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DETECTIVE FICTION AND ‘THE ORIGINAL CRIME’: BAUDRILLARD, CALLE, POE

Cultural Politics 7:3, Special Issue, ‘Baudrillard Redux’ (forthcoming: November 2011)

My investigation was proceeding without him.
Sophie Calle, Suite vénitienne (1999: 87).

Unlike other theorists in the French ‘poststructuralist’ tradition to which he is linked historically if not philosophically, Baudrillard appeared largely uninterested in the detective story. Besides Derrida and Lacan, who famously debated Poe’s ‘The Purloined Letter’, Foucault and Barthes were fascinated by the genre, and Julia Kristeva, over the past fifteen years or so, has taken to writing detective fiction herself. In fact theorists in general (Jameson, Eco, Todorov) have tended to be attracted by detective stories. Baudrillard, however, remained – typically, of course – an outsider in this respect.

Among the works of literature which he cites, none are detective stories. In keeping with his own fondness for describing his work as sci-fi (e.g. in The Transparency of Evil), he was always more likely to turn to SF for rhetorical effect, as in the case of Arthur C. Clarke’s ‘The Nine Billion Names of God’, which is mentioned frequently in his work of the early 1990s, or a Borgesian short story (e.g. the reference to what is probably ‘Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius’ [Borges, 1998] in Baudrillard 2003: ix). Even his 1995 book, The Perfect Crime, which self-consciously sets itself up as a parodic detective fiction, telling ‘the story of a crime – the murder of reality’ (Baudrillard 1996: i), the references to the genre are rather cursory, made only to underline the key metaphor of the perfect crime, the elimination of the world by simulation, rather than to contribute more intricately to his argument. In this essay, however, I want to argue that there is a value to assessing detective fiction from a particularly Baudrillardian viewpoint. To do so enables us to defamiliarize the genre in a useful way, by

highlighting a formal pattern at its core which revolves around the interplay of what Baudrillard terms 'seduction' and 'production'. I want to attempt this by analysing what might be regarded as the closest to a 'Baudrillardian' detective story, Sophie Calle's parodic detective dramas. I then want to return to more established examples of the detective genre and show how Baudrillard's engagement with Calle's works can help us reconsider the texts of its formative period, the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century: those by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and, especially, the supposed 'father of modern detective fiction', Edgar Allan Poe. Poe is a writer, I shall contend, who might be considered in some respects as a forebear of the seductive work of both Calle and Baudrillard.

THE OBJECT OF DETECTIVE FICTION

Baudrillard's apparent lack of interest in detective fiction is no doubt because the kind of formulaic art it amounted to is the very antithesis of the kind of 'art of seduction' which he valued. Baudrillard was always highly selective about which particular kinds of art could do more than simply reaffirm the values of simulation. More precisely, the model of 'investigation' upon which detective fiction rests is one which is deeply opposed to Baudrillard's approach to the object. Throughout his work he wanted to consider the object or its less tangible equivalent, the event, as something which should not automatically be assumed to be a dumb subordinate to the subject, but an entity with a certain capacity for 'agency' (a term surely to be understood rhetorically) in itself. The object or event can lure the human subject or a particular system of analysis to a point where it is unclear where the boundaries between itself and its other – as well as the distinction between real and fake and surface and depth – begin and end. The object always seems to be one step ahead, aware of a challenge by the subject and setting its own more devious challenge in return. What

Baudrillard means by ‘object’ here is essentially that which is the focus of analysis and observation. The most obvious example of this is the ‘observer effect’ in physics, the recognition that ‘any means of microscopic observation provokes such an alteration in the object that knowledge of it becomes imperiled’ (Baudrillard 1999: 81). As well as science, the ‘triumph’ of ‘the analyzed object’ (Baudrillard 1999: 82) can be witnessed in the human sciences. In Fatal Strategies Baudrillard gives the example of ‘the masses’, an entity which despite – or indeed because of – being unrepresentable (because it is silent and amorphous and has no desire) nevertheless provokes the entire political scene into trying to ‘to seduce, solicit, invest’ in it (Baudrillard 1999: 94).

The engagement with the object which we find in detective fiction is the opposite of this Baudrillardian approach. The detective story would seem to dramatize a certain model of positivistic thinking in which a subject, who is part of a wider system, masters an ‘object’. The genre thus figures as a symptomatic cultural expression of what Baudrillard classifies as the second great phase of his tripartite history of simulation: the industrial era, in which ‘production’ was the ‘dominant schema’ (Baudrillard 1994a: 50). In Forget Foucault (1977) Baudrillard clarifies precisely what he means by production:

The original sense of “production” is not in fact that of material manufacture; rather, it means to render visible, to cause to appear and be made to appear: pro-ducere. [...] To produce is to force what belongs to another order (that of secrecy and seduction) to materialize. Seduction is that which is everywhere and always opposed to production; seduction withdraws something from the visible order and so runs counter to production, whose project is to set everything up in clear view, whether it be an object, a number, or a concept. Let everything be produced, be read, become real, visible, and marked with the sign of effectiveness; let everything be transcribed into force relations, into conceptual systems or into calculable energy; let everything be

said, gathered, indexed and registered: this is how sex appears in pornography, but this is more generally the project of our whole culture, whose natural condition is “obscenity”. (Baudrillard 1977: 21-2)

The order of production refers to a world in which reality is ‘codified’ according to the ‘law of value’. This is the law which distinguishes between things, establishes the binary oppositions upon which Western culture is founded (life over death, good over evil, cause over effect) and produces a seeming stability in essences, identity, difference, and meaning. By doing so the law of value actually produces reality (i.e. through simulation): we experience the world through the system of values laid down in its underlying metaphysics.

