

# **An Eye On The City: The Detective Figure in Benjamin, Kracauer and Jameson.**

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*“At each successive instance of your reasoning I am baffled, until you explain your process. And yet I believe my eyes are as good as yours.”*

*“Quite so,” he answered, lighting a cigarette and throwing himself down into an armchair. “You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear.” (Conan Doyle 12)*

The difference between Holmes and Watson lies in the quality and logic of the detective gaze. In this essay I examine the detective’s gaze as a cultural construct using theories provided by Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer and Fredric Jameson. Using these three theorists allows me to trace the development of the gaze from its contested origins in nineteenth-century Europe, through its transformation in the Weimar and then post war periods, up to the construction of the new, postmodern version of the detective and his eyes.

The detective’s gaze evolves over time, across the lines between periods, in relation to developments in society and in technology. Each theorist also, necessarily, conceives of it in a personal and unique way. The value and weight they give the gaze is determined by the place an idea of the gaze holds in their general historical and cultural theories. The detective is a liminal figure whose gaze has both a witnessing and an ordering power. Because the theorist’s work is, in some ways, so like the detective’s, the theorists see themselves in him and their conception of him casts light on their struggle to understand the role they play in society. The sleuth is an allegory, a symbol to be read, but he is also the reader of symbols. In the works of Benjamin, Kracauer and Jameson the detective figure is doubly portrayed, in fact he is repeatedly defined by doubleness and liminality. The detective’s gaze shifts focus from the minutia of mass culture to the larger structures of feeling. He looks across boundaries and back into the theorist’s eyes [1]

The detective has a uniquely constructed gaze developed as a result of modernization and industrialization: the detective is a product of his times. And because of the position of the detective: between spheres, beyond boundaries, witness to the unseen spaces of the masses, he is also the product of new kinds of space. Thus the detective’s gaze is a site of articulation for modern and postmodern ideas about the individual and the crowd, the mediated gaze, the politics and power of the gaze, and its relationship to personal experience and the historical moment. In this essay I focus on the detective’s gaze and its place between boundaries.

“Of course the origin of the literary detective lies in the creation of the professional police, whose organization can be attributed not so much to a desire to prevent crime in general as to the will on the part of modern governments to know and thus to control the varying elements of their administrative areas” (Jameson, *On Raymond Chandler* 629)

With the creation of the professional police a step is made towards ordering the world and bringing it under professional surveillance. It is interesting that Jameson chooses to identify this as the origin of the detective. By doing so he implicitly emphasizes the panoptic quality of the gaze. This notion of detached surveillance is essential to an understanding of the detective figure. This is, as we shall see, the feature that evolves beyond the grasp of the private eye. Surveillance and suspicion become external and ubiquitous presences as the economic and political situation changes in the twentieth century. Nevertheless, there are multiple answers to the question, where does the detective come from? For Benjamin, the detective emerges from the figure of the flaneur in Paris in the nineteenth-century. Masses of the working classes are congregating at spectacles of all sorts, expositions and arcades in particular, to look, without touching, at the wonders of human production.

In *Theory of Film*, Kracauer emphasizes Benjamin's ideas about the crowd as spectacle:

“Walter Benjamin observes that in the period marked by the rise of photography the daily sight of moving crowds was still a spectacle to which the eyes and nerves had to get adjusted” (50). The flaneur adjusted to the sensory bombardment of the crowds by immersing himself in them, by consuming with his eyes the endless variations of bodies and of stories sweeping past. Despite what many have identified as the scopophilic pleasure of the flaneur's gaze, it is clear in *The Arcades Project* that this is only one dimension of its work:

“On the psychology of the flaneur: The undying scenes we can all see if we shut our eyes are not the scenes that we have stared at under the direction of guide-books; the scenes we see are the scenes at which we did not look at all- the scenes in which we walked when we were thinking about something else- about a sin, or a love affair, or some childish sorrow. We can see the background now because we did not see it then.” (438)

The flaneur has his own version of the double vision that comes to define the detective. Looking inward, the shape and nature of that which is outside becomes the structure of his thoughts. From the outset we should include in the portrait of the detective gaze its inheritance of the flaneur's peculiar focus and the ordering power that focus has over his own mind and memory. The detective, like the flaneur, is written on by the city that frames him.

The detective's gaze comes into the public imagination with the creation of the police and the activities of the flaneur, but according to Benjamin and Kracauer, it is galvanized and refracted by the invention of the camera:

Photography made it possible for the first time to preserve permanent and unmistakable traces of a human being. The detective story came into being when this most decisive conquest of a person's incognito had been accomplished. Since then, the end of efforts to capture a man in his speech and actions has not been in sight. (Benjamin, quoted from *Bored by irony* <http://www.notbored.org/playing-detective.html>)

In the imaginations of all three of these theorists the detective is somehow twisted up with developments in visual technologies. The ordering power of the gaze takes on a new dimension in relation to the power Benjamin sees in the camera.

