

The truth is (not) out there: becoming 'undetective' in social and educational inquiry

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Crime fiction and social inquiry: intertextual continuities

In this essay I explore the usefulness of literary fiction in social and educational inquiry¹ by focusing on the genre of the crime story, with particular reference to the ways in which positioned readings of crime fiction might inform understandings of research methodology (see also Gough, 2002). Like Cleo Cherryholmes (1993: 1), I want to break the 'silence of the research literature on the textuality of research findings' by attending to *some* of the 'many ways to read and interpret and criticize' research texts. Consider, for example, the intertextual continuities between research methods texts and crime fiction implied by variations on the word 'investigate' in each of the following passages:

Most qualitative researchers maintain a stance best described as 'investigative' (David Lancy, 1993: 30).

In undertaking educational research, the first problem is to find a problem to investigate (Robert Burns, 1994: 17).

there is that word again – 'investigate' – invoking the crime narrative, that investigatory hermeneutic which seeks to reveal, disclose, to *know*, and thence, so the myth goes, to empower (Sally Munt, 1994: 173).

If the word 'investigate' invokes a crime narrative, then those of us who 'investigate' questions, problems and issues that are not (at least in any obvious sense) 'criminal', should be able to identify the similarities, differences and continuities between our practices and criminal investigation. I attempt to do this by reading crime stories in terms of the 'investigatory hermeneutics' they share with forms of educational inquiry, and by reading research stories in terms of the literary tropes (analogies, metaphors, synecdoches, etc.) and textual structures they share with crime fiction. I emphasise that my primary purpose is to explore the hermeneutic and semiotic codes *shared* by educational inquiry and crime fiction rather than to demonstrate the generativity (or otherwise) of constructing the fictional investigation of crime as a metaphor for educational research. In this respect, my project complements, but also extends beyond, the work of other writers who have explored this particular metaphor in regard to social inquiry (e.g., Moring, 2001) or who argue the merits of understanding qualitative research metaphorically as, for example, jazz (Oldfather & West, 1994), and dance (Janesick, 1994, 1998, 2001). I am not merely asserting that educational inquiry *resembles* the fictional investigation of crime, but also that readers and writers of research texts and crime stories are materially connected by the cultural articulations of the discourses and sign systems in which they are interpellated. I also emphasise that both detective stories and research texts are, as Cherryholmes (1993: 2) writes of the latter, 'subject

¹ To avoid the longwindedness of constantly referring to both social inquiry *and* educational inquiry I will generally use only one of these terms, with the understanding that I intend social inquiry always to include educational inquiry. I draw most of the examples of research texts and methods to which I refer from the areas of educational inquiry in which I practice, but emphasise that they are also examples of social inquiry writ large.

to multiple readings', and thus recognise that the readings I offer here are partial and incomplete. Nevertheless, I argue that generating intertextual relationships between research literature and other literary forms is pertinent to such activities as supervising research students, teaching graduate programs in research methodology, interpreting reports of research, and choosing textual strategies for narrating social inquiry.

I discern three types of intertextual continuity linking stories of educational inquiry with detective fiction, and I explore each of them here. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, reports of educational research resemble detective stories insofar as they narrate quests to determine 'the truth' about something that is problematic or puzzling – stories in which 'investigators' seek (to reiterate Munt's terms) 'to reveal, disclose, to *know*, and... to empower'. In considering this analogy, my concern is with the extent to which the characteristic investigatory methods of fictional detectives resemble forms of educational inquiry. Secondly, following Umberto Eco's (1984: 2) characterisation of the novel as 'a machine for generating interpretations', I consider the extent to which the characteristic ways in which detective stories generate interpretations resemble the textual 'machineries' used in the discursive production of educational research. Thirdly, I consider some of the ways in which recent transformations of both detective fiction and educational inquiry can be understood as comparable – and intertextually linked – manifestations of cultural and discursive shifts signified by various notions of postmodernism and postmodernity.

Watching the detectives

For more than a century, detective fiction has both modelled and offered critiques of culturally privileged forms of social inquiry, although the extent to which detective stories indeed provide critical positions on dominant social institutions and discourses is a matter for debate. For example, in *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story*, Ernest Mandel (1984: 84) argues that the 'original detective story' (exemplified by Sherlock Holmes stories) is 'the purest, most elementary expression of bourgeois society'. Conversely, in *Uncommon Cultures: Popular Cultures and Post-Modernism*, Jim Collins (1989: 35) argues that the proliferation of crime fiction in the nineteenth century represented a widespread disillusionment with the state. Nevertheless, when teaching research methodology coursework, I invite students to consider undertaking educational research by 'watching the detectives'² – that is, by imagining educational inquiries conducted in the manner of fictional detectives with whom they are familiar and by comparing fictional crime investigation methods with various paradigms or traditions of social inquiry.

