Graphic Evidence: The Referential Value of Photographs in Crime Fiction and Film[1]

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1. INTRODUCTION

Photographic evidence is ubiquitous in crime novels and films. Photographs often serve as main leads for whole investigations: Philip Marlowe and Ezekiel ("Easy") Rawlins, the private investigators of, respectively, Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*[2] and Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress*[3] are asked to locate persons—respectively Velma Valento and Daphne Monet—they initially see only on photographic prints. In Constantin Costa-Gavras's *Music Box*, the Nazi past of Michael J. Laszlo, a Hungarian American immigrant, is exposed when his own daughter, in a misguided attempt to exculpate him, retrieves photographic archives that compellingly link him to WWII atrocities.[4] Similarly, the supremely effective forensic scientists of CBS's TV series *CSI* resort to a vast range of quasi-photographic techniques (X-ray photography, luminol reflection, microscopic analysis)—a profusion of imaging devices that likely exceeds the resources of actual crime labs.[5] John Anderton (Tom Cruise), the protagonist of Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report*,

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[2] Raymond Chandler, *Farewell, My Lovely* (1940; New York: Random House, 1976) 26.

[3] Walter Mosley, *Devil in a Blue Dress*, *The Walter Mosley Omnibus* (1990; London: Macmillan, 1996) 18.

[4] *Music Box*, dir. Constantin Costa-Gavras, perf. Jessica Lange and Armin Mueller-Stahl (Carolco, 1989).

[5] *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, creat. Anthony E. Zuiker, prod. Jerry Bruckheimer, perf. William Petersen and Marg Helgenberger (CBS-Alliance Atlantis-Bruckheimer Television, 2000-).

can avail himself of even more powerful photographic means, as he is given the opportunity to decipher images of future crimes intuited by precognitive mutants.[6] Finally, in one of the most famous instances of this narrative motif, the photographer protagonist of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up*, as he enlarges the negatives of snapshots he took in a London park, realizes that he has witnessed a murder he was not able to perceive with the naked eye.[7]

CSI, Music Box, and, in a more problematic fashion, *Minority Report* and *Blow-Up* fulfill what is arguably the commonsense view of the referential status of photography: graphic evidence, through all of its technologically enhanced avatars, is expected to offer what might be called an epiphany of the real—a truthful revelation enabling investigators to bring their cases to an ineluctable close. Intriguingly, however, not all crime stories grant photographic records such unreflecting confidence. In *Farewell, My Lovely* and *Devil in a Blue Dress*, photographs are deceptive. A manipulative witness has given Marlowe the portrait of a night-club dancer who is not the actual Velma Valento. Even in the absence of such tampering, photographs fail to disclose decisive information: Rawlins cannot learn from the picture he has in his possession that blonde beauty Daphne Monet's name is in fact Ruby Hanks, and that she is an African American passing for white. Not even the teasing hint that the "picture had been black and white originally but [...] was touched up for color" can deliver this crucial information.[8] In these two instances, the case must be solved by means of clues seemingly less prestigious or more fragmentary than photographs—testimonies, judicial records, fingerprints. Finally, *Blow-Up* makes referential uncertainty the object of a philosophical enigma: the film both asserts and denies the revealing power of photographic prints, as the reality of the murder spotted on the photographic negative remains in doubt.

In the present paper, I wish to use crime stories in literature and film as test cases for an analysis of the semiotic and communicative mechanisms underlying both the widespread referential trust afforded to photography and the occasional diffidence graphic evidence inspires. Crime narratives prove an ideal corpus for this research

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[6] *Minority Report*, dir. Steven Spielberg, perf. Tom Cruise (Cruise/Wagner-Twentieth Century Fox, 2002).

[7] *Blow-Up*, dir. Michelangelo Antonioni, perf. David Hemmings, Vanessa Redgrave, and Sarah Miles (Bridge Films-Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1966).

[8] Mosley 18.

because they are of necessity concerned with evidential procedures. Contrary to what might be expected of semiotically inclined research, the following reflections are not meant to demystify the referential claims of photography altogether. Rather, I argue that photographs deserve the trust they commonly enjoy, yet that these referential prerogatives are obtained not in a mere flash of recognition but as the offshoot of complex semiotic and pragmatic negotiations. Accordingly, the present argument is poised between the anti-referential outlook of (post)structuralist/post-Saussurean semiology and, on the other hand, a less skeptical approach whose theoretical grounding I derive partly from Peircean semiotics and partly from Jürgen Habermas's reflections on communicative action.

2. READING PHOTOGRAPHS: THE SEMIOTICS OF NEGOTIATED DISCLOSURES

Peircean and Saussurean semiotics prove complementary in their capacity, the former to enable, the latter to deconstruct referential readings of photography. Peirce uses a three-term model for the analysis of semiotic processes. Representation, in his view, occurs when a link is established between a "sign" and an "object" and, simultaneously, between the same sign and an "interpretant" (or "interpretant idea").[9] Peirce's "sign" and "interpretant" approximately correspond to Saussure's possibly more familiar terms "signifier" (the material form or token of the signifying process: e.g., the photographic print of Daphne Monet in *Devil in a Blue Dress*) and "signified"[10] (the "concept"[11] yoked to the signifier: Daphne Monet, the young mistress of a rich client, as Easy Rawlins imagines her on the basis of the photograph). Peirce's "object" designates the referent of representation, located outside the realm of signs and outside any interpretant consciousness (Daphne Monet as a person, independent of her representations). Saussure acknowledges the autonomous

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[9] Charles Sanders Peirce, *Peirce on Signs: Writings on Semiotics by Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. James Hooper (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1991) 239.

[10] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, and Albert Riedlinger, trans. Wade Baskin (1916; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 65.

[11] Saussure 67.

existence of this third element only with considerable reluctance, occasionally referring to it as the "thing".[12]

Of the two terminologies, Peirce's seems on first inspection better suited to the analysis of graphic documents with referential claims. Firstly, by taking referents into account, Peirce follows the intuitive notion that there is an extra-linguistic world out there, available for photographic capture. Saussure, on the contrary, contends that objects and ideas remain mere "shapeless masses" unless they are articulated by sign systems.[13] Secondly, Peirce's model applies indiscriminately to all types of signs—words, footprints on a beach,[14] bullet-holes,[15] or iconographic designs. Saussure, by comparison, only briefly mentions the possibility of a general "science of semiology"[16] while his theory remains tailored to the "arbitrary" signs of natural languages.[17] As Peirce takes the broadest possible field of signifying phenomena into account, he is able to distinguish between three classes of signs: "[i]cons",[18] which are linked to their object by dint of likeness;[19] "[i]ndices," which are linked to it by "a correspondence in fact";[20] and "[s]ymbols," which rely on a link of "habit," and constitute therefore Peirce's equivalent for the Saussurean arbitrary sign.[21] According to this classification, the semiotic specificity of photographs consists in their twin status as icons and indices: their graphic form is both homologous to their object and physically produced by the impact of light on silver-coated plate, film, or digital captors.

