

CHAPTER ONE



Introduction: The Case

From William Powell to Humphrey Bogart—or debonair to tough; from Bruce Willis to William Petersen—or wisecracking to wise: the celluloid detective has evolved over time, processing society’s fears about crime and articulating debates about law enforcement and justice. The 1980s saw cinematic justice exacted by muscle and firepower; today it is pursued with science and brainpower—or what Agatha Christie’s sleuth Hercule Poirot called using “the little grey cells.” In the mid-1980s, William Petersen starred as detective Will Graham in *Manhunter* (Mann 1986), the first film adaptation of Thomas Harris’s novel *Red Dragon* (1981), which introduced the world to Dr. Hannibal “The Cannibal” Lector. The film was ahead of its time, bringing the criminalist and that which he hunts—the serial killer—to the big screen several years before the genre became pervasive in the mid-1990s. Today William Petersen produces and stars in one of the most popular television drama series in the world, airing in 100 countries: *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (Cole 3). Like *Manhunter*, *CSI* centers on the investigations of its detectives, including Gil Grissom (played by Petersen), who are criminalists—detectives who specialize in the analysis of physical evidence.

The criminalist is a modern-day incarnation of the classical sleuth first envisioned by Edgar Allan Poe in the 1840s with C. Auguste Dupin, the hero of a handful of “tales of ratiocination,” and popularized by Sir Arthur



FIGURE 1. Basil Rathbone as Sherlock Holmes. The classical detective: Popularized by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, the sleuth is perhaps most identified with actor Basil Rathbone, who played Holmes in film and radio from 1939 to 1946. Photo from author's collection.

Conan Doyle's famous detective Sherlock Holmes in the late 1800s. "I always watched Sherlock Holmes movies on Saturday afternoons," says Petersen. "I think it's fascinating to deal with people who are smart at something" (qtd. in Dickson 11). And being smart is the defining characteristic of the criminalist: he *or* she (and often, unlike in previous eras of the fictional detective, the criminalist can be a woman) is a well-educated professional whose most powerful weapons against crime are intelligence, observation, and deduction. In between the classical sleuth and the contemporary criminalist, however, is a long history of change and development in the kinds of heroes that have populated the genre. The genre's codes have adapted and altered with the changing society that consumes it and the industry that produces it, forming trends or subgenres specific to the social, historical, economic, and political moment. The first type of detective, the classical detective or sleuth, was introduced by Edgar Allan Poe in the 1840s with his hero Dupin, and was present on movie screens in the 1930s and 1940s in detective series. In American detective fiction of the 1920s and 1930s, the sleuth gave way to the private detective of the hardboiled variety, created by authors like Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, who made it onto the screen in softboiled versions in the 1930s and hardboiled in the 1940s *film noir*. The street-wise, solitary detective of the hardboiled story, however, was replaced by the police detective of the procedural by the 1940s. The 1950s saw the hero as neurotic and often corrupt; the late 1960s into the 1970s, a violent vigilante hero; the 1970s into the 1980s, a return to a *noir*-hero; the 1980s, a cop-action hero; and the 1990s and 2000s, an educated, intelligent, middle-class criminalist. Although other kinds of detectives existed during each of these moments, these were the dominant trends within the overarching genre of the detective film. At the center of each trend, however, has been a preoccupation with investigating the hero and—as the vast majority of detective films have focused on male heroes—with the masculinity of that hero. This study is an exploration of the detective film over the course of the genre's history in film and its representation of the men of detection.

THE CRIME SCENE KIT

Detecting the Genre

Feminist criticism has exposed the constructedness of femininity in cinema and also explored the relationship of the female spectator to the image,

which has, subsequently, inspired the exploration of cinema's relationship to other marginalized subjects. Homosexual, African American, and other types of marginalized masculinities have been addressed by critics but the construction of normative masculinity in the cinema has only more recently been the focus of critical debates about cinematic representations of masculinity.¹ Similarly, although genre studies is a vital topic within film studies, there have been few studies that have addressed the detective genre and those that do tend to focus on one specific moment of the genre—*film noir*.² With a focus on *noir*, film critics have often neglected to address the detective genre in film as a whole, especially detective films prior to the arrival of *noir* and those classical detective films that ran concurrently to *noir* in the 1940s.³ Moreover, the discussion of masculinity in the detective genre has been almost totally ignored by critics.⁴ This study is an attempt to redress this gap in scholarship with an examination of the evolution of the detective film—*noir* and otherwise—and its representations of masculinity.

Gender has been a dominant focus of film scholarship because of popular cinema's preoccupation with the construction of ideal images of femininity and masculinity. Film studies, thus, is a logical perspective from which to address the question of masculinity in the contemporary era. In this study, I explore the relationship of gender and genre, engaging with feminist criticism and theories of performance, the body, masquerade, and spectacle to examine the construction of masculinity in Hollywood film. The construction of heroic masculinity is also affected by the actor who embodies it, and a star's persona and career trajectory can shift as social attitudes toward masculinity and heroism shift. In contemporary film, Bruce Willis portrays detective-heroes with different connotations from those portrayed by Morgan Freeman; but a star's persona is modified through the roles that he plays, and those roles are sensitive to changes in social conceptions of heroism and masculinity. Thus, Willis played cop action-heroes in the 1980s and early 1990s but now plays less physical, more sensitive detectives that are still considered heroic. The studies of masculinity over the past decade or so have attempted to de-universalize the male subject by highlighting the way that the masculine "norm" can be seen as fragmented, changing, and contradictory (Lane et al. 1). Popular film reacts to changing social conceptions of masculinity in an attempt to re-imagine those fragmented, changing, and contradictory notions of masculinity into a unified and unproblematic image of masculinity for its audiences.

