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1

Exploring Detective Films in the 1930s and 1940s: Genre, Society and Hollywood

Hollywood's version of the whodunnit in the 1930s and 1940s was not always of the classical style associated with the progenitors of the literary detective genre (Poe and Conan Doyle) or the writers of Golden Age clue-puzzle mysteries (such as Christie and Chesterton). The whodunnit does, nevertheless, provide the template for most of Hollywood's crime series, even if sometimes it is only to furnish a mystery sub-plot in films that emphasise action or suspense. The 'Charlie Chan' films, for example, which formed the longest running of Hollywood's crime series, privilege the mystery form of the whodunnit, including the conventional unmasking of the murderer in the denouement. There were also numerous 'Philo Vance' films throughout the period, the best known of which, *The Kennel Murder Case* (1933), is paradigmatic of the clue-puzzle style in its rendering of a locked-room mystery involving more than one person trying to kill the same man at about the same time on the same evening. Even in series that were more variable in style, such as the 'Sherlock Holmes' films, where the emphasis was often on suspense, there was still always some form of mystery or riddle to occupy Holmes while he contended with criminals whose identity he had already revealed, such as The Dancing Men Code in the espionage film *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon* (1942) or the mystery of how the victims are killed in a thriller such as *The Spider Woman* (1944). There are a number of reasons why Hollywood preferred to use a version of the whodunnit style during the 1930s and 1940s. The whodunnit aligned with the economic restrictions of 'B'-Movie production, which required a cheap and rapid turnaround of films, because stories could be recycled relatively easily, often merely by changing the setting

and the names of characters, and because action could be confined to a few sets. There were also narrative imperatives for the use of the whodunnit because its emphasis on the concealment of the criminal allowed interest to be maintained until the denouement. In addition there were moral concerns connected to the Motion Picture Production Code because, while the whodunnit formula focused on criminality, the types of crime represented were usually unrelated to the gangster violence that the Hays/Breen Office was concerned about (Black, 1994: 108) and this made its representation of crime morally 'safe'.

The Hollywood whodunnit

The whodunnit style that predominates in the Hollywood crime series is, however, a more multifarious form than its literary equivalent. Despite the recycling of established motifs such as the enigma, the interpretation of clues, and the denouement, Hollywood's preference for action-based narratives and the need to visualise detection within these confines means that it is often interfused with the thriller mode to allow suspense and action to come to the fore.[1] Hollywood's version of the whodunnit (and the styles that displaced it in the late 1940s) can still, however, be understood by reference to critical accounts of the literary detective form. These accounts have focused, for example, on the role of the detective and the nature of detection (Knight, 2004: 30–63; Rzepka, 2005: 90–113), the importance of ratiocination and the scientific method (Knight, 2003: 77–94; Scaggs, 2005: 33–54), the puzzle of the mystery as a form of game for the reader or audience to play (Cawelti, 1976: 105), the differences between the whodunnit and American hard-boiled forms (Soitos, 1996: 24; Messent, 1997: 7; Pepper, 2000: 10–34), the relationship between crime and morality (Palmer, 1991: 133–5; Pyrhönen, 1999), and the development of sub-genres such as the policier, crime thriller and the police procedural (Scaggs, 2005: 85–104).[2] Many of these features or motifs were significant within Hollywood crime texts in the period before the rise of the hard-boiled film, although they were very often modified because they had to attend to the imperatives of either visual representation or institutional arrangements. The problem of representing the intellectual process of detection as a central feature of the mystery narrative, for example, was a particular concern because it needed to be visualised for the audience. Concerns with morality and crime were also reframed because of the impact of the Motion Picture Production Code which was articulated in 1930 and fully in force from 1934. Criminal-detectives such as

The Saint, Falcon or Lone Wolf, for example, were turned into servants of law and society, a transformation that also affected their activities because their criminal inclinations were either recast as harmless pranks or channelled into detection, so that burglary became a means to discover clues rather than theft for personal gain.

The features of the classic detective formula that recur in the Hollywood crime series discussed here align quite closely with John Cawelti's taxonomy of literary detective fiction. Cawelti argues that there are four aspects that define the detective formula: situation, pattern of action, characters and relationships, and setting. Situation refers to the dominant narrative of the mystery provided by an unsolved crime and its elucidation, while pattern of action refers to the narrative arc that follows on from this premise and comprises '(a) introduction of the detective; (b) crime and clues; (c) investigation; (d) announcement of the solution; (e) explanation of the solution; (f) denouement' (1976: 82). The situation and the narrative as defined are particularly relevant to the films of the Hollywood crime series, especially when Cawelti notes that the denouement (the apprehension of the criminal) and the solution (the explanation of the crime) can be combined (Ibid.: 90). In the classical Hollywood narrative paradigm, these aspects are generally elided or follow in quick succession to integrate narrative threads in the resolution so that, although it is very often implied that the Hollywood detective has deduced the solution before the final scenes, he or she usually only provides the explanation in a denouement that also includes the capture of the criminal. On occasions, however, it is only in this final scene that the detective discovers the identity of the culprit (*The Falcon and the Co-eds* [1943]) or springs a trap either to capture the criminal (*The Scarlet Claw* [1944]) or to goad them into a confession (*The Saint in Palm Springs* [1941]), although 'The Thin Man' series presents the final denouement as a way for Nick Charles to work through possibilities until he reaches the right conclusion. Further aspects of the narrative are provided by Cawelti's category of characters and relationships which not only includes the detective, but also the criminal, the victim and 'false suspects' (Cawelti, 1976: 96), all of whom provide the material (in the form of clues or testimony) to drive the detective's investigation. Finally, there is the setting, which most obviously refers to the locations favoured by the classical detective story, but which also refers to the space that delimits the action so as to separate the detective's textual world from the 'complexity and confusion of the larger social world' (Ibid.: 97). Cawelti, however, also comments that the setting can often be used to represent stability in a world disrupted by crime (Ibid.: 98)

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and this introduces another significant motif in detective fiction, discussed by several critics: the detective's role in returning society to order (Schatz, 1981: 124; Copjec, 1993: 171; Messent, 1997: 8; Leitch, 2002: 173; Knight, 2003: 88 and 90; Scaggs, 2005: 46–9). Depending upon perspective, this might simply involve ensuring that crime is only a minor disruption rather than a sign of chaotic social relations (Field, 2009: 19), or might provide the detective with an ideological function so that the return to the status quo associated with the solution of a crime is an overt legitimation of bourgeois ideology (Mandel, 1984: 47).

