Language, Oedipus, and Chinatown

John Belton

What the detective story represents, of which social formations and tendencies it is the expression, this we all know.... [It embodies] certain aspects of bourgeois ideology..., serving as one of the most pointed forms of expression of private-property ideology (Eisenstein 128).

[Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannus] portrays the gradual discovery of the deed of Oedipus, long since accomplished, and brings it slowly to light by skilfully prolonged inquiry, constantly fed by new evidence; it has thus a certain resemblance to a course of psychoanalysis (Freud 340).

Laura Mulvey has interpreted the coincidental rise of the detective novel and the development of psychoanalysis (and that of archaeology) in the mid to late nineteenth century in terms of the fascination “Freud's world” had in “things that are concealed from the surface [and which] have roots in the past.” Mulvey in turn links these phenomena to the structure of the Oedipus myth, which takes the form of an investigation of that which is “hidden from consciousness” (186). Again and again, contemporary narrative theory has returned us to the site where these three roads meet—narrative, psychoanalysis, Oedipus—thereby taking on an archaeological project of its own, a search for the origins of narrative in the Oedipus myth. Yet this project is flawed not only by a certain essentialism, whereby the nature of a phenomenon is explained by its origins, but also by the self-fulfilling logic of its own hermeneutic enterprise. The Oedipus it uncovers is not the ancient story of Sophocles or Greek myth but the more recent, nineteenth century

1 See, for example, de Lauretis 118-157 and Mulvey 178-200.

re-writing of it by Freud. Though Sophocles' narration does indeed resemble a course of psychoanalysis, uncovering that which is known but repressed, modern narratives of investigation, including Freud's own recounting of the Oedipus myth in the language of a modern-day mystery, do not. That which is repressed in detective fiction, for example, is known only to the author; while Sophocles' audience, which was quite familiar with the Oedipus myth, perceived its working out ironically, readers of contemporary detective fiction remain in the dark, enmeshed in the process of narrative movement toward a final revelation. Even popular mystery novels, like Ross Macdonald's *The Three Roads* and *The Galton Case*, and films, like Joseph H. Lewis' *So Dark the Night*, which consciously model themselves on the Oedipus story, withhold their solutions from their audiences. Unlike earlier narrative forms such as myth, epic poetry, miracle and morality plays, and Renaissance drama, in which the narrator shares information with the audience, modern narrative forms tend to play games of cat and mouse with the audience; they strive "to maintain the enigma in the initial void of its answer," repeatedly postponing the mystery's final solution (Barthes, *S/Z* 75).

The scenario which Freud and his followers have constructed out of *Oedipus* is itself, in part, a by-product of the modern detective story. It is not so much Oedipus which gives birth to a certain kind of narrative—detective fiction—but vice versa: narrative produces Oedipus. The scenario of detection is, in turn, a product of the "commodification of narrative" that takes place in the consumer culture of late capitalism (Jameson, "Reification" 133). Sophocles' drama, the original power of which hinged on the interplay of various levels of knowledge (that of the audience, that of Oedipus) existing in a field of simultaneity, is transformed into a linear trajectory consisting of a succession of interdependent events which culminate in a solution. Within what Fredric Jameson refers to as the "instrumentalized culture" of modern mass society, popular literature, like all other phenomena, becomes an instrument which facilitates its own consumption. "A thing," he argues,

---

2 Marie Balmary comments at length on Freud's highly selective reading of the Oedipus myth (8-28). She does not, however, discuss the radically different narrative process implicit in Freud's version, which views the story purely in terms of Oedipus' investigation rather than in terms of Sophocles' "double" narration, which plays the audience's prior knowledge of the myth off against the main character's investigation of an apparent enigma.
‘no longer has any qualitative value in itself, but only insofar as it can be ‘used’: the various forms of activity lose their immanent intrinsic satisfactions as activity and become means to an end’ (Jameson, “Reification” 131). Thus the detective novel, unlike Greek tragedy, is ‘read for the ending’—the bulk of the pages becoming sheer devalued means to an end—in this case, the solution—which is itself utterly insignificant” (Jameson, “Reification” 132). In other words, within the contemporary culture of mass consumption, narrative undergoes a process of materialization and reification which abstracts it from the Real, gives it an “un-naturality” (Jameson, “Reification” 132), and reduces it to the status of an instrument, rendering it dramatically different from earlier forms of popular culture, such as Greek tragedy, which were “organic expressions . . . of distinct social communities” (Jameson, “Reification’ 134).

