
LUC BOLTANSKI
Mysteries & Conspiracies

MYSTERIES AND CONSPIRACIES

For Christophe Boltanski

MYSTERIES AND CONSPIRACIES

DETECTIVE STORIES, SPY NOVELS AND THE MAKING OF MODERN SOCIETIES

LUC BOLTANSKI

Translated by Catherine Porter

polity

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The idea that history might have copied history is mind-boggling enough; that history should copy *literature* is inconceivable.

Jorge Luis Borges, ‘The Theme of the Traitor and Hero’

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Written between 2008 and 2011, *Mysteries and Conspiracies* benefited from discussions with many colleagues – so many that I shall not attempt to list them all here – about the themes I had set forth in *On Critique.* But the current book is above all the fruit of friendly and even familial exchanges. Friends better informed than I about the sociological questions raised by literature, journalism, law, films and television generously offered skills that I lacked, and I hope they will not feel betrayed by my admittedly often awkward attempts to put what I learned from them into practice. Gabriel Bergounioux, Sabine Chavon-Dermersay, Philippe Roussin, Arnaud Esquerre and Marcela Iacub were of special help during the preparation of this book, and they offered well-informed and perspicacious readings of a preliminary version.

I also took excessive advantage of the little 'think tank' that I am lucky enough to have at hand almost without leaving home. My brother Jean-Élie Boltanski, a linguist and specialist in British literature, transmitted his passion for Anglo-Saxon detective stories and spy novels, as well as for the films they inspired. My daughter Ariane, a historian who specializes in sixteenth-century France and Italy, taught me a great deal about the origins of the problematics of conspiracy. My son Christophe, a war correspondent for a major news magazine, helped me understand the similarities and differences between sociological and journalistic writing. I exchanged ideas daily with my wife Élisabeth Claverie, whose current research focuses on the

anthropology of genocide and the establishment of international tribunals designed to judge suspected participants; her work bears especially on questions about the meaning of ‘organized crime’ or ‘common criminal enterprise’, questions that directly concern problematic relations between individual and collective entities, and thus the problematics of conspiracies. I express my deepest gratitude to these family members here.

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In conclusion, I have to say that my decision to embark on this project was spurred to a large extent by the so-called Tarnac affair, in which Julien Coupat, a militant French leftist whom I had known when he was enrolled as an EHESS student in my seminar and who later became a friend, was one of the principal individuals unjustly accused of having tried to cut the power supply to a train; he was arrested, charged under anti-terrorism laws, and imprisoned for six months. I began writing a month or so after the beginning of this affair in November 2008, and the process of constructing the book helped me manage my emotions and my indignation by shifting them onto a zone of reflection. I very much hope that the court's rulings, which have not yet been issued as I write, will exonerate the 'Tarnac Nine', although this will obviously not eliminate the prejudice produced by the relentless police efforts directed at Julien Coupat and his companions.

FOREWORD

With this volume, Polity completes its admirable task of making the principal works of the sociologist Luc Boltanski available in English. This makes accessible to British and American readers one of the major bodies of post-Bourdieusian European social theory. Undertaken in France between the 1980s and the present, oriented to solving problems left by the previous generation of theorists associated with post-structuralism and *pensée '68* – that age of 'heroic' theory, from an apparently revolutionary opening within the frozen post-war consensus – Boltanski's project transpired amidst a historical chastening of hopes for élite theoretical understanding and radical political transformation. Yet Boltanski did not make the turn to liberal (or neo-liberal), anti-totalitarian (or deradicalized), or banal Americanizing themes, as did those of his countrymen who created that self-abnegating *pensée anti-68* which has made fin-de-siècle French thought often look so barren when viewed from abroad.

In many ways, Boltanski has been a man out of place. Despite individual books, translated earlier, which have had enormous impact in particular sub-fields of Anglo-American scholarship (specifically *Distant Suffering* [1993], essential to theorists of humanitarianism, and *The New Spirit of Capitalism* [1999, written with Eve Chiapello], a fundamental analysis of the postmodern workplace), the coherence of his project had not been visible in anglophone countries until now. His reception abroad was blocked, on one side, by hostility to his early-career separation from

Pierre Bourdieu, making him seem more alien than necessary to the ‘reflexive sociology’ so ardently received in the English-speaking countries. On the other, it suffered from too much of a sensation of familiarity, as Boltanski’s commitments showed close affinities with Anglo-American intentions to rediscover the agency, resistance, and vernacular self-understanding of ordinary social actors.

