

## The High-Low Debate Revisited: The Case of Postmodern Fiction

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The virulent condemnation of popular culture in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by admirers of modernism has long since given way to its rehabilitation, as is evident in the flourishing Cultural Studies in Academe. The distinction between popular culture and authentic art had been articulated in terms of high versus low culture, as for instance in the work of Adorno and the Frankfurt School, a distinction which condemned mass culture unequivocally.

In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* Peter Bürger's analysis of the development of the high-low divide is persuasive. The eighteenth century considered art as an autonomous structure, separate from ordinary life, a realm of beauty in stark opposition to the turpitude of society, a view reinforced during the rapid industrialization in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of the Art for Art's sake movement: "The insights formulated in Kant's and Schiller's aesthetic writings presuppose the complete evolution of art as a sphere that is detached from the praxis of life" (26). So understood, the institution of art was, according to Bürger, the ideological legitimation for bourgeois culture.

The definition of "authentic" art as "high" becomes well established. As secularization spread art seemed the only remaining locus of any form of transcendence. In *After the Great Divide*, Andreas Huyssen further specifies: "Instrumental reason, technological expansion, and profit maximization were held to be diametrically opposed to the *schöner Schein* (beautiful appearance) and *interesseloses Wohlgefallen* (disinterested pleasure) dominant in the sphere of culture" (11). Art understood as such became the structuring principle of much modernist literature in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in writers such as Joyce and Pound. Narrative techniques included withholding referentiality and withdrawal into obscurity and difficulty, which led to indeterminacy of meaning. The reader is frustrated in the most fundamental concern, i.e., to understand.

Like the Dadaist movement before it, postmodern art tried to abolish the distinction between high and low culture, rejecting it as elitist, or at least bridge the divide between them, as did Pop Art. Postmodern literature calls attention to itself as fiction, mixing both serious and entertainment genres by using conventions and formulas from popular culture such as science fiction, thrillers, or romance.

The kinship between popular literary culture and high culture has been noticed by a number of critics such as, for instance, Michael Holquist in his essay "Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Postwar fiction" in *The Poetics of Murder*. For Holquist, what structured modernist writing, myth and the unconscious, has now been replaced by the detective story and its search for the truth.

what the structural and philosophical presuppositions of myth and depth psychology were to modernism (Mann, Joyce, Woolf and so forth), the detective story is to postmodernism (Robbe-

Grillet, Borges, Nabokov, and so on); if such is the case, we will have established a relationship between two levels of culture, kitsch and the avant-garde, often thought to be mutually exclusive (150).

The term “kitsch”, here used by Holquist to characterize the detective story, still carries pejorative connotations, reminiscent of the earlier condemnation of popular culture even as he shows its fundamental influence on post WWII literature. However, even when we eschew such connotations and abandon the terminology of high versus low, we still qualify certain novels as “serious” literature and others as “entertainment”. We feel instinctively that a novel by Thomas Pynchon, the *Crying of Lot 49* for example, and a Borges story such as *The Garden of the Forking Paths*, do not belong in the same category as James Bond novels, even though they all more or less deal with mysteries, spies and conspiracies.

This paper will try to clarify in what the nature of the relationship posited by Holquist consists. What are the differences that create the distinction between works of art? According to which criteria are such judgments made? Which formal characteristics create the distinction? While art may be considered as an ideological legitimation in modernity, on what basis do we determine that a work is or is not art?

Adorno's condemnation of popular culture is problematic for a number of reasons; to mention but the most obvious one: what constitutes popular culture in one era becomes part of high art in another: for instance, the realistic novel, popular art in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and jazz are now considered high art. Nevertheless, Adorno's analysis derives from a definition of art which is quite convincing and helpful in understanding significant features of postmodern fiction in particular. I would therefore like to briefly revisit the divide as analyzed by Adorno, and his opposition between authentic art and products of mass culture, autonomous art versus light art. His views are in fact close to those of Lukács and Bakhtin, whom I will also discuss.

