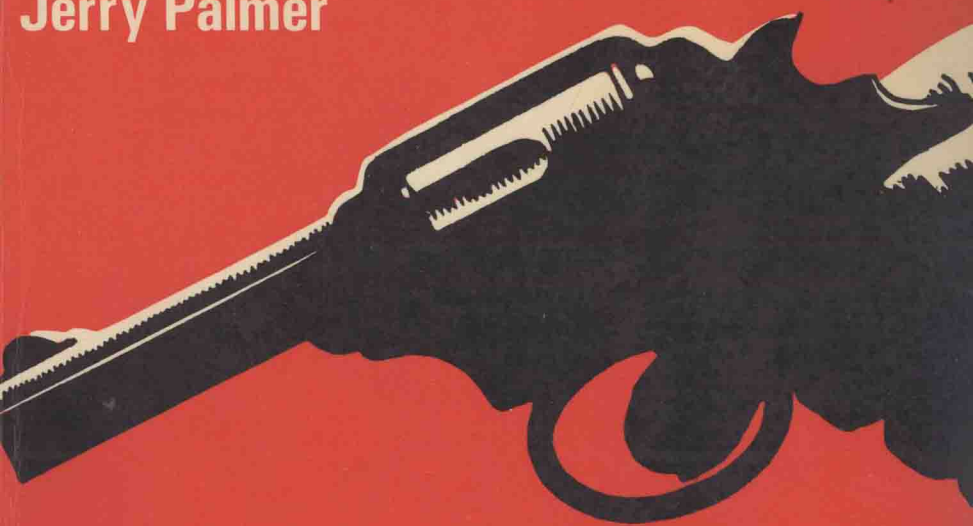


Thrillers

**Genesis and Structure of a
Popular Genre**

Jerry Palmer



Thrillers

Genesis and Structure of a Popular
Genre

Jerry Palmer



Edward Arnold

© Jerry Palmer 1978

First published 1978 by
Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd
41 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DQ

ISBN: 0 7131 6142 6 cloth
0 7131 6143 4 paper

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of Edward Arnold (Publishers) Ltd.
Printed in Great Britain by
Willmer Brothers Limited, Rock Ferry, Merseyside

Acknowledgements

Sections of Parts 1, 2 and 4 have appeared, in a slightly different form in other publications: *Politics and Deviance* (ed. Taylor and Raylor, Pelican Books, 1973); *The Manufacture of News* (ed. Cohen and Young, Constable, 1973); *British Journal of Law and Society* (1976).

The ungrateful task of indexing fell to Rosi Tucker, who performed it with a greater degree of patience and accuracy than an author has the right to expect.

The book was completed during a sabbatical from the City of London Polytechnic; I am grateful to my colleagues for the time off teaching.

To friends and colleagues I am grateful for constructive criticism and discussion: the National Deviancy Conference, before whom two sections of this book were given as papers; Andre Arnol; Bernard Esmein; Stuart Hall; Johnny Merrington; Chris Pawling; Frank Pearce; Paul Walton; John Whitley; Jock Young. The usual disclaimer about distorted ideas applies with as much force as ever.

Contents

Preface	1
Part I Heroes and Villains	5
1 The Amateur, the Professional and the Bureaucrat	7
2 Cold Blood or Exhilaration	16
3 The Hero: Alone, Sexy, Competitive	24
4 The Negative Thriller	40
5 Conclusion	53
Part II Ideology and Excitement	55
1 Thrills	57
2 What Makes a Good Thriller?	69
3 Competition and Conspiracy: Paranoia as Ideology	82
Part III In Historical Perspective	91
1 The School of Mayhem Parva: the Classic English Detective Story	93
2 Edgar Allan Poe and Wilkie Collins	107
3 The Literary Origins of the Thriller	115
4 Genre Theory	136
Part IV Sociology of the Thriller	151
1 Competitive Individualism	153
2 The Fear of Conspiracy	181
3 Synthesis	202
Part V After the Thriller	207
Bibliography	221
Index	227

Preface

'My theory is that people who don't like mystery stories are anarchists.' Rex Stout

If it were a question of focusing attention on the thriller, this book would be a little late :

The story (spring 1977) of a load of hijacked nuclear fuel that disappeared without trace ran under the heading, 'James Bond story of hijacked plutonium'.