Boltanski commenced his career as a student, assistant, and close associate of Bourdieu. He collaborated on the founding of *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* with ‘the boss’ (as Boltanski calls him in a recent memoir and reflection, *Rendre la Réalité Inacceptable* [Rendering Reality Unacceptable]) and co-wrote notable work on the ‘production of the dominant ideology’ in French media and society. As Boltanski formed his own distinct research programme in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, he drew up strong objections to the god’s-eye view that belonged to the sociologist in his mentor’s system. Their difference, and ultimate theoretical competition, is remembered as acrimonious up to the time of Bourdieu’s death in 2002.

In more recent summaries of his sociological life’s work including *On Critique* (2009), Boltanski has stressed that his research into the pragmatics of moral contestation and everyday critique ‘was fashioned *both* in opposition to [Bourdieu’s critical sociology] *and* with a view to pursuing its basic intention’ (x). Bourdieusian critical sociology had tried to fuse the quest for emancipation in Marx with the value-neutrality of Weber. It would unmask ideology and domination – the ways that privileged groups get to say what reality is like – but remain scientific, committing itself to no concrete interest or normative particularity. It might inspire readers to indignation, but always remained coy about its personal involvements. And the scientist would stand in for the revolutionary, but stood apart from political constituencies, somberly alone in knowing how things ‘really

are'. So Boltanski's moral and political sociology tried to plunge back into the perspectives of narrow interests and communities of limited view – but seeing multiple sides and approaches at once. He produces a 'sociology of critique', anatomizing the philosophical bases and rationales for different actors' multifarious challenges to institutions. Instead of the super-sophistication of the god's-eye observer, he traces the dynamics of unsophisticated 'affairs' and scandals (like the Dreyfus Affair) for practical social change. In place of the unconsciously incorporated dispositions of habitus, he explores the 'unofficial' ratiocination and unacknowledged moral philosophy that goes on where official discourse prefers to close its eyes (as in his ethnography of French women's experience of legal abortion, *The Foetal Condition* [2004]). During Bourdieu's lifetime, this tack could seem hostile to the predecessor's sociological edifice. From the standpoint of today, Boltanski's moral-philosophical and actor-centered perspective has come to seem the earlier system's vital complement and completion.

Mysteries and Conspiracies is not a departure for Boltanski, though the transposition to literary accounts of social order may seem unexpected. The underlying architectonics of how 'reality' is constituted, challenged, and stabilized through social forms belongs to *On Critique*. The last chapter in this book ('Regulating Sociological Inquiry') openly continues the meditations of that earlier apologia. The discovery of profound sociological significance in fictional media, too, goes back to some of Boltanski's earliest research on comic strips and is perhaps not altogether methodologically unlike his later uses of the literature of management theory. It also alludes silently to Boltanski's other life as a poet, librettist, and occasional writer on art. The incredible pleasure and good humor of Boltanski's unfolding of the detective novel and the spy novel, genres wholly familiar to us revealed in entirely

unfamiliar ways, is as much a wonder of artistic and readerly ingenuity, however, as it is a surprisingly convincing scientific strategy to capture a difficult social reality.

This book turns to popular fictions as a new means of cracking open the State and the law. This maneuver is not new. Literary scholars will certainly make it. But because Boltanski is a sociologist first, the outcome is uniquely felicitous. He knows what to look for – where the bodies may be buried, so to speak. State and law are simultaneously social fact and fantasy: anxiety-producing impositions of iron upon our soft reality, and highly personalized, fleshly protagonists of reassuring stories. Thus where literary scholars often seem undeservedly surprised and impressed at distilling *any* social order from fiction, Boltanski uses novels to attack very particular problems in our theorization of the place of 'the official' in the daily, unofficial experience of instituted power. He explores 'social causality'. He pries open such topics as the intimacy between police and social science; the idea of 'inquiry' as such and its delineation of the formations it looks into; the concealment of one order of reality and causation by another. (Hence his neutral interest in disreputable 'conspiracy theories', and the basis of distinctions between social causation we – the 'educated' – ratify, and those which we disdain.)

