



Reframing Suspicion

Introduction

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“Nothing whets the intelligence more
than a passionate suspicion”
(Zweig n. p.)

“We have now entered an age of suspicion,” Nathalie Sarraute writes in “The Age of Suspicion,” one of her 1956 essays published in the eponymous collection, because “today’s reader is suspicious of what the author’s imagination has to offer him” (57). Sarraute actually challenges the traditional novel and calls for a renewal of the genre—her essays paved the way for the French “Nouveau Roman.” Suspicion is thus cast in a positive, creative light, against prejudice and convention. However, suspicion is usually associated with mistrust and perceived negatively, as testified for instance by British psychologist Alexander Shand’s definition of suspicion in his 1922 eponymous article.

Dis-agreeable in feeling, [suspicion] is opposite to the pleasant emotion of Confidence or Trust. Yet it is as frequently displayed by some persons as Trust by others. There is a temper of Suspicion. Brave and generous natures are not prone to it, nor are the happy [...]. But those who have been deceived and plundered, those who have formed a bad opinion of human nature, acquire it. (Shand 195)

Shand adds that suspicion originally had a biological function—a sort of “alert and watchful attitude,” even “fear” (200), it helped animals to watch out for predators and other dangers, to be on the look-out. Shand also expresses astonishment that “an emotion that has such great social importance has been ignored by psychology as if it had none” (196). By contrast, suspicion early attracted literary men, as proved by Francis Bacon’s 1625 *Essay* “Of Suspicion.” Bacon writes that suspicions

are to be repressed, or at the least well-guarded; for they cloud the mind, they lose friends, and they check with business, whereby business cannot go on currently and constantly: they dispose kings to tyranny, husbands to jealousy, wise men to irresolution and melancholy [...]. There is nothing makes a man suspect much, more than to know little; and, therefore, men should remedy suspicion by procuring to know more, and not to keep their suspicions in smother. (1)

While both authors agree on the negative aspect of suspicion, Shand is particularly concerned about the social effects: “[suspicion] tends to destroy social intercourse [...] and the wider it spreads the more it paralyses the life of the community which reposes on some degree of confidence between its members” (196). In other words, suspicion sows the seeds of social dissent, and contributes to the destruction of the social fabric. As for Bacon, he also underlines

the origin of suspicion, that is, a lack of knowledge, hence the major role suspicion has played in detective and mystery fiction—significantly nicknamed “whodunit”—from the start since, as we read, “our chief aim is to pass from the doubt of suspicion to the certainty of knowledge” (Shand 210).

On the opening page of his suspense novel *Before the Fact* (1932), a literary source for Hitchcock’s famous film *Suspicion* (1941), Francis Isles gives a more embodied, so to speak, definition of suspicion:

Suspicion is a tenuous thing, so impalpable that the exact moment of its birth is not easy to determine. But looking back over the series of little pictures which composed the memory of her married life, Lina found later, that certain of them—a small incident here, its significance quite unnoticed at the time, an unimportant action there [...]—had become illuminated by her fear so that they stood out like a row of street-lamps along a dark, straight road. (1)

While Isles, too, underlines the negative connotations of suspicion—suggested by the character’s fear, and the image of the dark straight road—for him, suspicion starts out from surprising facts or clues, and calls for a theory. It consists in putting together seemingly insignificant or irrelevant elements which gain significance in the combination. In other words, by definition, suspicion is associated with insufficient knowledge and interpretation. In Hitchcock’s film, the heroine’s husband is under suspicion for his erratic behavior, which means that his status is uncertain—he could well be innocent—and her own knowledge insufficient to draw a definite conclusion.

The limits of human knowledge certainly contributed to the western tradition of “philosophical suspicion” embodied by René Descartes’s use of doubt as a philosophical method, and Immanuel Kant’s “*Sapere aude*”¹ (“Dare to know”), that is, have the courage to use your own understanding, which was “the motto of the Enlightenment,” as Kant puts it in his 1784 essay “What Is Enlightenment?”

The “science of suspicion” develops in the 19th century with the figure of the detective and the emergence of criminology. The detective is a new kind of expert. Relying on his own observation and sometimes on forensic detail, he can decode signs of criminal activity and translate them into clues, leading to the identification and arrest of criminals. To this day, modern legal systems have been grounded in distrust, they presume dishonest deeds,

¹ The famous phrase was initially used by Horace in his *Epistles* (I, 2, 40).

deceptive testimony, and concealed crimes. “Suspicion permeates the practice of the law” (Felski, *Limits* 47).

