From Edgar Allan Poe to Paul Auster: Literary Detection and Vision in the Age of Digital Surveillance Culture

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The role of the detective has been a source of cultural fascination and the subject of many works of fiction for nothing short of 175 years. When the world first encountered Edgar Allan Poe’s famous creation, the enigmatic C. Auguste Dupin in 1841, the modern detective story had its birth. Since the mid-nineteenth century the world we live in, which doubles as the arena of detection, has changed quite substantially. Thus, the enduring popularity of the literary genre is arguably something of an enigma in itself. How can the singular mind of a lone detective navigate a web of crime now so intangible it often exists in cyberspace? This article explores how the detective story has remained popular in an ever-changing world. It pays particular attention to the changing role of the detective’s supervision in the digital age of paranoia, drawing on textual evidence from the works of Edgar Allan Poe as well as postmodern author Paul Auster, alongside a selection of critics and theorists.

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The role of the detective has always been centred on a unique ability to see and infer things that others would simply overlook. Many classic readings of detective fiction posit the detective as a panoptic agent, an instrument of state surveillance vital to maintain social order. Panopticism is the sociological theory derived from Foucault’s (1995) ideological exploration of Bentham’s Panopticon prison model, which suggests that various different cultural arenas – especially public spaces and individuals – operate within a wider mechanism of socio-disciplinary surveillance. At its advent, Foucault's theorisation of the Panopticon was an inconceivably far-fetched model for detection, one possible to implement only inside a controlled environment. However, this theory now appears at odds with the methods of the detectives portrayed in fiction. Now, pervasive open access surveillance of our every move means that that which was once a contained panoptic labyrinth, has become an infinite rhizome\(^1\) space.

It is my contention that the already inefficient panoptic gaze of the police force has now been largely replaced by digital camera ‘eyes’, and for the postmodern detective and ergo the postmodern reader, the challenge is no longer to be an agent of supervision but rather to be one step ahead of the criminal in their journey through the rhizome maze of postmodern\(^2\) existence. This begs the question: have we now surpassed panopticism altogether? Postmodernity can obscure and question that which once seemed clear to a detective, but vitally also to a reader. The panoptic method that Foucault describes involves a ‘network of gazes that are supervising one another’ (1995, p. 171) and functions well in principle, but realistically the surveillance by the police en masse in detective fiction is consistently shown as ineffective and sloppy. In the digital age, nothing is hidden from view; everything is seen and our experiences are defined by seeing and interpreting what we see. Scrupulous and thorough vision has long been a notable strength of literary detectives. However, with information and vision no longer restricted by our spatial and temporal constraints, nothing escapes interpellation into the maze and arguably ‘we are born already inside it’ (Shaw, 2002, p. 99). The model of the rhizome maze has multiple entries and exits, and an infinite variety of possible routes due to its many forks and enormous scale. An individual’s existence inside the vast rhizome maze of an interconnected postmodern world is not only filled with, but defined by, the inescapable need for constant decision-making. Spoilt for choice by Western

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1 In its philosophical manifestation, a concept introduced by Deleuze and Guattari, representing multiplicity and non-hierarchical possibilities in decision-making (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).
2 Theorised by Lyotard in his 1979 work *The Postmodern Condition*, the postmodern and postmodernism represent 'an incredulity towards metanarratives', or a general suspicion towards overarching social concepts and commentaries such as science, religion and abject truth (Lyotard, Bennington and Massumi, 1983, p. 22).
capitalism and modern innovations, human existence is reduced to little more than an endless series of Borgesian forking paths\(^3\).

