of phenomenological and Marxist cultural analysis, because that is how we can understand and appropriate to our own ends her insistence on the “materiality” and actual effect of the different technologies: “Like human vision, the materiality and modalities of cinematic and electronic technologies of representations are not abstractions. They are concrete and situated and institutionalized. (...) Thus, in its attention to the broadly defined “material conditions” and “relations” of production (specifically, the conditions for and production of existential meaning), existential phenomenology is not incompatible with certain aspects of Marxist analysis.” (Sobchack 70).

contribution to this neatly devised system is the linking of the three representational technologies to the three periods and the corresponding “cultural logics” influencing them, arguing for the acknowledgement of a “perceptual revolution” besides the “technological” ones, mentioning that when arguing thus she is rather thinking of “themes” rather than of “essences”⁸¹.

The Sobchackian-Jamesonian framework, which constitutes one of the bases of my “medial” argumentation, works like this: 1840s market capitalism had the dominant cultural logic of realism, with photographic technology best expressing its nature and preoccupations. Monopoly capitalism, beginning with the 1890s, meant the advent of modernism and also the coming to the fore of the cinematic as a material, institutionalized technology of representation. Finally, the era of multinational capitalism starting with the 1940s has given birth in the subsequent years to postmodernism, with the electronic technologies truly forming its nature. While it is true that this system is different in many ways from the accepted period concepts used in literary research, its validity will appear in the filmic analyses which refer back to film and media history.

What I consider of paramount importance is the relation established between realism, modernism and postmodernism as three subsequent artistic canons influencing each other, and also the observation that the photographic and the cinematic are to be linked to this progressive narrative, with the electronic ending the story. However, one must be cautious with such overarching generalities, especially if wishing to analyze the effect of different technologies from within one of the three main ones, the interconnections between the cinematic and all the others being my aim. Thus Sobchack’s statement that she does not consider these highlighted technologies “essences” but “themes” appears as fully valid, as we must not forget that cinema history also has its realist, modernist and postmodernist canons. Therefore a further element helps to situate my material of analysis and establish the framework of examination even more suitably.

2.1. The position of film noir

For a broader picture of the question, I need to turn to Michael Walsh’s article specifically analyzing Jameson’s periodization of film history. Here Walsh mentions that

⁸¹“Extrapolating from Jameson, we can also locate within this conceptual and historical framework three correspondent technologies, forms, and institutions of visual and aural representation: respectively, the photographic, the cinematic, and the electronic. Each, we might argue, has been critically complicit not only in a specific “*technological*” revolution within capital,” but also in a specific and radical *perceptual* revolution within the culture and the subject. That is, each has been co-constitutive of the very temporal and spatial structure of the “cultural logics” Jameson identifies as realism, modernism, and postmodernism. (...) In this regard, the technological “nature” of the photographic, the cinematic, and the electronic is graspable always and only in a qualified manner – that is, less as an “essence” than as a “theme.”” (Sobchack 71).

Jameson classifies as realist the classical Hollywood genres, followed by modernist auteur-works starting with the 1950s⁸². The crime subgenre of film noir is generally understood as belonging to classical Hollywood genres, hence the Jamesonian “realist” corpus, with perhaps a touch of subsequent “auteur” solutions. In contrast, Paul Kerr, in his article about film noir, situates “realism” in a slightly different manner, since he refers back to cinema history. He argues that film noir tried to define itself as a “modern(ist)” trend in a context when the 1930s/1940s mainstream film was fascinated and dominated by the contemporary canon of classical realism⁸³. Kerr mentions several visual discourses which represented realism in that period, namely Technicolor cinema, television and the A-film produced by major studios, and it is as a “resistance” to these that he understands the narrative and film poetical characteristics devised by the subgenre of film noir:

It is this very “transparency” [of any realist discourse] which *film noir* refuses; indeed, Sylvia Harvey has noted that “One way of looking at the plot of the typical *film noir* is to see it as a struggle between different voices for control over the telling of the story.” From that perspective, *film noir* represents a fissure in the aesthetic and ideological fabric of realism. (Kerr 120)

In film noir productions attention is diverted from exactly those elements which in classical crime and detection films constitute the focus – the actual crimes themselves and the process of discovering the perpetrator –, and otherwise marginal features – the visual composition or the narrative technique – are positioned in the foreground. By abandoning goal-oriented thinking, by emphasizing episodes at the cost of narrative turns, by a non-schematic building of characters, and by exploiting the potential of scenes and visual technologies, film noir presents many characteristics which are to gain utmost importance in the film historical period following the classical canon, namely modernism. This perspective raises the important question of film noir’s belonging: we may consider it a late classical⁸⁴, or an early modernist phenomenon in film history. But it also highlights the fact that the

⁸²“In fact Jameson goes so far as to assert that film has two histories: one for the silent film, in which there is a progression from realism to modernism, then a truncation with the introduction of sound. This begins the process over from scratch, moving from an interlocking system of classical Hollywood genres (realism) to the modernism which comes to the fore in both practice and criticism (auteurism) in the 1950s with the end of the classical studio film, to full postmodernism, which emerges after the 1960s to exploit the cultural conditions of postwar late capitalism.” (Walsh 485).

⁸³Cultural historian Colin MacCabe describes classical realism (in literature and film) as follows: “classical realism ...involves the homogenization of different discourses by their relation to one dominant discourse—assured of its domination by the security and transparency of its image.” (Kerr 119-120).

⁸⁴ The corresponding literary term would be “realist”.

modern–postmodern turn presents a different image if we switch from the literary terrain on to the filmic one, not to speak about the further variations which the art and genre film canons represent.

As the analyses should show, I adhere to the view which considers the noir variant of detection and crime films as a forerunner of full blown cinematic modernism⁸⁵, and an early stage where the “postmodernization” of the crime and detection genre – e.g. the sensitivity for differently positioned cultural canons, an eagerness to (de)construct gendered identities, and attention paid to mediation and the functioning of (mass) technologies enabling it – becomes palpable. Therefore this chapter is based on the suggestion that the paradigmatic change from the modern(ism) to the postmodern(ism) can be better understood if we pay attention to how the works we categorize as “postmodern” actually construct this label themselves by generating signs and effects that can be considered “modern” – in this specific case pertaining to the category of film noir.

I aim to demonstrate that the contemporary crime movies analyzed here – *A Pure Formality* (1994, dir. Giuseppe Tornatore), *The Crying Game* (1994, dir. Neil Jordan), *Fight Club* (1999, dir. David Fincher), *Memento* (2000, dir. Christopher Nolan), and *Mulholland Drive* (2001, dir. David Lynch) – generate film noir “sites” of crime modernism, upon which they reflect, which they re-interpret and transcend. What emerges from this analysis of postmodern films is a “summary/memory” of the previous “modern” paradigm that has been “with us” in spite of the beginning of a new paradigm. That the phenomenon discussed is not an exclusively film historical one, is attested by the fact that a 2002 Scottish crime novel, Louise Welsh’s *Cutting Room* may be cited as an intermedial example, presented at the end of the chapter.

2.2. Sketching classical *film noir*

Although the genre has already been mentioned, as an example of (movie) fictions that have been capable of generating communication between mass culture and high art, it is necessary to provide a brief film historical introduction in order to critically position it in the subsequent readings. This subchapter is dedicated to this aim.

Film noir is a widely researched sub-genre within cinema thrillers based on detection and epistemological and/or identity mysteries. A historical as well as a stylistic formation, it

⁸⁵ This is a view shared by many film historians, among them David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. Kovács András Bálint formulates the next idea: “The modernist thought that plot is but a frame filled by expressive, emotional or intellectual content, the intensity of which is much more important than the consistency of the narration gains an acceptable solution for the first time in film noir within the patterns of classical narration.” (Kovács 274). *Translation mine*.

condenses many of the characteristics of cinematic modernity⁸⁶. The classical film noir canon is constituted by forty or fifty low-budget productions of Hollywood studios⁸⁷, B-movies made between 1941-1952⁸⁸, movies that owe much to European cinematic traditions like German Expressionism, an important modernist/avantgarde artistic current. Many film noirs were directed by European expatriate directors, for example Edward Dmytryk, Fritz Lang, Robert Siodmak and Billy Wilder, not to speak about the contributing art-directors or camera-operators with a European film background. American film theorist and director Paul Schrader, in one of the fundamental critical pieces referring to the genre, summarizes the main influences which led to the elaboration of this style and cycle of films: “(...) I would suggest that there were four conditions in Hollywood in the Forties which brought about *film noir* (...): war and post-war disillusionment, (...), post-war realism (...), the German influence, (...), the hard-boiled tradition” (Schrader 56).

The canonization of this crime cycle began with the interest shown in it by 1940-50s French film critics, who “used the phrase to refer to a new wave of cynical and stylized American movies that appeared across several genres, including caper films, detective films, gangster films and thrillers” (Blanford et al. 97-8). In his book, *Film Noir*, Andrew Spicer mentions that the first French critic to use the term – for such films as Huston’s *The Maltese Falcon* or Otto Preminger’s *Laura* – was Nino Frank, who resorted to the name in 1946, also because of the already established French usage of the *Série Noire*, a popular book and magazine cycle providing adventure and excitement for a large audience (Spicer 2). Therefore the (hi)story of the film noir genre is also deeply embedded in that of the European/French – American cultural exchanges, a process generating mutually “useful” stereotypes.

Film scripts of 1940s film noirs were frequently based on the detective fiction of writers such as Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Cornell Woolrich and James M. Cain, the so-called hard-boiled school: “The hard-boiled hero was, in reality, a soft egg compared to his existential counterpart (Camus is said to have based *The Stranger* on McCoy), but he was a good deal tougher than anything American fiction had seen” (Schrader 56). This type of crime fiction was considered by the some of the writers themselves as reacting to the feminized, safe world of the British countryside variant (Glover-Kaplan 214), many of the

⁸⁶Cinema as a technology of reproduction is so inherently linked to modernity as a historical/social period that one might wonder whether the expression “cinematic modernism” is not a tautology in itself.

⁸⁷It is hard to decide whether the fact of low-budget expenditure available for most film noir movies should be considered an all-determining factor for their peculiar poetics. However, many critics share such a view, among them Paul Kerr: “This analysis attends in particular to the relatively autonomous and uneven development of the B *film noir*, a category constituted, I will argue by a negotiated resistance to the realist aesthetic on the one hand and an accommodation to restricted expenditure on the other” (Kerr 109).

⁸⁸ Films like *The Maltese Falcon* (1941, dir. John Huston), *Double Indemnity* (1944, dir. Billy Wilder), *Mildred Pierce* (1945, dir. Michael Curtiz), *The Big Sleep* (1946, dir. Howard Hawks), *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947, dir. Orson Welles), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950, dir. Billy Wilder).

exponents of which had indeed been women writers. Gendering as a cultural code will gain a huge importance in the rest of this chapter; what needs to be stressed at this point is that it is replicated even “in” the sources of film noirs. Raymond Chandler, for example, explicitly constructed the hierarchy between good and bad crime fiction in terms of their masculine or feminine origin. Writing about Chandler’s “The Simple Art of Murder,” Glover and Kaplan observe that “the ‘classic detective story’ is doubly feminized”, that “its best-sellers are the ultimate commodities” in Chandler’s view, thus “second-rate items outlast most of the high velocity fiction [like Chandler’s own]”, with “old ladies [jostling] each other at the mystery shelf” (Glover-Kaplan 214)⁸⁹. Another proof of this gendering discourse strategy is, in my view, Chandler’s appreciation of Dashiell Hammett’s mode of writing – a gesture made in defiance of all those who would not consider Hammett a true writer or, for that matter, a writer of true detective fiction:

And there are still quite a few people around who say that Hammett did not write detective stories at all, merely hardboiled chronicles of mean streets with a perfunctory mystery element dropped in like the olive in a martini. These are the flustered old ladies – of both sexes (or no sex) and almost all ages – who like their murders scented with magnolia blossoms and do not care to be reminded that murder is an act of infinite of cruelty (...). (Chandler, *Simple* 196-7)

The common narrative pattern of the film noir involves as major characters an alienated hero, who is usually a private detective living on the edges of the law, and a femme fatale. There is also a network of minor characters who nonetheless play a prominent role and most of who are morally ambivalent and somehow interrelated (cf. Buckland 91-100). Two other important features of film noir, complicated narratives and the foregrounding of a narrator, which results in the dazzling use of voice-overs and flashbacks, also contributed to the generic arsenal. The highly subjective, unreliable, constantly modified, multi-perspective film narrative is usually told by the male characters, while on a visual level it is the women who dominate the pictures, a characteristic elaborated in detail below. With reference to the complex narrative pattern of movies categorized as film noir Paul Kerr seems to be right when

⁸⁹In Chandler’s own – somewhat wordy and diffuse – formulation: “[People with discernment] do not like that penetrating and important works of fiction a few years back stand on their special shelf in the library marked ‘Best-sellers of Yesteryear,’ and nobody goes near them but an occasional shortsighted customer who bends down, peers briefly and hurries away; while old ladies jostle each other at the mystery shelf to grab off some item of the same vintage with a title like *The Triple Murder Case*, or *Inspector Pinchbottle to the Rescue*. They do not like it that ‘really important books’ get dusty on the reprint counter, while *Death Wears Yellow Garters* is put in editions of fifty or one hundred thousand copies on the news-stands of the country, and is obviously not there just to say good-bye. To tell you the truth, I do not like it very much myself” (Chandler, *Simple* 182-3).

– based on the argumentation of Colin MacCabe and Sylvia Harvey – he interprets this aspect as a (conscious) opposition to the long tradition of realism in filmic or narrative discourse: “(...) indeed, Sylvia Harvey has noted that «One way of looking at the plot of the typical *film noir* is to see it as a struggle between different voices for control over the telling of the story.» From that perspective, *film noir* represents a fissure in the aesthetic and ideological fabric of realism” (Kerr 120).

Besides these narrative and thematic ingredients, classical film noir also exhibited a specific visual style, not unrelated to their being low budget movies filmed on black-white film and in settings easily produced. These were 1940/50s American urban settings or claustrophobic interiors, where lighting, shades and the composition or constellation of the objects gained a high importance⁹⁰. In the formulation of two film critics

[a]bove all it is the constant opposition of areas of light and dark that characterizes film noir cinematography. Small areas of light seem on the verge of being completely overwhelmed by the darkness that threatens them from all sides. Thus faces are shot low-key, interior sets are always dark, with foreboding shadow patterns lacing the walls, and exteriors that are shot ‘night-for-night’. (Place-Peterson 330)

This is an influence of German Expressionist cinema, and the gesture was interpreted by Frank Krutnik as a conscious effort to raise the status of noir thrillers, already differentiated by their self-reflexive relationship with 1930s gangster and caper films or horror movies (Krutnik 21-2). Many commentators see these methods as contributing to the sensual beauty and independence of the women in film noirs, as well as conveying the powerlessness and lack of control on the part of the male characters. As summarized by Janey Place the women “are overwhelmingly the compositional focus, generally centre frame and/or in the foreground, or pulling focus to them in the background. They control camera movement” (Place 45). Paul Schrader is, again, extremely illuminating, as he links the typical noir hero enmeshed in a frozen past to the strong and recognizable visual style⁹¹:

⁹⁰If we take into account Erwin Panofsky’s observation with reference to the material of filmic representation, this development is not only fortunate, but unsurpassable as well: “[t]he medium of the movies is physical reality as such (...). The problem is to manipulate and shoot unstylized reality in such a way that the result has style. This is a proposition no less legitimate and no less difficult than any proposition in the older arts” (Panofsky 83).

⁹¹The reliance on black-and-white, Expressionist cinema-style made film noir immortal from a film historical perspective, but it also contributed to its disappearance, as television aesthetics and colour film became dominant in film production: “Technically, television, with its demand for full lighting and close-ups, gradually undercut the German influence, and color cinematography was, of course, the final blow to the “*noir*” look” (Schrader 61).

The *noir* hero dreads to look ahead, but instead tries to survive by the day, and if unsuccessful at that, he retreats to the past. Thus *film noir*'s techniques emphasize loss, nostalgia, lack of clear priorities, insecurity; then submerge these self-doubts in mannerism and style. In such a world style becomes paramount; it is all that separates one from meaninglessness. (Schrader 58)

All these characteristics are essential factors in building a thematic universe where misunderstandings, mysteries and problematic solutions prevail, despite the fact that the film noir is a detection-centered genre. The tension between the quest and its elusive fulfillment results in fragile power/knowledge relations, not least in terms of gender identities.

3.1. Changing iconographies: the girls.

Classical Hollywood crime genres – and particularly film noir – are renowned for their strong visual style. These conventions – concerning the environment, the setting, but also the look, the dress and space for movement of the heroes – are typical and formalized, deeply related to the gender and sexual orientation of the noir characters, a fact emphasized by the defining star figures as well. Three relevant gender and icon categories can be easily established and analyzed from *The Maltese Falcon* (1941, dir. John Huston) on to the late 1990s *Fight Club*, *Memento* and *Mullholland Drive*: women, men, and possibilities of un/questioned heterosexual bonding. These – seemingly arbitrary – categories have the merit of easy access and identifiable nature, besides constituting traditional iconographical models in movies, as summarized by Erwin Panofsky:

Another, less obtrusive method of explanation was the introduction of a fixed iconography which from the outset informed the spectator about the basic facts and characters (...). There arose, identifiable by standardized appearance, behaviour, and attributes, the well-remembered types of the Vamp and the Straight Girl (perhaps the most convincing modern equivalents of the medieval personifications of the Vices and Virtues), the Family Man and the Villain, the latter marked by a black moustache and walking stick. (Panofsky 78)

What can we observe regarding women and actresses appearing in modern, classical film noirs and in postmodern neo-noirs respectively? If we think of classical noir movies like *The Maltese Falcon*, *Mildred Pierce* (1945, dir. Michael Curtiz) or *Laura* (1944, dir. Otto

Preminger), what strikes one immediately is the variety of female types, even if these may be considered stereotypical for the reasons mentioned by Erwin Panofsky. Very different role possibilities, requiring various iconographic representations, were open for actresses in these films. In *The Maltese Falcon* we have Sam Spade, the private detective – played by Humphrey Bogart – flirting with his “good girl, but hard on men”-type secretary, Effie, with the sad and troubling wife of his detective-partner, Iva, and naturally with the mysterious, corrupt vamp, Brigid O’Shaughnessy (Mary Astor’s performance)⁹². With small alterations, we find this female triptych in Curtiz’ well-known melodramatic noir, *Mildred Pierce*: a sad, troubled mother (Joan Crawford’s Oscar-winning performance), her sharp-tongued associate, Ida, and her evil daughter, Veda.

If we take a look at the late 1990s neo-noir examples, it is striking how the female role possibilities have considerably diminished and altered. In *Fight Club*, Marla Singer is the only woman who makes her appearance and has anything to do with the male heroes. She is a versatile figure, but, since her versatility and shape-shifting is a symptom of a lack of identity rather than a will to play roles (masquerade) and deceive the male figures, she can be considered as an ironic variant, a caricature of the determined, cunning women in classical noir movies. Marla is a vamp, a hysterical liar, a cheap prostitute, a futuristic person, and in her case this multiplicity bars the possibility for any iconic power, this being powerfully conditioned by the display of constant, repeatable features. The Marla Singer character exposes the blind spot of the mechanism of constructing memorable femmes fatales by blurring the features of this sole female figure – who, by the way, has to relate to men confessing rather openly the existence and necessity of homosociality. Given her undefined look and much-too-close male companions, no wonder that Marla’s “generic duty” of impersonating a femme fatale is, by definition, doomed to fail.

There is only one woman to whom Leonard Shelby, the detecting hero in *Memento*, relates, because his murdered wife and the clever, but cruel waitress, Natalie, played by Carrie-Ann Moss, might be equated⁹³. The trick Natalie plays on the detecting hero equals the lies Brigid tells Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*, but Natalie is not punished for her deeds as Brigid is. While Brigid/Mary Astor has the narrative and iconic possibility for negative excellence – the closing sequence with her tragic face covered with shadow-bars is a most memorable one – Natalie/Carrie-Ann Moss is an evasive presence. Both women literally

⁹² Most of the observations are also true for the novel that constituted the basis of the screenplay – Dashiell Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon*. Actually it is hard to believe that the novel was modified at all when it was transformed into a screenplay so high is the degree of similarity between the text and the film.

⁹³ In a sequence the detecting hero, Leonard Shelby is shown dreaming about his wife and when he awakes, the woman who lies besides him turns out to be Natalie, the waitress.

exploit the weakness of the detecting hero, but the differences between them appear clearly when comparing their iconic images.

In order to pursue such a comparative “iconographic” reading, below I present an analysis of costumes and clothing in the spirit of work done by cinema historian Stella Bruzzi. My examinations are obviously indebted to the perspectives and methods presented in her *Undressing Cinema*, particularly to one of her basic assumptions: “My fundamental premise [is] that clothing exists as a discourse not wholly dependent on the structures of narrative and character for signification (...)” (Bruzzi xvi).

Designer line and high fashion were the contexts created by the iconic women characters in classical noirs. Hats, robes, furs, flowers and pompous home-clothing, meticulously created hairstyles characterize Mary Astor as Brigid O’Shaughnessy or Joan Crawford as Mildred Pierce. Even the lesser female roles, or rather the actresses who interpret them, exhibit a careful clothing and hairstyle. Classical noir women have elegant, slender bodies and movements, stilettos are never missing accessories. In comparison, women in late 1990s crime movies reworking the noir tradition have undergone major changes, even bigger than their male counterparts. Natalie in *Memento* is played by Carrie-Ann Moss, an actress who has since then become a major icon of the *Matrix* universe: an androgynous woman, with a perfect body and wearing a black leather outfit. In Christopher Nolan’s film, she appears dressed in the simplest possible manner: wearing a blue sleeveless shirt, a short, girlish skirt and with an everyday, street-hairstyle. The only element that draws our attention to the way she looks and thus is reminiscent of the classical heroines in noir detection movies is her jewelry: earrings and necklace of turquoise color. However, thanks to its color, Natalie’s jewelry gradually blends with the overall blue (“color of memory”) of the film, losing its status as a clear reference to the icon of the beautiful but dangerous woman in noir crime movies. A similar homogenizing strategy is discernible in the iconic construction of the blonde heroine, Betty, in *Mulholland Drive*: with her everyday, functional clothing she (the actress Naomi Watts) is not unlike most viewers watching her on the screen.

Compared to Natalie, the sole female character in *Fight Club* is even lower on the scale ranging from exquisite beauty and noir elegance on to ridiculous, cheap taste or even kitsch clothing. Although this stylistic register is not unknown in the noir world – see for example Joel Cairo, played by Peter Lorre in *The Maltese Falcon* –, it is never attributed to the woman “belonging” to the questing hero. Marla Singer (played by Helena Bonham-Carter), Durden’s disillusioned female variant, is ridiculed in countless ways, although her efforts to reach the “very bottom” of acceptable life (excessive smoking, cynicism, extreme poverty, and attempts of suicide) are recognized as an “invariable quality” in a world

constantly in change. She differs so much in her looks, motivations and even language from both male figures that it is as if she were the member of a totally alien civilization, with whom the sole common ground might be established while making love. The extremely weird, distasteful, slightly gloomy look situates her as a fallen, but not a fascinating woman.

While Natalie in *Memento* or Betty in *Mullholland Drive* tone down the noir glamour towards a down-to-earth stylistic register, Marla Singer in *Fight Club* approaches the “vanishing point” of memorable noir femininity – due to the “void identity” on which her performances rest. Thus, on the evidence of these films, from important, differentiated screen identities women throughout the noir tradition become marginal, negative or featureless (exactly because they have so many “features”, like Marla Singer) characters.

3. 2. Tough counterparts

Parallel to this tendency, male role possibilities – from a dominating detective figure and several shadowy characters in *The Maltese Falcon*, the archetypal source for the noir genre – in the contemporary crime movies under examination evolve into a dual structure, with two equally important men participating in the process of quest. From easily deceived persons lacking confidence men can be seen to become shrewder, and multiply in their number – seemingly a counterbalance for women’s non-presence. In a sense, this is a return to an earlier period of the crime and detective genre, with Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson detecting together. We can think of Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) and Teddy (Joe Pantoliano) in *Memento*, or Tyler Durden (Edward Norton) and his alter ego (Brad Pitt) in *Fight Club*.

Humphrey Bogart and Mary Astor perform perhaps their best-known duet in John Huston’s cult film. By the time of *The Maltese Falcon* both had an established screen-persona – Bogart in cynical, smaller gangster roles and even comedies, Mary Astor as a comedienne, but also as an actress with considerable sex appeal, as Molly Haskell writes in *From Reverence to Rape*⁹⁴. In this movie they both recall, but also deviate from the 1930s Hollywood gangster and crime movie tradition – an aim to be performed by each and every screen criminal or pursuer according to Stella Bruzzi (68). In his suit, hat, trenchcoat, cigarette outfit Bogart is the stereotypical detective – while the gun is not an integral component of his look. Instead, he is the one who disarms characters, from crooks to policemen⁹⁵.

⁹⁴ See Haskell 189-230.

⁹⁵ That’s how Pam Cook categorizes Bogart among male stars of the period: “Little has been written about male screen costume, partly because consumerism and fashion are still mainly (and mistakenly) associated with femininity. Suffice it to say here that the tall, muscular, well-built body shape of 1950s stars such as Marlon Brando and Rock Hudson contrasted vividly with the slither proportions of leading male stars of the 1940s

In comparison to Bogart as Sam Spade, the detecting figure played by Guy Pearce in *Memento* wears a suit and a designer shirt, but he does not have a tie or a hat, and no trenchcoat either. He does not smoke, but he carries and uses a gun or different items suitable for fighting. The same iconic arrangement characterizes the naïve, entrapped film-director – a possible equivalent of Cary Grant in *North by Northwest* (1959, dir. Alfred Hitchcock) – Adam Keshner (Justin Theroux) in *Mulholland Drive*: designer suit, shirt and boots, golf-stick, expensive car, but no cigarette, trenchcoat, hat or tie⁹⁶. A narrative about the revolt of a young corporate worker against capitalism, *Fight Club* uses all these iconic elements of the crime, gangster and noir genre in a slightly altered sense. By throwing away his tie and lighting a cigarette, as well as repudiating his designer suit – an enslaving capitalist product –, Tyler Durden/Edward Norton thinks he is breaking free from the world previously determined by Versace or Calvin Klein, the well-known, stylish brands.

In the changes concerning the look of male detecting heroes we can observe the alterations of fashion: hats, ties or trenchcoats are clearly outdated, thus important and simple elements by which an atmosphere of mystery or simply shadows could be created, are lost. In consequence, the face and eyes of actors – as surfaces that create mystery – receive stronger emphasis. Suits deviate more from the ideal of neutral respectability: this process can be best illustrated by the two personalities Leonard Shelby has in *Memento*. As a respectable insurance agent, in the black and white parts of the movie, Shelby's suit, shirt and tie, or his hairstyle distantly remind one of the pin-up screen-Bogart in the role of Sam Spade. But when Shelby metamorphoses into a detecting hero, the features he loses are precisely those that made him similar to a classical detective: the well tailored suit and the respectable square look. The new, more relaxed, light-coloured – or in the case of Adam Keshner, disturbingly black – suit, the lack of cigarette and hat, and certainly the trendy car are the iconic elements that define our 1990s neo-noir detecting male heroes.

While in the case of male lead characters the iconic repertoire is changed, but nevertheless complete (car, car-mirror, car-window instead of cigarette and hat), in recent noir movies female figures are deprived of the traditional elegance, and instead are conferred a look of everyday (bad) taste, without any positive iconic power.

such as Humphrey Bogart. In 1950s Hollywood, to be a small man often meant that your sexuality was in question – as with James Dean, for example, or Montgomery Clift” (Cook 206).

⁹⁶ Although it is questionable whether Adam Keshner has any semblance to classical noir male detectives, his role as a film-director dominated by an evil film-producing corporation ready to use any means to make the director obey them is similar to many detecting men confronting a faceless power. And since he is the only male lead in a mystery story recalling noir elements, his iconic construction is important, all the more so as it is comparable to the masculine figures in the other examined movies.