Even a fairly superficial analysis of this kind reveals that educational research might not always have kept pace with developments in the methods of fictional detection that have accompanied the cultural changes of the late modern era. Much educational research still privileges scientific rationalism even though its apparent personifications in fiction – notably Sherlock Holmes and other heroes of the classic 'logic and deduction' detective story³ – are no longer taken for granted as appropriate models of how we can or should obtain worthwhile knowledge of the world. During the 1920s and '30s the detachment and 'objectivity' of Holmes's method of inquiry began to give way to a variety of more involved and subjective approaches. For example, Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, who first appeared in *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), investigates crimes in the manner of an ethnographer: her detailed

² This phrase is the title of a popular song by Elvis Costello (1977) – one among many instances of the tropes and images of detective fiction spreading beyond the common forms of popular narrative media that constitute the genre (novels, comics, movies etc.).

³ Note, however, that a strong case can be made for reading Holmes's method as *abduction* rather than deduction (see, for example, Eco, 1983a).

observations (thick descriptions) of life in the village of St Mary Mead provide her with a grounded theory of human behaviour which she deploys in solving mysteries both within that community and elsewhere. 'Hard-boiled' detectives such as Dashiell Hammett's (1930) Sam Spade and Raymond Chandler's (1939) Philip Marlowe display a different kind of involvement and subjectivity; they often are deeply implicated (as actors rather than spectators) in the mysteries they are called upon to explicate. In addition, Marlowe and his successors usually tell their stories in the first person, a change in narrative perspective that further problematised the role of the participant-observer in the dialectic of truth versus deception decades before interpretivist styles of inquiry seriously challenged positivistic social science. From the 1960s, fictional detectives have adopted more explicitly socially critical standpoints such as feminism, exemplified in different ways by Amanda Cross's (1964) Kate Fansler and Sara Paretsky's (1982) V. I. Warshawski. Via their journals and other writings, a number of my students have reported that they have been pleasantly surprised by the generativity of making such comparisons. For example, students who have read many 'cosy' mysteries for recreation, have found it intriguing to speculate on how the investigative methods of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple might translate into educational research and compare these with, say, the approaches taken by Amanda Cross's Kate Fansler. Such comparisons bring into sharp focus the differences between (and different consequences of) essentialist and interactionist interpretations of human behaviour.

However, methods of fictional detection are not strictly analogous to the forms of social inquiry that they might at first seem to resemble. For example, although Sherlock Holmes often appears to emulate procedures stereotypically associated with research in the natural sciences, the relationships that are assumed to hold between 'facts' and the meanings that can be ascribed to them are very different for fictional detectives and natural scientists. The 'facts' that natural scientists 'discover' are usually *produced* in circumstances designed and more or less controlled by scientists themselves and thus are already the result of many acts of interpretation. Conversely, the 'facts' to which fictional detectives ascribe meaning often result from deliberate acts of deception by guilty parties. But the problem of deception – deliberate or otherwise – is by no means irrelevant to educational research, especially when it comes to interpreting what students and/or teachers say and/or do when they are being observed or interviewed or are responding to questionnaires. As a methodological issue, the possibility of deception often is subsumed by questions about 'authenticity' – questions frequently raised in circumstances involving research subjects who are clearly less powerful or privileged than the researchers, as in much research on minority groups (see, for example, Michèle Foster, 1994, 1999). Critics of such research argue that we cannot assume that people who see themselves as oppressed, exploited, or marginalised by culturally dominant groups will necessarily tell the truth when interrogated by members of those groups. However, the question of whether or not researchers are being 'told the truth' in the course of their investigations might be pertinent in many more situations than are suggested by these criticisms.

One of Sherlock Holmes's well-known dialogues exemplifies another way in which the classic fictional detective departs from conventional understandings of scientific rationalism:

'Is there any other point to which you would wish to draw my attention?'

'To the curious incident of the dog in the night-time'.

'The dog did nothing in the night time'.

'That was the curious incident', remarked Sherlock Holmes.⁴

⁴ From 'The adventure of Silver Blaze', first published in *The Strand Magazine* Vol. IV December 1892 and reprinted in Doyle (1986: 271-96).

Holmes's willingness to apprehend and ascribe meaning to a silence – to perceive the absence of a trace as itself a trace – is a disposition that, in retrospect, seems more in keeping with recent critical and postcritical discourses of social inquiry than with nineteenth century conceptions of 'scientific method'. However, in terms of the broad analogies that can be constructed between fictional crime investigation and social inquiry, it might be more significant to note that this dialogue is just one among many instances of a fictional detective's methods – often represented as eccentric or idiosyncratic – being compared with the more conventional methods used by the police, usually to the latter's disadvantage. Variations on this kind of comparison are also found in the 'police procedural' type of crime novel, where the more 'successful' detectives often are those whose methods are in some kind of conflict (ranging from subtle subversion to outright rebellion) with bureaucratised versions of 'official' knowledge.⁵ For example, Sheri Kinney (1998) bases part of her argument for using experiential knowledge and unobtrusive observations in educational inquiry on a comparison of the methods used by the (unsuccessful) police detective and the (successful) amateur investigators in Alfred Hitchcock's (1954) *Rear Window*.⁶ We can use such characteristics of crime fiction to frame and generate questions about educational inquiry, including questions about the relative strengths and limitations of individualistic and collectivist forms of inquiry and the merits and demerits of institutionalising research efforts. Is there, for example, any place for 'private investigations' in educational research? Under what circumstances, if any, might it be defensible to assert, as a popular song puts it, that 'this is *my* investigation – it's not a public inquiry' (Mark Knopfler, 1982)?

