MORALISM AND INDIVIDUALISM IN URBAN FICTION: A DELEUZIAN AND BAKHTINIAN CRITIQUE OF SPATIAL TRANSGRESSIONS IN CONTEMPORARY CRIME NOVELS

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Urban crime fiction can be seen as an inheritor of the adventure novel tradition and the 'ordeal plot'. The semantic foundations of the ordeal plot are traditionally detailed as an opposition between labyrinthine and anomic settings on the one hand and a quest for moral authenticity on the other. In urban crime fiction one can clearly see how modern literature transforms this model in an attempt to cope with the 'modernity syndrome' (the paradoxical co-existence of decoding and recoding mechanisms). Contemporary urban representations, and this will be the main focus of this contribution, radicalize the transformed model.

Key words: literary history / urban studies / crime fiction / space / Bakhtin, Mikhail M. / Deleuze, Gilles

Historically, the 'urban novel' or 'city novel' was a strong discursive reality in both the production and reception of 19th and early 20th century fiction. To grasp the full extent of the contrast with the present situation we need to bear in mind, however, what this implies: that academic literary criticism often treated the phenomenon of the urban novel as something of a monolith, discussing it in tandem with generalizing, universalizing, or 'grand' narratives on 'the metropolis' and 'metropolitan life' by such early sociologists and urban theorists as Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Louis Wirth, or Lewis Mumford. The urban novel, as it was construed first by writers and then by critics, thus usually stood for a confrontation with the processes and symptoms of 'modernity' overall — a confrontation that was easily taken to transcend the particularities of place, race, lifestyle, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or national origin that have come to complicate and refine academic discourse in more recent years. In itself, this traditional approach is not surprising: literary repre-

sentations of urban worlds were themselves inspired by a kind of meto-
nymical motivation. The city was conceived as a privileged environment;
it was seen as a space in which the most important social and historical
processes came to the surface. Writers and critics had good reason to
emphasize the exceptional social status of the metropolis. According to
the most eminent urban sociologist that Berlin produced, Georg Simmel,
the city around the turn of the century was not so much a "spatial entity
with sociological consequences" as "a sociological entity that is formed
spatially" (Simmel1903: 35; quoted in Frisby 1986: 77). Urban space was
the modernization process itself turned flesh; it was the "point of
concentration of modernity". For this reason, literary representations of
the city (and studies about them) were much more than descriptions of
urban space; they were always also about a microcosm that metonymi-
cally, or better even, synecdochically, referred to major events and
evolutions in the social world at large. I want to recall, very briefly, two
of these events: on the one hand, the rationalization and fragmentation of
moral discourses that accompanies literary representations of the city, and
on the other hand, the commodifications and individualization of life-
styles that goes hand in hand with them (see Beck 1986). Both these
social phenomena have been analyzed extensively by urban sociologists,
but the most important observers of them have probably been the great
urban novelists of the 19th and 20th centuries (see Keunen 2001 and
Lehan 1998).

The main concern of these novelists can be described by referring to a
historical phenomenon I would like to coin "the modernity syndrome".
According to theorists of modernity like Simmel and Georg Lukács, who
describe the first pole of the modernity syndrome, the moral order changed
completely from the Renaissance onwards. Modernity can be considered
as the period in which the bourgeoisie introduced capitalism and thereby
installed a new type of morality. In the capitalist logic, nothing is sacred;
everything tends towards a decoding of the ancient social relationships. In
the name of individual liberties, traditions are done away with and social
forms are transformed into functional societal structures. In a capitalist
form of society, no universal value systems can thrive, as it is the axio-
matic structure of capital flows that ultimately determines the foundational
social relationships. Hierarchical structures based on social status and
corresponding qualitative values crumble, to the benefit of a seemingly
egalitarian society of free citizens. At the level of moral coding, a fault
line can be discerned. Bourgeois culture moves away from the codes of
the older, hierarchically organized social groups and is therefore plagued
by self-pity caused by the "loss of values".

