

Metaleptic Vertigo: Temporal and Generic Crossovers in *The Singing Detective*

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The scene seems familiar: the opening credits are composed of a series of drawings that unashamedly depict all the clichés of *film noir* – the profile of a man in a beige overcoat and trilby, a high-angle shot of a semi-naked woman's body lying under a streetlamp, a man's shadow cast onto a wall. The opening scene similarly shows an urban setting at night in the 1940s, with dark alleyways and wet pavements. An elderly busker playing "Peg O' My Heart" on his mouth-organ inserts bars of the German National Anthem at the approach of a man who silently exchanges a message with him. As the man steps down into an underground nightclub, the voice-over comments: "And so the man went down the hole, like Alice. But there were no bunny rabbits down there. It wasn't that sort of hole. It was a rat hole." The camera then tilts down to a flickering neon sign that reveals the name of the club: "Skinskape," while, on the soundtrack, the music of "I've Got you under my Skin" appropriately starts. However, while the tune continues, a cut to the next shot reveals a white sheet on an empty bed in a present-day hospital. Notwithstanding Marlow's (played by Michael Gambon) comment in voice-over, the viewer, like Alice, has been cast through the looking glass, crossing the frontier between two worlds.

Ever since its release in 1986, *The Singing Detective* (Dennis Potter/Jon Amiel, 1986), a BBC production,¹ has been praised as one of the greatest achievements of British television and the masterpiece of Dennis Potter,² one of the most creative and controversial playwrights for British television. However, as both Glen Creeber and Joost Hunningher have pointed out,³ one must not overlook the significant contribution of the director Jon Amiel, who used all the expressive resources of 35 mm film, as well as the unique qualities of the TV serial, exploiting repetitions with variations as its

¹ *The Singing Detective* was made in association with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. It was first broadcast in Britain in 1986 over a period of six weeks, starting 17 November. See Glen Creeber, Dennis Potter. *Between Two Worlds. A Critical Reassessment*, Basingstoke: Macmillan / New York: St Martin's Press, 1998, 167.

² Dennis Potter himself declared in an interview to *The Times* even before the serial was broadcast: "This is the piece of work I'd like to be remembered for" (quoted in Creeber, Dennis Potter, 166).

³ G Creeber, *The Singing Detective*, London: British Film Institute, 2007; Joost Hunningher, "The Singing Detective. Who done it?," in *British Television Drama in the 1980s*, George W. Brandt (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, 234-57.

foundation.⁴ *The Singing Detective* is certainly a masterpiece in metalepsis as defined by Gérard Genette: a “deliberate transgression of the threshold of embedding,” a process through which the boundary between different narrative levels is breached or blurred.⁵

More specifically, as a crossing over the ontological frontiers between diegetic universes and a violation of thresholds of representation undermining mimetic illusion, metalepsis foregrounds the very process of creation. It thus highlights both the intrusion of a narrative instance and the role of the viewer, who has to break from a referential reading of film in favour of “a shared knowledge of illusion.”⁶ *The Singing Detective* shows how effective metalepsis can be in film: it paradoxically highlights cinema’s powerful capacity for hypotyposis (namely the iconic power to present what is depicted as though it were before one’s very eyes), while, at the same time, calling attention to the gaps and seams within the narrative. “Discontinuity becomes programmatic.”⁷ Not only does metalepsis appear as a heuristic tool both within the diegesis and for the viewer, but it also becomes the source and essence of narrative and spectacular pleasure.

As in Alain Resnais’s *Providence* (1977),⁸ the main protagonist is a writer. Philip Marlow (without the e) is a writer of pulp detective fiction who suffers from an acute case of psoriatic arthropathy, affecting both his skin and his joints, and who is, therefore, confined to his hospital bed, where he mentally rewrites his first, out-of-print, novel entitled *The Singing Detective*. But in addition to this self-reflexive *mise-en-abyme*, other narrative strands are juxtaposed, eventually merging and cross-pollinating: memories from Marlow’s childhood at the end of the Second World War; paranoid speculations about his wife, Nicola, conspiring with her lover to steal his former screenplay, adapted from the eponymous book; and hallucinations brought about by his feverish condition.

