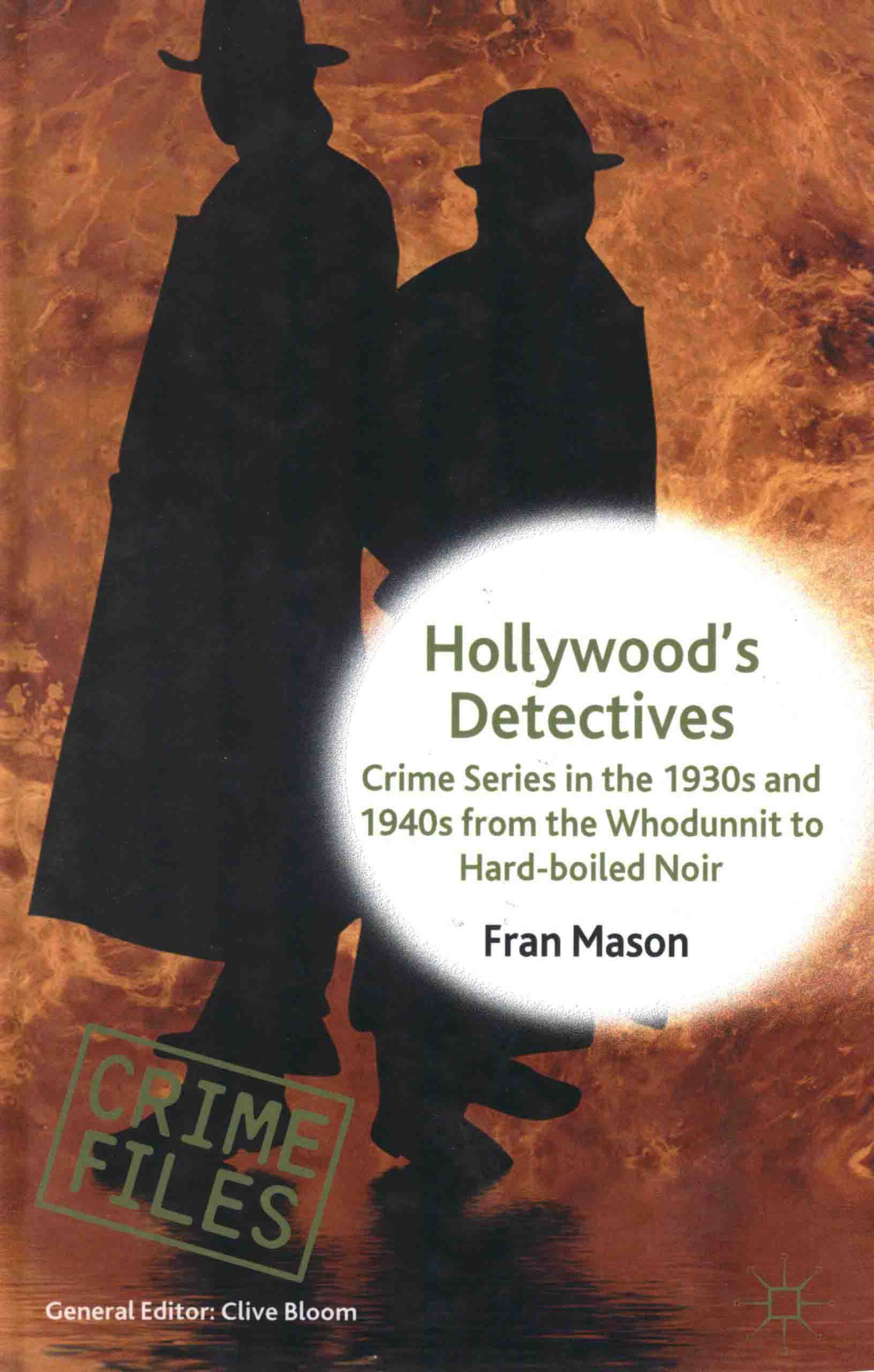
Hollywood's Detectives
Crime Series in the 1930s and 1940s from the Whodunnit to Hard-boiled Noir
Fran Mason
CRIME FILES
General Editor: Clive Bloom

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Fran Mason
Senior Lecturer in Film Studies and American Studies, University of Winchester, UK