This suggests that the detective is a figure of authority who is more than someone who merely solves crime or carries the burden of the narrative. Nevertheless, the detective's primary narrative role is the investigation of a mystery and his or her social role is often secondary to the cerebral problem that he or she has been set. Mandel, for example, notes that '[T]he real subject of the early detective stories is thus not crime or murder but enigma' (1984: 18) and this means that the detective must also be an interpreter and seeker after knowledge who gathers the world as information in visual cues and props before 'using her or his reasoning powers to penetrate below the surface of things' (Messent, 1997: 5). While clues and information are necessary in detective stories, their presentation has always been problematic within the cinematic form. A clue can be introduced by a passing reference in a novel without drawing attention to its importance, whereas to hold an object in shot in cinema seemingly 'overstresses' its significance (Knight, 2004: 111). Detective films can use a misleading shot as a form of red herring to direct attention towards objects that are actually insignificant, but the B-Movie crime series tend to have a much more mechanical approach to such matters and very often use visual clues to provide narrative information in an instrumental manner. This pattern is also a product of classical Hollywood's overall penchant for dynamic narratives (based on tension, conflict and suspense, or action and incident), but the particular demands for clarity and pace found in B-Movies, which generally have a running time of between sixty and seventy minutes, mean that screen time cannot be used up on static representation of props.[3] There are exceptions, but where this is the case, the use of visual clues is usually integrated into the onscreen action. In *Sherlock Holmes in Washington* (1943), for example, Holmes searches a room for clues to find out how a British agent transported secret plans to the United States. A collection of cameras, a negative containing the small image of a matchbook, a microscope, a slide projector and several matchbooks of the kind appearing in the negative are all put on the screen not only

for Holmes to find, but also to visually display his thought processes as he moves quickly around the screen space from one object to another. As importantly, information is conveyed at the same pace as Holmes' movement, so that the objects are located in a set of clear causal relationships to embed them in the larger story of the mystery when Holmes concludes that the clues indicate that the agent put the secret plans on microfilm which he then concealed in a matchbook.

Despite such exceptions, evidence in detective films tends to be revealed not in the form of props but through dialogue in interviews or conversations. This mode of collecting and revealing evidence also generates movement from scene to scene as the detective uses the information learnt from one character to guide him either to another character or to a location where new evidence can be gathered. The detective's trajectory through the narrative, therefore, is to move from one source of information to another, most usually in the form of reported testimony, suggesting a consonance between the cinematic narrative of the crime series and literary hard-boiled fiction, which shares a similar emphasis on testimony from suspects or witnesses, as both Mandel (1984: 36) and Scaggs (2005: 59) note, as opposed to the whodunnit's focus on objects to be interpreted. The tendency to rely on reported evidence is not, however, a product of the hard-boiled style's influence on cinema, but a result of the need for dynamic narratives and causal relationships between episodes or scenes within the classical Hollywood paradigm. Despite the relegation of the clue-as-object to a subsidiary role, crime series nevertheless still offer the same ideological imperative that underpinned the scientific method in the classical literary detective form which, in its fetishisation of the clue-as-object, sought to prove the objectivity of reality. The world is objective and open to interpretation for the film detective and the screened reality that he or she inhabits is ultimately where truth resides in spite of deceptions on the part of criminals and suspects. The film detective makes the world knowable by solving mysteries because, like Sherlock Holmes according to Moretti, he or she possesses the 'stable code' (1988: 145) that helps align signifier with signified. It can be argued, indeed, that the textual reality inhabited by the detective is solely a world of objects in spite of the general absence of physical clues because the characters the detective encounters become objectified as evidence to be observed so that they can be placed within a taxonomy of knowledge which allows them to be understood as units of meaning once their motives, relationships and actions have been learnt or accurately interpreted. To the detective, the world is a place of 'things' in

which other characters are functional, their only purpose to advance the investigation. The Falcon, for example, controls and re-directs sexual interest on the part of the female characters he encounters towards his investigation, thereby transforming desire into the affectless collection of information.

The instrumental treatment of narrative content also has relevance for matters of morality within the detective film through the transformation of crime from a social and moral matter to a mystery that is ostensibly empty of meaning because it is articulated simply for the purpose of entertainment, a feature that is also derived from literary detective works. As products of the classical Hollywood studio system, detective films in the 1930s and 1940s were necessarily governed by the Motion Picture Production Code and had to accord with its imperative not to present crime in a positive way. It is axiomatic, therefore, that Hollywood presumes crime is wrong, but the imperative to provide entertainment means that criminal acts are not necessarily treated in moral terms because they function primarily to generate mystery, tension or action in the detective's pursuit of an investigation. The criminal is therefore less a moral problem than a necessary opponent who sets in motion the suspense, thrills and incident that form the entertainment. The punishment or detention of the criminal in the denouement is often less a matter of morality or legality than an opportunity to provide excitement or gratifying release from tension in the case of action-oriented resolutions, or pleasurable satisfaction in the revelation scene in enigma-based films. While it is certainly the case, for example, that Moriarty is represented at the beginning of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1939) as morally repugnant because he values the orchids he tends more than the life of a man he has murdered, his presence in the film is not to articulate disapproval of criminality, but to provide the mysteries that will generate events and incidents. Moriarty's bringing to book is similarly empty of moral concern because it is primarily the means to afford action (in the race across London to prevent him bringing his plan to fulfilment), excitement and tension (in his struggle with Holmes atop the Tower of London), and spectacle (when he falls to his death). Many other examples which privilege entertainment over morality in the denouement can be offered from the crime series, such as Nora Charles' rescue of her husband Nick in *Shadow of the Thin Man* (1941), the gunfights at the end of *The Falcon Out West* (1944) and *The Falcon in Hollywood* (1944) or the perverse pleasure of characters being hoist by their own petard, such as Valdin in *Bulldog Drummond's Bride* (1939) who is killed by a bomb meant for others. The importance of the

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ending is therefore to emphasise narrative closure and, while conclusions have ideological or moral implications, these are institutionally subordinated to the satisfactory closing of the entertainment provided by the narrative.

One of the problems for the Hollywood studios in adapting the whodunnit to screen is that the observation, interpretation and deduction associated with it are not the stuff of visual entertainment. The 'Torchy Blane' adventure *Smart Blonde* (1937) illustrates the difficulties of transferring the whodunnit style to cinema. The film is a succession of conversations, primarily conducted by Torchy, a newspaper reporter, and her police officer fiancé, Steve McBride, as they move from one source of information to another, paralleling each other in a pattern that is made overt in a mirroring sequence during which Torchy and McBride, in separate scenes, interview two women involved in the life of the main suspect. The effect of this mirroring is to establish relations of equivalence between the two scenes so that no particular value is attached to the evidence uncovered in either, but this also reflects on the narrative as a whole because there seems to be very little meaning in the story of the investigation as it moves from one interview to another. Because there is little incident, the investigation is very flat and the pleasure of the text is primarily provided by the vibrancy of Glenda Farrell's performance as Torchy and her bantering relationship with McBride.

The 'Torchy Blane' films sought to address the flatness of the whodunnit narrative of *Smart Blonde* by privileging incident and action over mystery in *Fly-Away Baby*, aka *Crime in the Clouds* (1937). The film involves the pursuit of a suspect around the world, with the identity of the criminal apparently known early on so that there seems to be very little mystery until the narrative reveals at the end that someone else is responsible for the crimes. This occurs on a zeppelin flight from Germany to New York and the conclusion, in which the criminal plunges to his death as he seeks to escape by parachute, wraps up the mystery, which has only actually been introduced in the last reel, in a perfunctory manner. The prior material, except for an early scene in which the murderer is interviewed, is revealed to have been a wild goose chase, most particularly the round-the-world flight that has filled most of the film. A similar situation is also present in a hoax murder that takes up half the running time of *The Adventurous Blonde* (1937) and both cases suggest that the Hollywood detective film, particularly in its B-Movie form, is as based on incidental padding, digression and misdirection as it is on a linear movement towards conclusion. This means that the B-Movie narrative partakes of the contradiction implicit

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in most mainstream cinematic narratives in being driven by both the need for a linear plot that leads to resolution and by the need to suspend the ending until sufficient material (narrative information or entertaining situations) has been delivered.