The primary task of production is to suppress or to eliminate seduction. Where production brings things forward, manufactures them, gives them a value, seduction is a process ‘of diverting them from that value, and hence from their identity, their reality, to destine them for the play of appearances, for their symbolic exchange’ (Baudrillard 2003: 21). Seduction, then, is a form which enables the logic of production to be challenged. The crucial fact about seduction for Baudrillard – as he argued elsewhere – is that it is a disruptive form:

Seduction is a challenge, a form which tends always to unsettle someone in their identity and the meaning they can have for themselves. In seduction they find the possibility of a radical otherness. [...] Seduction is not so much a play on desire as a playing with desire. (Baudrillard 2003: 21)

Seduction continually ‘shadows’ or haunts production. That is to say, when anything is produced, the possibility of seduction is inevitably raised, too. This is the kind of dialectic Baudrillard repeatedly invokes in his analyses of simulation – a process which is geared towards production, in Baudrillard’s sense. Because simulation is a process which trades in artifice, producing versions of the real, so it always brings into being the possibility of

seduction. This is why Baudrillard can describe seduction – using a metaphor which is significant for the present purpose – as the ‘original crime’ (Baudrillard 2003: 23). Seduction is what the law contends with, if we understand the law in Baudrillardian terms as the law of production, the attempt to ‘positivize the world, to give it a unilateral meaning’. A crucial part of this activity involves ‘abolishing this ultimately dangerous, evil terrain of seduction’ (Baudrillard 2003: 23).

Seduction works according to invisibility and ambivalence, and thus threatens to cause productive systems to implode. Ultimately seduction causes a system to go into reverse. Examples of particular systems which are reversed or at least severely compromised by seduction abound in Baudrillard, and include historiography in The Illusion of the End, or Western liberal democracy in The Spirit of Terrorism. But the most exemplary case – one that figures as a kind of ‘cautionary tale’ about seduction – is psychoanalysis (explored in Symbolic Exchange and Death and in Seduction). The problem for psychoanalysis is that its very object of study, the unconscious, is primarily a seductive organism which generates signs that divert analysis. Psychoanalysis has a duty to recognise seduction as the ‘dangerous form’ which proves potentially ‘fatal to the development and coherence of the future system’ (Baudrillard, 1988, p.151). In fact it had the perfect opportunity, at the very outset, when Freud began to develop a theory about how fantasies of seduction were fundamental to cases of hysteria. Yet Freud chose to draw back from his encounter with seduction and develop instead ‘an eminently operational mechanics of interpretation, ...one which offers all the characteristics of objectivity and coherence’ (Baudrillard, 1988, p.152). As a result, he ensured that seduction would forever haunt psychoanalysis, continually being ‘reenacted in the course of every cure’ (Baudrillard, 1988 152-3).

As a fundamentally conservative genre, which is symptomatic of the realist, scientific, positivist impulses of modernity, detective fiction might be read as a continual demonstration

of the power of production to triumph over seduction. This applies especially to Doyle's Sherlock Holmes's stories. Their project, described by Catherine Belsey as 'to dispel magic and mystery, to make everything explicit, accountable, subject to scientific analysis' (Belsey 1980: 111), is in keeping with the 'project' of production: to bring into the light, to make readable, intelligible, real. The rationale behind Doyle's detective fiction – and indeed the direct subject-matter of many of its subsequent examples, from Christie and Sayers to Dexter and Rankin – is the bringing of what is hidden or invisible into the light so that it can be interpreted, judged, brought to account. It is quite appropriate that Foucault's work, especially the idea of panopticism, which is the mechanism that best demonstrates the logic of production according to Baudrillard, is so often invoked in analyses of the genre (Porter 1981; Miller 1988; Thomas 2000). Baudrillard's theory might therefore be invoked to strengthen the Marxist critique of a critic like Franco Moretti who uses detective fiction to show how culture does 'police work': 'Every [detective] story reiterates Bentham's Panopticon ideal: the model prison that signals the metamorphosis of liberalism into total scrutiny' (Moretti 2005: 143).