3.3. The third way

The only movie analyzed here that defies my categorization is *Mullholland Drive*, where women not only appear in a great variety, but they also bond in manners only latently coded in classical noir crime movies. The lesbian love relation thematized on all the narrative levels exemplifies the third tendency in the gender representations within the noir and the neo-noir tradition: the emergence of queer possibilities.

In *The Maltese Falcon* it is the character of Joel Cairo played by Peter Lorre who allows for a queered reading due to his meticulous dressing, fragility and much too nice manners⁹⁷. While it is true that this is another instance of the “criminalization” of non-heterosexual behaviour in crime movies⁹⁸, Cairo being a member of the criminal gang, we must also observe that no one in *The Maltese Falcon* is devoid of the “touch of evil”: Sam Spade, the detective is as much involved in shadowy matters as the two slow policemen. It must be mentioned that the original novels – Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* and Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* – are fully explicit in presenting the homosexual characters. In the latter one Geiger, the dubious bookseller is portrayed as such in the interesting sequence of Carmen Sternwood’s being drugged and photographed. The palpable homophobic subtext is there in the way the late-coming Marlowe perceives and categorizes the home of the murdered Geiger, especially the next day when he goes there with Carmen: “The place was horrible by daylight. The Chinese junk on the walls, the rug, the fussy lamps, the teakwood stuff, the sticky riot of colours, the totem pole, the flagon of ether and laudanum – all this in the daytime had a stealthy nastiness, like a fag party” (Chandler, *Big* 46).

In contrast, Cain’s *Mildred Pierce* originally does not include the all-female bondage that the movie, in turn, seems to establish between Mildred and her secretary. The relationship between Mildred, the successful businesswoman and her unmarried secretary does not exclude a lesbian subtext, yet there are no explicit signs of it, except long glances through the cigarette smoke. That the possibility is open, however, is signalled by the fact that in her (canonical) interpretation of the movie Pam Cook also points to it:

⁹⁷ An interpretation which is made obvious and repeated several times in Hammett’s novel, for example when Cairo visits Spade’s office for the first time:

“The girl returned with an engraved card – *Mr. Joel Cairo*.

“This guy is queer,” she said.

“In with him, then, darling,” said Spade.

(...) His features were Levantine. (...) He held a black derby hat in a chamois-gloved hand and came towards Spade with short, mincing, bobbing steps. The fragrance of *cyphre* came with him” (Hammett 45).

⁹⁸ Examining the “male-female” system of associations at work in the loosely understood crime genre, David Glover pays attention to the “terror of homosexuality”, threatening in texts which emphasize the importance of man-to-man bonding: “Homosexuality remains unfinished business for the thriller’s male order and has almost invariably been depicted in uncompromisingly bleak and contemptuous terms” (Glover 78).

Her relationship with Veda, coupled with her close friendship with Iva (played by Eve Arden, another actress who is an ambiguous sexual figure), represents an attempt to return to the pre-Oedipal bisexual stage, a regression from patriarchy. This regression includes the men too, who are represented as weak and dissipated, untrustworthy, except for Bert, who grows to maturity during the film. (Cook 39)

It is in the context of this generic tradition that the narrative and visual construction of the main heroines in *Mulholland Drive* acquires a special status. Rita, the mysterious femme fatale and Betty, the naïve blonde actress fall in love and their erotic scenes are among the most daring ones in recent crime movies using the noir tradition and meant for a mainstream audience. It is hard not to see in their couple – especially in the light of the sequence when Rita “chooses” her name – a logical outcome of the process in which non-heterosexual gendered behaviour was hinted at in the cycle of classical noir movies, but never explicitly thematized. And this in spite of the fact that the genre was deeply immersed in examining “proper”, “suitable” gendered reactions.

Homosexual bonding is also suggested to the informed viewer in *Memento*, by such iconic elements of a simplified homosexual code-system as tattoos, elegance, or naked male bodies, let alone the “intertextual queerness” established by Guy Pearce’s memorable previous role as a drag queen in the Australian movie, *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994, dir. Stephan Elliott). Nevertheless, as in *Fight Club*, homosexuality remains an implied meaning, although in David Fincher’s movie the redefinition of phallic masculinity at once with the exclusion of women and female features is mentioned. “We’re a generation of men raised by women. I’m wondering if another woman is really the answer we need”, says the imagined Tyler in the movie, uncannily echoing Jessica Benjamin’s late 1980s theoretical model of male psychosexual development, a model inspired by Freudian theory.

Benjamin’s argument, based on object-relations theory, points to the “hardships” of forming a viable masculine subjectivity: “[i]nitially all infants feel themselves to be like their mothers. But boys discover that they cannot grow up to become her; they can only have her” (75). She understands masculine identity as a secondary phenomenon, resulting from overcoming the primary identification with the mother. That is why, she says, it is extremely hard for boys to distinguish between becoming a separate person and becoming a masculine person, thus in this process of disidentification the mother is often not seen as another subject to be recognized, but an object. One might argue that this type of masculine attitude may be considered as a constant “cultural code” attached to the film noir genre. Late 1990s films stretch it to the extreme by negating the traditional glamour of noir women and by putting

more emphasis on the “masculine” matters, such as aggression, mental work, beautiful lesbian bodies, or the need for homosociality. This type of masculine behaviour is to be detected in crime thrillers such as *Heat* (1995, dir. Michael Mann) or the *Hannibal Lecter*-trilogy as well.

3.4. Rose in a crime scenery

The acknowledgement and mainstreaming of non-heterosexual identities is a trend that seems to accompany the historical turn from the modern(ist) to the postmodern(ist) paradigm of the crime genre⁹⁹. In this respect Louise Welsh’s novel, *Cutting Room*, is to be situated at the “most postmodern(ist)” end of our imagined scale, in the same sector where David Lynch’s *Mullholland Drive* or certain sequences of *Fight Club* and *Memento* belong. The detecting figure of the novel, the auctioneer Rilke is a homosexual man, for whom sexuality is an intense and necessary component of life. No wonder therefore that his detection process is deeply influenced by it, let alone his choices of garments and looks: “I had a feeling that perhaps a short-back-and-sides could be the prelude to romance for Joan – well, if Joan had been Joe I might have thought about it but the way things were I might as well keep my locks” (Welsh 3).

Parallel with this process of mainstreaming non-heterosexual identities, the range of female types in a crime setting diminishes considerably in the period between the 1940s and the 1980s/1990s, as argued previously. One of the figures who silently go missing is the powerful, nevertheless duplicitous femme fatale, elegant and mysterious throughout. Fortunately, there is at least one 21st century criminal fiction that could be cited as the counter-example, namely Welsh’s novel and the character of Rose Bowery. Given the high degree of self-consciousness and social-political sensitivity of the texts that can be seen as belonging to a late postmodern(ist) paradigm, a quotation like the following hardly needs any further interpretation:

If Maria Callas and Paloma Picasso married and had a daughter she would look like Rose. Black hair scraped back from her face, pale skin, lips painted torture red. She smokes Dunhill, drinks at least one bottle of red wine a night, wears black and has never married. Four centuries ago Rose would have been burnt at the stake ...
(...) I had never been so close to a woman, never wanted to be. (Welsh 11)

⁹⁹A phenomenon signaled by Shaw and Wanacker as well at the end of their book about the character of Miss Marple: “An anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic position is important in these novels (...). This constitutes a development which would have completely undercut the ideological basis of the classic detective novel” (Shaw-Wanacker 105).

The elegant ignorance of the institution of heterosexual marriage, the allusion to the image of the gorgeous lesbian – capable of tempting even an aging gay auctioneer, not to speak about the looks defined by black and red: these seem to be signs that feminine femme fatales have some chance of survival close to a cybernetic age as well.

A memorable sequence involving Rose is the one when she is preparing herself for a night out before the mirror and Rilke is watching her. A typical crime situation worthy of filmic representation, the beauty of the woman pursued is produced for the gaze of the man in search. Except that Rilke is in the camp for whom such a performance is only about (abstract?) beauty: “It was restful watching Rose metamorphose into herself. (...) I was conscious of a pride that heterosexual men must feel. I was going out on the town with a beautiful woman. (...) She caught my gaze and her reflection smiled back at mine” (Welsh 96). Accompanied by Rose’s sentence referring to the visit paid by the local police regarding the unpaid rent of Bowery Auctions – “When I was a girl I thought all sheriffs would look like Alan Ladd” (Welsh 13) – the reader may have already created the stereotypical crime film scenery in which the characters of Rilke, the huge detective yearning for a macho look and Rose, the black beauty acquire a meaning iconographically enhanced by the long generic tradition. This line of inquiry may be clinched by another image we get of Rose on the day of the great auction, on the occasion of her first encounter with Inspector Anderson: “Rose laughed, placed a cigarette between her lips and leaned towards Anderson’s proffered lighter. B-movie as ever, a flash of cleavage in return for his flame” (Welsh 130). This can be seen as another example for the phenomenon already suggested, namely the postmodernist use of the crime genre for an evocation of its cultural significance, for the cultural codes its elements carry.

4. The Crying Game

All the noir characteristics mentioned above participate in the creation of a world with a specific topography, epistemological doubts and recognizable figures, easily copied and parodied formulae. Perhaps the coherent and consequent blending of certain visual compositions with the connotations associated also contributes to the popularity of film noir within the eclecticism called the postmodern. One only has to recall the network of meanings usually triggered off by a high angle shot of a dark, hatted-and-suited male figure or the half-shadowed, not wholly frontal medium close up of a dark/white (blonde) hair and dressed woman. Some of these associations would be “secret, sin, murder, detective, and danger”

even if the movie did not otherwise display the other characteristics of film noirs¹⁰⁰, a mechanism operating for example in Jude's visual construction in *The Crying Game*, a British movie of 1994 by Irish director Neil Jordan.

The main plot-line of the movie concerns the love relationship developing between a straight IRA member, Fergus (Stephen Rea), and a transvestite hairdresser, Dil (Jaye Davidson), apparently dominating the whole filmic atmosphere. Yet by situating Jude (Miranda Richardson), the former girlfriend in a noir mise-en-scène and with corresponding costume and make-up, the tradition of love story and romance is contrasted with the well-known disturbance of heterosexual happiness in film noirs. In the sequence when Jude puts her earrings in the light of a side-spotlight, the frame presents her three mirror images, in a film quotation of all previous noir heroines "dressed to kill". That she is later shot is interpreted by feminist critics of Neil Jordan's movie as a misogynist gesture, punishing the active, transgressive woman. Necessarily simplifying the argumentation and the complexity of the two, explicitly feminist interpretations of the movie¹⁰¹, I will concentrate on two features they identify in relation to Jude. One is her reliance on an Oedipal/heterosexual matrix (also because she is an icon for Irish nationalism), the other is her "powerful woman" image. Although along different lines, both Edge and Irving see her final murder by Dil as the punishment of the feminist figure and Irving also considers it as failure of Neil Jordan to imagine an Irish national identity which does not exclude minorities, in this case women. From this perspective the director and the film do not escape the binaries of homogenizing nationalist, patriarchal, masculinist discourses – an opinion I shall try to refute.

Jude, the incarnation of the (necessarily ambiguous) Mother Eire figure is demonized, and presented as violent and sexually threatening. Edge reads these instances as representing national and international anxieties about contemporary masculine and feminine subject positions: the character of Jude is punished with death not only because Fergus rejects an oedipal nationalism, but also because of the feminist and empowered connotations of her look and behavior. Thus, claims Edge, feminine gender and active national identity mutually exclude each other on one level and Jordan's movie remains entrapped in this narrow vision as far as Jude's consecutive punishments (she is forced to stay silent, rejected by her lover, killed) are concerned.

Another moment when her double unreliability – as a woman and as an unstable national subject – comes to the forefront is her brief conversation with Fergus in the greenhouse. Asked by him whether "she has given "it" to Jody", an allusion to sexual

¹⁰⁰ A mechanism perfectly exploited in the "Jazz Mystery" sequence of Vincente Minelli's *The Band Wagon* (1953).

¹⁰¹ See Edge 1995 and Irving 1997.

intercourse (or serious emotional involvement?), she replies in an offended manner: “There are certain things I wouldn’t do for my country” (Jordan 11). Staged as a *noir* police interrogation – Fergus mockingly directs the light of a lamp over the otherwise unseen, crouching Jude – the sequence recalls the seriousness and compelling call of national discourse, opposed by a reckless subject.

While classical heteronormativity is questioned to a certain degree in the relationship between Dil and Fergus, its patriarchal version governs Jude’s fate. The movie is seen by Edge to break with traditional representations of the Irish Republican Army only with regard to the male characters who are not complete “violent psychotics”, moreover, they are made to partake in complex racial and sexual constellations. The representation of the only “real” female character, Jude, however, conforms to very traditional, mythical images of women “who kill”, and therefore transgress the boundaries of their sex. Patriarchal queer shots (at) feminism: approximately this is the feminist understanding of the gunfire duel between Jude and Dil in feminist critiques of the movie.

Another opposition governing the plot of Jordan’s film is the one between rural and urban, mythical and traditional, historical and modern. The autumn countryside and the rainy, gloomy London visually create the contrast, as well as motivate the changes in the appearances of two of the IRA members. Fergus is forced by his incognito to put on city suits and modify his haircut, Jude does the same by her own will: “I wanted a tougher look”, she explains. However, the traces of their provincial background do not melt away; indeed, Jordan repeatedly insists in the script that Fergus must look like a real city migrant, pettily elegant, not wholly familiar with the new codes of behavior. The sequence in the bar when he does not know how to handle the cocktail offered by Col and must be assisted by him to literally get to the drink is a reminder of his failure to pass as a “civilized” being.

Jude reappears as a cool killer, constantly represented according to the cinematic conventions of film noir, one of the most “urban” genres in cinema. This field of meaning is emphasized by Jane Giles in the BFI monograph about *The Crying Game*:

In London she [Jude] reappears out of the shadows, having transformed herself into a sleek urban *femme fatale* with a ‘tougher look’ of tight designer armour, helmet-like bob and a gun in her handbag. (...) Jude dresses for the assassination in front of a three-piece mirror, recalling *The Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1948). (Giles 60-1)

However, Jude's dialect and vocabulary do not resemble the rare, impressively eloquent sentences uttered by typical femmes fatales, at least not in the scene when she approaches Fergus, then leaves, whispering "Keep the faith" threateningly, and in an Irish dialect. Therefore both figures – Fergus and Jude – mix the qualities of pure urbanity and fragile provinciality, qualities inherently in a tense relation within an unbalanced urban noir universe.

Critics tend to make much of the friendship developing between Jody and Fergus since it subverts two strong stereotypes at work in IRA movies: those of the tough, heartless killer and pervasive/latent racism. What emerges is a caring, feminized masculinity (one can think of Fergus feeding Jody, or Jody confiding to him his great secret); a dominant, macho masculinity is fragmented into several possibilities. This choice on the part of the director and the movie is highly criticized from the feminist standpoint Sarah Edge occupies. She sees this proliferation of male identities as the source of a new type of masculine community which excludes women: "I would argue that, as Jody and Fergus bond, we begin to see emerging one of the underlying concerns of this film: that of male power, status and unity" (Edge 178).

On the one hand, one could criticize Edge's interpretation of the film's concern with masculinities without women as slightly male homophobic. On the other, it is in such a context of feminist concern over the exclusion of "real" women that the irony of Dil's transvestism comes to the forefront. Can't we rather say that aspects of femininity invade even the most protected areas of masculinity in her character as well as in her seduction of the supposedly straight, simple Irish guy? The finally positive assertion of a more flexible, impure femininity in the last images of a gorgeous Dil visiting her lover in prison could also be recalled in this respect. She is dismissed by this type of feminist criticism as a regression into a more traditional femininity when compared with the progressive look and behavior of the London Jude: "Unlike Jude, Dil is constructed in relation to the traditional signifiers of the feminine: she is beautiful and sexy" (Edge 180). This understanding not only forecloses the ironical and ambiguous possibilities concerning the successful passing of a male transvestite, but also ignores the tensions of a queered understanding of a man who looks like a woman and therefore cannot look like a man. I would also suggest that Edge's perspective argues for an exclusive understanding of femininity as feminist and in the end not detachable from the biologically female sexed body. Marjorie Garber best expresses the logic of understanding I propose to use here when she refers to Elaine Showalter's feminist criticism of the movie *Tootsie*:

For *Tootsie* is indeed not a feminist film. Nor is it a film about a woman, or a man pretending to be a woman. It is a film about a transvestite. (...) for feminists to see *Tootsie* as a film about men's views of women (and of feminism) is to erase or repress any awareness of that which the metadramatic nature of the film constantly stresses: the fact that "Dorothy's" power inheres in her blurred gender, in the fact of her cross-dressing, and not – despite the stereotypical romantic ending – in *either* of her gendered identities. (Garber 6)

From among the figures of the two feminine main characters Dil (Jaye Davidson) and Jude (Miranda Richardson) in the movie, only one elicits the critical interest of the feminist readings quoted above, namely Jude, the IRA member, the Irish woman from Belfast. Seen either as a typical product of patriarchal filmic representation – a woman subordinated throughout to sadistic/authoritative men and their sexualizing gaze – or on the contrary as a New Woman punished by the same mechanism, Jude becomes the sole signifier and signified of femininity for Edge and Irving. Dil, the Spitalfields/London, male-to-female transvestite hairdresser cannot successfully pass as a woman in the eyes of Sarah Edge and Katrina Irving: in the end, she returns as a hidden man forming an all-male coalition with Fergus, the IRA volunteer.

In contrast to the two feminist interpretations, the text of Stella Bruzzi is largely devoted to reading and understanding the figure and the femininity of Dil in her book about clothing and body in contemporary Euro-American movies, *Undressing Cinema*. Discussing the film's use of transvestitism under the subtitle "The Erotic Strategies of Androgyny", Bruzzi insists not only on Dil's impersonation of different gendered, classed and stylized identities, but also on the external and internal transformations Jude, Fergus, Jody and Peter undergo during the movie. This is a reading strategy that points to uncertainties, ambiguities and secrets in the gendered (self-) fashioning of the characters.

The comparison of the two types of reading (and through them the figures they foreground, that is Jude and Dil) allows for a more detailed discussion of mass cultural genres, (film) noir signifiers and the deep gendering implied in these processes. The cinematic (visual/thematic) conventions of popular genres that can be discerned in portraying Dil and Jude are romances/melodramas and (detective) thrillers/(neo) film noirs. Dil is signified and decodable by instances of mise-en-scène, pre-haircut appearance and the reactions of men to her as the heroine of a sad love story: "Like a character in one of Ophuls' or Sirk's 'woman's pictures', Dil is suffering from 'ennui' rather than a real disease: she is dying of love" (Giles 67). Meanwhile Jude gradually emerges as an independent, strong and mysterious

“investigating” noir femme fatale. The inversion of these metafilmic (metatextual) signifiers attached to the “real” and the “performed” femininity in Jordan’s movie creates a site of high tension of gen(d)eric invocations and negations. Thus the fates of Dil and Jude can be seen as also determined by the specific narrative conventions of romances and neo-noirs they are enacting within the delicate texture of this film.

5. Genre as a symbol

In *Mullholland Drive*, we encounter a memorable filmic site where a still-image becomes the store of personal memory and identity, parallel with the evocation of a film noir universe. In the opening sequences, the character played by Laura Elena Harring appears as a glamorous woman wearing a black evening dress, who is the victim of a terrible car accident. Losing her consciousness and memory, she finds refuge in a beautiful villa, the house of a rich Hollywood actress. Surprised in the bathroom by Betty, the missing actress’s niece from the province, naked and bewildered, the mysterious woman is unable to tell her name to Betty. While drying herself, she sees in the mirror (a metaphor of fractured identity) a poster of one of the most famous noir crime movies, *Gilda* (1946, dir. Charles Vidor), starring Rita Hayworth, the poster presenting the well-known, almost iconographic portrait of the actress-as-Gilda, the duplicitous femme fatale. In desperation, she introduces herself as Rita.

On the level of the narrative, this is a perfectly motivated element: where else should one see a movie heroine’s image if not in an actress’s house? The Lynch heroine borrows from the fascinating blonde star of classical 1940s crime Hollywood her name, and also the iconic radiance and role-trajectory of Gilda/Rita Hayworth. The collisions of movie poster and movie narrative, of mirroring a genre and adhering to it, are strongly self-reflexive moments in *Mullholland Drive*, an attitude “repeated” by the amnesiac heroine when she decides to call herself Rita (Hayworth) from now on. The much acclaimed, historical star persona of the actress of Spanish origins reverberates in the movie *Gilda* where she plays the part of a singer-dancer-performer, and the problems of being an actress (in Hollywood) constitute the nodal points in the multiple narrative spaces of *Mullholland Drive* as well. The regaining of her psychic integrity is accompanied by unconscious moments of remembering Spanish sentences for Rita in *Mullholland Drive*: this feature is conditioned by the pre-image of her screen persona, the 1940s Hollywood star who until 1937 wore the name Margarita Cansino and adopted “Rita Hayworth” after that year. A moment of tribute to the noir tradition by David Lynch, the sequence is a plausible illustration of how noir iconography lives on through the conscious re-appropriation by its successors.

The moment of adopting Rita's name is the emphatic point of the process that involves film noir generic allusions and film history as a meta-context of interpretation, of which a few further elements are: Sunset Boulevard (a reference name/street for the heroines in search) is also the title of Billy Wilder's melodramatic noir (1950) starring Gloria Swanson as the old and nostalgic actress; Dolores del Rio (the singer in the Club Silencio) was an acclaimed musical-actress of 1930s Hollywood. This moment can also be considered as an emblematic enactment of the turn from modern(ist) crime film poetics and gendered identity to a postmodern(ist) phase. A fragmented narrative structure, with objects, names and actors serving as linking elements instead of causal or logical relations – which, no matter how complicated the story, still prevail in classical noirs – characterizes the movie of David Lynch. And even if her heroine seems to be modeled after the heterosexual beauty on show for the male gaze, a role she is playing for the director Adam Kesher, Rita is primarily defined by being in love with a blonde actress. Betty Elms, the novice from Ontario – or Diane Selwyn, the second-rate Hollywood “worker” – occupies the position of Sam Spade/Humphrey Bogart or Philip Marlowe/Robert Mitchum in the classical noir gender-matrix. Entering in the middle of a mysterious affair, s/he begins to investigate and falls in love with her object of research, whom she must (try to) kill, in a manner not too different from Sam Spade – who promises Brigid O'Shaughnessy in *The Maltese Falcon* that “her precious neck” will have to suffer. Far from being simple inversions, these changes recall and re-interpret the canon of crime film from the period of modernity, engendering a fictional world that is as much dependent on noir narrative formulas and cultural codes (such as patriarchal and heterosexual gendered behaviour) as it is trying to leave them behind.

This practice is echoed in a sequence of Giuseppe Tornatore's filmed metaphysical detective story, *A Pure Formality*: the hero searching for the memory of his own suicide looks through a huge mass of photographs, all supposedly having been taken by him when he was still alive. Among amateur shots of holidays and friends, a photo of Humphrey Bogart (white suit, slicked hair, mysterious aura) appears¹⁰², without any functional role in the narrative of the hero's search for his own memory. A *noir* crime context having been previously created by alluding to Bogart (“Exact time is to be told by Humphrey Bogart as well?” the arrested

¹⁰²During his chase by the two sturdy policemen, Michel Poiccard (Jean-Paul Belmondo) – in Jean-Luc Godard's *Breathless* (1960) – emerges from an underground passage to arrive vis-à-vis a boulevard cinema, where the current program is a 1956 American movie directed by Marc Robson, *The Harder They Fall*. Michel stops in front of the poster and the film stills on display, most of which feature the well known profile of actor Humphrey Bogart, and a slow interaction starts between the two faces, the two actors, and the two traditions – European/French art cinema and American crime film. We are to regard in close ups and in shot-counter shot construction the faces of Bogart and Belmondo, a “dialogue” issuing between them thanks to the beautiful glide of the camera(s). Belmondo's smoking figure is turned into a still image, while Bogart's melancholic face comes to life thanks to the slightly vibrating camera and the smoke which covers it.

writer asks his guards), and by employing some utterly stylized noir visual solutions, this photographic moment is similar in its construction and effect to the discussed sequence in *Mullholland Drive*.

In Tornatore's movie, the noir conventions reappear in a totally masculine universe: in a sense, here we see the other extreme of the balanced patriarchal and heterosexual crime story. The hero in search for his memory is a writer in mid-life and creativity crisis, while the police officer leading the quest is a self-assured and pompous detective in love with literature. As if gendered identity did not matter, the two men (and the male guards on duty) conduct endless discussions about highly intellectual topics: novels, narrative structures, or the workings of memory. Offering no hints of non-heterosexual bonding either, *A Pure Formality* speaks about questions of gender through this utter lack of questions of gender. In this context, the name and photo of Humphrey Bogart refer to the cultural codes of a masculine identity that – despite the obvious problems occurring already in classical noirs – is still more functional than that of Onoff, the writer's, can ever be. As for the police officer (played by Roman Polanski, he is no copycat of Sam Spade: he does not smoke and by the end of the movie we have the strong impression that he is a quotation from one of the writer's books¹⁰³.

The mechanism of both cited sequences can be described from a film stylistical perspective if we refer back to Noël Carroll's discussion of the use of genres as symbols. Writing about Paul Schrader's 1978 movie, *Blue Collar*, Carroll mentions that

the images grow ominously dark while the story still seems comic and high-spirited. *Blue Collar* starts to look like a *film noir* (...) before the tension in the plot begins to build. But you feel the allusion strongly, and, sure enough, as time goes on, the stylistic reference turns out to have a premonition of things to come. (Carroll, *Allusion* 69)

The mode in which the noir atmosphere and style invade Paul Schrader's film can be said to be typical in the light of the techniques of allusion identified above in *A Pure Formality* or *Mullholland Drive*. Forcing one to employ strategies of understanding conditioned by genre film history, both movies recall elements belonging to a previous paradigm and present their story by strongly relying on the viewers' familiarity with noir gen(d)eric identities. Such examples can be understood as results, symptoms and instances of

¹⁰³ I must thank Tamás Bényei for suggesting that this "type" of interrogating police officer is also related to (high) literary traditions.

the turn from (the) modern(ism) to (the) postmodern(ism) having happened – at least in crime genres.

Both Theo D’haen and Noël Carroll mention a further characteristic of the way in which genre is reinterpreted by postmodern strategies of alluding to features from the period of modernity: they speak about the relevance of genres being used for the “cultural codes” they carry, for the symbolic connotations they have. Carroll mentions that in the case of such movies as Brian de Palma’s *Blow Out* (1981), Paul Schrader’s *Blue Collar* (1978), or Stanley Kubrick’s *Shining* (1979) the genres of crime, noir or horror film are re-interpreted, but that is not the sole “product” of these (then) young and nonconformist directors’ working with genres. “By referring to genres that have a large body of established meanings, by using genre itself as a symbol”, these films also have discursive implications for the status of other generic movies and the values represented by them (Carroll, *Allusion* 60). In turn, Theo D’haen claims that genres, precisely because of their formulaic structure, come to signal not only typical patterns of action, but also certain cultural values and codes¹⁰⁴.

How could we describe the cultural codes or the symbolic values carried by the genre of film noir? I think a fairly good estimation can be made if noir criticism’s most frequent topics – anxiety and gendered behaviour – are taken for the cultural codes or symbolic values associated with the genre and its re-workings. As for anxiety, let us quote Noël Carroll: “dark lighting in an urban setting is, in virtually dictionarylike fashion, now a telegraphic transmission for anxiety and a “descent” into “existential angst”, even if that mood is not exactly borne out in the film’s own specific dramatic development” (Carroll, *Allusion* 55-56). Slavoj Žižek expresses a very similar idea, although with reference to narrative developments. Analyzing *Blade Runner* (1982, dir. Ridley Scott) and *Angel Heart* (1986, dir. Alan Parker), he speaks about the existence of “a noir logic” which manifests itself in the quest of a detective figure after somebody who in the end is revealed to be himself. This results in the falling apart of one’s subjectivity/identity, which is shown to be constructed on a void.¹⁰⁵

The women of classical noir movies are considered to embody the “essence” of the vamp and film histories more often than not present photographs of heroines in classical noirs when visualizing femme fatale figures. Because of this constellation, a big emphasis falls on what sort of men the heroes, the detectives in these movies are, and their differences from traditional, heterosexual, macho masculinity also acquire importance. That gender-sensitive

¹⁰⁴ “Formula stories, then, are doubly coded: *literary* codes conventionally express *cultural* codes” (D’haen 165).