In order to offer a cohesive study on how the conception and valuation of masculinity has changed in American society, this book focuses on

popular, mainstream American film—more specifically, Hollywood film. Hollywood cinema is pervasive and exerts an influence not just in American culture but also around the world, where American popular cinema is predominant. Film is a powerful medium through which social values can be exported and emulated through cultural imperialism; however, it also offers a specific processing of American culture as a mainstream and popular entertainment. As a commercial entertainment that is produced with mass audiences and greatest box-office return in mind, Hollywood film presents mainstream rather than radical or controversial attitudes. This uniformity of mores and values in the fictional Hollywood world creates a consistency in representation across the films it produces. Although no longer a cohesive industry as it was during the Studio Era under the influence of the Production Code, which dictated cinematic content through a regulatory framework of self-censorship, Hollywood film production, nonetheless, still focuses on many of the elements that defined the Classical Hollywood style that dominated the studio era: genre films with goal-oriented and character-driven narrative, strong closure and often happy endings, and a visual style that strives to clarify narrative, character motivation, and theme.⁵

The focus of this book, however, is not Hollywood film as a whole but a single genre—films that can be defined as detective films. According to Christine Gledhill, genre is a particularly useful concept, filling the gap left by the fragmentation of grand theory by providing the conceptual space where certain questions can be pursued through the intersection of texts and aesthetics with industry and institution, history and society, culture and audiences (221). Genres are fictional worlds but they do not remain within the bounds of fiction; instead, their conventions cross over into critical and cultural discourse and can be seen as an alternative public sphere (*ibid.* 241). Popular film is such because it resonates and has cultural currency with audiences through its reflection—or, just as often, deflection—of social concerns and anxieties with heroes who overcome every problem with which they come face to face, whether finding love or bringing to justice international villains, problems that are easily resolved by the end of the narrative.

The detective genre has traditionally been a male-centered one based on the social assumption that heroism, villainy, and violence are predominantly masculine characteristics. Although there has been a proliferation of the female detective in recent decades in films, television series, and literature of the detective genre, the vast majority of protagonists throughout the history of the genre have been male.⁶ Not only is the genre male-centered, it is

also hero-centered, tending to adhere to a structure of binary oppositions—good/bad, civilized/uncivilized, law/crime, order/chaos, and heroes/villains. This book is concerned with the representation of masculinity in popular film; therefore, the detective genre's tendency to delineate character, narrative, and thematic concerns in terms of oppositions allows for a confident examination of positive and negative conceptions of masculinity. Not all detective films make absolute distinctions between these oppositions, and the examination of the indeterminate, "gray" area between heroism and anti-heroism also proves illuminating in terms of the social mores and attitudes toward crime and law that it can reveal. This book explores the changes in the conventions of the detective film in terms of how the genre processes changes in social conceptions and expectations of masculinity. As Harry Brod asks: "What do changing styles in genres such as adventure and detective stories tell us about masculinities?" ("Case" 43–44). The Western, the gangster film, and the war film are also male-centered genres; however, these genres exist only in occasional and intermittent cycles, whereas the detective genre has existed consistently in Hollywood film since its conception.

The genre of the Hollywood detective film has continued to be popular with, and relevant to, audiences for two main reasons: first, because the issues and themes explored in the genre are central to contemporary American society; and second, the genre is infinitely flexible in adapting itself to changing social and cultural conditions (Shadoian 1). A genre is a body of films that share a set of conventions, including formal elements such as themes, types of action, and character types; and visual elements such as settings, costume, and props (Buscombe 14). Thus, a detective film can be identified by a narrative that follows an investigation and a protagonist that functions as a detective-figure. As Rick Altman states, for a group of films to constitute a genre they must share a common topic and a common structure (23). In the detective film, the common topic is the investigation of a crime and the common structure is the detective as protagonist driving the narrative forward to a resolution of the investigation.

Beyond those two fundamental elements, however, detective films can cover a wide range of films and their content and conventions can crossover into other genres, making the attempt to define the group of films as a genre difficult. In fact, many critics regard the detective film as a subcategory of the overarching genre of the crime film along with the gangster film, the thriller, and the social-problem film. The detective film has much in common with the gangster film because of the shared setting of a contemporary urban

milieu and the similar address of the conflict between social order and anarchy, between individual morality and the common good (Schatz 26). The detective film's concern, however, with crime is most often an oppositional one: the gangster film aligns audience sympathies with the criminal while the detective film does so with the law. This inclination to champion one side of the law or the other is dependent upon the type of protagonist that occupies the center of the film. Narrative film functions to offer the audience a point of identification with the protagonist and thus align the audience's sympathies with him/her: the gangster film has a criminal as its protagonist and, thus, the audience's sympathies will be marshaled to his quest for personal fulfillment in opposition to the law; on the other hand, the detective film with its representative of the law (whether an official one or not) as the protagonist allies the audience's sympathies to the side of law, justice, and order.