Letters are still to this day addressed to Sherlock Holmes, Esq., 221B Baker Street, asking him to find missing relatives or cut inflation at a stroke.

When Princess Anne was the object of an unsuccessful kidnap attempt in March 1974, David Holbrook wrote to *The Times*: 'the best way to destroy civilization would be to pour out more and more violent fantasies through the media... It is thus almost inevitable that an attack should be made on Princess Anne, as a symbol of everything that is good... Contempt and hatred of woman is the essence of our "liberated" culture, and there is a direct line, speaking symbolically, from the hatred of woman indulged in *Oh! Calcutta!* and the James Bond films, to the shooting in the Mall. It is highly significant that a James Bond gun was used...' – though the significance may have been somewhat muted by the subsequent revelation that the Bond gun was used by the Princess's Special Branch bodyguard (*The Times* and *The Sunday Times*, 21 and 24 March 1974).

For Christmas 1964, Macy's sold copies of the diplomatic bag Sean Connery carried in *From Russia, With Love* – a small tribute, but an indication of what the phrase 'household name' means.

The American psychologist Berkowitz concluded after laboratory experiments that audiences seeing justified aggression on the screen – as is commonly the case in thrillers – were far more likely to behave aggressively subsequently than any other group of viewers.* By contrast, the BBC's 1972 policy statement on TV violence asserted, 'violent situations sometimes evoke qualities of courage and leadership which are admired by the majority of people.'

**Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 66(5).

2 Preface

I consumed thrillers, addictively, long before I was 'interested in them'; they became an object of study after I read Kingsley Amis's *New Maps of Hell*, an essay on science fiction. The difference between a science fiction addict and a science fiction reader, Amis points out, is that the addict will read any science fiction, no matter how awful, whereas the reader discriminates. Amis is a science fiction addict, and I recognized my appetite for thrillers in his description.

It follows that it is the formula of the thriller – what all thrillers have in common – that is the source of pleasure for the addict, and (probably) for the reader too: what else does a cinema-goer mean when he says, 'I love a good Western/gangster movie/musical'?

Criticism based on the analysis of formula is often regarded as a dubious enterprise. Applied to Shakespeare ('*Hamlet* is just another revenge tragedy') it appears absurd. Applied to medieval literature it is more palatable: the artistic variations between different epics are generally considered less interesting than the culture of chivalry and courtly love. Few critics object to its application to the mass media: one of the main functions of literary criticism, at least in its academic version, has been to separate the wheat (deserving of extended individual analysis) from the chaff (the subject of generalization).

And in this respect the formula addict concurs: what interests him, as a reader, is not the formulation of characteristics, but the enjoyment of each individual text as an end in itself. (For a resolution of this paradox, see Part II, §2.)

The literary critic who objects to formula-based analysis is on thin ice. He objects because reducing an individual text to a formula seems to him a travesty. But all criticism is a travesty, in the sense that any account of a work of art is inevitably unfaithful to the experience of the work. And in passing we may note that this is true of all formulations of any experience. To say 'I am sitting at a brown desk' is to omit everything that is specific to that desk (height, shade of brown etc.), that is, the *content* of the experience of sitting at it; to specify further is ultimately hopeless – the desk has associations for me that are inexpressible. No formulation ever lives up to the experience that it was meant to formulate.

On these grounds no literary critic can object to formula-based analysis. The genre addict is on firmer ground when he rejects it as not corresponding to his personal enjoyment of the text. However, it has the unfortunate side-effect of making all discussions of art completely meaningless, even statements like 'I cried my eyes out at *Love Story*': the statement is no doubt true, but the lunatic who thought that sane people only made true statements deserved incarceration. You only say things about films in order to start a discussion, and nobody starts discussions they believe are foredoomed.