Although it is important that such questions are raised in the study and critique of educational research methodologies, I emphasise that, as a pedagogical strategy, I see 'watching the [fictional] detectives' chiefly as an accessible and pleasurable preliminary to exploring more significant questions that arise from watching (as it were) the ways in which stories of fictional detection generate interpretations.

Crime fictions as model narratives of inquiry

The meanings that any given text generates are, at least in part, a function of the storytelling genre in which authors and readers perceive it to be situated. When we read an article in *Educational Researcher* or the *International Journal of Applied Semiotics* we are likely to mobilise a very different set of expectations and intertextual referents from those that we bring to reading a crime novel or watching a mystery on television. Each storytelling practice incorporates a particular selection of narrative strategies and conventions, the implicit or explicit knowledge of which influences the author's craft, the audience's expectations and the meanings that they mutually construct. However, given that both research reports and crime stories are narratives of inquiry, it seems reasonable to ask if we can learn anything by comparing them.

According to Roland Barthes (1978), the crime story sets up a central enigma to be explicated by the detective and/or the reader. Indeed, as Slavoj Žižek (1992: 58) writes, detective fiction can be understood as a quest to tell a story that concludes not when the solution to the mystery is revealed but when the detective is able to tell 'the true story' of the mystery in the form of a coherent linear narrative:

⁵ The US television drama series *House* provides a more recent example (from 2004) of the unorthodox investigator – in this case medical diagnostician Dr Gregory House – who clashes with authority (the hospital's administrators). As a character House has clear similarities to Sherlock Holmes: both are drug users, aloof, and largely friendless.

⁶ Kinney initially wrote this essay for a research methodology course I taught at the University of Victoria, Canada, in August 1995.

What we have at the beginning is a void, a blank of the unexplained, more properly, of the *unnarrated* (How did it happen? What happened on the night of the murder?). The story encircles this blank, it is set in motion by the detective's attempt to reconstruct the missing narrative by interpreting the clues. In this way, we reach the proper beginning only at the very end, when the detective is finally able to narrate the whole story in its 'normal,' linear form, to reconstruct 'what really happened,' by filling in all the blanks.

The classic form of detective fiction often reconstructs this 'missing narrative' in the form of an historical recount. The author – usually through the voice of an 'omniscient' narrator or the detective's Watsonian companion – opens what Dennis Porter (1981: 24) calls a 'logico-temporal gap' between the time of the crime's commission and the time of its telling. The function of the detective *and the narrative* is to close that gap and restore the logical temporal order. In hard-boiled crime fiction the 'missing narrative' is more likely to reconstruct a map of social order or disorder. These stories usually are narrated in the first person by the detective him/herself and the 'gaps' the narrative opens tend, at least metaphorically, to be spatial. For example, Fredric Jameson (1983: 131) notes that the form of Raymond Chandler's books reflects an initial 'separation of people from each other, their need to be linked by some external force (in this case the detective) if they are ever to be fitted together as parts of the same picture puzzle'.

Such differences in narrative perspective and strategy between classic and hard-boiled crime fiction have clear parallels in social and educational inquiry. These include the shift away from impersonal styles of reporting – the supposedly 'objective' accounts in which the researcher's presence in the text is disguised or hidden – towards textual strategies that foreground the subjectivity of the narrator and the ways in which she or he is implicated in, and indeed responsible for, the story. As crime fiction and educational research have developed during the past half-century, authors in both fields seem to have become more self-conscious of the inherent reflexivity of their respective narrative forms – increasingly aware that they are telling stories of quests to tell stories. If we accept Katherine Hayles's (1990: 285) view of cultural dynamics, in which 'issues become energized in theories because they are replicated from and reproduced in the social', then these parallels are not coincidental but, rather, reflect the multiple discursive currents and feedback loops through which the production of educational theories and popular fictions are culturally connected.

Similar currents and feedback loops also operate in the *consumption* of educational theory and popular fiction and thus it seems reasonable to ask how our approaches to reading and writing educational research might be influenced by what we learn about structuring narratives of inquiry from reading crime fiction. As Eco (1984: 54-7) suggests, our curiosity about 'the structure of conjecture as such' is one plausible explanation for the popularity of crime fiction:

I believe people like thrillers not because there are corpses or because there is a final celebratory triumph of order (intellectual, social, legal, and moral) over the disorder of evil. The fact is that the crime novel represents a kind of conjecture, pure and simple. But medical diagnosis, scientific research, metaphysical inquiry are also examples of conjecture. After all, the fundamental question of philosophy (like that of psychoanalysis) is the same as the question of the detective novel: who is guilty? To know this (to think you know this), you have to conjecture that all the events have a logic, the logic that the guilty party has imposed on them. Every story of investigation and of conjecture tells us something that we have always been close to knowing (pseudo-Heideggerian reference).