The films of the detective crime series, therefore, have twin imperatives towards delay and resolution, with the former being provided by what Bordwell calls 'retardatory material', which he describes as comprising 'comedy (e.g., byplay with incompetent police), romance (a young couple falls under suspicion, or the detective is prey to romantic inclinations), and the commission of more crimes' (1985: 64). This view mirrors Porter's analysis of the 'deflection or rebound from progress toward resolution' in literary detective fiction, which involves processes such as 'rival investigations or love motifs that intermittently suspend the principal investigation, and false trials and false solutions' (1981: 32) or, in Coward and Semple's analysis, the use of 'bumbling and inefficient' police (1989: 51).[4] While Bordwell refers specifically to hard-boiled Hollywood film, his analysis is relevant to most detective texts of the classical Hollywood period. The comedy of manners and verbal interplay in 'The Thin Man' series, for example, acts as incidental entertainment by providing textual material that does not contribute to the causal narrative, although it does help to delay the movement towards resolution by removing Nick and Nora from 'linear plot-telling' (Young, 1994: 265). Bordwell notes that the further commission of crimes in detective movies is one of the more significant ways in which 'retardatory material' is used, but such events, in accumulating incidents, have a secondary effect. While the continuation of criminal activity can often help to clarify the narrative information, by eliminating suspects (sometimes through their murder) or by providing clues that lead towards resolution, these incidents can also muddy the investigation by casting doubt on already existing solutions or theories, thereby acting as textual obfuscation or mystification that both impede the narrative of investigation and obscure the truth of the crime. It can be argued that such events are of more importance to the detective text than the arrival at truth in the resolution, because without them the narrative would consist only of a crime, clues indicating the identity of the criminal, a deduction of these clues and the arrest of the perpetrator.

These incidents fill the text and allow the detective to remain narratively active, suggesting that detective films are more padding than anything else, but these mystifications also provide the 'misleading motivation' that Tomashevsky, writing about fiction, says is designed to 'distract the reader's attention from the real situation' (1965: 80).

In addition to being part of the game in the literary text, they form an important part of the cinematic detective text by providing sub-narratives to the criminal narrative being investigated. However, because they are misleading, they help to mystify the main narrative with the result that the audience can often not distinguish what is the main narrative and what is a sub-narrative. For example, in *Charlie Chan in City of Darkness* (1939), there are three mystery narratives, one involving blackmail, another concerning burglary, while a third (the source of the murder mystery) deals with a spy ring. Even though they are mystification, the first two narratives are given most screen time, to imply that the answer to the murder mystery can be found in one of them, but they also have the effect of displacing the espionage narrative that forms the primary mystery until the final reel. A further effect of retardatory material is to problematise the generic lines of the whodunnit because many of the delays in the crime series involve the introduction of comedy, romance, action or suspense. It is difficult to describe the mystery story developed in the Hollywood detective series in terms of the formal detective story of literature with its characteristic whodunnit or clue-puzzle (Knight, 2004: 85–9; Leitch, 2002: 172). Even though films in the 'Charlie Chan', 'Falcon', 'Mr Moto' and 'Thin Man' series, for example, almost invariably have a whodunnit form in which the identity of the main criminal is only revealed in the concluding scenes (although interestingly the 'Sherlock Holmes' films do not always have this formula), the Hollywood detective film tends towards the thriller form, whether of the mystery, suspense or action varieties. They very often, therefore, involve cross-generic coding in which multiple formats within the mystery style are deployed, such as hard-boiled, whodunnit, action and suspense in *The Falcon Takes Over*, or draw in tropes from other genres, whether these are the comedy elements that are typical of the B-crime series generally or more specific interconnections such as the Gothic or horror codes that are articulated in some of the 'Sherlock Holmes' films (*Sherlock Holmes Faces Death* [1943], *The Scarlet Claw* and *The House of Fear* [1945]), the gangster form in *The Saint in New York* (1938), espionage in the war-time films of the series, or *noir* tendencies in some of the late 'Sherlock Holmes' and 'Falcon' films.

Mystery, suspense and thrillers

This cross-coding is only an exaggeration of existing tendencies within the format of the detective story as it had been created and developed in fiction. Many critical accounts of literary detective fiction draw on

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Todorov's 'The Typology of Detective Fiction' in distinguishing between the classical form and the thriller or *série noire*, the former associated with the whodunnit and its focus on deduction and analytic reason, and the latter, more problematically, with the hard-boiled style (Leitch, 2002: 65; Gates, 2006: 13–4; Field, 2009: 26–8). Todorov argues that the whodunnit is characterised by having two stories, 'the story of the crime and the story of the investigation' (1977: 44), the first of which (the pre-narrative *récit*) is over before the second begins and has no narrative within the text except through its reconstruction or recollection in the story of investigation because it is 'an absence' (Ibid.: 46). This latter story, however, involves no action, only the gathering of information through the inquiries of the detective, who is a detached observer of events immune from danger. In the thriller form, on the other hand, 'the narrative coincides with the action' (Ibid.: 47) and the detective is fully involved in 'danger, pursuit [and] combat' (Ibid.: 48) which threatens his or her safety because the thriller protagonist is immersed in the world of criminality. Another important difference between the two forms is that the whodunnit is defined by the mystery plot, whereas the thriller is focused more on 'curiosity' (the explanation of causes for visible effects by the provision of back-stories or simple questions of what will happen next) and 'suspense' (the expectation of certain events that follow from the initial cause of the narrative and how their specifics will be worked out). This distinction between whodunnit and thriller has generally been adopted by critical accounts of detective fiction so that Soitos (1996: 23–4), for example, uses it as the basis for a binary set of paradigms defining the whodunnit in opposition to hard-boiled fiction.

There are difficulties with such an opposition because Todorov adds a further category to whodunnit and thriller forms, that of the 'suspense novel', which most critics have ignored or conflated with the latter category.[5] Todorov argues that the suspense novel exists between the whodunnit and the thriller, commenting that it combines the mystery and two stories (crime and investigation) from the former with the primacy of the narrative of action that characterises the thriller. He adds that the suspense style 'served as a transition between the whodunit [*sic*] and the thriller' even though 'it existed at the same time as the latter' (Todorov, 1977: 50) and includes the work of early hard-boiled writers such as Hammett and Chandler within its domain. The thriller becomes clearer in its reference in such a formulation and bears little resemblance to the hard-boiled style with which it is most often associated because this form still shares with the whodunnit an enigma to be solved rather

than the 'curiosity' of the thriller format. It is the action thrillers of the 'Bulldog Drummond' movies and 'Dick Tracy' serials and films that Hollywood produced in the 1930s and 1940s that most closely resemble Todorov's thriller format. The films in Paramount's low-budget 'Bulldog Drummond' series, for example, are ostensibly detective fictions, but have very little in the way of mystery. The first of the series, *Bulldog Drummond Escapes* (1937), deals with the imprisonment of Phyllis Clavering (who reappears throughout the series as Drummond's fiancée) by Norman Merridew, but reveals both its villain and his crimes early on. The only mystery in the film derives from curiosity over the reason for Phyllis' captivity and most of the narrative entails rescuing Phyllis while trying to prove Merridew's guilt to the recurring character of Colonel Nielson, the police commissioner. Other entries in the series share the same lack of mystery and further emphasise the action elements within the thriller plots. *Bulldog Drummond Comes Back* (1937), the first to star John Howard, involves another abduction of Phyllis by a criminal who identifies himself in order to set Drummond a set of riddles to solve (the film's 'curiosity') in the hope of saving her, while *Bulldog Drummond's Peril* (1938) alternates between showing two groups of criminals enacting their plans in the quest to gain control of a formula for artificial diamonds and Drummond's pursuit of them. These films are dominated not by mystery but by suspense in a 'cops-and-robbers' mode, to which Phyllis draws attention in *Bulldog Drummond's Peril* and *Bulldog Drummond's Bride*.