The interest of the great urban novelists in excessive manifestations of
individual sovereignty is a second aspect of the modernity syndrome. It
reflects the individuation process of modernity, a process that can be
labeled a "recoding process". This recoding is related to the modern
subjects' tendency to stylize themselves as sovereign moral individuals.
In other words, the fragmentation of traditional codes by the capitalist
process of decoding is undone by a new moral coding foundation: the

individual. Going back to Elias' description of the civilization process, one can argue that the decoding that wins out in modern society goes hand in hand with a recoding of individual behavior. The demise of external coercion coincides with increased self-coercion. In the course of the modernization process, culture progressively functions as a strategy to manipulate culture participants - to *civilize* them, and to subject them to the requirement of "impulse control"; the moral codes are interiorized and assume the shape of individual codes of behavior. Deleuze and Guattari come to the same conclusions in their genealogical overview of cultural history in *Capitalisme et schizophrénie*. They observe that in the realm of "the brave and the free" the "oedipalization" of behavior becomes the most important mechanism of social coding (Deleuze 1972: 318). Anticipating the bio-political claims in Michel Foucault's *Histoire de la sexualité* and Negri's *Empire*, they argue that in capitalist societies the individual ideal of freedom paradoxically functions as a kind of psychological self-coercion. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that capitalist societies may very well exercise the most powerful kind of terror: psychological terror. Admittedly, capitalist individuals no longer live under the regime of despotic institutions, but they have to deal with an internal despot who burdens them with feelings of guilt and unattainable desires. The heroes of urban fiction certainly confirm this general tendency.

In what follows, I will shed light on both aspects of the modernity syndrome in order to clarify this somewhat abstract hypothesis. From time to time, I will refer to fiction writers, but in essence, my argument will be of a theoretical nature. My illustrations come from 20th century realist literature, more specifically the genre of the crime novel, because this genre can be seen as being the most familiar with the old strategies of urban writing. I will dwell on two images of the hero in the popular narrative culture of the 20th century. The first ties in with a traditional moralistic scheme; the second can be seen as a post-modernist stance that surmounts the traditional vision of the heroic act. The first seems to dominate most of our crime novel production in the West; the second can be considered as a more modest and marginal current within our popular culture.

Literary heroes and the spatial imagination

Urban crime fiction, as it was "invented" by the pioneers of the hard-boiled tradition, is marked by a strong moral concern. When dealing with modern society, they project moral values on the city. Moral polarities are used to give a semantic foundation to plot structures and heroes. In the hard-boiled tradition this structure is particularized as an opposition between labyrinthine and anomic settings on one hand, and attempts at elucidation on the other. In this sense these murder stories can be seen as a powerful expression of one aspect of the "modernity syndrome". They deal with the "decoding" of moral values in modern "civilized" societies. But the other half of the syndrome is present in crime fiction as well. The

dual plot structure is often combined with heroes that express a strong sense of individuality and a predilection for private meditations. Like other types of modern fiction, urban crime fiction is organized by the actions of heroes who are tested for their personal integrity. This reflects the individuation process of modernity, the "recoding process."

Urban crime fiction became respected because of its ability to depict modern society in its degrading and dysphoric aspects. The decoding process in the modern world (the aforementioned fragmentation of moral discourses and of life worlds) is central to the world of hard-boiled crime fiction. Raymond Chandler, one of the deans of this kind of world-making, captures the kind of morality that comes through in urban crime fiction in "The Simple Art of Murder":

> The realist in murder writes of a world in which gangsters can rule nations and almost rule cities, in which hotels and apartment houses and celebrated restaurants are owned by rich men who made their money out of brothels, in which a screen star can be the finger man for a mob, and the nice man down the hall is a boss of the numbers racket; a world where a judge with a cellar full of bootleg liquor can send a man to jail for having a pint in his pocket, where the mayor of your town may have condoned murder as an instrument of money making, where no man can walk down a dark street in safety because law and order are things we talk about but refrain from practising; a world where you may witness a hold-up in broad daylight and see who did it, but you will fade quickly back into the crowd rather than tell anyone, because the hold-up men may have friends with long guns, or the police may not like your testimony, and in any case the shyster for the defence will be allowed to abuse and vilify you in open court, before a jury of selected morons, without any but the most perfunctory interference from a political judge. It is not a very fragrant world, but it is the world you live in, and certain writers with tough minds and a cool spirit of detachment can make very interesting and even amusing patterns out of it (Chandler 1944: 59).

References to the second pole of the modernity syndrome complete the picture. For Chandler, an important feature of crime fiction is the wish to offer a picture of "redemption." The appropriate answer to the decoding processes of modernity is the moral integrity of the detective. In a much quoted passage he states:

> Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid. The detective in this kind of story must be such a man. He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honour, by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world. (…) If there were enough like him, I think the world would be a very safe place to live in, and yet not too dull to be worth living in (Chandler 1944: 59).