It is not difficult to make a case for asserting that 'the fundamental question' animating much educational inquiry is also 'the same as the question of the detective novel: who is guilty?' For example, much socially critical educational research – feminist, neo-Marxist, antiracist,

postcolonialist – is concerned with identifying 'who is guilty' of reproducing a given society's structural inequalities through its education system. To determine this, critical educational researchers 'have to conjecture that all the events [the power relations and material conditions that constitute structural inequalities] have a logic, the logic that the guilty party has imposed on them' – the 'guilty party' being (as many such researchers 'have always been close to knowing') the patriarchal hegemony constructed by white, middle-class, Eurocentric, heterosexual, able-bodied men and their fellow travellers. William Reid (1981: 165) captures the notion that critical research in education 'tells us something that we have always been close to knowing' in his characterisation of what he calls 'radical' curriculum inquiry:

The assumptions underlying such work... are: that no worthwhile curriculum improvement is possible without a radical transformation of social and political institutions; that abstract concepts like 'class', 'capitalism' or 'hegemony' are, in some way, 'real' and provide the key to what is wrong with society; that the needed remedies are already known, at least in principle, and that the function of research and theorising is to increase the power of already known facts.

The analogy between critical educational research and crime fiction can be taken further. As Žizek (1992: 53-4) writes, 'the scene of the crime with which the detective is confronted is... as a rule, a false image put together by the murderer in order to efface the traces of his [sic] act'; the scene's 'organic, natural quality is a lure, and the detective's task is to denature it' by decoding the 'doubly inscribed' signifying materials that become known as 'clues'. These doubly inscribed signifiers are sometimes verbal, as in the Sherlock Holmes story in which a murderer uses a dying woman's words – 'It was... the speckled band!' – to throw suspicion on gypsies camped nearby. The 'true story' is told when Holmes is able to read 'band' as a synonym for 'ribbon' rather than 'gang'.⁷ However, in most crime stories, the doubly inscribed signifying materials are nonlinguistic although, as Žizek (1992: 54) asserts, they are nevertheless 'already structured like a language' because they are elements of a story written by the guilty party. Critical educational researchers are similarly concerned with decoding doubly inscribed data. They do not 'read' events such as the participation rates or achievement levels of girls in mathematics as part of the educational scene's 'organic, natural quality' but set out 'to denature it', to reveal the 'true' structure of the story inscribed by the guilty party. For example, in 'Ned Ludd was framed', Pat Thomson (1998) offers an alternative interpretation of the historical events and circumstances that produced the term 'Luddite' as a pejorative description of someone reluctant to take up new technologies. Thomson suggests that the story of the Luddites as misguided vandals is 'framed' by a dominant discourse that silences and forecloses debate on social and technological change by reinforcing a simple binary opposition between those who are for and against 'progress'.⁸

There is, of course, another reason for the 'clues' at the scene of a fictional crime already being 'structured like a language', namely, that the scene is indeed written by an author whose intent is not so much to delude the fictional detective and the fictional representatives of 'official' knowledge but, rather, to mystify the 'real' reader. The 'false' solution towards which readers are enticed is so ubiquitous as a narrative strategy in detective fiction that Žizek (1992: 54, 57) concludes that it a 'structural necessity' of the mystery story form:

⁷ 'The adventure of the speckled band', first published in *The Strand Magazine* Vol. III February 1892 and reprinted in Doyle (1986: 194-209).

⁸ Thomson's essay was written for a research methodology course that I taught at Deakin University, Australia, in 1996.

The status of the false solution is epistemologically internal to the detective's final, true solution. The key to the detective's procedure is that the relation to the first, false solutions is not simply an external one: the detective does not apprehend them as simple obstacles to be cast away in order to obtain the truth, rather it is only *through* them that he can arrive at the truth, for there is no path leading immediately to the truth... The detective does not simply disregard the meaning of the false scene: he [sic] pushes it to the point of self-reference, i.e., to the point at which it becomes obvious that its sole meaning consists in the fact that (others think) it possesses some meaning.

I have no systematic empirical evidence to support the view that the 'false' solution is also a 'structural necessity' of the stories produced in the traditions of critical (or, indeed, any other forms of) educational research. However, the rhetorical strategy of demolishing a so-called 'straw argument' as a means of advancing a counter-argument is hardly unknown in the literature of educational inquiry. Furthermore, given that the objects of most postpositivistic methods of educational research are assumed to be social constructions rather than 'naturally occurring' phenomena, it seems likely that the narrative structures of conjecture that they deploy are indeed analogous to those of crime fiction,⁹ and might be recognised as such by some researchers.