Literary criticism aims to explain, and for that reason fluctuates

uneasily and incessantly between cultural history and statements of personal preference. No explanation is ever satisfactory from every conceivable angle, and the job of the critic is to specify the framework within which his explanation can claim validity – that is why introductions are usually written last.

The starting-point of *Thrillers* is the recognition that its author is a genre addict, and by that token a member of a numerous and flourishing species. To offer any explanation above the banality of 'escapism' involves an analysis of what the thriller formula is, since that is what is addictive; in quizzically brief summary, it is competition and conspiracy (see Parts I and II). The sections devoted to this exploration therefore move from a commonsense, intuitive recognition of what a thriller is – i.e. the kind of book found in that section of bookshops – to a formal definition.

That definition, by grouping a number of texts, forces the exclusion of others. If this capacity for grouping and exclusion is applied to a short period of time – say, post-World War II – the results appear pedantic: arguments about whether Alastair MacLean and Raymond Chandler belong in the same group of texts are not very promising, in themselves. Applied to a longer time-scale, the results are more significant. It is a cliché that the Private Eye is a modern incarnation of the knight in shining armour, complete with damsel in distress and an inner-city version of the dragon or the robber baron. Like most parallels that attempt to jump history, it is superficial in the extreme: formal definition of 'thriller' allows the exclusion of various types of writing – including the epic – that preceded and contributed to it (see Part III, §2).

Situating the thriller in literary history allows an approximate chronology – in the event, the mid-nineteenth century, in England, France and the USA, although this study of its emergence, for reasons of space, is restricted to England. Localization in history suggests the possibility of ascribing roots in social reality to the basic formula of the thriller, which has remained unchanged for a century now. Thus Part IV is devoted to a properly sociological analysis of the emergence of the thriller in a particular society.

The dilemma of criticism is to specify the framework within which it can claim to be valid without taking refuge in the tautology 'within the framework of these texts'. The framework within which this analysis can lay claim to validity can be summarized in a series of propositions:

That a group of texts can only be properly reduced to a common denominator if it can be shown that the common denominator is, in the fullest sense, fundamental to each of the texts, and not an accidental or superficial feature. (See especially Part III, §4).

That because literature is part of society both in its process of pro-

4 Preface

duction and its consumption, the common denominators that tie texts into each other form part of the stock of commonplaces of that society. The more popular the group of texts, the more this is true. That it is not sufficient to deduce from literature that such-and-such is a commonplace. If it is a commonplace it will be found elsewhere – though in remote and only partially literate cultures this ‘elsewhere’ may in fact have disappeared.

That formulations of common denominators between texts are unlikely to be radically unfaithful to these texts if it can be shown that they function with equal success as formulations of other, non-fictional texts, or as formulations of the (often unstated) premises of political debates and practice : in other words, if formulations can be shown to ‘correspond’ both to fiction and to its social roots.

Footnotes

For simplicity’s sake I have reduced the apparatus of footnotes and references to a minimum. Quotations in the text are identified by as few details as possible : either title or author, usually, and page numbers. Reference to the Bibliography will give precise identification : thus ‘Eco’s essay on the James Bond novels . . . , 87’ refers to Non-fiction : Eco, U., ‘James Bond : une combinatoire narrative’, *Communications* 8 (1966).’ Similarly, ‘Sir Eric Roll . . . , 147’ refers to ‘Non-fiction : Roll, Sir E., *A History of Economic Thought*, . . .’. References to thrillers are given by chapter, not page, since they are subject to reprinting in various formats. The editions quoted in the Bibliography are the original English ones. References to other fiction are to the edition used.

Where no reference is given at the end of a quotation, it should be taken as coming from the next source cited in the text.

Part I Heroes and Villains

Thrillers have their own morality. It is a morality which has little in common with the ethics that are publicly admitted to regulate men's lives in our society : it has no respect for equality, privacy, due process of law or the impartiality of authority. It is a morality of unequivocal self-assertion tempered only by an entirely personal sense of decency. Sometimes even that minimum restraint is lacking, and then it is the morality of the jungle. Thrillers promote the belief that the ends justify the means, and rarely stop to examine what the ends are. They have scant respect for any of the moral institutions of our society.

