

The Detective

Let us begin by visualizing a room where a homicide has been committed. This room has been locked from within, but no one is inside and all the windows are sealed shut, leaving no means of entry or egress. How would you begin to analyze the scene of the crime? This is the enigma Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin faced when trying to solve the *Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841), a short story by Edgar Allan Poe that initiated the genre of the detective novel. This tale also serves as a definitive moment for what has come to be called the locked-room dilemma, a puzzle no one can seem to solve except for the canny sleuth who uses logic and highly honed powers of observation to unravel the mystery. Locked-room mysteries have come to characterize a certain 19th-century anxiety regarding the distinction between exterior worlds and interior spaces. The locked apartment identifies the potential for a room to transform from a space of insulation against metropolitan chaos into a realm of shadows and secrets.

The shuttered rooms of Dupin's quarters in the Faubourg St Germain of Paris underscore an increasing unease regarding distinctions between 'inside' and 'outside' that Mark Madoff adduces in relation to the detective's interior *locus*, "a place of unexpected, inexplicable peril, of chaos which seems to sweep aside even the usual laws of physics."⁹ As Jill Lepore maintains, 19th-century Americans were obsessed with physical boundaries marking privacy, "like the walls of a house, and, equally, with the holes in those walls, like mail slots cut into doors."¹⁰ Lepore links sleuthing, architecture, and tectonics when explaining: "To detect is, etymologically, to remove the roof of a house."¹¹

What of these locked doors and shuttered windows in terms of an increasingly chaotic exterior world? Luc Boltanski argues that detective fiction developed concurrently with the invention and description of a new mental illness that psychiatry labeled as paranoia. In this case: "The investigator in a detective story thus acts like a person with paranoia, the difference being that he is healthy."¹² The rising vocation of the professional detective augmented this anxiety. Poe based Dupin on Eugene-François Vidocq-considered to be the father of modern criminology and the first private eye-a former criminal who founded the detective branch of the civil police force called the *Sûreté Nationale* in 1812 and the first private detective agency. This transition toward heightened social administration and state surveillance purportedly resulted in promoting the modern police societies that protected bourgeois property and sexual morality. In contrast to this normalizing system of control, Dupin was a counterculture figure or secret confidant who demonstrated Poe's concept of ratiocination, a method of analysis executed through logic and close

observation. Dupin exercised the kind of resourceful imagination and unorthodox reasoning abilities, thoughtfulness and patience, which provide model methods for reading architecture through intimate details. "Here is the origin of the detective story," Walter Benjamin writes, "which inquires into these traces and follows these tracks."¹³

As Benjamin summarized, with "The Philosophy of Furniture" (1840) and "new detectives," Poe became "the first physiognomist of the domestic interior."¹⁴ Benjamin's analysis also proffered clues for reading architecture from the inside of these 19th-century rooms through terms such as *etui*, traces, collections, and detectives. As souvenirs and mementos of the people living there, a proliferation of domestic objects came to form interior collections the inhabitant curated. Writing of Benjamin, Georges Teyssot notes: "It is during this period that his idea of 'dwelling' was established, with all the variations of meaning encompassed by the notion of habitation."¹⁵ Traces accumulate on the domestic interior through the patterns of everyday use—the fingerprints and scuff marks, wear and tear, mends and amends that deposit a residue of human inhabitation and identify focal points for examining otherwise undetected details. The title of Naomi Schor's *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (1987) frames this approach to embroidering the finer points of interior spaces as "bounded on the one side by the *ornamental*, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the everyday, whose 'prosinness' is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women."¹⁶

Fingerprints leave traces. The scientific analysis of identifying a person by the most unique and specific physiognomic detail codified in 1888, when Francis Galton developed a way to classify the ridges on our fingers as part of forensic science. This new approach to identification, necessary in the increasingly ugly and crowded metropolis, parallels the emergence of developing specific street addresses necessary to help the police locate a suspect's abode. The trajectory of this milieu eventually implicates modern architecture's preferred materials of chrome, glass, white walls, and polished marble as ideal surfaces for imprinting one's digits. Modernism's hygienic compulsions and open plans worked toward displacing *etui*, traces, collections, and corpses from its interiors, while making detection all that more accessible.

For Poe, the real crime was bad taste in decoration. In "The Philosophy of Furniture" he described an ideal room, elevating the practice of interior decoration to a literary conceit while instructing his audience on how to read a room. Gas-lit glass chandeliers represented the quintessence of false taste. Instead, to avoid the glare and glitter they produce, he proposed an oil lamp Aime Argand patented in 1780 whose plain ground-glass shade cast uniform moonlight rays. Charles Baudelaire, who translated a number of Poe's works into French, wrote an introduction to "The Philosophy of Furniture," commenting "that the room which he offers us as a model of simplicity, is one which will seem to many a model of luxury."¹⁷ Baudelaire drew from Poe's exegesis on interior decoration the sentiment that it is a delightful pleasure to imagine

an ideal home as a place of dreams, described by silk, gold, wood, and metal, flickering in softened sunlight, or the brilliance of artificial lamps.

Characterizing the domestic imaginary of his time, Poe's detective novels elucidate rooms surrounded by doors disguised as bookcases, locked chambers, secret corridors, hidden drawers, and open keyholes. Wearied by the proximity of crowds, the inhabitant returns to her or his rooms inhaling an aroma of *parfum noire*, Baudelaire's allusion to the intermingling of sensations and memories a certain fragrance may elicit. Detective novels teach the reading of domestic interiors through a method of cryptography, a process of deciphering the secret writing of rooms facilitated by the close observation of traces, interior appurtenances, and clues hidden in plain sight.

- 9 Mark S. Madoff, "Inside Outside and the Gothic Locked-Room Mystery," in *Gothic Fictions: Prohibition/Transgression*, ed. Kenneth W. Graham (New York: AMS Press, 1999), p. 50.
- 10 Jill Lepore "The Prism: Privacy in an Age of Publicity" *New Yorker*, June 24, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/06/24/the-prism>.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), p. 13.
- 13 Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), p. 245.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 George Teysot, *A Topology of Everyday Constellations* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), p. 84.
- 16 Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 4.
- 17 Charles Baudelaire, "Preface to the Philosophy of Furniture," in *Histoires Grotesques Et Sérieuses* (Paris: Michel Levy, 1865) in *Baudelaire on Poe Critical Papers*, trans. and ed. Lois and Francis E. Hyslop, Jr. (New York: Dover).