Suspicion also permeates the researcher’s work, as suggested by Marjorie Nicholson in her 1929 article, “The Professor and the Detective”: “if you come to compare the methods by which the scientist or the philosopher has reached his conclusions, you will find that they are merely those of his favorite detective. [...] Scholars are, in the end, only the detectives of thought” (493, 495). No wonder that in *Psycho-Analysis and the Establishment of the Facts in Legal Proceedings* (1906), Freud himself should compare the use of clues in criminology and psychoanalysis. He underlines their “exactly similar method of disclosing psychological material which is buried away or kept secret” (107). Both psychoanalysis and criminological analysis are concerned with a “secret [...] something hidden” (108). Both rely on “self-betrayal,” that is, not a direct confession but rather “an indirect representation” by means of involuntarily uttered signs (107). However, Freud also points out the limits of this analogy—first epistemological limits, as the two sciences of suspicion differ in terms of the status of knowledge. “In the case of the criminal it is a secret which he knows and hides from you, whereas in the case of the hysteric it is a secret which he himself does not know either, which is hidden even from himself” (Freud 108). In other words, while criminology infers “the true facts of the case” from clues, psychoanalysis calls into question “the facts of the case” as such. Freud explains that “in your examination you may be led astray by a neurotic who, although he is innocent, reacts as if he were guilty because a lurking sense of guilt that already exists in him seizes upon the accusation made in the particular instance” (113). Criminology and psychoanalysis share an attentiveness towards clues, but their conception of clues is different. In the case of psychoanalysis, the indices or traces of the unconscious cannot be called “true” or “false.” The traces of the unconscious always refer to other traces, and ambiguity or “indirect representation” prevails. Elizabeth Strowick explains that “the concept of ‘trace’ in Freud does not function in terms of the reference of a sign to an object [...]. It seems as if the unconscious would mobilize the indexicality of the sign in order to rebuff the idea of reference” (656).

In 1965, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur coins the phrase “the hermeneutics of suspicion” to refer to an art of interpretation based on the demystification of illusion. Freud, Marx and Nietzsche, “the three masters of suspicion,” as Ricoeur calls them, “clear the horizon for a more authentic word, for a new reign of Truth, not only by means of a ‘destructive’ critique, but by the invention of an art of interpreting” (Ricoeur 33). The three thinkers jointly constitute a “school of suspicion” as they share a commitment to unmasking “the lies and illusions of consciousness;” they are the architects of a distinctively modern style of interpretation that circumvents obvious or self-evident meanings in order to draw out less visible and less

flattering truths (Ricœur 356). In the hermeneutics of suspicion, the role of the “source texts is to offer a plenitude of traces, clues, or symptoms; the job of the suspicious critic is to interpret these clues by situating them within larger structures of social or linguistic determination” (Felski, *Suspicious* 222). Ricœur, therefore, suggests a positive, even dynamic view of suspicion, as a means of interpretation and even revelation.

However, in her 2009 book *Ricœur and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion*, Alison Scott-Baumann insists that Ricœur only uses “the hermeneutics of suspicion” for ten years or so. She writes that “maybe he abandons the term because it inhibits faith, belief in anything.” She adds that “there is in fact more activity outside Ricœur’s texts on the use of this term, than within his texts and there is a lack of evidence of close reading that can contextualize the hermeneutics of suspicion within Ricœur’s work” (65, 66). “I call suspicion,” Ricœur writes, “the act of dispute *exactly proportional* to the expression of false consciousness. The problem of false consciousness is the object, the correlative of the act of suspicion. Out of it is born the quality of doubt, a type of doubt which is totally new and different from Cartesian doubt”² (Ricœur 34, my emphasis). The phrase “exactly proportional” shows Ricœur’s concern that an excess of suspicion and a dearth of suspicion are equally dangerous. For Richard Rorty, “the hermeneutics of suspicion” is “destructive criticism [...] constant awareness that any new theoretical proposal was likely to be more excuse for maintaining the status quo” (57). The use of Ricœur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion” in this extremely negative context suggests why Ricœur abandoned it. However, he continued to use the term suspicion. Scott-Baumann writes that “suspicion itself contains two parts—it contains a negative moment of subjective doubt that is necessary to destroy idols, and it also contains an egocentricity that can take us into such a suspicious state of mind that we destroy ourselves” (71). According to Ricœur, the danger of suspicion, indeed, is that it can lead to hubris. In his latter works, however, Ricœur used it as “a condition of possibility,” instead (Scott-Baumann 76).