Conversely, Saussurean semiologists handle photographs as if they were Peircean symbols only.[22] Symptomatically, Roland Barthes's early essays, which offer pioneering Saussurean readings of photography, discuss what might be called rhetorically staged

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[12] Saussure 65.

[13] Saussure 112.

[14] Peirce 252.

[15] Peirce 240.

[16] Saussure 17.

[17] Saussure 67; see also 68-69.

[18] Peirce 252.

[19] See: Peirce 30.

[20] Peirce 30.

[21] Peirce 251.

[22] Photographs, in this light, rank among what Saussure calls "completely natural signs," to which Saussurean semiology reserves only a marginal status (Saussure 68).

images—photographs deliberately scripted for the delivery of meaning. Barthes's "The Rhetoric of the Image" focuses on a pasta advertisement in green, white, and red tones evoking stereotypes of Italy by a carefully orchestrated display of boxes of spaghetti surrounded by tomatoes;[23] *Mythologies* famously analyzes a *Paris Match* cover featuring a young African soldier saluting the French flag, in glorification of the French Empire.[24] Through these examples, Barthes suggests that photographic meaning is produced not by the direct agency of indexical and iconographic reproduction but as a secondary system—by connotative or quasi-allegorical mechanisms. This otherwise extremely productive analysis of photographic connotation therefore endorses the characteristically Saussurean tendency to view any material referent as shapeless semiotic fodder. Meaning, in Barthes's view, is constructed over and above the photographic object, in the network of conventional sign systems that makes up the general fabric of culture.

Saussurean readings like Barthes's, precisely because of their anti-referential inclination, are able to bring to light aspects of the semiotics of photography that Peirce's realistic/referential approach downplays. In particular, they highlight the intriguing possibility that photographs might be signs without objects after all. In the Saussurean perspective, it is indeed pointless to tie the meaning of a photograph (its "signified") to the indexical and iconic reproduction of a pre-existing, presumably stable extra-semiotic referent: objects simply do not exist prior to their ascribed linguistic or cultural function. Therefore, a photograph, beyond its signifier, only has a signified, or, to use another Saussurean term, a "value"[25]—a structural meaning that is infinitely rewritable according to the sign's context or to the evolution of cultural norms. In this logic, the term photographic object should be used only as convenient shorthand, acknowledging that visual data is often given a value so predictable that the photographic signifiers may trigger instant recognition within a given cultural community. In this Saussurean perspective, *Devil in the Blue Dress* depicts a situation where instant object recognition proves deceitful. Instead of the private investigator's

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[23] See: Roland Barthes, "The Rhetoric of the Image," *Studying Culture: An Introductory Reader*, eds. Ann Gray and Jim McGuigan (London: Arnold, 1997) 16.

[24] See: Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Ann Lavers (1957; New York: Hill and Wang, 1986) 116.

[25] Saussure 111.

hard-earned discovery of a photograph's actual object, the novel highlights the photograph's capacity to acquire an unforeseen value: by the last chapter, the print is no longer the representation of a young woman endowed with the trappings of stereotypical white American attractiveness but the sign of a young African American straddling the color line. This reading admittedly goes against the dynamic of Mosley's novel, which builds up towards a climax of referential recognition. Instead, it relies on the constructivist premise that being a blonde beauty or a tragic mulatto are social roles that Daphne chose (or was forced) to embody. Her photograph therefore merely reproduces, or better, rewrites pre-existing cultural codes endowed with conventional, negotiable values. The photographic representation process, in this light, at best adds a new layer of encoding to an already scripted social field.

The possibility of objectless photographs is the premise of *Blow-Up* and of its metaphotographic precursor, Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*.[26] In both movies, a crime is viewed through the supposedly reliable gaze of photographic equipment, yet the putative object of this photographic capture remains elusive and its value is refashioned under the protagonist's and the film viewers' eyes. Hitchcock's wheelchair-bound photographer (James Stewart), playing the peeping Tom with his telephoto lenses, thinks he has spotted a crime of passion in an apartment on the opposite side of his block's courtyard. He is therefore led to elaborate numerous crime scenarios. Yet the actuality of the murder is at first unclear, and, when mischief is ascertained beyond reasonable doubt, one crucial component of the photographed (or, more accurately, the photographically espied) object—the victim's body—proves difficult to locate. Antonioni's photographer (David Hemmings) is, by comparison more successful in his object search, since he is at first able to retrieve the body he has spotted on his enlarged negatives. Yet his prints and negatives are stolen, and he proves unable to communicate his discovery to his stoned-out swinging-London acquaintances. When revisiting the crime scene, he realizes the corpse has disappeared. While Hitchcock's narrative brings its mysteries to predictable closure, Antonioni's ending declines to resolve the paradox of photographic object-lessness. Leaving the now vacant crime scene, the photographer joins

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[26] *Rear Window*, dir. Alfred Hitchcock, perf. James Stewart and Grace Kelly (Paramount-Patron, 1954).

a game of mock-tennis played by a group of proto-hippie merrymakers. Devoid of a real ball and therefore initially objectless, the game soon acquires the texture of reality as camera movements follow the putative object, whose familiar tennis thud is progressively registered by the film's soundtrack. Accordingly, the scene contrasts the referential logic of photography, which in this instance has been found wanting, with a social mechanism for the construction of perception and meaning reminiscent of Wittgensteinian language games and Saussurean semiotics.[27] The invisible ball is a sign with negotiable value, and its reality status is determined by the social consensus the game may command.

What is presented as a philosophical paradox in Hitchcock and Antonioni becomes a vital hermeneutic stake in nonfiction contexts: press or documentary pictures sometimes display a degree of undecidability unexpected in documents reputed for self-evident disclosure. In 2004, the release of previously classified aerial photographs of Auschwitz taken by RAF planes in 1944 reignited controversies about the Allied Command's attitude toward the Jewish holocaust.[28] To early-twenty-first-century observers, the RAF photographs spark off instant recognition: they display with remarkable sharpness the death camps' familiar configuration of barracks and train tracks, as well as the crematoria, from whose tall chimneys trails of smoke are seen to issue.[29] The question was therefore raised whether Allied Air Forces, provided with such seemingly compelling evidence of genocide, should have bombed the camps in order to stall the Nazi program. On the one hand, the military argument in favor of a raid was far from clear-cut, given the inaccuracy of WWII bombings. On the other, the suspicion exists that a lingering anti-Semitism led Allied war leaders to ascribe a low priority to efforts at saving extermina-

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[27] For a Wittgensteinian interpretation of the film, see: Peter Brunette, "DVD Commentary," *Blow-Up*, dir. Michelangelo Antonioni (Warner Home Video N4/Z10 65135, 2004).