¹⁰⁵ Although it was published in English, the edition of Žižek’s book I have had access to is its 2001 Romanian translation, (Žižek 8).

criticism has been flourishing with reference to the noir genre is no surprise¹⁰⁶. Therefore I would suggest that a prominent cultural code transmitted by the noir genre consists in patterns of (primarily) patriarchal, heterosexual gendered behaviour, but also cases of its non-fulfillment. In Giuseppe Tornatore's *A Pure Formality*, for instance, a typical noir star like Sam Spade/Humphrey Bogart reappears not only for the sake of a quotation on a photograph, but also as another element that contributes to the development of disoriented, bewildered masculinity, a cultural code associated with the film noir genre.

Given the attention paid to "gender problems" in classical noir movies, its constant recycling from Roman Polanski's 1974 *Chinatown* to David Lynch's 2001 *Mulholland Drive* should also be considered in the wider context created by feminism and queer identity movements and the social changes in gender roles over the last few decades. Jane Place sees as symptomatic the interest in and popularity of these films as "narratives in which male fears are concretised in sexually aggressive women who must be destroyed" (Place 54). And, it might be added, in dangerously close men-to-men or women-to-women relationships. I would argue therefore that the origin of film noir – as a mass cultural genre from the period of modernity, (also) dramatizing post World War II anxieties about changing gender relations – is closely related to its patterns of reappearance in a postmodern context.

Especially if considered retrospectively, from the vantage point constituted by 1990s arthouse thrillers reworking (neo) noir panels, film noir may be deemed a metonymic signifier for the modern(ist) corpus of crime genre films. Furthermore, film noir allusions can be seen as constituting metafilmic signifiers in postmodern crime films. James Naremore presents a similar argument with reference to film noir, a genre that relates to artifacts, but to discourses as well, gaining a particular significance in the context of postmodern culture: "A plausible cause could indeed be made that, far from dying out with the studio system, noir is almost entirely a creation of postmodern culture – a belated reading of classic Hollywood that was popularized by the cineastes of the French New Wave, appropriated by reviewers, academics, and film-makers, and then recycled on TV" (Naremore 107). These allusions can be also seen as signifiers capable of highlighting elements of crime modernism (or modern crime) for the sake of transcending them. At the same time they also emphasize the thematic of changing gendered behaviour, of non-patriarchal or non-heterosexual, "ambivalent" types of sexual and gender conduct¹⁰⁷. Nevertheless, one must observe the historical changes in the way this signifier is used, the differences between the poetics and gendered world of 1980s neo noir

¹⁰⁶ Rick Altman in the *Oxford Filmenciklopédia* categorizes the genre as having been "created" by film critics instead of producers or the audience, a rare case in genre film history (284-285).

¹⁰⁷ A phenomenon to be observed in other films as well, including *Pulp Fiction* (1994, dir. Quentin Tarantino), and *The Man Who Wasn't There* (2001, dir. Joel and Ethan Coen).

and late 1990s crime films with noir allusions, a task to be (partially) undertaken in the following sections of the dissertation.

Chapter 6

LATE MODERN(IST) VERSIONS?

SOLUTIONS FOR MEDIAL ENIGMAS

In line with the metanarrative of the turn from modernism and modernity to postmodernism and postmodernity this chapter sets out to analyse detection films following the era of film noir, and thus totally relegated to a modern(ist) canon – as well as a crime story on which one of the analyzed movies is based. The already introduced angle of analysis – how mediating technologies influence detection and contribute to the emergence of a quality which is considered an essentially postmodern one (e.g. the “deadly” (objectifying) nature of representation) – is further developed along a historical axis, starting with the year 1960 and until the late 1990s, while attention is also paid to gender(ed) codes in the analyzed criminal fictions. Yet, as the conclusion will show, the conscious employment of mediating technologies in the process of leaving and discovering criminal traces does not wholly conform to a narrative of historical development and growth, thus allowing one the gesture of constructing (again) the modern(ist)–postmodern(ist) dichotomy not exclusively as a historical, but also as a conceptual pair of opposites.

1.1. “Don’t Look Now” when gender is played upon

When the revelation of gender identity and orientation is constructed in the form of a mystery story where the correct decision might mean life or death, we are confronted with a dramatic narrative representation of gender construction. And when the protagonist is a bewildered male hero trying to come to terms with the gender (orientation) of apparently female persons in order to unravel a web of mysteries, one can say that the patriarchal mechanism of creating normative gender roles is staged. Therefore the following reading of du Maurier’s text is intended to offer a radical version of how mediating images/surfaces can and may lead to fatal conclusions, in a fundamentally gender-conscious fictional environment.

The instances of “gender mysteries” in du Maurier’s 1970 story, “Don’t Look Now”, are interwoven with a criminal plot whose victim is the leading male figure, unable throughout the story to correctly identify the gender roles played by women. At once the main focalizer and the surrogate narrator, his is the mind and the gaze for which heterosexual

femininity, latent lesbianism, disruptive transvestism and unnatural feminine monstrosity become visible or, on the contrary, remain hidden. His death is a result of his failure to attribute the correct gender identity to women and can be interpreted literally, as well as allegorically, as the destruction of a heterosexual masculinity by femininities not obeying a normative gender dichotomy¹⁰⁸. It must be mentioned that the male protagonist of *Don't Look Now* also fails to accept his psychic capacities, which perhaps could have provided him with a possibility to redefine his masculinity.

After the shock of the tragic death of their beloved five-year old daughter, the British couple – John and Laura – go on a holiday in Venice. While having a lunch on a trip they observe a pair of identical twin sisters and they start to invent amusing stories about their identity, resuming an old guessing-game they used to play. However, Laura enters into conversation with them, as one of them, a medium, confesses having seen their dead daughter. Upset by his wife's credulity and fearing that she will lose her mental balance, the husband tries to distance themselves from the twins. They meet once more in a restaurant, where the psychic sister tells Laura to leave Venice, this being a message from little Christine in the spirit world. John is identified by the same figure as also having psychic powers and as being in a great danger: unlike his wife, he does not believe a word. However, a telegram about the illness of their son in England settles the dispute, and Laura travels by plane; John is to follow her later by train. While leaving Venice, he sees his wife entering the city in the company of the two fearful sisters, and the mystery of why she came back from the plane consumes his energies. With the help of the police he finds the twins, whom he suspects of doing harm to Laura. In the evening he contacts her by phone in London, where she has nevertheless arrived. The sisters explain his vision about Laura returning to Venice as an example of "second sight": he has seen the future, not the present. Relieved, John wanders through Venice, when he notices the figure of a little child running from a chaser, whom he identifies with a murderer at large in the city. He tries to help the child, but enters into a trap made by his own suspicion and misattribution, and is killed, giving sense to his vision about a distressed returning wife in the company of the psychic sisters.

As I stated above, the short story presents a model of gender (orientation) attribution to females by a male gaze and voice. It is John who initiates the play about the surprising twin sisters: "DON'T LOOK NOW," John said to his wife, "but there are a couple of old girls two tables away who are trying to hypnotise me" (du Maurier, *Look* 17). The allusion to being

¹⁰⁸My interpretation is indebted to Toril Moi: "From a phallogocentric point of view, women will then come to represent the necessary frontier between man and chaos, but because of their very marginality they will also always seem to recede into and merge with the chaos of the outside" (Moi 112).

hypnotised is later supported by the supernatural capacities of the blind epileptic sister who can communicate with the spirit world and is capable of telepathy and thought transference.

The old topos of the blind and apparently mad messenger is played upon here, as well as the conventional association of women (especially man-less ones) with madness and obscurity: “Quite frankly, I judge your old sisters as being a couple of freaks, if nothing else. They’re obviously unbalanced, and I’m sorry if this hurts you, but the fact is they’ve found a sucker in you” (du Maurier, *Look* 37), John says to Laura on the occasion of their second encounter with them. The blind sister mainly talks to her twin, and both of them, as well as their fantastic message, find a listener only in the other woman, Laura. John mostly considers all three of them to be beyond reason.

This pattern recalls the one identified by Shoshana Felman in her reading of Balzac’s 1830 short story *Adieu* in the article “Women and Madness: the Critical Fallacy”. Felman establishes a boundary between the dichotomic pairs initiated by *male/female* and mainly exemplified by the relation between two mute women unable to communicate with the men trying to contact them. The demarcation line identified by Felman is noticeable in the present story as well:

Understanding occurs in this text only on one side or the other of the boundary line, which, separating silence from speech, distinguishes madness from reason. It is nonetheless striking that the dichotomy Reason/Madness, as well as Speech/Silence, exactly coincides in this text with the dichotomy Men/Women. (Felman, *Women* 126)

The hypothesis that the sisters are not female and respectable originates from Laura, who humorously tries to spin up their mutual game: “They’re not old girls at all,” she said. “They’re male twins in drag” (du Maurier, *Look* 17). John immediately links the phenomenon of cross-dressing with the idea of criminal intent:

‘you know what it is – they’re criminals doing the sights of Europe, changing sex at each stop. Twin sisters here on Torcello. Twin brothers tomorrow in Venice, or even tonight, parading arm-in-arm across the Piazza San Marco. Just a matter of switching clothes and wigs. ‘Jewel thieves or murderers?’ asked Laura. ‘Oh, murderers, definitely. But why, I ask myself, have they picked on me?’ (du Maurier, *Look* 18)

Laura soon denounces this seemingly innocent attribution in favour of another fiction: “‘They’re neither murderers nor thieves. They’re a couple of pathetic old retired schoolmistresses on holiday, who’ve saved up all their lives to visit Venice’”(du Maurier, *Look* 18). At one point all the attributions are denied by what Laura thinks to be the truth: “‘You see, the thing is that she’s a retired doctor, they come from Edinburgh and the one who saw Christine went blind a few years ago’”(du Maurier, *Look* 24).

In spite of the sense that the identity of the twin sisters has been accurately determined, the idea of criminals in drag pervades the story. Of course, this is strongly related to the fact that John is the main focalizer and surrogate narrator, and his point of view is the most accessible for the reader. That the sisters have a greater influence on his wife than he might have, due to their supernatural capacities and Laura’s fragile state of mind after the tragic death of their daughter makes him feel uneasy. No wonder that he gives the only explanation possible in a heterosexual matrix of gender binaries: “[s]he’s phoney,” he thought, “she’s not blind at all. They’re both of them frauds, and they could be males in drag after all, just as we pretended at Torcello, and they’re after Laura” (du Maurier, *Look* 36).

Desperately looking for his lost wife, whom he thinks he has seen returning with the twins, he dismisses all the other possible explanations concerning the identity of the sisters and strongly focuses on the evils possibly resulting from their exercising (sexually and psychically) attractive powers on his wife. As the tension of the story increases, or maybe precisely for this end, the idea of criminal males in drag is equaled in its threatening quality by the twins attributed (by John) feminine gender identity and a latent lesbianism: “Anxiety had turned to fear, to panic. Something had gone terribly wrong. Those women had got hold of Laura, played upon her suggestibility, induced her to go with them, either to their hotel or elsewhere” (du Maurier, *Look* 52).

The idea of lesbianism menacing the understanding of a heterosexual couple is hinted at earlier in the story. When first seeing the sisters, apart from the game with “males in drag”, the deciphering of the austere mode of dressing and haircut of the more active sister leads John to the image of lesbian households:

He had seen the type on golf-courses and at dog shows – invariably showing not sporting breeds but pugs – and if you came across them at a party in somebody’s house they were quicker on the draw with a cigarette lighter than he was himself, a mere male, with pocket matches. The general belief that they kept house with a more feminine, fluffy companion, was not always true. Frequently they boasted, and adored, a golfing husband. (du Maurier, *Look* 19)

John's fear of the two unreasonable women exercising a greater power on his wife than he does is alluded to by the comparison between the two habits of offering light at parties. Him being excelled by an apparently female person not only accounts for the great degree of masculinity involved in a possibly lesbian woman, but also degrades his masculinity, and this situation is exactly what he fears in relation to his wife.

Whether in drag or lesbian, John decodes the sisters as (sexually) threatening his wife: this opinion betrays a profound mistrust in the stability of his own masculine gender identity. The fact that they appear for him as unreasonable, "psychic", demonstrates the working of a vicious circle, one that designates as unnatural those women who do not conform to the patriarchal male gaze. "Patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of femininity on all biological women, in order precisely to make us believe that the chosen standards for femininity are *natural*. Thus a woman who refuses to conform can be labelled both *unfeminine* and *unnatural*" (Moi 108).

1.2. Gender Safety?

The menace manifest in the inexplicable events and the attributed queer habits does not avoid the intimate relationship of the married couple either; the departure of Laura deeply disturbs John.

Laura had climbed down the steps into the launch and was standing amongst the crowd of passengers, waving her hand, her scarlet coat a gay patch of colour amongst the more solemn suiting of her companions. The launch tooted again and moved away from the landing-stage, and he stood there watching it, a sense of immense loss filling his heart. (du Maurier, *Look* 42)

After succeeding to locate her in Britain and dismissing his (supernaturally explicable) vision of the future, John recedes into a regained heterosexual, rational safety in spite of all the anxieties he himself has created throughout the narrative. However, a drama of the monstrosity and supreme mystery of a feminine figure menacing the construction of masculinity remains to be enacted in a terrifying gothic framework.

The origin of this event lies in the fact that the male gaze misunderstands again and again the gender and the social markers of the women he encounters. He and his wife apparently safe from threats, John is walking through the evening Venice, relieved. Although during his intercourse with the police he has heard about a horrible murderer at large in

Venice, all his doubts are soothed. When he sees for the second time a small creature dressed in a scarlet coat, running along the water, no thoughts related to crime occur to him. He follows the creature in spite of the uncanny, strange features that accompany the repeated appearances of the pixie hooded being:

John hesitated, his eye caught by a small figure which suddenly crept from a cellar entrance below one of the opposite houses, and then jumped into a narrow boat below. It was a child, a little girl – she couldn't have been more than five or six – wearing a short coat over her minute skirt, a pixie hood covering her head. There were four boats moored, line upon line, and she proceeded to jump from one to other with surprising agility, intent, it would seem, upon escape. (du Maurier, *Look* 31)

The tragic misapprehension of the creature in the pixie hood, dressed in the same scarlet as his wife, leads to John's pointless death. He does not make the connection between the running little figure he sees in the dark Venice street and the mysterious maniac killer at large in the city, the possibility of (a not necessarily gender-) drag does not occur to him. Unable to interpret the agility, strength, speed and size of the creature in a non-patriarchal framework, where adult women would be allowed to behave like children (=gender neutral beings) if need be, John does not identify the running figure with an adult woman, but obviously with a little girl.

This situation can be read as a reversal of the suppositions he holds concerning the twin sisters, where he does not hesitate to assume the criminal intent and the unconventional gender behaviour, in spite of the harmlessness of the old women. The sisters invested with all the markers forbidden for women in a patriarchal heterosexual matrix (supernatural powers, no male companion, latent lesbianism, attracting women) are supposed to wear drag and send us to the idea of a self-reflexive narrative. This pattern, especially when contrasted with John's self-evidently innocent "reading" of the young female figure, rhymes with the hypothesis of Marjorie Garber about the relation existing between drag/cross-dressing and self-reflectivity: "The more I have studied transvestitism and its relation to representation the more I have begun to see it, oddly enough, as in many ways normative: as a condition that very frequently accompanies theatrical representation when theatrical awareness is greatest" (Garber 164).

The psychic twin sisters are attributed drag, and their figures may be linked to the idea of a self-reflexive narrative and, finally, criminal intent. However, it is not they who represent the final menace for John, but the apparently helpless pixie-hooded female child. In the last

scene of the story the falling hood reveals an evil female dwarf who is throwing the knife at John's throat in a manner similar to the previous murders. This is as surprising as it is severely logical, since it follows a trajectory of deconstructing (punishing?) the "innocent" gender attributions of the patriarchal, heterosexual male gaze and voice. John has to be killed by a monstrous woman, a transvestite cannot cause real harm since he/she is "that spectral other who exists only in representation – not a representation of male or female, but of, precisely, itself: its own phantom or ghost" (Garber 180). Therefore the sisters allegedly in drag do not have a word to say in the game occurring between real males and females.

The unrelated interpretational gaps in Daphne du Maurier's short story foreground each other, re-creating the hermeneutic loops at contingent points of the narration. The crime produces itself as an effect of the intermingling of marital, gender and criminal misunderstandings. The constant mis- and re-readings concerning the gender identity of three cardinal figures is mirrored by a heterosexual couple misinterpreting each other and by the inability of the heterosexual male in quest to seize the important clues within the criminal line. Yet it is not only the family peace that is disturbed: the husband becomes the victim of a maniac killer, not least because he projects unconventional gender roles unto his wife and a pair of twin sisters. At the same time he is unable to correctly assign the highly conventional gender and monstrosity of the person who finally kills him: these two opposing mistakes lead to the annihilation of the sole male figure, the surrogate narrator/focalizer and therefore the story itself.

1.3. "Don't Look Now", dear viewer

The 1973 movie adaptation of "Don't Look Now" directed by Nicholas Roeg is a film which, similarly to all the others analyzed, is interested in constructing and solving a criminal mystery, yet without police or justice procedurals being actually called for¹⁰⁹. *Don't Look Now* presents the tragic story of the married couple temporarily living in Venice by employing strongly effective visual methods which seem to be most powerful in those sequences that clearly are subsequent additions to the story as created originally by Daphne du Maurier. We may think of the fragments opening and closing the movie, but also consider that compared to the criminal intentions and motivations presented by the story of du Maurier the film puts the emphases in different places and it builds a different motivational chain, thanks to the medial possibilities offered by the moving image. To an ampler formulation of

¹⁰⁹ As a matter of fact, the main protagonist, John Baxter's visits at the police inspector and the bishop interpret and mirror each other, not least because of the effect created by the fascinating Italian buildings and their reverberating and empty interiors, where the human figures and their everyday deeds are downsized by the neighbouring walls.

this difference we may cite the opposition of the verbs “to tell” and “to show”, since the movie seems to substitute for moments of narrative telling and emphasis steps of showing and revealing, as we will later see. Thus a comparative reading of the two “interpretations” is meaningful and important, with the specific solutions of the filmic variant highlighted below.

The Baxters’ ten-year old daughter, Christine, is drowned in a pond near their house, a tragic event which nearly drives her mother crazy. John, the father, is an architect and restorer, and he is summoned to Venice to work on a 15th-century church, where he also takes Laura, his wife. Venice, with its extraordinary, nearly impossible architecture and the enchantment of decay visible everywhere grows into a real character in the movie, at least that is how the strange string of events the Baxters’ are suffering from may be (also) interpreted. The evil force metaphorically represented by the space of Venice is personified in du Maurier’s story by two English ladies, tourists, and it is their appearance which warrants the title “Don’t Look Now”.

That one of the ladies, the blind Heather, is a medium who can get in touch with little Christine (wearing a beautiful red mackintosh) contributes to Laura’s gaining back her balance, causing, at the same time, anger and irritation in John. His half-heartedness in matters of the spiritual world will lead to his brutal death, especially in the creepy sphere of Venice where such messages seem absolutely normal. The movie employs different strategies to suggest that spirits and the metaphysical world are at home in Venice: we may delight in the great number of children wearing red hoods, caps and bonnets, appearing in the most surprising points of the Venice space, not to speak about the psychic visions of blind Heather. Her unmovable, grey and blue eyes become one with the small English pond covered by rain, which caused Christine’s death, a montage whence the film starts and towards which it is moving in the end.

In the story, John is also equipped with the power of second sight, a capacity to see into the future, that is how it is explained that John spots his wife dressed in black, on a water-taxi, in a moment when she is supposed to be travelling to their son in an English boarding school. The movie chooses to present and motivate this unbelievable event with more subtle tools. While in the short story it is mentioned several times that the blind Heather “senses” the supernatural powers of John, the film does not stress this fact. Therefore the moment of seeing Laura in black does not appear as mystical or supernatural, only hard to understand or lacking any logic, all the more so as the coordinates of the image and the sound remain the same throughout the scene. The same shot and formation of characters which appear visible “only” for John’s second sight are chosen by Roeg to be shown at the end of the movie, as the funeral march of the restorer, an outcome of his murder by the red-hooded dwarf. As a consequence

we, the viewers, get the feeling that what happened was a simple inversion of the shots, in such a way that the film's texture gave us an "early" glimpse of the three black-dressed female figures on the gliding Venetian boat – instead of simply showing it at the end of the movie, where the sequence actually belongs. As this is an extremely suggestive shot, characterized by a geometrical structure and the colour black in a movie otherwise presenting patterns melting into each other as well as red, grey and brown, it is hard to miss the importance of John's vision, yet we all sigh with relief at the end of the film when we are informed that John had the occasion of "simply" seeing his own funeral march.

That the movie version of "Don' Look Now" is deeply rooted in an emphatic visuality also means that different pictorial representational systems are effective in it. The colours red and purple spread over the world of the movie as a red herring or a red thread, literally, suggesting the omen of sinister events at their every appearance. How are further surfaces created thanks to the clash and influence of the different media? To answer this question I shall analyze the opening and closing sequences of the film, the essential differences between the two being created by the rhythm of the montage – as both sequences are characterized by a fragmentary quality which links the different events, space-corners and perspectives.

In the opening sequence the in and the out, the rainy, wet and extremely green grove and the friendly, warm home are in opposition, with the running and leaping red and fair young girl opposing the two static, reading adults in the house. The girl is a beautiful vision, and as we see her on several occasions mirrored in the water, with her head turned upside down, a strange, fearful, but also loaded atmosphere is created, especially if combined with the mechanical voice of the robot-soldier she is playing with. A further figure appears in the grove outside, a child on a bicycle, who will play the role of the message-carrier later.

The reading blonde woman inside is counterpointed by the mustached man who is intently watching pictures of a seemingly late gothic church on a slide projector. With every click of the projector the currently examined slide-image is imposed on the first-level (diegetic) story – with the two spaces of parallel happenings, the in and the out –, generating a third, fundamentally pictorial narrative. The glass window of blue-gold-and red in the middle of the projected slide, also thanks to the low camera angle of the photography, gains supernatural dimensions, and we would even immerse in it, were it not for the owner of the focalizer look, John Baxter, who observes a small, but incongruent detail in the right lower corner of the picture. This moment is similar in its construction to those to be analyzed a propos *Blade Runner* or *Blow Up*, presenting the process in the course of which the searching protagonists examine the photographs, followed by the camera's look. However, in those films, discoveries of incongruent, thus meaningful details on the photographs are motivated

by a will to find the hidden elements, but in Roeg's movie, as if in concordance with the whole spirit of the movie, it is chance, as well as sensing points of connection hard to discern on the surface and in (a) physical reality that stand behind Baxter's discovery. The detail on the slide that the restorer observes is in absolute discrepancy with the sacred silence of the church interior, a silence to be felt on the picture as well. It is in one of the banks in the lower half of the image that a figure emerges, who, thanks to the red mackintosh seen in the grove, can be considered a familiar one, being a small creature seen from behind and dressed in red.

The movie remains faithful to the original in that it constructs a most dense network of pre- and post-references, by repeating the main motives, and by constantly making visits to the future as well as the other world of spirits. It is in this atmosphere and in view of the end of the movie that the strange turn of events inside the house should be understood: the deeply *biedermeier* romanticism of the home is dirtied by a patch of blood as John, while examining the slide under a magnifier, drops a glass by chance, the shards of which hurt his finger. The patch grows into a pond exactly in and on the church interior photographed from below, connecting as a tail to the red hood of the figure in the church pew, and then emerging, to the left, as a real rivulet of blood. The slide takes over the whole frame, being first only splattered with red dots, and then fully covered by a non-coloured sea as blood spreads on the surface.

In the opening sequence of *Don't Look Now* we already have at least three narratives, determined by the space being divided into house and nature, then by the church slides being intercalated in the line of the moving images – this third pictorial narrative deeply conditioned by the discrepancy of the little creature in the pew. At this point we may even sense a fourth, rather abstract narrative string of events forming, and the use of “forming” is meant here in its most literal sense, as this fourth one is an abstract story, which channels meaning through colours: red, the colourless white, and the emerging blue. After the patch of blood partially covers the slide, examined as a piece of architectural document, it turns upwards and the whole photograph falls prey to the power of colours which swallow up forms, thus the figurative representational systems of photography and architecture disappear under the coverage of an older, not to say atavistic mode of representation. In the emptied right upper corner of the slide it is the colour blue which remains the winner, covering the surface. The victorious blue may originate from the photographed glass window, as if an imprint of that, reappearing from under the red of the blood and carrying with it the ultimate superiority of the sacred, a fourth narrative. Another explanation for the meaning of this fourth narrative may refer to the place occupied by the colours on the colour scale: red and blue are total opposites, thus re-enforcing opposition as the basic theme of *Don't Look Now*.

But before we may go after the archaic colour story “narrated” on the church slide, the parallel, yet divided spaces of the first-level diegesis reach each other through the figure of the father. John Baxter, having contemplated the red hood splattered with blood, raises his head in terrible knowledge, but it is too late, as the dreaded face of the child running towards the house and the soundtrack becoming silent suggest. Their playing daughter, wearing a red mackintosh, had already sunk under water. As a small Ophelia, she floats dead, and not even her father’s animalistic howl can break the evil spell. In Roeg’s movie the frequent slowing down of the images, the freezing of the frames, as well as the sudden and abrupt mode of montage, not to speak about the truly sinister and influential string music soundtrack, contribute to the movie’s wealth in iconographic constructions – to be discerned for example in the whirling image of the father rescuing his dead daughter.

An even more shocking sequence is produced by the representation of the mother’s grief and pain: she, having seen the father carrying their dead daughter, screams hysterically and covers her face with her hands, a sound and a gesture that, thanks to the quick montage, become one with the close up and the noise of a drilling machine shown in the next shot. It is important to mention that, although sometimes it creates an effect of “artistry”, in Roeg’s movie every small happening and detail is subordinated to generating and solving the enigma, thus the association of “screaming woman-drilling machine” is not an arbitrary one, as the drilling machine pertains to the restoration narrative of the Venice church.

The complex interplay of media governs the last but one sequence of the movie, the presentation of John’s death; however, in this case, the “narrative entity” of the movie emerges in its full nakedness and reflexivity. The red blood patch flowing through and growing on John’s throat recalls its pre-image, the patch on the slide, constructing the former as having an anaphoric function. Meanwhile, in a fragmentary montage sequence, the whole movie rolls in front of our eyes, and before we may carelessly think that this is a simulation of John’s fading consciousness, recalling the phenomenon when in the moment of death someone’s whole life reappears, the sequence itself contradicts such a supposition. There are so many such moments represented and shown which cannot be joined to John’s perspective that we have to reconsider such a supposition, thinking instead of the film’s representing its own mechanism. Further examples for the self-conscious functioning of *Don’t Look Now*’s visual world: the immersion of blind Heather’s still, lifeless grey eyes into the pond that caused Christine’s death, or the burning (in)to white of the slide splattered with blood, to the point when the surface for representation shows but simple nothingness.

In Roeg’s movie, in spite of the different levels of diegesis brought into play, there is a master narrative nevertheless, which is capable of containing and decoding the whole network

of enigmas. It is here that I wish to relate back to the system of argumentation governing the thesis: movies which represent a late modern(ist) mode of thinking and worldview do not discard, because they can not discard the supposition that there exists an all-encompassing sphere which explains every mystery, whence the key to the otherwise unsolvable mysteries appears as functional. The trope of the blind woman is in a sense the condensation of such a worldview, and we must see that this type of simplifying explanatory scheme is absent in enigmatic movies that may be called postmodern(ist).