The enactment of recoded moral attitudes is a fundamental story pattern in modern societies. Modern subjects do not see themselves as

devoted citizens, but like to cultivate the image of a person who acts morally in a spontaneous way. In essence, this attitude is a symptom of a phenomenon that Norbert Elias dubbed "emotional and moral self-coercion". Crime fiction hyperbolizes this fundamental tendency: far from being a savior of the metaphysical order, modern heroes are extrapolations of our tendency towards self-coercion. In a sense they seem to be emblems of unbound freedom and of a life that is more adventurous than that of ordinary people, but their attitude is, in fact, more ambiguous. They hyperbolize not only our freedom, but also illustrate our troubled experience in a world that forces individuals into the "social correctness" of self-coercion.

In order to trace the basic structure of the crime novel, we can draw on two essays by Mikhail Bakhtin written in the late thirties (Bakhtin 1981 and 1986). One of the core concepts in his history of the novel is the concept of "ordeal". According to Bakhtin, the Novel of Ordeal is "the most widespread sub-category of the novel in European literature. It encompasses a considerable majority of all novels produced" (Bakhtin 1986: 11). The novel of ordeal is a novelistic sub-genre of Greek origin which reached its peak between the second and the sixth century. It underwent countless metamorphoses (hagiography, chivalric literature, the baroque adventure novel). Moreover, this literary genre survived its historical prototypes: in the Gothic novel and the 18th century sentimental novel, Dumas and Sue's 19th century adventure stories, and the contemporary Hollywood action movie and crime fiction are to a great extent also indebted to the narrative of the ordeal. The name of the genre derives from the fact that the story centers on the hero's trials in confrontation with (often adventurous and well-nigh insurmountable) obstacles. The nature of the test (the ordeal) is not so much determined by the concrete shape of the obstacles, but largely depends on the identity the author has chosen for his hero. Whether the test concerns the hero's loyalty, bravery, virtue, saintliness or magnanimity, the result is always the confirmation of the basic qualities of the heroic individual and the traditions that they incorporate like nobody else does.

One of Bakhtin's important insights is the observation that the "adventure novel of ordeal" is characterized by a high degree of *stasis*. The hero of these stories is thrown into a world dominated by ordeals or whims of fate, but these do not change him in the least. The ordeal is based on a set plot ("a typical composite schema"; Bakhtin 1981:87) and a stereotypical narrative worldview, the adventure chronotope: "The adventure chronotope is (…) characterized by a technical, abstract connection between space and time, by the reversibility of moments in a temporal sequence, and by their interchangeability in space. In this chronotope all initiative and power belongs to chance" (Bakhtin 1981: 100). There is hardly any interaction between the hero and the world; the world can test the hero, but is not capable of really changing him. In the same way, the hero cannot change the static order of the world. The ideological consequence of such a view of humanity is that our identity coincides with a predetermined self. The hero stands for vague, but in any case fixed values, and the world he has to cope with also has a fixed meaning.

The static world view that Bakhtin describes is a constitutive part of the literature of autocratic and theocratic societies. Epic literature is one of the most important types of literary expression from the Scandinavian Eddas and the *Carmina Burana* of the Carolingian Renaissance to the *chansons de geste*. It is a kind of allegorical narrative art that is structured by binary oppositions which are informed by aristocratic and religious codes. Through this kind of binary opposition, the epic romance glorifies the ruling position of social elites. For contemporary cultural historians (such as Deleuze and Jameson), this type of positional thinking constitutes the prime characteristic of the pre-capitalist narrative. As Northrop Frye put it: "Romance is the struggle between higher and lower realms, between heaven and hell, or the angelic and the demonic or diabolic" (Jameson 1981: 110-1). The epic romance is a genre that collects narratives in which the oppositions between the strong and the weak, between heroes and intriguers, between figures of order and figures of chaos, determine the plot. In these stories, the hero acts as the (representative of the) lawmaker, but at the same time as a metaphysical agent that renders society coherent (again). The sacrifices made to achieve this goal are superhuman; the protagonist is a superman. In *Anatomy of Criticism* Frye analyzes epic heroes as follows: "The hero of romance is analogous to the mythical Messiah or deliverer who comes from an upper world, and his enemy is analogous to the demonic powers of a lower world" (Frye 1957: 187).[1]