The detective's gaze is ambivalent. It is simultaneously complicit with the dominant system: pinning identity down, performing the flaneur for a profit; and rebellious to it: breaking open the prison of ordered surfaces:

“Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling.” (Art and Mechanical Reproduction)

The gaze is drawn into the minute detailed markings on velvet or plush like a camera zooming in for a close up and this action has an ambivalent political power. Every object of the material world has humanity's fingerprints all over it. Commodities have multiple faces that may be examined in different lights and beneath different lenses. The gaze holds a liminal place between the outer and inner life worlds. Gazing in and out it juxtaposes the evidence of the material world with sense impression and reason. As the gaze is technologized it begins to transform the meaning of representations of the detective's gaze.

For Kracauer, film is uniquely able to render the reality of life as it is experienced by the masses in 1929. In Berlin, where the political situation is veering closer and closer to

totalitarianism, the detective and the camera inhabit a liminal space with a certain kind of political power. Not only can they reveal the “ruins of ancient belief” hidden beneath the shiny surfaces, but they can also create new value on the surface. However, that revolutionary re-ordering gaze is fragile and can be disoriented and disempowered by containment within a totalitarian cultural framework, as Kracauer witnessed in 1939.

Despite this bitter disappointment, Kracauer retains his belief in the political potential in film representation. In the epilogue to his *Theory of Film* Kracauer wonders if, in a world without wholes that consists of “bits of chance events whose flow substitutes for meaningful continuity” (297) if “perhaps the way to inner life leads through the experience of surface reality” (286). Kracauer’s slippery logic reflects the disordering of space begun in the arcades and accelerated on film. The detective, like the theorist, like the film camera, witness the world in flux and negotiate a way through it.

In Jameson the function of the detective’s gaze, despite his hard-boiled status, is essentially the same: he witnesses the unseen spaces of the city, its ruins and relics, and he actively constructs a causal link between unmoored signifiers. It is the quality of the space within which this figure operates that has changed, and it is this transformation that poses a representational problem only partially addressed by hardboiled detective fiction.

Jameson, as we saw at the beginning of this essay, emphasizes the panoptic quality of the detective’s gaze. He stands on thresholds or glances through windows, and he is always watching and being watched back:

“We looked at each other with the clear innocent eyes of a couple of salesmen” (Chandler in Jameson 628).

This quality of the gaze is a function of its mediation, not by the camera, but by the new form of capitalist logic.

For Jameson in 1970, the detective novel is a nostalgic genre of the same economic, cultural and political moment that produces pop art and camp. These forms are all nostalgic for “a span of years too often referred to simply as the thirties and which in reality extends from the New Deal well across the parenthesis of the Second World War, and up to the beginning of the Cold War” (Jameson 637). The hard-boiled detective novel is nostalgic for the period of time in which Kracauer and Benjamin wrote their interpretations of the detective figure

(This nostalgia) aims at a world like our own in its general conditions, industrialism, market capitalism, mass production, and is unlike it only in being somewhat simpler. But this historicity is itself a historical thing. It is as far from the ritual cycle of the seasons as is the turnover in clothing fashions. (637-638)

The new detective fiction is a product that remembers another time and its remembrance is equally a product. The detective gaze becomes circumscribed by the logic of capital that motivates this nostalgia.

Jameson identifies a particular evolution in genres that he claims is produced by the specific economic moment, what he comes to call the cultural logic of late capital:

The perception of the products with which the world around us is furnished precedes our perception of things in themselves and forms it. We first use objects, only then gradually do we learn to stand away from them and to contemplate them disinterestedly, and it is in this fashion that the commercial nature of our surroundings influences and shapes the production of our literary images, stamping them with the character of a certain period. (642)

This process requires a gradual shift in focus. We begin life with these products pushed up all around us, ubiquitous and therefore unknowable. Over time they become distinct. Their true nature is revealed only after they have left their imprint on our minds. The origin of this shift

in focus is included in the portrait of the detective produced by Benjamin and Kracauer. The flaneur is penetrated and altered by the city and its products as his pensive gaze draws them inwards. The detective, galvanized by the deconstruction of the prison house of surfaces caused by the new optical devices, is able to look at the material world from a distance.

The hard boiled detective gaze retains the classical structure. Jameson suggests that this dislocation of the gaze has become a general phenomenon. Even the masses are converted by the “commercial nature of our surroundings” until everyone is Other in relation to commodities.

There is an underlying idea of Otherness that structures the inquiries into the function of the detective gaze produced by our three theorists. According to Kracauer:

In the detective novel, proponents of that society and their functions give an account of themselves and divulge their hidden significance. But the detective novel can coerce the self-shrouding world into revealing itself in this manner only because it is created by a consciousness that is not circumscribed by that world.