The cinematic version of the cops-and-robbers format is important in the films of the detective crime series and its presence suggests that they are as much thrillers as they are whodunnits. Most of the 'Lone Wolf' films tend towards the cops-and-robbers format until the end of the Warren William period when films such as *Secrets of the Lone Wolf* (1941) and *One Dangerous Night* (1943) provide whodunnit narratives, while the later films of the 'Torchy Blane' series also offer this form, as in *Torchy Gets Her Man* (1938) in which Torchy and McBride go up against a counterfeiting gang. The 'Dick Tracy' series of films made at RKO in the 1940s, which were preceded by four serials made at Republic between 1937 and 1941,[6] are the most obvious example of the cops-and-robbers format with the titles of the films announcing the duel between Tracy and a criminal in two cases: *Dick Tracy vs. Cueball* (1946) and *Dick Tracy Meets Gruesome* (1947). The villains that Tracy confronts are usually henchmen rather than the criminal geniuses that characterise the thriller form adopted by the detective crime series, which are more ingenious in their deployment of a variety of thriller styles. These include the

detective versus the criminal mastermind, the detective versus a gang, the 'MacGuffin' format, or the caper, chase or pursuit narrative as types of specific plot; or the articulation of different modes such as suspense, thrills, action, or mysteries in the form of puzzles or games. Most often, the series thrillers combine narratives by drawing on different generic sign-systems to offer up several modes at one time. Such overlaps and borrowings are not unusual with regard to genres or sub-genres, as Steve Neale has demonstrated (1990: 57), and indicate that any genre is flexible in its use of signifying patterns. The detective crime series of the classical Hollywood period share the same flexibility and derive narratives not only from the whodunnit format, but from a range of different genres and sub-genres, each with their own representation of particular types of crime and criminal. *The Falcon Strikes Back* (1943), for example, draws on the criminal mastermind narrative (Geraldine Lipton, a notorious fraudster), a caper involving her gang (a bond fraud), the criminal monster (in the form of the insane murderer Dugan), and the whodunnit (the Falcon's pursuit of clues through two sets of crimes), as well as marshalling motifs from espionage (albeit as misdirection), Gothic (the final encounter between Dugan and Mrs Lipton), and *noir*-style betrayal (the double-crosses within the gang), even as it also manoeuvres its generic references within the kind of light-hearted romp that is associated with the comedy thriller. The multivalent generic references of *The Falcon Strikes Back* are not untypical of the detective crime series produced by Hollywood in the 1930s and 1940s, even if the mystery style of the whodunnit (and its associated tropes of enigma and deduction) commonly acts as a focus for the assembly of other crime-related textual forms.

Detectives, personas and individuality

The kind of crime text that is on show in the crime series is often determined by the persona of the detective because the style of film very usually depends upon the kind of situation that is most appropriate for the protagonist. Matters of generic verisimilitude would, for example, prevent Dick Tracy from pursuing a case to an isolated Gothic-inspired mansion such as that which Sherlock Holmes investigates in *The House of Fear*. Similarly, Holmes might be considered out of place in the cartoonish criminal underworld represented in *Dick Tracy vs. Cueball*, even if, after defeating the Hoxton Creeper in *The Pearl of Death* (1944), he might be able to convincingly face Splitface (*Dick Tracy* [1945]) or Gruesome. His 'type' as a detective, however, makes him appropriate for

the textual worlds of whodunnit, Gothic mystery, espionage, and *noir*, all of which he appeared, albeit less successfully in some than others, so that *Pursuit to Algiers* (1945), an international thriller, is often considered one of the weakest of the Holmes films (Thompson, 1988: 50) because of a misalignment between persona and text. There are therefore certain discourses attached to particular detectives that make them fit the worlds within which they are placed. Sherlock Holmes can be framed within a text with Gothic resonances, for example, because the discourses of ratiocination and deduction that characterise his method not only make him an appropriate champion of reason against the supernatural, but also provide motivation for a narrative that resolves with the revelation that apparent supernatural causes are actually the product of human criminal agency.

The persona of the actor performing the role of the detective also plays a significant part in determining the form and style of the detective's textual world. It is not the discourses surrounding Sherlock Holmes that allow him to enter Gothic worlds, even if he does so in Conan Doyle's fiction in *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1939), but the discourses surrounding Basil Rathbone's incarnation of Holmes as a result of his performance in the film version of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* that allow Holmes to enter further Gothic mysteries. Gates discusses Parish and Pitts' view that the B-crime series catered to star personas and summarises their argument that 'Basil Rathbone *was* Sherlock Holmes; Tom Conway *was* the Falcon; Warner Baxter *was* the Crime Doctor; and Warren William *was* The Lone Wolf' (Gates, 2006: 72, citing Parish and Pitts, 1990: xi). It should be noted, however, that Tom Conway onscreen is a construction of the persona of 'Tom Conway' through the performance of the roles he played, including the roles he undertook at the same time in the horror films of the Lewton unit which confirmed, shaded or developed the persona created by the Falcon. It would be more accurate to say, therefore, that there are discourses that attach to the Conway screen persona that produce meanings which allow him to fit the charming but morally ambiguous Falcon as well as the stern and suffering figure of Paul Holland in *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). In particular, it is the very ambiguity of his persona that creates the doubtful motives that allow his character of Holland in *I Walked with a Zombie* to appear as the cause of misery for his wife and younger brother before it is revealed that it was their affair that caused his suffering.

The same use of prior or parallel textual discourses in creating persona is the case for other stars playing detectives. William Powell and George Sanders were able to perform roles as Nick Charles in the case

of the former and The Saint and the Falcon in the case of the latter, not because their signs of 'Britishness' created associations of villainy, as Gates argues (2006: 72–3), but because their personas accumulated discourses associated with being aristocratic or patrician (within the context of Hollywood's understanding and deployment of such figurations) that could be articulated in a variety of ways. In both cases, the personas were dashing, charming and witty with an air of superiority, but these could be deployed flexibly depending upon what the situation required to make them caddish or roguish in one cluster of meanings (the latter most often being called upon in their detective personas); dangerous or cruel in a more overtly 'villainous' way; loyal, noble or self-sacrificing; or bored, languid or world-weary. Sanders' portrayal of The Saint, for example, draws on many of these meanings, but softens the cruelty, while retaining an air of danger, to make the persona roguish rather than caddish or devious. The performance of the star persona in the same role over several films does, however, reiterate the same patterns of meaning, as Mary Beth Haralovich notes in her discussion of Sherlock Holmes on film (Haralovich, 1979: 54), even if on occasions, as with The Saint, these can be modified. It is less the case, in these circumstances, that the star is the role than that the performance of the star persona is the film. Clearly, other factors are important, such as setting or supporting characters, so that the Falcon, for example, is not quite the same figure without Goldy Lock accompanying him because certain possibilities (physical humour) are no longer available, while the creation of Holmes' persona by Basil Rathbone is also affected by playing opposite Nigel Bruce as Dr. Watson. However, the persona tends to determine the possibilities available, whether this is with regard to setting, type of narrative, specific incidents or situations that are allowable, or style and mode, although there are occasional exceptions such as the 'Michael Shayne' series in which Lloyd Nolan as Shayne has a variable persona depending upon the style of the film. In *Michael Shayne, Private Detective* (1940) he is downbeat and rather bungling because the film is in the comedy thriller mode, in *Dressed to Kill* (1941) he is observant and wise because it is a whodunnit, and in *Blue, White and Perfect* (1942) he is an action hero because the film is a Nazi-busting movie.