At first sight, the classical mythical patterns of thought seem to recur in 19th century realist fiction. Urban stories especially share a strong ethical preoccupation with epic romance, and in a sense they figure as "the missing link" between 20th century crime writing and the tradition of the adventure story. During the 19th century (until the interbellum period) cities were staged, described and evaluated as spaces of transgression, and opposed by a protagonist (or a series of characters) with a high degree of ethical self-consciousness. The mythical conflict implies a battle between an endangered moral world and an anomic world — a battle that cannot be brought to a conclusion and therefore always involves spleen and other signs of depression. Amy Kaplan supports this point of view in her study of American realism: realism has to be studied as "a strategy for imagining and managing the threats of social change – not just to assert a dominant power, but often to assuage fears of powerlessness" (Kaplan 1988: 10). The strongest expressions of these preoccupations can be found in city literature. In realist and modernist literatures many novels open with the image of an uprooted traveler who innocently enters a city. The image functioned as the strategy of choice to give shape to the grand parade of modernity. Especially works that can be categorized as realist, naturalist or realistically oriented modernist (like Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* or Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*), as well as films from the interbellum (like Joe May's *Asphalt* or King Vidor's *The Crowd*), used the motif of 'arrival in the big city' to submerge the audience in a highly charged and emotionally gripping situation (see Keunen 2000: 206-7, 303). Even though the urban material selected by authors and film makers was usually characterized by diversity and heterogeneity,

these works shared a fascination with the Big Confrontation between individual and city. The arrival in New York, Chicago, Paris, Berlin, or London was a symbol of the encounter with historical developments everyone could recognize, and social tensions everybody could feel. For these reasons the image of this confrontation became one of the most potent symbols of modern culture. The attention shifts from superhuman heroes and aristocratic ideals to the experiences of normal citizens in everyday life. The struggles between good and evil disappear to make room for the existential vicissitudes of individual heroes, for what Erich Auerbach has called "the entrance of existential and tragic seriousness into realism" (Auerbach 2003: 481). In other words, the ordeal is primarily situated at the level of the confrontation with modernity, and decoding, anomic society (see Auerbach 2003: 463, 473, 550-2). In a large number of French realist novels of the first half of the 19th century (Balzac) and in French naturalism (from the 1860's on), the urban hero strongly relies on an individualized heroism that runs parallel to the general recoding tendency in modern society. The plot of the realist novel, like that of the *Bildungsroman*, is constructed around the moral development of the protagonist, who, in a struggle with the social world (often symbolized by the city), reaches maturity or resignation. The urban individual is at the mercy of an ethically superficial and often threatening city. This is certainly the case in Anglo-Saxon naturalism: the confrontation between the individual and the city often takes the form of a tragic conflict from which the individual barely escapes (Williams 1985: 235; Göbel 1982: 90-92). Therefore, it is not surprising that the theme of the struggle between the individual and the city became immensely popular in the 19th and early 20th century.[2] The metropolis became the narrative mould in which the author could test his heroes. Diane Wolfe Levy rightly argues that "the realistic city of early 19th-century novels functioned either as a backdrop or an objective test to be passed or failed by the protagonist. It was presented in highly symbolic terms of success or failure" (Levy 1978: 73)[3].

City literature in this sense was an excellent expression of what I call the modernity syndrome. On the one hand, modern fiction addresses transformations in the social world (the tendency towards differentiation and fragmentation, and towards the relativity of moral absolutes); on the other hand, it addresses changes in the subjective answers to these trans-formations. The first can be called decoding phenomena; the second can be called recoding strategies. Thus, I would like to argue that, together with increasing anomy, modernity is also characterized by a different view of individual values. Theorists of modernity have observed that individuals in an anomic society take on an aura of subjective freedom. Literary historians find that there is a process of individualization in lite-rature, that the modern author cannot fall back on the old moral polarities and that the ordeal of his heroes can no longer take place in a transparent, comprehensible world. As Jameson put it: "In the increasingly secularized and rationalized world that emerges from the collapse of feudalism" the author needs to look for themes that will have to replace "the older magical categories of Otherness which have now become so many dead

languages" (Jameson 1981: 131). The modern author finds these themes especially in the psychological world – more specifically, in the polarity between subjective representations of morality and the value-indifference of the objective world.