Quickly summarized, Adorno's analysis goes as follows. In its opposition to industrial mass culture, modernism intensified the divide between high and low art. In *The Culture Industry* Adorno distinguishes between popular culture – the expressive cultural forms of the people – which for Adorno contained rebellious elements, and mass culture in which these rebellious elements are eliminated. The fundamental difference is the fact that mass culture is now programmed from above, for the sake of profit and the exercise of social control. It appeals to the human yearning for happiness by providing hollow substitutes and illusory order in lives that do not satisfy but stupefy. Modernism then, its experimental techniques discouraging easy “consumption”, becomes resistance to mass culture and the total commodification of art.

Even before mass culture, art was already a “commodity,” but high art pointed to the truth of the social structure. By critically assessing society's failure to satisfy the human need for freedom and happiness, authentic art could hold out, negatively, some promise of change. As Adorno argues: “In artists of the highest calibre like Beethoven and Rembrandt, the keenest awareness of reality was joined to an equally acute sense of alienation from society” (13). He

further notes: "All works of art, including affirmative ones, are ipso facto polemical. The very notion of a conservative work of art is somehow absurd. By emphatically severing all ties with the empirical world, art in an unconscious way expresses its desire to change that world" (253). In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno defines the relationship between high and low art:

Light art has accompanied autonomous art as its shadow. It is the social bad conscience of serious art. The truth which the latter could not apprehend because of its social premises gives the former an appearance of objective justification. The split between them is itself the truth: it expresses at least the negativity of the culture which is the sum of both spheres. The antithesis can be reconciled least of all by absorbing light into serious or vice versa (107-108).

However, Adorno expresses doubts that autonomous art itself is still possible:

Today with the most increase of real tension the possibility of the work of art itself has become utterly questionable. Monopoly is the executor: eliminating tension, it abolishes art along with conflict. Only in this consummated conflictlessness does art wholly become one moment of material production and thus turn completely into the lie to which it has always contributed. Yet at the same time it here approaches more closely to the truth than those remnants of traditional art that still continue to flourish, to the extent that all preservation of individual conflict in the work of art, and generally even in the introduction of social conflict as well, only serves as a romantic deception. It transfigures the world into one in which conflict is still possible rather than revealing it as one in which the omnipotent power of production is beginning ever more obviously to repress such a possibility (107-108).

In other words, there can no longer be authentic art; whatever traces remain are romantic illusions. This passage is disturbing as it seems to regard the world as static and resembles the neoliberal triumphalism after the fall of the Soviet Union.

In his introduction to Adorno's *The Culture Industry*, Bernstein concludes that Adorno's critique of mass culture may be regarded as a judgment in advance of postmodern culture and its attempts at overcoming the high-low divide. Rather than seeing it as promoting greater democratization and inclusiveness, Bernstein considers it in Adornian fashion, as "a false reconciliation of the difference between the culture industry and high art and hence a false reconciliation of universal and particular" (23).

I do not agree with such a stark condemnation of contemporary art, at least not as it concerns postmodern literature. Of course the split between high and low culture has not been

overcome, but postmodern attempts at mixing genres from high and low yield interesting results.

I would like to examine more closely how the relation between serious and entertainment literature functions concretely in the case of a significant trend in post WWII fiction. I will argue that postmodern fiction involves a dialectic between so-called serious literature and entertainment literature that enriches both, rather than excluding the other or abolishing the divide between them. While the split is maintained there is a mutually beneficial dialectical relationship between the most popular literary genre – the mystery novel – and serious literature. If we agree with Adorno's definition of high art as expressing negativity, a critical rejection of the present, such negativity can still be found in postmodern fiction despite, and paradoxically, because of, its use of features from mass culture.