From a Jamesonian perspective, the historical coincidence of the development of psychoanalysis and of popular detective fiction is no accident; both are products of eighteenth-century rationalism and science. They represent attempts to produce knowledge, symptomatic, in part, of the extent to which the commodification of culture had permeated not only popular fiction but science as well. In other words, detective fiction and psychoanalysis derive from the reification of capitalist culture, from a process of isolation and abstraction which first breaks down then reorganizes the totality of experience into discrete, semi-autonomous, knowable fragments. Psychoanalysis becomes implicated in this reification process through its reliance upon language—the “talking cure,” which partly translates human experience into linguistic texts. These are recounted in the form of the dreams, childhood memories, etc., which the analyst and the analysand read in an attempt render rational certain aspects of the irrational. Detective fiction, by contrast, emerges as a much more mechanistic restructuration of the reading process whereby phenomena are reorganized into formulaic categories which reduce the complexity of experience to a series of delays, snares, equivocations, partial answers, suspended answers, and jamming actions (Barthes, S/Z 75). As a form of

---

3 Fredric Jameson (Unconscious 62-63) equates Weber’s term “rationalization” with Lukacs’ term “reification” to describe the ways in which psychoanalysis and other late capitalist forms broke down and reorganized “traditional or ‘natural’ unities,” transforming phenomena into abstractions (rationalization) which were then given the status of things in the new order (reification).
knowledge production, detective fiction attempts to reduce phenomena—the enigma or mystery—to terms which can be readily understood and consumed. Because psychoanalysis and detection share a *structural* identity as forms, which have as their object the production of knowledge about the irrational, psychoanalysis has itself been appropriated and commodified as a kind of narrative of detection by writers of detective fiction and by filmmakers who, like Freud in his analysis of Sophocles, find a “figural” resemblance between narration and psychoanalysis. The result of this appropriation and commodification is psychoanalytic detective fiction, which looks back beyond Freud and the advent of psychoanalysis and which takes its shape around a reductive psychoanalytic scenario involving quasi-mechanistic attempts to rationalize the irrational. It is with this scenario that the present paper deals.

Contemporary critics of modern detective fiction see in *Oedipus Tyrannus* a source for narrative patterns and thematic concerns, structured around a series of basic binary oppositions, which inform the narrations of investigation from Sophocles to the present but which change in their configuration from period to period. Though Sophocles’ play does not literally take the form of a “whodunit” in that the audience knows “whodunwhat,” it is nonetheless centered on the revelation of the identity of a murderer, and its detective hero solves the mystery through an adaptation of the question-and-answer techniques of Socratic reasoning (Knox 95). The pure reason of the detective confronts the irrationality of the criminal, the forces of the Superego struggle with those of the Id, and out of these oppositions emerges a tenuous compromise between that which can be known and understood and that which cannot.

Sophocles construes the epistemological dilemma which characterizes the genre’s interplay between the rational desire to know and the irrational repression of knowledge as an internal one, situating it within his detective hero who is also the criminal he seeks, whereas Poe and other, modern, practitioners of the genre externalize it, pitting the rational detective figure against an irrational counterpart. Thus, in *Murders of the Rue Morgue* (1841), Dupin represents the powers of pure reason which triumph over the nightmarish ape, who, though human in shape, remains bestial in behavior. Dupin’s historical successor is Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, who relies on the powers of deductive reasoning, acute observation, and scientific method to solve his mysteries. Though
American hardboiled fiction tends to de-emphasize the detective’s allegorical identification with pure reason, in large part through a demotion of the detective figure in status from upper class, intellectual, invulnerable armchair detective to middle (or even lower) class, intuitive, highly vulnerable as well as flawed gumshoe, it nonetheless preserves the genre’s essential binarism. Though the irrational universe of the crime and of the criminal milieu often includes the detective within it, the story of the crime and the story of its investigation necessarily remain distinct, as Tzvetan Todorov has pointed out (44-46).

At the heart of the detective genre lies a central paradox that governs works as disparate as those of Sophocles and Chandler: through the acquisition of knowledge the limitations of knowledge are discovered. Like Oedipus, the detective hero is led step by step to an acknowledgement of the essential irrationality that governs human existence. And, like Oedipus, the detective struggles under the weight of this knowledge, denying it by means of an arbitrary restitution of the symbols of order—that is, by “seeing justice done.” Oedipus blinds himself and casts himself into exile; the detective turns to the reassuring logic of language—the rationalization of events in a summary speech which “explains away” the mystery. Through language, the disturbing threat of the irrational is “contained” or held in check.

It is no accident that American detective fiction has become identified with a certain attention to verbal style, especially in the hardboiled work of Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, James M.