The serial thus borrows from different generic codes including film noir, detective fiction, period drama, situation comedy, the musical and the form of autobiographical narrative,⁹ to name the most obvious. This playful foregrounding of generic conventions establishes “epistemological boundaries” of knowledge (to adopt Branigan’s terminology¹⁰), and horizons of expectation, only to transgress them.

⁴ Both recall that Jon Amiel suggested many changes from the first screenplay that served to develop the detective story and the role of Marlow’s wife, and to increase the number of cross-cuts between the different narrative strands; in particular, he and his film crew conceived the famous “Dry Bones” scene which Potter had planned on a dark background. See Creeber, *The Singing Detective*, 13 and Hunningher, *The Singing Detective*, 242.

⁵ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983, 88.

⁶ Christine Baron, “Effet métaleptique et statut des discours fictionnels,” in John Pier & Jean-Marie Schaeffer (eds), *Métalepses. Entorses au pacte de la représentation*, Paris: Éditions de l’EHESS, 2005, 295–310, 298, our translation.

⁷ Samuel G. Marinov, “Pennies from Heaven, *The Singing Detective* and *Lipstick on Your Collar*. Redefining the Genre of Musical Film” in *The Passion of Dennis Potter. International Collected Essays*, Vernon W. Gras & John R. Cook (eds), New York: St Martin’s Press, 2000, 195–204, 201. Marinov’s wording echoes Robert Stam’s description of modernism: “discontinuity becomes programmatic and rather aggressive. Interruption pre-empts spectacle; in fact, it becomes the spectacle.” Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature. From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992 [1st edition 1985], 7.

⁸ It is worth noting that the screenplay was written by David Mercer. Mercer and Potter are seen by John Caughie as “the two writers who can most closely be identified with modernism in television drama.” John Caughie, *Television Drama. Realism, Modernism and British Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 167.

⁹ Potter insisted he was playing with the “form of autobiography,” quoted in Graham Fuller (ed.) *Potter on Potter*, London: Faber & Faber, 1993, 95. Or again, in an interview given in 1990: “*The Singing Detective* played with the autobiographical genre. It pretended to be autobiographical because that’s a very powerful way of writing.” Vernon W. Gras & John R. Cook (eds), *The Passion of Dennis Potter. International Collected Essays*, New York: St Martin’s Press, 2000, 241.

¹⁰ Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film*, London & New York: Routledge, 1992, 85.

Not only do the different narrative layers display a kaleidoscopic array of echoes that bind them together thematically and formally, but they constantly intermingle with each other. The *noir* atmosphere, with its tilted angles, its distorted focal lengths, its deep shadows, and its drained colours, invades the hospital ward as well as the childhood memories of the London underground. The same gestures and dialogue lines are repeated from one diegetic universe to another, often providing match cuts.¹¹ As in a dream, characters are regularly displaced: in the second episode, Marlow's wife (Janet Suzman) has replaced his mother (Alison Steadman) in the forest. The obsessively recurrent image of a drowned, naked woman being pulled out of the Thames sometimes shows the same woman, sometimes the Russian prostitute Sonia (Kate McKenzie), from the fictional novel, other times Marlow's present-day wife, and even his dead mother, all framed identically. Identity is all the more unstable as some different roles are played by the same actors: Michael Gambon is, of course, Marlow, the Singing Detective, as well as his creator. The characters of Raymond Binney (the mother's lover), Marc Binney (Detective Marlow's client), and Marc Finney (Nicola's imaginary lover) are all played by the same actor, Patrick Malahide. The young Philip's mother (Alison Steadman) also appears as Lili the German spy; Nurse Mills mutates into the nightclub singer Carlotta (Joanne Whalley); Sonia (Kate McKenzie) is a Russian prostitute both in Marlow's novel and in the writer's recent past.