Nicole Rafter argues that the overarching label of the crime film should not be regarded as a genre because the various films that make up its subcategories—for example, detective films, gangster films, courtroom dramas, and cop and prison movies—are too diverse in their features and concerns to be united under one genre heading. Instead, she suggests that the crime film should be seen as a category that encompasses a number of genres, including the detective genre (Rafter 5). Thomas Leitch holds the opposing view—that the overarching category of crime film should be regarded as a more cohesive genre than critics have considered it heretofore, one that includes gangster films, detective films, and the much-ignored crime-comedy (289). He argues that an investigation of the connections between these subgenres rather than their differences illuminates why certain subgenres are popular at specific times as the product of specific factors—from the economic imperatives of the film studios that produce them to the changing attitudes toward the culture of the audiences that consume them (295–96). Leitch states that every crime film has three main roles—the criminal, the victim, and the avenger or detective—and that the different subgenres of the crime genre focus on different angles of the triangular relationship between villain, victim, and detective; thus, the gangster film is firmly aligned with the criminal, the “wrong man” film with the victim, and the detective film with the investigator. While I agree with Leitch that specific subgenres of the overarching crime genre have been dominant at specific times in the course of film history, my interest is in the detective genre (or detective subgenre of the crime genre, according to Leitch) because of its focus on heroic masculinity.

There are many ways to group films into genres: by their emotional effect on viewers (for example, the horror film or the weepie), by their content (for example, the science-fiction film or musical), by their themes (for example, the social problem film), by their setting (for example, the Western), or by their protagonist (for example, the gangster film and the detective film). Genres can also be determined by the labels that the film industry places on its films, such as the musical, the Western, or the gangster film, and labels that critics place on films, often retrospectively. For example, feminist and psychoanalytic critics in the 1980s applied the term “melodrama” to films of the Classical Hollywood period that were considered, at the time of their release, woman’s films and “weepies” when the term melodrama was applied to action-adventure films.⁷ The label *film noir* was also one applied retrospectively by French critics to describe a body of Hollywood films produced during and after World War II that Hollywood itself had defined as detective films, crime melodramas, or thrillers at the time of their release. Critics have argued whether or not *film noir* is a genre at all or whether it is merely a style or movement in film—and then debated its parameters.

Film noir has proven a difficult genre or category of film to delineate and different critics include different films in their definitions of *noir*. For example, in Charles Higham and Joel Greenberg’s 1968 book *Hollywood in the Forties*, the films that are now seen as exemplifying the genre of *noir*—such as *The Maltese Falcon* (Huston 1941), *The Big Sleep* (Hawks 1946), *The Blue Dahlia* (Marshall 1946), *Murder, My Sweet* (Dmytryk 1944), *The Glass Key* (Heisler 1942), *Dark Passage* (Davis 1947), *This Gun for Hire* (Tuttle 1942), *The Big Clock* (Farrow 1948), and *Gilda* (Vidor 1946)—are not listed in their chapter on *noir* (entitled “Black Cinema”) but in the chapter on melodrama. Similarly, the films that are now regarded as melodramas, like *Ivy* (Wood 1947) and *So Evil My Love* (Allen 1948), are instead described as *film noir*. As James Naremore points out, the use of the term *film noir* was not widespread until the 1970s and was a creation of postmodern culture in a belated rereading of Classical Hollywood (14). According to Paul Schrader, *film noir* is a group of films defined not by setting and conflict but by tone and mood; it is not a genre at all but a style and a time period (169–70). The period of *film noir* is generally considered to have run from 1941, with the release of John Huston’s *The Maltese Falcon*, to 1958, with the release of Orson Welles’s *Touch of Evil*.

There has been much debate since the supposed return of *noir* as to what actually constitutes *noir* and whether it existed beyond the 1950s. While some critics argue that a new group of films appeared a decade after

Touch of Evil that attempted to replicate or reference classic *film noir*—for example, Leighton Grist argues that *Harper* (Smight 1966) is the starting point of “modern” *film noir* (267)—others suggest a continuation of *noir* rather than its termination in the late 1950s—for example, Foster Hirsch (“Detours” 15–18) and C. Jerry Kutner (287–88). The idea of *film noir* as a genre rather than a style (*chiaroscuro* lighting) or theme (social critique) seemed increasingly justified as neo-*noir* emerged in the 1960s and 1970s and was regarded as commonplace by the 1980s. Contemporary film’s use of *noir* elements to evoke *noir* associations helps to solidify what originally constituted *film noir* in the postwar period.

The labeling of *film noir* is problematic as genre critics rarely agree on what genres exist and to which genre specific films belong. Complicating this, as Steve Neale argues, is the tendency for individual films to participate in several genres at once (*Genre* 25). This hybrid nature of films is more the rule than the exception as film producers/directors borrow from other genres to differentiate a film from its generic predecessors and to make it innovative and interesting. For example, rarely are the films that I discuss referred to as detective films. The label “detective film” seems to have become a pejorative one, evoking the image of a sleuth sporting a deerstalker and magnifying glass in a predictable plot of investigation and solution through examining minutely important clues and interviewing witnesses—in other words, the classical mystery that one’s parents (or grandparents) would have read. There are no audience thrills, social relevance, or brave heroes in this conception of the genre. Instead, many of the films I discuss, despite having detective-heroes who investigate crimes, tend to be labeled as thrillers, dramas, or crime films. For example, on the Internet Movie Database *L.A. Confidential* (Hanson 1997) is described as belonging to the genres of crime, drama, mystery, and thriller; *The Sixth Sense* (Shyamalan 1999) to thriller, drama, and horror; *Sleepy Hollow* (Burton 1999) to horror, mystery, and romance; *Devil in a Blue Dress* (Franklin 1995) to crime, thriller, and mystery; *The Bone Collector* (Noyce 1999) to mystery, drama, and thriller; and *Memento* (Nolan 2000) to drama (www.imdb.com). On the official Web site for *The Bone Collector*, the film’s director Phillip Noyce describes the film: “It’s a love story. It’s a thriller. It’s a detective story” (www.thebonecollector.com). This demonstrates not just the hybridity of individual films, but also the difficulty in categorizing them or assigning them to one genre.