---

4 The Black Mask school of detective fiction, represented by figures such as Hammett and Chandler, felt that earlier mystery novelists had lost contact with life and language. Chandler explains this position in a discussion of Hammett’s essential difference from his predecessors. “Hammett,” he wrote “took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it in the alley . . . Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse; and with the means at hand, not hand-wrought dueling pistols, curare and tropical fish. He put these people down on paper as they were, and he made them talk and think in the language they customarily used for these purposes” (Murder 16).

5 This is best exemplified in Sam Spade’s apparently digressive anecdote in The Maltese Falcon about a certain Mr. Flitcraft whose encounter with the irrational (a falling beam) is answered by an abrupt departure from his normal routine and identity. Yet Flitcraft’s brush with the irrational results not in any control over it but rather in his increased reliance on reason and order—on his construction of another normal routine and identity in a different city.

6 The psychiatrist’s speech at the end of Psycho lays bare this process in its essential inadequacy to “rationalize” the irrational. It tends to distance spectators from the immedacy of Norman Bates’ insanity by giving a name to it.
Cain, and Ross Macdonald, who, though widely disparate stylists, share a fascination with the power of what Mencken referred to as the “American form of the English language” (Mencken, vii). Though the proletarian tough guy of American detective fiction may lack the mental powers of his predecessors, he compensates for his failings as a man of intellect with his verbal wit. Both the writer and the detective hero “control” their worlds through linguistic means. Hammett’s sparse, highly verbal prose style and paratactic syntax establish a world in which the laconicity and the linear logic of the detective hero testify to his ability to penetrate the subterfuge of his antagonists. At the other end of the stylistic spectrum, Chandler’s hypotactic syntax, colorful metaphors, and descriptive excesses establish a narrative voice which values verbal excellence. The prowess of his private eye is measured by the control of language, especially of witty repartee, which enables him to best his opponents in the verbal arena even though they may dominate him physically. In Farewell, My Lovely, Marlowe even dubs one of his flat-footed, slow-witted antagonists “Hemingway,” taking a jab at the minimalist, excessively laconic verbal style that informed a number of Hemingway-influenced American mystery writers and confirming the privileged status of verbal wit over linguistic directness within the genre.7

The first encounter, in the film version of Double Indemnity, between Fred MacMurray’s Walter Neff and Barbara Stanwyck’s Phyllis Dietrichson provides the locus classicus for hard-boiled repartee used as a mode of playful combat. Always the glib insurance salesman trying to make a sale, Neff attempts to talk his client’s wife into bed with him while she coyly parries his advances (see note for full text).8 Double Indemnity’s double entendres about “speeding”

---

7 Marlowe repeatedly plays on “Hemingway’s” ignorance of who Ernest Hemingway is, initiating a running gag that culminates a chapter later. Hemingway asks Marlowe, “Who is this Hemingway person at all?” M: “A guy that keeps saying the same thing over and over until you begin to believe it must be good.” H: “That must take a hell of a long time. . . . For a private dick you certainly have a wandering kind of mind” (Farewell 138).
8 The exchange runs as follows:
   PHYLLIS: There’s a speed limit in this state, Mr. Neff. Forty-five miles per hour.
   WALTER: How fast was I going officer?
   PHYLLIS: I’d say around ninety.
   WALTER: Suppose you get down off your motorcycle and give me a ticket?
   PHYLLIS: Suppose I let you off with a warning this time?
   WALTER: Suppose it doesn’t take?
and “traffic tickets” not only introduce the couple’s relationship in terms of crime and punishment, but also establish the basic sexual antagonism which structures the remainder of the film and prepares the ground work for the final, non-verbal exchange in which they shoot each other. The success as detectives of film actors such as Humphrey Bogart, Robert Mitchum, and Dick Powell, who have a talent for handling dialogue, underscores the centrality of verbal prowess to the genre.

The detective hero, in other words, is clearly situated on the side of patriarchy, using its tools (such as language) to render knowable that which cannot be known. From the perspective of patriarchy, the source of mystery in the genre—that which defies the rationalizing power of the detective figure—is woman, who uses language deceitfully, a figure epitomized in femmes fatales such as Miss Wonderly/O’Shaunessey (Mary Astor) in The Maltese Falcon, whose lies block the detective’s investigation.