Starting with Adorno's notion that it is through aesthetic form that authentic art does its critical work, I would like to examine the form of the serious postmodern novel, the literary genre most closely linked to social reality. The novelistic form orders the fictional contents in ways that enable us to judge the work qualitatively. In the aesthetic process narrative strategies affirm or deny values, and express or reject world views that can be traced back to their historical and social context. For a better understanding of the mediations effected by the aesthetic form between social reality and art, I am drawing on theories of the novel developed by Mikhaïl Bakhtin and George Lukács.

While for Lukács the novel is elegiac in its search for a lost totality, Bakhtin sees the novel as a process of democratization, critical of authority, a joyful opening up to an always unfinished future.<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin identifies the questioning of reality as fundamental to the structure of the novelistic genre. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, he sees the novel as a literary genre that emerged with modernity as a mode of representation of the world. The fictional world has its own structures including a multiplicity of perspectives which allow for self reflexivity as well as reflection on the world. While Bakhtin discusses the difference between the epic and the novel in categories very similar to those of Lukács, he argues that the novel is characterized by being firmly anchored in the present:

I find three basic characteristics that fundamentally distinguish the novel in principle from other genres: 1) its stylistic three-dimensionality, which is linked with the multi-linguaged consciousness realized in the novel; 2) the radical change it effects in the temporal coordinates of the literary image; 3) the new zone opened by the novel for structuring literary images namely the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its open-endedness (11).

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of similarities and differences between Lukács and Bakhtin, see Michael McKeon, ed., *Theory of the Novel*, Baltimore and London: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

The origins of the modern novel lie in the parody of medieval canonical literature and the univocal language of centralized authority. Bakhtin sees the development of the novel as part of the popular movement towards greater human freedom. The novel is the genre par excellence that shows the polyphony of human speech; it is dialogic and contains in its very structure a multiplicity of voices. The diversity of voices, conflicting or not, subverts the dominant language and with it, the authority of officialdom, exposing the lies, hypocrisy and immorality of the world. The novel is a demystifying phenomenon emerging with modernity and scientific investigation. Its different voices provide different perspectives or to use Bakhtin's term, "ideologies."

According to Tzvetan Todorov, Bakhtin uses the term "ideology" in the widest possible sense: "by ideology we mean the totality of *reflections* and *refractions* in *the human brain* of social and natural reality which it expresses and fixes with a word, a drawing, graphics or another semiotic form" (9). (My translation from the French).

Accepting this wide definition of ideology, one could consider the novel as an axiological discourse where conflicting values, explicit or implied, confront one another. This is achieved by the interplay of formal characteristics, such as characterization and plot, and another major, specifically novelistic device, irony. The tension between different voices allows for the confrontation of different values; by examining closely the interplay between narrative elements and narrative techniques we can determine to a certain degree which points of view are validated or devalued, or whether the novel refuses to choose and remains ambiguous.

I believe that the structures of the search and polyphony identified by Bakhtin can still explain the fundamental organization of the novel today. With the ideological changes resulting from social changes, the emphasis has shifted away from the search for meaning and one's place in the world as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, or the nature of consciousness as in the modernist novel. Novelistic techniques have adapted and no longer focus on linear plots or characterization. Surprisingly, in much postmodern fiction lies a mystery or a crime and the search for a solution structures the plot; these are features borrowed from the most popular of entertainment literatures, the mystery novel.

Postmodern writers who have resorted to such borrowing techniques include, among others, Jorge Luis Borges, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Umberto Eco, Italo Calvino, Leonardo Sciascia, Leon de Winter, Jean Echenoz, Paul Auster and Thomas Pynchon. Nevertheless, despite their reliance on techniques of popular fiction, their novels are considered "serious" literature. Conversely, there are many novels classified as mysteries that have obvious features borrowed from serious literature such as the novels of Arturo Perez-Reverte and Jan-Willem van de Wetering.