This inability to readily delineate the detective genre or separate it from broader and related genres is indicative of the critique of generic labels

as straightforward. For example, technically *Citizen Kane* (Welles 1941) can be defined as a detective film with a narrative that revolves around an investigating-figure—the reporter Thompson—and a mystery to solve—“Who is Charles Foster Kane?” Although the reporter’s investigation may be the driving force behind the narrative, Thompson is an almost invisible figure (his face is quite literally hidden in shadow and is never revealed to the audience) and in the end it is Kane who fulfils the role of protagonist rather than the detective. Similarly, the spy, such as James Bond, often plays “detective” as his missions involve solving a mystery; however, with the spy there is greater emphasis on action—as when Bond attempts to elude the villain and his minions—than on the skills of detection. Genre is also affected and determined by industrial and cultural factors more so than the seemingly organic evolution of a specific kind of narrative. Altman describes a genre as multifaceted: a blueprint, a structure, a label, and a contract (14). Therefore, the idea of genre can be seen as a tool used by the industry to “pre-sell” a film to audiences: as a blueprint and a structure the idea of genre can be used to develop a film along pre-established lines that have proven successful with audiences; then the generic label that can be attached to the film functions as a contract between the producers and audience that the film will deliver the expectations audiences have of that generic label.

The continual presence of the detective genre throughout cinematic history and its popularity with contemporary audiences is due, in part, to the pleasure that the genre offers audiences—although the specific kind of pleasure can vary among subgenres. Classical detective films of the 1940s offered a reassuring picture of the restoration of order and a nonviolent and bloodless image of murder whereas the *noir*-detective films of the same period offered a much darker and more violent image of urban society, offering a critique of its social moment that was left almost unexplored in Classical Hollywood films. Although contemporary neo-*noir* films echo the former with a particular *noir* look, they rarely explore the latter, offering little substantial criticism of present-day society. Instead they offer audiences the pleasure of narratives concerned with anti-heroes or criminal protagonists and the spectacle of violence, as well as an acknowledgment of the generic structures that neo-*noir* self-consciously plays with. What the various trends of the detective film have in common are particular kinds of pleasure—although in differing quantities and relationships: audience participation in the construction of the narrative, identification with both sides of the law, and the lack of ambiguity of the classical narrative structure.

Narrative and the Detective Genre

Tzvetan Todorov argues that the classical detective story, or whodunnit, consists of two different narratives: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation (44). In *Murder on the Orient Express* (Lumet 1974) the action of the film is literally brought to a halt until the story of the crime has been reconstructed through the investigation of the famed Belgian sleuth, Hercule Poirot (Albert Finney). A snowfall blocks the railway tracks shortly after the murder occurs and brings the train to a standstill; the investigation then proceeds. It is only at the precise moment of Poirot's revelation of the identity of the murderer that the snowplow reaches the train, clears the tracks, and the train whistles and shudders forth once again on its journey. Although such a literal halting of action is rare in detective stories, there is always a sense that the characters cannot resume their normal lives until the story of the crime is reconstructed and the criminal is brought to justice. The narrative of the crime in the classical detective story tends to occur in the present, usually a retelling of the events as the memoirs of a character who was present at the scene, often in the capacity of the assistant or companion to the sleuth who investigates; but this narrative of the investigation is separated in time from the narrative of the crime that occurred at some point in the past. There is, therefore, a temporal gap between the events of the story and the telling of the story. Todorov argues that this gap disappears with the advent of the second form of the detective novel, which peaked in America around World War II: the thriller, or what the French referred to as *série noir*, or what is now more commonly referred to as the hardboiled detective novel (47). The thriller sets the story at the time of its occurrence, rather than as a retrospective, and suppresses the first story—the story of the crime—while highlighting the second—the story of the investigation.

Both these types of the detective story survive today in literature and film; however, the pure form of the whodunnit as established by Edgar Allan Poe, popularized by Arthur Conan Doyle, and continued by Agatha Christie has not survived except in rare instances.⁸ Even the contemporary adaptations of the classical novels—for example, the *Agatha Christie's Poirot* television series (1989–) starring David Suchet—abandon the framing structure of the memoir to recount the narrative of the investigation. Todorov further argues that, whereas the classical detective novel functions to create a curiosity in the reader by beginning the narrative with an effect (the crime) and looking for the cause (the perpetrator), the thriller instead

creates suspense for the reader following a more direct cause-and-effect relationship between events (47). Rather than establishing a mystery that needs to be solved like the whodunnit, the thriller follows the investigation and capitalizes on the thrills and fears induced in the reader as the narrative questions whether or not the criminal will be brought to justice before he/she commits further crimes. In this sense, both the classical and the thriller traditions have survived in contemporary detective stories but most often are married to one another. The goal of many contemporary detective films remains the discovery of “whodunnit,” although they are rarely the “locked room” variety of crime story with a sleuth as the investigator. But the contemporary detective film does combine the original intentions of both forms of the detective story—to instil curiosity and to evoke thrills in the consumer. As David Bordwell indicates, the detective genre aims to promote three emotional effects: curiosity about the past, suspense about upcoming events, and surprise with respect to unexpected disclosures (65). To promote all three emotional states the narration must limit the viewer’s knowledge by restricting it to that of the investigator’s.