Narrative, psychoanalysis, Oedipus; the detective story; the cinema. To the late nineteenth century developments of detective fiction and psychoanalysis singled out by Mulvey we might add that of photography and the cinema, which share a similar fascination with the reconstitution of the past in the present. Though more obviously concerned with that which is accessible to than with that which is hidden from consciousness, photography and the cinema share certain of the epistemological concerns which also structure detective fiction and psychoanalysis: they produce a consciousness of phenomena. But the consciousness which they produce eluded earlier forms of representation. As Merleau-Ponty has suggested, the cinema is the phenomenological art par excellence: it “make[s] us see the bond between subject and world . . . [and makes] manifest the union of mind and body, mind and world, and the expression of one in the other” (58). Its basic apparatus constitutes, through

| PHYLLIS: Suppose I have to whack you over the knuckles? |
| WALTER: Suppose I bust out crying and put my head on your shoulder? |
| PHYLLIS: Suppose you try putting it on my husband's shoulder? |
| WALTER: That tears it! [pause] Eight-thirty tomorrow evening then? |
| PHYLLIS: That's what I suggested. |
| WALTER: Will you be here too? |
| PHYLLIS: I guess so. I usually am. |
| WALTER: Same chair, same perfume, same anklet? |
| PHYLLIS: I wonder if I know what you mean? |
| WALTER: I wonder if you wonder? |
the agency of camera lenses and microphones, a consciousness of things; its signifying practices, ranging from editing to mise-en-scene, read events for us, providing a form of knowledge of them. The cinema submits the Real to the epistemological regimes of the Symbolic and the Imaginary. But, unlike the detective novel and psychoanalysis, the knowledge which it produces exceeds language and other Symbolic systems. The cinema puts us, as subjects, in contact with that which remains, in part, resolutely other. If the irrational is broadly understood as that which evades the attempts of the Symbolic to “know” it, then the cinema, as we shall see, has the unique ability to represent the irrational.

Narrative, psychoanalysis, Oedipus; the detective story, the cinema, Chinatown. Questions of knowledge, the cinema, and their relation to language lie at the heart of Chinatown (1974), as they lie at the heart of the detective genre as a whole. Indeed, Chinatown emerges as an exemplary instance of the genre, tacitly acknowledging its roots in Sophocles, in American hard-boiled fiction, and in earlier detective films. The “drought-stricken” Los Angeles of Roman Polanski’s film resembles the plague-ridden city of Thebes; both cities are being punished, as it were, for Oedipal crimes. Both narratives play with the themes of sight and vision as metaphors for knowledge and conclude with a ritualistic blinding which testifies to the horror which knowledge brings. At the same time, Chinatown’s narrative, which, unlike that of Sophocles, is “read for the ending,” recalls both the plot patterns of Macdonald’s novels, which carefully trace back the source of the present mystery to some familial disturbances in a previous generation and the character types of film noir; it is peopled by alienated, morally ambivalent, passive anti-heroes inhabiting the fringes of a violent, criminal milieu,

9 The “blinding” in Chinatown is not self-inflicted by the hero but is displaced onto the heroine, Evelyn Mulwray, who is shot through the eye by a policeman. Themes of sight and vision are integrated into the compositional design of the film (discussed later) in which the voyeuristic detective hero and the object of his investigative gaze appear within the same shot. Finally, a pair of glasses found in the Mulwray’s garden pool becomes a crucial piece of information linking Noah Cross to Hollis Mulwray’s murder. The film literally plays with this object, planting verbal cues foreshadowing its eventual discovery when the oriental gardener, cleaning the salt water pool, comments that the salt water is “bad for glass,” pronouncing the “r” in the word “grass” with an “l” sound. Polanski’s racial humor is typically in poor taste, yet it serves to further integrate orientalism into the larger thematic tapestry which links sight, vision, and knowledge. For a discussion of the relationship of knowledge and sight in Sophocles’ play, see Knox 126-128 and Balmary 16-18.
femmes fatales, neurotics, psychopaths, and other psycho-sexual misfits.

More specifically, *Chinatown* alludes directly to *The Maltese Falcon* (both the novel and the film), beginning with a scene that closely resembles the initial interview between “Miss Wonderly” and Sam Spade in which the detective is “used” by his client. Ida Sessions, the woman who visits Jake Gittes’ (Jack Nicholson’s) office as “Mrs. Mulwray,” has been hired to set the detective up. And, it appears, she has been hired by none other than the director of *The Maltese Falcon*, John Huston, who plays the patriarchal villain, Noah Cross, in the film. But such allusions serve to call attention more to the underlying differences between the two films than to their similarities.