Popular literature is based on formulas and conventions, in other words the repetition of the same schemas to provide entertainment that ultimately affirms the status quo. In the thriller or mystery novel there is a mystery, usually a crime that will be solved at the end of the novel, preferably with the punishment of the criminal. The truth will be known and whether

justice is served or not, the implication is that it should be. Detectives use the scientific method while also relying on intuition, to analyze clues and solve the problem. There are always relations of cause and effect, a rational explanation of events or motives that can be uncovered as the search progresses towards its inevitable conclusion. What appear as random, unrelated and insignificant incidents or anodyne objects turn out to be vital clues that ultimately become part of a coherent story. There is always progress from ignorance to knowledge, brought about by one or more central characters capable of uncovering the hidden connections and thereby restoring the status quo ante disturbed by the crime. Order, however bad, is affirmed.

While the mystery novel firmly retains realistic narrative techniques of description and characterization, even with the most improbable plots, it introduces an interesting twist in the treatment of time that structures the genre: the mystery novel has a double time structure, one borrowed or played with in postmodern fiction as well as in for instance Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Denis Porter in *The Pursuit of Crime* points out that in order to generate suspense, as one tale is told, another is uncovered: the tale of the investigation also reveals the hidden story of the crime.

In the process of telling one tale a classic detective story tells another. It purports to narrate the course of an investigation, but "the open" story of the investigation gradually unravels the "hidden" story of the events leading up to itself at the same time that it initiates the process of detection." The crime is revealed before its causes are revealed. ..It is a genre committed to an act of recovery, moving forward in order to move back (29).

Let me briefly give you some examples and contrast two authors, the Spaniard Arturo Perez-Reverte, who writes literary mysteries and an Italian postmodern novelist, Leonardo Sciascia. A short analysis of their work can give us some insight into the fundamental differences between the mystery genre and the serious postmodern novel.

The novels of the popular Spanish author and journalist Arturo Perez-Reverte are variously described as Gothic thrillers, mysteries, romances, adventure stories, or historical fiction. To mention a few of his novels: *The Flanders Panel (La tabla de Flandes)*, *The Club Dumas (El Club Dumas)*, and *The Seville Communion (La piel del tambor)*. Arturo Perez-Reverte's novels include all the basic structural elements and formulas of the mystery story: a crime or mystery that has to be solved, an investigator aided or hindered by assistants, a search. At the end of each novel there is a rational solution, thereby fulfilling the reader's main expectation of the genre.

However, there are odd elements in each novel, slight or not so slight deviations from traditional conventions. Not only do the novels mix conventions from the different subgenres of the mystery story, but they also fudge the boundaries between the mystery genre and the serious novel.

In the *Seville Communion* the Pope's personal computer has been invaded by a hacker, who claims that an old church in Seville kills to defend itself from demolition by a local bank. The Vatican, worried about the breach in computer security, sends Father Quart to investigate. The hero, a handsome James Bond, is a professional agent of the Vatican's Special Services; a hatchet man, a soldier who sees himself as a modern-day Knight Templar. He is a solitary technocrat with a laptop and gold credit card. He starts out as a cool observer and ends up passionately committed to the "just" cause. The identity of the hacker is eventually revealed, and while this remains a big surprise, the reader doesn't particularly care since Quart's spiritual transformation has become far more interesting than the solution to the mystery. In that sense, this book is more like a 19<sup>th</sup> century realistic novel: Stendhal's *The Red and the Black* with its similar hero comes to mind. As an heir to the 19th century realistic novel, it aims at the greatest verisimilitude to the "real" world and provides detailed descriptions of people and contemporary settings, particularly of the city of Seville.

Although this novel is structured around an intellectual puzzle as in the classic mystery, the "puzzle" is not solved by the investigators' exceptional reasoning or luck. Rather than originating the searches or controlling the investigations as in "normal" mysteries, the protagonist turns out to have been a pawn in elaborate games orchestrated by the villains. The manipulators themselves come to a bad end. There is little sense of the coherence of reality or the possibility of rational control implied by the classical mystery. The absence of any significant police activity connected to the crimes reinforces the confusion as to the genre in which the characters operate.