One feature in the representation of the detectives that significantly influences their meanings is their status with regard to law and crime because this determines their relations to society. Of particular import is the detective's ability to stand above society, resist its temptations, deal with its problems and finally mete out justice. The detective in the classical detective story has always been a singular figure 'alone capable of

dissipating the threat to the social order that is posed by an act of criminal violence' (Palmer, 1991: 124) and, as several scholars have noted, his or her amateur status is significant in setting the detective apart from the forces of law and the criminality that the police deal with on a daily basis (Moretti, 1988: 143). This means that the detective is not entangled within the bureaucracy of crime and the everyday 'legwork' that policing entails, often using a sidekick (Goldy or Lefty in some of the 'Falcon' films or, until he is replaced by a younger brother, Number One Son in the 'Charlie Chan' series) or the police (Lieutenant Abrams in 'The Thin Man' series or Inspector Lestrade in the 'Sherlock Holmes' films) for these purposes. More importantly, although the detective is reliant on the police for aspects of the investigation, even as he outdoes them in intuition and deduction, he or she is able to stand outside the disorganised excess of information accruing in the bureaucratic and procedural areas of the law as a social institution which itself acts as a metonymy for the muddled and baffling (and baffled) landscape of society as a whole, with its confused motivations, mystifications, false leads and appearances, and general lack of structure. The detective of the crime series is often configured as a transcendental subject who is someone able to stand above his or her own subjectivity from which position the transcendental subject can perceive his or her own conscious being and observe its relations to wider formations (such as society or other consciousnesses). Such a figure could also be described as a 'subject-outside-history', unaffected by the social, cultural, economic, ideological and political relations, apparatuses or institutions that comprise historical forces, albeit only as an impossible fantasy of a subjectivity freed from their movement. The classical detective has been a particular focus for the fantasy of transcendental subjectivity from Dupin and Sherlock Holmes through to the rise of the hard-boiled detective, although the latter is a problematic figure in this regard. Two key aspects of the transcendental subject are to be outside structures of labour and monetary exchange (to be independent, in other words, of the means of capitalist production, whether as producer or product) and to be free from state apparatuses (institutions, bureaucracy, ideology) in order to make the classical detective a model or fantasy figure outside of or above the social relations within which most people exist.[7]

The amateur detective, particularly in the mode of the gentleman detective, fulfils these criteria by being outside money, labour and institutional attachment to the forces of the law and the State. It is not necessarily that such figures are independently wealthy, but that they are never shown as having any relation to money, as if somehow they

are divested of any need for it, even when they must hire hotel rooms (*Charlie Chan at Monte Carlo* [1938]), take trains across the American continent (*The Falcon Out West*) or fly from London to France (*Bulldog Drummond's Bride*) or from London to Washington (*Sherlock Holmes in Washington*). It is unsurprising, therefore within, generic paradigms that most of the amateur detectives in the classical Hollywood crime series are gentlemen, adventurers or individualists. Of the amateur detectives, only Torchy Blane and Boston Blackie are remotely working class and neither is overtly coded as such despite the former having a fast-talking, brassy persona derived from the urban dramas made by Warner, the studio that produced the 'Torchy Blane' series, which frame her in these terms. Indeed, Boston Blackie, as an ace safe-cracker who has reached the height of his profession before moving into official society, is represented as one of the aristocrats of criminal and working class society, having a figure who is effectively his butler in the form of The Runt. There are similar ambiguities in the case of Nick Charles, in 'The Thin Man' series, because of his past life among criminals as a professional detective before he enters high society. The remainder of the amateur detectives are predominantly from the upper echelons of society, such as Philo Vance and Michael Lanyard (Lone Wolf), while Gay and Tom Lawrence (the two incarnations of the Falcon), Simon Templar (The Saint), Bulldog Drummond, and Sherlock Holmes are all either aristocratic or from the professional and intellectual class, and, as significantly, all English. This outsider status is important in establishing the detective as an individualist, free from social relations even if some of the detectives have to strive to maintain their self-sufficiency. The struggle to maintain autonomy is often a significant concern for criminal-detectives such as Boston Blackie, the Lone Wolf, The Saint and the Falcon, who often have to prove their innocence of a crime by finding the real culprit. This is not merely a narrative trope to make them active as detectives, thereby setting the story of the investigation in motion, but also a way of conveying the quest for individuality as a struggle in representing the ways in which they are beset by attempts to curtail their freedom through imprisonment as a metonymy for the bonds created by society.

Most significant in this concern with autonomy is the detective's freedom of movement across society and his or her ability to enter restricted or controlled spaces. Detectives in the crime series are given licence to enter any space because they are police officers or associated with the police or because they take upon themselves the right to do so, often through breaking and entering (Nick Charles, The Lone Wolf, the

Falcon), the use of disguise (Sherlock Holmes) or trickery (The Saint). The series detective is therefore generally characterised by mobility, both spatially and socially, able to overcome barriers or restrictions (implicit or defined) by slipping into areas others are unable or unwilling to enter, whether these are bank vaults, hideouts, salons, criminal dens, or private homes, in order to move through high society, middle-class and working-class worlds, and the criminal underworld, even if they require a mediator in the form of an assistant to do so on occasions. They very often take on the iconography of the thief or the police officer in the process, to become temporarily their 'other', even if only in facsimile or dissimulated form, but above all such freedom suggests their status as transcendental subjects because they cross cultural, social and economic boundaries as if they did not exist. The same is also the case with the hard-boiled detective, as Ralph Willett observes of Dashiell Hammett's Continental Op (Willett, 1996: 43–4), but the sense of the investigation as a form of entanglement and the private eye's specific location within a particular city, suggests that he has a more delimited or restricted space through which he can move, while the fact that the private eye has to defend his own spaces (office or home) from being penetrated by police or intruders also indicates not only that he has a more precarious control of space generally, but also, as a result of identification of self with private space, that he is under threat from the city he inhabits.