In *Maltese Falcon*, Spade, though torn between duty and passion (between reason and the irrational), sends Miss Wonderly/Brigid “over,” solving the mystery of the murder of his partner and seeing justice done. Indeed, his final speech, in which he marshalls the facts of the case and arranges them in a ledger of moral account-keeping, testifies to his investment in the forces of reason exemplified by language. The verbal eloquence of his final description of the falcon as “the stuff that dreams are made of” places Spade solidly in the camp of romantic cynicism where rationalism can unmask human folly. While in the proto-noir *Falcon* the irrational remains in check, in the post-noir *Chinatown* the delicate balance between reason and passion has gone awry. The film’s innocents—Hollis and Evelyn Mulwray—are killed and their deaths go unavenged. Noah Cross remains unpunished for his crimes of incest, murder, and illegal land speculation. In fact, Cross emerges the victor, securing what he wants. Evelyn’s (and Cross’s) daughter, Catherine, traumatized by first Hollis’s then her mother’s death, is taken away by Cross, possibly to beget for him another sister, daughter, grand-daughter, like herself.

The detective hero here, like Oedipus at the start of Sophocles’ play, is unable to solve the mystery because its solution lies in the realm of the unnatural, with which he will remain unable to deal. But as Sherlock Holmes tells Watson in “The Sign of Four,” “when

---

10 The name “Noah” testifies to the character’s archetypal role as father, though the script perversely plays against the Biblical Noah’s denunciation of corruption and his association with flood (rather than with drought).
you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth" (Doyle 111). Though Holmes rationalizes the irrational, using deductive reasoning to arrive at the truth, even Holmes, when faced with the unnatural, in the form of a mystery whose explanation lies in miscegenation and tabu sexuality (see "The Yellow Face"), cannot countenance that truth and fails to solve the mystery.

Chinatown's detective hero looks back to those of Hammett, Cain, Chandler, and Macdonald—"the classless, restless man of American democracy, who spoke the language of the street" (Macdonald 15). Polanski's decidedly more modernist hero, however, lacks the cunning and energy of Sam Spade and the incorruptibility of Marlowe. Gittes is a sort of burnt-out Marlowe; he has lost his moral vision and deadened his feelings. Giving himself over to the good and easy life of a bed-room dick, Gittes catches not criminals but husbands and wives cheating on one another. The verbal style of his hardboiled predecessors is, in Gittes, repressed and displaced, surfacing not in what he says but in what he wears—in his stylish suits, hats, and Florsheim shoes. His self-obsession undermines his oedipal function as psychoanalytic detective; he remains more intent on satisfying his own curiosity than on fulfilling his professional obligations to his clients.

Gittes' activities as a detective involve neither intelligence nor instinct. Like Mike Hammer in Aldrich's Kiss Me Deadly (which also deals with the poverty of language in the face of unnatural knowledge), he is driven more by greed and sexual curiosity than by reason. And he is just as problematic a figure in terms of the audience's identification with him. Though Nicholson's good looks and star status invite our involvement with the character, Polanski prevents his star from playing as anything but a perverse surrogate for our basic voyeuristic drives. Nicholson's Gittes is clearly no ego-ideal: how can one identify with an actor whose physical appearance—his bandaged nose—testifies to the unattractiveness of his nosiness?

The desire for knowledge which characterizes the detective genre as a whole is translated by Polanski into virtually pornographic interest in sexual misconduct. From the black and white photos of Curly's wife fornicating with another man to the apparently adulterous affair between Hollis and Catherine to the bloody finale in Chinatown, the film repeatedly engages Gittes and the audience in the act of looking—looking not only at evidence but at
evidence of a particular sort, evidence of sexuality. In this way, Polanski fuses the generic concerns of the detective story with the primary drives of fetishism and scopophilia which characterize the spectator’s voyeuristic relationship with the cinema. Chinatown thus transforms explicit concerns with detection into implicit concerns with the nature of the cinema as well, concerns which have been extensively explored by contemporary psychoanalytic film theory (Metz, 58-78).

The widescreen, Panavision frame repeatedly contains both an object/event/clue and an observer/perceiver of it, such as Curly shuffling through surveillance photos of his adulterous wife in the post-credit sequence or Gittes following Hollis Mulwray from the hearing room to the dry river bed.\(^\text{11}\) We watch Gittes watching Mulwray in the rear view mirror of his roadster or see the reflection of Mulwray and Catherine in the lens of Gittes’ camera as he takes photos of them from a nearby roof top. The film’s mise-en-scène regularly juxtaposes both the perceiver and the object perceived in the same frame, self-reflexively inscribing onto the on-screen action the status of the film camera itself in relation to the pro-filmic event. Through techniques such as these, the film calls attention not only to the knowledge which Gittes produces through his investigation but to that produced by the larger narrative as well, critiquing the cinema’s apparent objectivity and exposing its inability to produce satisfactory knowledge.