(The Mass Ornament 174)

The consciousness that is not circumscribed refers simultaneously to the detective novelist and to his or her protagonist. It also harkens back to Benjamin’s discussion of the escape provided by the camera, which we have read in relation to the detective’s liminal gaze. In the Arcades Project Benjamin identifies an alienating characteristic of the modern city, rooted in the idea that personal relationships become formalized by the logic of capital:

The jostling crowdedness and the motley disorder of metropolitan communication would be unbearable without psychological distance. Since contemporary urban culture forces us to be physically close to an enormous number of people people would sink completely into despair if the objectification of social relationships did not bring with it an inner boundary and reserve. The pecuniary character of relationships places a functional distance between people that is an inner protection against the overcrowded proximity. (George Simmel quoted in The Arcades Project 448)

Boundaries are laid within the self in order to protect the self from the despair of physical and psychological proximity. The individual is isolated from objects and people by multiplicity (AP 226, 227). Benjamin and Kracauer suggest that in the modern world, amidst the swirling crowds, increasingly man finds himself alone.

At this point the positioning of the detective figure begins to echo profoundly with theoretical interpretations of the spatial positioning of modernist writers. Kirsten Ross, in her essay “Watching the Detectives” explores the relationship between the modernist experience of isolation and exile and the postmodern detective’s identity within urban space. This idea about the foundational modernist experience of alienation comes from Raymond Williams:

In *The Politics of Modernism* (1939), Raymond Williams proposes a history of modernism constructed through different experiences of exile and emigration. By concentrating on the social foundations of modernist artists, their lived experience of isolation and depaysement in the transnational capitals of the new imperialism, he locates the decisive factor of modernism in the experience of the metropolis on form and language. (Ross in Baker, Hulme, Iverson, 46)

If we take a moment to concentrate on the social foundations of our modernist theorists, Kracauer and Benjamin, we can identify them both within Williams’ framework. Benjamin wrote most of the Arcades Project while in exile. Turned away from the Spanish border and hunted by Nazi soldiers who had already captured and interned him once, he took his life at the same mountain pass where Kracauer and his wife would attempt to pass some days later. After eight years of exile in France, Kracauer and his wife finally escaped in 1941 (The Mass

Ornament 1). In addition to this physical experience of dislocation, both authors write from a position of temporal dislocation. Benjamin juxtaposes nineteenth-century Paris with his own time. Kracauer follows this same method, but because he makes it to America alive, he also stands from an exiled position in triumphant post-war America looking back upon the lost promise, the disappointment and tragedy of inter-war Berlin. The experience of exile defines the modernist experience of space and time. That experience qualifies the detective's gaze and continues to define interpretations of the gaze in the postmodern period.

Jameson hints at another dimension of the consciousness that is simultaneously intertwined and detached when he draws attention to Raymond Chandler's position as linguistic outsider. Educated in England, Chandler's style is defined by his distance from "the American language":

In this, the lived situation of the writer of a borrowed language is already emblematic of the situation of the modern writer in general, in that words have become objects for him. (625)

The idea of detachment is important for Jameson, important to his understanding not only of Chandler but also of the contemporary moment in literature. Jameson argues that this particular kind of detachment is the product of new, distinctly American ideas about space. This idea creates a binary between modern and postmodern that is problematic in light of the modernist experience of exile.

Jameson wrote his essay "On Raymond Chandler" fourteen years before "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" was published. I think this close examination of Chandler's work within the history of detective fiction brought Jameson several steps closer to his eventual theory of a distinctly new American dominant ground tone. Throughout the Chandler essay he suggests that the fictional detective is a product of a wide range of developments during the nineteenth-century and that the American hard-boiled detective is the product of more recent developments:

"The murder in the placid English village or in the fog-bound London club is read as the sign of scandalous interruption in a peaceful continuity; whereas the gangland violence of the American big city is felt as a secret destiny, a kind of nemesis lurking beneath the surface of hastily acquired fortunes, anarchic city growth and impermanent private lives." (627)

Already Jameson is positing "some radical break or coupure" between the old and new worlds. However, with it Jameson creates an oppositional binary based on a simplification of the past that ignores the influence of the "canonization of the works of radical estrangement" (Williams in Ross 46) as well as the sense of lurking violence and chaos that defined the Modernist experience of European cities. Kracauer refers to an abyss over which distraction stretches in Weimar Germany, "like life buoys, the refractions of the spotlights and the musical accompaniment keep the spectator above water" (The Mass Ornament 326), and Benjamin spends some time examining the idea of the city as a treacherous jungle, an idea that is echoed in "On Raymond Chandler." Jameson sees a radical difference between the cultural products of an earlier period and his own, but the nostalgia that defines hard-boiled combined with the modernist trope of boundary and exile reveal that the genre is not the politically powerful new kind of representation Jameson is seeking. Hard-boiled detective fiction is an interregnum genre. By the time Jameson writes "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" the scope and quality of the new period has become clearer, and hard-boiled, along with all the other nostalgic forms, is revealed as a politically impotent throwback.