One will not find here the discussions of language and form that define literary criticism; the quarry is altogether different. Through detectives and secret agents, Boltanski discovers shoring-up processes, in social fantasy, of forms of order necessary to the state which the state may not, juridically, contain (like the moral law, the agreements of gentlemen, the ethos of a civil service – or the 'deep state' and global-financial-racial conspiracy). In *Mysteries and Conspiracies*, Boltanski thus confirms his admission to the fraternity of great literary sociologists and sociologists of literature – whether we speak of the distinct orientations of

a Raymond Williams, Lucien Goldmann, Franco Moretti, or Pierre Bourdieu. Through this most recent of Boltanski's books, originally published in French in 2012, the English-language audience has the opportunity to have 'caught up' on his work at last, in two senses. We can await the new books to come.

Mark Greif
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PREFACE

This book takes as its subject the thematics of mystery, conspiracy, and inquiry. It seeks to understand the prominent place these thematics have occupied in the representation of reality since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It focuses, first, on works belonging to two literary genres intended for a broad public in which these thematics have been featured: crime novels and spy novels, grasped in the forms they took from their beginnings in the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century (chapters 2, 3, and 4). Then, by developing the thematics of inquiry (which is at the heart of crime fiction) and the thematics of conspiracy (the main subject of espionage fiction), the work veers towards questions that concern not only the representation of reality in popular literature but also the new ways of problematizing reality that have accompanied the development of the human sciences. These sciences have made inquiry their principal instrument. But they have also sought to establish a procedural framework allowing them to distinguish inquiries that can claim ‘scientific’ validity from the many forms of inquiry that have developed in the societies they study. These forms include police investigations and/or their fictional stagings, and even inquiries undertaken occasionally by social actors in order to unveil the causes, which they deem real but hidden, of the ills that affect them.

For this project devoted to the human and social sciences, I have drawn essential material from three fields in

particular. First, psychiatry: at the dawn of the twentieth century, psychiatry invented a new nosological entity, paranoia, one of whose chief symptoms is the tendency to undertake interminable inquiries and prolong them to the point of delirium. Second, political science: this discipline has taken up the problematics of paranoia and displaced it from the psychic to the social level, looking on the one hand at conspiracies and on the other at the tendency to explain historical events in terms of 'conspiracy theories' (chapter 5). Third, sociology: this discipline pays special attention to the problems it encounters when it seeks to equip itself with specific forms of 'social' causality and to identify the individual or collective entities to which it can attribute the events that punctuate the lives of persons and groups or even the course of history.

The articulation among these seemingly disparate objects is established by positing the analytic framework presented in chapter 1, which serves as a general introduction. This framework seeks to pin down the social and political conjuncture in which, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the thematics of mystery and conspiracy became tropes destined to play a prominent role both in fiction and in the interpretation of historical events and the workings of society. The thesis proposed here links questions about the representation of reality with changes that affected the way reality itself was instituted during the period in question. The relation between reality and the state is at the heart of the analysis. Mysteries can be constituted as specific objects only by being detached from the background of a stabilized and predictable reality whose fragility is revealed by crimes. Now, it is to the nation-state as it developed in the late nineteenth century that we owe the project of organizing and unifying reality, or, as sociology puts it today, of *constructing* reality, for a given population on a given territory. But this demiurgic project

had to face a number of obstacles, most critically the development of capitalism, which ignored national borders.

As for the thematics of conspiracy, it is the focal point for suspicions about the exercise of power. Where does power *really* lie, and who *really* holds it? State authorities, who are supposed to take charge of it, or other agencies, acting in the shadows: bankers, anarchists, secret societies, the ruling class … ? Here is the scaffolding for political ontologies that count on a distributed reality. A surface reality, apparent but probably illusory even though it has an official status, is countered by a deep, hidden, threatening reality, which is unofficial but much more real. The contingencies of the conflict between these two realities – REALITY vs. *reality* – constitute the guiding thread of this book. We shall follow the conflict, as it unfolds, from several different angles. For the appearance and very rapid development of crime novels and then spy novels, the identification of paranoia by psychiatry and the development of the social sciences, sociology in particular, were more or less simultaneous processes that also coincided with a new way of problematizing reality and of working through the contradictions that inhabit it.