2.1. A cinematic killer: *Peeping Tom*

The 1960 film directed by Michael Powell differs to a great extent from most of the English films of the period, both in its theme and the technical or stylistic methods employed. Most films contemporary with *Peeping Tom* either enforced the dominant realist way of filmmaking, or turned to comedy, as well as other generic traditions, in order to have an audience. Contrary to these directions, Powell's film unites a rather terse narration communicating mostly through space, interiors and mise-en-scène, with an expressionistic-hallucinatory "inner" diegesis generated by the main protagonist's own perspective and deeds. However, by starting from the schemes and generic panels of representing murder and crime on film, and by creating an intensely mediatic environment, *Peeping Tom* may be regarded as another version of the idea which I see as intensifying thanks to the modern–postmodern turn in the crime genre: namely that representational technologies are of a "deadly" quality¹¹⁰.

The central figure of the movie, Mark Lewis, is a speechless and lonely young man working as an assistant cameraman in a big movie studio. He is living, as one of the tenants, in the huge house inherited from his parents, and, wandering on the streets of an English city, has the opportunity to live through his obsession – voyeurism combined with an urge to kill. This is a special kind of obsession, as Mark Lewis hardly ever leaves the house without his best friend and most useful technological prosthesis, his hand camera. It is never the spontaneous or natural view in itself which fascinates him, rather the image represented on and by the square objective of the camera, and, respectively, it is the projection machine – or better said the technological print of the original view – which ravishes him.

What are the new elements that this film teaches us concerning detection as a model for constructing knowledge and the technological allegory related to it? The narrative scheme of detection does not appear here in its classical form, since the filmic apparatus presents us the murders and deeds of the perpetrator, his personal and private perspective being the

¹¹⁰ I must mention that it is not an easy task to develop a reading based on this idea, as the two representative interpretations of the film by Kaja Silverman, and respectively, Ilsa J. Bick, are (intensely) psychoanalytically inspired, as if phenomena of the psyche obscured any other dimension in relation to *Peeping Tom*.

favoured one, without the always retrospective detective's point of view or immersion in the story gaining any true importance. In the greatest part of the movie it is Mark's figure and person which determines what we may see and know, even if we are offered the usual third person, objective narration, when events are presented in the absence of the focalizer main character. Following Mark, the voyeur, we not only take a look at and commit the murders, but also re-view in his company the film reels developed by him in the darkness of his attic room. Thus we approach the original criminal activities in the same moment when – thanks to Mark's camera and projector – these are transformed into symbolically coded representations, a field which should be the territory and the performance of the detective.

Mark, the voyeur killer is detecting after himself in many respects: first, by observing the terror of women who must contemplate their imminent death by the knife on the camera's leg, a deed which clearly constructs and presents him as a murderer. But his other detection activity is also centered on amateur films, those made by his father, the hero and subject of which is Mark, as a little boy. Just as the father, a famous research psychologist was interested in inducing and understanding the generation of fear in his son, so is Mark cruelly experimenting with female suffering and pain caught in the act. In this second narrative of detection little boy Mark appears without question as a sad victim – we might recall the desperate reaction of Helen, the friendly neighbour girl representing everyday commonsense opposite Mark's dark and mad world, as soon as she understands what is happening to the fair boy on the screen – and this fact may motivate his adult deviance, even if not exempting him from the terrible deeds he commits.

The victims of Mark Lewis are lonely and unsuspecting women – a prostitute, a dancer, and a model – whose common feature is that they earn a living out of putting themselves, their body and their movements on display, revelation being their chief occupation. Employing a rather morbid argumentation we may state that Mark, the voyeuristic assistant cameraman does nothing but accomplish and finish the visual performances of the women when he records the last moments and movements of their lives with his light portable camera, framing their gestures and giving them utmost importance. The women's dreadful looks and faces turned into stone may be contemplated on several occasions in the movie: in the first-level diegesis as action-segments happening – Mark stabs to death while recording –, the quoted secondary representations – such as newspaper articles and police proceedings – also speak about the murders, while, and in the final analysis, we may also review the events through Mark's narrow and portable camera frame simultaneously with his relishing the terrible report films in his secret room.

It must be mentioned that there are well-defined differences between first-level diegesis and its second-level representation: in the movie world Mark is always present in his typical brown coat and filmic apparatus bag, while in the movies made by him he is nothing but the eye hiding behind the camera lens, melting with the technical device without which he is hardly capable of perceiving the world around him. Further elements characteristic of the different diegetic levels are the wide, respectively narrow angles, the latter ones originating from Mark's portable camera, not to speak about the colour-contrasts: the first level diegesis is always in colour, but Mark's films are not necessarily so, and they are also in contrast as far as the quality of the filmic image, its surface and composition is considered. Mark's footages are granular, badly lit and composed, or quite often recorded from behind parapets and coat-tails, as the cameraman eager to watch death always needs to start his filming activity in secret, without revealing his true intentions. Kaja Silverman also devotes attention to understanding this difference when she comments on the nature of the images seen through the viewfinder:

This motif conveys the usual message that we are looking at a "subjective shot", but it also functions as a powerful metaphor for the barrier Mark tries to erect between himself and his victims so as to dissociate himself from them (...). Here, too, Mark's project converges with classic cinema, which also turns upon the fiction that an irreducible distance isolates the viewer from the spectacle. (Silverman 34)

Thanks to Powell's *Peeping Tom* the film-reel, the screen, the different cameras, lights and projection machines are not only essential features of the movie, but may be incorporated into the allegory I am trying to construct related to the nature of leaving traces and reading them – from the perspective of technological media employed. For an even more focused argumentation I will concentrate on a particularly important sequence of the movie.

As if a climax of their timid friendship, Mark and Helen, the girl downstairs, spend an evening together, they walk, talk, and have dinner in a restaurant. A small, but wholly significant detail: Helen succeeds in persuading Mark to leave his ever present camera at home, as he certainly won't need it. Mark is willing to give in, and not only thanks to Helen's obvious kindness, but also because the larger scheme the movie is presenting concerning the possibilities of feminine roles: Helen is a librarian and an amateur writer, thus she is all that the "visual women", who fall prey to Mark's obsession, are not, being a symbolically-spiritually circumscribed creature in contrast with the others who are of flesh-and-blood and fully visible.

When they arrive home, Helen goes to sleep, in the faith that her blind mother, Mrs. Stephens had already done so, but Mrs. Stephens is to have a long evening. Her role – interpreted brilliantly by Maxine Audley – is essential in understanding the movie as a technological detection allegory: this lady is the sole person in the film who, in spite of her being alive, is unable to perceive Mark and the traces left by him, namely the filmic records of the murderous moments. This lack of hers is the condition that in another dimension she becomes capable of detecting Mark and interpreting his deeds, contrary to the surrounding world. Mrs. Stephens, thus, is to play the role of the detective, or better said a metaphysical detective, being a blind lady confronting a murderer who “works” with a camera.

In the sequence chosen for a closer analysis Mark, who is returning from the rendezvous with Helen, hurriedly sneaks into the dark attic room and greedily sets out to project the movie made about the killing of the dancer woman, as the reel has been developed while he was away. However, he hears a noise and discerns in the corner a Mrs. Stephens leaning on her stick. The choreography and discussion of the two is of central importance in relation to vision, visibility, camera, and filmic material, as well as the meanings attributed to these in this film. “Take me to your cinema” says the blind woman and Mark literally performs the request when he places Mrs. Stephens before the lights emerging from the projection machine, thus the mother’s hand is superimposed over the close-up of the dancer looking out from deadly terror. As the film’s screening is finished, Mark, in the position of a crucified Christ, leans over the white screen, in sorrow, as he repeatedly did not manage to fix the lights and bring the image into focus, “the lights fade too soon”, he moans. Yes, the lights always fade too soon, agrees Mrs. Stephens, who starts to question Mark about the nature of his films, but no answer comes, as Mark is unable to lie to her, at least. The roles of the mother¹¹¹, the detective, and the prophet merge in the figure of Mrs. Stephens, who, even if living in eternal darkness, feels (as she mentions to Mark, “instincts are wonderful things, Mr. Lewis”) and knows that the constant noise made by Mark’s night ramblings in his room over hers, his silent appearances, his hands which are warm from running and excitement, “are not healthy things”.

Mark lifts his weapon upon the only oracle who is certified and legitimized to judge him. The mother can be seen to act as such for several reasons: she approaches the emotionally damaged Mark¹¹² with an acceptance that could be described as instinctually

¹¹¹ Ilsa J. Bick also emphasizes this characteristic a propos Mrs. Stevens: “In fact, the one mother who comes closest to approaching Mark in an empathetic and understanding way, Mrs. Stevens, is blind (...). (...) only through the touch of her *hands* is Mark “seen”, just as Mark is filmed by *his father* touching his dead mother’s hands– and yet, her *face* remains hidden from the father’s camera/sight” (Bick 188).

¹¹² His father was a severe and terrorizing man; his mother is dead, as well as substituted by a fascinating stepmother.

motherly, yet her blindness prevents her from categorizing him as the murderer created and hidden by filmic technology – that is why she becomes capable of peering behind the seeable, perceivable technology and the products generated in this way. Actually, this is how we may identify Mark's inner urge: his constant camera-state, his vision that perceives the world through and in frames and elements to be lit seem to veil over and communicate at once his desire to be accepted as a human being, naked, without his technological prostheses. This is also suggested by his willingness to leave at home the apparatus on the occasion of his dining with Helen, as his relation with her is the only one where long forgotten human gestures – aimless discussions, gifts, and happiness – are surfacing. Besides Helen, he also allows (or rather numbly suffers) to her mother to caress his face, and feel it, in an attempt to know him. Ilsa J. Bick formulates a complex set of relations, starting from Mark's need "to recapture the look of the mother":

Seeing and being seen, touching and being touched– in his efforts to recapture the look of the mother, Mark looks and touches from distance; and his apparatus forecloses the possibility of being seen or touched. So, too, does his apparatus take away the sound of the mother's voice– his films are as silent as Mrs. Stevens is blind. (Bick 188)

2.2. Murder in close-up?

What we show through the texture of visual-pictorial representations, throwing them as prey to employed technologies, are also sentenced to an endless death by being forced into frames, stillness and an unchangeable state. In the narrative of *Peeping Tom* pleasure or catharsis – complementary qualities that are postulated by aesthetic conceptions of art and which may compensate for "technological death" – become mere appendices (supplements?) which cannot contribute to transcending such a condition. Michael Powell's film consistently sidesteps the possibility for aesthetic pleasure: Mark is an assistant cameraman, with an infinitely small proportion in defining the visual world of the light comedy produced meanwhile. His second job, pursued out of hobby and not because of material necessity – photographing erotic pin-ups – increases the number of cheap products meant for immediate consumption, not allowing for any immersion, let alone an artistic contemplation¹¹³ Thus Mark's diligent, focused work with the camera, the development of the film reels, and the

¹¹³A given suggested by the comical intermezzo with the shy gentleman who intends to buy these pin-ups at the beginning of the movie.

careful watching of the footages cannot be absolved by contributing to the creation of any kind of “artistic beauty”, even if a degree of expressionistic effect is generated by them. *Peeping Tom* offers us a totally bare, stripped solution in showing the “deadly” quality of representation: the main protagonist literally and metaphorically annihilates the objects and subjects of representation in the chain of those moments when he transforms these into moving images and film. Thus we can consider the camera armed with a knife the mixture of an infinitely subtle philosophical statement and a sensual weapon at once.

Still, Powell’s film is not devoid of a certain amount of melancholy and sadness, qualities which to a large degree derive from the physical qualities of actor Carl Boehm who is playing the part of Mark Lewis, and his unmoving, yet eloquent face. These qualities of loss are also functions of the psychological metanarrative of the film which tells us the story of a boy-child who grows into a monster because of emotional terror and coldness around him. I do not wish to develop this psychological line of inquiry in my interpretation, since, as elaborated in the introductory chapter, I think that most movies telling tales of murder and detection – especially if considered in the light of theoretical axioms accompanying the turn from the modern to the postmodern – can be fruitfully questioned from the perspective of how they consider effects of technological media of record and multiplication, and broadcasting, as well as how they succeed in channeling the melancholy, the grief and the sentiment of loss generated by the death and the freezing of the represented.

Peeping Tom resolves this matter in a rather straightforward manner when attaching this sentiment of mourning to the main protagonist’s inner world and soul, in the sequence when, to the question of Helen about how Mark’s camera would see and photograph her, Mark desperately grabs the camera and answers to her: “No, not you. Whatever I photograph I always lose”. It is a most fascinating opportunity for a psychoanalytical reading strategy at this point – this is the direction pursued by Kaja Silverman in her interpretation of the movie in *The Acoustic Mirror* – but the movie’s events and replicas may also be interpreted as parts of a larger technological allegory. When Mark parts from Mrs. Stephens in the staircase, after their encounter mentioned above, the mother feels and caresses the man’s face, a gesture to which Mark answers with the following words: “Are you taking my picture? It’s been long since anyone did this.” The situation is a deliberately ambivalent one: it’s been a long time since anyone caressed or photographed him, since his childhood, actually, when his mother was still alive and his father was chasing him with his ever present camera. In this short fragment practices such as taking pictures, touching, caressing and annihilating, even murdering are bordering on each other, as if preparing the ground for the climactic scene of

the movie, when Mark, under the horrified eyes of the watching Helen, stabs himself to death in a state of ecstasy and madness, with his beloved and murderous camera.

The movie, however, does not take the play of possibilities and meanings to its final limit, thus it does not show us the subjective, first-person close-up of Mark literally entering (into) his death under the guise of the knife peering out from his camera. Instead, we may contemplate the sequence in a medium shot, from one side of the happenings. Therefore, even if together with Kaja Silverman we may praise the film's progressive development of reflexivity, "the film-within-the film trope", and the role attributed to the male/female identity generation in it¹¹⁴, we may draw attention to a small inconsistency, which enables a further conclusion. If the film had wanted to be "truly" faithful to his credo built up about the nature of (filmic) representation, it should have showed Mark's suicide in a subjective close up, constructing the first level diegesis (which contains Mark's murderous camera) as a murderer that (also) kills through and by representation. That such a turn is not inserted in the film's visual and narrative world is explained, in my view, by a historical given, namely that Powell's film, even if seemingly an avantgarde one compared to other works made in the year 1960, still does not indulge in the representational deconstruction characteristic of a more and more radical postmodern(ist) paradigm. It aims towards such a quality, but because of historical circumstances, it does not fully endorse it.

3. The voice that kills

Klute, the 1971 American movie directed by Alan J. Pakula, is one of the 1970s detection movies made with an artistic zeal, offering itself for questioning from the perspective of mediation and detection, as the tape recorder plays a major role in both committing and uncovering the criminal deeds. Pakula's movie constructs the process of detection, or the creation and the uncovering of the mystery fully based on media which prothesise sound, namely the telephone, the tape recorder and the player. The movie is almost fetishistically fascinated by the devices employed for this aim: the portable, silver, rectangular player, always turned on by a mysterious hand, being the sole participant in the frame, as well as the bigger machine used by detective John Klute in his work, are constant appearances. *Klute* is thus based on the manipulation of voice and sound, as well the multiplication of diegetic worlds conditioned by such an endeavour. However, these features

¹¹⁴“*Peeping Tom* gives new emphasis to the concept of reflexivity. Not only does it foreground the workings of the apparatus, and the place given there to voyeurism and sadism, but its remarkable structure suggests that dominant cinema is indeed a mirror with a delayed reflection. It deploys the film-within-the film trope with a new and radical effect, making it into a device for dramatizing the displacement of lack from the male to the female subject” (Silverman 32).

are important only as far as they contribute to the advancement of the narrative, and in this respect *Klute* differs from *Don't Look Now* as there the narrative worlds generated by the different (pictorial) representational systems may be nearly arbitrarily changed.

The movie invests a lot of energy in the depiction of the character of the exquisite call girl, Bree Daniels, which, incidentally, is also a dramaturgical necessity if the film wants to make genuine for the viewers the enigma that appears in the form of Bree's voice and monologue played again and again from the recorder. At the very beginning of the film a hand belonging to "nobody" places the silver device on a neutral, badly lit surface, pressing the start button, and we hear the words of a woman, speaking about (her) wishes, their satisfaction, as well as her own openness to a male counterpart possibly in the same room with her, also mentioning that she is taking off her pullover in the meantime. It is easy to guess that we are witnessing an amorous encounter between two people, what is uncertain is the identity of the one who records these rendezvous, and especially to what end. Even if businesslike, the repeated rendez-vous still belong to the participants' private sphere, and their recordings are, because any moral grounding is missing, quite delicate to handle.

The movie is dedicated to the revelation of this mystery, but what we know from the very beginning is that someone(s) is watching Bree, and following her about, as she is frequently telephoned without anyone speaking at the other end of the line. Such sequences appear as signs of an absolute loneliness. Bree lives in an upstairs attic room, the ceiling of which is covered in glass and wire, and filming is often performed through this ceiling, from a high camera angle, with us having the occasion of observing the woman's life as a plane image. The shot where we peer into Bree's window, from the other side of the street, with someone's fingers becoming visible on the left side of the frame, further enforces our doubt.¹¹⁵

John Klute, the small town private detective, slides without difficulties into this ceaselessly operative system of observation, when he begins to conduct investigations, after the FBI has quit the job of finding Tom, the victim. Klute also devotes most of his time to observing Bree, to recording her phone calls and to following her through the daily routine¹¹⁶.

¹¹⁵ "the dominant images of the criminal ambience and investigation in *Klute* – the tape recorder, the telephone, phone-calls from 'breathers', bugging – suggest a prying search into areas of private life and its personal secrets (...). The psycho-sexual dimension of this privacy is further emphasized by the vertical camera-work, sudden plummeting downward zooms, or ascensions in lifts shafts, and by an imagery of netting, wire mesh, and claustrophobic rooms (...)." (Gledhill, *Klute* 2 116).

¹¹⁶ Diane Giddis' interpretation of the movie is to a significant degree founded on the idea that Klute, the investigator, and Cable, the evil-doer, are fundamentally connected: "The two men are identified with each other throughout the film. (...) He [Cable] is always shown or heard stalking Bree immediately before, immediately after, or while Klute is on the scene." (Giddis 196) Christine Gledhill also writes about the juxtaposition of Klute and Cable in the narrative, and about the similarity of their actions – "an ambiguous staring gaze" – towards

First, he is motivated by the fact that Bree does not want to enter into conversation with him and help him, then, as a relationship blossoms between them, it is anxiety and a wish to unravel the mystery which urge him.

One of the sequences of central importance in the movie is when observer and observed, Klute and Bree are returning from their evening shopping in a cheery mood and as they enter Bree's apartment together, the phone starts to ring. Tension creeps onto Bree's face as she lifts the receiver, prepared for the well-known silence on the other end, but her surprise and fear are all the greater when she has to listen to her own voice, in the form of the tape-monologue the viewer already knows. She is forced to face her own self, but a slice of it that is hard, if not impossible for her to accept. As she confesses during one session, she must attend psychoanalytical therapy, for she is unable to integrate the truth of her being a call girl, a part which she hopes to leave behind as love with Klute is installed in her life. She must also openly acknowledge that she is being followed and observed against her will. The recording of her voice suggests a state of having no body, thus foreshadowing annihilation as well. As Christine Gledhill observes in her reading of the movie: "(...) Bree's voice has been stolen from her by her aggressor, Cable, and then turned against her" (Gledhill, *Klute* 2 123).

Recording someone's voice is an even more objectifying process than visual representation of any kind, thus of a more gruesome nature, a quality which emerges on the occasion of Bree's meeting the self-revealing killer, Peter Cable, at the end of the movie. Cable forces Bree to listen to the audio record of one of their previous meetings, he also being one of her earlier clients. Based on this record we may understand the mystery around Tom's disappearance. Meanwhile, Bree gets to know about the process of her being observed and her voice being recorded.

Contrary to most of the films analyzed hitherto, *Klute* attempts to construct the criminal traces as auditive ones, while the center of the enigma, in accordance with the noir traditions, it is a woman¹¹⁷. Thus the movie offers a more than supplementary role – as it is usually the case – to media which contribute to enhance our hearing: first, the telephone, through which Bree must listen not to the usual voice or information, but to silence; then, as if in a nightmare, to her own voice and herself. The silent telephone, as well as the playing of the speaker's own voice state the existence of the medium called telephone, but also ignore its usage, or even worse, present the blind spot of this medium. More threatening and spooky

Bree: "The two sides of the forties private-eye stereotype's attitude to women – romantic idealisation, and embittered accusatory disgust – have been split here between two characters (...)" (Gledhill, *Klute* 2 121).

¹¹⁷The (neo) noir quality of *Klute* is also assessed by Christine Gledhill as a function of the female heroine: "Bree Daniels has to fill the place of the film noir heroine in an investigation of female sexuality. At the same time Pakula wants to use the genre's conventions to explore issues of contemporary life" (Gledhill, *Klute* 2 121).

than being forced to listen to one's own erotic and loose, not to say indecent confession to a less daring partner could be if Bree should listen to her own words uttered in that very moment, reverberating in the receiver. By choosing to confront Bree with her former monologue, the film forces us to draw an even more terrible conclusion: Bree has been observed and followed for a long time, in the past, but in the present too, thus the telephone, as well as the emphatically presented tape recorder and the tapes become actual signs for the missing blackmailer-observer.

Still taking into account traces coded and decoded medially, in another influential sequence of Pakula's film, we are to listen to the voice of the policeman assigned by the FBI on the case, without actually seeing him. Our first reaction is to see this as a simple voice off narration, but in this case we are the witnesses of a dialogue between John Klute and the policeman mentioned above. Since the movie systematically "trains" us to accept sound and voice as entities separated from the image, we easily fall back into this condition. While listening to the dialogue and the policeman's voice what we see are letters written with a typewriter – the personal ones of the vanished Tom – and projected on a screen with a slide-projector, the well known device of 1970s detection movies. The images of the different letters and answers to them are placed near each other through montage, as what they are trying to achieve is to identify the sender of the vulgar letter found in Tom's legacy by comparing the style – spacing and character of the letters themselves – to the other ones sent to the same person. In this sequence the traces embodied in the different media are presented as wholly abstract entities – we may think here of the infinitely magnified typewritten letters which finally are transformed into a meaningless, even if decorative pattern¹¹⁸, or the dialogue coming from no identifiable source, missing any matching pictorial representation – urging us to ignore the seen narrative/story for the sake of observing the presented letters, sound, slides and the films' montage technique.

In *Klute* we may observe a whole arsenal of tricks and frauds operated through and with voice. Diane Giddis identifies the (directorial) play with Bree's voice as a major strategy for presenting the complex neurotic personality of the would-be actress who is actually a call girl: "The use of Bree's voice is especially effective in revealing her divided impulses. Bree's words often belie her actions. We hear her tell her therapist that her fear of Klute makes her

¹¹⁸ An even more pronounced process of this nature is to be seen in a recent investigation movie, David Fincher's 2006 *Zodiac*: as the mysterious hide-and-seek between the police (officers) and the brutal killer calling himself the Zodiac and yearning for media attention advances, without any noticeable police results, except the pile of letters sent by the Zodiac to newspapers, we are presented the two detectives pursuing their daily routine in the San Francisco police building, as well as the offices of the San Francisco Chronicle. But they are surrounded by the segments from the various written representations of the Zodiac case – the letters, newspaper articles and headlines – represented as transparent, or patterned curtains and walls which surround the detectives in space, wherever they go.

angry, makes her want to manipulate him, while we watch her returning his caresses” (Giddis 198). During these psychoanalytical “confessions” we may observe interesting pieces of sound montage, bridging the different images: while listening to Bree’s tired, irritated, colourless voice¹¹⁹ about her life and her scattered dreams, her love for detective John Klute, the image shows us detective John Klute on his way to visit the police department’s store in pursuit of a lead. It happens on several occasions that the soundtrack of the previous, the following, or the parallel sequence glides over the images actually seen, thus enforcing the impression that the film plays with the givens of a movie belonging to the crime genre: namely, that image and sound have the same aim and route to follow. In *Klute* these two perceptual spheres enhanced by different media have their autonomous (and separated) existence, and they are not telling or presenting the same stories¹²⁰. The difference, however, does not originate in the criminal’s telling lies or hiding facts, it is rather conditioned by the everyday paradox that sound and image are always and ever each other’s opposites, thus a harmonious match should be an exception rather than the rule.

How is it then possible to discover the truth based on audio-traces? As shown by the example of John Klute, this has no real chances, except if it emerges by itself. This is exactly what happens when Bree Daniels and Peter Cable meet for the last time: the enigma is solutioned, while the medial loops are disentangled. The autonomy of the technological detection is again subordinated to the criminal narrative’s anthropomorphic urge – a frustrated male punishes the reckless woman. This is what we have seen in the previously analyzed modern(ist) films, a gesture clearly disappearing from the later movies made and produced in postmodernity.

4. 8 MM: a snuff movie.

The 1999 movie directed by Joel Schumacher also deserves our attention because it shares a thematic similarity with Louise Welsh’s already cited novel, *The Cutting Room*, both being engaged in exploring the nature of snuff representations, although in different media. *8 MM* invokes a morose Philadelphia private detective, Tom Welles, who is investigating the production circumstances of a short and amateurish snuff movie filmed on 8 mm film. Meanwhile Welsh’s auctioneer investigator is interested in a bunch of –as far as we may

¹¹⁹Kaja Silverman’s observation related to the manipulation and foregrounding of Bree’s voice allows for a much more far-reaching conclusion to be drawn: “(...) Hollywood requires the female voice to assume similar responsibilities to those it confers upon the female body. The former, like the latter, functions as a fetish within dominant cinema, filling in for and covering over what is unspeakable within male subjectivity” (Silverman 38).

¹²⁰Christine Gledhill speaks about the unreliability of words and the power of Klute originating from his hardly ever speaking: “Klute is distinguished from his noir predecessors by his silence. But silence is also his source of power, for words are shown in this film to be deceptive, not adequate to the truth, and eventually dangerous” (Gledhill, *Klute* 2 125).

deduce from the verbal hints, artistic – black-and-white photographs found in the attic of the lately deceased Mr. McKindless. Thus both narratives construct a media technological environment as the context of detection, while the traces also emerge as already and forever mediated; however, *Cutting Room* seems to devote more attention to this specific situation than the film *8 MM*, a statement I am to support below.

The occasion of Tom Welles' first viewing the snuff film found in the deceased magnate, Mr. Christian's studio, is a sequence worth analyzing. The respectable widow summons the detective because his credentials are good and he has got a reputation for his discretion. He is the adequate man to clear up the moral and material dirt left over by an even more respectable patriarch, meanwhile consoling the widow and proving to her that their long and loyal marriage was not a superficial façade behind which her husband led a shady life with brutal and deadly pornography in a leading role. The black-costumed, serious, stern and taciturn detective enters the private screening room of the Christian mansion, to see and give his firsthand opinion on the short snuff film.

The preceding sequence ends with Mrs. Christian's wrinkled, sad, but still beautiful face in the right half of the frame, looking up on Welles, whose left-hand figure remains the constant element which introduces the next sequence, this one having a remarkably structured composition. With Welles sitting on the left, another female face appears on the right side of the frame, practically imposed on Mrs. Christian's. Yet, while the dark colours of the former frame present the night intimacy and luxury of a mansion, this time a dubious and fearful, derelict room emerges, and the face in question belongs to a slightly dressed, tormented, black-haired girl. We watch the scene from behind the silk screen which constitutes the field of Welles' viewing, thus having the possibility to consider within one shot both the object of the quest – the snuff movie, the girl who is murdered before our eyes – and the subject who initiates it, or to put it more simply: the detective and the enigma. A man dressed in a sadomasochistic leather outfit and a terrible mask covering his face attacks the frail girl sitting on a nylon sofa, slashing her body with a knife.

The tight space, the bad lighting, the out-of-focus image – features also mentioned by Pat Gill in her interpretation of *8 MM* (176) – constitute clues for the detective and us, viewers, to understand where and why the murder is happening. This short snuff movie is the technological trace par excellence, since complicated machinery is needed for its "reconstitution", and, as we are informed, the copy seen by Welles is the only existing one. Pat Gill adds that filming on 8 mm film is quite outdated (176), especially if compared to the present of the diegetic world where video seems to be main medium used for recording – see Dino Velvet's productions – and for viewing as well. Welles appears as a technologically

crafted investigator throughout: he is employing sophisticated digital tools in his pursuit of the circumstances of the murder, for example in the anonymous darkness of a hotel room where he is carefully studying the digitalized version of Mr. Christian's snuff movie, stopping, enlarging, searching and printing frames. When he hires an office across the street to watch Eddie Poole's Celebrity Film porno agency, he uses a high-tech system of listening and recording to the producer's telephones. Yet he is an innocent technological adept, therefore he needs Max California, the porn-shop manager, to guide and accompany him along his route through the underground, nevertheless exotic world of half-illegal pornography¹²¹.