The detective genre illustrates how in film the *syuzhet* (plot) manipulates the *fabula* (story). The *fabula* is the story from which the plot is derived, and is a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events; the *syuzhet*, on the other hand, is the actual arrangement and presentation of the story in the film (Bordwell 49–50). Like Todorov, Bordwell agrees that the detective tale is composed of two stories: the story of the crime—which is composed of the cause of the crime, the commission of the crime (indicating the identity of the criminal), the concealment of the crime, and the discovery of the crime—and the story of the investigation—which is composed of the beginning of the investigation, the phases of the investigation, the elucidation of the crime, the identification of the criminal, and the consequences of the identification (64). In the detective genre, the telling of the story of the crime followed by the story of the investigation in chronological order would erase any sense of suspense and much of the mystery. It is the withholding of crucial events of the story of the crime by the *syuzhet*—i.e., gaps—that promotes curiosity, suspense, and surprise in the detective film. The basic structure of the detective film narrative begins with the crime and its concealment, and then the majority of the story follows the investigation and the resolution of the mystery surrounding the crime. As the story progresses, facts and clues are revealed, but they are revealed sporadically and among other information that may or may not be relevant to the detection of the crime (“retardations”). As Bordwell states, the detective film “justifies the

gaps and retardations by controlling knowledge, self-consciousness, and communicativeness," thus these delays in information are justified by the degree of subjectivity of the narration (65).

A purely objective and omniscient narrator could reveal all to the reader at the beginning of the story, his/her knowledge of the events being complete; but this would ruin the suspense of the detective story and the pleasure for the reader that the suspense supplies. It would go against one of the original "rules" of the detective story: the rule of "fair play"—that the story should provide readers with enough clues to solve the mystery themselves (Waugh 160). All classical detective stories, therefore, are told to the reader by a subjective narrator whose knowledge of the events is limited: the "Watson-figure," inspired by Sherlock Holmes' companion Dr. Watson. In the literary versions of the classical detective story, the subjectivity of the narration is defined by the Watson-figure's recounting, in the form of a memoir, the events of the investigation of the detective. In the film versions and in later literary incarnations of the classical detective story, the literal subjectivity of the narration is abandoned for a more subtle, over-the-shoulder mode of narration; but there is still a restriction to the reader/viewer's access to the workings of the sleuth's superior intellect, and identification is often established with the companion rather than the detective him/herself. The knowledge of the reader/viewer is similarly restricted to that of the private detective of the hardboiled narrative, since he tends, despite the accompanying voice-over in the film versions, to keep his elucidations to himself. The subjective narration of the detective story does not necessarily mean that the novel is told in the first person, nor are there necessarily point-of-view shots in the film attributed to the detective or a voice-over narration spoken by the detective. However, the narration of the story and the relaying of the information are attributed to a specific character who is the center of consciousness for the story. It is his/her presence in the story that defines the quantity of information relayed to the reader/viewer as he/she is the character with which the reader/viewer is asked to identify. This narrational position in the novel or film is actualized in an over-the-shoulder point of view that follows the character who acts as the center of consciousness for the enunciation of the narrative. Some detective novels and films do have first-person narrators and point-of-view shots. In the case of film, however, this is not typical for the genre.

Two *films noirs* that did attempt such an explicit identification are *The Lady in the Lake* (Montgomery 1947), in which the camera offers the subjective point of view of the detective for the duration of the film, and

Dark Passage (Davis 1947), in which the camera is positioned for an extended sequence at the beginning of the film so that the heroes (Robert Montgomery and Humphrey Bogart, respectively) are rarely shown in front of the camera but rather as the driving force behind it. However, these experiments in visually representing the subjective point of view of the detective-hero were unsuccessful and not repeated. Narrative cinema is propelled by the actions of a film's protagonist, and that need for action relies on the physical presence of that character/star in front of the camera, which also establishes a visual identification for the spectator with that character. In *The Lady in the Lake* and *Dark Passage*, the absence of the protagonist as the subject in front of the camera constitutes the lack of a center of consciousness for the narrative and a lack of identification for the spectator. For film audiences, it would appear, the presence of the star in the role of the detective as a visual point of subjective identification was very necessary as part of the appeal of the genre.