In 20th century crime writing this enactment of both cultural mechanisms of the modernity syndrome, this symbolic attempt to cope with modernity, seems to be continued, as will be argued below. The decoding of moral values can be seen as a good conductor for ancient images of moral decay and metaphysical uncertainties. This image of the modern hero can be seen as a transgressive figure who replaces the ancient heroes of the epic. It certainly ties in with Lotman's thesis on the transgressive nature of modern and ancient heroes: "He may be a noble robber or a *picaro*, a sorcerer, spy, detective, terrorist or superman – the point is that he is able to do what others cannot – namely, to cross the structural boundaries of cultural space" (Lotman 1990: 151).

The transgressive hero in recent urban crime fiction

The quotes from Chandler show that urban crime fiction certainly revitalizes the old patterns of a general moral problem. Chandler is writing about the thirties, but in later phases of 20th century culture the basic premises are roughly copied by crime novelists. In contemporary crime fiction the pattern changes only a little. In many aspects contemporary crime stories resemble the older literature of ordeal, but they replace the old metaphysical and religious challenges by issues regarding the decoding mechanisms in modern society. What Michael Denning says about Eric Ambler's work goes to the heart of contemporary crime fiction: "the obsessive story of the loss of innocence, and the demystifying reduction of all civilization to violence and brute force: all these aspects join to form a concern for individual ethical decisions in the context of certain established and permanent aspects of human nature and experience" (Denning 1987: 84). In crime fiction the older mythical structure is particularized as an opposition between, on the one hand, a spatial projection of a decoded life world and, on the other hand, heroic struggles with that urban space of moral transgression. The hero of the modern crime story does not seem to fight a specific kind of evil, or a negative moral agency; he often fights a more abstract enemy, the lack of moral foundations. During this struggle, he discovers his own, idiosyncratic moral code; he develops his ego by falling back on a highly minimalist moral theory, a prudential ethics. In some cases, the ethical self-consciousness, the recoding strategy, of the traditional hero becomes an even more extreme individualistic stance; resistance to the transgressive environment takes on radical transgressive features itself. An extreme example of this can be found in the work of Andrew Vachss, a former administrator who specialized in cases of child abuse after reading law. In his crime stories (which nearly always take place in New York during the eighties or the nineties) he leaves the general picture of modern life intact and only

updates the world described by Chandler. He primarily tackles the moral decadence of the modern world, the transgression of modernity in general, and of urban space and society in particular. As in older forms of realist fiction, the city takes on the role of the antipode. The city belongs entirely to the dark sector of the mythical world; Vachss's universe is characterized as follows by a *Playboy* critic: "Lower Manhattan dockside hell, populated by various baby rapers (sic), gun runners, pimps, and snuff film magnates.*"* The hero moves "through the catacombs of New York, where every alley is blind, and the penthouses are as dangerous as the basements" (Shames 1986). Vachss's basic concept as a writer of crime stories is a recurring element in 20th century fiction. In that century's dominant stories, Hollywood's televisual stories, there is a similar tendency to take up the city in a mythical, static world. "The New York of *Taxi Driver* turns restless, although the alienated Travis moves towards a numbness, a growing repression that ultimately bursts into ferocious, massive violence. Haunted by its filth and brutality, Travis hates the city; New York is the City of Dreadful Night" (Willett 94-95).

What is important to me in this city imagery is the fact that the city elicits a slightly different kind of subjective response. In contrast with Chandler, the hero takes on a more "unethical" stance. The manifestly unethical attitude of the hero in Vachss's novels can be seen as a radicalization of the second pole of the modernity syndrome: the tendency to cultivate an image of transgressive freedom is turned into a new kind of image of individual sovereignty. *Mystery Guide* typifies Vachss's hero with the following adequate qualification: "The protagonist is named Burke; he has no first name, having been raised in state institutions from the beginning. He's a survivor, a grifter, a kind of man-hunter; he's a criminal in economic matters, but he feels burning hatred for the other kind of criminal: child molesters, rapists, pornography producers, neo-Nazis, woman-abusers, anyone who gets a thrill from the pain and fear of others. He has a moral code that owes little to what the conservative pundits like to call 'traditional Judeo-Christian values': in Burke's view, it is simply a public service to kill and scam his neighbors who happen to be 'maggots'" (Mystery Guide 2004).[4] In spite of his unconventional moral stance, a hero like Burke still illustrates the recoding mechanisms in modernity. Without the re-adoption of moral values, albeit in a highly individualized form, there seems to be no chance of survival in a strongly decoded society. Consequently, the evocation of a predetermined self remains one of the dominant features of contemporary crime fiction.