In spite of the various technological tools presented and used during the detection process, Schumacher's film does not engage into any kind of analysis of this specific situation, even if the narrative enmeshed in a mediatic maze actually calls for such an endeavour. Thus, just as the snuff movie is burnt when it gets back to its creator, Dino Velvet, with all the mysteries elucidated, the film *8MM* does not bother to reflect on the specific case of a crime trace's being constituted by another film. Instead it centers the mysteries around and in the human beings involved: Welles needs to find out the identity of the murdered girl and of those who have murdered her, without any attention being paid to the several layers of "death" involved, especially the ones "performed" thanks to the technical apparatus.

While on the set of the snuff-porn movie commissioned by Welles and his partner, Max, we see no technical equipment which would signal that filming is going on, only the most sensational props of a sadomasochistic tableau vivant are on display. Dino Velvet, the cult porn director is not equipped with a camera but with a bow instead, and the arriving Welles' attention is grasped by the knives on show and the brutal figure of Machine, the killer we have already seen in the snuff movie. From the perspective of my inquiry the whole film has a similar effect: instead of paying attention to the medial possibilities it devotes time to human conduct, portraying a family man detective who enters a dangerous world, out of compassion for the weak. In this respect, Pat Gill's reading of *8 MM* along the gendered behaviour of protagonist Tom Welles is much more adequate than a questioning from a mediatic vantage point. The diegetic levels constituted by the different media of representation – film, photography, sound-recording, even writing in the guise of the murdered girl's diary – do not influence each other, because they form the bits of one single

¹²¹One cannot but notice the cultural stereotypes at work in the whole movie: Welles' descent into this rotten and damned world is accompanied by a soundtrack which – only in these sequences of lust, nakedness and perversity – is constituted by what we shortly like to label "Oriental" music, with Arabian, Persian, or Turkish melodies and instruments. This is a most subtle way to signal that Welles has crossed the line dividing a civilized, normal, "Western" world where ethics, family and decency belong from the hell, where "devils", as Max says, reign.

narrative, and all of them refer to one single set of denotations, without any possibility for the represented world to become autonomous, or to gain primacy over the primary diegesis.

Thus the murder and the case of investigation have the medial aspects incorporated as another set of props, without the film's reflecting on the consequences of mediation and representation. For Tom Welles, the snuff film is wholly transparent, pointing towards his closed circle investigation, not having the power and the right to generate a new or different narrative level. Within these circumstances, *8 MM* shares with *The Cutting Room* only one aspect, the interest in underground pornographic trade, but not an analysis of the nature of representation and the consequences of medial traces, an endeavour surely pursued in Louise Welsh's novel. The 8 mm film burns and disappears.

The overall conceptual framework which informs my argumentation is the metanarrative of the turn from modernism and modernity to postmodernism and postmodernity, with the small proviso or correction that mass cultural and medially self-conscious developments and phenomena must also be considered if we wish to understand the implications and historical importance of this paradigm shift. This chapter may be concluded with the statement that the medial focus allows for observing historical differences among crime and detection films produced in different periods. Thus, we cannot overlook the belief in ultimate truth and order, as well as a nearly naïve reliance on mediatic technologies in the process of detection in the case of films which temporally belong to the modern(ist) canon of films. However, as the example of the 1999 movie *8 MM* shows, it would be rather simplifying to assert that all mediatic detection films or fictions created after the turn to the postmodern are equally conscious or doubtful as far as the power and influence of involved technologies go – a question which is analyzed more fully in the next chapter.

Chapter 7

A POST(MODERN) MEDIAL MAZE

PHOTOGRAPHY, FILM AND TEXT

1.1. Photography as a sign: realist, modernist?

Based on the presented ideas of Sobchack and Jameson we may understand the widely defined technologies of the photographic, the cinematic and the electronic as being inherently related to realism, modernism and postmodernism respectively. However, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, the paradox of film noir simultaneously being “modernist” and “realist” in two different frames of reference is an existing one. This paradox also characterizes the photographic technology, which, in contrast to the Jamesonian-Sobchackian system – where it stands for the “realist” artistic articulations – it is considered by many as embodying the “true nature” of the modern, and especially of criminal pursuit in this context.

Now I turn to the examination of another major strategy by which the postmodernist movies discussed here form/create “islands” or “moments” of modernism: the insertion of photographs and still images – significant from a narrative or symbolic perspective – into the film-flow. The clash of fixed, mechanical (or Polaroid) photographs with the obviously flowing medium of the film informs the viewers not only about the hyper-conscious use of different media, but also about the temporal connotations that modernist/fragmentary forms injected in smoother, postmodernist fictional worlds might have. Therefore, in the sequences where photography is contrasted with the elusive “moving image”, I propose to see enactments of the turn from the modernist paradigm (of technology and poetics) to the postmodernist one. This proposition is not unaware of historical and critical-theoretical developments referring to photography and film, and of the modernist and postmodernist canon of both media. What I wish to emphasize is that the intermedial relationship of „still” and „moving” images in these movies based on detection can be fruitfully theorized starting with the most basic, temporal and medial differences between photography and film.

At the same time I intend to construct a story of how photographs intrude into our selves: from *Blow Up* to *Memento* we face a process of material images entering our most secret, intimate selves. While Thomas, the photographer in *Blow Up* is not personally immersed in the photographic process, and the pictures remain interesting objects for him, in

movies that belong to the period of postmodernism – in this analysis beginning with *Blade Runner* – the pictures become constitutive elements of the characters' subjectivities. This, in my opinion, is an allegorical, but nevertheless easily decipherable parable about the slow dissolution of the mimetic principle: reality/model (subjectivity) and representation/photograph are related in the most convoluted manner, and neither of them enjoys (epistemological or, for that matter, ontological) primacy over the other. Wilterdink's idea offers another view on this issue: "[p]ostmodernism in its various branches came to be associated with (...) a critique of objectivism/realism as well as of individualistic subjectivism" (Wilterdink 199). Whether such a fundamental endeavour is pursued in the movies analyzed should emerge on the following pages.

Finally, by emphasizing the objectifying effects of photography which leads to the annihilation of the represented in the very process of representation – a particular case of which is presented in Louise Welsh's crime novel, *Cutting Room*, also discussed below – the chapter also links to the overarching argumentation which postulates the intensification of medial consciousness as a possible content of the turn from the modern to the postmodern in the crime genre.

1.2. The cultural "haloes" of photography: modernity, detective fiction.

Photography, the medium of representation fully developed technically by the late 1860s, but not widespread in its usage and influence till several decades later, precedes film as a technological development, the latter not becoming functional on a larger scale until the 1910s. And even then, it was based on the technical principles that made possible the existence of photography in the first place: in this sense it might be claimed that the process and the end product of photography constitute the "technological unconscious" of film – as a technology of reproduction and representation.

In their "Introduction" to a multi-essay volume examining the countless links between modernism/ity and cinema, Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz offer a concise argument that supports this idea about photography being a technological and symbolic forerunner of film¹²². Charney and Schwartz state that cinema "was a representational form that went beyond Impressionism and photography by staging actual movement; yet that movement

¹²² Anne Friedberg also considers the incongruencies between cinema and modernism/modernity: "Because the invention of the cinema was coincident with the urban and cultural changes that marked modernity, the cinema has been commonly thought of as a "modern" apparatus. And yet most work on cinema and modernism retreats from theorizing modernity itself, leaving the relation between modernity and cinematic modernism ambiguous at best" (163). She then explicitly differentiates between modernism as an artistic/aesthetic discourse and the classical cinema representation: "The cinema can be seen as a "modern" form embodying distinctly *anti*-modern narratological conventions (closure, mimesis, realism) disguised in "modern" technological attire" (165).

could never be (and to this day still is not) more than the serial progression of still frames through the camera” (Charney-Schwartz, 10). It is in this spirit and context that I wish to speak about the relationship of ”still frames” and ”moving images” in the films analyzed, about the role photographs seem to play, since this allows me to extend the script of the turn from modernism to postmodernism.

Many critics consider photography more akin to modernist sensibility than film, even retrospectively. One of them is American art historian Douglas Crimp, who observes that the institutions of modernism redefined by postmodernism are “first, the museum; then, art history; and finally, in a more complex sense, because modernism depends both upon its presence and upon its absence, photography” (Crimp 172). The role of photography in creating modernist poetics and ways of perception is even more markedly emphasized by Tom Gunning in his article ”Tracing the Individual Body: Photography, Detectives, and Early Cinema”¹²³. He refers to such photographic qualities as indexicality, iconicity and detachability, these being the main reasons for the fact that photography could become a singular technique of realistic representation, a participant in modernist symbolic and material systems of exchange and a de/constructor of the idea of a solid identity (Gunning 18).

Embedded in the cultural discourse defined by modernity and engendering modernism, photography has been seen as influencing deeply the appearance of detective fiction itself, and this relation again attests the priority of photography over film, at least concerning detection as an epistemological and cultural paradigm. We may recall a well-known formulation that connects retrievable signs of one’s identity to photography, and indirectly, to the birth of detective fiction. “Photography made it possible for the first time to preserve permanent and unmistakable traces of a human being. [t]he detective story came into being when this most decisive of all conquests of a person’s incognito had been accomplished” observes Walter Benjamin in “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire”, referring to how the identity of a person might be determined in a context defined by crime conventions and photography (Benjamin 48). In turn, Gunning continues this line of thought when analyzing the use of photographic evidence in police and judicial procedures in the 19th century, calling photography ”the ultimate modern clue” (Gunning 20). Given this radical resemblance between the two technologies of representation – photography and detective fiction – it is by no means accidental that photographs and the process of taking pictures have a prominent role in the examined movies organized around mysteries of identity.

¹²³ ”Photography stands at the intersection of a number of aspects of modernity, and this convergence makes it a uniquely modern means of representation” (Gunning 19).

1.3. Medial characteristics

The medium of photography has been considered in the context of different paradigms, especially in the light of the technology of digital image making and processing. The examples in the films analyzed do not so much problematize the question of what happens to reality and to the referent in digital image-creation, as encourage a heightened awareness of the complicated links between the illusory, self-contained totality of the filmic narrative and the photographs “wedged” in it. Why is it possible, one can wonder, that for our detecting-detected heroes it is not the resilient celluloid or the digital possibilities that offer a route to repeatedly preformed identifications, but the same, good old mechanical photography? Answers to this question can be given if some of the specific medial characteristics of photography are considered in connection with the filmic sites analyzed.

In Peter Wollen’s formulation, if the film is similar to a line, the photograph corresponds to a point (Wollen 76). This suggests a synecdochic relationship, with all the connotations of hierarchy, a characterization further supported by Christian Metz’s idea that “film ‘includes’ photography: cinema results from an addition of perceptive features to those of photography. In the visual sphere, the important addition is, of course, movement and the plurality of images, of shots” (Metz 139). According to Victor Burgin, among the visual media, film and painting belong to a group different from that of photography: while the former appear as objects for the viewers, photos constitute “an environment”, a background capable to move with/after us. Burgin also writes that “whereas paintings and films readily present themselves to critical attention as objects; photographs are received rather as an environment” (Burgin 130). It is also in terms of the concept of the environment or context that Susan Sontag tries to capture the essence of photography when stating that “[t]he photographs change, depending on the context in which they are seen” (Sontag 65).

As a technology of representation and communication, photography conveys “less” and on fewer channels than film, and, being the most widespread and basic form of contemporary visual culture, its effect often is to “generate” immunity on the observer’s part, this latter feature being intensely exploited in the movies to be analyzed.

Another important characteristic summarized by Christian Metz is the fact that film and photography “are prints of real objects, prints left on a special surface by a combination of light and chemical action” (Metz 139). It is especially about mechanical photography that we can say that it is a material index, pointing to its referent in the real world¹²⁴. Maggie Humm, writing about the same Metz article, mentions that photographs “are much closer to

¹²⁴ “Photography, on the other hand, remains closer to the pure index, stubbornly pointing to the print of what *was*, but no longer *is*” (Metz 139).

their referents than is film” (Humm 647), a difference that will gain paramount importance in understanding the hidden causes for film characters’ using photography. The indexical link between the real referent and its photographic representation is interestingly dramatized in a 1995 movie, *Smoke*, the joint effort of American prose writer Paul Auster and director Wayne Wang.

Auggie Wren (played by Harvey Keitel) is the owner of a Manhattan corner tobacco-shop, an amiable fellow visited by all sorts of smokers from the neighborhood. Auggie’s most regular hobby is that of taking a picture of the crossing in front of his shop, at 8 o’clock sharp every morning, ”be that rain or shine” as he says. The albums that contain the enormous number of black and white snapshots are perused by a disillusioned writer (William Hurt), who leafs through them quickly, bored by the radical resemblance between the images. It is obviously the naked reference that repulses his intellect, although he is impressed by the stubbornness of Auggie Wren. Seeing his boredom, the photographer and tobacco shop-owner offers him the recipe that would turn his identical photos into worlds worth discovering. This amounts to detaching the referent from representation by looking slowly and individually at the photographs, thus freeing them from the burden of recalling the well known street scene and instead discovering the impressions, long gone elements that photos are able to preserve.

Photographs arrest and stop time. Christian Metz says that they represent the passing of time more faithfully than mirrors, since a mirror makes us face the actual present, but a photograph is capable of keeping the past as past, in a frozen mode, not haunted by destruction or decomposition¹²⁵. In Peter Wollen’s view, photographs are devices for stopping time that keep mosaics of the past just like ”flies [are kept] in amber” (Wollen 76). Being objects that preserve what is past in its former presence, and also offering paths for remembrance, photographs can create a palpable, perceivable past: therefore they offer to our protagonists wandering in the labyrinths of their memories that unmovable, thus recognizable world they so badly need. But keeping what is past in/on photographs is an act not devoid of its paradoxes: by forcing for example our beloved ones into frames, silence and lack of motion, photographs still preserve them as dead, writes Metz¹²⁶. The act of mechanical photography captures parts of the past once and for all, similarly to the act of death, while film has the power of bringing the dead back whenever the tape is viewed again.

¹²⁵ “Photography is motionless and frozen; it has the cryogenic power to preserve objects through time without decay” (Metz 78).

¹²⁶ “Film gives back to the dead the semblance of life (...). Photography, on the contrary, by virtue of the objective suggestions of its signifier (stillness, again) maintains the memory of the dead *as being dead*” (Metz 141).

As often acknowledged in this thesis, overarching generalizations ease the task of interpretation, but also obscure and simplify. While being aware that such an opposition constructed between photography and film is most helpful in the following film analyses, one should not ignore Mary Ann Doane's observation about the same problematic. Drawing on Barthes, she mentions that while photography "freezes a moment in time", "the cinema makes an inexorable appeal to the present tense" (Doane 143). Doane completes the Barthesian opposition by drawing attention to the "two temporalities at work" in film:

Accompanying the spectatorial experience of the present tense of the filmic flow is the recognition that the images were produced at a particular time, that they are inevitably stained with their own historicity. This is what allows film to age—quickly and visibly—in a way similar to that of the photograph. Not only does the technology itself become "dated" (the use of black and white, Cinemascope, film noir lighting), but the contents of the image inevitably bear the traces of the moment at which they were produced (fashion, cars, interior design, architecture). (Doane 143)

This is a statement hard to refute and I hope that through the analyses presented in the other chapters of the dissertation concerned with the "historicity" and the aging" of the filmic image I demonstrate an awareness of this "double temporality". Nevertheless, in order to pursue the present analyses, I need to adhere to the absolute opposition postulated between the representational technologies of photography and film.

2. 1. Behind reality

In order to have a context that would make possible the reading of the chosen movies in the spirit of the argumentation summarized previously, one needs to consider at least two of the most popular and well-known movies that give photography a role within the filmic narration. I am referring to *Blow Up*, the 1966 film directed by Michelangelo Antonioni and Ridley Scott's 1982 science fiction movie, *Blade Runner*. And as this dissertation is primarily preoccupied with historical periods and paradigmatic changes, these analyses will contribute to the identification of period specificities as far as photography and film are concerned. Antonioni is the *auteur*-director of the 1960s European art movie „genre" and his films embody some of the essence of (high) modernism in film¹²⁷, while *Blade Runner* was hailed at the time of its release as *the* postmodern movie¹²⁸. And while detection is present in both

¹²⁷ See Neale and Bordwell.

¹²⁸ See Bruno.

films, the film noir universe is consciously recreated only in Ridley Scott's movie, from the exterior city images on to the dark and shadowy interiors, or the figure of the detective who – if we accept the possibility that he too is a replicant – is ultimately searching for himself. In an exhaustive analysis of the film Forest Pyle emphasizes the noir subtext of *Blade Runner*, arguing that by drawing attention to this film historical style Scott's movie is immersed in generating nostalgia in true postmodern(ist) manner:

Most immediately, perhaps, the film addresses the memory of its *audience* by working in—and *with*—a style, *film noir*, that cannot help but evoke nostalgia. But the *film noir* effect of this hybrid of the 1940s and the early 21st century creates a curious effect, since the cinematic nostalgia played out in shadows and muted colors is projected onto the future. (Pyle 236)

The comparison of these two films with the body of movies primarily examined in this work is intended to contribute to clarifying the problems of definition already touched upon: how could one differentiate between the now classic 1970s/1980s postmodernism and the developments in the last decade?

2.2. Murder in the park: *Blow Up*

Thomas, the cynical and well-to-do photographer goes on a ramble in an empty London park of geometrical appearance. A lean young woman and a respectable older man meet on the lawn, the rendezvous seemingly a secret one. The photographer is carried away by the sudden, most photogenic theme, and the machine sets to work: the film's soundtrack during this sequence is almost exclusively made up of its rattle and click. However, privacy is invaded and the woman in checked shirt is terrified at the thought of having been photographed, like us the viewers, who certainly sympathize with the lovers rather than with the interrupted artist. At this point the secret, perhaps adulterous nature of the date offers itself as an adequate explanation for the woman's overreaction, contrasted to the placid, careless answers of Thomas. He is being followed to his home by the woman, who is desperate to recuperate the negative of the photographs made in the park.

Although I concentrated on presenting the narrative line that leads up to the specific constellation of detection and photography presented in *Blow Up*, the entire movie is based on representing photographic practice by/on film. In this framework the interlude of the park photographs is by no means the most spectacular or interesting one, yet from the point of view of my larger enterprise this is what deserves attention. Thomas is visited by the young

woman, who is ready to do anything for the negative; she strips and drinks, kisses and laughs – while she is tense and frightened, a quality one can discover at a second viewing of the film. A chase, half-serious and half-determined, persuades the photographer that the negatives do have a huge importance, and he decides to change them, offering the naked young lady another film negative.

After she leaves, perhaps relieved by the success of her project, the photographer sets out to develop the negative, an activity suggested by the title of the movie itself. Since „the narrative [is] *about* the processes of reproduction” (Jameson, *Cultural* 37), we can admire the whole technological arsenal used in developing photographs and finally the mysterious photographs themselves. This is the point where the first differences appear between *Blow Up* and my film corpus concerning the role of photographs in the larger context of the films. While in *A Pure Formality*, *Memento* or *Mullholland Drive* the photographs inserted in the film-narrative are fundamentally objects of/for identification for the heroes and heroines immersed in a quest, revealing otherwise unrepresentable information about their selves/subjectivities, in *Blow Up* the photographs are „objectified” twice, if we can say so. Photographs exist as objects to be looked at in this 1960s film, while in the movies made in the last decade they are intimately related to the subjective identities of the questing heroes and in this sense they come to life, enter the subject constructions presented in the films. This is not the case in *Blow Up*: Thomas looks at the photos to find out more about the models („the objects of the photos) and not about himself, the subject (or photographer). He holds on to the photographic images because of his curiosity and not out of some deep existential needs as Rita in *Mullholland Drive* or Leonard Shelby in *Memento*. In this sense, the troubling circular relationship that is constituted between Leonard Shelby, the photographer and the photographs he takes because of his unstable identity is not present in Antonioni’s film.

The first thing Thomas notices about the large size, beautifully composed, „stolen” photographs is the unusual trajectory of gazes: the film-camera focuses on the models’ faces at the same time as suggesting that this is how Thomas looks at them. Interestingly, photographs in *Blow Up* are getting closer to the sense of a film image by Thomas’ moving between them and examining them: thus in this sequence they are situated somewhere in between fixed photos and stills from a moving film. It is again the expression on the young woman’s face that betrays the radically humanist conception behind Antonioni’s film and that suggests something irregular: terror and unease, and intense attention paid to a bush across. In the modernist tradition of depth-knowledge conceptions – that were dissolving with the onset

of postmodernity according to Fredric Jameson¹²⁹ – Thomas tries to approach the mysterious spot physically, by isolating squares on the single shot and preparing enlargements. Paradoxically, increasing accuracy leads to epistemological uncertainties. Contours become more and more blurred, on the consecutively enlarged shots we are faced with patches of grey and black instead of recognizable referents such as the tree, the fence or the lawn. Yet the dissolution of the objects of representation that Thomas has photographed in the park is a joyous process after all: a shadow in the form of a gun appears, apparently the very object looked at in such a terror by the young woman. Hidden, secret faces of reality manifest themselves for those who are able to read, we can conclude, and the activity of enlarging and looking at photos transforms Thomas, the photographer into a detective, who says to his friend: "Imagine, I impeded a murder attempt while photographing in the park".

The most important moment in Antonioni's *Blow Up* is certainly the emerging shadow in the form of a gun, signaled by disturbances in the trajectories of gazes. Thomas visits the park by night to test his hypothesis of murder and indeed the clue – in the form of a dead body – is there. The camera saw more and in more detail¹³⁰, just like the woman photographed, while Thomas needed time and thinking to arrive at this knowledge. But because *Blow Up* is not a movie of detection or epistemological quest, the power of photography is not so crucial or important as the feelings and state of the young man full of ennui. Thomas, after all, enters the "tableau of [those men] examining and manhandling the visual evidence of female misconduct", as Tom Gunning classifies one of the most important roles photography played in silent movies made in the 1910s (Gunning 40).

3. Depth disappears: *Blade Runner* and *Fight Club*

Blade Runner is a prominent example of memory being represented in/as photographs, and human subjectivity as dependent on visual representations for its functioning, a tendency and a cultural cliché gaining more and more foothold in the late 1990s postmodernist movies analyzed here. Pam Cook identifies this tendency in relation to contemporary film studies as well, in which case my endeavour is but a small gesture in this direction: "One of the most significant developments in film studies over the last fifteen years or so has been the growing preoccupation with memory and nostalgia" (Cook 1).

With Ridley Scott's 1982 science-fiction movie we enter a new phase in the relationship between human subjectivities and photographs, or subjects and objects: the

¹²⁹ See Jameson, *Postmodernism*.

¹³⁰ I need to thank Tamás Bényei for his suggestion that in this case it is the camera rather than the photographed images that becomes part of the protagonist's subjectivity, assuming the explicit role of a prosthetic device to human perception.

difference postulated between the seeing human being (camera) and the referent object photographed gradually starts to melt. Photographs in *Blade Runner* are essentially connected to the rebellious artificial beings known as replicants whom the title-character, Rick Deckard, a retired policeman and killer (Harrison Ford), is hired to exterminate. Genetic and technological engineering is shown at its most efficient projecting and creating the different replicant models, which – except for the fact that they live for exactly four years – seem to be superior to their creators in strength, agility and physical beauty. Yet stable personality is assured only by emotional and spiritual safety, goes the ideology of the makers, thus replicants must be "equipped" with a nice childhood, memories and families in spite of having been assembled in laboratories. Photographs, thanks to their – already mentioned – indexical, iconical and detachable nature seem to be the most efficient way of anchoring the memory implants of replicants, who may refer back to these images whenever the verity of their mnemonic activities is called into question. "I didn't know why replicants would collect photos. Maybe they were like Rachel: they needed memories", summarizes the gloomy futuristic detective in a laconic manner. In the most literal sense, photographs are exterior, visually perceivable building blocks of the (artificial) subjectivities the replicants have, equaling (their) memories – and it is totally subsidiary that these memories are not the "natural" ones.

The dramatic and symbolic event of the "found", ownerless photograph is repeated in Scott's film when the blade runner begins to analyse one of the photographs he found in the hotel room of replicant Leon. Except for the technology used – television screen and scanner instead of mechanical photographic apparatus – the process is very similar to the enlargement that Thomas performs in *Blow Up*: delimiting ambiguous sections on the photograph, enlarging them and trying to understand the meaning of the forms perceived. The blade runner is looking at the photograph of some "anonymous motel room", with a blonde figure sitting in the unlit corner and small gadgets covering the space. Thanks to the ingenious machine, however, small and hardly perceptible sections gain clarity when enhanced, a thing happening when the blade runner is examining the mirror on the photograph and the mirror image turns out to represent an angle of the room otherwise unseen. The shawls made of scales and the two female figures that become visible will offer the solution to the blade runner's question: but it is even more important that – just like in *Blow Up* – photographs hide under their surface segments of an otherwise unseen reality that finally prove to be essential pieces of information. These segments, however, cannot be seen at a first glance, only with the help of technological devices which reveal that the photographs actually have three dimensions and

depth, opening on totally new worlds¹³¹. In the case of *Blade Runner* the woman in the red scarf lying on the bed is part of the dream-dimension generated by the technical apparatus: when we are simply looking at the original photo, there is no trace of women in the photographed room¹³². A blurred, but still recognisable Polaroid photograph of the sleeping woman with a snake-sign on her neck emerges from the machine, but just like the photograph of Natalie in Nolan's *Memento*, this could be any woman's image, so few personal/individual traits are apparent. As we know, Polaroids do not have negatives; they appear as the sole possible and unrepeatable variants of a reality slice; a set of characteristics that certainly fits this dissected photograph in Ridley Scott's movie.

The idea that one's identity, subjectivity or memory is anchored to an external, material image is palpable from *Blade Runner* on, and two late 1990s movies offer sequences that attest this imaginary topos about photographs having entered our innermost selves. During a bus ride, the two Tyler Durdens in David Fincher's *Fight Club* observe advertisements for male underwear and they are obviously frustrated by the handsome models, a feeling that later no doubt contributes to their transformation into aggressive fighters. The amnesiac heroine of *Mullholland Drive* chooses to identify herself with a movie heroine she sees on a poster, while the amnesiac writer in *A Pure Formality* manages to reach his personal past when seeing a photograph of his younger self. This mechanism of "photo-identification" is a fundamental pillar of both the plot and the story of *Memento* as well.

All the movies examined here seem to be obsessed with the idea that someone's self, memory or possibility of identification might be deposited in/to images. I would advance the opinion that the trajectory of these heroes is much influenced by the "anticipation of what they are going to look as images". Or, to quote the original formulation of Celia Lury: „[i]ndeed it sometimes seems, as Baudrillard (1995) claims, that since we now live in a culture in which we each have a video recorder in our bed, we are constantly in the position of having to transform ourselves in the anticipation of what we might look like as an image" (Lury, *Stylization* 78).

¹³¹ Forest Pyle draws our attention to the importance of gaze and seeing throughout the movie, related to the detection process: "The motif of the eye and its gaze runs throughout the movie (...). All this literal and symbolic attention to eyes, this ubiquity of the gaze, only serves to underline the failures of seeing, for it turns out that one can never tell the difference by looking. (...). But because one cannot see or detect a difference does not in and of itself prove that such difference is absent: there may well be internal differences unavailable to empirical detection" (Pyle 236).

¹³² While it is true that this process may be regarded as the spatialization of the plane which is the photograph, however, the space "created" provides solid (even if hitherto unseen) information that becomes the basis of detecting inquiry in the film.

4.1. Photo Recall¹³³

Photo Recall: this could be a suitable summary for some of the most memorable situations where photographs appear in the 1990s movies discussed: detecting, inquiring heroes – unable to reach and use their memory – finally succeed in retrieving some bits and pieces when faced with photographic images. Onoff, the persecuted writer in mid-life crisis, questioned by Commissar Roman Polanski in *A Pure Formality* remembers his life and the persons participating in it when faced with a huge sack of mostly black and white, but some colored photographs as well; representing persons he met and took a picture of. As for Leonard Shelby, the problematic former insurance agent in *Memento*, memories are not activated when photographs perform the necessary link to the stored information: memories *are* the photographs themselves, because since his brain injury the hero has not been able to “make new memories”.