B-Movie production

The Hollywood detective crime series of the 1930s and 1940s are not only defined by their relationship to the generic codes of the format they adopt within the series as a whole or across the different films within each series. Their production as B-Movies also has an impact on the films' style, narrative and content. Indeed, the B-Movie production of most of the series often helps to either confirm generic codes or to vary them to produce a pastiche or cross-generic style. Although there had been cheaply produced films within the Majors before the rise of the B-Movies, the main period of the development of B-Movies occurred from the middle of the 1930s onwards as a response to economic difficulties experienced by the Hollywood studios between 1930 and 1933 which saw them showing net losses in 1932 before three of eight majors (Paramount, Fox and RKO) went into bankruptcy or receivership in the following year (Schatz, 1996: 159). Between 1930 and 1933, average weekly attendance dropped from 110 to 60 million

(Miller, 1973: 2) and cinema owners, which included the vertically integrated Big Five (MGM, Warners, Paramount, Fox and RKO), sought new ways to draw in audiences. Balio recounts how versions of lotteries such as 'Bank Night and kindred contests, such as Prosperity Night, Movie Sweepstakes, and Treasury Night' (1993: 28) were used to sell tickets, but it was the development of the double feature that was the most important response to the economic travails because it changed exhibition practices across the United States in both first-run and independent cinemas until the Majors cancelled their B productions when divorcement killed off the double-bill in the late 1940s (Kerr, 1986: 234) and a number of the crime series discussed here went into Poverty Row production ('Charlie Chan', 'Michael Shayne', and a version of the 'Falcon' series). The double-bill allowed cinemas to change their programmes twice or more a week and thereby provided a variety of offering for audiences, albeit very often only with a change of supporting feature or the replacement of two programmers with two more of the same status. Initially, it was the affiliated theatres who were the main users of double bills, but their success led to first-run theatres following suit because the latter found they couldn't charge the same price for a ticket for a single film that other theatres were charging for two.

According to Miller (1973: 30) the double-bill, with a headlining or 'A'-feature and a supporting film with B-grade production (most often also including cartoons and a newsreel) quickly became pervasive in the United States, with 85 per cent of movie houses adopting the practice by 1936, by which point all of the majors had developed their own B units to service the demand for second feature fare (McClelland, 1978: 14; Taves, 1993: 316).[8] Not all B-Movies came from these units, however, not only because there were many Poverty Row independents producing cheap films to act as filler in the double-bill (Maltby, 1995: 66), such as Republic, World-Wide, Grand National and Monogram (which produced the 'Mr Wong' crime series), but some films made by the Majors with an 'A' budget failed to receive the success, critical or popular, that was expected of them and were subsequently relegated to supporting status. In addition, there were what Taves (1993: 317) refers to as 'lower-level A's', also referred to as '"shaky A's," "gilt-edged B's," "in-betweeners," or "intermediates"' which straddled the boundary between A and B picture and which could be shown at either end of the bill depending upon where they were exhibited. Such films, also termed 'programmers' by Miller (1973), might be a bottom or top of the bill film depending upon 'distribution and exhibition arrangements' (Spicer, 2002: 32). The films in MGM's 'Andy Hardy' series were somewhat in this category, as also

were the 'Charlie Chan' films, which began production with reasonably high budgets before the development of the double-bill (Miller, 1973: 8), but which could appear in either position on a bill once the double feature had become a staple of exhibition practices. Because of its necessity within the double feature, the B-Movie also became a key part of the block-booking system through which the Majors guaranteed a steady income by including them in a package along with a headline production (Maltby, 1995: 66). This ensured that the studios received income not only from the headliners, but also the low-budget films, which became a staple of the industry as an economic rather than an aesthetic product until divorcement and the decline of the B-Movie in the late 1940s, even though the profit made on a B-Movie was low, $10,000 on a picture made for $70,000–80,000 according to Cross (1981: 7) as opposed to the higher profits based on percentages that accrued on class-A pictures. However, as Taves notes, the flat fees that were charged for B features meant that 'the expected gross to the studio from a B could be more reliably determined in advance because of the flat fee' (Taves. 1993: 314) and this meant that B-Movies invariably showed a profit that couldn't always be guaranteed by a prestige film.

B-Movies therefore serviced a purely economic need and there was hardly any attempt to generate aesthetic value within the format, even if occasional B-Movies could be unexpected successes. It is for this reason that B-Movies have received little critical attention, even though they amounted to about half of the Majors' product in the 1930s, not only because of their perceived lack of artistic merit, but also because they emphasise the industrial nature of Hollywood studio production in the 1930s and 1940s, their very existence revealing that A or prestige pictures were also conceived by the studios as 'product' to fill seats. There are, however, clearly differences between the two types of picture, most importantly with regard to budget which affected all other areas, particularly the length of shoot which averaged only about three weeks, but could be scheduled for as little as a week (Taves, 1993: 318). Although B units shared the same process of production as used for A-films, the personnel involved were distinct, so that directors, screenwriters, and players usually only worked on either As or Bs, even if some moved on from Bs to As (Rita Hayworth, for example, appeared in both the 'Blondie' and 'Charlie Chan' series while Glenn Ford appeared in the former and Robert Young in the latter), dropped from As to Bs (John Barrymore, who appeared in three 'Bulldog Drummond' movies), or occasionally provided supporting roles in As (e.g., Nigel Bruce and Warner Oland).[9] B-Movies did not, therefore, have access to star

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personnel and had to make do with existing sets or lots (often re-using sets from more expensive productions), because there was no budget to do anything other than dress what was already available, or use library footage to create backgrounds (Cross, 1981: 20). On occasions, films would try to convince audiences that cheapness of production was actually narratively motivated. In *Bulldog Drummond Comes Back*, for example, Drummond openly mentions as he is shuttled around places he has already visited that he is being given the 'run-around' by the villains, but this only draws attention to the limited number of sets being used. Similarly, in *The Falcon in Mexico* (1944), a narrative is created for the Mexican guide, Manuel, that has him constantly swapping cars to cover up the fact that the long-shots of the Falcon's arrival at various locations are drawn from stock footage in which different cars appear.

The development of B units also had advantages because they allowed the studios to remain active throughout the year and to balance overheads because stock, sets and personnel were in constant use. In the case of Columbia, which had fewer economic resources than most of the other majors, B-Movies to service the cinemas owned by the Big Five were the life-blood that kept the studio in production, with an occasional prestige movie being made by a director such as Frank Capra (Kuhn, 1999: 22–3). Series films were extremely important in this regard, with most of these being in the B category, although some ('The Thin Man' and 'Gold Diggers' films) had prestige production. The creation of the double-bill as standard exhibition practice in the United States by the mid-1930s and the creation of B units to fulfil the demand for film product created conditions suitable for the development of 'series' films generally and crime series in particular, with Fox putting most of its resources for B production into series (Miller, 1973: 46). A variety of series developed across different genres, such as the western ('Cisco Kid' and 'Durango Kid'), comedy (the 'Ritz Brothers', 'Blondie', and 'Mexican Spitfire'), romance ('Maisie'), action adventure ('Tarzan'), and horror (the 'Wolfman' and 'Mummy' series as well as compendium monster films involving the 'Wolfman', 'Frankenstein' and 'Dracula' once the latter films had moved from prestige to B production), but crime was a particular focus for the production of series films. The general demand for regular product that the series provided and the quick turnover of scripts that was needed made the crime format attractive because of the availability of ready-made scenarios that could be recycled from other films or crime series or from the wealth of literary and radio whodunnits on the market. By the time of the rise of the B unit

in the mid-1930s, Charlie Chan was already a recurring character in fiction and film and there had been several 'Philo Vance' and 'Sherlock Holmes' films, while The Saint and other detectives were also developing back catalogues in fiction that could provide scripts once the rights had been acquired. The pulp ethos that created the 'simple, standardized, and repetitive' product that Taves notes as an important feature of B-Movies (1993: 333) also helped to make crime films ubiquitous in B production and the most numerous of the series (Cross, 1981: 60).