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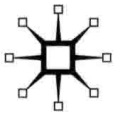

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Series Preface

Since its invention in the nineteenth century, detective fiction has never been more popular. In novels, short stories, films, radio, television and now in computer games, private detectives and psychopaths, prim poisoners and overworked cops, Tommy-gun gangsters and cocaine criminals are the very stuff of modern imagination, and their creators a mainstay of popular consciousness. *Crime Files* is a ground-breaking series offering scholars, students and discerning readers a comprehensive set of guides to the world of crime and detective fiction. Every aspect of crime writing, detective fiction, gangster movie, true-crime exposé, police procedural and post-colonial investigation is explored through clear and informative texts offering comprehensive coverage and theoretical sophistication.

Preface

Although the hard-boiled literary detective style had developed in the 1920s and became a significant sub-genre of detective fiction in the 1930s in the works of Hammett and Chandler, the Hollywood studios were slow to transfer hard-boiled texts to the screen. Apart from MGM's adaptation of Hammett's *The Thin Man* in 1934 and early versions of *The Maltese Falcon* (in 1931, aka *Dangerous Female*, and as *Satan Met a Lady* in 1936), there was very little production in this area until John Huston's version of the latter text in 1941. This is because detective films of the 1930s and 1940s were mainly based either on the classic style of detective narrative found in the whodunnits associated with the 'Golden Age of Mystery' or on an action-based thriller format, usually as 'B' features that were cheap to make and which could be developed into a series of sequels. Even when hard-boiled fiction appeared in Hollywood in the 1940s it was often adapted to service the detective mystery series, as is the case with the softening of Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely* when it was used as the basis for the narrative of *The Falcon Takes Over* (1942). The detective film in this period is usually not, therefore, the hard-boiled style most often associated with Hollywood detectives, but the amateur sleuth or master detective format that was developed in B-Movie mystery series such as 'The Falcon', 'Sherlock Holmes', 'Charlie Chan' and 'Mr Moto'. In creating these series, Hollywood primarily drew on American sources when adapting literary texts, such as Hammett's *The Thin Man*, S. S. Van Dine's 'Philo Vance' novels, Earl Derr Biggers' 'Charlie Chan' series or John P. Marquand's 'Mr Moto' stories. It also, however, recycled its own earlier adaptations (the 'Boston Blackie' and 'Lone Wolf' series), developed its own detectives ('The Crime Doctor'), or transferred the English style to an American context by using Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, Leslie Charteris' The Saint and Michael Arlen's Falcon. Until the first adaptations of hard-boiled or *noir* works by Hammett, Chandler and Cain appeared in the early to mid-1940s, the dominant style therefore was the whodunnit detective mystery rather than the suspense thriller.

This study seeks to examine the dominant tendencies in the detective crime series of the 1930s and 1940s which have often been overlooked in favour of studies of hard-boiled or *noir* detectives even though the output from the crime series far outweighs that of the latter forms. In

part, the crime series have been overlooked because they are considered to be contrived, inauthentic or formulaic as 'generic' B-Movie product, whereas hard-boiled films either express a perceived authenticity that makes them meaningful explorations of American society or else they are deemed to transcend genre to become more complex (often by being considered in their interfusions with *film noir*), so that they deal with difficult things such as desire, ideology, social relations, the operations of money in capitalism, and the various corruptions, perversions, deviancies and transgressions arising from the representation of these to produce ambiguity and confusion where the crime series films produce simplicity and certainty. Some of the series are formulaic, certainly, most notably the Columbia series 'The Lone Wolf' (after an interesting incarnation of the role by Melvyn Douglas in *The Lone Wolf Returns*) and 'Boston Blackie', but this does not mean that the crime series don't have any interest. This is not to claim that the films overtly deal with social concerns. It must be remembered that the vast majority of the crime series were B-Movies and that they were therefore produced to provide an entertaining diversion to accompany the main feature. They do not therefore often overtly engage with political, cultural or social concerns, except during the wartime spy films, and care needs to be taken to avoid reading too much into light diversions.