Urban crime fiction is organized by the actions of heroes who are tested for their ability to survive in urban culture. We can clearly see how story tellers cope with the modernity syndrome (the paradoxical co-existence of decoding and recoding mechanisms): the public realm is pictured as a space of material and moral disorientation, but is also combined with a search for moral values. This search can be illustrated by the emergence of secondary plot lines that evoke closed private spaces. Crime novelists often refer to spatial settings which compensate for the loss of collective value systems. Statements in a recent overview of contemporary American

crime novels confirm this observation. Theo D'haen and Hans Bertens conclude from their reading of James Ellroy that his characters "consciously and cynically implicate themselves in what they know to be a corrupt and even inhuman system. The alternative is that they opt out" (Bertens 2001: 112). This "opting out" very often takes on the shape of a movement towards alternative spaces; sometimes those spaces can be called "individualized gated communities"; sometimes they can be labeled as "emotional secure life worlds." A good example of what I would call "individualized gated communities" is the situation of the character named Burke in Andrew Vachss's work. Burke's office is an anonymous, non-registered dwelling in a warehouse.[5] The house is protected by all kinds of electronic equipment, but most of all by an enormous Great Dane, Pansy. The same kind of armoured biotope is the bunker in the Bronx in which The Mole lives, the technical genius of the Burke series. The bunker is protected by a multitude of wild dogs that keep neo-Nazis from taking revenge for the countless attacks of the Mole.

The second phenomenon worth mentioning is the appearance of what I would call "emotionally secure life worlds." An exponent of this is the systematic development of a specific secondary plot line devoted to the private life of the heroes, as in Robert Parker's Bostonian crime novels: the protagonist, Spenser, is often flying towards a kind of "nuclear family", his girlfriend and his dog. The attention paid to private life plots finds its best illustrations in contemporary crime series on television. Often contrasted with suggestive images of a chaotic, hectic city life (for instance, in the presentation of New York in *NYPD Blue*), television producers concentrate frequently on the sentimental or existential problems of their heroes. This emergence of love or family idylls ties in with a general tendency in Western literature. Zola already opted, in one of his major novel on the complexity of modern city life (*Le Ventre de Paris*), for an idyllic subplot, and Dickens is, of course, one of the masters of idyllic plot lines. In fact, we can trace this narrative strategy back to the very roots of realist novel writing. In novels from the second half of the 18th century the development of the protagonist is closely tied to a world model dominated by an idyllic setting and cyclical time processes. Bakhtin calls this model the "idyllic chronotope" because it shows a specific temporal logic in combination with a particular setting, "a grafting of life and its events to a place, to a familiar territory" (Bakhtin 1981: 225). Central to these narratives are the intimacies of life in a small community in the country or in a non-urbanized culture. The flight from the city to the country house is a recurrent theme in early realist novels, used to illustrate the moral concerns of the heroes.[6] Urban modernization processes, in contrast, are associated with the down-swing of cyclical time and described as phases of decay. In the 19th century heyday of realism these thematic clusters are redistributed and confronted with clusters describing the modern aspects of city life. The protagonist in realist novels, then, can be seen as a character who anticipates the moral stance of 20th century crime novel heroes. Their development is described as a process that includes moments of temporary resignation: in secondary plot lines they

take on the appearance of victims who are forced to withdraw from a society plagued by modernization.

In both the case of an "individualized gated community" and of an "emotionally secure life world" the retreat can be considered the evocation of a recoded "authentic" space that strengthens the tendency towards moral autonomy and individuality; the sovereignty of the individual becomes the last refuge for a way of life that seems to be dominated by decoding processes.

No more heroes: Post-modern strategies of coping with the modernity syndrome.

Besides the obvious realist or modernist tendencies in popular narrative culture, there are some developments that deviate from the general scheme. In the 20th century, the crime hero partly changes in shape. First, in *bellettrie,* and second, in popular fiction, we observe a clear tendency to demythologize the heroic stance that dominated traditional prose writing. James Ellroy, for instance, cannot be considered as an author of recoding-fiction. Some of his heroes contradict the thesis that crime fiction cultivates recoded authentic life worlds. In some of Ellroy's novels, which were recently described as "a hypnotic trip to America's underbelly and one man's tortured soul" (Bertens 2001: 97), the direction of the dynamics of classic crime fiction is even reversed; the story "makes the 'system', the agent and the characters, however powerfully drawn, puppets-on-a-string, devoid of free will" (Bertens 2001: 112). The attitudes of the heroes do not coincide with a recoding process, but illustrate, on the contrary, the radical affirmation of the decoding tendency, as in Michael Connelly's *Angels Flight* (1999), in which the hero "hands in his freedom" (Bertens 2001: 112). There are good reasons to believe that the predilection for heroes with a more or less predetermined self has to a certain degree waned in the last decades, at least in some exponents of crime fiction.