What's more, characters and events from the different narrative frames at some time cross the walls of the different narrative spaces or address each other from discourses that are supposed to be separate.¹² At the end of Episode 1, patients and staff from the present-day hospital are standing on the 1945 bridge, blurring the two periods of time. Likewise, young Philip darts across the hospital ward after running away from his mother in the underground (Episode 5), or the two patients, Mr. Hall (David Ryall) and Reginald (Gerard Horan), are seen among the soldiers on the train that takes young Philip and his mother away from home (Episode 3), as well as in the orchestra of Marlow's nightclub (Episode 6). In an emblematic way, the two Mysterious Men, Stoppardian Laurel-and-Hardy lookalikes, appear in the hospital ward from which they run away, to find themselves lost in the Forest of Dean, before returning to the ward to confront their creator. Like Pirandello's characters, they then provide some metafictional comment as they complain about being mere "padding," deprived of any consistence or even a name.¹³ Metalepsis is even more flagrant when it involves the figure of the author: in Episode 4, Marlow literally dictates his wife's lines. Filmed in close-up, his voice-over is first heard: "No luck full stop No good full stop Talk about difficult exclamation mark" before the next shot shows Nicola repeating the same words without the references to punctuation. Conversely, Finney starts inserting punctuation and stage directions in his speech: "I have this awful dash he stops himself comma and all but shudders full stop." And similar disruptions occur even within embedded narratives: the scene where Mark Binney meets Sonia in the second episode is thus suddenly interrupted to reveal it is Binney's embedded narrative to Marlow.

¹¹ To give but a few examples, in Episode 3, the father waving good-bye on the station platform is echoed by the singing detective in a song, then by the scarecrow which becomes alive. In episode 5, Dr Gibbon's word association game which Marlow has to play is echoed by Nicola with Finney in the next scene. In the same episode, Marlow, lying in bed with the present-day prostitute, repeats the lines that Binney was telling Sonia the prostitute in episode 2: "The river looks as though it's made of tar, sludging along. Full of filth." Most specifically, the same question "who did it?" is used as a leitmotif that finds relevance in all the narrative strands.

¹² In Episode 2, for instance, the writer, Marlow, thus answers his novel's detective when the latter asks Binney "Are you as nervous as you seem?" – "Yeah, I'm as nervous as I seem."

¹³ To Nurse Mills's question, "Who are you? What do you want here?" one answers, "Those are exactly the right questions;" to Marlow telling them, "I have no idea who you are or what you want," they respond, "Disowning us now, are you? Bloody orphans, are we? We're never told! Our roles are unclear! No names, even. No bloody handles!"

Throughout the film, self-reflexive devices highlight the artificiality of representation: young Marlow sitting atop his tree repeatedly addresses the camera to express his thoughts and, more specifically, all the characters are prone suddenly to dance and sing in lip-synch, a device which has somehow become a trademark of Potter's work,¹⁴ and which provides a Brechtian distancing effect, while simultaneously commenting upon the action, in allowing the characters to articulate suppressed dreams and feelings.

Nonetheless, for all the elaborate disjunctive montage of this multi-layered, convoluted narrative, many film scholars have stressed the presence of a unifying entity since, ultimately, the various narrative strands are all linked through Marlow's consciousness. They have noted how the detective story—with its misogynist portrayal of double-crossing women—echoes the traumatic memory of Marlow witnessing his mother's adultery, as well as his paranoid suspicions about his wife, and works as an allegory for his psychoanalytical cure, the investigation of which leads to his redemption from the sense of guilt that, quite literally, cripples him.¹⁵

However, the psychoanalytical narrative remains a narrative convention just like the other *genres* used in the film, a useful weapon in the author's hands with which to play with the audience's expectations.¹⁶ I would argue that if *The Singing Detective's* achievement is, without any doubt, the creation of a mindscape, its significance is not so much its psychological meaning as its figurative possibilities. Indeed, the film builds up an inherently intertextual world where the boundaries between past and present, between the "real" and fantasy have collapsed,¹⁷ but what matters are the passageways, the in-betweens, that allow for potential reconfigurations and re-figurations. As if to answer Troy Kennedy Martin's statement for a new television drama, *The Singing Detective* creates "a world where total meaning is not within the objects pictured but in the space between them."¹⁸