Yet besides enabling us usefully to restate the ideological pattern repeated in so many examples of classic detective fiction, my view is that Baudrillard's 'formal' understanding of seduction means we can embark upon a more radical reconsideration of how examples of the genre are structured. It is important at this point to note that seduction has featured in discussions of detective fiction for many years. The aim of Belsey's reading of the Holmes stories, for example, is to demonstrate how female sexuality becomes effaced only for the stories to remain 'haunted by shadowy, mysterious and often silent women', the silence of which 'repeatedly conceals their sexuality, investing it with a dark and magical quality which is beyond the reach of scientific knowledge' (Belsey, 1980, p.114). Seduction has been considered even more directly in relation to the femme fatale, the symbolically castrating

figure who uses her sexuality to divert the detective from his investigative path. This is the pattern we find in novels such as Hammett's The Maltese Falcon (1926) or Chandler's The Big Sleep (1939). Much has been written about the sexual politics involved in such a portrayal of gender relations, in particular the way the femme fatale occupies alternative roles as redeemer and destroyer, draws on familiar stereotypes (see Kaplan 1978). Yet Baudrillard insisted that sexual seduction is merely a localized example of a more general form. As he clarified the issue in Passwords, seduction is to be considered a 'feminine' principle in the sense that it 'contradicts the masculine/feminine opposition, the value opposition between the two sexes' (Baudrillard 2003: 21-2) – in other words the gendered identity which is a consequence of the modern emphasis on production. This more general understanding of seduction is closer to my purpose in this essay. The relationship between troubled 'shamus' and seductive 'phallic woman' in hard-boiled detective fiction is merely, in Baudrillardian terms, a particularly stark depiction of the suppression of seduction and production which, I want to argue, is at the heart of the genre.

THE ART OF SEDUCTION: SOPHIE CALLE'S 'INVESTIGATIONS'

Where the outcome, even in the most 'noir' examples of hard-boiled fiction is a hard-won victory for production, as the detective still manages to triumph and the femme fatale is controlled or eliminated, the work of the French conceptual artist, Sophie Calle, at once clearly foregrounds the productive logic of detective fiction and suggests how production is incapable of containing the effects of seduction. Calle's art fascinated Baudrillard because it embodies the potential value of art as, as he later put it, 'one of the terrains of seduction' (Baudrillard 2003: 28). [1] In particular, her work exemplifies one of the fundamental laws of Baudrillard's conception of seduction, the idea that to seduce is to be seduced. That is, the kind of leading astray involved in seduction has nothing to do with coercion nor force, nor direct persuasion nor enticement. Such crude efforts would only ensure that the object of

persuasion becomes suspicious about what is being asked of it. Rather, to seduce someone successfully requires the almost paradoxical achievement of leading them astray by making them act of their own free will. This law is demonstrated by Calle's work The Sleepers, in which she invited twenty-four people to sleep one by one in her bed for eight hours while she watched them, photographed them every hour, and made notes. What impressed Baudrillard about this is the fact that never, not once, did Calle meet with refusal from the people she asked. This, he thinks, is precisely because of the very mystery and absurdity of her challenge. It proved, Baudrillard wrote, that '[i]n the end, we are secretly flattered when something without or against reason is asked or even demanded of us...' (Baudrillard 1990: 27). Calle thus exemplifies what we might call Baudrillard's 'aesthetic':

The unknown man who is followed or the unknown girl who invites you to bed is like the sentence which surprises you, like the illogical incident which makes you laugh – this belongs to those objects Canetti described as “effective because unexpected”. We have no way of counteracting them, we invite them, we rush towards them with an energy equal to that with which, in other circumstances, we would oppose them. (Baudrillard, 1987, 105-6).

The Sleepers is presented as a kind of sociological experiment, with photographs and notes about each 'subject' documenting its 'progress' ('He agrees to answer my questions' [Calle 2003: 150], 'My questionnaire puts him to sleep' [Calle 2003: 148]). Notably, however, the objectives and conclusions of the project are left entirely unclear. This is typical of Calle's work, especially her earliest work in the early 1980s, which specializes in aestheticizing real intrusions into the lives of strangers, and deploying techniques of examination and surveillance to create a kind of pseudo-investigation. There is The Hotel (1981) for example, for which she took a job as a chambermaid in a Paris hotel and took photographs of the occupants possessions in order to construct snapshots of their owners, or The Address Book,

which documents Calle's 'investigation' (Calle 2003: 100) into the life of the owner of an address book she found on the street by systematically tracking-down and interviewing the people listed in it. [2] In each case, though, while numerous details about the subjects of Calle's projects are recorded (e.g. the hotel guests' food, postcards and books they are reading, and the owner of the address book's fear of flying and childhood ambition to be an egyptologist) all the subjects remain elusive. In her refusal or inability to provide interpretations, Calle is patently parodying the pretensions of the modern investigation.

This is especially true of her most famous project, Suite vénitienne (1980), which documents Calle's pursuit of one 'Henri B.' on a business trip to Venice where she tracked him in secret for 13 days. Perhaps the most striking feature of the strange story is that, throughout it all, Calle repeatedly denies a number of possible motivations for her behaviour, no doubt partly to anticipate the responses of her future readers/viewers, but mostly, it seems, as a reminder to herself. She is not interested in Henri B. His feelings, she says, 'do not belong in my story' (Calle 1999: 91). She is not in love with him, even though at times her activities feel like pursuing a lover. She does not intend to uncover his 'secret life'. She tries not to impose a narrative on her activities by wondering what the outcome might be. Nor does she even intend to produce a work of art, as this took place before she considered herself an artist (Calle 1993: 30). She said of Henri B., 'I didn't need to know anything exceptional about him. I just wanted to know that he had bread at ten o'clock' (Calle 1993: 33).