A good example of this fairly recent tendency is offered by the Spanish writer Eduardo Mendoza. In a lesser-known trilogy of crime novels, the author of "City of Wonders" reinvents the picaresque novel by adapting the genre to the contemporary urban world of political corruption, child abuse, and financial fraud. The nameless protagonist of the trilogy is a petty criminal who was raised in Barcelona's underworld and who, after being caught, is living in an asylum, where he is writing his hilarious adventures in an almost lunatic manner. (Mendoza leaves it up to the reader to decide whether the adventures are a realistic report or the phantasmagoria of a mythomaniac). In the three novels the protagonist is either forced or seduced into solving crime mysteries, but in solving these, he does not resemble the ethical self-conscious protagonist of other modern stories. On the contrary, unlike Chandler's heroes he lives "beyond good and evil" and, in contrast to those of Vachss, he is merely guided by the laws of chance and fate. The moral vocation that characte-

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rizes other stories of modernity, and that in a sense compensated for the rather static world view of the adventure stories, is replaced by the frog perspective of a *picaro*. He is only doing the right thing because of a superficial feeling of sympathy for a *femme fatale,* or because he is forced to engage in a struggle with criminality. His methods during this struggle are often as immoral as the deeds of his adversaries. Thus Mendoza injects the novel of ordeal with another important and distinct type of story telling: the picaresque novel. This fusion of two distinct narrative forms is remarkable because it shows clearly that the battle between morality and modernity has been transformed. There is still some confrontation with the amorality of urban space in this kind of fiction, and there is still a transgressive movement (in the sense of Lotman), but the quest for moral self-coercion seems totally absent.

The evolution (in the history of the novel of ordeal) from a positive moral message to a purely negative affirmation of subjective disintegration is, in the light of the aforementioned modernity syndrome, not surprising. It can be interpreted as a radicalization of the decoding process, as an enactment of the impossibility of recoding strategies. The novels of Mendoza and Ellroy therefore picture a different kind of recoded space; they articulate environments and attitudes that I want to coin as "idiosyncratic psychological spaces": their characters are pictured as individualists with pathological tendencies. Developments in other media confirm this observation. The movies of the eighties and nineties that Liam Kennedy analyzed in his collection of essays, *Urban Space and Representation,* can be seen as baring the same dichotomy. Kennedy works with the implicit documentary material of movies, with the "over-determined semiology of urban signs and scenes" he observes in them. Films like *After Hours* (1985), *Falling Down* (1992), *Heat* (1995) and *Seven* (1997) are read by him as symptoms of "paranoid spatiality". The city images he analyzes are documents that refer to "an uncanny simulacrum of self, an always already interiorized space" (2000: 119).

This tendency in crime fiction points to a different reaction to modernity. Often the "self" is faced with the devastating problem that his personal representations and concepts can no longer simply be applied to phenomena of the outside world. The modernity syndrome seems to have caused, in some cases, a catatonic state of mind.

To understand this minimalistic kind of heroism concept, a broadening of horizons in the direction of some general tendencies in urban literature is necessary. The observation that urban fiction and urban modernity are closely intertwined — my starting point — applies both to traditional crime fiction and to the realist and modernist masterpieces that appeared in the heyday of urban fiction (which, I would claim, was between 1850 and 1930). When we want to investigate late modernist and post-modernist fiction, however, such an observation is no longer evident. It seems very doubtful whether urban fiction in the post-war period still functions as a synecdoche, and whether it continues to entertain the same connection with major social evolutions. In a sense, the different attitudes of some contemporary crime novelists towards the recoding mechanisms in our

culture (the staging of heroes who live in an idiosyncratic state "beyond good and evil") can be considered a symptom of the growing neglect of this kind of synecdochic thinking.[7] The images of heroes we get from novels like those of Mendoza and from the films of Scorsese go hand in hand with changes in the portrayal of the decoding tendencies. The urban setting is no longer tackled directly, but seems to be filtered by a series of problems that are of an almost psycho-pathological kind.