For example, in their editorial introduction to *Rethinking Curriculum Studies: A Radical Approach*, Martin Lawn and Len Barton (1981: 17) raise the possibility of approaching curriculum inquiry in a manner that 'owes something to the attitude and procedure of Dashiell Hammett's detective, the "Continental Op"'.¹⁰ They elaborate this position by quoting from Steven Marcus's (1977: 15-16) introduction to a collection of Hammett's Continental Op stories:

The Op is called in or sent out on a case. Something has been stolen, some dire circumstance is impending, someone has been murdered – it doesn't matter. The Op interviews the person or persons most immediately accessible. They may be innocent or guilty – it doesn't matter; it is an indifferent circumstance. Guilty or innocent, they provide the Op with an account of what they really know, of what they assert really happened. The Op begins to investigate; he compares these accounts with others that he gathers; he snoops about; he does research; he shadows people, arranges confrontations between those who want to avoid one another, and so on. What he soon discovers is that the 'reality' that anyone involved will swear to is in fact itself a construction, a fabrication, a fiction, a faked and alternate reality – and that it has been gotten together before he ever arrived on the scene. And the Op's work therefore is to deconstruct, decompose, deplot and defictionalize that 'reality' and to construct or reconstruct out of it a true fiction, i.e., an account of what 'really' happened.¹¹

When I first read Lawn and Barton's text in the early 1980s I was not aware that a literary scholar like Marcus might have intended the word 'deconstruct' to signify something more than common English usage suggested at the time – a compound verb in which the prefix 'de-' signalled either the removal or reversal of 'construct'.¹² Certainly, neither Lawn and

⁹ One point at which this analogy might break down is in ascribing such qualities as 'guilt' and 'deception' to the agents of the 'false' solution.

¹⁰ 'Op' is a colloquial abbreviation of 'operative'; thus, the 'Continental Op' is a private investigator employed as an operative of the Continental Detective Agency. The Continental Op's creator, Dashiell Hammett, served as an operative for the Pinkerton National Detective Agency from 1915 to 1921.

¹¹ Lawn and Barton (1981) incorrectly attribute this quotation to Hammett rather than to Marcus.

¹² The seventh edition of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1982) has no separate entry for 'deconstruct' as it does, for example, for 'decompose'.

Barton nor any of the other contributors to their collection made any reference to Derrida's work or to literary and philosophical understandings of deconstruction or poststructuralism and their implications for curriculum inquiry. But when I returned to Lawn and Barton's (1981) text in the early 1990s I knew that Marcus's (1977) assertion that 'the Op's work ... is to deconstruct' *could* have referred to Derrida's (1972: 271) sense of deconstruction as 'being alert to the implications, to the historical sedimentation of the language we use'. Such a speculation seems reasonable, given that Marcus was a professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, and that by the time he wrote his introduction to *The Continental Op* Derrida was well-known among US literary theorists (see, for example, Paul de Man, 1971).¹³ Nevertheless, I doubted the suggestion (intended or not) that the Continental Op worked as a Derridean deconstructionist (or that Hammett's stories might represent Derridean deconstruction at work), because my readings of crime fiction (and related literary criticism) up to that time led me to suspect that crime fiction was an irredeemably modernist genre. However, I began to wonder if poststructuralist detective fiction was indeed possible and my curiosity about this possibility initially guided the inquiries documented in this essay.

If narratives of educational inquiry are structurally analogous to crime stories then it seems reasonable to suppose that those of us who write educational research might find some clues to the improvement of our textual practices by examining some of the more innovative and adventurous examples of crime fiction. During the past thirty years or so, one relatively superficial innovation has been to characterise the detective as a much less stereotyped identity – we can now find many more fictional detectives than previously who are something other than white, middle-class, Eurocentric, heterosexual, able-bodied men. However, it seems to me that relatively few of the stories that are categorised as, say, feminist detective fiction have departed markedly from the dominant narrative forms of the genre. Among the possible exceptions are the Kate Fansler stories written by 'Amanda Cross', a pseudonym of Carolyn Heilbrun, a distinguished feminist academic whose publications include studies of the representation of women in such narrative forms as literary fiction, biography and autobiography (see, for example, Heilbrun, 1989, 1997, 1999). Like her creator, Kate Fansler is a professor of English literature and the mystery novels in which she features can be read as critiques of taken-for-granted representations of the storylines which give substance and pattern to the dominant cultural discourses into which women's subjectivities are interpellated.¹⁴ Julianne Moss (1999, 2003) takes a similar approach to interpreting the practice of inclusive schooling in Tasmania, Australia, between 1996 and 1998 as an 'educational detective story' – a quest to expose the relations of dominance perpetuated by the special education knowledge tradition.¹⁵

Another step in the evolution of detective fiction that seems to have preceded an analogous transformation of educational research is signalled by the emergence of what