[28] See: *Auschwitz: The Forgotten Evidence*, dir. Lucy Carter, prod. Taylor Downing (Flashback Television-Channel 4, 29 Nov. 2004); see also: Mitchell Bard, "Could the Allies Have Bombed Auschwitz-Birkenau?" *Jewish Virtual Library*, The American-Israeli Enterprise, 2007, 8 Aug. 2007 <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/bombau.html>

[29] See "Auschwitz: The Forgotten Evidence," *Channel 4.com*, 20 Oct. 20 2007 <http://www.learning.channel4.co.uk/history/microsites/A/auschwitz/pic_1.html> <http://www.learning.channel4.co.uk/history/microsites/A/auschwitz/pic_2.html> <http://www.learning.channel4.co.uk/history/microsites/A/auschwitz/pic_3.html>

tion-camps prisoners. Implicit in this debate, however, is the problematic interpretation of even such revelatory images. Witnesses interviewed for a Channel 4 documentary venture the hypothesis that, even though European resistance networks had documented the extermination process, the genocidal apparatus was still so unfamiliar that photograph analysts confronted with the Auschwitz images literally did not know what they saw.[30] Death camps had not yet acquired a meaning sufficiently distinct to transform the visual data into a photographic object.

Similar controversies have arisen more recently about the attack on the Pentagon on 11 September 2001. Commentators, particularly on Internet web sites, have pointed out that no indisputable photographic source exists indicating that a passenger airliner did crash against the building, leaving open the possibility of a missile or car-bomb strike.[31] Ironically for a key event of the information age, the available photographic data is indeed fragmentary or poorly legible: crash pictures display few recognizable plane components and frames from surveillance cameras only reveal a fast-flying, poorly identifiable object zooming past.[32] Yet what renders the alternative scenarios (or conspiracy theories) possible in this case is primarily the untested assumption that commentators and the general public are spontaneously competent to interpret the visual data of such unfamiliar events as plane disasters: a fantasy referent (9/11 as a US-sponsored conspiracy) is therefore offered to cover up the thoroughly explainable absence of a well-defined photographic object.

In this light, the Saussurean approach seems to leave all photograph viewers in the awkward position of Nicholas Branch, the CIA analyst of Don DeLillo's novel *Libra*, who scrutinizes the "data-

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[30] *Auschwitz: The Forgotten Evidence*; see also: Bard.

[31] See: "Pentagon Attack Photos," *9-11 Research*, 8 Aug. 2007 <http://911research.wtc7.net/pentagon/evidence/photos/index.html>; "Pentagon Attack Footage," *9-11 Research,* 8 Aug. 2007 <http://911research.wtc7.net/pentagon/evidence/footage.html>; "The Pentagon Strike: Mysteries Persist in the Pentagon Attack," *9-11 Research*, 8 Aug. 2007 <http://911research.wtc7.net/pentagon/analysis/index.html>; "Welcome to Brads 911 Investigation, Pentagon WTC Photo and Video Analysis!" *Brads Batcave September 11,* 8 Aug. 2007 <http://www.cosmicpenguin.com/911/bradm/911index/pentagon.html>.

[32] See: "Pentagon Attack Footage."

spew" yielded by the "secret history" of JFK's assassination.[33] The superlatively meticulous Branch must retrieve proper photographic objects from the Zapruder film, the grainy 8mm home movie offering the best available visual record of the president's shooting. Echoing the accents of (post)structuralist indeterminists, Branch describes these "six point nine seconds of heat and light"[34] as a "major emblem of uncertainty and chaos".[35] In this, DeLillo traces an implicit link between the analyst's hermeneutic skepticism and the secrecy and isolation of his covert investigation. Likewise, had Antonioni's protagonist managed to have other witnesses view the enlarged prints of the murder in the park, the photographed event would likely not have been left in a state of suspended reality. A similar connection, albeit more discreet, links the referential instability of photographs in *Farewell, My Lovely* and *Devil in a Blue Dress* to the proverbial autonomy of the novels' Chandlerian investigators: as they collect evidence within an individual quest, Marlowe and Rawlins deprive themselves of the opportunity to evaluate clues collegially. On the contrary, other crime narratives—TV shows such as *CSI*; films like Costa-Gavras's *Music Box*, or Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report*—favor collective hermeneutic evaluation: they feature scenes where images are spread out on viewing tables, displayed in a court of law, or, in *Minority Report*, flashed on ethereal computer monitors, under the intent gaze of several investigators and attorneys. In so doing, these narratives suggest that the referential insights delivered by photographs must take the form of what we might call negotiated disclosures—revelations of new data made meaningful within a specific discursive context. Since such narratives depict investigations where graphic evidence leads to a conclusive ending, they also suggest that the disclosed meaning, even when dialogically negotiated, is not infinitely rewritable.

Jürgen Habermas's concept of communicative action offers theoretical groundings for the process of negotiated disclosure. Specifically, Habermas's writings make it possible to account for a phenomenon that Saussurean theory marginalizes—the construction of objects of perception that, though provisional in absolute terms, are not destined to instant annihilation in a Heraclitean flow of signify-

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[33] Don DeLillo, *Libra* (1988; London: Penguin, 1989) 15.

[34] DeLillo 15.

[35] DeLillo 441.

ing practices. Habermas defines communicative action as the set of speech acts "by means of which a speaker wishes to reach understanding (*sich verständigen*) with another person about something in the world".[36] This unobtrusive formula describes communication as a convergent dialogical process supported by a belief in the immanent rationality of linguistic exchanges. The dialogical component of Habermas's concept of communicative action resides in the philosopher's assumption that, in a given exchange, meaning is never constructed exclusively on the basis either of the "sender" (the addresser, the subject), of the "receiver" (the addressee, the other), or of the "objects or states of affairs" (the referent, the thing, the object, data).[37] An utterance is not a self-contained unit that can be appropriated by one agent of communication: it is bound to interact with the other instances of communication, and is indeed shaped from the outset by the anticipated presence of such instances. Communicative action is in this respect similar to the possibly more familiar dialogism of Mikhail Bakhtin. Yet Habermas departs in an important respect from the Russian theoretician in that he does not presuppose that the negotiation of meaning in linguistic exchanges is, as Bakthin puts it, inherently "centrifugal".[38] Communicative action as Habermas views it is guided by what Bakhtin calls the "centripetal forces of language".[39] The latter term designates linguistic mechanisms and cultural institutions that, in the libertarian logic of Bakhtin and of his poststructuralist followers, exert a restraining influence on the inherent fluidity of experience. In Habermas, on the contrary, it refers to the very communicative texture of knowledge and social behavior. Conversely, Habermas calls "strategic action" the use of language that fails to heed the appeal to reason of communicative action.[40] Strategic action stands therefore as a derogatory label not only for

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[36] Jürgen Habermas, "Actions, Speech Acts, Linguistically Mediated Interactions, and the Lifeworld," *On the Pragmatics of Communication*, ed. Maeve Cook, trans. Maeve Cook and William H. Hohengarten (1988; Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2002) 216; italics in the original.