As the film progresses, symbolic systems begin to break down, refusing to produce knowledge and to render the irrational fully rational as they do in the classic, pre-noir detective film. Linguistic systems collapse, as do other forms of “readable” representation. The femme fatale, whose verbal facility (seen in her ability to lie) makes her a worthy opponent for the detective hero, loses her control over language. Evelyn tries to describe for Gittes her relationship to Catherine, the film’s mystery woman, with the explanation that “she’s my sister... she’s my daughter... she’s my sister and my daughter.” Not only do these words have to be beaten out of her by the detective, but when she finally tries to explain the significance of what she has just said, language fails her again; she speaks haltingly, unable to give a name to their relationship. To

\(^{11}\) Polanski films some of this as a reflection in the side mirror of Gittes’ car, emphasizing both the voyeuristic nature of the detective’s action and the notion of Hollis as an “image” whose meaning the observer desires to interpret or understand.
name it would be to bring it within the ordering structures of language, rationalizing its essential otherness. Much as her earlier stutter when she says "father" betrays her awareness of the inadequacy of language to render the truth of her own feminine experience—that her "father" is also her "husband"—her words here reveal her linguistic status as that of "infans," of a child unable to speak the language of the father. And it is literally her father who has placed her in this position, who has denied her access to the Symbolic and forced her to remain within the shadows of the Imaginary.

The film's detective hero, Jake Gittes, serves to confirm the lack of linguistic authority for the "feminine" voice within patriarchy. His knowledge of Evelyn's secret towards the end of the film renders him suddenly mute. Formerly glib and articulate, now he, like Evelyn, is unable to say what he knows, to give verbal form to his knowledge; and his attempt in the final scene to explain the truth to Lt. Escobar—to use language to control events—fails. Not only must he fall back on quasi-truths concerning Hollis Mulwray's murder and Noah Cross's real estate schemes, which overlay the un-speakable truth of the incestuous father-daughter relationship at the heart of the mystery; no one will listen to him. As soon as he knows the truth, he loses control; he is outwitted by Cross and forced to betray Evelyn and Catherine to him. Jake is reduced to the role of the pawn of patriarchy. Literally handcuffed to one of its representatives, the policeman Loach, Jake is unwittingly complicit in its punishment of female transgression: his forward lunge in an attempt to interfere with Escobar's aim drags Loach into range. Loach, in turn, shoots and kills Evelyn. To paraphrase Jake's comment about a past love: in trying to prevent her from being hurt he only made sure that she did get hurt.

Images also become "obtuse," resisting attempts to decipher their meaning.12 Photographic or visual evidence grows more and more problematical as the complexity of the plot progresses. We read the photos of curly's wife as concrete evidence of her adultery, but the rendezvous between Hollis and Catherine, which we see being photographed (and actually reflected in the lens of Gittes' camera, repeating the voyeuristic motif of object/observer depicted

12 The term "obtuse" is applied by Roland Barthes (Image 54-55) to a group of still photographs in an attempt to describe the nature of that meaning which cannot be articulated in language yet which the stills can be seen to nonetheless possess.
within the same frame), snares us into a misperception; we read it, as Gittes does, as evidence of sexual transgression. Later, when we learn that Catherine is Hollis’ step-daughter, we re-read the scene from a new perspective, suddenly seeing that their relationship was entirely innocent. Intent on catching Mulwray with another woman, Gittes dismisses the revealing photos which show Mulwray and Cross in a heated argument (and which, if read “properly,” could explain much of the mystery) and rushes off to Echo Lake to spy on the harmless outing of Hollis and Catherine. By the end of the film, we have learned not to trust appearances, but that’s about all. The film provides us with no logic to use in the decipherment of its images, leaving us only with an inarticulate representation of horror and absurdity—with the gaping bullet-hole in Evelyn’s face where her left eye used to be. The film’s rhetorical strategy brings us closer and closer to a sense of the essential incomprehensibility of human desire. It gives us experience of rather than knowledge of the irrational. The “logic” of Chinatown suggests that, though irrationality can be adequately represented in certain powerful images, it cannot be understood.

The title of the film comes from screenwriter Robert Towne, who once had a friend who had been a member of the vice squad of the Los Angeles Police Department. Though he never worked in Chinatown, he saw it as a place where “they really run their own culture” (Leaming 94). In other words, he saw it as a site of absolute difference. The title, then, refers to a world that cannot be understood. As a title, it actually conveys what the film is about—otherness or, as William Galperin more precisely puts it, the film’s own continuous resistance to representation (1162). Towne’s script develops this notion of Chinatown as a source of mystery. Before it is ever seen, Chinatown is discussed by the film’s characters. Gittes, when asked by Evelyn what’s wrong with Chinatown, replies that “you can’t always tell what’s going on there,” acknowledging, through his presumed racial and cultural alienation from things Chinese, its status as a site that lies beyond “human” (i.e., white, male) rationality. But he then adds, “like with you,” identifying Evelyn both with Chinatown and with the racial, cultural, and presumably sexual indecipherability with which it is associated. Evelyn’s presence in the film and her secret “fill in,” as it were, for the absent place of Chinatown, which remains unseen until the last sequence in the film. As the femme fatale, Evelyn is Polanski’s lady from Shanghai who, though Caucasian, is given an Eurasian qual-
ity by the make-up artist’s orientalization of her face (shaved eyebrows, monochromatic make-up) and by the way in which her face is shot, highlighting her high cheekbones.