George Orwell noticed this :

It is implied throughout *No Orchids For Miss Blandish* that being a criminal is only reprehensible in the sense that it does not pay. Being a policeman pays better, but there is no moral difference, since the police use essentially criminal methods. ('Raffles and Miss Blandish', 258)

Orwell was not very interested in thrillers. He was concerned with morality, and was worried that thrillers should suggest that the process of law enforcement fell beyond its bounds. From the point of view of the thriller he missed the essential. Mickey Spillane's Hammer reflects on this question, and formulates the ethic of the thriller with great clarity :

I knew why I was allowed to live while others died! I knew why my rottenness was tolerated and kept alive and why the guy with the reaper couldn't catch me and I smashed through the door with the tommy-gun in my hands spitting out the answer at the same time my voice screamed it to the heavens!

I lived only to kill the scum and the lice that wanted to kill themselves. I lived to kill so that others could live. I lived to kill because my soul was a hardened thing that revelled in the thought of taking the blood of the bastards who made murder their business. I lived because I could laugh it off and others couldn't. I was the evil that opposed other evil, leaving the good and the meek in the middle to live and inherit the earth! (*One Lonely Night*, ch. 10)

Orwell omits something very basic to the thriller : when we read and enjoy a thriller there is no doubt in our minds that the hero is on the side of the angels, and we adopt his point of view, whole-

heartedly, for the duration of the reading; we couldn't enjoy the story if we didn't. In doing so we distinguish between the hero and the villain.

On what grounds do we do so? How do we know that the hero is in fact the hero and the villain the villain? This question is more difficult than first sight suggests, and the first section of this book is devoted to answering it.

§1 The Amateur, the Professional and the Bureaucrat

Umberto Eco has analysed the Bond novels in terms of a set of contrasting pairs: pairs of characters, such as hero/villain, or hero/woman; and pairs of values – cupidity/idealism, for instance. One of the pairs of values is programming/risk; he refers to ‘the Programming that is opposed to Bond’s typical tendency to improvisation’ (‘James Bond’, 79-80).

Eco has glimpsed something that is fundamental to Fleming’s portrayal of the world, and to the world of the thriller in general. In *From Russia, With Love* Bond is the object of a minutely detailed assassination attempt that is constructed by SMERSH, the Soviet assassination service. SMERSH’s planner is a chess Grand Master and – anachronistically, one hopes for the sake of the Soviet Union – a Pavlovian psychologist who believes that men are basically puppets, whose behaviour is easily controllable provided you pull the right string. The plan is a fine blueprint, down to the detail that Bond is to be shot through the heart with a single bullet from a gun disguised as a copy of *War and Peace* at the exact moment the train he is on enters the Simplon Tunnel.

As convention dictates, Red Grant, the ‘executioner’, describes the plan to Bond in the minutes before his death is due, secure in the conviction that the plan has taken care of all possible contingencies. He is wrong, of course, and Bond kills him: a regrettably unforeseen circumstance. The point is that Grant believes that there can be no unforeseen circumstances, for this is the purpose of programmed action – to abolish the random, to abolish everything to which a place and a time have not been assigned. Bond relies on Grant’s literal application of the plan to allow him the space to manoeuvre. As Eco would have it, he improvises. He lights a cigarette and manages to slip the case into his breast pocket; the bullet only bruises him. He shams death and contrives to fall close to a knife concealed among his luggage.

The knife represents the presence among Bond’s activity of programming. When he leaves on this mission the gadgets branch of the Secret Service gives him a specially constructed briefcase:

In each of the innocent sides there was a flat throwing knife, built by Wilkinsons, the sword makers, and the tops of their handles were concealed cleverly by the stitching at the corners. . . . More important was the thick tube of Palmolive shaving cream in the otherwise guileless spongebag. The whole top of this unscrewed to reveal the silencer for the Beretta, packed in cotton wool. In case hard cash was needed,

the lid of the attaché case contained fifty gold sovereigns. These could be poured out by slipping sideways one ridge of welting.