When saying that photographs are stores for individual memories, I am not only referring to the processes of how screen memories work in these movies, but also to the way we, viewers construct the image and identity of the heroes/heroines seen: it is thanks to the photographs that we are able to narrate their identities. A common feature of all cases is that memory is externalized in the most literal sense and personal recollections of the heroes cannot be activated until they face the corresponding photographs. It is as if photos constituted a core of their identity, a core that can be retrieved whenever there is a need for it, a core the protagonists might repeatedly identify with. But when these “cores” are made up of amateur, badly composed, feebly lit or made photographs, a medium that might be closely connected to the cruel passing of time and even death, we can say that operating one’s memory by placing it in photographs has a number of drawbacks¹³⁴. If – in the case of the films – the past is connected to photography as a medium, and the narrative present is linked to film as a medium, the question of how the medial characteristics influence the type of memory and identity the heroes and heroines have might be posed.

In *A Pure Formality* the writer played by Gerard Depardieu is being hailed by policemen while aimlessly rambling in a forest, at night in pouring rain. Not having identification papers on him, he is escorted to the police headquarters, which functions in a castle recalling Kafka. A long interrogation begins, the heavy atmosphere hardened by

¹³³ “[A]ll these metaphorical accounts of memory [photo, black box, archeological site, etc.] indicate that it cannot be thought or represented except in terms of something that already determines how we conceive of it” (King 9).

¹³⁴ Let alone the problems originating in a reversed hierarchy of object and representation: memory/identity should be *represented*, *symbolized* by photographs, but not be identical with them. Or else: “[I]f reality itself appears to be already constituted as image, then the hierarchy of object and representation – the first being the source of the authority and prestige of the second – is collapsed. The representation can no longer be grounded, as Husserl wanted, in presence” (Owens, *Photography* 86).

frequent shots of the interior, which is barely lit, with rain tickling in through innumerable holes. Police officer Roman Polanski is intent is to prove that Onoff, the writer is the perpetrator of the murder the evidence of which – a dead male body – has been recently found on the nearby river shore. The nerve-racking interrogation reaches its climax when the dazzled writer is shown the sack full of all types of photographs. He says these are photographs taken of all the persons he met. The images align themselves into an internal, intimate diary and in the context of the filmic narration so far – the life history and the motivations of the writer not having been elucidated at all – gain a positive emphasis. The slowly turned, sometimes torn or faded photos force the accused writer to withdraw from his alleged amnesia, a state that impedes the police inquest. The images have a salutary effect on the audience as well who are able to insert the still pictures into the gaps of the ambiguous life history seen and narrated.

In *Memento* the same photographic activity and its end products counterbalance the short-time memory loss of the pursued investigator, who is animated by the need to revenge the death of his wife. In order not to forget, Leonard Shelby takes pictures with his Polaroid machine of the most basic, yet necessary elements of his life: the motel he lives in, the car he steals, and the persons he meets. Whenever he is faced with the possible object of his memory-replacing photographs, Shelby compares the ‘real thing’ with its representation and if the match occurs, recognition and further incorporation of the element photographed in his actions ensures, e.g. he enters his rented room. Perhaps in a moment when memories are still vivid, sometimes within the ten minutes following the experience itself, Shelby prepares a drawn and glued map of his acquaintances and planned activities, a map that is being constantly extended. He consults the map – like the life-saving photographs and the writings stretching on his body – before making new moves in his detection. This map on the wall of his hotel room is literally a cognitive map, albeit external, material and constructed of images instead of being an abstract concept based on the activity of human neurons. Shelby’s cognitive map is totally similar in its function to his Polaroid photos: it is a substitute for his badly functioning memory.

Both *A Pure Formality* and *Memento* portray male heroes with considerable psychic problems, and the movies can be said to present – among others – the protagonists’ efforts to reach their locked memories, thus regaining the possibility of identity and power for action. Writing about the effect that (repeated) viewings of films create in spectators, Anne Friedberg states that this is similar to what she calls “postmodern amnesia”, a condition which may be considered as valid for the examined detecting heroes as well: “reseeing films outside of their historical context further separates the film from the context of a past. Here, the

symptomatology of postmodern amnesia – the loss of the capacity to retain the past – meets the detemporalized, derealized spectator” (185).

4.2. *Memento* and *A Pure Formality*: memories caught in technologies of representation

Pam Cook’s observation concerning “memory films” seems to be valid in the case of *A Pure Formality* as well, especially in relation to Onoff, the writer confronted with his photographic collection: “Memory films allow the slippage between past and present to be consciously addressed, since memory itself reorders the past from the perspective of today” (Cook 11-2). In the case of Onoff, the huge mass of photographs at once appears thoroughly and specifically personal, pointing to the hero irrespective of the context they appear in, and seem fatally contingent. They allow the viewer to complete the blank figure with a life history – the persons seen on the photographs do not appear in the movie, so they cannot be identified with the exception of a feminine figure – but there is no guarantee that this is a true, authentic photo album, it could refer to anyone’s life.

The story of Tornatore’s movie takes place in the imaginary region following death and Onoff, the interrogated writer is indeed the one who killed the person found, but the body appears to be his own, and the quest and interrogation identify him as the perpetrator of a suicidal act. Therefore an urgent need for inserting markers of the real is constituted, and photography is capable of such a performance, thanks to a characteristic mentioned by Christian Metz: film and photography “are prints of real objects, prints left on a special surface by a combination of light and chemical action” (Metz 139). In this sense, the equation of Onoff’s personal memory with a sack full of photographs validates his being to viewers, emphasizing his (missing) reality by activating the commonsense knowledge referring to the visible, strong relationship between reality, photographic activity and photographs. Because, as Roland Barthes writes, “*the photograph had to be there* ([this is] the mythical definition of denotation)” (Barthes 30-1).

In the context of these films the role of photography might be more plausibly assessed if contrasted with that of the moving image, the film. While the latter’s representational process can be better disguised, thus creating the illusion of non-representation, mechanical photography has a stronger in-built ‘reality-effect’: exactly what the heroes, lost in their hallucinations, need. And the urge for creating the effect of reality is much more emphasized if we consider the reception processes: viewers must be persuaded that what they see is real, palpable, not just the inner, psychic fights of tormented characters. After all, every film

analysed here pretends to adhere to an action-packed genre: they fake to be crime or thriller stories, not just “simple” cases of disturbed psychology.

The feature of photographs that they are highly dependent for their meaning on the context where they are presented (or met) can be seen to be at the source of the growing number of irrational murders committed by the pursued detective in *Memento*. The photograph that appears to be of a smiling buddy at a given moment and site is transformed into the trace of a heartless swindler at another juncture in the chain of actions. The memory-deficient hero, who cannot relate to the overall context, clinging desperately instead to the photographed pieces, cannot but make confused choices and commit yet another meaningless killing, guided by his Polaroid images¹³⁵. One of Shelby’s life-saving pictures is that of his motel, the Discount Inn, the Polaroid image of which is shown to the viewers several times. Yet the accidental look of Discount Inn makes it another instance of the American topos of interchangeable empty motels,¹³⁶ having no role except in a context: a claim also made for photography as a technology of communication. Interchangeability or the fragile dependence of repetition on memory is pertinently materialized in the motel clerk’s attempt to make more easy money: he rents Leonard Shelby two rooms, identical in their look, a trick working with this hero lacking a properly functioning memory.

However, Leonard Shelby’s (supposedly) dead wife is shown on moving images or on short filmic insertions whenever his detecting husband remembers her. Why not materialized on a Polaroid photograph carried everywhere, in the spirit of the above argumentation about the essential kinship of photography and death? An answer emerges if we suppose the conscious use of different representational media for the different types of memories considered. Since the long-term memory of the main protagonist of *Memento* is intact and functioning, he is capable of remembering related, narrative, or moving images from his past, like in the case of the clips with his wife. As for his deficient short-term memory, its functioning is represented by the point-like appearances of Polaroid photographs that freeze the past as past, without the life- and narrative-generating powers of film.

As a matter of fact, this fiction of Nolan’s film has quite solid psychological bases as demonstrated by Dutch psychologist Douwe Draaisma in his exciting book on the tradition of

¹³⁵ A very similar mechanism is formulated by James Buzard: “[t]he photographic image emerges from a history but cannot supply that history; instead its present users appropriate it and overlay it with a new meaning arising from their own “desolate mentalities”, from their own needs and exigencies. In itself equivocal, forever susceptible to new uses and new stories, the image participates in the production and maintenance of the subject by illustrating the subject’s self-confirming story of free and vital subjectivity” (Buzard 161).

¹³⁶ This statement can be supported by “extra-textual” data: in the 2001 Remember Productions DVD-edition of the movie, more precisely in the “Anatomy of a Scene” special feature, production designer Patti Podesta presents in a detailed mode the search for the “perfectly anonymous” motel room, a search also documented with location photographs.

representing memory in technological metaphors, *Metaphor Machine*¹³⁷. There he speaks about both „anterograde” and „retrograde” amnesia (Draaisma 233), the former being the diagnosis of Leonard Shelby. Further, he differentiates between „explicit” and „implicit” memory, and this differentiation explains why and how the insurance agent is still able to function as a detecting and conscious human being:

The processes that remain intact even in the case of amnesia are called „implicit memory”. [People with amnesia] Forget that they have learned something – they introduce themselves every morning to the leader of the experiment – but they do not forget what they have learned, thus they perform the tasks better/more efficiently [because] implicit memory is not touched/effected by amnesia. (Draaisma 186)

He also mentions that implicit memory „is not to be reached by conscious remembering, but it stores experiences”, exactly the case with Shelby as well, that is why he is able to detect¹³⁸. According to the fiction sustained by *Memento*, one’s long-term memory is fixed once and for all; events in the present do not, cannot influence it, do not modify or alter it. But if we try and observe the movie in its totality and consider its use of media from this perspective, we will discover that the idea of long-term memory being retroactively altered is also suggested by it.¹³⁹ Thus it can be supposed that the particular narrative structure of Christopher Nolan’s movie and the image-sequences determined by it serve to represent medially the third mode of the hero’s functioning of memory: long-term memory being filled up (that is: modified) in spite of his short-time memory loss. The fraud that cannot and must not be narrated – namely that our hero might also simulate the short-term

¹³⁷ I had access to the book’s Hungarian version, therefore all quotations and references are my translations.

¹³⁸ The quotations in Hungarian: „Amnéziás betegekkel való érintkezés során derült rá fény, hogy léteznie kell olyasminek, mint implicit emlékezet, amely ugyan a tudatos visszaemlékezés számára hozzáférhetetlen, de tapasztalatot raktároz” (Draaisma 185). „Az emlékezetvesztés esetén is érintetlenül maradó folyamatokat „implicit emlékezet”-nek is nevezik” (Draaisma 187). „Kísérletek hosszú sorával megállapították, hogy az amnéziás betegek elsősorban a motoros és a perceptuális feladatokat ugyanolyan gyorsan sajátítják el, mint a nem sérült emberek. Például a tükörrajzolósi vagy tükörolvasási feladatokat, vizuális útvesztők és térbeli kirakós feladatok megoldását az amnéziás betegek ugyanolyan gyorsan képesek elsajátítani, mint bárki más. Elfelejtik, hogy valamit tanultak – minden reggel újra bemutatkoznak a kísérlet vezetőjének –, de azt, amit tanultak, nem, és ezáltal jobban végzik el a feladatot. Az implicit emlékezetet nem érinti az amnézia” (Draaisma 186).

¹³⁹ This point is brilliantly summarized by Nicola King, when she writes that human memory does not function similarly to a video-recorder or a store the content of which was fixed definitively and can be unpacked at ease, rather it should be conceived of as a web of neurons the pattern of which changes whenever a specific piece of memory is recalled. “The belief that all the events of one’s life are ‘recorded’ and potentially available for recovery persists in spite of research which suggests that memory does not work like a video-recorder: ‘it isn’t a place, a store-house or a machine for recording events’, but ‘an intricate and ever shifting net of firing neurons...the twistings and turnings of which rearrange themselves completely each time something is recalled’ (Grant 1998: 289)” (King 15).

memory-loss in order to justify the repeated acts of killing – is in this way betrayed by the film itself, by its structure and the media employed.

Already in the script the narrated story is separated into two halves: the events leading up to the caesura are shown in black and white and in a chronological/linear order, yet fragmented into five-minute pieces. Events after the rupture are represented in a reversed chronological order, on color film and also divided into pieces of similar length. In the film a black and white insert is followed by a color one, the planes of the past perfect, of the simple past and of the narrative present – at the same time the planes of Leonard Shelby's memory – are being mixed, without any of them having precedence over the other two. The meaning that can be abstracted from the rhythmical alteration of black and white and color footage, and from the whole movie unsystematically assembled of the short stories, could be the following: that is how the injured memory is building up, retaining every trace, even if in a strange order. That is, Leonard Shelby has no excuse for the repeated murders he commits under the guise of not being able to remember them: the celluloid keeps the print of every criminal deed.

This interpretation is not singular, as in her reading of David Lean's 1945 movie, *Brief Encounter*, Pam Cook mentions concerning Nolan's film that thanks to the ingenious narrative pattern of the film viewers are placed in the situation of the memory-deficient hero:

Indeed, narrative continuity itself, and our ability to understand or read a film, depends on memory, as Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (2000) demonstrated so brilliantly. This was a thriller featuring a hero suffering amnesia, whose confused perspective the audience was invited to share as he tried to make sense of events and objects around him. (Cook 98)

Thus we could conclude that memory-types and the media that represent and symbolize them have an over-determined relationship in the movie-sequences analyzed. Photography, in my understanding, gains such an important role thanks to its characteristics such as: context-dependent meaning, a tight, indexical relationship to reality and to the past, as well as the complex situation which it occupies between the different time-planes.

5.1. The detective and the photographs. *Cutting Room*.

Louise Welsh's novel is full of surprises and unexpected turns; to say that nothing is what it seems is understating the case. Our wonders may begin with the title itself, unless one of the analytical perspectives employed in this chapter – the “deadly” quality of representational media – facilitate our interpretative work. In this case, our associating the

process of developing photographs or the stages of editing a movie with the medieval atmosphere of a chamber of horrors proves to be right.

Rilke, the first-person, searching narrator, auctioneer by profession, is hired to clear the McKindless house within a week's period, even though the job would in fact necessitate much more time. However, money and reputation are stronger forces than he may withstand, even if his instinct suggests that he shouldn't have accepted the commission. "I should have stopped right there and asked her why, but I was already making calculations in my head, adding up time, manpower and money, wheeling straight into business as she knew I would" (Welsh 5). Deals too good are not to be trusted in a crime genre setting, but Rilke, the gentlemanly amateur sleuth, is still too small a fish compared with the complex machinery of transnational organized crime, so even if he counters that "[a]ntiques of that calibre hadn't seen the inside of a Glasgow saleroom for years, hadn't seen Bowery Auctions ever" (Welsh 8), he is not going to miss the big chance. Would Sam Spade or Hercule Poirot have reacted differently?

The first signs that Rilke notices, trying to come to terms with the huge task, make us think about the dissolution of stable, perceivable identities in crime texts. Even if the answer to this strange occurrence is given in the *dénouement* of the novel – Mr. Roderick McKindless, a backstage porn criminal has only staged his death and the clearance of his goods –, the overpowering and bewildering effect of the man who is capable of not leaving traces of himself cannot be ignored, especially after repeated readings of the novel:

Still, impressed as I was, I did notice an absence. Usually you get a feel for the person who used to live in the house you're clearing – little things, style, a mode of living. (...) Of Mr. McKindless I was no wiser by the end of the day than I'd been at the beginning. There was sterility to the collection, and almost self-conscious expense about the dead men's possessions. (Welsh 9)

In a truly gothic manner, the secret that the unfolding search is meant to elucidate is hiding in the attic of the McKindless house, in the supposedly deceased Mr. Roderick's private study. The unique collection of pornographic books, among them those published by the Olympia Press ("concentrated on the avant-garde, particularly sex" (Welsh 19) do not seem to generate any doubts in the beginning. Moreover, Rilke seems to be happy that the trace of a personal, individual man is finally emerging; "the private person" he was missing is there on the neatly arranged shelves. The deadly quality of the photographic apparatus is most apparent in the three horrid pictures Rilke finds in the McKindless envelope:

The flash has been overexposed, rendering the woman a bleached white against the dark background. The monks were in sharp focus but she was almost a negative. Her features had vanished, save for the anxious dots of her pupils and the open gasp of her mouth. (...) The woman had been cruelly treated” (Welsh 35). “For the final photograph the photographer has stepped a little closer. The girl lies on the same wooden boards. Now she is wrapped in a white sheet, only her bare feet exposed. (Welsh 36)

Doug Balfour, the sports bet fan and representative of a famous local firm of photography is the first to professionally take a look at the images of the girl’s torture, taken somewhere in Paris, a little after the Second World War. Preceding him, the first casual viewer, the photocopyist girl is turned into a “motionless, frightened mannequin” (Welsh 44) when she sees the pictures, as if they had the power of the Medusa head. Dougie ascertains the authenticity of the shots, no chance of camera trickery there, he says, but he is horrified when seeing the girl apparently murdered in front of the camera: “Christ, Rilke. I hope she was acting but look at her. For fuck’s sake, man, that’s an open wound” (Welsh 48).

It is Leslie who assesses the photographs in an adequate manner and takes them for what they are: a horrendous intrusion into average people’s everyday lives. S/he nevertheless understands that Rilke is not drawn by the secret perverse pleasure of the “snuff” pornographic snapshots: “If this is real then it’s a horrible thing, but it’s a long time ago. Who did it doesn’t matter. She’s long gone and you won’t be able to change that. The past is the past” (Welsh 56). Rilke, by not accepting this simple truth, by wanting to re-live the experience of the (apparently) murdered girl, enters the camp of idealistic, heroic detectives, the successor of knights in search for the Holy Grail, as Will Wright would have it.

The next meeting we witness in the course of the quest is with Trapp, the “man you would forget”, who is suggested by Leslie as an expert in the pornographic trade. It is he who questions the connection of the photographs to McKindless, the private person, arguing that he might have bought these, being an avid collector of such materials. Another trace of the theoretically informed background narrator surfaces in Rilke’s answers, a small treatise that may exemplify Michel Foucault’s famous conditions in his essay “What is an Author?” That is how Rilke argues his idea that the deceased old man has been involved in the torture and possible murder of the girl on the photograph:

'I've a feeling about them. The way they were stored together, the similarity in the style' I was surprising myself now – 'the length of the shot, the general arrangement. Remember, I spend my life classifying, determining provenance, authorship. (...) There's something I can't quite put my finger on, but what it amounts to is a consistency of composition and the decision to store them together. (Welsh 72)

In his paper Foucault is dwelling upon the question of how certain works are attributed to an author, what are the minimal criteria for establishing the link of authorship between dispersed verbal constructions and the body or name of an actual person. Our literary thinking, he claims, is a conservative discourse, which is attested by the fact that the four criteria of Saint Jerome in reference to authorship are still valid: the third of these is the consistency of style, and this is the argument Rilke, the detecting auctioneer employs in his word-duel with Trapp, whose sentences quoted above might easily blend with the following ones: "one must also exclude works that are written in a different style, containing words and expressions not ordinarily found in the writer's production (the author is here conceived as a stylistic unity);" (Foucault 111).

For Trapp, the anonymous power figure, stylistic unity and common provenance are not solid reasons for accepting McKindless' authorship and the case that photographs represent as mirrors what has been actually staged in front of the lenses. In this debate it is the detective, Rilke, who opts and wishes for the possibility of mimesis, as this would be the only representational model in which the photographed crime could be real, an indispensable condition if he wants to fashion himself as a true, target-oriented hero on a quest. Thus we can draw another important conclusion concerning the links between representational media, crime and detection: unless the mimetic model of representation is valid – where an indexical and iconic correspondence between sign and signified is at work – the chances for real crime, or better said identifiable traces, diminish rapidly and we arrive to the situation where the most the detective can do is linger over the mediatic apparatus. In a sense this may be said to be the case in Chuck Palahniuk's novel, *Fight Club* as well: here the ups and downs of narration signal that mimesis is no longer possible in the absence of such a separating line between represented and its representation – at least this is how I interpret the trope of the split personality clerk fighting with himself. In this situation, just like in Rilke's case, attention and detection efforts are not being absorbed into solving the crime, but they are invested in analyzing the media of representation, photography in Welsh's or oral/verbal narration in Palahniuk's case.

5.2. Death in the camera

The Camera Club is an ingenious business in soft pornography, another private hell that Rilke must get to know on his quest for the truth. Anne-Marie, a pretty young student invites into her home foreign men interested in taking photographs of her, preparing their own pinups, with the girl they have always dreamed about. The adventure is expensive and exclusive, but Rilke must melt with the audience if he hopes to enter in contact with the girl, like McKindless, in the private room of whom Rilke found Anne-Marie's business card. That's how he feels while working with the Polaroid machine, in a sequence where he is forced into the position of the long gone photographer of the nameless girl's staged murder: "I felt like an assassin. The eye behind the lens. My mouth tasted of ashes. I swallowed, pressed the button, and the flash exploded" (Welsh 87). Anne-Marie, this time from the inside of the frame and in the situation of the photographed object, confesses: "I never talk to the clients. I'm the muse, untouchable and silent. I'd lose my power over them if I spoke. I'm a fantasy object" (Welsh 89). Describing the economy of voyeuristic desire, her sentences also betray the fatal nature of erotic photographs: once in the limelight, the living body is estranged and frozen, and this happens more intensely if the photographed object is a naked female body, the ultimate element of patriarchal pornographic imagination.

The cruelty and the impersonality of representational media as well as their deadly quality is foregrounded in the "TV Land" sequence where Rilke is compelled to watch a video production aimed at mocking the false gender identity of one-evening transvestites: "Too close the lens zoomed in, roving over the pits and craters of a lunar landscape. She smiled and the camera focused on her mouth. Seeing beyond the full painted bow to the thin lips, the receding gums and the nicotine teeth of the man Sandy wanted to forget" (Welsh 113). Rilke senses that media such as photography or video prey on living beings' private dreams and their carefully constructed appearances in order to satisfy the curiosity of an always hungry audience. Considered from this angle, his desperate need to verify the process of the snuff photographs' coming into being is fuelled by the idealistic urge to stop representation from killing our fantasies, even if they are self-deluding ones.

A few pages later, the boundary that separates reality and representation, sign and signified is mentioned again, in the form of Rilke's wish to let go the haunting pictures for the sake of a life safe and without frissons: "(...) I wanted to feel myself in the real world. The world of objects and people. The black and white basement where the girl lay was in the past. I could see her eyes, her torn throat, but I couldn't reach through the celluloid and touch her" (Welsh 132). The desire is fulfilled by the already mentioned Anne-Marie, who calls Rilke,

and shares with him a secret, that of her having been photographed by Mr. McKindless alone. “For four days I had been carrying McKindless’s photographs in my pocket, trying to reach past the two dimensions of the image, to peer round corners that weren’t there. Anne-Marie had got closer than me. She had been inside the frame” (Welsh 214). Rilke’s expression, “inside the frame” is an accurate metaphor for the ultimate ideal of crime genre: being there at/in the moment of the crime happening, the picture being taken, the chance of truth a real possibility for those capable of seeing it. The fact that Anne-Marie is still alive after she has been photographed “languid, posed as a corpse” by the old Mr. McKindless is perhaps a proof, far-fetched and hard-to-believe, but still a proof that the first girl on the photograph initiating the detection might have survived the session in the *Soleil et Désolé* Paris brothel.

6. Conclusions

The filmic and literary loci analysed above expose with a rarely met clarity a belief in the power of photography to preserve and transmit the “unmistakable traces” of a human being, at the same time suggesting the futility of such an enterprise. Simultaneously, one can observe the elements, usually decomposed, of a story of crime and detection. These are the reasons for my claim that the way photography is used in these “anti-detective” movies could be caused by the “need” of *Fight Club*, *A Pure Formality*, *Memento* and *Mullholland Drive* to generate effects of (the) modern(ism), as a sign of their belonging to the next phase of (the) postmodern(ism).

In conclusion, we may thus state, that the modern–postmodern turn, seen as a change of paradigms, can be better understood if we pay attention to how the works we tend to categorize as “postmodern(ist)” actually construct this label themselves by generating signs and effects that can be considered “modern(ist)”. A related idea is mentioned in Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism*, although in a slightly different tone, since Jameson sees it unavoidable to arrive to the “modern” whenever one tries to analyze postmodern(ist) artefacts: „rigorously conducted, an inquiry into this or that feature of the postmodern will end up telling us little of value about postmodernism itself, but against its own will and quite unintentionally a great deal about the modern proper, and perhaps the converse will also turn out to be true” (Jameson 66). My suggestion develops further Jameson’s observation by paying attention not so much to the inherent modern(ist) grounding of everything postmodern, but rather to the interlocking, mutual interdependence of these qualities while perceiving or reading an artifact. I argue that we are not urged to decode something as postmodernist

without the given work creating a sense of modernism at the same time, a trace of modernism by the transcendence of which post-modernism as a quality might emerge¹⁴⁰.

¹⁴⁰This is a proposition for a critical analysis that would illustrate the (also) Jencksian axiom: “Post-*Modernism* means the continuation of Modernism *and* its transcendence, a double activity that acknowledges our complex relationship to the preceding paradigm and world view” (Jencks 11).

Chapter 8

MEDIATION AND REPRESENTATION IN CRIMELAND

SURFACES AND APPARATUSES

My search through modern(ist) and postmodern(ist) crime has, in many respects, led to a self-induced deconstruction of my original categories of analysis, the modern and the postmodern. One of the major recognitions, therefore, is the one according to which the two basic terms of my argumentation form a dichotomy, where each of the poles is fully dependent on the other for its meaning to function. This has allowed, in one of the previous chapters, for the suggestion that by speaking about the differences between modern and postmodern (crime) we (always) speak about a conceptual pair of opposites, which in many cases are not in concordance with the known historical differences and periods. However, I would not totally abandon the heuristic power of considering the turn from the modern to the postmodern an art (literary, film, and even intermedial) historical phenomenon, since we cannot ignore that the “modern-postmodern question” is a specific concretization, a subclass of stories and narratives about historicity.

To argue for both of these insights in the below chapter I will present several filmic instances which in my reading perform and create the aura/meaning of “the modern, modernity” and “the postmodern, postmodern”, respectively. That not all the contemporary movies mentioned, which cite film noir slices, belong to the crime and detection genre, is, in my view not a drawback of the argumentation. It rather highlights the fact that urban crime and modernity have been transformed into a cultural-technological cliché which transcends the boundaries of the original genre.

1.1. Two women and their mediated confessions

A further aspect in assessing the power and effect of mediation and technologies in Western cultural discourse about crime concerns the relation of guilt and sin with\to the (ideological) film noir apparatus and to gender and gendered codes of behavior. We never simply watch films and men\women on the screen, but the actual filmic codes – in our case the stylistic and dramatic conventions of film noir – are always already responsible for the way women, or the quality of being female appears on screen.

Feminist cultural criticism is eager in stating that it is the woman who must bear the burden of guilt, and it is about this cultural mechanism degrading the feminine that Rita Hayworth alias Gilda is singing “Put the blame on Mame” in the striptease sequence of central importance in Charles Vidor’s 1946 noir movie, *Gilda*. Gilda, the ultimately unknowable and fatally destructive heroine is something of an archetype: it is hard to find an anthology of the film noir genre which would not mention her slender figure covered in a black silk dress and cigarette smoke, not to speak about the numerous critical readings referring to her. Thus Gilda\Rita Hayworth is worthy of our attention as one of the most memorable incarnations of the “guilty woman in a film noir” cultural cliché.