The groundwork for the postmodern structure of feeling is laid down by modernist experience and interpretation. Read with the hindsight provided by “Postmodernism and the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” the difference between the two periods becomes apparent. Their essential difference is visible not in their versions of dislocation or liminality, but instead in where they locate potential revolutionary power. For Benjamin, that force could only come from a shock produced by a dialectical image. For Kracauer, a similar shock is required but is located in the politics of distraction: the masses must be made aware of the quality of their lives by witnessing the madness of their own distraction and the abyss that it conceals. For Jameson, however, political representation requires entirely new forms structured in relation to the new forms of capital:

“This is not, then, clearly a call for a return to some older kind of machinery, some older and more transparent national space, or some more traditional and reassuring perspectival or mimetic enclave: the new political art- if it is indeed possible at all- will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism.”

Hard-boiled detective fiction could not fulfill that charge because it remained steeped in the modernist logic from which it tried to differentiate itself. It is not the fundamentally new genre Jameson predicts or requires because its protagonist is still defined by “that whole metaphysics of the inside and the outside” (*Postmodernism* 61). What comes to express the new cultural logic is an evolution of the detective genre, what Jameson calls the “conspiratorial text” (3), a development predicted by Benjamin when he wrote: “In times of terror, when everyone is something of a conspirator, everyone will be in a situation where he has to play detective” (“Paris” quoted in *Bored by Irony*).

Before the nineteen-eighties Jameson’s work is inspired by early twentieth-century modernism, especially the works of people like Walter Benjamin (McPherson). Postmodernism changes the cultural logic and, therefore it changes Jameson’s ideas about art. When he could still imagine boundaries between inside and outside, secret and truth, the detective figure held power for him. When those boundaries are effaced and all is surface the detective is useless and “the older motif of conspiracy knows a fresh lease on life” (9). Already in nineteen-seventy we catch a glimmer of this notion. The form of the hard-boiled detective novel reveals in its double time and form nothing but a death that is meaningless and stale “reaching out to remind the living of its own moldering resting place” (*On Raymond Chandler* 650). This death is an empty version of the modernist’s apocalyptic vision. What replaces it, according to Jameson in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, is conspiracy,

ghettos with barbed wire, police patrols and missiles, all caricatures of the mode of production itself (most often called late capitalism) whose mechanisms and dynamics are not visible in that sense, cannot be detected on the surfaces scanned by satellites, and therefore stand as a fundamental representational problem- indeed a problem of a historically new and original type” (2).

In the new world order the panoptic gaze is everywhere and the ordering power of the detective’s gaze is unmoored. The inside, the secret, the true, has disappeared and art must find a way to tell new and meaningful stories.

How could there be private things, let alone privacy, in a situation in which almost everything around us is functionally inserted into larger institutional schemes and frameworks of all kinds, which nonetheless belong to somebody- this is now the nagging question that haunts the camera dollying around our various lifeworlds, looking for a lost object the memory of which it cannot quite retain.

(*The Geopolitical Aesthetic* 11)

The conspiracy text inherits the ideological connection between the seeker of knowledge and the camera. But the idea of an otherness, an interiority that could be brought meaningfully to light has past and what remains is a ghost of a memory.

The schizophrenic, amnesiac gaze of that postmodern camera offers the cultural questioner a powerful metaphor with which to examine the more recent flourishings of detective fiction. The works of Thomas Pynchon, Martin Amis, Joan Didion and Paul Auster make more sense and are much more important when read in this light. Their books are not simply versions of hard-boiled. Instead they retain the entire history of their gaze: flaneur, detective, hard-boiled and finally, in this strange economic and political moment, conspiracy. To complete the work that I have begun here these works should be read alongside the many other contemporary explorations of conspiracy and paranoia, especially television shows like the X Files and 24, and in relation to the new, post 9/11, world order. And, whether it is anachronistic or not, our gaze as theorists and historians should retain aspects of its modernist construction as detective because our ancient, fossilized question still has yet to be answered.

As Sir Arthur Conan Doyle put it in 1892:

“What is the meaning of it, Watson?” said Holmes solemnly, as he laid down the paper. “What object is served by this circle of misery and violence and fear? It must tend to some end, or else our universe is ruled by chance, which is unthinkable. But what end? There is the great standing perennial problem to which human reason is as far from an answer as ever.” (Conan Doyle 213)

[1] As a reflection of this relationship to the theorists, not as a statement about the gender identity of the private eye, in this essay I refer to the detective and the flaneur with the masculine pronoun

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