The frequent intrusion of historical events and their impact on the ultra modern world of the novel – complete with mobile phones, computers and fax machines – disorients not only the protagonists, but also the reader who is not quite sure whether she is reading an adventure story, a Gothic tale of devil worship, a mystery novel, or a romance.

Equally reminiscent of Borges' fiction are actual historical events mentioned as part of the hero's fictional past: as one of the Vatican's delegates Quart took part in the negotiations around Noriega's "real" extradition. No matter how unorthodox his investigation, intuitive rather than analytic, the truth comes out. Further adding to the confusion is the appearance of real people as fictional characters: in *Club Dumas*, for instance, Umberto Eco is one of the guests at a literary party.

However, while these novels abound with literary references to other forms of literature and the author makes it very clear that we are always dealing with texts, do *The Flanders Panel* and *The Club Dumas* qualify as postmodern anti-detective novels as described by the critic Stefano Tani, or whom "serious" postmodern fiction uses mystery genre conventions but transcends the genre by subverting the conventions, especially the denouement. In Perez-Reverte's novels, the narrator and the characters may refer to the textuality of the narrative or the incoherence of life and the difficulties of interpretation of both life and books, but the narrative itself is formally coherent and follows the internal logic of the mystery genre. The truth is known, there is a rational explanation for everything at the end of the story, and order

is restored. Those, I believe are the crucial defining features of the genre, no matter how many liberties the author takes with the other conventions. In the end there is not the kind of questioning either of his own views or rejection of the world.

One of the most interesting postmodern writers of what Tani has called anti-detective fiction is the Italian writer Leonardo Sciascia. Like Arturo Perez-Reverte' fiction, many of his novels are structured as detective novels. There is a murder, or several, and an investigation by the police or amateur detectives; the narrators carefully introduce foreshadowing and clues. There are many ironic references to detective fiction, and writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Agatha Christie are mentioned, as well as commentary on the workings of detective fiction. In *To Each his Own*, Sciascia comments:

One corollary of all the detective novels to which a goodly share of mankind repairs for refreshment specifies that a crime present its investigators with a picture, the material and, so to speak, stylistic elements of which, if meticulously assembled and analyzed, permits a sure solution. In actuality, however, the situation is different (53).

How different the situation is becomes clear in for instance *To Each his own* (*A ciascuno il suo*), *One Way or another* (*Todo Modo*), or *The Knight and Death*, (*Il Cavaliere e la Morte*), where the mystery structure is undermined by the subversion of one or the other of the conventions. In *To Each his Own*, the amateur detective, professor Laurana, starts to investigate the murders of the pharmacist and Dr. Roscio out of intellectual curiosity. As Tani points out, the title of the novel, *A ciascuno il suo* is the translation of the Latin *unicuique sum* implying "justice and rightful distribution." (57). However, this is far from being the case. Laurana himself, although he has a glimmer of the truth, refuses to believe his own suspicions of Dr. Rosco's widow since he has fallen in love with her. He himself is murdered when he is beginning to ask too many questions. At the end of the novel, a conversation between notables of the village reveals that everyone knew who murdered Dr. Roscio and the pharmacist, without doing anything about it; they consider Laurana a naïve fool for having meddled. The widow and her lover, who had organized the murders, are now marrying. The truth is known but there is no justice and Laurana gets killed in his attempt to find it. In spite of all his ratiocination, he was blind to the corruption of his society.