Despite my earlier critique of panopticism, it is not to say that contemporary detectives altogether renounce panoptic logic; many actually exploit network systems of panoptic vision to aid their own investigations. An example of this can be witnessed in visual adaptations of the genre such as BBC’s contemporary *Sherlock* (2010), wherein Holmes uses the homeless network to provide extra eyes for him around London. Returning to the genre’s roots, in Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*, detective Dupin wryly suggests to the police prefect, ‘Perhaps the mystery is a little too plain’ (Poe, 2012, p. 251), an allusion to the missing letter being hidden in plain sight. His suggestion is met by the police prefect ‘with a “roar” of laughter’ (p. 251). This portrayal of the police force as overconfident and prone to ‘physical oversight’ (p. 266) is arguably given in all sub-genres of detective fiction, with the possible exception of Nordic noir\(^4\) and its police procedural. Even then, a talented lead detective must often work to unpick the messy initial reports made by their incompetent colleagues. This format can be seen in *The Laughing Policeman* (Sjöwall and Wahlöö, 1970), where a botched initial report hinders the police investigation. This trope endures and manifests itself again in contemporary Nordic noir television serial *The Bridge* (2012). The crucial distinction in the contemporary examples provided is that panoptic agents and methodology are adopted knowingly and willingly as merely one avenue of investigation by the detectives, who ultimately have no choice but to engage with wider digital surveillance to solve their respective mysteries.

Now, anyone with an internet connection can have eyes all over the world, widening not only the arena of detection but, vitally, the arena of vision. The reader is no longer just a passive observer of events, but an active viewer in a post-panoptic surveillance age. Not only is ‘the game afoot’ (Doyle, 1991, p. 72), but the game is permanently altered. Paul Auster’s novella *City of Glass* (2013) perfectly encapsulates the dilemmas produced by the interconnectivity of the postmodern world for both the detective and the individual. The individual, be it the everyman or the most accomplished private eye, is consistently unable to compete with the countless vantage points that technology offers the state and contemporary criminal. As a result of this the individual must still walk the city – for the city remains the arena of detection – from ground-level and choose to pursue a single reality down one fork of each path. This

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\(^3\) A term derived from the work of Argentine philosopher and theorist Borges *The Garden of Forking Paths* (Borges, 1985) where all the possible outcomes of a decision occur simultaneously. In turn, each outcome leads to the proliferation of alternative possible outcomes. In essence, it is an impossible and inescapable maze.

\(^4\) The popular sub-genre of crime writing and television drama, often serialised, set in bleak urban Scandinavian settings and often featuring the procedural deconstruction of crimes by a team of police detectives.
process of constant, ceaseless decision-making is one relatable to a contemporary audience, for whom a myriad of seemingly inconsequential choices are a daily occurrence.

The dilemma of forking paths is literalised for Auster’s protagonist Quinn in his search for the missing character Stillman, when he encounters two men who closely resemble the photograph he has been given as a reference. The narrator describes the moment when ‘[t]he first turned right, the second turned left’ (Auster, 2013, p. 56) and Quinn is forced to make a decision regarding which fork of the path to follow. Not only does this gothic doubling\(^5\) with the uncanny two Stillmans represent a nod to another significant trope in detective fiction, it also captures the paranoia and uncertainty plaguing postmodern readers; both readers of fiction and readers of clues such as detectives. In Quinn’s first meeting with Stillman there is a covert reference to the theme of doubling when Stillman states, ‘Quinn […] rhymes with twin, does it not?’ (p. 74). His observation leads the reader to consider doubles in the text, for example the two Stillmans at Grand Central Station, or the family of Paul Auster who appear copies of Quinn’s own. However, it also brings about a consciousness of the constructedness of the text world, which at times seems little more than an arena for the author’s linguistic acrobatics.

Gothic doubling is also implied by the resemblance of the Stillman pursuit to Poe’s story *The Man of the Crowd* (Poe, 2012), where the narrator pursues an old man for days on end based on nothing more than a hunch. In spite of the clear departures from traditionalist conceptions of reality, the dilemma of forking paths really resonates with readers, and the lines ‘There was nothing he could do now that would not be a mistake […] Uncertainty would haunt him to the end’ (Auster, 2013, p. 56), are demonstrative of the decisions we are constantly forced to make in order to navigate the rhizome of the postmodern world. Uncertainty and paranoia are important characteristics of postmodernism, with doubling, reflections and refractions often clouding meaning. For the postmodern reader, seeing is no longer synonymous to believing.