The films do, however, articulate at various points matters relating to ideological formations within the United States, even though it is difficult to see in the crime series films an open response to the New Deal ethos of Roosevelt's presidency. Indeed, the films themselves are quite often uncertain or fractured in their mapping of ideology and this has much to do with their B status and their flexible definition of the mystery format which produces a profuse number of codes from one film to another in the series and even within films, so that there are often competing or conflicting meaning systems in operation. For example, conflicting codes of masculinity are produced in the representation of the Falcon because his active sexual desire is sometimes presented as charming, confident and attractive, but on other occasions it is shown to make him bungling because his constant interest in sex gets him into trouble. He can therefore be hyper-masculine and competent or incompetent and inefficient at different times, sometimes even in the same film (*A Date with the Falcon* [1941]). It is not a conscious ploy to seemingly confirm a sexualised masculinity before debunking it because often it is the generic codes in operation that determine the representation. Thus, in *A Date with the Falcon*, when the film requires comedy, the Falcon can be made to look foolish by making a hasty

retreat on to a window ledge, but if the superiority associated with the amateur detective is required he can then light a cigarette and calmly smoke it while a crowd down below urges him to jump.

This is only one example and there are many others, including the conflicting codes surrounding Charlie Chan and Mr Moto because of the complex and contradictory representations of their ethnicity, the representations of law and crime that develop in the criminal detective series ('The Saint' and the 'Falcon') which offer interesting discourses concerning the disorder the detective creates in pursuing an investigation whose purpose is to return society to order, and the representation of Sherlock Holmes within an American ideological system that still wants to value aspects of his Englishness. All these will be considered in this book, as well as the development of the comedy thriller format in 'The Thin Man' films, which were given class-A or prestige status as headlining films, and the rise of hard-boiled and other types of crime film in the 1940s which helped to bring the detective crime series to an end in 1949 when the last of the 'Charlie Chan' films, *The Sky Dragon*, was released by Monogram. A particular concern throughout will be on the production of the crime series as B-Movies designed to support a headlining feature on the double-bill that became the standard model of cinema exhibition in the 1930s. This mode of production is significant because it influences and diffuses the codes of the detective genre through the operation of a form of cinematic vaudeville that articulates a range of generic codes to provide entertainment over and above the mystery narrative, so that even though the use of comedy, romance, music and other forms might appear to be intrusive, it is argued here that they are a key aspect of the fun that the crime series provide.

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Exploring Detective Films in the 1930s and 1940s: Genre, Society and Hollywood

Hollywood's version of the whodunnit in the 1930s and 1940s was not always of the classical style associated with the progenitors of the literary detective genre (Poe and Conan Doyle) or the writers of Golden Age clue-puzzle mysteries (such as Christie and Chesterton). The whodunnit does, nevertheless, provide the template for most of Hollywood's crime series, even if sometimes it is only to furnish a mystery sub-plot in films that emphasise action or suspense. The 'Charlie Chan' films, for example, which formed the longest running of Hollywood's crime series, privilege the mystery form of the whodunnit, including the conventional unmasking of the murderer in the denouement. There were also numerous 'Philo Vance' films throughout the period, the best known of which, *The Kennel Murder Case* (1933), is paradigmatic of the clue-puzzle style in its rendering of a locked-room mystery involving more than one person trying to kill the same man at about the same time on the same evening. Even in series that were more variable in style, such as the 'Sherlock Holmes' films, where the emphasis was often on suspense, there was still always some form of mystery or riddle to occupy Holmes while he contended with criminals whose identity he had already revealed, such as The Dancing Men Code in the espionage film *Sherlock Holmes and the Secret Weapon* (1942) or the mystery of how the victims are killed in a thriller such as *The Spider Woman* (1944). There are a number of reasons why Hollywood preferred to use a version of the whodunnit style during the 1930s and 1940s. The whodunnit aligned with the economic restrictions of 'B'-Movie production, which required a cheap and rapid turnaround of films, because stories could be recycled relatively easily, often merely by changing the setting

and the names of characters, and because action could be confined to a few sets. There were also narrative imperatives for the use of the whodunnit because its emphasis on the concealment of the criminal allowed interest to be maintained until the denouement. In addition there were moral concerns connected to the Motion Picture Production Code because, while the whodunnit formula focused on criminality, the types of crime represented were usually unrelated to the gangster violence that the Hays/Breen Office was concerned about (Black, 1994: 108) and this made its representation of crime morally 'safe'.

