



The Time of the Crime

Phenomenology, Psychoanalysis, Italian Film

DOMIETTA TORLASCO

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The Time of the Crime

Introduction

WHETHER IT ALL BEGAN WITH FILM OR CRIME, it is impossible for me to say. I grew up in the shadow of Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, 1943), the first neorealist film and also the free adaptation of James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934), and by the age of fifteen I was responding to the frustration of not having a VCR by recording sounds and voices from Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'avventura* (*The Adventure*, 1960). For years I kept a photograph of Anna, the woman who vanishes at the outset of the film and whose disappearance is gradually forgotten, between the pages of my date book. Probably a still from the set, the picture shows Anna, dark hair and dark eyes, dressed in white, leaning against an iron gate. Her look is oblique, directed toward an indeterminate zone beyond the frame, defying a spectator whom she addresses through avoidance—an impossible look, the promise or threat of a double disappearance. Film critic Pascal Bonitzer brilliantly writes of this “disappearance of disappearance,” the mark of a crisis that will gradually dismantle the detective story, undermining its certainties and opening it to ontological interrogation. As if the puzzle in pieces, and not the process of its reassemblage, exercised the strongest attraction, several of Antonioni's films seem to adopt the model of the police investigation only to undo it. What is left is a world of fragmentation and dispersion, which the characters traverse as “detectives without purpose and out of

place,” caught in a web that disconnects them. “Un giallo alla rovescia,” is the director’s own definition of *The Adventure*, a detective story “back to front,” turned upon itself, reversed.¹

The radicalness of Antonioni’s challenge comes into sharper focus as one turns to Ernst Bloch’s essay “A Philosophical View of the Detective Novel.” On the trail of the uncanny as it has appeared in literature and drama from Sophocles to Edgar Allan Poe, Bloch writes of the detective story as a genre devoted to the “search for that remoter ‘something,’ which is already close at hand,”² analyzing its incessant “knitting and knotting” and identifying its fundamental characteristics—the suspense connected with the process of guessing; the conjectural activity that, through a careful evaluation of apparently insignificant details, leads to the act of discovery; and, most notably, the omission of the pivotal event: the detective story opens on a crime that has already been committed. It is this very omission, Bloch emphasizes, that provides the genre with its specific narrative form, namely, “the form of a picture puzzle.”³ Whether relying on induction, like Sherlock Holmes, or on intuition, like Hercule Poirot, the detective looks at the crime scene from a “micrological” perspective, seeking out those unintentional and overlooked signs that will allow him to shed light into an original, prenarrative darkness, that is, to transform the unnarrated event into a narrative sequence. What happens to this form when *The Adventure* unfolds as a story of forgetfulness and decreasing tension—of an investigation that forgets itself, leaving behind a crime which might or might not have taken place—is thus something other than a plot variation. And it can be said to produce an effect well outside the boundaries of the genre proper if, like Bloch, one recognizes that the same process of discovery and reconstruction also characterizes the works of writers such as Ibsen and Freud, structuring the very relation between light and darkness, revelation and disguise, surface and depth around which they revolve.

My fascination with the crisis of the detective genre expresses more than a subjective preference for certain formal and narrative strategies. Numerous critics, from Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer to contemporary film scholars like Tom Gunning, have identified the detective story as the genre in which modernity and its visual regimes are both exposed and defamiliarized. The increasing abstraction of space and time,

the expansion of perceptual experience through technologies as diverse as the railway and the cinematograph, the standardization of techniques for the identification and control of the individual in the crowd of the big city—all these aspects of modern life find expression in a textual universe structured around the figures of the detective and the criminal. If the detective wants to know the truth of the crime, he needs to interpret the traces of what is no longer there, reading clues and symptoms with a passion for conjectural reasoning that, according to Carlo Ginzburg, aligns him with the psychoanalyst and the historian alike. “Reality is opaque,” writes Ginzburg in his famous article on Morelli, Freud, and Holmes, “but there are certain points—clues, symptoms—which allow us to decipher it.”⁴ The fact that the photograph, with its strong indexical and iconic ties to the referent, constitutes the ultimate tool in the process of detection speaks to the visual nature of the investigator’s challenge: the determination to see again what had once occurred, to seize the image of a time now passed. Such a desire to see is so strong that, Gunning reminds us, “the camera recording the very fact of malfeasance appears in drama, literature, and early film before it was really an important process of criminal detection.”⁵ Catching the criminal in the act, then, expresses the desire not only to attach guilt to an identifiable body, but also to “see through” the obscurity of the crime, reconnecting the present of the trace to the past of the deed.⁶ Seeing is at once this movement of translation from opacity to clarity and the guarantee of a reordering of time. “Detective fiction,” we read in a study on the art and ideology of suspense, “is preoccupied with the closing of the logico-temporal gap that separates the present of the discovery of crime from the past that prepared it. It is a genre committed to the act of recovery, moving forward in order to move back.”⁷ What happens, then, when the investigative paradigm deteriorates as it does in *The Adventure*? What happens not only to our desire to see into the past but also to the very possibility of isolating the past from the present and the future, locating the detective and ourselves, the spectators, in a time that is successive to the time of the crime?

The work I am presenting is dedicated to the study of the relationship between time and vision as it emerges in five Italian films, all following the experience of *The Adventure*: Antonioni’s *Blow-up* (1966)

and *Professione: Reporter* (*The Passenger*, 1975), Liliana Cavani's *Il portiere di notte* (*The Night Porter*, 1973), Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Edipo Re* (*Oedipus Rex*, 1967), and Bernardo Bertolucci's *La strategia del ragno* (*The Spider's Stratagem*, 1970). The center around which these films revolve is the image of the crime scene—the spatial and temporal configuration in which a crime is committed, witnessed, and investigated. Uniquely influenced by both neorealism and the tradition of film noir, these films present us with a crime to be “seen,” not once and for all but over and over again, in the folds of the landscape as well as on the faces of people and things. They appear as strange and unsolvable detective stories in which continuous, linear time dissolves, and the privileges of the seeing eye are challenged by the very scene under analysis. In fact, it is by dilating or contracting the detective story to its extreme limits that these films articulate forms of time which defy any clear-cut distinction between past, present, and future, offering us a temporality which cannot be calculated, determined with certainty, but only made visible. “*In detective fiction,*” claims Joan Copjec in her work on film noir, “*to be is not to be perceived, it is to be recorded*”—here, perception overturns the power of counting, of “making up people,” becoming the very texture through which the subject is dispersed, blurred almost to the point of fading or disappearance, and time is released.⁸

Whether a photographer, a journalist, or a mythical solver of riddles, in these films, the investigator who looks back at the crime scene to discover the truth comes to occupy a position of passivity with respect to the object of his quest—he searches, and is found; he looks, and is seen. Yet, the picture of the past by which he is gradually confronted is anything but external to him. What appears in front of the investigator's eyes is not the past as it was, but the past as it will have been in relation to the time of his search. If the detective story proper begins with a murder that has already been committed, a death that has already taken place, the death which seems to count the most in these films is the one that is yet to occur—the investigator's own death. It is in the anticipation of this death, which the investigator is called to face not as a fact but as a possibility, as the assumption of his own finitude, that the search unfolds. Again and again, the crime scene draws the detective into a time that I can describe only by means of a compound tense, the future anterior.