Rather than offer an impossible conclusion to a history that is presumably far from over, the book's epilogue returns to the terrain of literature by looking at Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. That text concentrates – with an intensity whose brilliance has been endlessly praised by the novel's many commentators – the principal threads that I am seeking to disentangle at least to a limited extent here. *The Trial* takes up the thematics of mystery, conspiracy and inquiry that are at the heart of crime novels and spy stories. But by inverting their orientation and perverting their mechanisms, Kafka's text discloses the disturbing reality that these apparently anodyne and diverting narratives conceal.

It is certainly possible to challenge an approach that consists in grasping the question of reality by relying at the

outset on a documentary corpus made up of works intentionally presented as fictions. All the more so since, in the narratives at issue, it is conventional to leave a maximum of free play to the imagination for the explicit purpose of entertaining the reader – that is, precisely in order to remove the reader from the pressures and constraints of daily life and thus of reality. Nevertheless, crime novels and spy stories have arguably been the chief means for exposing to a broad public certain concerns that, precisely because they go to the heart of political arrangements and call into question the very contours of modernity, could not easily have been approached head on, outside of limited circles. According to this logic, it is precisely because uncertainties about what may be called *the reality of reality* are so crucial that they find themselves deflected towards the realm of the imaginary.

It is generally acknowledged today that crime novels and spy novels count among the principal innovations of the twentieth century in the domain of fiction. These genres made a sudden appearance in English and French literature at the end of the nineteenth century and in the first half of the twentieth, and they spread very broadly with remarkable speed. Initially associated with so-called popular literature, these narrative forms, organized around the thematics of mystery, conspiracy and inquiry, were rapidly extended to more ambitious literature, which took over their predominant themes. But the appearance and very rapid development of these genres are more than interesting phenomena within the history of western literature. Detective stories and tales of espionage, which have been proliferating continually since the early twentieth century, first in written form[1] and then through films and television, are the most widespread narrative forms today on a planetary scale. Thus they play an unprecedented role in the representation of reality that is offered henceforth to all human beings, even illiterates, provided that they have

access to modern media. In a sense, these narratives constitute objects of predilection for a sociological approach that is turning away from a strictly documentary function and seeking new ways to grasp certain symbolic forms, especially political thematics, that have developed during the twentieth century,[2] somewhat the way history and philosophy have been able to make use of the Homeric poems to analyse the symbolic structures of ancient Greece, or the way classical tragedy used those same texts to explore representations of power in seventeenth-century France.

On the conceptual level, this project has given me an opportunity to deal with questions that I had carefully avoided earlier, questions that I not only was unable to answer but that I did not even know how to formulate. The first of these is the question of the state, which is probably the hardest for sociology to address, precisely owing to the foundational ties that link the apparatus of state power with this apparatus of knowledge. I should also mention the question of social causality, one that has been largely abandoned by contemporary sociology; the question of which entities are pertinent for sociological analysis; the question of relations of scale (micro- and macrosociology); and the question, finally, of the place that should be attributed to events in the descriptions proposed by our discipline. Let me reassure the reader: none of these major issues will find a satisfactory solution here. But it has nevertheless been a relief to me to dare to look at them straight on.

This book also gave me an opportunity to use concepts that were better broken in because I had worked with them in earlier studies, for example the concepts of uncertainty, trial, affair, critique and especially *reality*, constructed reality understood as a network of causalities based on pre-established formats that make action predictable. In *On Critique* (2011 [2009]), I sought to show that the idea of the

‘construction of reality’, which belongs today to the *organum* of normal sociology, is meaningful only provided that one analyses the way *reality* comes to attach itself to the surface of what I call, in that same work, *the world* (a distinction that is taken up again with more precision in the first chapter of the current book). Everything that happens emanates from the world, but in a sporadic and onto-logically uncontrollable fashion, while reality, which is based on a selection and an organization of certain possibilities offered by the world at a given moment in time, can constitute an arrangement apt to be grasped synthetically by sociologists, historians and also local actors. One goal of my present endeavour is thus also, in a way, to flesh out the conceptual system proposed in *On Critique.*

I must add, nevertheless, that in writing this book I have hoped that readers who are not sociologists but practitioners of other disciplines (or even of no discipline at all) could read the text with interest. I have undertaken this project with a concern for grasping symbolic forms that, situated as they are on the borderline between social and political reality in its most tangible aspects and in particularly fantastical fictional representations, are not easily grasped either by using the methods of classic sociology or by resorting to the means available to literary studies. This approach implied taking as given the links that have always brought sociology into proximity with the vast realm of the ‘humanities’. In this way I have hoped to contribute to the analysis of the political metaphysics that, without necessarily being inscribed in the canonical forms of political philosophy, have nevertheless marked the previous century and that to all appearances still haunt the century that is now our own.