Every trend of the genre has been very much concerned with narrative—namely, the reconstruction of the story of the crime—and heroes that restore order to the social disorder incited by criminal behavior specifically through the construction of a cohesive narrative of the crime. The construction of a cohesive narrative was essential to the classical detective story with the climax of the film being the “scene of revelation” in which the sleuth reconstructed the story of the crime—the story revealed literally through a flashback sequence in which all the missing pieces of the puzzle are filled in and put in their proper place. Suddenly the detective not only puts all the clues—the pieces of the puzzle—together but puts them together in the proper sequence/pattern that clears up the mystery surrounding the crime and also identifies the perpetrator of the crime. *The Usual Suspects* (Singer 1995) was the first of contemporary crime films to play with these generic conventions and exploit audience expectations in an obvious and meaningful way, garnering critical acclaim and popularity with audiences because of it. Contemporary audiences are overly familiar with the “rules” of the detective genre, and *The Usual Suspects* offered a challenge, playing with viewers' expectations and predetermined knowledge. As the film's star Kevin Spacey explains:

This was the experiment that Bryan Singer and Chris McQuarrie did on an audience with *The Usual Suspects*. They said: “Let's see if audiences are as smart as we think they are. Smarter than most people treat them. So let's use an audience's intelligence about movies. They

know movies, they go to movies, they watch movies over and over again, they know dialogue from movies, they know archetypes, they know plotlines, they know storylines, they know where movies are going. Let's take all this incredible intelligence that an audience has about movies, and use it against them." (Southam 98)

The detective-hero, Agent Kujan (Chazz Palminteri) presents his "scene of revelation" after interrogating Verbal Kint (Kevin Spacey) based on the information supplied to him in Verbal's recounting of the events leading up to the heist and his own interpretation of that information. But while the revelation of "whodunnit" seems logical from the facts as they were told to Kujan and the audience, the facts on which the deductions are drawn prove to be fabricated. The audience believes the narrative because of the preconception that seeing is believing: we are shown, rather than merely told, Verbal's narrative in a series of flashbacks and, therefore, we assume that the events narrated have, in fact, occurred. At the end of the film it is revealed that Verbal's narrative was partially or wholly fabricated, but the film does not necessarily break the rule of "fair play." This is achieved through the alignment of the camera wholly with Verbal as the narrator, a relationship of oral and visual narration made explicit in the film's flashback sequences. The film does not obscure but instead highlights that the camera reveals specific events and conceals others.

In the first scene, the events of the heist at the harbor are shown: Dean Keaton (Gabriel Byrne) meets Keyzer Soze and is killed by him. Although the camera seems to suggest that it shares Keaton's point of view, it only reveals Soze's hand and parts of his body—but not his face—despite the fact that Keaton can see much more; therefore, the point of view belongs to someone other than Keaton. The scene ends mysteriously, with a close-up of rope and tackle, a shot that is held for an atypically long period of time. In the second telling of the same scene near the end of the film, the significance of the rope and tackle is revealed: it is Verbal's hiding place at the moment of Keaton's murder. Therefore, it was his point of view that the camera revealed in the first instance—not Keaton's. In the re-showing of this scene, certain discrepancies in Verbal's narration are made apparent, which, mirrored by inconsistencies in the cinematography, suggest Verbal is lying in at least one of the versions of the story.⁹ It is revealed in the end, however, that he is, in fact, Keaton's murderer and that both versions were false. Some viewers may feel cheated in watching *The Usual Suspects* because all that is shown is not "the truth." But because of the explicit connection drawn



FIGURE 2. Will Petersen and Marg Helgenberger in *CSI*. Male and female, black and white, young and old, middle-class and educated: *CSI*'s heroes like Gil Grissom (Will Petersen) and Catherine Willows (Marg Helgenberger) reassure contemporary audiences that catching criminals is a science. Photo from author's collection.

between Verbal's spoken narration and the camera's visual narration—and the fact that both contain discrepancies—the film can justify its “trick” ending. *The Usual Suspects* began a trend that marked the beginning of a new cycle of detective films in contemporary Hollywood: a cycle of films that not only acknowledged and exploited the audience's accumulated knowledge of films and the detective genre, but that also gave equal importance to the puzzle of the narrative—and the gruesome spectacle of violence that is a distinguishing feature of the new era of the genre.

The classical detective gathered all the suspects into one place and revealed to them the identity of the killer; but this scene of revelation was a recounting of the facts as they occurred rather than an attempt on the hero's part to identify with the perpetrator of the crime and experience the crime through his eyes.¹⁰ The contemporary criminalist is able to enter into and/or manipulate the literal space of the crime in an attempt to occupy the position of the criminal or—in the case of *Crossing Jordan* (2001)—the victim, or—in the case of *CSI* (2000)—the murder weapon. In the first few seasons of television's *Crossing Jordan*, the solution to the mystery would be, in part, arrived at through a game played between Jordan (Jill Hennessey) and her father, the ex-cop (Ken Howard), whereby one of them would pretend to be the victim and the other the killer. What followed was an imagined flashback sequence to the crime in which Jordan and her father replace the real participants; if the scenario did not seem to be correct, then another scenario would be reenacted until a logical conclusion was reached. In *CSI*, the “reading” of the cadaver and/or crime scene leads to an oral—accompanied by a visualized—reconstruction of the crime in which the cadaver is seen alive and then killed again. These sequences are done with digital effects; for example, the camera—and viewer—follows the passage of a bullet through a wall and into the head of a sleeping child.