In *One Way or another*, the first person narrator, the investigator, is a painter who has wandered aimlessly into a hermitage transformed into a hotel. The head of the institution, the learned and suave Don Gaetano, invites him to participate in the yearly spiritual exercises organized for high level government officials, politicians and businessmen. The painter realizes that the spiritual retreat is an excuse for sexual relaxation for the participants. Backroom deals and a couple of murders are then committed. An acquaintance of the painter's, Scalambri arrives with the public prosecutor to investigate. He suspects blackmail but cannot find much evidence. Then Don Gaetano himself is murdered. The painter believes that Don Gaetano understood everything but refused to say what he knew. The vague implication is that he was



murdered to keep him quiet. In the end, the surviving participants are told to go home, presumably to continue their nefarious activities with total impunity. Before leaving, the investigators, the painter, Scalambri, and the inspector discuss the case and conclude that materially speaking, they are the only possible suspects in Don Gaetano's murder, a suggestion indignantly rejected by Scalambri. While the painter says he killed the priest, his remark is taken as sarcasm. The culprit is not found, nor are the motives; the truth is never known and hence no justice will be done.

In *The Knight and Death*, a very powerful business leader, Sandoz is murdered. The thoughtful vice-prosecutor, who is gravely ill with cancer, investigates the murder and suspects Aurispa, an equally powerful adversary of Sandoz. He is given a number of clues, a card with Aurispa's handwriting saying "I will kill you," which Aurispa explains was part of a game they played, pretending to be in love with the same woman; Aurispa also mentions a 'joke' told by the murdered man – something confirmed by friends and acquaintances – that he received threatening phone calls by an organization called 'the children of eighty-nine.' The vice-prosecutor reflects on the vagueness of the date: does it refer to 1789, the French Revolution, or 1989, the year of terrorist attacks in Italy? Of course the entire state apparatus is mobilized to try to find the organization, but the investigator begins to wonder whether it really existed or was invented to cover up the murder. Neither of the two clues leads anywhere and the vice-prosecutor, too ill to continue, abandons the case. His interest in the case is revived after his friend, to whom he had mentioned his doubts, is also murdered. On his way to a meeting about his friend's death, he too is killed. Here again, the truth is not known and no justice done; he who sees too clearly is murdered. This story also points to the ambiguity of facts and the unreliability of causal explanations, both primordial elements of the mystery genre.

However, the lack of transparency of reality, the impossibility of having justice done and the general impression that the truth is hidden to protect powerful forces, indicates a larger "truth" for Sciascia: Sicily and with it, Italy, are totally corrupt in the context of an apathetic citizenry. Sciascia extends this judgment more generally: "I have used Sicily as a metaphor, so to speak, of the world. ...The problems of the Sicilian microcosm are the ones that can kill the world." (quoted by Tani, 56). In all the novels mentioned, readers are of course immediately made aware that they will not be entertained. Discussion of paintings and their symbolism, metaphysical reflections on causality and the nature of reality and death, theological arguments; all such conversations point to the serious nature of his fiction.

In other writers such as Jean Echenoz, the subversion of mystery story conventions results in what has been characterized as "postmodern" fiction with its lack of an organizing consciousness. Echenoz portrays a universe of contingency and irrationality where the characters experience what we could describe, along with Lukács, as "homelessness". In other words, postmodern fiction uses the conventions of the mystery genre, to express contemporary *angst* and uncertainty.

Mystery novel schemes can be repeated endlessly as the novels of Agatha Christie and Simenon have shown. They do indeed conform to Adorno's characterization of products of the

culture industry as stereotypical, based on the repetition of similar situations, precluding any opening to the future. However, postmodern fiction like Sciascia's plays with these structures and creates aesthetic tension by subverting the conventions, for instance by either proposing no solution or multiple solutions or by leaving the mystery unsolved and the past hidden. The discrepancy between the expectations generated by the initial use of generic formulas and the unfolding of the story leaves readers disoriented and forces them to question the workings of society and more importantly the nature of reality on which it seems completely contingent. In that sense I believe that Adorno's requirement of negativity for serious literature is met. The question remains as to the content of this "negativity." What exactly are these novels negating by using mystery story narrative techniques?

In other words, why did a minor, if immensely popular genre such as the mystery story become the starting point for new narrative techniques in serious literature? Why not for instance use the formulas of the western or the science fiction genre? The connection can be explained by the relation of mystery fiction to the basic Enlightenment assumptions challenged by postmodernism.