Cross provides a similar opportunity in the script for linking Evelyn and Chinatown. In describing his daughter to Gittes, Cross tells him, “You may think you know what you’re dealing with, but, believe me, you don’t.” Gittes immediately replies, “That’s what the D.A. used to tell me in Chinatown,” associating the woman, her mystery, and the place. Because Chinatown is, like Rosebud in *Citizen Kane*, not seen until the last few minutes of the film, its meaning—i.e., what it designates—floats. The object or place to which the word refers remains unseen, enhancing its status as place of mystery and enabling it to function abstractly. It figures, then, as a quality or attribute that attaches itself to certain characters, like Evelyn (whose house servants happen to be oriental as well); or it becomes associated with certain ideas, such as mystery, inscrutability, and, finally, sexuality.

The association of Chinatown with sexuality actually takes place quite early in the film. Towne introduces a crucial reference to Chinese sexuality and otherness in the form of an apparently anecdotal, off-color joke which Jake’s barber tells him about “screwing like a Chinaman.”13 When Jake then repeats this joke to his partners at the office, Polanski places him in the foreground while Evelyn, of whose presence he is unaware, stands listening in the background and his partners desperately try to alert him to the fact that there is a lady in the room. The scene is played to set off Jake’s vulgarity against her propriety. (We learn that she has come to sue Jake because the photographs he took of her husband and Catherine have been published in the paper, causing a scandal.) But the telling of this dirty joke accompanies her first appearance in the film, attaching connotations of sexual otherness to her through a process of proximate association.

It is Jake himself, however, who is most directly linked by the script to Chinatown through his awe of its otherness, an awe re-

---

13 The joke characterizes Chinese male sexuality as both different from and superior to occidental male sexual prowess. Intercourse is repeatedly interrupted by the Chinaman prior to climax in order to prolong the sex act. At the same time, it incorporates notions of sexual transgression through the white woman’s recognition that her white husband is “screwing like a Chinaman,” a recognition which supposedly betrays her intimate familiarity with the sexual habits of Chinese males. These associations reinforce the sense of otherness attached to Evelyn and Chinatown in this scene.
vealed, in part, in the joke and, in part, in his subsequent references to his prior experience as a policeman in Chinatown. Further implicating Jake and his past in the mystery associated with the meaning of the term “Chinatown,” the script suggests parallels between Jake’s past and the present mystery in the form of an enigmatic girl in Chinatown whom Jake once tried to help. The place is connected not only with the past but with an undisclosed personal tragedy that once took place there. Jake characterizes “his” Chinatown for Evelyn, telling her that “it bothers everybody who works there, Chinatown, everybody. To me it was just bad luck.” Evelyn asks, “Why was it bad luck?” Gittes explains, “I was trying to keep someone from getting hurt; and I ended up making sure she was hurt.” Though we learn no more than this about Jake’s past traumatic experiences in Chinatown, the past is obsecurely illuminated through its apparent repetition in the present. In trying to help Evelyn, Jake makes sure that she gets hurt. He dispatches her and her daughter to Chinatown to hide from her father and the police with her servant, Khan. Then he is forced to lead Cross and the police to her, setting in motion various forces that ultimately result in her death.

In Towne’s original script, Evelyn Mulwray kills Cross, and Gittes helps her and Catherine escape across the border into Mexico (Leaming 99). Polanski’s final sequence reverses Towne’s original happy ending. Though shot at point blank range by Evelyn, Cross demonically survives, and it is Evelyn who dies. Chinatown’s downbeat conclusion has its roots in the nihilistic resolutions of 1940s films noirs, like Double Indemnity and Out of the Past, rather than in those of the conventional detective films of the 1930s, like The Thin Man and its sequels.14 It does not conclude with the triumph of the heroic detective and the forces of reason, epitomized in the detective’s last-minute identification and apprehension of the criminal and his final summation, which usually entailed a lengthy account of who-did-what, how it was done, and how the detective solved the mystery. It ends instead with a sense of bewilderment, alienation, and despair; with an assertion that individual