The complicated bag of tricks amused Bond, but he also had to admit that, despite its eight pound weight, the bag was a convenient way of carrying the tools of his trade, which would otherwise have to be concealed about his body. (ch. 13)

Despite the ironical 'bag of tricks', he is glad enough of it when it comes to the point. A contingency has been foreseen, although not in any detail, and Bond benefits from this planning.

This is a far cry from the attempt to foresee every contingency that characterizes SMERSH's plans. Bond's activity is more the product of experience and flexibility than of contingency planning: in fact it is remarkable to observe the monotonous regularity with which Bond's precautions are outflanked by the planning of his adversaries. What lets him win is his capacity to improvise on the basis of well-learned lessons from the past. The eponymous villain of *Dr No*, who is 'interested in pain', has devised an endurance test that ends in certain death – Bond is plunged from a great height, half-wrecked by his previous efforts, into a closed pool that contains a giant squid 'the size of a railway engine'. Bond confronts this 'assault course against death', as the doctor calls it, armed with a lighter, a table knife, and some wire bent approximately into a spear. Needless to say, these are more than enough to ensure victory: the squid empties a boilerful of ink over him and stands down. Again the capacity for improvisation is opposed to the ability to construct a programme.

But Bond is not opposed to programmed action himself, when the occasion demands. At the beginning of *Moonraker* he sets a trap at the gambling table for Drax by pretending to be a prime candidate for fleecing. To bait the hook he carefully gets himself a little merry, and then takes some benzedrine to keep going. The narration comments:

Bond knew what he was doing. Whenever he had a job of work to do he would take infinite pains beforehand and leave as little as possible to chance. Then if something went wrong it was the unforeseeable. For that he accepted no responsibility. (ch. 5)

The actual trap consists of a stacked deck which he set up before the game began and substitutes for the proper one. He carries out a minutely detailed plan, complete with mechanical and chemical aids, to the letter. This is programmed action.

Clearly there is a difference of extent in the application of programming techniques. If the tendency is pursued obsessively, the result is the 'bureaucracy of crime' that Fleming incarnates in SPECTRE, the Special Executive for Counterintelligence, Terrorism, Revenge and Extortion, the collective villains of *Thunderball* and *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*. In this passage, from the beginning of *Thunderball*,

Blofeld – the chairman of the board – outlines the company's plans :

'The Corsican section,' he said softly, 'will put forward recommendations for the replacement of No. 12. But that can wait until after completion of Plan Omega. On this matter, there are certain details to be discussed. Sub-Operator G, recruited by the German section, has made an error, a serious error which radically affects our timetable. This man, whose membership of the Red Lightning Tong in Macao should have made him expert in conspiracy, was instructed to make his headquarters at a certain clinic in the south of England, an admirable refuge for his purposes. . . . Unfortunately this foolish man took it upon himself to become embroiled in a hotheaded fashion with some fellow patient, at the clinic, . . . This will involve an irritating but fortunately not a serious delay in Plan Omega. Fresh instructions have been issued. . . . The date of his flight will be communicated to Sub-Operator G and he will by that time be recovered and will post The Letter according to plan. The Special Executive . . . will readjust their flight schedules to Area Zeta in accordance with the new operational schedule.' (ch. 6)

The tone of voice is distinctly not that of Bond or his people. It could almost be the voice of a tetchy senior civil servant, or a particularly unpleasant general. In any event, the characterization through the use of bureaucratic terminology ('Plan Omega', 'Sub-Operator G', etc.) is precise.