As women constitute important touchstones in noir narratives and the visual worlds based on them, and since they often must give account of their deeds, a great number of female confessions are available in the noir literary and filmic corpus. A classical example would be the book-length confession of the “second Rebecca” in Daphne du Maurier’s (same title) novel, but the event is not missing from the first piece of the film noir cycle, John Huston’s 1941 *The Maltese Falcon*, and it becomes the dominant narrative and dramaturgical device in Michael Curtiz’s *Mildred Pierce*, directed four years later. Several decades pass and the shadowy prostitute played by Jane Fonda also confesses to the cynical private eye (and the indifferent psychologist) in Alan J. Pakula’s 1971 movie, *Klute*, and another book-length confession is to be read in Emma Tennant’s 1983 novel, *Woman Beware Woman*. The questions that have drawn my attention to this – otherwise minor – narrative detail are the following: what does it mean, how is the confessing woman represented in the stylistic, technological and medial context constituted by the genre of film noir? How do the narration, the camera, the lighting methods suggest that a confessing woman, or more precisely, a fascinating confessing woman, does not have the right to be considered innocent? And what is the influence of confession as such – a most inadequate\embarrassing situation in a fictional film context, since it makes appeal to discourses about truth and lie?

In order to answer these questions, after a short discussion of relevant sequences, I will present my argumentation. The first example comes from earlier in time, from Michael Curtiz’s *Mildred Pierce*, with the eponymous female character played by Joan Crawford (the title is also that of the realist, third person singular crime novel written by American author James M. Cain). This movie starts with a shot coming from an unknown origin, the victim of which, a mustached gentleman dressed in tuxedo, collapses in the living room of an elegant house and in front of the camera looking up on the scene. The last word of the dying man is the name of the heroine, “Mildred” and she is there also, dark and dressed in fur. She goes away in a car and fortunately is prevented from committing suicide – by jumping from the

bridge into the river – by a night police patrol. Then she meets a man she knows, Wally, who invites her for a drink in a nearby bar, so, as a return favour (or at least so it seems at that moment) Mildred tells him to go and visit instantly her seaside house. The building is known to the viewer from the opening “shooting sequence” and it (supposedly) causes no wonder when Mildred locks Wally in the house, leaving him alone with the dead body. Trying to escape from the trap, Wally is caught by another night police squad, while Mildred is also met by the usual speechless detectives when she arrives home. The site changes and, on the same night at the Los Angeles police headquarters Mildred faces Wally, and they also meet Ida, Mildred’s woman friend and Bert, Mildred’s former husband. Police interrogation starts and we are told that the victim seen dying by the camera is Mildred’s current husband, Monty Beragon. Mildred is the last in line who must answer to questions of the detectives.

The sequence I wish to analyze with respect to the „film noir apparatus which creates the woman confessing her guilt” is the one where Mildred is interrogated about the murder¹⁴¹. The interrogation is conducted by a friendly, grey-haired, old detective, who presents apologies to the elegant and broken lady, as further inquiries are only formally necessary: the murderer is found, first husband Bert having confessed. The guilty weapon is in his possession and one more proof cannot be overlooked, namely that Bert was jealous of his successor, thus it is logical that once he had the occasion he shot Monty dead. Mildred is seized by terror and wonder, but also must overcome a strong inner barrier before she states to the detective that this script is impossible and the truth lies somewhere else. At this point we may only guess that Mildred’s confession has its origin in the depths of her personality and personal history, thus she has to fight her own resistance if she wants to make the truth audible and visible in order to prove Bert’s innocence. It is at the end of the narration/story that the real nature of the events is revealed, and the most important element of the plot is presented: the person of the perpetrator, Veda, Mildred’s evil and already rotten daughter – figuratively Mildred herself, the mother.

Mildred’s figure is built up from close-ups and medium shots, corresponding to the dramaturgy of the dialogue conducted with the detective. Also thanks to the shot-counter shot construction she can be observed from (sitting) eye line height and a relatively small distance. The body parts of Joan Crawford playing Mildred Pierce are (being) framed horizontally by

¹⁴¹In the well documented analysis and interpretation history of the movie Pam Cook convincingly argues that it would be a mistake to consider the whole film a film noir, yet she agrees that the sequences I analyze belong to the film noir discourse: “As I indicated in my opening paragraph, the film does not fit easily into the category of film noir. Although the opening and closing sequences, and two short interruptions during the film, are shot in ‘classic’ noir style, the first two long flashback sequences in which Mildred tells the story of her past are significantly different – more evenly lit, few variations in camera angle, and so on – except towards the end of the second flashback when Mildred realizes that Monte has betrayed her and she ‘confesses’ to the murder, when noir *mise-en-scene* takes over Mildred’s discourse as well” (Cook 32).

the doors in the background and vertically by the used table plate placed between her and the interrogating detective. We can see Mildred practically from a frontal perspective, even though her look falls a little bit obliquely on the detective, who – in contrast to the straight, even stiff position of the woman – sits in a cozy, comfortable manner, not facing the camera, but actually turning his back on it several times.

In the three sequences which contain the confession of Mildred – situated on the film roll and in the story at a distance of forty-five minutes from each other – we have occasion to observe Mildred's elegant dress with a high collar, her fascinating, long fur-coat, an impeccable hair and beautifully made-up eyes, as the camera often chooses to „watch” her closely, offering us the same possibility as well. During her confession Mildred is not using her hands or making gestures, even though she lights a cigarette, and when moments are presented which are important from the plot's „point of view” the camera swings, the image lightens with a fade out and we find ourselves in the past which constitutes the background of the narrative, a past background which is infinitely more exciting and action-packed if compared to the present of the police headquarters with the sad lady as the lead. With respect to the difference in style and tone between the interrogative present and the happy flashback past in *Mildred Pierce* I need to quote again Pam Cook's summary of Joyce Nelson's analysis which establishes a significant opposition:

(...) the scenes that take place in the present are significantly more suggestive of film noir than are the two segments comprising Mildred's version of her own story. She goes on to show that Mildred's discourse is markedly different from the framing discourse of the detective, in that he is simply concerned with establishing the Truth, with resolving the enigma, while Mildred's story contains complexity and ambiguity, showing a concern for feelings rather than facts. The detective's discourse is directed towards cleaning up the past, and this involves the invalidation of Mildred's version of the story, in terms of form *and* content. (Cook 32)

Extrapolating from Cook and Nelson, my direction of analysis may be reformulated as paying attention to the conflict between the apparatus of film noir and the “female” representational system of melodrama/women's film, the emphasis being placed on the first member of the opposition¹⁴². We can fully identify Mildred with the woman confessing about

¹⁴² The interpretation of Pam Cook referring to *Mildred Pierce* is more complex and developed in this respect, as this quotation also suggests: “It seems that a basic split is created in the film between melodrama and film noir, between ‘women's picture’ and ‘man's film’, a split that indicates the presence of two ‘voices’, female and

sin and guilt, as the shadow of doubt lingers over her during the entire movie, and stylistic elements also contribute to the creation of this meaning¹⁴³. The female body is motionless and caught in the viewfinder of the camera, for „her” the space is reduced to the almost two-dimensional plane defined by the counter shot’s interrogating detective, which also equals the context where spectatorial activity is centralized. Neither the narrative, nor the visual composition allows Mildred to turn or stand up, to communicate with her body or to protest using her gestures. This „meaning” is also enforced by the contrasting mode the camera-perspective “constructed” by/belonging to her dialogue partner focuses and zooms or turns around in the night police headquarters, or it stands up and enters into interaction with the other “inhabitants” of the room.

The second illustrative moment with respect to the analyzed question is chosen from Alan J. Pakula’s 1971 movie *Klute*. Christine Gledhill assesses suggestively the value of the feature that the movie’s Bree Daniels (Jane Fonda) works as a prostitute in New York: ”But a reduction in the female image has taken place, for by definition the *femme fatale* is a stereotype designating the mysterious and unknowable power of women, whereas the role of prostitute represents a more defined sexual role, amenable to social control (...).”(Gledhill, *Klute* 2 122) Also thanks to this “downsizing”, in this case the act of the confessing woman – the why and the how of the confession – is more plausibly motivated than in the case of Mildred Pierce.

At the start of the story – the analyzed genre being the film noir where the narration is profoundly dependent on retaining the plot information while presenting the story to the viewers– we are facing the disappearance of a lawyer called Thomas Grunemann, whom the police is unable to find in spite of all the prodding coming both from his wealthy family and his influential business and firm partners. After six months of useless search John Klute, his close friend and small-town cop accepts to try and follow the only existing trail, which leads to the sinful city of New York. The sole piece of writing worthy of interest from this perspective in the legacy of Grunemann is a typewritten letter in vulgar language, addressed to the New York call girl, Bree Daniels, who becomes suspicious because of this proof¹⁴⁴.

male, which in itself is a mark of excess since ‘classic’ film is generally characterized by the dominance of a metadiscourse, which represents the Truth” (Cook 33).

¹⁴³ A link alluded to by Pam Cook as well with reference to the next scene of confession not analyzed here: “The first flashback ends at the point where Mildred is at the height of her economic success and Bert gives her the divorce she wanted. We return to the present in the police station, and the lighting (shadows) on Mildred’s face suggests her guilt in the present when she has just been seen as successful in her own right in the past” (Cook 35).

¹⁴⁴ The major feminist interpretation of the film by Kaja Silverman concentrates on the differences generated by a split between „the visual and the auditory systems” in it: “(...) A prostitute’s voice has been taped without her knowledge by one of her customers, who plays it over and over to himself in private. This voice is heard by us repeatedly when detached by from the body of the prostitute, Bree Daniels (Jane Fonda), although it is always

After their original antipathy starts to melt, Klute and Bree set out on a common quest to find Grunemann, and in order to fulfill the task Bree even decides to temporarily suspend her detached/dispassionate – even if profitable – job/mode of making money. Since *Klute* is/can be categorized as a consciously convoluted neo noir movie, perhaps it is of little importance to summarize all the plot-elements, yet it must be mentioned that love between detective and prostitute is a vulnerable event, and it radically changes the course of otherwise rational, objective processes of ratocination. Therefore Bree continues to see her psychologist, to whom she confesses the changes in her psyche and state of mind, and tries to analyze and make meaningful her new self, – that is the woman in love open for and ready to offer tenderness – with no material profit in return. In her interpretation of the movie Christine Gledhill stresses the importance of these, since “(...) it is largely in these psychotherapy sessions that Bree Daniels, unlike the forties *femmes fatales* who preceded her, is given an inner consciousness (...)” (Gledhill, *Klute* 2 123). It is in this situation that we meet the guilty noir woman who makes a confession, even if not explicitly about a murder – only about adulterous and thus sinful sexual life which has led to the death of someone. It must be mentioned that it is not clearly revealed even by the final image of the movie whether Bree had a part in Grunemann’s death – or that she was only manipulated by the diabolical figure of the firm leader, Peter –, yet she also becomes the victim of another attempt.

The image-sequence of her major confession is constructed in a similar manner, but even more rigidly composed than the one in *Mildred Pierce*. The figure of Jane Fonda appears on a would-be documentary medium shot, being framed by different lines and background pictures, while she practically and frontally bumps into the camera. She performs a sequence of artistically developed gestures, her voice dries up with emotion sometimes and she is hiding – as if in shame and embarrassment – her face behind her hands. Her interrogator, the woman psychologist, turns towards her in a three-quarter profile and during the part analyzed here she stays silent (even if we witness their dialogue several times during the film), only looking attentively and also amazed at the call girl trying to understand the nature of love.

In her book about the organization of voice in the movies, *The Acoustic Mirror*, Kaja Silverman also devotes a section to the analysis of this sequence, interpreting the confession of Bree Daniels as a sign of the wish to become bodiless and invisible – a most paradoxical thing on the part of a character who makes her living by selling her sexual/sexed body and also constitutes the main nodal point of the filmic mystery.

fully contained within the diegesis. This dislocation creates a kind of ripple effect in the text, which relies to an unusual degree upon voice-off and embodied voice-over” (Silverman 81).

That she in fact aspires to the condition of a disembodied voice (-over) is indicated not only by her verbal masquerade, with its nonmatch of body and voice, exteriority and interiority, actions and feelings, but by a remark she makes to her analyst: «What I'd really like is to be faceless and bodiless and to be left alone». (Silverman 83)

As I have already mentioned, the movies categorized as belonging to the noir subgenre are intent on presenting private (personal) crimes, with a preference for the adventures of a more or less reliable private detective/detecting figure. As this cultural corpus is also considered one of the most easily recognizable and codified grounds of heterosexual gender(ed) codes defined historically and stylistically, the pole opposite the detective is rarely constituted by rival men. More often the enemy is a woman who appears and disappears, thus we can see how the subgenre raises the specific interest of gender criticism. Supposedly it is the gendered world construction typical of the film noir genre which motivates the phenomenon that in static situations resembling that of *Mildred Pierce* or *Bree Daniels*, where one must save oneself by telling stories, like *Sheherezade*, men enter quite rarely. This does not mean that men do not commit crimes or do not confess their deeds in the noir model¹⁴⁵, yet they are not forced into a situation which is full of tension and simultaneously creates and deconstructs the diegetic illusion, where they must address their words – for a considerable amount of time – to the pole circumscribed by the camera, the counter shot and the viewer. A well known exception could be Billy Wilder's 1944 movie, *Double Indemnity*, yet, if compared to my summarized examples, a serious difference would be that in this movie the filmic apparatus does not make any effort to situate the male lead – working as an insurance agent and recording on tape his confession of a murder – as a sexually agreeable spectacle as well, while the illusory nature of the diegetic world also must and does emerge.

1.2. Is diegesis being hurt?

The one making a confession is multiply subordinated: to the interrogator, to the idea of truth, to the camera looking from the direction of the counter shot and naturally to the viewer comfortably watching from the darkness of the screening room. It is a narrative situation typically suitable for women, when and where they must reveal themselves, while the men leading the quest may stay silent and listen for one and a half hours. Yet one small

¹⁴⁵At this point I seem to disagree with Pam Cook's observation that "[i]t is unusual for film noir to have a female protagonist narrating her own story (...)" (Cook 34). However, the opposition is on the surface, as my argument is but a small correction to the more generally valid claim of Cook: while women do not actually narrate, they do make confessions quite often in film noir pieces.

detail is worthy of attention concerning the noir female confession constructed according to the logic of the shot-counter shot structure¹⁴⁶.

In his article Noël Burch (1-7) states that creating a believable diegesis is the aim of most films, alluding to the fact that thanks to the movie's image and voice-system and also to its narration, there comes into being a self-coherent "imaginary/dreamlike illusion", which is also the result of the general (actual) viewer's filmic experience and activity of generating meanings. According to Burch, the basic condition for this to happen is the viewer's capacity of identification with the point of view offered by the camera, while s/he and their spectatorial activity are not being thematized or mirrored in the world seen on the screen. As Burch says: "The secret of maximalizing the diegetic process lies in the invisibility and invulnerability of the viewer" (Burch 2)¹⁴⁷

Although the filmic sequences analyzed here – where women playing central roles in the process of crime detection make confessions – do not expose the viewer ('s position) in an explicit manner, filmic moments constructed in the indicated way – frontally positioned, fixed, and transforming search and observation into exclusive spectatorial activities – succeed, in my opinion, in a partial deconstruction of the (first order) diegetic world. In spite of both Mildred and Bree having interlocutors who interrogate them, the confessing women's appearance on screen obviously defies the "handy" logic of the classical shot-counter shot system. Mildred, for example, is closer to us, the light used to present her is more diffuse than in the case of the interrogating detective, who, compared to Mildred, seems and thus is smaller, less important/more insignificant and also shadows fall on him. As for Bree Daniels, she is composed on the screen in an extremely artificial manner which is motivated, in my reading, only by the frame's dimension conditioned by the camera' lenses, thus perhaps the viewer should not wonder when seeing the psychologist listening to her from a greater distance, represented only by her head. From the standpoint of my argumentation the difference in the person of the interrogators – Mildred is making her confession to the police detective while Bree to her analyst – is not a meaning-generating, significant one, as both women are being haunted by the shadow of doubt during the whole length of the films, and Bree also confesses to the detecting figure at other points in the film. The two chosen and

¹⁴⁶Pam Cook summarizes the analysis of Joyce Nelson referring to this film, where Nelson also works with the system of shot-counter/reverse shot, yet on the greater scale of the whole filmic narrative instead of short sequences, therefore her conclusions are relevant in the context of *Mildred Pierce*: "The 'false suture' involves the masking, through the work of other filmic and cinematic codes, of the exclusion of a reverse-shot in order to create an enigma that the film will answer for the viewer, later, in the final flashback, when the missing shot is reinserted and the truth about the murder is revealed" (Cook 31).

¹⁴⁷I had access to the Hungarian version of Burch's article, translations are mine: „A digetikus folyamat maximalizációjának titka mindig is a néző láthatatlanságában-sebezhetetlenségében rejlik [...]” (Burch 2).

analyzed sequences seem to conform to similar patterns of construction, hence their analysis in conjunction with each other.

If we reach back to the shot-counter shot system, what we find there is an urge to present an objective and easy to understand/perceive point of view about dialogues mainly, with both participants receiving a relatively equal share of the camera and screen attention. This golden and classical rule is implicitly overwritten in the analyzed female confessions in these noir and neo noir crime movies, a gesture that I interpret as a small, yet unignorable detail in the process of turning women and the female body into a spectacle and a fascinating image.

Thus we can state that the two suspicious women making confessions at a distance of thirty years in the cultural corpus of the film noir conform to similar rules of construction. The frames where Mildred and Bree appear are wider and larger than the ones with their interlocutors, and in their case the focal points are also closer to the screen, with the consequence that the confessing women – even if presented in medium shots, while sitting – seem to be huge, suggesting close-ups. This manner of showing them (Mildred and Bree) is not motivated by the position or point of view of their partners; as a matter of fact, the views offered about the confessing women could be characterized as impossible ones for the human optical system. The images presented about Mildred Pierce and Bree Daniels respectively are in sharp contrast with the commonplace medium shot profiles of their interrogators, which, however, are faithful representations of the personal point(s) of view of the two women, and a contrast is to be observed with the distance shots meant to objectively situate the two conversing figures as well. The guilty women making their confessions are presented thus not in the fictional-diegetic worlds of the two films, but their images are “messages” addressed specifically to the almighty viewer.

If we take into consideration the logic of Noël Burch, the gesture most inimical to diegetic illusion is the actant’s direct look addressed to the camera, as this uncovers the comfortable invisibility of the actual viewer (Burch 6). Yet Mildred is forced to occupy this position during almost the total length of the story, as she has the possibility to play an active role by joining the construction of the first-order diegetic world only in the flashback sequences, which are also considered anti-diegetic devices/modes of narration, opening the way for new orders of diegesis. In the case of Bree Daniels we may not detect openly such a strategy of estrangement from the main diegetic world, but in Pakula’s film a similar effect is created by the fixed position of the camera showing Bree, and also the unchanging frame of her image.

These two examples chosen from the film noir corpus show that in this context “the female confession” has the following features: a female figure filmed from a more or less fixed camera position, placed in a frame wider than the one presenting the interlocutor, and accompanied by an inconsequent usage of the close up. This latter cannot always be associated with the optical point of view of the interlocutors, therefore a seamless joint structure of shot-counter shot does not emerge during these sequences of confessions by suspicious women. My conclusion is that such compositions of the women’s confessions introduce a break in an action world that is otherwise generating a seamless diegesis (being in the strongly diegetic genre of crime and noir films), while to the visual markers of femininity a double bind of confessional disclosure is associated: from the point view of the narrative, as the women make their confessions, but also visually, since they may be observed in a more detailed manner than the interlocutors facing them. As visual culture also means our everyday life, these examples may suggest that women, even if making confessions – that is symbolic/verbal representations – are much more interesting as images, as elements of an amazing (and sexually motivated) spectacle. In a different order of thought, since her argumentation refers to the use of female voice in Hollywood movies, Kaja Silverman also arrives at a similar conclusion: “This opposition expresses itself through the close identification of the female voice with spectacle and the body, and a certain aspiration of the male voice to invisibility and anonymity” (Silverman 39).

What appears thus in this type of presenting women as continuous, seamless and poster-like images is actually the coming into being of “woman as spectacle” (Mulvey 23), a process in the course of which viewers can minutely observe the suspected women treading on forbidden land, just as the interrogators are able to analyze the weak points of their verbal confessions they tell. These celluloid women turn into confession and revelation both in a narrative and a visual sense, and we may suppose that this causes embarrassment for the viewers as well. The long confessions and the private (not to say intimate) “confessing female representation” created by the camerawork and the lighting technique are capable of making the viewer aware of her/his status as a voyeur, also emphasizing the consciously constructed nature of the diegetic world.

The starting idea of this subchapter originated in two sequences from noir crime movies made in different film historical moments – 1945 and 1971 –, sequences where women supposedly guilty in the murders committed in the two crime narratives make confessions about their deeds, their reasons/motives and, indirectly, also about their personalities, personal histories. My aim with this analysis was to show/suggest that the “femininity” of these women – a quality which is deeply associated with guilt in the context

of film noir codes – is not only dependent on surface markers or dramaturgical features, but that it is also specifically conditioned by the filmic, stylistic characteristics functioning as an “ideological apparatus”. Thus a simple analysis of “women as images” may offer the opportunity to reveal otherwise hidden mechanisms of generating meanings, mechanisms which will affect the real world outside films, the way we think or, better said, are allowed to think “woman, the female, and the feminine”.

The above analysis also demonstrates that a strong coherence and similarity exists in the corpus of films adhering to the film noir codes. Such coherence may question the validity of a “modern-postmodern” turn having taken place at all, except in relation to the “surface” signifiers such as fashion or historical objects. This is why I propose in the last subchapter to reformulate the original hypothesis and understand the narrative of the turn from (the) modern(ism) to (the) postmodern(ism) as a specific case of speaking about historicity.

2.1. Letters, shadows, bodies and mirrors.

The field of meaning attributed to the “modern” based on Baudelaire, Calinescu and Felski – namely, an intense attention paid to time’s passing as well as change, both valued in a positive manner – seems to come to life not only in a thematic mode in the crime corpus, as seen in one of the earlier chapters, but it also materializes in the use and employment of different, mostly technologically generated, media. This phenomenon is surely an integral part of the “modernization” process so characteristic of the second part of the 19th, and basically all of the 20th century, and the changes it induced are countless. The examples below are meant to bear upon this problematic.

In the starting opus of the film noir cycle, John Huston’s 1941 *The Maltese Falcon*, we enter the story together with the dangerous female lead, the duplicitous Brigid O’Shaughnessy. She pays a visit to the Spade and Archer detective agency and hires the charming gentlemen – Sam Spade and Miles Archer – to find her sister. Their triangular conversation sequence ends with the camera panning the figures of the two detectives, then, by a quick vertical movement, it stops on the carpeted floor of the office, where we can see the (inverted) shadow of the agency’s name: Spade and Archer. After Archer’s death a great deal of screen time is used for showing its re-writing to simply: “Spade”.

In Dashiell Hammett’s novel this sequence is a rather short one, with minimal attention devoted to the change:

He [Spade] sighed mockingly and rubbed his cheek against her arm. “That’s what Dundy says, but you keep Iva from me, sweet, and I’ll manage to survive the rest

of my troubles.” He stood up and put on his hat. “Have the *Spade&Archer* taken off the door and *Samuel Spade* put on. I’ll back in an hour, or phone you.” (Hammett 31)

Thus we could argue that in the filmic version both the change in ownership and its representation are given more importance, moreover, the letters of the agency’s name play a situating role from the beginning of the movie. Besides the most pragmatic role of communicating the name of the owners, the filmic moment of highlighting it has a further significance, as it suspends the narrative flow of the images, concentrating the viewers’ attention on the form, style, and arrangement of the letters themselves. We do not see the actual letters, but only their shadow, and the close-up centered on the image of the letters generates a strong sense of a modern, energetic, functional style; after all, we are in a private detective agency.

A similar context and image is to be seen in Michael Curtiz’s 1945 noir movie, *Mildred Pierce*, the story of a too loving mother who chooses to build up a separate life from the father of her daughters. The narrative voice belongs to the heroine herself, in a setting not unusual if we think of the genre: a police room, where Mildred Pierce is questioned in relation to her former lover Monty Beragon’s violent death. The moment of her confessing the murder – inducing a great awe in the old cop – is followed by the flashback sequence and the images of her successful restaurant, with an obsessive emphasis on the advertising billboards. The focus is on the written form of the heroine’s name, most adequately explained by the need to signal the identity of the newly opened restaurants. The short sequence may be seen to have the same perfect unity within the gloomy story – like the suspended atmosphere of the detective agency’s name discussed above. Moreover, the intensity of the medium’s naked existence is heightened by the versions presented in relation to the same signified: “Mildred’s”. We see painted name-signs, drawn ones, neon variants, simple and decorated letter-styles, and their effect can be again that of signifying up-to-dateness, hipness, the quality of being modern.

Yet it is not only letters that force us in 1940s noir crime films to concentrate on their quality as media, to consider and interpret the interruption and suspension that they may cause in an action- and mystery-packed story. A live performance has the same effect in the 1946 Charles Vidor film *Gilda*. Johnny Farrell, the (subsequent) owner of an illegal South American casino, is suspected by the police of having killed his former boss. After the tough undercover policeman warns him of their presence, Johnny’s attention is distracted by a tune: the wife of the former boss, Gilda is singing, dancing and displaying herself on the stage of the casino.

The body of Rita Hayworth dressed in black becomes a medium of the performance, and the three intensive close-ups of her face, neck and hair serve to enhance this impression. These images introduce again a stylistic register totally foreign to the previous sequences: a register of chic, elegance, and of a mysterious modernity. Any filmed sing-and-dance performance insists on its being a corporeally mediated artistic experience: the peculiarity of this sequence in *Gilda* lies in the specific and far-fetched narrative context of its appearance – the main hero is accused of economic crimes – and in the self-consciousness of the performer herself. She not only looks back, smiles, flirts and strips, but also becomes a pin-up image within this sad, grotesque and violent film. I would argue that a side effect of this visual technique is the one I identified previously: it creates a temporal island made of screen surface, when the viewers (both fictional and actual) are forced to consider mediation as such.

This attitude of contemplation and the attribution resulting from it – and I mean the attribution of such stylistic markers as “elegant, up-to-date, modern” – is more pronounced when the technology of mediation involved needs a more sophisticated apparatus than simple letters, clothes or the human body. In Alfred Hitchcock’s first Hollywood movie, *Rebecca*, directed in 1940, we are faced with the story of a marriage between a humble girl and an aristocratic castle-owner, who, in the end, turns out to have a part in the murder of his first wife, Rebecca. The second wife makes great efforts to live up to the standards of a code of conduct unknown to her and in the sequence to be analyzed we see her in an elegant black dress ordered from London, with which she tries to impress her husband. Maxim finds it unsuitable for his simple and childish wife, to whom he starts to show the amateur film sequences shot during their honeymoon. The home movie viewing is interrupted twice: once by the celluloid’s running off the machine and once by the appearance of the house staff, who want to find out more about the disappearance of a china statue. The second wife is to blame, as she is the one who has dropped it and she is publicly disgraced both by her husband and the house manager, Mrs. Denvers. The honeymoon-film viewing is resumed, and the discussion of husband and wife creates a strong tension between the happiness seen on screen and the anxious gestures and words they utter “extradiegetically”.

In this fragment we are emphatically directed to the medium of film: Maxim, the husband is extremely interested in the very activity of screening, while the anguish and fright of the young wife are suggested by the shadows on her face, shadows that are induced by the flickering light of the film. Together with the elegant atmosphere of the evening dress, this home movie sequence creates the image of an up-to-date couple, while an incongruity similar to the ones mentioned above occurs. The medial self-consciousness, the reflection on the broadcasting medium of the film is framed by a sad, petty and action-packed sequence, that of

the search for the broken statue. Thus, again, the viewer remains with the feeling of a suspended stylistic island that communicates on a level different from the proper filmic narration.

The famous Chinese theatre and mirror-scene at the end of Orson Welles' 1947 *The Lady from Shanghai* is yet another example of a suspended and medially self-conscious sequence in a movie engaged on the narrative level in a criminal pursuit of a totally different kind. The mirrors that mirror a serial murder and the camera shots that slowly convey these layers of visually mediated images contribute to the same sense of artistic, elegant and most up-to-date modernity, an island of medial attention in a sea of criminal actions. Or, in a different model of explanation: "Sometimes, the sense of immersion in the motion picture is not complete, and we become aware of Alice's glass between the created world and us" (Rogers 222).