These assumptions are related to the concept of the search as a basic structural principle in novels, as explained in Georg Lukács' early work, *The Theory of the Novel*, and his analysis of the 19<sup>th</sup> century realistic novel. Lukács defines the novel as the portrayal of the search for meaning in a meaningless world, exposing the gap between ideals and degraded reality. The novel is the locus of "transcendental homelessness" in a world where meaning is no longer immanent, where no "totality" joins individual and community, value and fact. In the process the search for meaning becomes a search for self-understanding. The novel investigates the gap between what is real and what is said and thought, a gap expressed by one of the novel's distinctive features, irony. The novel portrays the resulting clash between the conventionality of the objective world and the interiority of the subject, between the real and the ideal. The hero is a problematic individual, who does not conform to the world and believes in some transcendent ideal. However, "the world is without God" and so his belief remains purely psychological and subjective and may lead to madness or crime. "For crime and madness are objectifications of transcendental homelessness – the homelessness of an action in the human order of social relations, the homelessness of a soul in the ideal order of a supra-personal system of values" (62).

The mystery genre, as an offshoot of the realistic novel, retains two fundamental traits of Lukács' definition. The subject matter of the mystery is the search. The heroes, the detectives, whether private, police or amateur, are also problematic characters, but only in the sense that they are eccentric. They may have private values conflicting with society's values, but in the end their actions aim at upholding the existing order, implying there is no way out of the existing power structures.

One way of understanding Lukács' notion of the search for values and a lost totality is to see it as the search for truth and justice, the subject matter of the mystery genre. The distinctive trait of differentiating the serious novel and the mystery novel then becomes the way in which

the theme of the search is treated, its object and the way it ends. In the serious novel the search ends in the realization that the values of the hero or heroine are in fundamental conflict with those of the official order and yet superior to them even though they too are marked by the general degradation of society. The irony constitutes the truth of the realistic novel. It involves a transformation of consciousness, invoking negatively the possibility of a different order of things, as Adorno would argue.

In his famous theorization of postmodernity, *La condition postmoderne*, Jean-François Lyotard describes the postmodern loss of faith in the two “metanarratives” that have legitimated Western culture since the Enlightenment: the belief in the pursuit of the “truth” on the one hand, and justice and equality on the other. As the humanist worldview expressed in these metanarratives fades from Western consciousness, so does its expression in serious literature. In postmodern fiction, the novel questions the very foundations of modernity, knowledge and justice. Postmodern literature rejects both realist and modernist narrative techniques that presuppose a centralizing subject or consciousness organizing the story in more or less linear fashion, hereby undermining the possibility of getting at objective truth.

The genre in which these two Enlightenment metanarratives have been encoded in the most formulaic manner is the mystery story, with its search for truth and justice. As we have seen, the search is at the heart of the mystery novel; at the end of the story, the search is completed, the puzzle is solved, the truth is known and the principle of justice is maintained whether justice is actually served or not. Both the protagonist and the world return to the status quo ante; the criminal is known and punished or if not punished, the implication is that he or she should be. The entertainment novel provides closure; only one voice prevails as there is only one “truth”, one solution to the mystery. There are always rational explanations that illuminate events what seemed inexplicable and coincidental. Even in mysteries such as Raymond Chandler’s that provide scathing indictments of society, the cynical truth of the detective remains, with the expectation that the same situations will occur over and over again. Another example are the novels by Michael Dibdin whose detective, Aurelio Zen, even more cynical than Philip Marlowe, still solves the mystery in the end.

By contrast much postmodern fiction, while playing with these conventions, does not imply the need for justice. In Jean Echenoz’s novel *I am gone (Je m’en vais)*, murder takes place but is no cause for concern or action, as is also the case in Sciascia’s *To Each his Own*. Postmodern fiction either proposes no solution or has multiple solutions as in Leon de Winter’s *De Hemel van Hollywood (The Sky of Hollywood)*, thereby undermining a fundamental Enlightenment belief in rationality and scientific investigation to arrive at the truth.