Significantly, some of the most frequently recurring images are of bridges, tunnels, and corridors. The very first shot frames an empty covered alleyway into which the camera tracks, with the shot dissolving into a deserted street with a lit streetlamp. Then another dissolve opens with a track along a wall to reveal the very same alleyway of the opening scene, this time with a busker in the background. From the onset, passageways are foregrounded as transitional spaces, full of potentialities, as if waiting to be peopled. Furthermore, the repetition of the first shot in the third – but with an additional prelude and a different content – suggests the possibility of rewriting, opening up the film to constant alterations and revisions. I will describe this figure as an open loop, perhaps best illustrated at the end of Episode 2. The scene takes place in the local pub where Marlow's father performs in front of the other villagers. The camera starts by framing young Philip, who listens, engrossed in his father's singing, and it slowly dollies round the room to complete a full circle, but instead of young Philip, it now shows

¹⁴ As Glen Creeber explains, the lip-synch technique was first used by Potter briefly in *Moonlight on the Highway* (1969) and plays a major part in *Pennies from Heaven* (1978), *The Singing Detective* (1986), and *Lipstick on your Collar* (1993) (Creeber, Dennis Potter). For a more comprehensive analysis see Samuel G. Marinov, "Pennies from Heaven, *The Singing Detective* and *Lipstick on Your Collar*. Redefining the Genre of Musical Film."

¹⁵ In particular, the extensive biblical subtext has been thoroughly studied. See Creeber, *The Singing Detective*.

¹⁶ Significantly, in Episode 3, Marlow's voice-over is heard composing his autobiography in the same way as he composes his detective novel, inserting punctuation marks: "The rooks gather in the lost trees comma like premonitions of the night full stop."

¹⁷ In the last episode, Marlow acknowledges that his memory is as vague as a dream: "I cannot now distinguish between the train that brought my mother and me to London and the one which took us back. Which took me back, I mean. But I tell you – there was something odd about that journey – something not right – something I still dream about."

¹⁸ Caughie, *Television Drama*, 156.

the adult Marlow, in his hospital pyjamas and bandages. Contrary to a conventional shot counter shot,¹⁹ the transition is not carried out through editing but through camera movement within a single shot, undermining the principle of continuity itself as it conflates two incompatible chronotopes. Likewise, the continuity of tracking movements is used to cross over different temporal frameworks. In particular, the rotating track onto Marlow's face in a high-angle shot, while classically suggesting the entrance into the character's consciousness, typifies the vertigo-like disorientation of spatiotemporal landmarks within its continuous movement.

However, the most frequent transitional device throughout the series is the use of the sound bridge.²⁰ Jon Amiel himself compared the music to an elevator: "My image for *The Singing Detective* was that of [...] a four-storey building [...]. And the elevator that shuttled you up between the different floors was the music."²¹ Because it is one of its most original features, many relevant analyses have been made of the use of songs that unite the different narrative strands, as they are thematically connected to Marlow's childhood memories and to his fictional protagonist, who sings in a nightclub. For example, at the beginning of Episode 3, the Mills Brothers' song "Paper Doll" continues uninterrupted from the father waving good-bye on the station platform, to the detective singing the song in his nightclub, to close-ups of Marlow on his bed, then back to the father, still waving, who starts lip-synching, followed by the scarecrow that young Philip sees from the train, and, finally, by a group of soldiers on the train, amused at the song's allusions to "flirty guys," and thus hinting back to the mother's adultery. But the use of the sound bridge is not limited to musical numbers: bird song, the clackety-clack of the train and of the underground train, and the mother's shout as she calls "Philip" constantly echo, from one narrative strand to another.

The Singing Detective certainly makes the most of the multi-tracked nature of film. Not only does it fully exploit the conjunctive and disjunctive interplay between sound and images, but both the aural and visual tracks have recourse to multiple superimpositions: sounds, music and voice-overs from different diegetic universes repeatedly intermingle. Sometimes, as at the end of Episode 3, the voice-over of the young Philip and the adult Marlow are joined together, significantly evoking the endless loop of repetitions: "round and round and bloody round. The same bits all the time." On a visual level, multiple dissolves and superimpositions abound: in many of them, surfaces function as interfaces. It is no coincidence that Marlow's disease affects his skin, his most intimate frontier, as the exterior world flakes off. The surface of the water, the curtain of the hospital bed, the pearl curtains of the Skinscape, the portrait hanging on the wall of Binney's staircase, the canopy of the Forest of Dean, all are used as transitional spaces and, ultimately, as surfaces of projection. Significantly, the first shot that conveys the first shift from the universe of 1945 London to the present-day hospital shows a white bedsheet even before the main character, supposedly responsible for the different narratives, is introduced. What is clearly at stake is the possibility of projection. While plotting with her lover, Marlow's wife, Nicola, makes shadows shaped like parrots on the wall, an obvious comment on what the characters really are as they repeat the lines Marlow has uttered. And, of course, the *noir* aesthetics highlight shadows over the actual physical bodies. Just as the voice-over, at the same time, conjures a body and subtracts it from the image, so too bodies are treated first and foremost as projections, as Marlow's voice-over wisely comments: "You can throw a long shadow. You can throw a short one. And you know