It is not only in Fleming that the villain is a bureaucrat and the hero an improviser. Desmond Skirrow's *It Won't Get You Anywhere* is based on the same polarity. Here the villain is a millionaire Welsh Nationalist whose corporation, Allelec, has total control of the National Grid. His plan is to fuse the whole of England and to establish control of the country in the resulting panic, turning it into a slave-labour camp. He is aided in this process by a team of experts, whose most important components are a public relations man and an electronics genius. During the final briefing before the operation is due to start, the public relations man explains how he has 'programmed' the population of England into acceptance of his chief's status as a leader :

'My full report is here for further study. It includes a summary of the final depth probe completed this week, but in brief it shows that my main task has been successfully completed. Expressed in non-scientific language, it means that your name, Sir, is now firmly welded into the national feeling of affluence and progress, and that this is so right across the country. The Kramer attitude probe and two full Semantic Orientational, one based on our overt propaganda and the other on our subliminals, give identical results. The average emotional acceptance index is far beyond the established high norm, up in the nineties. . . . On the domestic side . . . all Allelec operation points have responded to the measures I advised. The work-population, Sir, has now reached the high-low tension balance I set out to achieve.'

'What the hell does that mean?' said Llewellyn.

'It means, Sir,' said Schneider, 'that your workers are, without being aware of the fact, in a state of extreme expectancy. On the point of what I must describe, I am afraid, as corporate orgasm.' (ch. 36)

At a later stage England's prospective masters decide to execute Brock (the hero) and to display their electronic policemen at the same time. Brock is placed inside a live electric fence and confronted with a small machine that has electric ears and a poison needle; it reacts to any sound and injects the quarry it locates. Brock is armed only with a handful of hairpins opportunely gleaned while he was held prisoner; he shoves one up the recharging socket at the back of the machine and short-circuits it.

Brock's defeat of the Welsh terror, like Bond's defeat of SMERSH and Dr No, represents the triumph of improvisation over planning. The object of the programming that typifies the villain in these novels is to initiate a series of actions that unfold with machine-like precision and predictability. One would expect – if Umberto Eco's analysis was right – heroic improvisation to have exactly the opposite qualities. But it doesn't. Even Bond, as we have seen, 'programmes' events, albeit on a small scale. In fact Eco's simple pair of opposites (programming/improvisation) is inadequate: the world of the thriller is not divided into two categories, but into three: the Improvisor, the Programmer and the Total Incompetent. Or as I would sooner call them, discarding Eco's terminology entirely, the Professional, the Bureaucrat and the Amateur.

The presence of the Amateur in the thriller is easy to overlook. Thrillers are about action, and the Amateur's participation in the action is – by definition almost – passive. Most frequently the Amateur is a girl whom the hero is obliged to rescue. She's unable to save herself – she lacks the necessary expertise to improvise successfully. And since she is only there by accident, she has no master plan which will bring other people in to deal with contingencies. In short, she doesn't belong.

Matt Helm's ex-wife, in Donald Hamilton's *The Removers*, is the perfect incarnation of the Amateur. She, Helm and her present husband are held prisoner by the villain – typically, because she was on guard while they slept, and was quite unable to cope. Helm has been trying to indicate to her that the only hope is for her to seduce the frustrated and obviously over-sexed villain, but this course of action doesn't seem to appeal. Helm reflects:

I mean, she was obviously going to be raped anyway. It had been inevitable since early that morning when she'd let them take the shotgun from her. I'd assumed she'd know it – hell, all she had to do was *look* at the guy – and was planning on it, figuring how best

to make use of the fact that she was female, for the common good. . . . I guess the fact is that I'd been counting on her as I'd have counted on a good female agent in the same spot as any woman with courage or good sense, for that matter. . . . But it was becoming obvious that the thought hadn't crossed her mind, or that if it had, she'd dismissed it as something too horrible to be seriously considered. A provocative glance or two, maybe, even a smile, perhaps, but if anybody seriously expected her to go into that room with this vile man and entertain him . . . Well! How disgusting could you get, anyway? I wasn't going to get any help from her, that was abundantly clear. (ch. 23)

In Fleming's books, Bond mistakenly assumes that Vesper Lynd (*Casino Royale*) is an Amateur: 'And then there was this pest of a girl. He sighed. Women were for recreation. On a job, they got in the way and fogged things up with sex and hurt feelings and all the emotional baggage they carried around. One had to look out for them and take care of them' (ch. 4). In fact she is the villain, a double agent, but Bond's description clearly shows the attitude of the Professional towards the Amateur. In *From Russia, With Love* he is again mistaken in assuming Tatiana's innocence, but right in assuming that she is an Amateur: she is entirely incapable of dealing with the complexities of the situation and is an immediate victim of Grant's simple plot.