[37] Jürgen Habermas, "Toward a Critique of the Theory of Meaning," *On the Pragmatics of Communication,* ed. Maeve Cook, trans. Maeve Cook and William H. Hohengarten (1988; Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2002) 278.

[38] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981) 272.

[39] Bakhtin 270.

[40] Habermas, "Actions" 220.

propaganda, but also for all poststructuralist concepts describing the inevitable dissensus in language use—Jacques Derrida's "différance",[41] Jean François Lyotard's "differend",[42] or Michel Foucault's Nietzschean nexus of power and knowledge.[43]

Habermas's belief in the possibility of communicative understanding is arguably as much a metaphysical axiom as the opposite poststructuralist claim, according to which signifying processes are condemned to endless drift. Habermas makes his philosophical commitment plausible, however, by emphasizing the immanent dimension of meaning construction. Immanent meaning is, in this light, primarily enabled by the mechanics of speech acts themselves. The latter are indeed regulated by a web of "validity claims",[44] which serve as "stewards"[45]—i.e., as supports and constraints—for linguistic exchanges. Thus, speakers who endorse communicative action agree to a mode of address in which the very illocutionary force of speech acts may ensure valid communication. At a broader level, the "intermeshing"[46] of communicative practices adds up to a "lifeworld"[47] that perpetuates itself as "society and individual constitute one another reciprocally".[48] Within the horizon of the lifeworld, subjects may avail themselves of a prerogative of "preunderstanding".[49] They resort to a "ground" of "unthematically presupposed knowledge"[50] that "keeps contingency in check" and helps subjects cope with epistemological "surprises".[51] This implies that the lifeworld is neither absolutely alienating nor closed in upon itself.

In a Habermasian perspective, photographs acquire an object through a process in which disclosure and negotiations are closely intertwined. Reinterpretations of the image do, in this light, not

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[41] Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967) 89.

[42] Jean-François Lyotard, *Le différend* (Paris: Minuit, 1983) 9.

[43] Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977 by Michel Foucault,* ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980) 131.

[44] Habermas, "Theory" 293; Habermas, "Actions" 253.

[45] Habermas, "Theory" 294.

[46] Habermas, "Theory" 251.

[47] Habermas, "Actions" 251.

[48] Habermas, "Actions" 252.

[49] Habermas, "Actions" 236-37.

[50] Habermas, "Actions" 245.

[51] Habermas, "Actions" 245.

necessarily obliterate previously disclosed states of affairs. The hermeneutic reframing of the RAF death-camps pictures illustrates this non-aporetic complexity. At the moment of their capture, the photographs could be interpreted as depicting a mere military-industrial compound. Their capacity to signify the presence of ex-termination camps would have depended on the analysts' intelligence of the Nazi's genocidal plans—a point that, to early-twenty-first historians, is still an object of debate. The logic according to which the evaluation, whatever its outcome, was initially carried out was binding, though open to revisions. Then, as now, the photographs' evidential status depended on their capacity to provide indexi-cal/iconical reproductions of spatial configurations. This basic refer-ential feature acts as a preunderstood premise, though it also implies a historically determined and dialogically shared knowledge of photographic technology. The later realization of the horrors implic-itly recorded by the documents in no way questions this initial realis-tic contract. On the contrary, twenty-first-century viewers, who understand these images on the basis of a well-developed history of the Nazi genocide, expect the photographs' new value to be but-tressed by the same trustworthy referential mechanisms as those taken for granted by 1940s analysts. Their confidence in the truth-status of the images need not be rooted in blind belief in photograph-ic reflectionism or in some naïve trust in the mechanisms of commu-nicative action underlying historical research. It relies, in the first place, on the fact that, even for viewers sensitive to the fact that photographs are hermeneutically reframed, important aspects of the photographic object of the death-camps shots have not changed: the pictures still depict barracks, train tracks, etc. Still, compared to WWII-era observers, early-twenty-first-century viewers can avail themselves of a metaphotographic awareness of the historicity of the photographs' reception—a prerogative that, again, does not require the assumption that the object/value of those images has undergone an absolute metamorphosis. Eventually, a successful interpretation of these images will aim at creating a situation where any radical ques-tioning of their photographic knowledge—negationist comments, particularly—can only be phrased through strategic action, i.e. through propaganda. By the same token, one may still envisage the moment when the Zapruder film, given new historical disclosures, might leave the realm of strategic action and be given a solid photo-graphic object after all.

3. BODY/PAPER/VOICE TRAILS: DIALOGIZED EVIDENCE AND SEMIOTIC TWINING

In crime narratives, the negotiated disclosures enabled by evidential photographs occur within a communicative environment character-ized by what we might call semiotic twining. I mean thereby that crime enigmas are rarely, if ever, solved on the basis of clues of a single, homogeneous semiotic type. Fulfilling the Peircean insight that signs fall into several classes, detective stories spin a multi-threaded yarn where elements of a phenomenologically heterogene-ous nature—material evidence, written and iconographic documents, verbal testimonies—complement, corroborate, or contradict one another. In Bakhtinian terms, this implies that the signs that make up criminal evidence are caught up in a primary pattern of dialogization resulting from the interaction of signifiers issuing from different planes of experience. As investigators are led from one piece of evidence to the next, they weave trails that bring together paper, voice, and material clues.

A technical term used by detective writers aptly designates one strand of this evidential twine: investigators tracking missing persons or reconstituting the circumstances of a crime follow a paper trail—a string of written records. Philip Marlowe's investigation in Chan-dler's *The Big Sleep* is indeed structured as a labyrinth whose path-ways are traced out by a complex spread of documents—blackmail notes, photographs, and the coded records of a pornography ring.[52] Likewise, Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson) in Roman Polanski's *China-town*,[53] as he investigates the death of Hollis Mulwray—the chief engineer of the Los Angeles water department –, discovers key evidence in the municipal land registers. This scene of Polanski's film makes the concept of the paper trail comically literal as Gittes, prohibited by a suspicious municipal clerk from copying the records, borrows the clerk's ruler and rips off a page from the huge volume, covering up the tearing noise by faking a sneeze. The paper trail, we learn from Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, is not a mere structural requi-

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[52] Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep* (1939; London, Penguin Books, 1948).

[53] *Chinatown*, dir. Roman Polanski, writ. Robert Towne, perf. Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway, and John Huston, (Long Road-Paramount, 1974).

site of fictional crime plots: it is also a central feature of life in a rationalized society. Captain Gregory, the head of the LA Missing Persons Bureau, tells Marlowe that fugitives, if alive, are bound to "get back in the fiscal system":[54] however strong their desire to disappear, they must leave behind the administrative traces without which modern life cannot be sustained.