¹³ John Caputo (1997: 205) notes that 'Derrida was first welcomed to the United States by literary theorists, first at Johns Hopkins University in the 1960s and then in the 1970s at Yale and Cornell'. Caputo indicates that US philosophers 'caught on to Derrida' sometime later, and their disputes with literary theorists' readings of Derrida were not represented in print until the early 1980s. Poststructuralism and deconstruction had little impact in US educational theory and curriculum studies until scholars such as Cherryholmes (1987, 1988) began to publish their 'poststructural investigations' in the mid- to late-1980s. According to Pinar and Reynolds (1992: 245), two Quebecois scholars – Jacques Daignault and Clermont Gauthier – were, for most of the 1980s, 'the only curricularists working post-structurally'.

¹⁴ In this judgment I depart from Munt (1994), who sees the Kate Fansler stories chiefly as expressions of liberal feminism. Although I agree that the gender politics of these stories might appear to be relatively conservative, I also believe that they make sufficient gestures towards poststructuralist conceptions of narrative framing – including subtle dispersals of the subject, and hints of multivocality – to interpret their textual politics as being rather more adventurous.

¹⁵ Moss undertook the doctoral research reported in her 1999 dissertation under my supervision.

William Spanos (1987: 154) calls the 'anti-detective story': stories which 'evoke the impulse to "detect"... in order to violently frustrate it by refusing to solve the crime'.¹⁶ Anti-detective stories can be seen to have evolved as part of the wider cultural transformations that tend to be subsumed by the concept of postmodernism. As Jeanne Ewert (1990: 167) writes, 'the detective novel is eminently suited to postmodern manipulation because its tacit dependence on the hermeneutic code offers the possibility of disabling that code' (p. 167). Although postmodernist scepticism towards modernist versions of rationality and agency supports Stefano Tani's (1984) suggestion that the classic detective story is 'doomed', literary postmodernism continues to provide explicit and implicit narrative models of 'detection' – of methodological and textual inquiry strategies. Thus, the explication of continuities between educational inquiry and postmodernist anti-detective fiction might be helpful in framing educational research as a postmodernist textual practice.

Postmodernisms and fictional 'detection'

In some ways, we can understand the detective story not so much as *a* modernist form of storytelling but as *the* modernist genre *par excellence*. Brian McHale (1992: 146) argues that modernist fiction is characterised by an 'epistemological dominant', its plot organized as 'a quest for a missing or hidden item of knowledge'. Thus, in its structure and thematics, 'a modernist novel looks like a detective story', centrally concerned with 'problems of the accessibility and circulation of knowledge, the individual mind's grappling with an elusive or occluded reality' (McHale, 1992: 147). The detective is the archetype of the modernist subject – a quest(ion)ing 'cognitive hero', an 'agent of *recognitions*... reduced synecdochically to the organ of visual perception, the (private) eye', seeking to understand the *universe*, a unified and objective world. Modernist fiction might offer multiple perspectives on the world, but does so without disturbing the essential unity of the self: 'each perspective is lodged in a subjectivity which is itself relatively coherent, relatively centered and stable' (McHale, 1992: 254).

By contrast, McHale (1992: 247) sees postmodernist fiction as being characterised by an 'ontological dominant' in which neither the world nor our selves are assumed to be unitary. Rather, postmodernist fiction explores the possibility that we function in an ontologically plural *multiverse* of experience – that selves and worlds operate in many modalities. According to McHale, the characteristic genre of postmodernism is SF – an acronym for something much more complex than many popular stereotypes of 'science fiction'¹⁷ – with its stock-in-trade of a potentially infinite variety of bodily forms, beings and cultures:

while epistemologically-oriented fiction (modernism, detective fiction) is preoccupied with questions such as: what is there to know about the world? and who knows, and how reliably? How is knowledge transmitted, to whom, and how reliably?, etc., ontologically-oriented fiction (postmodernism, SF) is preoccupied with questions such as: what is a world? How is a world constituted? Are there alternative worlds, and if so, how are they constituted? How do different worlds, and different kinds of world, differ, and what happens when one passes from one world to another, etc.? (McHale, 1992: 247)

¹⁶ Few of the examples of anti-detective stories that Spanos cites – including Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock* – evoke the detective fiction genre *per se* but all were written prior to 1960 and it is noteworthy that Spanos sees them as relatively early gestures towards the postmodernist literary imagination.

¹⁷ As Donna Haraway (1989: 5) explains, SF designates 'a complex emerging narrative field in which the boundaries between science fiction (conventionally, sf) and fantasy became highly permeable in confusing ways, commercially and linguistically'; SF also signifies 'an increasingly heterodox array of writing, reading, and marketing practices indicated by a proliferation of "sf" phrases: speculative fiction, science fiction, science fantasy, speculative futures, speculative fabulation'.