The cinematic vaudeville of the B-Movie

To define B-Movies only by the cheapness of their production would do them an injustice, not only because such a view ignores the differences among studios (with regard to favoured genres or differences in production values), but also because it overlooks the ways in which film makers sought to produce an entertaining package within the limited running time available (usually just over an hour). The shortness of the films was a particular difficulty for the producers, screenwriters and directors of B-Movies because the narrative space it offered wasn't sufficient to develop the different plot lines that afforded complexity in A-features. Narrative material, therefore, had to be thinned out to avoid the abundance provided by sub-plots with a concomitant loss of variety. For example, when Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* was adapted as *The Falcon Takes Over* (1942) a number of excisions or modifications were made to streamline the plot, including the removal of several characters who provide a good deal of incidental story material: a phoney doctor who holds Marlowe the detective in his sanatorium in a drugged state when he gets too close to discovering the truth of the jewel heist gang, the two corrupt police officers who help to put him there, and an honest police officer who helps Marlowe reach the gangster Laird Brunette. In addition, some characters are given more prominent roles, most notably Velma and Brunette (who become members of the heist gang they have nothing to do with in the novel), or substituted for others, such as the police officers Randall and Nulty who, in the novel, occupy separate sub-plots that add to the narrative complexity but who in the Falcon adaptation are replaced by the simplified double-act of O'Hara and Bates. These modifications winnow out much narrative incident that might threaten to push *The Falcon Takes Over* beyond the running time allowed for supporting features, but also leave gaps that must be replaced so that the film doesn't come in below the usual duration for a B-Movie of about 60–70 minutes.

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Such reductions in narrative material are partly the result of costs (because more characters means more money spent on acting personnel),[10] but they are also the result of the need to avoid the narrative inflation created by having a large supporting cast whose characters need to be introduced and then developed sufficiently to make their presence credible within the logic of the narrative. B-Movies generally therefore have a direct, but truncated storyline focusing on a small number of characters, but this can be problematic if it thins the narrative too much, particularly in the whodunnit variety of detective film which requires sufficient complexity (usually provided by a sufficient number of subsidiary cast members to provide suspects) in order to conceal the truth of the solution. On occasions, the necessary mystification is provided by an instrumental approach to the use of subsidiary characters in which they are introduced for a few scenes before being discarded. Such is the case in the 'Sherlock Holmes' film *Terror by Night* (1946), in which a middle-aged couple, Mr and Mrs Shallcross, are used briefly as suspects when Watson believes they have confessed to the murder being investigated, only for them to be jettisoned from the story when it is discovered that they only confessed to the theft of a teapot from a hotel. This seems a very simple and mechanical use of the characters, but the situation is more complex and it is this complexity which demonstrates that B-Movies are not simply formulaic, but can be very ingenious in their narrative construction. The Shallcrosses serve more than one purpose in the narrative because in addition to providing textual mystification, albeit briefly, they also provide a comic interlude as part of the film's package of entertainment, not only in the comedy of bathos with regard to the teapot, but also in the byplay created by the comedy of errors involving Watson. In addition, the scene in which they are involved comes just after Sherlock Holmes has decided to search a coffin in the baggage car, the search of which, less than a third of the way through the film, would uncover the secret that would solve the case and bring the narrative to an end. The introduction of the Shallcrosses is a necessary delay in the narrative of investigation, but their scene also has a final function because, as Kristin Thompson points out (1988: 64), it helps to re-direct the investigation away from the search of the coffin, thereby creating new narrative spaces.

It isn't always the case that B-Movies have this innovative and economical approach to the construction of narratives and oftentimes they are just economical. Films of the detective crime series are full of narrative short-cuts, such as secret doors, to allow an easy escape in order to keep a criminal (and occasionally a detective) narratively

active, or secret compartments where clues can be found easily so that the detective doesn't have to spend a lot of screen time searching a room thoroughly. Although these narrative abbreviations are contrivances, they are also important elements of the detective film's regime of generic verisimilitude (consistency with the law of genre) which Steve Neale argues are 'least compatible with regimes of cultural verisimilitude' (credibility according to discourses of 'reality'), but which also often create the greatest pleasure for the audience of a genre text (Neale, 1990: 48). The B-Movie also uses an instrumental approach to the transmission of information which, due to the exigencies of narrative time, needs to be delivered quickly and clearly. Thus, in the 'Torchy Blane' film *Blondes at Work* (1938), confusion over a telephone that doesn't ring is quickly cleared up when McBride discovers the murder weapon obstructing the sounding of the bell. Similarly, relationships, friendships and bonds of trust are established very quickly in B-Movies if they don't exist already. For example, in *The Saint in New York*, The Saint befriends Sebastian Lipke, the taxi driver, during a cab ride and wins the trust of Inspector Fernack within minutes of meeting him. In the economy of the B-Movie, very little is left to implication, so that bottles of poison are clearly marked 'Poison' (*The Adventurous Blonde*) and cans of gunpowder 'Explosives' (*Mr Moto Takes a Chance* [1938]), but narrative abbreviations or contractions are more pervasive than minor details such as this, becoming part of a wider instrumental approach to narrative. Many B-Movies embody Boris Tomashevsky's discussion of narrative functionality in relation to the 'compositional motivation' created by 'motifs' in which he refers to Chekhov's view that 'if one speaks about a nail beaten into the wall at the beginning of a narrative, then at the end the hero must hang himself on that nail' (Tomashevsky, 1965: 79). B-Movie narratives offer quite clear causal relationships between motifs in this way, but very often they don't wait until the end of the film to resolve them in the way that Tomashevsky describes, but do so almost immediately after they have first been deployed. Such an approach is on show in *After Midnight with Boston Blackie* (1943), for example, when Manleder, an associate of Blackie, brings along a camera at one point, ostensibly to capture photographs of crimes being committed, although the narrative purpose of the camera is actually to provide flash bulbs for Blackie to throw so that he can distract the gangsters following him into a cellar and then overpower them as they look in the direction of the small explosions the bulbs create.

Despite this tendency to reduction with regard to narrative material, there is also a paradoxical inflation within B-Movies in order to offset

the possibility that the film might under run. In *The Falcon Takes Over*, discussed previously, so much has been winnowed out from Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* that the film has to compensate by adding comedy sequences that fill out the narrative (involving the Falcon playing drunk or the slapstick that results when his sidekick Goldy is found at the scenes of murders on no less than three occasions). Similar forms of 'padding' can be found in other B-Movie films, whether it is the long journey that Larry Talbot takes to find Frankenstein's castle in *Frankenstein Meets the Wolfman* (1942), the farce-based courthouse sequence at the end of the 'Torchy Blane' adventure *Blondes at Work*, which has no bearing on the narrative of investigation but which delays the announcement of a confession that would otherwise have ended the film much earlier, or the helter-skelter action sequence at the end of *Bulldog Drummond's Bride* which lasts nearly a quarter of the film's running time. Such textual inflation is not simply about filling the narrative, however, but also derives from the B-Movie's fundamental purpose, which is to provide entertainment as a supporting feature to the headlining film. Such 'padding' is not in these circumstances necessarily extraneous, nor are the pared down and instrumental narratives of B-Movies simply to do with bringing in a film within its allowable running time. The 'padding' can be part of the entertainment of the film and the narrative contractions treated as devices that reduce narrative time in order to allow the deployment of more non-plot based forms of entertainment. Richard Maltby's argument that 'Narrative functions as part of the provision of pleasure in cinema entertainment, not as the point of it' and his further comment that 'We may enjoy chase scenes in an action movie, the songs in a musical, or the performance of a favorite [*sic*] star, while remaining disengaged from the overly familiar or repetitive plot-line' (Maltby, 1995: 324) are particularly resonant for the B-Movie in this regard.