Baudrillard's 'Please Follow Me' uses Suite vénitienne (implicitly) as an example of how seduction can cause a dominant system to implode. Calle's refusal to clarify her motivations and objectives, even to herself, meant that her work introduces seduction into the particular 'system' that is the prevailing modern construction of coherent autonomous subjectivity. Her pursuit of Henri B., Baudrillard argues, 'relieves him' of 'the responsibility for his own life', for it is as if she is responsible for him, like an anxious mother shadowing

her child who has wandered away from home, thinking he is alone. And, paradoxically, this means that she is simultaneously relieved of the responsibility for her own life, too, for all her energies are channelled simply into the act of reproducing the unpredictable movements of another. The beauty of this game, for Baudrillard, is that it parodies one of the prevailing myths of Western culture: that we are unique, separate, autonomous beings, in charge of our own destiny. Our pretensions to uniqueness are made to seem ridiculous when we are doubled in this way, as when someone makes fun of another by mimicking them. But, more seriously, our desires and will are what make us individuals and when these are negated, so is our sense of individuality.

Baudrillard is uninterested in placing Suite vénitienne in any kind of cultural or generic context, yet it clearly deploys the kind of tracking/tailing motifs that are a centrepiece of ‘private-eye’ fiction. Its implicit parallel with the detective genre is brought out more clearly by its counterpart in Calle’s body of work, The Shadow (1981). Here Calle switched around the co-ordinates of her Venetian following game so that she was the quarry and a hired detective the follower. She enlisted her mother to engage a private investigator ‘to follow me, to report my daily activities, and to provide photographic evidence of my existence’ (Calle 1999: 123). The work is presented via two accounts of the day, Calle’s and the detective’s. The detective’s work is a failure. She provides him with clues which have shaped her as a person, such as visiting important places in her past and meeting people who are important to her – she hides them in plain view, in other words, as in Poe’s foundational detective story ‘The Purloined Letter’ (which we shall return to below). Yet the detective is quite unable to fit them together into a meaningful narrative. He is capable of recording details, such as what she is wearing, but is unable to identify the people she meets. He correctly names the painting by Titian she pauses beside in a gallery, but does not speculate as to its potential significance to her. His is akin to the blank gaze of the surveillance camera,

unable to evaluate the information it takes in. That he is not even able to get the joke is underlined by the moments when Calle buys a photo of a Private Detective from an office and lingers in front of a film poster for Is it Reasonable?, ‘a detective comedy’. The joke is on him. In effect, he is metaphorically being followed too: his own movements are choreographed, plotted in advance by Calle’s project. On a literal level, too, to underline his status as quarry, Calle has also arranged for a friend to follow him and provide photographic evidence of the tailing.

In its opaque, parodic seductiveness, Calle’s Suite vénitienne might be regarded as the paradigmatic ‘Baudrillardian’ work of art. Part of my interest in it here is that it shows how the form of seduction might translate into a discernible narrative form, what this form might ‘look’ like, and the effects it might produce. In its basic structure, Suite vénitienne is organized around one object seducing another – which of course becomes a kind of mutual seduction, whereby it is impossible really to tell which one is the initiator of the seduction (Baudrillard is careful to insist that Henri B. is ‘seduced’, despite his unawareness of Calle’s pursuit, just as surely as the artist herself). It exemplifies Baudrillard’s rule that to seduce is also to be seduced, until the mechanisms associated with ‘production’, such as coherent autonomous identity and agency, become collapsed and irrelevant. More precisely, Calle’s parodic ‘detective fictions’ suggest that we can defamiliarize detective fiction ‘proper’ and consider that at its core is not a concern with either crime or investigation but the interplay of seduction and production.

One candidate that critics (Benjamin 1983; Brand 1991) have pinpointed as an origin for the detective genre is Poe’s enigmatic 1840 story ‘The Man of the Crowd’. The story details the fascination felt by the flâneur-narrator towards an old man who resists his practice of grouping the passers-by on the city streets into recognisable types. Thinking he has glimpsed a diamond and a dagger beneath his coat he pursues him for twenty-four hours

through the London streets, only to abruptly give up the chase and decide that '[t]his old man ... is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd' (Poe 1986a: 140). The story is commonly regarded as a detective fiction in need of a detective, i.e. someone who has the analytical ability the narrator does not possess to determine precisely what kind of crime the old man has committed. But from a Baudrillardian perspective what we are faced with in 'The Man of the Crowd' is the seduction of the narrator by an 'object', the old man, which has initially aroused his interest. Considered in this light the tale figures as a precursor of Calle's Suite vénétienne. The old man's sheer enigmatic quality diverts the narrator from his purpose, overturning his apparently controlled, rational demeanour and causing him to descend into interpretive delirium. It leads to what has been called 'epistemological anxiety' (Brand 1990), where of course in Suite vénétienne there is no attempt to read, simply a surrender to the seduction. Where production is barred from the text in Calle, it is made impossible in 'The Man of the Crowd'.