2.2. The scene and the surface

1930s-1940s crime movies – as a genre – may be conceived of as a stage for performing historical modernity, be that expressed in clothing, interior design, technical equipment or the psychic maze of screen personalities. Mary Ann Doane, in her 2002 volume (*The Emergence of Cinematic Time - Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*) argues in this vein with respect to the cinematic image and also to the specific genre of film noir – to which all of the previously analysed film sequences belong. In her formulation there are always "two temporalities at work" during cinematic viewing, the "presentness of the filmic flow" being accompanied by a spectatorial awareness that the images seen were created and composed in certain, already past moments. It is within this context of interpretation that I wish to advance my suggestion concerning the paramount importance of sequences like the ones above, an opinion that coincides with Doane's view:

This is what allows film to age—quickly and visibly—in a way similar to that of the photograph. Not only does the technology itself become "dated" (the use of black and white, Cinemascope, film noir lighting), but the contents of the image inevitably bear the traces of the moment at which they were produced (fashion, cars, interior design, architecture). (Doane 143)

I have referred to sequences like the amateur film-viewing in Alfred Hitchcock's 1940s *Rebecca*, or the repeated and frozen images of the ad-letters in *The Maltese Falcon* or *Mildred Pierce*. I argue that these moments of (inter)medial awareness have the role of

pinning down the viewer's historical sense by communicating in a most concise way the factual, the metaphorical and the mediated nature of modernism. This "up-to-date" universe has several specific moments when its edgy, avant-garde nature is being foregrounded, while the quality of "being modern" comes to life. Moreover, the opposition of an extremely action-packed, filmed criminal pursuit to slow, beautifully composed scenes gives birth to the sense of "art, artistic" as well: which is perhaps why 21st-century critical attention may be engaged in reading these movies.

In the light of the proposition that I consider to be a main claim made by the present thesis – namely, that the temporal advancement from modernism towards postmodernism in the crime genre is accompanied by a growing self-consciousness concerning the "deadly" quality of representation and mediation – sequences like the ones mentioned above acquire a special importance. Although the chosen fragments do not yet display death and disappearance in connection to the media emphasized (at least not thematically), the explicit self-awareness is already present. This is a historically specific case, the nature of which will be clarified better if we summarize the phenomenon John D. Anderson and Sheena Rogers speak about in the chapter of their volume on new developments in cognitive and evolutionary film theory. With the metaphor of "Alice's looking glass" Rogers refers to the material, objective conditions of film-viewing – the screen, the frames, the light-darkness mix – that we viewers almost always choose to ignore in favour of the diegetic, illusionary world on the screen. In her formulation:

The movie screen is an object in our world, its properties specified through one set of information structures available in our optic array before, during and after the movie plays across it. The properties of Alice's world are specified through another set of informative structures, caught by the camera, and available only when the movie rolls, and we look through the glass. (Rogers 221)

John D. Anderson writes that "[w]hen viewing a motion picture, we are constantly in alternation between seeing the scene and seeing the surface" (Anderson 196), and although both writers theorize the difference between the cinematic apparatus/the viewer's physical entity and the visual-aural illusion created, I would claim that a similar process governs the moments of self-awareness mentioned above. Our attention is split between the quite specific settings of a "modern(ist) crime story" – the "scene" in which the immersion is all the more deep as action-elements and concrete historical markers abound – and the media of letters or a dancing body – "the surface" – which withdraw the previous statements and the "reality

effects” they create. Withdrawing such a statement, opening the scene so that we can see the surface is an impulse identified in many modernist artworks: this could be a second feature, besides thematizing modernization in gender and national/ethnic identity, which may identify these 1940s crime fictions as belonging to a mass cultural canon sensible to developments in modernity and modernism.

3. Being postmodern: quoting classical Hollywood

As far as the film sequences to be analysed are concerned, we could simply use a phrase like “postmodern(ist) quotations of modern(ist) fragments”, were it not for the conceptual modification introduced previously, namely the categorization of the discourse about the turn from modernism to postmodernism as a case of narratives about historicity. Thus the appearances of such film historical (and also film noir) elements as the persona of 1940s actress Veronica Lake, or filmic quotations from *Double Indemnity* and *All About Eve* will be seen in my reading as allusions to “past classics, worthy of quotation”, instead of simply being labeled (post)modern(ist) props, adding to the well known and deeply analyzed arsenal of postmodern quotation techniques. Hopefully, and in line with the arguments presented above with reference to the 1940s crime/film noir sequences, it will emerge that instances of “postmodern(ist) quotations of modern(ist) elements” are also moments where the meaning of “past” and “present”, or simply put, “historicity” is being constructed on screen, through the use and clash of differently positioned media – photography, film, and television. I also want to pay attention to what kind of metaphorical meanings are being constructed in relation to films’/filmic historicity.

The 1997 blockbuster directed by Curtis Hanson entitled *L. A. Confidential* was adapted from James Ellroy’s crime novel. The movie is a fictive (or nostalgic, in the Jamesonian terminology) screen version of the turn of the 1940s and 1950s. One of the several “criminal” plot-lines in which the more or less corrupt members of Los Angeles police force are engaged is concerned with the deluxe prostitute network called Fleur de Lis. The specificity of the service lies in the ladies employed who resemble divas of Hollywood’s Golden Age – Ava Gardner, Jane Russell, or Lana Turner – either thanks to natural resemblance or to plastic surgery. After we have witnessed the violent death of “Rita Hayworth”, following macho detective Bud White we pay a visit to the call girl playing the role of Veronica Lake in the collection. The cultural signifier “Veronica Lake” has at least three signifieds in this sequence, and the first one, if we begin with the diegetic world of *L. A. Confidential*, is the character of Fleur de Lis-employee Lynn Bracken, played by Kim Basinger. As the actress is more renowned than her actual role there should be no wonder that

she emerges in a fascinating and shining green robe, her fair and wavy hair perfectly synchronized with the curves of her body – and we should (not) question this obvious role playing if considering the discussion she conducts with Bud White, a discussion centered on her likeness to Veronica Lake.

It is at this juncture that the second signified of the name enters the analyzed film scene: in the opening shots we observe Lynn and her ridiculous client (otherwise a highly placed bureaucrat in the city administration) in a context which is fully determined by the black-and-white film fragments projected on the background of Lynn's room of pleasure(s). It is there that a female figure reminiscent of Basinger's Lynn is to be observed, the same hairstyle, although obviously outdated pieces of clothing characterizing her as she is having a conversation in a train with a shadowy young man – about her five dollars that have gone missing in the meantime. Viewers are supposed to decipher the projected fair woman as American film history's real Veronica Lake as well as create, following the two-level filmic image (the diegetic colour film designed and falling over the black-and-white quotation) the essential similarity of the two female figures – a similarity which, perhaps, cannot and will not transcend the surface of the filmed bodies. The field of meaning referring to a mere surface similarity between Veronica Lake/Lynn Bracken/Kim Basinger – that is slices in/from the continuity of film history – is reinforced by the suggested third signified of the name Veronica Lake. Namely the pin-up photograph of the classical Hollywood star, a framed image which we may observe thanks to Bud White's curiosity and which is perhaps the most effective means of establishing the correspondence between the lively and nostalgic Lynn Bracken and the empty name of Veronica Lake, a signifier that is endowed with meaning only if related to a film historical narrative.

Pedro Almodóvar's *All About My Mother* (*Todo sobre mi madre*), directed two years later, is another example for an interesting quotation from the classical Hollywood corpus. The central character of the film, Manuela, appears at the start as a nurse working in a transplant hospital, while the viewers are introduced to the inventive title sequences of the film. Next we meet Manuela at home, where she is cooking dinner for herself and her son, Esteban, the latter writing and taking notes while the television is emphatically turned on in the room. "The movie begins," he shouts to his mother, and then, following the ad for baby napkins, we can watch a second title sequence. The fact that this latter film enters and replaces the first-level diegetic world of Esteban and Manuela is at least doubly motivated, since this is the program on their "diegetic television set" and its title – that of a 1950 movie by Joseph L. Mankiewicz – is *All About Eve*, strangely resonates in the already projected Spanish "version" mentioned above. The temporal gap between the two titles is so small that

we may even remember them as synchronic screen appearances, especially if taking into account the palimpsest constituted by their being overwritten with the handwritten title of Esteban's short story, the repeatedly mentioned *Todo sobre mi madre*, in extreme close-up.

Mankiewicz's *All about Eve* is a paradigmatic example of films about film and scene divas, which perhaps form a subgenre of their own in (especially American) film history. The black-and-white sequence we watch on the small living-room television screen in the company of Manuela and Esteban presents the moment when the aging, yet still successful theatre diva, Margo Channing (played by Bette Davis) reappears from under the surface of her stage make-up and mask. Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to call her figure and face larva-like, and it is at this point that Eve Harrington, the actual heroine of the film is to be seen close to Margo for the first time, starting as a charming young fan in search of an autograph and gradually supplementing Margo in her roles by the end of the film.

The composition of the sequence, especially from the perspective of the joining together of the diegetic world and the quoted film historical slice, is fundamentally different from what we see in *L. A. Confidential*. In the latter the objects used for projecting the Veronica Lake film-fragment, as well as the process of projection and its object blend organically (and also on a material level) with/into the first-level diegesis of the sequence. There the projection screen literally cuts the room in two halves; its being rolled up at the arrival of the police detective makes it possible for Lynn Bracken to display her volatile and beautiful figure, and the light that suddenly enters the living room is motivated by the stopping of the projection machine, while a film historical background is constituted by the projected Veronica Lake-sequences to the meeting between Lynn and Bud White.

In comparison, the sphere/activity of watching television and the television set does not intrude in such a straightforward and hard-to-miss manner into the first-level diegesis, even if the element in question – the television as a medium – plays a central stylistic and dramaturgical role in Pedro Almodóvar's filmic universe. In the sequence summarized from *All About My Mother* we, the film's viewers have the chance to observe mother and son from the beyond the bulky TV-set, a pair who apparently have no direct relation to the classical Hollywood-slice quoted from Mankiewicz's diva film. Yet in the knowledge of the whole movie we may conclude that the importance of the sequence cited from *All about Eve* is paramount, being a synecdochic concentration of the main plot line in Almodóvar's film. Esteban and Manuela have a discussion about the incorrect Spanish translation of the English title, which corresponds to *The Nude Eva*, thus we, the viewers also have the possibility to watch the quotation in screen close-up. As *All about My Mother* is not a nostalgia film in the genre and atmosphere of *L. A. Confidential*, the distance between diegetic world and film

historical citation could be characterized as huge, an impression enhanced by the technological device employed for the creation of film-within-the film structure, namely the television set. Moreover, the fact that Manuela and Esteban as characters of the first-level diegesis occupy a corner in the imaginary space of the sequence that is clearly different from the quotation's spatial structure, and that they are never to be seen in the same shot as/with the surface cited from *All About Eve* also enhances this impression. As we proceed with viewing Almodóvar's film the appropriate nature of the classical Hollywood quotation emerges more and more clearly, yet at this point in the film its importance, in my reading, lies in recalling/building the meaning and phenomenon of "film history" – yet not as a context or background for the actually seen movie as it was the case with *L. A. Confidential*, but rather as a radically different and differentiated visual surface, with only language/discussion making possible the connection between the two temporal and artistic formations.

A third example of quoting classical Hollywood's (crime) canon in contemporary (more or less) generic movies is provided by Brian de Palma's 2000 film, suggestively entitled *Femme Fatale*, or, to be more precise, its title sequence. Even before we are presented with an interpretable frame we are "faced" with a male voice that has a slightly outdated tone, then its owner emerges slowly from the right corner of the screen, dressed according to the (black-and-white) fashion of the 1940s, like his interlocutor, a blonde woman in a shadowy living room. It is only at this moment that the composition of the sequence may be fully grasped, and that we realize that the two characters' rectangular image is covered by a yellowish-green surface, actually the figure of a prostrate naked woman filmed from behind and being mirrored by/on something. As the camera pulls back from the primarily black-and-white "original" surface and it discretely stops in the background, it becomes clear that we are looking at a television screen, but in this case we do not have such a direct access to what is to be seen on it, as in the case of the quotation in Almodóvar's film, when it grows into a close-up.

In this third example, someone is intensely watching the black-and-white quotation carrying the burden of film history, someone who is mirrored at the same time on the television screen: a blonde woman, through the figure and surface of whom we can also access the quotation. As the already mentioned title of the film appears, a gunshot is heard within the television world and the connoisseur-viewers know that the self-centered classical femme fatale played by Barbara Stanwyck has pointed the gun at the man who nevertheless and against all reasonable motives madly believes (in) her, the quotation being the denouement of Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity*. It is not hard to thematically link the two

beautiful women, a mental process aided by their fascinating appearances, the guns and cigarettes they hold and the title (*Femme Fatale*) of de Palma's movie.

As I mentioned above, I also want to pay attention to the metaphorical haloes that surround the meaning of "film history" in the analyzed examples. In my opinion, these sequences perform more than simply linking by means of a quotation different segments in films and in time: they also offer the possibility of imagining the modes/ways "film history" as a cognitive category is supposed to function. Such an "imaginary film history" is perhaps more typical of the perception of non-professional moviegoers, but I doubt that professional interpretative communities could exempt themselves fully from under the influence of such powerful movie images and filmic constructions. Therefore we can conclude that "film history" is a surface, be it a silk or a television screen, a surface that may materialize in front of our eyes as in *L. A. Confidential*, it can be fundamentally different from what we are/how we exist as suggested by the scene in *All About My Mother*, yet appear uncannily familiar. Finally film history can be seen as a construction to be approached only through the layer of the contemporary, actually through the film we are watching – this is the conclusion we can draw from having considered the introductory sequence from *Femme Fatale*.

If we consider for a moment Linda Hutcheon's and Craig Owens' suggestion to see postmodernism as "a problematic" and "a crisis in cultural authority", we may try to isolate the core of this "critical problem" and identify it as that of representation. Representation in the sense of re-creating, re-presenting through the use of different media (partly already existing) messages, be they coded verbally, visually, or aurally¹⁴⁸. The multiplication of technologies, the concentration of images, and the hyperreality of the sign are well known "axioms" employed to define postmodernity: "[i]ndeed, postmodern discourse releases literary, cultural, and even commercial activity toward a purported free play of images that foreground, even argue, their displacement and difference from an ideology of representation, an ideology of reflection" (Caraher 62).

Brian Caraher speaks about the "ideology of reflection" floating away in "a free play of images": instead of aiming for such a radical deconstruction of the medial model of representation, I have tried to explore the patterns formed by the "free and floating images" mentioned by Caraher. If direct – mirroring – correspondence between model and representation via mediation is a feature that is questioned with the advancement of the turn

¹⁴⁸ "The desire of representation exists only insofar as it never be fulfilled, insofar as the original always be deferred. It is only in the absence of the original that representation may take place. And representation takes place because it is always already there in the world *as* representation" (Crimp 178).

from modernism to postmodernism¹⁴⁹, we have to ask what happens and especially how – what happens – happens? What may be hypothesized on the basis of this central “representational problem” is the acknowledgement or, on the contrary, ignorance of the opacity and/or transparency of the media used in texts and films sensitive to the modernist paradigm’s replacement by the postmodernist one¹⁵⁰. With the readings presented in this chapter I intended to offer an answer to these questions.

¹⁴⁹I am not suggesting that such a preoccupation is exclusive to this paradigmatic transition or that it could not have been discerned in classical modernism. What is specific to the crime fiction examined through the magnifying glass of the modern–postmodern turn is a growing amount of cases when instead of a “successful” representation we arrive to or we are faced with the naked process of creating a representation, i.e. mediation.

¹⁵⁰„In fact, many postmodern strategies are openly premised on a challenge to the realist notion of representation that presumes the transparency of the medium and thus the direct and natural link between word and world. Of course, modernist art, in all its forms, challenged this notion as well, but it deliberately did so to the detriment of the referent, that is, by emphasizing the opacity of the medium and the self-sufficiency of the signifying system. What postmodernism does is to denaturalize both realism’s transparency and modernism’s reflexive response, while retaining (in its typically complicitously critical way) the historically attested power of both. This is the ambivalent politics of postmodern representation” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 32).

Chapter 9

CONCLUSIONS

1. General results

The overarching question posed by this dissertation could be summarized in the following way: how can we conceive of (the) modern(ism), and, respectively, (the) postmodern(ism) in the specific context of literary and filmic crime genre and how can we introduce the idea of a turn into this historical narrative? On a very general level and for the sake of conclusion, I have to advance the view that has shaped the practical analyses and thus may be given as a (temporary) answer to the question formulated above: (the) modern(ism) and (the) postmodern(ism) – as heuristic tools in (crime) literary or filmic interpretation – do not have real force if employed separately.

Thus the basic consequence of four decades of debate about their nature – as attested by the numerous works produced on aspects of the modern and the postmodern – is in my view (and this is hopefully supported by this dissertation) the recognition that this is another binary opposition the members of which gain their meaning by mutually relying on each other¹⁵¹. Therefore, throughout my analyses I paid attention – besides the inherent modern(ist) grounding of everything postmodern – to the examination of the interlocking, mutual interdependence of these qualities while reading an artifact. I have argued that we are not encouraged to decode something as postmodernist without the given work creating a sense of modernism at the same time, a trace of modernism by the transcendence of which post-modernism might emerge as a quality.

By stating this I argue for understanding the modern(ism) and the postmodern(ism) as deeply and fundamentally interrelated – specifically in the analyzed crime genre –, an interrelationship which is particularly striking if we consider the post/modern epoch retrospectively, from the angle provided by the ‘Net aesthetics’ of a digital age. I am deeply indebted to Linda Hutcheon’s idea that questions pertaining to the modern–postmodern problematic tend to lose their relevance with the strengthening of a digitalized worldview. This insight helped me see the unity of the preceding period defined by my basic category of analysis: the turn from the modern to the postmodern.

¹⁵¹ An assertion already suggested by Matei Calinescu in the 1970s *Faces of Modernity*: “What the prefix *post* implies, however, is an absence of *positive* periodizing criteria, an absence which in general is characteristic of transitional periods” (Calinescu 133).

This recognition informed one of the main lines of interpretation in this thesis, one that has enabled me to make another claim: the attention and space devoted to the process of mediation have increased along the time-axis defined by (the) modern(ism) and (the) postmodern(ism) in English-language crime genre, a type of cultural text by definition devoted to the analysis of mediation – or traces – as such. Throughout my thesis I tried to examine the material of analysis for this variable, to find that even if self-consciousness in this respect is already the genre's own in the late 19th century, the final impossibility of representation, of “killing” the represented by subjecting it to technologies is one of the major preoccupations one hundred years later. I have also argued for including the obvious destabilization of narratorial voices into this larger picture, since not only pictorial or filmic, but also verbal and oral mediation become suspect as the postmodern/ist analysis of the modern/ism is performed.

Although this is a suggestion not tested in this thesis, I would risk that while mediation, traces and representation are material and epistemological practices which are meaningful both in a modern/ist and a postmodern/ist framework, their relevance is lost or at least fundamentally modified in a context circumscribed by digital practices. To elucidate this point – a minor and incidental one for my purposes anyway – I shall quote from an article published in the special edition of *Newsweek* magazine – dated December 2005-February 2006. In an article entitled “Knowledge Glut”, Danny Quah, Professor of the London School of Economics, writes: “But dissemination is cheap and getting cheaper. Unlike other commodities, knowledge is easy to copy. (...) And when value is digital, a copy is no longer inferior to the original” (Quah 43). A short text, but formulating what is a major blow to detection and crime axioms: how to trust mediation and trace-leaving from now on?

If asked whether it has proved useful at all to posit the modern–postmodern divide in the examination of the criminal genre, I would answer that if it is indeed useful, it is useful only with the proviso that a canonical shift between modern(ist) mass culture and postmodern(ist) high art has to be supposed. A detailed analysis of texts and films “taken from” the temporal boxes of modernity and postmodernity cannot and finally must not be performed unless the limitations of modernism and postmodernism as artistic formations are recognized and complemented with (at least) such other symbolic constructions as mass culture or realism. One must also acknowledge that an outcome of this complex process is a canonical environment where the simultaneous usage of mass cultural–generic elements and high artistic–theoretical markers is tolerated: hence my proposal in the “canon” chapter to envisage a third canonical channel which is a result of the modern–postmodern turn, and the importance of which is more accentuated as the digital age and ‘Net aesthetics’ are advancing.

This process of change needs to be completed with alterations that occurred in accepted forms of gender(ed) behaviour as well.

2. 1. Differentiating (in) postmodernism

Early postmodern(ism) is different from its late variant, already tinged with effects of the subsequent paradigm, Net Aesthetics. In view of this, visual and verbal texts belonging to the 1960s-1980s need a different perspective and mode of approach than those of the 1990s-2000s. This difference is conveniently illustrated in the historical overview of gendered crime representations in the respective chapters, where I also make an attempt to assess the importance of genre re-workings in the light of the turn from the modern to the postmodern. The earliest corpus could be most suitably described as narratives informed by the opposition of normative gendered roles and interest in paranoid fears about the dissolution of personality, while the texts closer to us in time need the perspective offered by the change of representational systems and the role of different media in leaving traces, as well as a “wish” for a dialogue with their theoretical insights and the spectacle of various non-normative sexualities. If in Daphne du Maurier’s 1970 story, “Don’t Look Now”, the male hero is supremely punished for his incapacity to imagine and accept a non-normative heterosexual system of relations, in Louise Welsh’s 2002 *Cutting Room* or David Lynch’s 2001 movie, *Mulholland Drive* homosexuality or lesbianism have become routine models of identity.

2.2. After “nostalgia”

A phenomenon considered in detail in the dissertation has been the postmodernist use of the crime genre and especially that of the film noir for an evocation of its cultural significance, for the cultural codes carried by its elements. This segment of examination has led to different results concerning the nature of the respective film canons; however, when writing about canonical changes, one must be aware that the nature of categorization itself impedes nuanced treatment. The present situation is not different either, although temporal – and in my opinion – poetic features indicate that late 1970s/early 1980s crime movies with noir allusions cannot be “postmodern” in the same manner as the late 1990s examples analyzed above – without depriving the concept of its heuristic power. Although a detailed comparative analysis has been outside the main concerns of this dissertation, it is possible to advance some of the main reasons for supporting this argument.

Before going into details, it must be stated that from the perspective of the audience the postmodernism of 1970s/1980s neo-noirs does not mean the same as that of late 1990s crime movies. While the previous ones hardly enjoyed wide popularity or box-office success

outside the USA, the films analyzed here have had a global outreach. Thus, “globalization” as a key component of 1990s postmodern(ism) must not be underestimated, similarly to a more widely available knowledge of film and genre history, which is a fundamental component if the conception of “post-modernism constantly recycling modernist canons” is supposed to work.

Late 1970s/early 1980s neo-noirs – like Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* or Lawrence Kasdan’s *Body Heat* – are among the examples Fredric Jameson uses to elaborate the category of “nostalgia films”. Interpreting these films as symptoms of an era when the sense of history/historicity has disappeared, I think he validly characterizes them as “pastiche[s] of the stereotypical past” (Jameson, *Cultural* 21), with fashion or visual elements making it possible for the viewer “to receive the narrative as though it were set in some eternal thirties, beyond real historical time” (21). In Jameson’s reading, the postmodernism of *Body Heat*, a 1984 crime movie with noir allusions, is in fact its hallucinatory retro-effect, while the movie’s intention is to perfectly pastiche the 1940s generic past, in spite of its being produced four decades later. This is clearly not characteristic of the 1990s films I analyze here: we may want to remember the sequences when classical noir figures or stylistic features appear in the midst of contemporary “arthouse” or high-tech environments. What the noir elements in *Memento* or *A Pure Formality* stand for is rather an intense care for historical differences, the need to construct a separate generic identity even if aware that this cannot be but relational, as postmodernism is to modernism.

Previously I introduced the idea that in the process of the turn from the modern to the postmodern genres have been used in different ways. We can sketch three obvious modes: 1. a genre being used in a non-reflexive way, for its formulaic structure; 2. the genre used for the sake of re-interpreting the formulas; 3. and finally, generic structures being used for the cultural codes or symbolic values they represent. “Nostalgia film”-type neo noir movies made in the 1970s/1980s obviously make use of the first two modes, while I would claim that there is another trend of the neo noir remakings, which culminates in late 1990s films. In this case the noir allusions are primarily used for the cultural codes carried by the genre and not so much with the intention of re-interpreting the well-known formulaic elements. To support the general claim I have analyzed many textual examples – both from novels and from movies – throughout the thesis.

Thus we could conclude that most of the 1970s/1980s neo-noirs are better qualified as genre pastiches, primarily using the generic elements in order to re-interpret them. They are less interested – unlike the late 1990s films – in using the (film noir) genre for the cultural codes it represents, that is, as a “telegraphic message” for anxiety and a heightened emphasis

on gendered behaviour. That is why heterosexual gendered relations might be said to dominate films like *Chinatown*, where the element of novelty is not constituted by literalizing homosexual/lesbian subtexts or by consciously generating the historical distance between modern(ist) and postmodern(ist) gendered heroes. Instead – and in formulating this idea Jameson is more than prophetic – the diminishing of such a distance/difference is the real aim, in a movie where there is no chance of Faye Dunaway dressing ridiculously or cheaply as Natalie in *Memento* or Marla Singer in *Fight Club*.

Answering the question of how the movies analyzed here differ from similar films produced two decades earlier does not exempt one from defining their particularity vis-à-vis contemporary films that can be categorized as belonging to the postmodern. Basically because of the self-reflexive employment of noir generic allusions and the cultural codes carried by them, *A Pure Formality*, *Crying Game*, *Memento*, *Mullholland Drive* and (to a lesser degree) *Fight Club* form a group that – in spite of the mainstream audience they are directed at – questions the panels of gendered behaviour in a (film) historical crime context.

3. Coda

On the general level I have claimed that the modern–postmodern turn – at least as regards the mass cultural genre of crime and detection – should be conceptualized as a dynamic process, with several variables (poetics, gender roles, canonical position) in transformation, and resulting in hybrid texts that share modern(ist) and postmodern(ist) characteristics alike.

In addition to these perspectives, the importance attributed to the change and evolution of technologies of representation has emerged during the working/writing phase of the dissertation, and it has led to partly unforeseen results in the context of the analyzed mass cultural crime genre. Ingeborg Hoesterey identifies a similar process in postmodern(ist) art practices when she writes that “[t]he gesture of exhibiting, of foregrounding the structures of mediation of older art to viewers of a different mentality and cultural makeup, is typical for most enterprises of the postmodern sensibility” (Hoesterey 29). The unearthing and the undressing of the mechanism of media and modes of representation widely used earlier and gradually losing some of their importance with the passing of time forms a visible “archeology” allowing for what I have called a “freezing” of previous/modernist features within the analyzed body of written or filmed texts that consider or offer themselves as “postmodern”.

Finally, and somewhat wistfully, I need to mention the last and (perhaps) inevitable “piece of result”, the recognition that the dichotomy formed by the “modern-postmodern turn”

is a narrow and thus – to a certain degree – a negligible one. The analyses undertaken above have demonstrated that a strong coherence and similarity exists in the corpus of films adhering to the film noir code-system. Such coherence may question the validity of a modern-postmodern turn having happened at all, except in relation to the surface signifiers such as fashion or historical objects employed in the *mise-en-scène*. This is why I have proposed in the last subchapter to reformulate the original hypothesis and understand the narrative of the turn from (the) modern(ism) to (the) postmodern(ism) as a specific case of speaking about historicity.

Therefore I cannot miss the chance of one last and final quotation, the ironical reading of which is more than desirable; for otherwise the preceding one hundred and eighty pages totally lose their relevance, which would attest the quick aging of one's reflexive products – for example, a dissertation:

One film, for instance, can be held to be postmodern through its use of pastiche, another because it dismantles fictional subjectivities, a third simply because its commodity status obscures the relations of productions it represents. Similarities can be cited as evidence of the postmodern and so can differences, because these point to cultural fragmentation. Postmodernism can be mobilized as an explanatory device across a widely varying range of films because it can be so many different things at so many different moments. (Walsh 489)

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