Poe’s *The Purloined Letter* is ‘a tale of ratiocination’\(^6\) (Silverman, 1991, p. 67), where fumbling police detection and a neglect of close observation lead to the vital clues being overlooked, with the truth left ‘hidden in plain sight’ (Muller & Richardson, 1988, p. 232). It is the paranoia and suspicious reading of clues that lead detective Dupin to uncover the location of the missing article. Dupin’s distrust of abject truth is well ahead of his time and sets him apart from his early contemporaries; he is suspicious of everything and, therefore, does not overlook that which may seem too obvious to someone scrutinising the more complex clues. He is not

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\(^5\) Gothic doubling is a literary trope derived from the notion that when two alternative manifestations of a figure or object appear simultaneously with only minor variation, reality is unsettled. This plays on both the traditional dichotomisation of good and evil in literature and Freud’s psychological ‘Theory of the Uncanny’.

\(^6\) Ratiocination is the process of precise and reasoned thought, often towards a conclusive end or solution.
seduced by distracting untruths, but instead produces and makes visible the truth. He creates his own mental information network, allowing him to compete with the relatively primitive, unsophisticated network of state surveillance in the pre-digital age.

Despite the fact that Poe's stories were written more than two hundred years before Auster’s, his influence on the genre, particularly on the readers of the genre and their tendency towards literary detection, stands undisputed. Jorge Luis Borges pondered in 1985, ‘How many things begin with Poe?’, and accredited Poe with the creation of ‘a reader who reads with incredulity […], with a special kind of suspicion’ (Borges, 1985, p. 16). This is a description applicable to the paranoid reading practises now more widely associated with the metaphysical detective fiction7 sub-genre, although it is arguable that a postmodern audience will approach every text with the same suspicion and paranoia that they apply to reading the world they inhabit on a daily basis. Poe’s detective Dupin performed innovatively suspicious readings of his world, just as all postmodern readers are now conditioned to perform suspicious readings of their surroundings, hence the enduring appeal of this type of story.

From Poe to Doyle, Christie to Auster, detective fiction has always been fascinated with gazes and the visible. Just as the detective uncovers to make a living, the writer produces literature. This relationship is demonstrated by Tzvetan Todorov’s ‘homology’: ‘author: reader = criminal: detective’ (Todorov, 1977, p. 127). Assuming this model, the reader is a viewer of the author’s constructed web of mystery and thus inspects and creates the text through their reading of it. For both Poe and Auster, writing was not a frivolous hobby but a financial necessity. Auster’s memoirs, entitled Hand to Mouth (Auster, 1997), epitomise the desperate struggle of a starving author to feed himself, and parallels between his own life and his protagonists are blatant. The fictional detective who features in Quinn's crime stories, published under the pseudonym of ‘William Wilson’8 (Poe, 2012), a subtle nod to Poe, is named Max Work and this naming is a clear comment on the similarities between writing and detecting to scrape a living. The name Max Work is also wordplay and can be read as ‘maximum work’ rather than just the name of a fictitious figure. Financial imperatives, combined with the constant tension between production and seduction in the genre, suggest that detective work and the writing of detective fiction both arguably constitute forms of intellectual prostitution. Poe writes that Dupin is not ‘[s]educe[d] into error or hur[r]ied into miscalculation’ (2012, p. 101), but instead makes the truth clear and visible for the reader.