Walter Benjamin described Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd' as an 'X-ray picture of a detective story. In it, the drapery represented by the crime has disappeared. The mere armature has remained: the pursuer, the crowd, and an unknown man' (Benjamin 1983: 48). This is conventionally understood to mean (as I think it was intended to) that 'The Man of the Crowd' gives us a basic generic prototype, a skeleton which came to be fleshed out, initially by its author himself in his Dupin stories, and subsequently by numerous other writers, until we had the detective story proper, so to speak. The narrator of the story is the embryonic detective, able to pinpoint and track down a potential danger to society, while the old man is the criminal attempting to exploit the anonymity provided by the crowd. Yet in the light of Baudrillard's notion of seduction, we could also take Benjamin's comment as it stands, and reverse its apparently forward-looking temporal logic. The term 'X-ray' could imply that the

detective structure has effectively been ‘seen through’ by ‘Man of the Crowd’. The story would be what results if the detective story is first invented and then stripped down until only its basic mechanism, its motor – that is, seduction – is left. Or, to put it differently, what we would have is Calle’s Suite vénitienne, a variation on the basic theme of ‘Man of the Crowd’. Rather than a loose parody of detective fiction, Suite vénitienne might thus be regarded as a quintessential work of the genre, not despite the absence of a crime, motive or detective, but because of it. By exposing the choreography of seduction which drives the genre – one person seducing another, and being seduced in turn – Calle’s text bears the same relation to the detective genre as Sterne’s singularly convoluted self-reflexive novel Tristram Shandy to the traditional realist novel, according to Viktor Shklovsky: it was the ‘the most typical novel in world literature’ (Shklovsky 1965: 57) because its innovations exposed what drives the novel as a form. Somewhat perversely – though I think quite in keeping with the ironic reversals of Baudrillard’s own rhetoric – this can lead us to identify a text such as Calle’s Suite vénitienne, which otherwise conforms only loosely to the kind of generic conventions of detective fiction, as an exemplary work of the detective genre. Suite vénitienne might be regarded as the perfect Baudrillardian crime story in that it has no victim, no crime, no motive, simply an investigation, and even that, once set in motion, requires no victim nor even a detective. As Calle at one point notes in her ‘report’, ‘My investigation was proceeding without him’ (Calle 1999: 87). These absences, however, are precisely what makes it an exemplary detective story.

Baudrillard and Calle might in this way open up the potential for a fresh reading of detective fiction, as a genre which is less about the triumph of production and indeed less about reading – that is, the production of meaning, an activity which is conventionally regarded as central to detective fiction. [3] Instead of revelation, both Suite vénitienne and The Shadow are about preserving or even creating secrets – secrets, moreover, which the

author does not know herself. The secret belongs to the text, the object the artist has created, yet which – like all art – has taken on a life, and almost therefore an ‘agency’, of its own. Calle’s parodic detective stories show in different ways that what seduction counters most of all in detective fiction is interpretation. ‘Seduction’ is defined as whatever ‘is opposed to production’; withdrawing objects, numbers and concepts from clear view, making things unreadable or ambiguous, ironic, impossible to calculate or to systematize, raising questions over the ‘reality’ of something. Calle’s parodic detective dramas are examples of these effects: they are unreadable, trade in the unsaid and the invisible, and even their status as ‘real’ is never clear (just how complicit or otherwise are Calle’s counterparts in each game, for example?).

Of course classic nineteenth-century detective fiction or the innumerable generic twentieth-century descendents could never work in the same way. Even examples of what has been called ‘metaphysical’ detective fiction, a parodic sub-genre of the traditional mode, [4] still results in the production of stable meanings insofar as it is clear which conventions are being subverted and what the implications are. Nevertheless, once we begin to recognise the form of seduction at the heart of detective fiction we can begin the task of reassessing the relationship between production and seduction even in classic texts. In what remains of this essay I want to further expand upon the reassessment of Poe’s status as originator of the conventions of detective fiction later developed by such writers as Doyle and suggest that while his work initially might seem to demonstrate, as Doyle’s does, how detective investigation can triumph over seduction, in fact the interplay between production and seduction is far more complex. This time I want to consider what is undisputed as a formative example of detective fiction, ‘The Purloined Letter’ (1844).

POE'S 'THE PURLOINED LETTER'

What is striking about considering 'The Purloined Letter' in the light of the foregoing discussion is that the story, despite its title, is not about reading at all. This was something that struck Lacan in his famous seminar on the story, 'the fact that the tale leaves us in virtually total ignorance of the sender, no less than of the contents, of the letter':

we know only the dangers it entails should it come into the hands of a specific third party, and that its possession has allowed the Minister to "wield, to a very dangerous extent, for political purposes", the power it assures him over the interested party. But all this tells us nothing of the message it conveys. Love letter or conspiratorial letter, letter of betrayal or letter of mission, letter of summons or letter of distress, we are assured of but one thing: the Queen must not bring it to the knowledge of her lord and master. (Lacan 1987: 41)

The contents of the letter are less important, in other words, than the function of the letter, the very fact that it is in the possession of the thief, ready for him to use with destructive consequences at any moment. Of course, such an effect would depend upon the secrets contained within the letter. However, as the narrator states early on in the story, 'it is th[e] possession, and not any employment of the letter, which bestows the power' upon the thief (Poe 2006: 330). The object is therefore powerful not so much as the conveyor of meaning, but as an object within a particular structure within which it harbours a constant threat of 'agency'.