The ambition of the major realist writers (crime novelists included) to represent the city in a "totalizing" manner as the symbol or embodiment of modernity has both waned and been displaced in past years. The tendency towards "emotional secure life worlds" and "individualized gated communities" can be considered a realist strategy. In the case of Zola, Dreiser, Döblin, Dos Passos, Chandler, or Vachss, would-be heroic attempts were made to describe the problems that are linked with the modernity syndrome. Other tendencies seem to reject this modernist project and focus on more complex phenomena. Comparing these narratives with the glorious past of the city novel, we cannot but observe a sharp contrast. In staging the possibility of a recoding strategy, the decoding processes are partly countered. In stories that minimize the heroic stance, however, a more culture-philosophical meta-reflection seems to reign. Implicit meditations on the pitiful status of the hero in the modern world are inserted into the story and, because of the prevailing notion of disintegration (the impossibility of recoding strategies) these novels have a much more critical attitude: the decoded world is exposed in its naked objectivity.

NOTES

[1] In this sense, the epic hero is the executor of an eschatological goal. Lotman has written extensively on the important role of eschatological and mythical thinking in traditional (and popular) narratives: "The action, set in linear time, is constructed as a narrative about the gradual decay of the world and the ageing of the god, after which comes his death (dismemberment, torment, eating, burial) and resurrection, which marks the end of evil and its final eradication. So the increase of evil is connected with the movement of time; and the disappearance of evil with the end of time, its stopping forever" (Lotman 1990: 158-9).

[2] At the end of the twentieth century however this collective symbol seems to persist only in the popular imagination, or in post-colonial or lesbian and gay writings, in which migration to the metropolis often continues to be a stock ingredient (for example, in the form of au pair narratives or adaptations of the *Bildungsroman*).

[3] Descriptions of city life differ greatly from (pre)romantic imagery; they are strongly focused on those aspects of the world that aroused moral indignation in 18th century writers. Balzac, Zola, and Gissing usually focus not on idyllic community life or the flight from the city, but on the most advanced stages of modernization and the concrete spaces where this process takes place. Bakhtin's work suggests that these particular chronotopic images can be analysed as the reverse of the idyllic chronotope: "here the issue is primarily one of overturning and demolishing the world view and psychology of the idyll, which proved

increasingly inadequate to the new capitalist world. [...] We get a picture of the breakdown of provincial idealism under forces emanating from the capitalist centre" (Bakhtin 1981: 234). In his study of the *Bildungsroman*, Bakhtin builds on this argument and points to the fact that the realist novel is capable of reading buildings, streets, works of art, technology, and other social organizations as signs that refer to historical developments concerning moral fragmentation: the changing nature of people, the succession of generations and eras, class conflicts (Bakhtin 1986: 25).

[4] In the *Chicago Tribune*, Vachss's work was related to mythical polarities even more explicitly: "With his soiled white hat, this Lone Ranger of the 1990's asks difficult questions while shining light into the darkest recesses" (The Zero - Official Website of Andrew Vachss).

[5] This concept refers to a relatively recent phenomenon in urban planning. The tendency towards walling private property, and obsessive attention to security and control have found their most extreme expression in the much-publicized "gated community." Gated communities, which started mushrooming in the U.S. in the 1980s, are more than apartment buildings with private security services and a private parking lot. They are entire neighborhoods or subdivisions, newly built or existing, that are literally walled off with a fence and a gate. In their study of the phenomenon, Edward Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder define them as "residential areas with restricted access in which normally public spaces are privatized" (1997: 2).

[6] Urban spaces may also embody the idyllic chronotope, but only in urban milieus where cyclical regeneration takes place: intimate enclaves such as middle class houses, suburban villas, parks, and historical monuments. Other aspects of the city are avoided, or function as symbols for banal and unaesthetic experiences.

[7] The exceptions to this tendency are crime novels situated in a post-colonial context. Here, the culture-sociological impulse is largely retained (See Christian 2001). Peter Brooker has extensively analysed this phenomenon in *Modernity and Metropolis* and comes implicitly to the conclusion that post-war fiction in general is much more concerned with responding to a sociological diversification in the literary field. Four out of seven chapters of his study are dedicated to the theme of community building in city prose and to the efforts of writers to reconstruct their own identities through their fiction.

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