¹⁹ The scene of the adult being an actual witness of a scene set in his past recalls Ingmar Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* (1957).

²⁰ Genette specifically defines sound bridges as metaleptic devices (Gérard Genette, *Métalepse*, Paris: Seuil, 2004, 74).

²¹ Quoted in Creeber, *The Singing Detective*, 22.

the mistake people make? They think the size has something to do with what's inside them. Am I right or am I right?"

Ultimately, the figure of the author as the origin of the narrative process collides with that of the spectator, reduced to immobility and projecting her/himself on the screen. At the end of the final episode, as the two Mysterious Men in search of a role confront their creator, Marlow-the-detective bursts into the hospital ward, starts shooting, and eventually shoots Marlow-the-author in the head. It is tempting to see in this murder a literal translation of the "death of the author" famously theorised by Roland Barthes, suggesting that "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination."²² It is true that the penultimate words are left to the fictional reader, Reginald, the patient who had been reading Marlow's eponymous novel throughout the film. But rather than a Barthesian interpretation, I would see this climactic conflation as the ultimate short-circuit that breaks the projection mechanism: after his symbolic death, Marlow is free to move out of his hospital cubicle, drawing its curtain open. Significantly, the last shot shows a long, empty corridor, as we hear Vera Lynn's song "We'll Meet Again." The circular time evoked in the song seems to be contradicted by the linearity of the corridor, yet the image does come full circle, as it echoes the very first image of the film. Again, this is a perfect illustration of the open loop structure that governs *The Singing Detective*.

What is remarkable in *The Singing Detective* is that, while pre-empting any narrative closure and mimetic illusion, it never precludes the possibility of narrative motivation or emotional involvement. The great variety and creativity displayed in the transitional devices allow for surprise effects, and doubt is maintained in ambiguous passages. Because the voice-overs of Marlow the writer and Marlow the detective obviously sound the same, their cynical remarks can often apply equally to their respective universes. But even when characters seem to follow Marlow's stage directions, as with Nicola and her lover, it is still possible to interpret this as a game of their own, when they are shown working on the screenplay. In Episode 4, a transitional shot between a scene with Binney in the London of 1945, and another with Nicola's lover, Finney, in the same flat, shows an external shot of a man looking out from the window while it is raining, and no clues indicate to which narrative strand the shot belongs. Or again, in Episode 2, when Marlow's father is filmed singing in the local pub, using the lip synch device, the distancing effect is shaken back into referential adhesion when, at the end, the audience sing in chorus.

Despite his avowed lack of sympathy for Dennis Potter, John Caughie has perceptively summed up the playwright's greatest achievement: "What is most striking and valuable about him [...] is that he remained with television, expanding the boundaries of the possible in television drama."²³ Through its elaborate montage, its open loop structure, its use of superimpositions and its playful metalepses, *The Singing Detective* could be an illustration of Thomas Hardy's statement that "man, even to himself, is a palimpsest."²⁴ It certainly opens up the screen to "the landscape of the mind,"²⁵ and demonstrates how film can cross over genres and referential codes to create a multi-layered conflation of spatial and temporal strata, be it within a single shot, a scene, or a whole series.

²² "A text is made up of multiple meanings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The Reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination." Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music Text*, London: Fontana, 1977, 148.

²³ Caughie, *Television Drama*, 176.

²⁴ Thomas, Hardy, *Far from the Madding Crowd* [1874], New York & London: Norton & Company, 1986, 189.

²⁵ Gras, *The Passion of Dennis Potter*, 3.