The Hollywood whodunnit

The whodunnit style that predominates in the Hollywood crime series is, however, a more multifarious form than its literary equivalent. Despite the recycling of established motifs such as the enigma, the interpretation of clues, and the denouement, Hollywood's preference for action-based narratives and the need to visualise detection within these confines means that it is often interfused with the thriller mode to allow suspense and action to come to the fore.[1] Hollywood's version of the whodunnit (and the styles that displaced it in the late 1940s) can still, however, be understood by reference to critical accounts of the literary detective form. These accounts have focused, for example, on the role of the detective and the nature of detection (Knight, 2004: 30–63; Rzepka, 2005: 90–113), the importance of ratiocination and the scientific method (Knight, 2003: 77–94; Scaggs, 2005: 33–54), the puzzle of the mystery as a form of game for the reader or audience to play (Cawelti, 1976: 105), the differences between the whodunnit and American hard-boiled forms (Soitos, 1996: 24; Messent, 1997: 7; Pepper, 2000: 10–34), the relationship between crime and morality (Palmer, 1991: 133–5; Pyrhönen, 1999), and the development of sub-genres such as the policier, crime thriller and the police procedural (Scaggs, 2005: 85–104).[2] Many of these features or motifs were significant within Hollywood crime texts in the period before the rise of the hard-boiled film, although they were very often modified because they had to attend to the imperatives of either visual representation or institutional arrangements. The problem of representing the intellectual process of detection as a central feature of the mystery narrative, for example, was a particular concern because it needed to be visualised for the audience. Concerns with morality and crime were also reframed because of the impact of the Motion Picture Production Code which was articulated in 1930 and fully in force from 1934. Criminal-detectives such as

The Saint, Falcon or Lone Wolf, for example, were turned into servants of law and society, a transformation that also affected their activities because their criminal inclinations were either recast as harmless pranks or channelled into detection, so that burglary became a means to discover clues rather than theft for personal gain.

The features of the classic detective formula that recur in the Hollywood crime series discussed here align quite closely with John Cawelti's taxonomy of literary detective fiction. Cawelti argues that there are four aspects that define the detective formula: situation, pattern of action, characters and relationships, and setting. Situation refers to the dominant narrative of the mystery provided by an unsolved crime and its elucidation, while pattern of action refers to the narrative arc that follows on from this premise and comprises '(a) introduction of the detective; (b) crime and clues; (c) investigation; (d) announcement of the solution; (e) explanation of the solution; (f) denouement' (1976: 82). The situation and the narrative as defined are particularly relevant to the films of the Hollywood crime series, especially when Cawelti notes that the denouement (the apprehension of the criminal) and the solution (the explanation of the crime) can be combined (Ibid.: 90). In the classical Hollywood narrative paradigm, these aspects are generally elided or follow in quick succession to integrate narrative threads in the resolution so that, although it is very often implied that the Hollywood detective has deduced the solution before the final scenes, he or she usually only provides the explanation in a denouement that also includes the capture of the criminal. On occasions, however, it is only in this final scene that the detective discovers the identity of the culprit (*The Falcon and the Co-eds* [1943]) or springs a trap either to capture the criminal (*The Scarlet Claw* [1944]) or to goad them into a confession (*The Saint in Palm Springs* [1941]), although 'The Thin Man' series presents the final denouement as a way for Nick Charles to work through possibilities until he reaches the right conclusion. Further aspects of the narrative are provided by Cawelti's category of characters and relationships which not only includes the detective, but also the criminal, the victim and 'false suspects' (Cawelti, 1976: 96), all of whom provide the material (in the form of clues or testimony) to drive the detective's investigation. Finally, there is the setting, which most obviously refers to the locations favoured by the classical detective story, but which also refers to the space that delimits the action so as to separate the detective's textual world from the 'complexity and confusion of the larger social world' (Ibid.: 97). Cawelti, however, also comments that the setting can often be used to represent stability in a world disrupted by crime (Ibid.: 98)

and this introduces another significant motif in detective fiction, discussed by several critics: the detective's role in returning society to order (Schatz, 1981: 124; Copjec, 1993: 171; Messent, 1997: 8; Leitch, 2002: 173; Knight, 2003: 88 and 90; Scaggs, 2005: 46–9). Depending upon perspective, this might simply involve ensuring that crime is only a minor disruption rather than a sign of chaotic social relations (Field, 2009: 19), or might provide the detective with an ideological function so that the return to the status quo associated with the solution of a crime is an overt legitimation of bourgeois ideology (Mandel, 1984: 47).