Mark Seltzer nicknames the criminalist “the mindhunter” who, like Poe's sleuth Dupin, tries to get into the mind of the killer he seeks and tries to simulate the killer's experience in performing his murders. In the detective film, this entering of the space and sharing the criminal's perspective is literalized. In *Under Suspicion* (Hopkins 2000) Victor Benezet (Morgan Freeman) uses Henry Hearst (Gene Hackman) and his account of the discovery of the crime scene to enter the space of the crime—literally. Henry sits in Victor's office as he begins his account of how he came to find the body of a young girl. The camera moves into a close-up of his eyes as his flashback will offer his point of view of the incident. The flashback reveals him jogging with his neighbor's dog up the path by his house. Jump cuts

and the repetition of various moments of the sequence highlight the patchiness of Henry's recollection of the event. The camera cuts back to the police station as Henry details his actions that day. As we re-enter the flashback, Henry—in the flashback—speaks the words that Henry—in the police station—is speaking. He says, "We took the path by my house like always." The jump cuts and the dialogue bridges collapse time and space, allowing the present to enter into the space of the past. It also prepares the audience for the moment when Victor, the detective, appears in the flashback next to Henry. As Henry jogs past the bottom of the stone steps, Victor appears in the bushes and watches the dog run off the path when it smells the corpse in the woods. Back in his office, Victor stands behind Henry as he tries to share the man's point of view. In the flashback, as Henry kneels beside the girl's body, Victor also materializes on the other side of the victim and asks Henry questions about his discovery. It is as if the two men have returned to the scene of the crime, as it was when it was discovered, to discuss the physical evidence. The camera then takes up the position of Henry, and Victor confronts the camera and the audience in a direct address intended for Henry.¹¹

The contemporary detective film takes advantage of the popularity of films, such as *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino 1994), that disrupt or obviously manipulate the realist narrative with jumps in time, space, and logic to relate the detective story in a more dramatic way. However, just as in the classical detective story, firm narrative closure is necessary. If the criminal attempts to construct a false narrative—i.e., like Verbal Kint—with misleading clues or the lack thereof, the detective offers the reader/viewer the "truth"—the "real" story of what occurred. In *Along Came a Spider* (Tamahori 2001), a decoy kidnapper, Gary Sonjei, is used by the real criminal, Jezzie Flanagan (Monica Potter), to keep Detective Alex Cross (Morgan Freeman) off her scent as she pursues her intended victim. In *Murder By Numbers* (Schroeder 2002), the two young killers (Ryan Gosling and Michael Pitt) attempt to commit the perfect murder with a trail of false clues that point to a different kind of killer. In *The Bone Collector* (Noyce 1999), the killer (Leland Orser) is recreating the illustrations from a book on Victorian murders—literally, from a narrative. The detective's organization of facts, clues, and testimony—whether seemingly significant, random, or misleading—into a cause-and-effect, linear, and logical story brings a sense of conclusion to the mystery but, more importantly, a sense of comfort to the audience that, as civilized beings, we retain a mastery over the world in which we live no matter how complex, violent, or chaotic it seems.

Detecting Social Change

The genre's continued presence on screen and popularity with audiences, however, is also due, in large part, to its specific ability to change with the times. As social attitudes toward policing, law, and crime have altered, the detective genre has engaged these changes. As Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner state: "Genre films have been some of the most powerful instruments of ideology. [. . .] But the close tie between genre films and social ideology means as well that genre films are among the most fragile forms, the most vulnerable to the effects of social change" (76). The longevity of a genre depends not so much on the repetition of the conventions of the genre as on the differences—the innovations—that make each film new and exciting. As Altman argues, change must occur within a genre; otherwise it would go sterile (21). The issues of law and order, crime and its detection, are ongoing social concerns and will always have relevance to audiences, especially when packaged in films that offer a certain kind of social commentary at the same time as pleasurable entertainment. Social and historical factors alter the emphasis, themes, and protagonists of the detective genre, leading to new subgenres and cycles of the genre and also to new interest for audiences.

Genres do evolve over time, but they also tend to adhere to the more global codes of Hollywood film in general: cause-and-effect logic, character-driven narratives, self-effacing cinematography, narrative closure, emotional identification with protagonists, evil punished and innocence rewarded, and heterosexual coupling. As Ruth Vasey explains, "[I]f the movie is a product of Hollywood we know that the fiction will be governed by a set of narrative and representational conventions that will override the social, geographic, and historical characteristics of its nominal locale" (3). As well, broader cultural myths about heroism can also remain relatively unaffected by social change: the frontier hero was the inspiration for the hardboiled private eye and also retributive heroes like "Dirty" Harry and Rambo. As contemporary critics of genre have argued, genre is less an organic evolution of film narratives than a result of negotiation between producers and consumers of film to ensure that the popularity and success of one film will lead to others like it in an attempt to mimic its success.¹² As certain trends do well at the box office, more films will be produced within that trend; similarly, if audiences enjoy one film, they will undoubtedly go to see another film that purports to be in the same vein.¹³ However, a film cannot be seen as belonging to a genre without containing some of the elements associated

specifically with that genre: in the detective film a crime must be committed, a mystery must surround that crime, and a protagonist must investigate the crime and solve the mystery.