— 1 —

REALITY VERSUS *REALITY*

The London meanderings of Aristide Valentin

‘The Blue Cross’ is the first story in *The Innocence of Father Brown*, which is in turn the first of five collections of detective stories published by G. K. Chesterton between 1911 and 1935 (Chesterton 1994). Father Brown, the detective hero of these tales, is a Catholic priest, small in stature and quite ordinary in appearance. He faces a superb criminal: Flambeau. French by birth but worldwide in scope, a brilliant artist of crime, Flambeau is wanted by the police in at least three major European countries. At least, this is the case in the early stories; later, Father Brown manages to ‘turn’ Flambeau and make him an invaluable collaborator. Together they solve mysteries that arise like shooting stars from the ether in the earth’s atmosphere, repeatedly penetrate our world and disrupt its seemingly stable and orderly arrangement of reality.

When ‘The Blue Cross’ begins, a French detective, Aristide Valentin, has gone to England to track down Flambeau, about whom he knows nothing except that he too has crossed the Channel. Valentin is French to the core, thus devoted to reason. But as he has a good understanding of how reason works, he is not unaware of its limits, and he knows that there are circumstances when reason requires us to pay the closest attention precisely to what seems to elude it. On this occasion, Valentin has no trail to follow. All

possible paths of investigation are open to him; he has no reason to prefer one to another. Not only does Valentin not know where Flambeau is, he does not even know what has drawn his quarry to London: a criminal enterprise, inevitably, one for which Flambeau has devised a plan, but there is no reason to suppose that the deed has already been done. Valentin thus opts for an approach that consists in paying attention to minuscule events that seem senseless and thereby take on the character of *mysteries*.

In the opening sequence of 'The Blue Cross', Valentin meanders about the streets of London, not seeking *clues* (as Sherlock Holmes does), since he does not even know the nature of the criminal deeds towards which certain particular arrangements might point; if he knew, he could establish a referential relation between these arrangements and the deeds themselves. He simply pays close attention to every event that has the character of a mystery, in the sense I have just given this term. A first mystery: he goes into a restaurant for breakfast – it is a tranquil, simple place with old-fashioned charm – and orders coffee and a poached egg. As he is about to put sugar in his coffee, he is astonished to find that the sugar bowl does not contain granulated sugar, as he expected, but salt. When he proceeds to examine the salt shaker, he observes that it is full of sugar. He summons the waiter, who acknowledges the oddity and attributes it to two priests, one tall and one short, both calm and respectable, who had had soup at that very table a short time before. Why this attribution? Because, the waiter explains, while one of the two priests behaved normally (he paid the bill and left), the other lingered a moment and (second mystery) grabbed his cup of soup and tossed its contents against the wall.

Valentin, continuing his random pursuit, comes across a display of fruit in a grocery-shop window: oranges and nuts. Now (third mystery), on the pile of nuts there is a sign indicating 'premium tangerines, twopence', and on the pile

of oranges, ‘top selection of Brazil nuts’. Under questioning, the enraged merchant answers that two priests had come by and that one of them had (fourth mystery) deliberately overturned the basket of oranges. Valentin then speaks to a policeman standing across the street and asks him if by any chance he has come across two priests. The policeman answers that they had climbed aboard a yellow bus and that one of them appeared drunk (which constitutes a fifth mystery, priests not being the sort of individuals one generally expects to see strolling inebriated about the streets in the morning). Valentin in turn takes a yellow bus and sits on the top deck. After a while, the bus passes a pub with a broken front window, looking as if it had been deliberately smashed (sixth mystery). The owner, when questioned, tells him that this misdeed was committed by two men in black. When it was time to pay the bill, one of the two had given him a sum three times higher than the price of the meals consumed. ‘It’s for what I’m about to break’, the man said, whereupon he used his umbrella to break the glass. Finally (seventh and last mystery), a woman encountered in a charming sweetshop tells Valentin about a package that a priest gave her, asking her to send it to a certain address. By tracking this package, Valentin puts himself on the trail of the still unknown criminal and crime that justify his own presence in London.