In a postmodernist perspective, the paper trail brings up the image of a textualized, Borgesian environment—cities made of signs. Yet semiotic twining ensures that the evidential fabric of crime narratives should not have the weightless homogeneity of a uniformly textual space. With its interwoven paper and non-paper clues, the trail of evidence has complexity and depth. Its heterogeneous elements are endowed with specific semiotic, pragmatic, and referential preroga-tives: their evidential weight, their definiteness, and their mode of narrative distribution differ. Paper-trail clues are explicit, accurate, and interpretable by means of a well-regulated code: the LA land register sends Gittes to well-defined persons and places. On the other hand, signs belonging to what we might call the body trail—material elements such as corpses, characters' physical characteristics, finger-prints, smells, or, the lay-out and interior decoration of buildings—are inert or mute Peircean indices. If correctly interpreted, however, they may help investigators clinch a case with more binding power than any other element of the evidential twine: the decisive clue in *Chinatown* is not the above land register, nor even the photographs Jake Gittes routinely uses in his investigations, but the analysis of the salt content of the water contained in the victim's lungs.

Finally, what we might call the voice trail—the string of verbal testimonies coaxed or coerced from witnesses—may seem least trustworthy of all. Yet testimonies—whether obtained face-to-face, in telephone conversations, or even from recordings—perform two crucial functions. Firstly, if delivered in a confessional mode, they carry the existential depth that confers a human resonance to the disclosure of impersonal evidence. Easy Rawlins, in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, needs to hear from Daphne Monet's own lips that she is "two people"—the black Ruby Hanks, "born in Lake Charles, Louisi-ana",[55] and glamorous Daphne, Mr. Todd Carter's seemingly white upper-class lover. Likewise, Jake Gittes in *Chinatown* knows he has

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[54] Chandler, *Big Sleep* 123.

[55] Mosley 179.

found the nexus of the Mulwray murder case when the victim's wife (Faye Dunaway), after having become the detective's lover, reveals under physical duress that an incest story underlies the real-estate conspiracy that led to the engineer's death. Secondly, witnesses, if viewed as structural elements of crime plots, are what we might call, by reference to Tzvetan Todorov's comments on detective fiction, "narrative donors"—providers of retrospective snippets of stories.[56] By a game of constant revisions, their fragmentary or mendacious testimonies serve as building blocks for the definitive narrative reconstruction of the crime, which the investigator is expected to deliver to the readers. *Farewell, My Lovely* offers a clever inversion of this motif: Velma Valento, now known as wealthy Mrs. Lewin Locklin Grayle, instead of delivering her own testimony, holds Philip Marlowe at gun point and compels him to piece together in his own voice the fragments of her narrative of miraculous social ascension, intrigue, murder, and identity change.[57]

In this light, the semiotic function of crime-fiction photographs consists in their capacity to tie together, conflate, or, as it were, short-circuit the phenomenological strands of the evidential twine. Crime photographs transpose body clues onto paper prints, thus allowing material evidence to accede to the plane of coded (or symbolic) communication, and making material clues available to the verbal negotiations of photograph analysts. In short, snapshots, by virtue of their prerogative of indexical capture and iconic duplication, trigger an epiphany of the real as they hold the promise of making matter signify and speak without betraying the objective integrity of the state of fact they represent. The photographs of Velma Valento and Daphne Monet in Chandler's and Mosley's novels are, in this respect, both an anticipation of the women's bodily presence—readers take for granted that the investigators will come face to face with them—and a promise of the revelation of these characters' authentic meaning. Likewise, in *CSI*, countless forensic objects—mangled body parts, typically—are, by dint of their being circulated in photographic form, recontextualized within semioticized environments—computer monitors displaying the

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[56] Tzvetan Todorov, "Les hommes-récits: *Les mille et une nuits*," *Poétique de la prose (choix), suivi de Nouvelles recherches sur le récit* (1971; Paris: Seuil, 1978), 33; narrative donors [*hommes-récits*; my translation] are intradiegetic narrators who keep the narrative going by telling (and therefore offering) fragments of stories to the main characters.

[57] Chandler, *Farewell* 239.

characteristic graphics of computer software, and, more broadly, the whole procedural framework of investigatory practices. Only thus is the interpretation of these physical traces possible. Spielberg's *Minority Report* depicts this integration of material clues into a signifying realm with the hyperbolic clarity of science-fiction aesthetics: the footage of future crimes issuing from the brain feed of the film's precognitive mutants is graphically spliced up, recomposed, and captioned by investigators so as to form a huge signifying chain comparable to comic strip visuals or film storyboards—a graphic narrative commented upon and amended in real time.

4. WHODUNNITS AND EXISTENTIAL MYSTERIES: EVIDENTIAL NEGOTIATIONS, OPEN AND CLOSED

By deconstructionist standards, the capacity of crime-fiction photographs to bring physical traces into a space of communicative negotiation still fails to confer to them the status of referential documents. Peircean indices (and thus, implicitly, photographs), Jacques Derrida contends, seem to qualify as natural signs. Yet, like other signs, they become conventional, arbitrary tokens once they join the signifying chain.[58] Photographs may therefore paradoxically be seen to enact the victory of the symbolic order over realistically oriented natural signification: they ensure that even non-semiotic traces are subjected to the non-referential logic of sign systems. However, we pointed above that the issue of referentiality need not be phrased in such uncompromising terms: it does not exclusively depend on the belief in or the rejection of signs presumably giving unmediated access to the real. Instead, it is linked to the shape we ascribe to communicative negotiations. The non-referential skepticism of poststructuralism is compelling only if one endorses the metaphysical hypothesis according to which communicative exchanges are infinitely open-ended. If the opposite option is taken into consideration—if, as is the case in Habermas's theory, communicative negotiation is thought to unfold in a non-infinite lifeworld –, the gesture by which photographs weave material traces into signs offers a more solid basis for referential discourse.

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[58] Derrida 74.

Remarkably, one of the most central generic dichotomies of crime fiction is keyed to these incompatible conceptions of communicative negotiations. Literary historians distinguish between two main formulas of detective fiction: mystery novels of the so-called golden age of crime writing—Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories or Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot mysteries, for instance –, and, on the other hand, hard-boiled novels, initiated as of the late 1920s by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler.[59] Mystery novels, also known as whodunnits, focus exclusively on the resolution of criminal enigmas. Sometimes described as the literary embodiment of the abstract rationality of modernity,[60] they are tied to a rigid reading contract which lends to the text the features of a formal game: readers compete with the novelist and the fictional investigator for the resolution of the enigma.[61] Hard-boiled novels, on the other hand, in addition to deduction games, develop a looser action plot mingling crime detection with violence and sex. While whodunnits are often acted out within a closed space, emblematized by the English manor of the Cluedo board game, hard-boiled plots require a broader field of action, often encompassing a whole city.[62] Hard-boiled investigators, unlike the ratiocinating eccentrics of whodunnits, boast a professional profile rooted in the complexities of the social world. In their most familiar Hollywood embodiment—Humphrey Bogart's interpretation of Hammett's Sam Spade and Chandler's Philip Marlowe—they appear as autonomous professionals making the best of an unequal, corrupt environment.