In other publications I have taken up the question of what narratives of educational research might look like if they were modelled on SF rather than detective fiction (see, for example, Gough, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2008). Here it will suffice to note that SF narrates ontological inquiries by such strategies as exposing a plurality of worlds by staging confrontations among them (or focusing attention on boundaries between them) rather than by personifying inquiry in the figure of a detective. Indeed, as Scott Bukatman (1993) notes, SF detective stories have rarely enjoyed success. The combination is difficult because the boundary between possible and 'impossible' in SF is so flexible and, because SF stories often are predicated upon some imagined future event or technological innovation, the 'solution' to the mystery may involve an unforeseeable twist (aliens, a time machine).¹⁸ Douglas Adams's (1987, 1988) novels, *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* and its sequel, *The Long Dark Tea-Time of the Soul*, are rare instances of SF and detective genres being blended, albeit in the guise of humorous parodies of both.¹⁹ However, Adams's Dirk Gently novels are also examples of the anti-detective story which, in the light of McHale's reasoning, can be read as a postmodernist literary deconstruction of modern fiction's paradigmatic genre.

One of the most celebrated anti-detective stories is Umberto Eco's (1983b) novel, *The Name of the Rose*, which takes some well-known examples of generic detective fiction as its intertextual models,²⁰ but – as Eco (1984: 54) himself puts it – 'is a mystery in which very little is discovered and the detective is defeated'.²¹ In *The Name of the Rose*, Eco uses the narrative form of detective fiction to deconstruct, disrupt and undermine the rationality of the models of conjecture conventionally provided by the genre – which is why, as Eco (1984: 57) writes, his 'basic story (whodunit?) ramifies into so many other stories, all stories of other conjectures, all linked with the structure of conjecture as such'. Eco provides a physical model of conjecturality in the abbey's labyrinthine library but also demonstrates that his detective – William of Baskerville – cannot decipher the complex social milieu of the abbey by assuming that it has a comparably logical (albeit complicated) structure. Following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1983), Eco (1984: 57-8) likens 'the structure of conjecture' to the infinite networks of a rhizome rather than to the finite (and hierarchical) roots and branches of a tree:

The rhizome is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other one. It has no center, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite. The space of conjecture is a rhizome space... the world in which William realizes he is living already

¹⁸ Larry Niven (1976) summarises some of the difficulties that authors face in writing hybrid SF/detective stories. The distinctions that McHale draws between the detective and SF genres are demonstrated particularly clearly by George Alec Effinger (1988) whose SF detective, Marid Audran, literally and materially embodies the shift from epistemological to ontological investigation when he deliberately shifts his mode of 'being' by augmenting and modifying his brain functions through the use of neural implants.

¹⁹ Parody is symptomatic of other attempts to postmodernise detective fiction. As Munt (1994: 173) explains: 'The few feminist crime novels appropriating a post-modern aesthetic express their sense of play and experimentation through parody'.

²⁰ These include, for example, Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Dorothy Sayers's *Gaudy Night* and Edgar Allan Poe's 'The purloined letter'.

²¹ By way of reflecting on my own textual strategies, I must point out here that I am not privileging Eco's interpretation of *The Name of the Rose* merely because he wrote it. I agree with the spirit of Eco's (1984: 7) dictum that 'The author should die once he [sic] has finished writing. So as not to trouble the path of the text'. I quote Eco for the same reasons that I use or paraphrase other authors' words: because their formulations and interpretations are agreeable to me and because I am self-consciously writing in a genre of academic journalism characterised by the rhetorical deployment of frequent quotations and citations. For a thorough analysis of *The Name of the Rose*, both as detective fiction and as an example of 'the literature of semiotic possibility', see Peter Trifonas (1999).

has a rhizome structure: that is, it can be structured but is never structured definitively... it is impossible for there to be *a* story.

This message is repeated in other anti-detective stories, including Paul Auster's (1987) *New York Trilogy* and Sophie Calle's (1999) remarkable *Double Game*.²² Peter Høeg (1993: 410) makes a similar point quite explicitly in the final paragraph of *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* (published in North America as *Smilla's Sense of Snow*): 'Tell us, they'll come and say to me. So we may understand and close the case. They're wrong. It's only what you do not understand that you can come to a conclusion about. There will be no conclusion'.