That said, one of the aims of this study is to problematize the notion of genre in terms of looking for a category that can contain a wide variety of films over a long period of time. Narratives that contain the preceding list of conventions—a crime, a mystery, and a detective—can all be seen as falling under the umbrella of the detective genre; however, the detective genre has undergone many cycles of development over the decades, and each cycle of films can be seen, more or less, as an autonomous subgenre or trend—films that have much more in common with other kinds of film from that social moment than with detective films from another decade. As John Cawelti explains:

A formula is a combination or synthesis of a number of specific cultural conventions with a more universal story form or archetype. [. . .] But in order for these patterns to work, they must be embodied in figures, settings, and situations that have appropriate meanings for the culture which produces them. (6)

Thus, although all detective films may deliberate themes of law and order, heroism and villainy, the commitment to one side of the debate or the other will change over time in relation to shifting social opinion. For example, the gangster film of the early 1930s offered a sympathetic image, if not a glorification, of criminal behavior by aligning the audience with the criminal as the “hero” of the film, while the G-Men pictures of the mid- to late-1930s firmly aligned audiences with the detectives who brought those criminals to justice. Similarly, the mid-1990s saw a resurgence of sympathy for, if not veneration of, villainy with the popularity of screen villains like Hannibal Lecter, John Doe, and Keyser Soze. While different and conflicting representations of masculinity and heroism will exist in different films at the same moment and often even within the same genre, most often one specific trend within a genre will be predominant. Similarly, the presence of particular stars in the role of the detective-hero affects the construction of that protagonist’s heroism and masculinity as certain stars carry with them specific associations of masculinity. Thus, both these factors—the social moment and the star—affect a film’s characters, themes, and plot. For example, the prison film *Lock Up* (Flynn 1989) starring Sylvester Stal-

lone has much more in common with the 1980s cop-action film and Stallone's previous roles as Rocky and Rambo than with a prison film of the 1990s like *The Shawshank Redemption* (Darabont 1994) starring Tim Robbins, which itself has more in common with the "sensitive men" films of the early 1990s.

Thus, in this study, rather than search for cohesion across the decades of detective films, my aim is to highlight the individual dominant trends—those trends that were most prolific and more popular at a specific time. It is my contention that a film's thematic concerns are determined less by a genre's conventions and more by contemporaneous social concerns, and that by examining the cohesive trends within a genre—trends defined by specific thematic concerns—the development of that genre in relation to social shifts can be identified. My interest in the detective genre, thus, is not to explore the genre as a cohesive corpus of films and generate a list of films that can "count" as detective films—in other words, explore the similarities of the films I discuss—but rather to highlight their differences. According to Nick Browne, film genre criticism has often only attempted to regulate, classify, and explain film through genre; instead, he argues it should consider film genres as gravitating toward "specific assemblages of local coherencies—discreet, heterotopic instances of a complex cultural politics" (xi). Increasingly, film genre scholarship has attempted to explore genres as products of specific historical, economic, political, and industrial moments rather than as a cohesive body of films that extends over great periods of time. For example, Vivian Sobchack takes up Marc Vernet's point that *film noir* is not easily definable as a genre and instead she explores *noir* as a cultural mode related to changes in American culture around World War II (129). Similarly, my aim in this study is to investigate the dominant trends or cycles that, in themselves, offer a cohesive treatment of masculinity in relation to good and evil/law and order as the hero, but in comparison with one another demonstrate shifts in social conceptions of masculinity.

In doing so, I will challenge the idea of a cohesive genre as each trend/cycle has arisen from a specific moment as a result of cultural circumstances and, as such, differs from the trends that precede and succeed it. The erudite and upper-class Nick Charles as played by William Powell in *The Thin Man* (Dyke 1934) differs greatly from vengeful and violent Harry Callahan played by Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry* (Siegel 1971), and Eastwood's portrayal of Terry McCaleb in *Blood Work* (Eastwood 2002) differs from his earlier role. The question to address then is, "Why

were these trends dominant and why at those moments in time?" The answer is that each trend offered a processing and negotiation of the social change and upheaval of the time, although not necessarily in a direct reflection. Shifts in politics, economy, gender relations, race relations, and important events have an impact on how a society views itself and, in doing so, this view colors and informs the cultural products of that society. Each type of fictional detective has a different relationship to the law and the crime committed: some are official investigators, others amateur; some are paid to investigate, others get involved for personal reasons; some have special skills or experience in investigations, others are just average people with no investigating experience; some are clearly defined as moral men, others as almost indistinguishable from the criminals they pursue. These differing relationships between the protagonist and the law—between masculinity and heroism—reflect the themes of the specific trend to which they belong and process the specific social concerns and attitudes toward masculinity and crime of their time.

The genre is about containment and closure: the detective film presents a problem—the mystery—to be investigated and resolved by the end of the film. The detective film not only wraps up the case by the conclusion of the film but also the issues it raises, including questions of gender, race, law and order, heroism and villainy. No matter how gray these issues may seem at the beginning of the narrative, the majority of Hollywood detective films firmly identify good with the law and evil with the villain who transgresses it. As Barry Keith Grant says of the success of films like *Thelma and Louise* (Scott 1991) featuring "other" kinds of heroes, "The essentially monolithic construction of white masculinity in genre movies has been fractured by the emergence of other voices, other representations," including women, black men, and the working class ("Strange" 188). However, the detective film tends to offer conservative messages about race, class, and gender—bringing closure to anxieties raised in the course of the narrative about white masculinity's place in today's society. The white hero's masculinity is validated and confirmed; the black hero's race is rarely an issue and he could just have readily been portrayed as white; and the femininity of the female detective and that of the victim is realigned with social expectations—the former through marriage and/or motherhood and the latter through death. Lastly, the genre also offers closure in terms of social fears about crime, as the villains—no matter how seemingly unstoppable—are eventually brought to justice. The detective offers the ultimate line of defence for society from evil

and, thus, the detective film offers fantasies of resolution for society's anxieties concerning crime and gender. Through an investigation of the evolution of the detective film—and its relationship to changing social conceptions of masculinity—perhaps we can detect men.