14 Unlike other noir-influenced films of the 1970s, such as Farewell My Lovely, or of the 1980s, such as Blade Runner, Chinatown does not evoke the stylistic patterns of film noir (shadowy or expressionist lighting, claustrophobic sets, disorienting editing patterns, hallucinatory nightmare sequences, etc.), though its lone wolf detective, femme fatale, cynical narration, and pessimistic conclusion do look back to certain thematic concerns of film noir.
action is either unable to effect change or counter-productive. In terms of an oedipal scenario, it culminates with paralysis, with a frozen order: the original authority of the criminal-father is not renegotiated by the detective-son nor does it look forward to the creation of a new order in which the son eventually takes the place of the father. Chinatown closes with barely articulate mutterings which convey only the impoverishment of language in the face of the events that have just taken place.

At the conclusion of the film, Gittes murmurs the phrase "as little as possible." The words refer back to an earlier conversation between Jake and Evelyn in which he tells her the D.A.'s advice to cops who work in Chinatown: he tells them to "do as little as possible." After Evelyn's death, Jake's partner pulls him away, saying, "Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown." It is a place where you do as little as possible because nothing can be done. It is a place where Jake's knowledge of the truth (of Cross's crimes) is of no use; Gittes cannot tell the police all that he knows for the facts are too incredible. In pleading with the police, Gittes can only appeal to the cover stories about murder and political corruption, which are merely superficial symptoms of a more profound moral corruption. Chinatown is a place where corruption, the unnatural, and the irrational reign, where reason has no force.

The development of psychoanalysis and of detective fiction reveal a central axis within the deep structure of the late nineteenth century, western European mind—a fascination with scientific exploration and a profound belief in the power of rational investigation. In both forms, the past comes under the careful scrutiny of a quasi-positivist, rationalization-reification, is exhumed, and rendered accessible to knowledge. The psychoanalytic method, like the modus operandi of the detective hero, is a form of rational investigation that not only takes place through the agency of language but also takes language as its object of investigation, regarding the recounted dreams of patients and the testimony of witnesses and suspects as texts which must be deciphered. Once deciphered, these texts are then translated into secondary texts—the psychoanalyst's report, the detective's summation.

Chinatown, however, problematizes the traditional genre of psychoanalytic detective fiction by laying bare the gap between psychoanalysis, which produces knowledge of the irrational—which brings it to the surface—and detection, which rationalizes the irra-
tional—which explains it away. The film brings us into contact with
the unnatural, giving us access to it, but calls attention to the failure
of its figural representative of human reason and logic, the detective
hero, to produce a rational reading of phenomena. Lacking
the wit and/or powers of reasoning of the traditional detective,
Gittes is unaware of what he is looking for or, as Cross puts it, he
may think he knows but he doesn’t. Unable to see much beyond the
tip of his slashed nose, Gittes can only blindly blunder forward. As
a detective “hero,” he functions only inadvertently as a psychoanaly-
list, unwittingly succeeding in getting the patient (or subject un-
der investigation) to articulate the original trauma or mystery
which lies hidden. Yet Gittes does not so much release the re-
pressed, cathartically dispelling it by bringing it out into the open
and exposing it, as re-repress it, pressuring it to the surface
through violent rather than through verbal means (when he beats
the hidden secret out of Evelyn), then quickly suppressing it once
again, unable to deal with it himself.

And the detective fails to function as a detective. Gittes gradually
loses his prowess as an investigator of representations. Having lost
his ability to interpret language and signs, he is reduced to doing
and saying “as little as possible.” Neither the psychoanalyst nor the
detective can function in a world in which language has lost its
traditional ties to meaning, in which there is no longer the relative
play of difference but only the absolute otherness of “Chinatown.”
For both psychoanalyst and detective, Chinatown’s Real “resists sym-
bolization absolutely” (Jameson, Unconscious 35). With Chinatown,
the genre of detective fiction loses touch with its origins in nine-
teenth century rationalism and comes face to face with the Real,
which has broken through the cracks of its excessive reification in
the post-modern culture of 1970s America. In Chinatown, lan-
guage, Oedipus, and narrative no longer meet at the crossroads,
functioning together to produce knowledge of the Real, but rather
fall apart in the contemplation of it.

15 Jameson includes Chinatown in his list of contemporary films which illustrate
post-modern tendencies in American cinema, but he limits his discussion of the film
to its nostalgic value (the 1930s setting and costuming) and to its supposed parody
of film noir stylistics “Postmodernism” 117). As noted above, Chinatown eschews film
noir stylistics, though it does borrow heavily from noir thematics.
WORKS CITED