How to understand ‘mysteries’

Aristide Valentin’s ramblings through the streets of London, where he lets himself be guided by a series of *mysteries*, give us a first indication of how this term is to be understood. A *mystery* arises from an event, however unimportant it may seem, that stands out in some way against a *background* – to borrow terms from the psychology of form – or against the traces of a past event, not witnessed by the narrator, that remain perceptible later

on. This background is thus constituted by ordinary understandings as we know them through the intermediary of authorities (educational in particular) and/or through experience; the latter gives actions a relatively predictable character, especially by associating them with habits. A mystery is thus a singularity (since every event is a singularity) but one whose character can be called *abnormal*, one that breaks with the way things present themselves under conditions that we take to be *normal*, so that our minds do not manage to fit the uncanny event into ordinary reality. The mystery thus leaves a kind of scratch on the seamless fabric of reality. In this sense – to return to concepts introduced in *On Critique* – a mystery can be said to be the result of an irruption of the *world* in the heart of *reality* (Boltanski 2011 [2009]: 57–9).[1]

By the world, I mean 'everything that happens' – to borrow Wittgenstein's formulation – and even everything that might possibly happen – an 'everything' that cannot be fully known and mastered. Conversely, reality is stabilized by pre-established formats that are sustained by institutions, formats that often have a legal or paralegal character, at least in western societies. These formats constitute a semantics that expresses *the whatness of what is*; they establish *qualifications,* define *entities* and *trials* (in the sense in which the term 'trial' is used in *On Justification* [Boltanski and Thévenot 2006 (1991)]), and determine the relations that must be maintained between entities and trials or tests if these are to have an acceptable character. In this way, reality is presented as a network of causal relations that holds together the events with which experience is confronted. Reference to these relations makes it possible to *give meaning* to the *events* that are produced by identifying the *entities* to which these events must be *attributed*.[2]

These causal relations are thus tacitly recognized in general as unproblematic, so that it does not seem

necessary to verify them, to establish proofs for them – or at least it does not seem necessary to push the investigation beyond the boundaries that have been set up by habit and also by the trust placed in the validity of the established formats. Especially when the causality in question has a social dimension, this trust is based on agencies that guarantee the regular attribution of events to pre-defined entities – among which, in the modern era, legal and governmental agencies play a preponderant role. We shall see later on that law can be considered as one of the principal social arrangements used to establish and maintain these attributions.

Unlike events that can be qualified as ordinary, an event possesses an enigmatic or mysterious character when it escapes the normal attributions of a specific entity (there is no valid reason for a waiter to put sugar in a salt shaker) or when the nature of the entity to which it can be attributed is unknown. Thus a mysterious event may well have an immediate *signification* (a certain building has collapsed), in the sense that the change of state affecting the situation in which it intervenes can be described in a way that relies on generally accepted physical data (if the building had risen into the sky, it would have been called a 'miracle'). But one can say that the event does not have a *meaning* as long as it has not been possible to *attribute* it to a given entity or, when that entity is already known, to determine that entity's *intentions*. The event, as a singularity, thus takes on full meaning only by being related to an entity credited with an identity, a certain stability across time, and an intentionality – whether this latter is manifested, or not, by way of a conscious act.[3] A given building has collapsed. This is a 'fact'. But to give the event a meaning, we have to be in a position to identify the entity to which it can be attributed as well as the reasons behind it. Must the cause of the collapse be imputed to an earthquake? A design flaw? A construction defect on the part of the builder (who used

inferior materials to save money, for example)? To an illegal manoeuvre on the part of the owner so he could get the insurance money? To a criminal who sought to cover up the murder he had just committed? To a bomb set off by a terrorist (and, in that case, what were his real intentions, and is it truly appropriate to call him a terrorist)? We shall come back to these notions in more detail later on.