Another interesting example is Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night, a Traveler (Si una notte d’inverno un viaggiatore)*, based on a plot involving fraud, unfinished mysteries and mysterious readers. Lawrence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* with its endless digressions must have inspired Calvino. The novel starts out as a mystery and within that frame there are nine unfinished mysteries. It is difficult to decide what to make of this fascinating novel; yes, the framing mystery itself is more or less solved in the end, but it leaves the reader to wonder about what

he or she has read: is it parody, pastiche, or is the writer mocking himself and the reader, or it is a combination of all of the above? If so, to what end? The numerous references to books, reading, and reflections on various narrative strategies involving the elements of fiction, are all ways that the novel raises questions about the act of writing itself, as a text about texts, and the relations between art and reality.

Unlike the reordered world of the thriller, the postmodern novel often trails off into uncertainty or questions the nature of reality and time, as in Borges' *Garden of the Forking Paths*. To quote Michael Holquist again:

The most common expectation, ...which postmodernism defeats is that of syllogistic order. Like Poe, Robbe-Grillet and Borges have a deep sense of the chaos of the world, but unlike Poe, they cannot assuage that sense by turning to mechanical certainty, the hyperlogic of the classical detective story. Postmodernists use as a foil the assumption of the detective fiction that the mind can solve all... (173).

However, serious postmodern fiction has provided mystery writers such as Janwillem van de Wetering and Arturo Perez-Reverte with strategies to revitalize the genre with typically postmodern traits such as intertextuality, the mixing of literary genres, and the use of undermining irony. The hyper-logic and rationalism of the classical detective story may be gone, but the truth is always known in the end and there is always an explanation for the mystery even as most aspects of reality described remain chaotic and confusing. But certainly, the inclusion of postmodern features makes these mysteries a great deal more interesting

In the postmodern novel, formal expectations raised by the use of mystery novel techniques are dashed and leave the reader shocked and disoriented. Unlike the reordered world of the thriller, the postmodern novel often trails off into uncertainty or questions the nature of reality as in Borges' *Garden of the Forking Paths*, where time is spatialized. If the hallmark of authentic art is the expression of negativity through aesthetic form, the postmodern novel would qualify as such. Indeed, the boundaries between serious and entertainment literature have not vanished, even as postmodern writers are borrowing structures from popular literature; rather, they have successfully invigorated the novelistic genre. These postmodern novels confirm thereby one of Bakhtin's insights into novelistic form as infinitely flexible, adept at finding new narrative structures. Narrative conventions from the mystery genre appear to have given writers extraordinarily flexible tools to widely express their assessments of the postmodern condition.

Bakhtin also pointed out that

In the history of the novel, the criminal trial and legal-criminal categories have an enormous organizational significance... Crimes play a correspondingly huge and significant role in the content of

novels; ... it suffices to mention on the one hand, the adventure detective novel (the investigation, clues, piecing-together of events) and on the other hand the novels of Dostoevsky (124).

For Bakhtin, these legal-criminal categories are specific forms for “uncovering and making private life public” (124). Again, this points to the novel’s demystifying role.

Equally true for Bakhtin, the polyphonic structure of the novelistic genre emerged from the dissonance between subversive popular language and the official discourse of hegemonic literature. Ironically, in our culture of mass production and mass consumption today, popular literature is now the locus of conformity to the official line while subversion resides in so-called serious literature which negated the “happy ending” and restoration of order in the world promised by popular literature. This brings us back to Adorno and his critique of mass culture.

Adorno seems to have assumed the end of history when claiming that the culture industry destroys the possibility of negative resistance in art. On the contrary, I believe that the tension created through aesthetic form in postmodern fiction offers the critical distance from the present needed to question social reality. Certainly, intellectual and social movements today seem to parallel the questioning of the postmodern novel, expressing our scepticism about technological progress and the viability of our world.

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