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7 A sub-genre of detective fiction, first seen with the likes of Poe, in which the detective uncovers more questions than answers and encounters ambiguity and uncertainty in a labyrinth-like world of useless clues.
8 Poe’s 1839 short story entitled ‘William Wilson’ also centres thematically on gothic doubling and the parallel lives of its characters.
The tension between the production of clues and the simultaneous avoidance of seductions is one that has endured through to the postmodern mystery tale. For Poe, the truth, which in *The Purloined Letter* is the location of the stolen article, was present in the story all along, just not made apparent to the reader as significant. This illustrates that Poe’s writing, though advanced in its consciousness of paranoia and seduction, is largely concerned with the process of coming to know a singular and definite truth, hence can be said to be concerned with the ‘epistemological dominant’. Coined by Brian McHale in his 2001 work *Postmodernist Fiction*, the epistemological dominant is the main focus of societal fascination, questioning and knowledge during a given time period. The mode of the detective novel encapsulates the epistemological dominant as in detective novels the who, what, why, where and when are consistently sought answers for and resolved (McHale, 2003). The rationality of Dupin’s method is essential to Poe, who focused on the rationalisation of detection in his writing.

Dupin’s resistance to seduction illustrates an early fascination with the binary opposition of production and seduction in the genre. In his work entitled *Seduction*, Baudrillard writes about the etymological origins of production and seduction, and discusses their relationship to vision. He writes:

> […] pro-duction in the literal sense of the term […]. Its original meaning […] to render visible or make appear. Sex is produced like one produces a document, or as one says of an actor that he performs (se produit) on stage. To produce is to materialize by force what belongs to another order, that of the secret and of seduction. Seduction is, at all times and in all places, opposed to production. Seduction removes something from the order of the visible, while production constructs everything in full view, be it an object, a number or concept (Baudrillard, 1990, p. 40).

The binary opposition of seduction and production that Baudrillard constructs allows us to understand the significance of the constant tension between the detective and opposing seductive forces in crime stories. Seduction appears manifoldly from the deceitful femme fatale figures of texts such as O’Shaughnessy in Hammett’s *The Maltese Falcon* (Hammett, 2010), to the seductive power of the supernatural in Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (Doyle, 1991). The detective’s weapon is their mind and analytical ability, just as the author’s mind is their tool too; they essentially sell the same things. This observation demonstrates a few vital things about suspicious reading and the postmodern condition. Our societal fascination with the undressing of mysteries and visual construction of stories arguably manifests itself allegorically to the practice of voyeurism. Perhaps, bringing spectatorship into the equation means that detective work might be better placed as synonymous to pornography than prostitution. This notion is especially relevant to postmodern detective work, as the open
access camera lens replaces the private gaze of the peep show visitor that would have been the equivalent in Poe’s time.

A notable issue with examining the gaze of the detective in a postmodern context is that its reliability and even its very existence are drawn into question. In City of Glass, there is the central question of who the real detective actually is. Is it Daniel Quinn, the fictional struggling author who receives a chance phone call and decides to take on a case? Is it Max Work, the private eye protagonist of his novels? Or is it Paul Auster, the author who Quinn impersonates and then acquaints? The private eye’s entangled identity bears no significance to the reader when placed in relation to the importance of their methods of observation and modes of living. Auster writes that ‘[t]he reader sees the world through the detective’s eye’ (Auster, 2013, p. 8), but this means that the reader is also subject to the detective’s biases, delusions and mistakes, as their only route through the rhizome maze is formed by following the detective.

Despite its earlier emergence as a modern archetype in the hardboiled9 and film noir10 subgenres of the early 20th century, the contemporary rise of the private eye is arguably a postmodern phenomenon. The name simultaneously captures the importance of vision and anonymity to the success of a private detective. Nicol describes how, ‘[m]ore than an interrogation of reading’, Auster’s work constitutes ‘a dramatization of the act of writing, of trying to make some kind of narrative sense of the world’ (Nicol, 2009, p. 181). This analysis is concurrent with the socio-visual conjecture that the detective’s role is not only to find order in chaos, but most importantly ‘to anticipate’ (Poe, 2012, p. 266) or see ahead through the entangled paths of the rhizome by writing about the city and attempting to make literary sense of things.