This suggests that the detective is a figure of authority who is more than someone who merely solves crime or carries the burden of the narrative. Nevertheless, the detective's primary narrative role is the investigation of a mystery and his or her social role is often secondary to the cerebral problem that he or she has been set. Mandel, for example, notes that '[T]he real subject of the early detective stories is thus not crime or murder but enigma' (1984: 18) and this means that the detective must also be an interpreter and seeker after knowledge who gathers the world as information in visual cues and props before 'using her or his reasoning powers to penetrate below the surface of things' (Messent, 1997: 5). While clues and information are necessary in detective stories, their presentation has always been problematic within the cinematic form. A clue can be introduced by a passing reference in a novel without drawing attention to its importance, whereas to hold an object in shot in cinema seemingly 'overstresses' its significance (Knight, 2004: 111). Detective films can use a misleading shot as a form of red herring to direct attention towards objects that are actually insignificant, but the B-Movie crime series tend to have a much more mechanical approach to such matters and very often use visual clues to provide narrative information in an instrumental manner. This pattern is also a product of classical Hollywood's overall penchant for dynamic narratives (based on tension, conflict and suspense, or action and incident), but the particular demands for clarity and pace found in B-Movies, which generally have a running time of between sixty and seventy minutes, mean that screen time cannot be used up on static representation of props.[3] There are exceptions, but where this is the case, the use of visual clues is usually integrated into the onscreen action. In *Sherlock Holmes in Washington* (1943), for example, Holmes searches a room for clues to find out how a British agent transported secret plans to the United States. A collection of cameras, a negative containing the small image of a matchbook, a microscope, a slide projector and several matchbooks of the kind appearing in the negative are all put on the screen not only

for Holmes to find, but also to visually display his thought processes as he moves quickly around the screen space from one object to another. As importantly, information is conveyed at the same pace as Holmes' movement, so that the objects are located in a set of clear causal relationships to embed them in the larger story of the mystery when Holmes concludes that the clues indicate that the agent put the secret plans on microfilm which he then concealed in a matchbook.

Despite such exceptions, evidence in detective films tends to be revealed not in the form of props but through dialogue in interviews or conversations. This mode of collecting and revealing evidence also generates movement from scene to scene as the detective uses the information learnt from one character to guide him either to another character or to a location where new evidence can be gathered. The detective's trajectory through the narrative, therefore, is to move from one source of information to another, most usually in the form of reported testimony, suggesting a consonance between the cinematic narrative of the crime series and literary hard-boiled fiction, which shares a similar emphasis on testimony from suspects or witnesses, as both Mandel (1984: 36) and Scaggs (2005: 59) note, as opposed to the whodunnit's focus on objects to be interpreted. The tendency to rely on reported evidence is not, however, a product of the hard-boiled style's influence on cinema, but a result of the need for dynamic narratives and causal relationships between episodes or scenes within the classical Hollywood paradigm. Despite the relegation of the clue-as-object to a subsidiary role, crime series nevertheless still offer the same ideological imperative that underpinned the scientific method in the classical literary detective form which, in its fetishisation of the clue-as-object, sought to prove the objectivity of reality. The world is objective and open to interpretation for the film detective and the screened reality that he or she inhabits is ultimately where truth resides in spite of deceptions on the part of criminals and suspects. The film detective makes the world knowable by solving mysteries because, like Sherlock Holmes according to Moretti, he or she possesses the 'stable code' (1988: 145) that helps align signifier with signified. It can be argued, indeed, that the textual reality inhabited by the detective is solely a world of objects in spite of the general absence of physical clues because the characters the detective encounters become objectified as evidence to be observed so that they can be placed within a taxonomy of knowledge which allows them to be understood as units of meaning once their motives, relationships and actions have been learnt or accurately interpreted. To the detective, the world is a place of 'things' in

which other characters are functional, their only purpose to advance the investigation. The Falcon, for example, controls and re-directs sexual interest on the part of the female characters he encounters towards his investigation, thereby transforming desire into the affectless collection of information.