Hard-boiled narratives also differ from mystery novels in that they are steeped in an atmosphere of uncertainty and loss. When crime enigmas are solved in these narratives, the detective's final

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[59] See: Tzvetan Todorov, "Typologie du roman policier," *Poétique de la prose (choix) suivi de Nouvelles recherches sur le récit* (1971; Paris: Seuil, 1978) 11-15.

[60] See: Siegfried Kracauer, *Le roman policier: un traité philosophique*, trans. Geneviève Rochlitz and Rainer Rochlitz (1925; Paris: Petite Bibliothèque Payot, 1981) 53.

[61] See: Leroy Lad Panek, *An Introduction to the Detective Story* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1987) 133-43; Jacques Dubois, *Le roman policier ou la modernité* (Paris: Nathan, 1992) 47-63.

[62] See: André Vanoncini, *Le roman policier* (Paris: PUF, 1993) 58; Christophe Den Tandt, "Down these (Gender-Divided and Ethnically Fractured) Mean Streets : The Urban Thriller in the Age of Multiculturalism and Minority Writing," Ghent Urban Studies Team, *The Urban Condition: Space, Community and Self in the Contemporary Metropolis*, eds. Dirk De Meyer, Kristiaan Versluys, et al. (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1999) 393-95.

victory is overshadowed by angst and disenchantment. In this respect, hard-boiled novels qualify as existential mysteries or Lacanian thrillers—stories in which protagonists struggle against social and moral evils that find no palliative. Marlowe's investigations in Chandler's *The Big Sleep* and *Farewell, My Lovely* indeed resemble a quixotic gesture meant to avert a loss that, like the ever resurfacing lack postulated by Lacanian psychoanalysis, finds no compensation.[63] In the former text, the murder of likeable former bootlegger Rusty Regan, which lies at the heart of the novel's blackmail scheme, allegorizes the disappearance of authentic masculinity in a modern city ruled by libidinal perversion and economic inequality. In the latter, ex-convict Moose Malloy's frustrated search for his former girlfriend Velma Valento marks the passing of a working-class universe of authentic romance: the exotic dancer has, unknown to Malloy, metamorphosed into Mrs. Mervin Lockridge Grayle, an upper-class femme fatale. The existential pessimism of the hard-boiled tradition has been highlighted most explicitly in discussions of film noir, its Hollywood counterpart. Lack of closure is regarded as a definitional feature of this cinematographic genre.[64] In classical noir, this pessimistic narrative feature is often covered up by means of forced, improbable happy endings.[65] Later neo-noir movies like *Chinatown* are not subjected to this censorship:[66] at the end of Polanski's film, one of the narrative's chief victims—Evelyn Mulwray, who was raped by her wealthy father—is shot by the police, while her daughter/sister is delivered into the hands of the incestuous patriarch.

Transposed into semiotic terms, whodunnits and existential mysteries offer textbook examples of, respectively, centripetal and cen-

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[63] See: Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, Livre XI : Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Seuil, 1973) 229.

[64] See: James Naremore, *More than Night: Film Noir in Its Contexts* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1998) 2, 38; E. Ann Kaplan, "Introduction to New Edition," *Women in Film Noir*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: British Film Institute, 1998) 1.

[65] The film versions of *Mildred Pierce* and *The Big Sleep* feature sentimental endings or scenes of romance absent from their source novels; see: *Mildred Pierce*, dir. Michael Curtiz, perf. Joan Crawford, Zachary Scott, and Ann Blyth (Warner Bros., 1945); *The Big Sleep*, dir. Howard Hawks, perf. Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall (Warner Bros.-First National, 1946). Likewise, *Gilda* ends with a melodramatic ending miraculously releasing the two main protagonists from an adulterous conflict that should logically lead to their deaths; see: *Gilda*, dir. Charles Vidor, perf. Rita Hayworth, Glenn Ford, and George Macready (Columbia, 1946).

[66] See: Kaplan 11.

trifugal negotiations of evidence. The trail of clues, in the former case, inexorably leads to a truthful answer, as misleading elements are disambiguated and false hypotheses discarded. Existential mysteries, on the other hand, do not negate the possibility of crime solving: hard-boiled investigations often reach some degree of literal closure (popular novels can ill afford the narrative frustration triggered by, say, Antonioni's *Blow-Up*). Yet they portray detective work as a problematic and unfulfilling venture, able to fathom only lesser mysteries.

In either crime sub-genre, the narrative's commitment to a closed or open communicative negotiation affects the status of individual clues and the nature of the object on which investigations revolve. Clues—photographs included—are either buttressed or fragilized by the overall narrative context. Readers of Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* may be puzzled to see Hercule Poirot resort to a prestidigitator's trick in order to "resurrect"[67] an inscription on a scrap of charred paper—a technique Poirot himself calls "a very makeshift affair".[68] Yet the soundness of the procedure is supported by the dynamics of Christie's centripetal plot. In the more skeptical context of hard-boiled narratives, on the contrary, Chandler's Marlowe is able to voice reservations about evidence Poirot could never allow himself to utter: "Proof," Marlowe says, "is always a relative thing[; i]t's an overwhelming balance of probabilities".[69] Accordingly, the evidence dug up by Marlowe in *Farewell, My Lovely*—a twined trail of real-estate deeds, checks sent by registered mail, fingerprint traces, and finger marks on a strangled victim's neck –, while it helps the detective unmask Velma Valento, cannot account for the exotic dancer's uncanny metamorphosis into the soulless Mrs. Grayle. Photographic evidence is enabled or relativized likewise. The *CSI* TV series establishes a relation of mutual implication between the numerous truth-supporting forensic photographs displayed on screen and, on the other hand, a narrative format that, except for carefully tailored exceptions, prescribes that all cases find their proper answer. On the contrary, ambiguous or misleading photographic clues—the swapped snapshot in *Farewell, My Lovely* or the

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[67] Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934; Hammersmith, UK: HarperCollins, 1994) 63.

[68] Christie 63.

[69] Chandler, *Farewell* 238.

ethnically ambiguous portrait of Daphne Monet in *Devil in a Blue Dress*—are the more confusing as they appear in a narrative environment of ubiquitous deception and ambiguity. In the centripetal whodunnit format, where such devices may of course also occur, they would rank only as instances of factual trickery, unable to hint at any essential elusiveness of truth.