The traditional incredulity of curious detective fiction readers, hungry for answers to countless questions, has become amplified into the insatiable appetite of the perpetually distrustful postmodern reader. As previously touched upon, seeing is no longer synonymous with believing. This is because it is now as easy to digitally fabricate or manipulate footage and images readily consumed by a crowd of hungry journalists as it is to witness an event first hand. When Shaw writes that ‘a Borgesian Labyrinth must be thought of as circular, with no outlet’ (Shaw, 2002, p. 99) what he is really saying is that it should be thought of not as a simple maze, with clearly traceable routes, but as a potentially infinite rhizome space. In choosing to read a metaphysical detective story, the reader actively decides to enter the rhizome. Rather than watch an armchair detective search for the one exit by eliminating many

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9 Hardboiled detective fiction is a subgenre of detective fiction, usually set in prohibition era America where the private eye faces corruption and often serious danger in order to solve a case.

10 The film noir genre is comprised of black and white films, mainly from the 1940s and 1950s, and is characterised by its dark intrigue, eroticism and strategic use of low lighting and striking visual contrasts.
blind alleys as in classic detective fiction, the reader watches the detective consciously enter the maze and grapple with a seemingly ceaseless number of forking paths. This process of detection parallels the experience of the postmodern reader in their everyday life, one characterised by an overwhelming variety of choices. Ergo, the metaphysical detective fictions of Poe and Auster satisfy a desire for suspicious existence and multiple endings that readers are unable to achieve in their own personal linear narrative realities.

In their attempts to read the city, detectives encounter obstructions to their vision including reflections, refractions and distortions, and must overcome things which threaten to warp or obscure truths. A great detective is aware of the limits of their field of vision and makes provision for this shortcoming. Auster acknowledges the challenges to vision posed by sprawling modern cityscape through his clever choice of title. The title City of Glass literally describes the setting of the action, whilst simultaneously implying both transparency and reflections. Although at a glance, a city full of glass might appear to be a panoptic and readable space, upon closer inspection it is more of a Borgesian labyrinth than one can ever hope to successfully navigate; every forking path is reflected in countless surfaces and the real becomes indistinguishable from the surreal.

Another acknowledgement of the limitations of the detective’s field of vision is the postmodern resistance to teleology adopted by many writers. Poe resists traditional closed endings in his detective stories with The Purloined Letter beginning and ending with musings in French. They can be read either as closed endings with a discrete, defined moral, or as conscious acknowledgements of the limits of closed narratives in general: hence an invocation to metafiction. The epigraph¹¹ that Poe accredits to Seneca is evidence of metafictional intertextuality. The postmodernist novel City of Glass is naturally laced with metafictional elements, such as the closing sentence of the main narrative: ‘What will happen when there are no more pages in the red notebook?’ (Auster, 2013, p. 132). This demonstrates an awareness from within the text that it is a produced and artificial object, effectively admitting that the form has limitations.

As vision is vital to the detective, it is of equal importance to the reader, as it has been concluded, using Todorov’s homology, that they occupy similar roles. Since the indisputable importance of vision to the enduring popularity of detective fiction has now been established and thoroughly examined, the final logical step towards a meaningful conclusion about the genre is to turn to the ultimate reason for its success - the evolving sensibilities of the audiences who consume it. The nature of the genre implores us to think of audiences as

¹¹ ‘Nil sapientiæ odiosius acumine nimio’/ Nothing is more hateful to sense than too much cunning (Poe, 2012, p. 250).
viewers more than readers; perhaps this is why visual adaptations of the genre are so popular and successful. Detective fiction often functions by showing rather than telling the reader of its processes, giving rise to criticism of the genre as ‘un-literary’ by Todorov (1977, p. 121). Even if it is considered to fall under the category of visual culture, making it less traditionally literary, that is not necessarily a criticism. The enormous spectatorship drawn by writings occupying space in both literary and visual cultural circles is evidence that interaction with technological advances, particularly instruments of digital surveillance, makes them more appealing and relatable to a postmodern readership.

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