The instrumental treatment of narrative content also has relevance for matters of morality within the detective film through the transformation of crime from a social and moral matter to a mystery that is ostensibly empty of meaning because it is articulated simply for the purpose of entertainment, a feature that is also derived from literary detective works. As products of the classical Hollywood studio system, detective films in the 1930s and 1940s were necessarily governed by the Motion Picture Production Code and had to accord with its imperative not to present crime in a positive way. It is axiomatic, therefore, that Hollywood presumes crime is wrong, but the imperative to provide entertainment means that criminal acts are not necessarily treated in moral terms because they function primarily to generate mystery, tension or action in the detective's pursuit of an investigation. The criminal is therefore less a moral problem than a necessary opponent who sets in motion the suspense, thrills and incident that form the entertainment. The punishment or detention of the criminal in the denouement is often less a matter of morality or legality than an opportunity to provide excitement or gratifying release from tension in the case of action-oriented resolutions, or pleasurable satisfaction in the revelation scene in enigma-based films. While it is certainly the case, for example, that Moriarty is represented at the beginning of *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1939) as morally repugnant because he values the orchids he tends more than the life of a man he has murdered, his presence in the film is not to articulate disapproval of criminality, but to provide the mysteries that will generate events and incidents. Moriarty's bringing to book is similarly empty of moral concern because it is primarily the means to afford action (in the race across London to prevent him bringing his plan to fulfilment), excitement and tension (in his struggle with Holmes atop the Tower of London), and spectacle (when he falls to his death). Many other examples which privilege entertainment over morality in the denouement can be offered from the crime series, such as Nora Charles' rescue of her husband Nick in *Shadow of the Thin Man* (1941), the gunfights at the end of *The Falcon Out West* (1944) and *The Falcon in Hollywood* (1944) or the perverse pleasure of characters being hoist by their own petard, such as Valdin in *Bulldog Drummond's Bride* (1939) who is killed by a bomb meant for others. The importance of the

ending is therefore to emphasise narrative closure and, while conclusions have ideological or moral implications, these are institutionally subordinated to the satisfactory closing of the entertainment provided by the narrative.

One of the problems for the Hollywood studios in adapting the whodunnit to screen is that the observation, interpretation and deduction associated with it are not the stuff of visual entertainment. The 'Torchy Blane' adventure *Smart Blonde* (1937) illustrates the difficulties of transferring the whodunnit style to cinema. The film is a succession of conversations, primarily conducted by Torchy, a newspaper reporter, and her police officer fiancé, Steve McBride, as they move from one source of information to another, paralleling each other in a pattern that is made overt in a mirroring sequence during which Torchy and McBride, in separate scenes, interview two women involved in the life of the main suspect. The effect of this mirroring is to establish relations of equivalence between the two scenes so that no particular value is attached to the evidence uncovered in either, but this also reflects on the narrative as a whole because there seems to be very little meaning in the story of the investigation as it moves from one interview to another. Because there is little incident, the investigation is very flat and the pleasure of the text is primarily provided by the vibrancy of Glenda Farrell's performance as Torchy and her bantering relationship with McBride.

The 'Torchy Blane' films sought to address the flatness of the whodunnit narrative of *Smart Blonde* by privileging incident and action over mystery in *Fly-Away Baby*, aka *Crime in the Clouds* (1937). The film involves the pursuit of a suspect around the world, with the identity of the criminal apparently known early on so that there seems to be very little mystery until the narrative reveals at the end that someone else is responsible for the crimes. This occurs on a zeppelin flight from Germany to New York and the conclusion, in which the criminal plunges to his death as he seeks to escape by parachute, wraps up the mystery, which has only actually been introduced in the last reel, in a perfunctory manner. The prior material, except for an early scene in which the murderer is interviewed, is revealed to have been a wild goose chase, most particularly the round-the-world flight that has filled most of the film. A similar situation is also present in a hoax murder that takes up half the running time of *The Adventurous Blonde* (1937) and both cases suggest that the Hollywood detective film, particularly in its B-Movie form, is as based on incidental padding, digression and misdirection as it is on a linear movement towards conclusion. This means that the B-Movie narrative partakes of the contradiction implicit