   Trust or distrust in photographic signs, we noted above, leads semiotically or philosophically inclined observers to scrutinize the status of the photographic object itself, and thereby to accept or discard the possibility of stable referents available to photographic capture. It is hardly surprising in this perspective that centripetal crime narratives should endorse a realist view of photography, and that existential thrillers should, on the contrary, often focus on what we may call unphotographable objects—beings whose meaning is so unstable that they resist photographic objectification. *Chinatown* mobilizes the two opposite logics. The film's first scene illustrates the quasi-miraculous capacity of realist photography to solve whodunnit plots. Jake Gittes, who makes a living out of adultery cases, shows to one of his clients photographs of the latter's wife having sex with a stranger in a Los Angeles Park. Beyond the client's sobs, the scene hardly requires any dialogue, so self-explanatory is the object captured on film. Photography works more problematically in the Mulwray case, however. Gittes is initially asked to tail the public-works engineer accompanied by a young woman—supposedly the latter's mistress. As Jake takes snapshots of the couple in several locales, he is in no position to understand what his lens is actually recording. The young woman, we learn much later, is the slightly retarded Katherine Cross, the incestuous daughter of Mulwray's wife Evelyn. Katherine is a paradoxical, overdetermined character—the metaphorical embodiment of the economic and sexual perversions Polanski's film, true to the hard-boiled tradition, attributes to the American upper classes. Katherine is in this respect functionally equivalent to other metaphorically overdetermined characters—Velma in *Farewell, My Lovely*, Daphne in *Devil in a Blue Dress*, or Carmen Sternwood in *The Big Sleep* –, figures whose complexity eludes photographic referentiality. Carmen, the murderously nymphomaniac daughter of a California oil magnate, seems on first inspection widely available for objectifying images, as her nude shots are circulated by a pornography ring. Yet, by her murderous rage, she rises to the status of unfathomable threat to the men who

might want to possess her. Likewise, by the end of *Chinatown*, Jake may think he understands the mystery of Katherine Cross. Yet the latter's fear at seeing her mother shot down and at being returned to her (grand)father elicits a fear no representation, even of a photographic nature, can contain. The powerlessness of photography with regard to the complex objects of the hard-boiled world is allegorized in a dream sequence of *The Big Sleep* where Marlowe, after having discovered the nude Carmen in the pornographer's apartment, sees himself trying to photograph "a naked girl […] with an empty camera".[70]

It would be mistaken to infer from what precedes that crime-fiction photography exists only in the dichotomized variants of realist transparence and aporetic representation. If anything, this assumption would unduly privilege hard-boiled narratives, endowing them with the (post)modernist glamor of axiomatic skepticism. Other crime narratives—Costa-Gavras's *Music-Box*, for instance –, instead of opting either for absolute knowledge or unreflecting doubt, embed photographic evidence within a narrative obeying a logic of problematic convergence: photographic clues are referentially corroborated in this film, yet their validation relies on a chain of evidence more complex than a first-time viewing of the movie may suggest. They are, in this respect, caught up in a genuine process of negotiated disclosure. Accordingly, *Music Box* paradoxically highlights, at least temporarily, the instability of the photographic object. Against the simplicities of whodunnits, it acknowledges that there is no immediate link between graphic image and judicial proof. Symptomatically, *Music Box* manages to maintain this epistemological caution even though, as a film, it can avail itself of a semiotic prerogative denied to most novels:[71] the capacity to display photos as graphic signifiers. Viewers are given the opportunity to see the photographs handled in a film's narrative. They therefore benefit from the considerable evidential potential afforded by the images' indexical and iconic dimensions. I have so far downplayed this fundamental semiotic asymmetry between novels and films because I believe that it is ultimately of a lesser weight than what I called above the overall shape—centripetal or centrifugal—of semiotic negotiations. Contrary

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[70] Chandler, *Big Sleep* 46.

[71] Only the relatively small corpus of novels featuring photographs would have the capacity to mobilize iconic/indexical recognition, provided these photographs illustrate the written narrative.

to what one may expect, it is impossible to clearly demarcate the handling of crime photographs in novels and films solely on the basis of the presence or absence of iconic/indexical signs. While fiction can admittedly never appeal to the evidential power of indices and icons, film narratives can, on the other hand, disqualify some of the graphic clues (forged or ambiguous photographs, for instance) iconically and indexically presented to the viewers' eyes. *Music Box* thrives on these complexities: it expertly balances the commonsense trust in photography against the deconstruction of its evidential and judicial power.

Set in the 1980s, *Music Box* traces the painful revelation process experienced by lawyer Anne Talbot (Jessica Lange) as she discovers that war-crime charges leveled against her father are vindicated. Anne's father, Michael Laszlo (Armin Mueller-Stahl), is a Hungarian-born steel-mill worker who claims he fled Eastern Europe as a WWII refugee. Laszlo was in fact a member of a pro-SS unit of the Hungarian police which committed exactions against Jews and Roma. Ignorant of his past, Anne volunteers to represent him in court when US federal authorities, at the request of the glasnost-era Hungarian government, launch an extradition case against him. The judicial argument relies on testimonies of war-crime survivors as well as on a set of documents from Hungarian archives—administrative records, photographs, and a wartime identity card issued by the police unit Laszlo is accused of having joined. Initially, Laszlo, his counsel, as well as Anne's CIA-connected in-laws manage to counter the prosecutor's argument by pointing out that Hungarian authorities may be using forged documents and forced testimonies in order to wreck Laszlo's reputation. The latter, since he became a US subject, has indeed been active in anti-communist campaigns. Anne then follows court officials to Budapest, the scene of the war crimes, in order to hear a new witness. This latest testimony, however, proves as judicially impeachable as the previous ones. Yet Anne discovers proof of Laszlo's guilt from another corner. Asked to pay a courtesy visit to a person she thinks is merely one of her father's Old World acquaintances, she discovers her host is the sister of Tibor Zoldan, her father's wartime police lieutenant. Zoldan, she realizes, had been blackmailing Laszlo for years. Pre-trial investigations had raised suspicions of a blackmail plot; the latter's reality is vindicated beyond any reasonable doubt as Anne retrieves from a US pawnshop the object in which Tibor had stashed documents

incriminating her father. The blackmailer had concealed photographs of the atrocities, featuring all participants, in a charmingly ornate music box. Devastated, Anne releases the documents to the press.