The Amateur and the Bureaucrat are logical opposites. In the world that the Bureaucrat envisions, nothing is ever done for the first time, everything is entirely predictable. In the world of the Amateur, nothing is ever done for the second time, everything seems entirely spontaneous. In the world of the Bureaucrat everything has a place and a time; in the world of the Amateur, everything is 'out of joint', to misquote *Hamlet*.

Although they are opposed in this sense, the Amateur and the Bureaucrat have something in common: both of their worlds exclude the possibility of learning from experience. The Bureaucrat cannot learn from experience because in his world there is nothing new and unexpected: everything is as it should be. This is why, when circumstances deviate from the norms he has established, he is lost. Dr No's 'obstacle course against death' lets him down, and he immediately falls victim to Bond's improvised manoeuvre - Bond takes over a crane shifting a load of guano, and buries him in it: the adaptation of a machine intended for something else is typical of the hero's flair.

The Amateur cannot learn from experience because, for him or her, everything is new. The essence of experience is that it encompasses both the old and the new, the foreseen and the unforeseen: experience only becomes such when phenomena cease to be radically disparate, when the new occurrence can be related to a set of old ones in such a way that the set is altered by the inclusion of something new, and the new phenomenon is construed in terms of what is already known. The

Amateur, transported out of his familiar world into the world of the thriller, lacks the appropriate set of previous knowledge.

The Professional is characterized by exactly this capacity to learn from experience. He has a fund of knowledge, visible in the capacity to make plans and in his ability to respond rapidly to new situations. But his knowledge is not rigid, like the Bureaucrat's, and he is therefore able to respond flexibly to new situations. By contrast, the Amateur cannot respond at all, and the Bureaucrat responds inflexibly.

*

Even this categorization isn't in itself grounds for distinguishing between the hero and the villain.

In Donald Hamilton's *The Removers* Matt Helm confronts a minor, rather inept villain :

'All right for you, Buster,' he said in his best, menacing tone. 'You want it here, you can have it here, the full treatment!' He started forward.

I took my hand out of my pocket and gave the little snap of the wrist that flicks that kind of knife open if you keep it properly cleaned and oiled and know the technique. Opening it two-handed is safer and more reliable, but it doesn't impress people nearly so much. Tony's eyes widened slightly, and he stopped coming. This wasn't supposed to happen. When you pulled knives on suckers and squares, they turned pale green and backed off fearfully; they didn't come up with blades of their own.

He hesitated, saw that my cutting implement was only about half the length of his, regained confidence, and came in fast. I was tempted to play with him a bit, but it was hot. I was tired and sleepy, and when you start cat-and-mouse with human beings you deserve trouble and sometimes get it. I sidestepped his clumsy thrust, moved inside the knife, clamped a good hold on his arm, and made one neat surgical cut. The knife dropped from his fingers. (ch. 13)

Matt Helm, clearly, is a professional. The inevitability of the outcome, rendered with a degree of irony that serves as its guarantee, is intended to stress that. But what about his opponent? Is he a Bureaucrat, failing because he can't adapt to an unforeseen contingency, or an Amateur whose lack of experience betrays him? He's certainly not an Amateur, but he doesn't have the marks of the real Bureaucrat either (rigorous planning). In fact he is a Professional, but a third-rate one.

There is nothing in the structure of the thriller to prevent the villain being just as professional as the hero. The villain whom Matt Helm's ex-wife isn't about to seduce is – by Helm's own assessment – extremely professional :

In a way, it was nice to be dealing with at least one professional. With amateurs, you've got to watch every minute that they don't do by mistake what they could never do on purpose. . . . But with Martell