Much of the story concerns the efforts of the Prefect of the Parisian police, Monsieur G___, not simply to produce the object itself but to make sense of how it has been hidden, to crack the mystery. His and his team's detective-work reads like a demonstration of the principles and methods associated with production. They systematically take apart every

piece of furniture in every room in the entire building, dismantle cabinets, look for secret drawers, push long needles into cushions, unscrew the rungs and jointings of every table, check the cavities inside table and chair legs, search mirrors, bedclothes, curtains, carpets, scrutinize book-covers, their bindings, and every page within. Having dissected the building in this way, their search extends to every aspect of the two adjoining buildings and their grounds, including even the moss between the paving-bricks. The arsenal of the Prefect and his team, which Dupin refers to as their ‘eyes, [...] probes, [...] gimlets, and [...], microscopes’ (Poe 2006: 340) are the literal tools of production, the latter especially a state-of-the-art piece of contemporaneous productive technology, referred to on six occasions in the story. These devices allow the Prefect’s team to apply the logic of the panopticon – the assumption underlying which is that power and control require visibility, and that bringing something into the light reveals its identity or the truth. But they neither uncover the letter nor solve the mystery of how it has been concealed.

Dupin is withering in his critique of this approach:

What is all this boring, and probing, and sounding, and scrutinizing with the microscope, and dividing the surface of the building into registered square inches – what is it all but an exaggeration of the application of the one principle or set of principles of search, which are based upon the one set of notions regarding human ingenuity, to which the Prefect, in the long routine of his duty, has been accustomed? (Poe 2006: 337).

The Prefect’s approach has in fact enabled the thief, Minister D____, to operate as an agent of seduction in concealing the letter. Though the Prefect has known from the outset that he is the thief, he makes two crucial errors about him – both the results of the blindspot created by his adherence to the logic of production. Firstly, he discounts the Minister’s status as poet and concentrates on his reputation as a mathematician. While this assumption is understandable,

and shared by the narrator (who states, without thinking, that '[t]he mathematical reason has long been regarded as the reason par excellence'), it is immediately countered by Dupin, who argues that 'mathematical reasoning is merely logic applied to observation upon form and quantity' and the only truths it can deliver are 'abstract or general truths' (Poe 2006: 338). This is why the Prefect appeals to apparently universal rules in his investigation in order to discover the location of the letter – 'in searching for anything hidden, [he and his team] advert[s] only to the modes in which they would have hidden it' (Poe 2006: 338) – rather than taking into account the peculiarities of the mind of his adversary. This is what leads to the Prefect's second mistake: not to recognise that the Minister is second-guessing him at every turn. From the outset the Minister has 'foreseen [...] the secret investigations of his premises' and has therefore encouraged these by the 'ruse' (Poe 2006: 338) of frequently leaving his home at night so the team could immerse themselves further and further in their pointless activities.

Dupin's method resembles that of the Minister rather than the Prefect in that his technique places the emphasis on the 'identification of the reasoner's intellect with that of his opponent' (Poe 2006: 336). He guesses that the Minister will have realised the futility of hiding the letter in the complex way the Prefect expects and which is susceptible to the formidable methods of his team, and has resorted instead to 'simplicity'. This is why Dupin is easily able to obtain the letter. In anticipating the Minister's anticipation of the Prefect's moves, Dupin supersedes him as the supreme 'agent of seduction' in the tale.[5] This description is actually endorsed elsewhere in the Dupin canon, in the comparison between chess and draughts which illustrates the specialist technique of 'analysis' at the beginning of the first Dupin tale, 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841). While chess would seem instinctively the game which demands more intellectual effort and ability, in fact it is simply 'elaborate frivolity' compared with draughts, as can be demonstrated by its endgame:

Let us suppose a game of draughts where the pieces are reduced to four kings, and where, of course, no oversight is to be expected. It is obvious that here the victory can be decided (the players being at all equal) only by some recherché movement, the result of some strong exertion of the intellect. Deprived of ordinary resources, the analyst throws himself into the spirit of his opponent, identifies himself therewith, and not unfrequently sees thus, at a glance, the sole methods (sometimes indeed absurdly simple ones) by which he may seduce into error or hurry into calculation (Poe 1986b: 190)

Detective-work in Dupin's sense is not a matter of production, bringing what is hidden into the light, but of seduction, causing the criminal to lead himself astray, the seducer to be seduced. At the heart of Dupin's 'method' (though it is not a system in the way 'the Holmes method' is) is what we might think of as a Baudrillardian 'ironic' strategy, by which a subject or system is doubled, followed step-by-step until it is compromised or implodes. This in fact is how Dupin has dealt with the Prefect, doubling the police officer's 'productive' approach to the situation, subscribing to its own logic until it reaches excessive levels and the system implodes. Once the Prefect has detailed his exhaustive search, Dupin advises him '[t]o make a thorough re-search of the premises' (Poe 2006: 337), knowing this second search will lead to even more exhaustive efforts and a more crushing failure. Where 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' uses draughts as an analogy for the process of seductive doubling, in 'The Purloined Letter' it is the parable of the 8-year-old boy who is unaccountably successful at the game of 'even or odd', which involves guessing whether the number of marbles concealed in an opponent's hand is even or odd, because he is able to anticipate the choice his opponent is likely to make each time. The boy reveals his method to Dupin:

When I wish to find out how wise, or how stupid, or how good, or how wicked is any one, or what are his thoughts at the moment, I fashion the expression of my face, as

accurately as possible, in accordance with the expression of his, and then wait to see what thoughts or sentiments arise in my mind or heart, as if to match or correspond with the expression. (Poe 2006: 336).