In a semiotic perspective, the complex story of Michael J. Laszlo's judicial exposure boils down to the disambiguation of a wartime ID photograph. The prosecutor's chief piece of evidence is indeed the police identity card of the torturer whom all witnesses call by his nickname, Mishka. The film therefore needs to prove that Mishka—appearing on the photograph as a young uniformed officer with a blank, defiant stare –, and the personable, grey-haired Michael J. Laszlo are the same person. Symptomatically, because Costa-Gavras's narrative initiates a centripetal negotiation, it refrains from fully highlighting the difficulties inherent to the procedure. While witnesses for the prosecution, in heartrending testimonies, detect an unmistakable iconic resemblance between the photograph's object and the defendant present in court, the link remains far from judicially binding, and would be problematic even in a context where the truthfulness of the testimonies were not questioned. The problematic status of Mishka/Laszlo as a single photographic object is even more perceptible if, bracketing off referential illusion, one takes into account the fact that the young uniformed actor on the ID is not the older Armin Mueller-Stahl.

Music Box manages to validate the prosecutor's reading of the photograph, however, by a clever use of all strands of its investigation's evidence trail. From the point of view of characters, the link between Mishka and Laszlo is established by the blackmail plot. The latter story weaves intricate strands of paper, voice, and body clues between the two figures, as if, where direct identification proves unworkable, a broader, indirect circle of evidence could substitute itself to the more direct, yet fragilized indexical/iconic bond. Evidence of blackmail first crops up in Laszlo's financial records, which mention unaccountable money transfers to Tibor Zoldan. The nature of these transactions is disclosed through the convergent impact of testimonies delivered at the trial, the reminiscences of Zoldan's sister, a photograph of Zoldan displayed in his sister's house, as well as the pawnshop receipts leading to the music box. Anne's identification of Zoldan's photograph occurs in melodramatic fashion, as she spots on the policeman's face a scar — a body-trail clue transposed onto photographic paper — that had been mentioned by several trial witnesses.

Yet, because *Music Box* deploys a centripetal negotiation, it cannot restrict its portrayal of evidential procedures to the unfolding of such complex chains of evidence. If it did, the problematic dimension of photographic reference would receive excessive emphasis: the film might suggest that the identification of photographic objects is the work of exceptional skill or chance. Accordingly, the plot features several narrative devices maintaining the equilibrium between epistemological confidence and skepticism. Firstly, viewers do not have to wait until the ending to make up their mind about Laszlo's guilt. By the middle of the film, they are presented with a body-trail clue that clinches the case. A trial witness physically demonstrates to the jury the sadistically playful execution technique Mishka favored for his exactions: he obliged prisoners to do pushups above an upturned bayonet until they impaled themselves out of exhaustion. A scene at the beginning of the film shows Laszlo carrying out a similar pushup routine, minus the bayonet, in front of his grandson. Secondly, the realist view of photography, even as it is problematized, is still discreetly appealed to. The Mishka/Laszlo photograph, as it is displayed in court, finds its referential prerogatives buttressed both by elements of *Music Box*'s narrative context and by intertextual connections. The witnesses' testimonies, though judicially impeachable, sound too emotionally jarring to be disbelieved. Also, *Music Box* implicitly aligns itself with the tradition of Hollywood courtroom dramas—Fritz Lang's *Fury*,[72] Stanley Kramer's *Judgment at Nuremberg*[73]—where displaying photographs of atrocities in the middle of a judicial argument signals an epiphany of the real.[74] Thus, by the close of the film, when we see the war-crime photographs emerge from the music box as if by magic, and be instantly broadcast in the press under huge headlines, we may feel encouraged to bracket off the complexities of Costa-Gavras's film and let ourselves be reassured that graphic evidence produces truth unproblematically.

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[72] *Fury*, dir. Fritz Lang, perf. Spencer Tracy and Silvia Sidney (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1936).

[73] *Judgment at Nuremberg*, dir. Stanley Kramer, perf. Spencer Tracy, Burt Lancaster, Richard Widmark, Marlene Dietrich, and Maximilian Schell (Roxlom Films-United Artists, 1961).

[74] See: Christophe Den Tandt, "Hollywood Courtroom Dramas: The Politics of Judicial Realism," *Folkways and Law Ways: Law in American Studies*, ed. Helle Porsdam (Odense: Odense UP, 2001) 193-99.

5. CONCLUSION: CRIME NARRATIVES AS METAREALISM

I have contended that graphic evidence, in so far as it seeks to trigger referentially reliable negotiated disclosures, must in the first place be handled by participants in the communicative process who, as Habermas specifies, share a fundamental commitment to mutual understanding, and therefore reject axiomatic skepticism. Secondly, I have pointed out that the epistemological commitment of communicating subjects will be buttressed or thwarted by the discursive features of the texts in which photographic evidence is produced: specific narrative contexts, patterns, or genres empower the referential impact of photographs, while others undercut it. Thirdly, the power of graphic evidence is supported by the capacity of photographs to serve as mediating elements within trails of clues composed of phenomenologically heterogeneous signs: photographs bring material evidence into signifying chains, thus creating signifying practices that are not restricted to arbitrary tokens.

Admittedly, this argument sweeps perhaps too swiftly across key distinctions — the difference between fiction and non-fiction, notably, or even the discursive specificity of novels and films. In other words, I have used crime narratives, whether in literature or on screen, as test cases for a discussion whose scope spills over the boundary of popular narratives, or even fiction itself. While it would be impossible in the present pages to make good for these theoretical shortcuts, I may at least roughly delineate the status crime narratives could be ascribed within the broader discussion of literary and filmic realism in which the present research fits. Crime narratives, whether whodunnits or hard-boiled novels, have, I believe, a metarealist value:[75] their function consists in displaying and exploring, within the medium of artistic or fictional works, the spectacle of proof and deduction allowing subjects to ascertain reality on the basis of evidence, graphic or other. From this perspective, their usefulness in the exploration of realist practice is not diminished by their playful, formalist dimension. Instead of merely mirroring the texture of

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[75] For a discussion of metarealism, see: Christophe Den Tandt, "The Realist Underground: Referential Practices at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century," *Belgian Journal of English Language and Literature* ns. 4 (2006): 71.

phenomena, crime narratives playfully foreground evidential procedures that they still enact with due respect for logic and the specific prerogatives of signs and clues. To this extent, crime narratives, as they handle graphic evidence, contribute to the development of a realist discourse that, as Pam Morris suggests, scrutinizes the construction of the "possible worlds"[76] available to human subjects in their discursive interactions.

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[76] Pam Morris, *Realism* (London: Routledge, 2003) 146.

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Referential writing presents a thesis, then provides evidence that supports the thesis. Main Forms of Referential Purpose. Referential-Informative Purpose. A newspaper report on a crime would be another good example. Example: 3 August 1728 On 3 August 1728 two ladies going in a chariot from Beckingham to Bromley, were robbed by a single highwayman. Referential-exploratory writing is more speculative than informative or interpretive. In referential-exploratory writing, the writer presents a thesis in the form of a question: How can pollution from automobiles be reduced? What would happen if marijuana were legalized in the United States?