Thus, the anti-detective story not only subverts the rationality of the investigatory methods modelled by conventional detective fiction but also denies the defensibility of the dominant cultural expectations (such as a desire for *the* 'true' story) that animate such investigations. The literature of educational inquiry is replete with examples of researchers not understanding what they come to conclusions about, lured by the possibility of telling 'one true story' and encouraged by the cultural pervasiveness of detective stories as intertextual models of how research should be narrated. The significance of anti-detective stories for educational inquiry is that they model ways of narrating research differently and, furthermore, they might help us to reshape our expectations about what it is possible and desirable to narrate. For example, Valerie Harwood (2001: 151) names 'being undetective' as a deliberate strategy for 'working in ways that do not nourish searches for truth' but at the same time sustaining an 'obligation to truth'. She quotes the narrator of *The Name of the Rose* who observes that 'William was not at all interested in the truth, which is nothing but the adjustment between the thing and the intellect. On the contrary, he amused himself by imagining how many possibilities were possible' (Eco, 1993: 306). Harwood suggests that asking 'how many possibilities are possible?' is an 'undetective' way to create 'vigilance to truth' without searching for *the* truth.²³ I prefer to formulate Harwood's strategy as *becoming* undetective because I am disposed to accept Deleuze and Guattari's (1987, 1994) insistence that we should not see our lives and work in the fixed and immobile terms of 'being' but, rather, that 'all life is a plane of becoming, and... the perception of fixed beings... is an effect of becoming' (Claire Colebrook, 2002: xx).

The pedagogical usefulness of *The Name of the Rose* in teaching and learning about educational research methodology is enhanced by the availability of the contrast between the postmodernism of the novel and the modernism of Jean-Jacques Annaud's film version. As McHale (1992: 149) observes:

the William of Baskerville whom we encounter in the film is a *successful* detective. He suffers a defeat, of course, in the burning of the library and particularly of the lost volume

²² Sophie Calle is a photographer and installation artist whose work explicitly resembles that of spies and detectives, including unobtrusive surveillance of herself and others. For example, Calle (1999: 122-3) writes that she produced one exhibition by having her mother hire a detective agency 'to follow me, to report my daily activities, and to provide photographic evidence of my existence'. Parts of *Double Game* are playful collaborations with novelist Paul Auster. In *Leviathan*, Auster (1992) used episodes from Calle's life to create a character named Maria. In *Double Game*, Calle responds by enacting some of Maria's character sketches while Auster switches roles with Calle by putting her under observation. Calle pushes the play of art imitating art imitating life further by asking Auster to invent an entirely fictitious character whose 'scripted life' she follows. *Double Game* has three parts. Part I is 'the life of Maria and how it influenced the life of Sophie' (Calle, 1999: 10-11), Part II is 'the life of Sophie and how it influenced the life of Maria' (34-5), and Part III is 'one of the many ways of mingling fact with fiction, or how to try to become a character out of a novel' (233-4). In *Double Game*, Calle deconstructs not only the detective 'story' but also the *performance* of both detective and author.

²³ Harwood acknowledges that her 'undetective' strategy borrows from, and extends, my earlier formulations (Gough, 1994b, 1996, 1998) of the interrelationships between fictional genres and educational inquiry.

of Aristotle; but he has not been defeated *as a detective*, but rather (like Sherlock Holmes himself in story after story) vindicated in the end. By contrast, Eco's original William of Baskerville conspicuously *fails* as a detective. He discovers the truth, yes, but by stumbling upon it, not by a successful chain of deductions.

William's failures as an exemplary modernist detective provide opportunities for the novel to foreground productive narrative strategies from postmodernist repertoires. Consider the following interchange between William and his 'Watson', Adso:²⁴

'What I did not understand was the relation among signs... I behaved stubbornly, pursuing a semblance of order, when I should have known well that there is no order in the universe.'

'But in imagining an erroneous order you still found something...'

'What you say is very fine Adso, and I thank you. The order that our mind imagines is like a net, or like a ladder, built to attain something. But afterward you must throw the ladder away, because you discover that, even if it was useful, it was meaningless... The only truths that are useful are instruments to be thrown away' (Eco, 1983: 492).

William could equally well be describing the changes wrought by poststructuralism in the relationships between investigatory methods – 'detection' – and object of social inquiry. Once we have 'found something' with the ladders and nets – the 'erroneous order' – we have imagined, they can be thrown away since, in deconstruction, the method precedes the problem and is 'meaningless' once it has served its purpose of foregrounding the effects of our uses of language in constituting that problem. But whereas structuralist ladders and nets lead us towards closure and a semblance of 'order in the universe', poststructuralist ladders and nets tend to be temporary markers of ongoing processes of reconfiguration, leading not to closure but to new openings. *The Name of the Rose* is itself such an 'erroneous order', which Eco emphasises by using metafictional narrative strategies – strategies that expose his story's status as text and as fiction – to destabilise the projected world of the novel, thus drawing attention to the very processes by which it is constructed both as a world to be explored and the means of its own exploration.

Thus, after poststructuralism, I suspect that it is no longer defensible to consider undertaking educational research in ways that are analogous to the methods of Sherlock Holmes, Miss Marple, Philip Marlowe, V. I. Warshawski, Dirk Gently, Kate Fansler, or even William of Baskerville. We might find more inspiration for our practice by 'watching the undetectives', such as the authors of SF and other postmodernist fictions whose work probes the mysteries of the word-worlds they inscribe.

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²⁴ Elsewhere (Gough, 1994a), I have used excerpts from this passage to frame a comparison of the ways in which the concept of order is manifested in phenomenological and poststructuralist curriculum inquiry.

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