‘The Purloined Letter’ shows Dupin doubling first the Prefect then the Minister in order to solve the mystery.

Not only is ‘The Purloined Letter’ little interested in reading, it is not really about the letter either. The letter is simply the object which provides a pretext for a sequence of seductions: the Prefect by the Minister, the Prefect by Dupin, then the Minister by Dupin. As Lacan realised, what drives the story is the network of intersubjective exchange. As with Calle’s pseudo-detective dramas we have here a detective story which is interested less in the crime, its motivations or its consequences, than in the ‘choreography’ of seduction around which it is structured. Opposed to the formidable and complex mechanism of ‘production’ is what Dupin refers to enigmatically as the ‘poetry’ of the object of the Prefect’s investigation – and this ‘object’ is actually threefold, consisting of the letter itself, the Minister’s method of concealing it, and Dupin’s ability to anticipate both the thief and the investigator. While he defines mathematical reasoning at great length, Dupin leaves implicit the definition of ‘poetry’ in the story – in other words, the precise means by which his status as poet enables the Minister successfully to conceal the whereabouts of the letter. We can conclude only generally that poetry figures in the tale as the opposite to the blind application of general rules, as in mathematics, and is a matter of identifying oneself with the mind of others, and favouring ‘simplicity’ over complexity. As the story moves to its conclusion Dupin returns again to the idea – explored when assessing the futility of the Prefect’s complex investigation – that the methods of the police are representative of an attitude shared by ‘the mass’ (Poe 2006: 336) or ‘the whole world’ (the Prefect ‘never once thought it probable, or possible, that the Minister had deposited the letter immediately beneath the nose of the whole world, by

way of best preventing any portion of that world from perceiving it' [Poe 2006: 341]). The implication here is that the world has been overtaken by the ideology of production, that which makes the world real and intelligible, and provides it with stable meaning and value. Yet the story of the purloined letter offers a cautionary tale about this state of affairs because it shows how the pervasiveness of production prevents people from really seeing what is under their noses. This is something which Dupin again explains through a tangential example of a game, this time a puzzle-game 'played on a map' in which one player challenges another

to find a given word – the name of town, river, state or empire – any word, in short, upon the motley and perplexed surface of the chart. A novice in the game generally seeks to embarrass his opponents by giving them the most minutely lettered names; but the adept selects such words as stretch, in large characters, from one end of the chart to the other. These, like the over-largely lettered signs and placards of the street, escape observation by dint of being excessively obvious (Poe 2006: 340-1)

On the face of it, this might be considered the foundation of what Conan Doyle, an admirer of the Dupin stories, would later develop into the fêted 'Holmes method', which depends upon observing apparently insignificant details which others miss. But, as 'The Purloined Letter' has revealed by this stage, what leads Dupin to triumph is more than his ability to apply the same methods of observation better than others. It is his capacity to understand seduction and put it into practice himself.

Dupin's example of the map game is another instance where 'The Purloined Letter' sounds positively 'Baudrillardian' in giving us a variation on the famous 'map that precedes the territory' (Baudrillard 1994a: 1) statement in Simulacra and Simulation. What is clear from Dupin's counter-investigation is that the Prefect and his team have been dealing with a simulated version of reality rather than actuality. As Lacan observed of 'The Purloined

Letter’, ‘the detectives have so immutable a notion of the real that they fail to notice that their search tends to transform it into its object’ (Lacan 1987: 39). Once the letter itself is described at the end of the tale, we see that this has been especially true of their perception of the eponymous object. We realise that it is not simply the fact that the letter is concealed in plain view that confounds the Prefect but because it does not look the way he expected it to. It is soiled, crumpled, torn almost in half, with chafed edges, and has a large black seal instead of a small red one. The letter, Dupin explains, is ‘to all appearance, radically different from the one of which the Prefect had read us so minute a description’. What throws him is ‘the radicalness of these differences, which was excessive; the dirt; the soiled and torn condition of the paper, so inconsistent with the true methodical habits of D___’ (Poe 2006: 342). At the end of the story, then, we are shown how the logic of production creates the real through simulation. Just as the agents of seduction in ‘The Purloined Letter’, the Minister then the detective, turn the letter inside out in order to perpetrate their deceptions, so the story reveals what is on the inside of the productive framework which constitutes reality in the modern world.

