

"Forget it, Number Five, it's Chinatown."

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Tony Ellis — 25 Aug 2001, 17:11

Dan wrote:

Ooh now this gets interesting. How, if the ancients were so sold on reason, did they manage to be so ridiculously wrong about the way the world was put together?

Would these be the ridiculous Pythagorean scholars who postulated a spherical Earth moving in a circular orbit about a central fire in the fifth century BC, or the ridiculous Aristarchus of Samos who did the same thing in 250 BC? :-)

(and I'm inclined, personally, to think that the ancients weren't so ridiculously wrong and the moderns not necessarily spot on) ...

Agreed. And I think you're right: broadly speaking, the ancients applied Reason through discourse, the Moderns through experiment. But then, the Moderns had access to a whole technology of glass instruments and vacuum pumps with which to be experimenters.

My own example of postmodern detective lit was going to be film noir but I don't really know the genre well enough to give examples.

Off the top of my head:

The Third Man, which just about invents the genre: Holly Johnson, writer of cowboy stories, attempts to impose his own naïve form of narrative on post WWII Vienna. But the solution to his dogged quest to find the Bad Guy who killed his friend is the discovery that the friend -is- the Bad Guy.

Kiss Me Deadly: Mike Hammer slugs his way right out of the hard-boiled detective genre and into the terrifying, unsolvable world of the atom bomb, in of the most jaw-dropping dénouements in the genre's history.

Chinatown: gumshoe Jake solves the murder mystery, but precipitates tragedy, not a restoration of order.

There you have it: solving the mystery in detective fiction brings order, solving it in film noir brings the discovery that there -is- no order.

Broadly speaking I would agree with what I take to be the general consensus: that this is precisely the sort of mystery Gene Wolfe does not write. But at least one important exception springs immediately to mind: The Fifth Head of Cerberus. In both the first and the final novellas, the 'detective' far from solving a mystery becomes ensnared in one. The universe remains corrupt and unsolved.

In fact it's just hit me: the seedy underworlds of St Anne and St Croix are pure film noir, complete with criminal kingpin, bent cops, and femmes fatales. Does anyone else think "Mean

Streets: The Fifth Head of Cerberus Considered as Film Noir" sounds like a good title for a Wolfe essay?