The B-Movie as a whole can perhaps best be understood as a set of attractions, considered as a form of 'cinematic vaudeville', and the B-Movie crime series, because of its need for material that retards the progress of the narrative toward closure (which includes its mystifications) in order to keep the detective active in the narrative, is particularly prone to this form of textual organisation. As has already been noted, the B-Movie crime film becomes indistinct with regard to its generic conventions, incorporating multiple forms of crime codes in addition to the mystery format of the whodunnit. In addition, crime films in all of the series discussed here incorporate cross-generic elements, such as slapstick, banter and farcical misunderstanding, romantic

involvements, or the thrills and spills associated with the action or adventure format. Gates notes the tendency to mix comedy and detection in the crime series of the 1930s and 1940s as part of its comforting vision of a 'stable and happy society' (2006: 76), but the cinematic vaudeville provided by comedy goes beyond this. It pertains more clearly to Kerr's description of the hybrid B-Movies that developed in Poverty Row studios which mixed 'melodrama and mystery, gangster and private eye, screwball comedy and thriller' (1986: 232) in order to provide fare that would differentiate the supporting feature from the main A-feature. Kerr also notes that exhibition practices developed in the 1930s and 1940s that offered contrasting styles in the double-bill so that '*The Saint in New York*, for example, was billed with *Gold Diggers in Paris*, *Blind Alibi* with *Holiday*' (Ibid.). This suggests that cinemas presented their products in much the same way as a vaudeville theatre, offering different forms of entertainment on a bill that also included, for example, cartoons, comedy shorts and newsreels.

The B-Movie develops an internal pattern that provides a textual form of vaudeville within a narrative frame, although this narrative is itself only one part of the entertainment on the bill and often, indeed, becomes merely the thread that connects the other kinds of entertainment on offer. In *The Falcon in Mexico*, for example, there are several scenes involving musical entertainments which, although integrated into the narrative because certain incidents occur during or after their performance, are not in themselves necessary to the plot. These are supplemented later by carnival sequences, which provide incidents that are more embedded into the plot (a murder and the Falcon taking on the disguise of a dead man to draw out the murderer), but their presence is also in many ways supernumerary to the narrative. While it could be said that these sequences are simply a way of cutting costs by using stock footage inter-cut with material shot specifically for the film, this would ignore the visual pleasures provided by the both the exotic setting and the performances offered within the carnival scenes. Such textual material is not merely an interlude in the narrative, even if it seems to be an interruption in the goal-oriented organisation of events that leads to closure, because it is deployed as an attraction that complements (and perhaps even displaces) the entertainment provided by the mystery narrative. While such material might appear to be an intrusion or a supplement, it is nevertheless a very important part of the pleasure provided by the B-Movie which needed to provide something for everyone as part of the overall package of entertainment on the cinema bill.

The cinematic vaudeville that the B-Movie offers can be considered, therefore, as a set of routines organised in the manner of a bill of entertainment in itself, providing some action, thrills, romance, mystery, suspense and comedy, as well as musical entertainment on occasions. Different films emphasise a particular aspect according to genre (thrills in horror, mystery or action in crime films), but they also provide other attractions so that, for example, *Congo Maisie* (1940), from MGM's 'Maisie' series, includes exotic adventure, song and dance routines, magic tricks and comedy to supplement its primary romance narrative. Such is the importance of cinematic vaudeville in B-Movies that in detective films the mystery that motivates the narrative becomes merely one of the routines. Indeed, the denouement usually creates a routine of its own, sometimes in the form of action, although most often it seems closer to a magic act, rather than a deductive explanation of events, with the detective performing a magician's 'reveal' when he names the criminal.[11] Thus, for example, Basil Rathbone's performance of the detection as Sherlock Holmes is just one part of the B-Movie bill, no different in many ways to the comedy act provided by Nigel Bruce's Dr Watson, who can even be considered to be more important within the B-Movie aesthetic because of the entertainment he provides. The organisation of material as cinematic vaudeville means that the B-Movie offers genre confusion similar to the form of pastiche that Dyer refers to as 'pasticcio'. In this style, combination, interruption and abundance are most significant: 'However much a pasticcio may have a dominant or underpinning formal tone or structure, or may make sense by virtue of implicit meaning, still much of the flavour resides in the sense of profusion' (Dyer, 2007: 19). The characteristics of diversity and distraction that accrue as a result of the accumulation of different textual components, which Dyer also sees as features of the 'circus, vaudeville, revue and early cinema programmes' (Ibid.: 16), applies significantly to the B-Movie. This is not to claim that this is the only place where combination or genre hybridity occurs because, as Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson have argued, genre hybridity can be found in most Hollywood films of the studio era in the use of the romance plot across all genres (1985: 16–17).

The films of the crime series seem particularly prone to profusion and combination and not only in their incorporation of suspense, thriller and espionage forms within a whodunnit mystery narrative. The need to delay the denouement means that the narratives are constantly distracted from their goal by the mystification that is characteristic of the genre but also by the incorporation of cross-generic material.

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Each crime series usually incorporates comedy through the use of an assistant (The Runt in the 'Boston Blackie' films, Watson in the 'Sherlock Holmes' series, Lee, Jimmy or Tommy Chan in 'Charlie Chan'), as well as in the use of inefficient police officers, both of which create comedy routines that have a burlesque or vaudevillian flavour, such as the routine Dr Watson performs with the Shallcrosses in *Terror by Night*, as well as farce or comedy of errors. In addition, the crime series provide action sequences and thrills in a melodramatic mode (very often in the form of nick-of-time rescues or fights in precarious situations such as on rooftops), romances, musical performances, and any other distractions or divagations appropriate to the situation in order to divert the film away from the movement towards closure. *The Falcon Out West*, for example, has as its narrative motor the investigation of the murder of a ranch-owner in New York, but it moves to the West in order to add western tropes to those of mystery, romance and slapstick humour. The same film also exemplifies the tendency of the crime series to shift away from their usual setting not only to vary the format by presenting an already used plot in a new location, but also to place the detective within new generic parameters. This is most obviously the case with the espionage films that most detectives found themselves within after the United States' entry into World War II, such as the Lone Wolf adventure *Passport to Suez* (1943), but can also be seen in the Gothic style of, for example, *The Scarlet Claw* (in which Sherlock Holmes finds himself in a village in Canada) and in the use of the milieu of the criminal underworld to evoke gangster figurations in *The Saint's Double Trouble* (1940) or the *noir*-mode in *The Falcon in San Francisco* (1946). In combination with the retardatory material that delays the denouement, this cinematic vaudeville suggests that the detective crime series of the period can be best understood in terms of a concept of narrative 'bafflement', both in the mystifications that provide confusions, but also in the way that these and the cinematic vaudeville delay, side-track or 'baffle' the linear plot with non-essential scenes or routines.

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