MAKING DETECTIVE FICTION MORE UNINTELLIGIBLE

Gill Plain has commented on the habit of critics to ‘fix’ crime fiction ‘in a rigid set of critical and historical paradigms which define it as a narrative of the always already known’ (Plain 2000: 6). This is borne out by the familiar narrative history that detective-genre scholars tend to work with, the convenient, linear narrative which begins with Poe’s three Dupin stories in 1841-5, continues with the ‘formalization’ of detective conventions by Conan Doyle and the Christie-led ‘Golden Age’ of ‘clue-puzzle’ detective fiction and is then followed in the twentieth century by other developments such as the American ‘hard-boiled’ detective novel

and the 'metaphysical' detective story. In particular Poe's detective is considered the ancestor of the great intellectual detectives of the clue-puzzle variety of the genre, Holmes and Poirot. However, the fact is that, unlike these apparent descendents, Dupin solves crimes not through Foucauldian investigation but through a more mysterious process. This does not involve the elimination of seduction through the mechanism of production so much as a process which is practically the opposite. In this respect, Sherlock Holmes is actually more like a brilliant version of the Prefect in the 'The Purloined Letter' than its detective. There is no more sustained example of detective-work as the logic of production than the famed 'Holmes method'. Sherlock Holmes's procedure, as he reminds Watson repeatedly, is to 'see what others overlook' (Doyle 2001a: 30) – more precisely, to 'observe' instead of simply 'seeing' (Doyle 2001b: 5). This services a more pervasive, 'panoptic' project of unmasking and making visible, which is again characteristic of the project of production, the fantasy underpinning which is stated by Holmes at the beginning of the 1891 story 'A Case of Identity' when he wishes he and Watson 'could fly out of that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs, and peep in at the queer things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the plannings, the cross-purposes, the wonderful chains of events, working through generation, and leading to the most outré results' (Doyle, 2001, p.27). The narrative pattern which recurs continually in the Holmes stories, whereby a mystery presents itself and then Holmes exercises his supreme powers of ratiocination to solve it, is a gratuitous display of the power of production, in Baudrillard's sense. Whatever is secret or invisible or illusory or initially inexplicable is, time after time, made visible, called to account, made to signify by the nineteenth-century detective, a supreme 'agent of production'. Poe's detective fictions also revolve around production and seduction but cannot so easily be made to fit the ideological model of the age.

Baudrillard once insisted that the function of theory ‘is, ultimately, to make the world more unintelligible... we live in a system of total – and even totalitarian – explanation, exploration and investigation and the real task of theory is to complicate the object’ (Boyne and Lash, 1995, 82). This would surely also be the task of any properly Baudrillardian literary criticism. Analysing seduction in detective fiction can complicate a familiar object, not least because it allows texts other than those which display the litany of generic features – urban setting, violent crime, locked room, gentleman mastermind, homosocial camaraderie, etc. – into the category, such as the work of Sophie Calle. For all the myriad examples of individual crimes in the tradition of detective fiction, Baudrillard can help us see that the genre as a whole again and again depicts ways of dealing with the ‘original crime’, seduction. Where the law (of production) continually endeavours to ‘positivize the world, to give it a unilateral meaning’ examining seduction in detective fiction might enable us to find moments when its familiar narratives actually negativizes the world, empties it of meaning or at least compromises those meanings which are produced by its detectives.

8650 words

NOTES

1. Baudrillard’s most sustained engagement with her work is ‘Please Follow Me’, his analysis of her Suite vénitienne (Baudrillard 1987), though different versions of this also appeared in 1983 in Fatal Strategies and, later, in Transparency of Evil in 1990.
2. The owner was, predictably, alarmed and outraged to find his private life being exposed in a daily newspaper, and threatened legal action.

3. The comparison between critical reading and detective-work has a long history. In Edmund Crispin's novel The Case of the Gilded Fly (1944), the academic investigator Professor Gervase Fen announces 'Good literary critics ... are always good detectives. I'm a very good detective myself [...] In fact, I'm the only literary critic turned detective in the whole of fiction'. Tzvetan Todorov's classic essay 'The Typology of Detective Fiction' draws on a 1928 article by the detective writer S.S. Van Dine to posit the following homology that aligns the author with the criminal rather than the detective: 'author : reader = criminal : detective' (Todorov 1977: 49) while other critics have pursued the comparison in more depth: e.g. Holquist 1973; Huhn, 1987).
4. Patricia Merivale and Elizabeth Sweeney define a metaphysical detective story as a text which self-consciously 'parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions [...] with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot' (Merivale and Sweeney 1999: 2).
5. Ross Chambers has pointed out that the Minister and Dupin are the prime seductive figures in the text chiefly due to their 'duplicitous discourse' (Chambers 1984: 53).

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ABSTRACT

Baudrillard appeared uninterested in the detective story and his work barely features in studies of the genre. This essay argues, however, that analysing detective fiction from a Baudrillardian perspective – concentrating in particular on how the genre is structured around a tension between the forms Baudrillard termed 'production' and 'seduction' – can nonetheless illuminate how it works and enables us to reassess how far classic nineteenth-century detective fiction adhered to the principles of scientific logic, panopticism, and positivism. The essay begins by exploring detective fiction generally in relation to Baudrillardian approaches to the object and seduction before looking at two very different examples of detective fiction, but which turn out to explore the opposition between production and seduction in similar ways: the parodic detective dramas of the contemporary conceptual artist Sophie Calle, and Edgar Allan Poe's classic detective story, 'The Purloined Letter'.

KEYWORDS

Baudrillard, Seduction, production, detective fiction, Calle, Poe

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