Detective stories vs. fantastic tales and picaresque novels

Detective stories, as a genre, set forth mysteries and their solutions. Stories of this form begin with an event and work back towards its causes.[4] The formation of this literary genre thus entails a certain number of presuppositions about reality. Indeed, it has been observed that an enigma can only stand out against the background of a stabilized reality. Detective stories are based, more precisely, on two presuppositions that distinguish this genre from its predecessors: tales, especially fantastic tales, on the one hand, and, on the other, novels that can be called ‘picaresque’, in a succinct designation of a narrative orientation that originated in Spain and developed in quite diverse forms in French and English literature.[5]

Detective stories are distinct from tales, whether miraculous or fantastic, to the extent that they bank on the existence of a reality known as ‘natural’, that is, on the type of causal linkages that the ‘natural’ sciences establish. The association between the narrative logic of detective stories and scientific logic was central to the earliest analyses of this genre (Messac 1975 [1929]). Detective stories could not exist without a clearly established dividing line between natural reality and the world known as supernatural. If gods or spirits can modify reality according to their whims, and if we cannot know their intentions, then reality does not

possess the necessary stability for mysteries to stand out in a salient way against the background formed by the normal course of events. In detective stories and also, of course, in spy stories, there are no references to supernatural beings, such as ghosts, and this absence marks the difference between the two literary genres we are considering, on the one hand, and so-called fantastic tales, on the other. To be sure, in the literature of the second half of the nineteenth century there are many narratives associated with the fantastic genre that do not refer directly to the intervention of supernatural beings, or to anything magical, but that seek to arouse anxiety and unease in the reader by depicting ordinary situations in terms apt to bring out their strangeness (Todorov 1973). But this device, particularly evident in Guy de Maupassant's fantastic realism, aims to look on all reality as tinged with an anxiety-producing uncanniness, often by presenting it as it might appear to a subject afflicted with mental illness. Now, this literary approach, too, excludes the possibility of establishing a detective-story intrigue. For if reality as a whole takes on an enigmatic form and is tilted towards the impossible and the incomprehensible, then the singularities on which mystery-based novels rely (singularities that the investigator's job is to explain) are swallowed up in a framework that no longer allows the ordinary to be distinguished from the extraordinary, the interpretable from the inconceivable.

The work of Edgar Allen Poe, who was both a master of the fantastic genre and the inventor of the detective story,[6] allows us to distinguish clearly between these two genres. Paranormal phenomena are not excluded from Poe's fantastic tales. But such phenomena never come into play in those that prefigure the detective story. Similarly, while Arthur Conan Doyle was a devoted practitioner of spiritiualism in his private life and even wrote a history of the practice (Doyle 1926),[7] he excluded supernatural and paranormal elements from the detective stories featuring

Sherlock Holmes. These narratives do not incorporate any events apt to transgress the causal modalities that we customarily ascribe, in western societies, to ‘natural laws’. And while certain characters may initially evoke such phenomena – ghostly appearances, doors that open or close without human or mechanical intervention, and so on – the inquiry always ends up giving them a natural explanation, or attributing them to manoeuvres designed to deceive the story’s protagonists (and by the same token its readers).

This restriction clearly does not apply to Doyle’s many fantastic tales. Let us compare, for example, two stories that both include the mysterious appearance of a monster. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, a *detective* story, readers are first allowed to believe that the huge beast terrifying the villagers is of paranormal origin. But this irrational belief is disproved by Sherlock Holmes’s investigation. The irrational has a rational outcome. In ‘The Terror of Blue John Gap’, a *fantastic* tale, rational arguments are invoked at the beginning of the story, but they are belied by subsequent events. The inhabitants of a remote mountain village in England also believe in the existence of a terrifying monster. The narrator, ‘a man of a sober and scientific turn of mind, absolutely devoid of imagination’, is scornful at first of these ‘old wives’ tales’ and tries to find a rational explanation for the strange phenomena reported by the locals (the inexplicable disappearance of sheep on moonless nights), before finding himself in the presence of a monster from the bowels of the earth whose victim he becomes in turn (Doyle 1977: 69).

A second presupposition concerns the social world. If the mysteries on which detective stories hinge are to stand out sharply against the background of reality, reality has to be consistent not only with natural ‘laws’ but also with social regularities. This is what distinguishes detective stories from picaresque narratives. Both genres belong to the vast domain of adventure stories. A detective story includes