Suspicion also concerns the production of meaning in human sciences. Unlike hard sciences that reproduce the relations between cause and effect on the basis of experiments, and thus formulate general laws, human sciences may be called “sciences of suspicion” (Vogl in Strowick 649) as they use a common method, that is, “the paradigm of clues” (Ginzburg 88) where knowledge results from the interpretation of clues. For Strowick, “[the paradigm of clues]

² “Whereas Descartes’s consciousness is what it is, is what it says, it says what it is, after Marx, Freud and Nietzsche we are faced with the doubt caused by false consciousness and this necessitates a hermeneutics for uncovering what was covered and removing the mask” (Scott-Baumann 69).

advocates the methodical practice of reading details, and it is details that are read in both criminological surveillance and psychoanalysis in order to determine identity” (652). Further down Strowick adds: “The human sciences play a decisive role in the establishment of the modern disposition of suspicion, for it is through the paradigm of clues—which infers invisible causal relations from visible signs—that they produce the hidden spaces of suspicion” (653). This approach relies both on the notion that meaning is hidden, repressed, in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter, and that the secret part is the most valuable.

A large number of readers and critics still uphold suspicious reading, including Djelal Kadir in his book *The Other Writing: Postcolonial Essays in Latin America’s Writing Culture* (1993) as he writes that we are “in an age and place in which alertness and insight have to be self-conscious practices cloaked in reflexivity and suspicion, lest we be had or taken” (2). The suspicious reader/critic looks for signs or clues, moves from an effect to the identification of a cause, from observation to explanation—like a traditional hunter deciphering animal tracks and interpreting traces. Simon Stern defines the clue as “a significant detail that does not come into visibility until an expert recognizes and interprets it” (363). In other words, it is something minor, hardly visible, and as Felski writes “it is a product of specialized knowledge—a hieroglyph to which the expert holds the key. [...] The device of the clue has the effect of coating mundane or irrelevant details with a sheen of supercharged significance” (*Limits* 99). For Marxist critics, in the wake of Louis Althusser’s symptomatic reading,³ and postcolonial critics, in particular, every detail has a secret meaning, even silences are significant. Eve Kosofsky Sedwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991) and Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) both show that a text’s gaps, tone, silences and imagery can be read as symptoms of the queerness or race absent only apparently from its pages.

Suspicious or symptomatic reading, however, has been questioned in recent years. For instance, Pierre Bayard argues that a clue is a choice: a decision to focus on certain things while ignoring others, which could lead to a very different interpretation: “What constitutes a clue for one person may be meaningless to another. And a clue is named as such only when it serves as part of a more general story” (Bayard 49). Bayard thus reopens the case of the Hound of the Baskervilles and explains why Holmes got things wrong. As for George Levine, he writes that suspicious reading may lead to treat the text “as a kind of enemy to be arrested” (3). Felski has

³ In *Reading Capital* published in French in 1968, Althusser developed a method of symptomatic reading inspired by Marx.

a more nuanced position and suggests that suspicious reading should be considered “not just a critique of narrative but also a type of narrative,” which has “much in common with the literary text it seeks to diagnose and expose” (Suspicious 232). She advocates downsizing suspicious reading, therefore, yet sticks to the principle of reading suspiciously.

Others, by contrast, advocate other types of reading, including Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus in their polemical “Surface Reading: An Introduction” to the 2009 special issue of *Representations*. While they were “trained in symptomatic [or suspicious] reading,” they explain that “in the last decades or so [they] have been drawn to modes of reading that attend to the surfaces of texts rather than plumb their depths” (1-2). For them, surface reading includes narratology, thematic criticism, genre criticism and discourse analysis. In this type of (surface) reading, Best and Marcus argue, “the critic becomes an anatomist breaking down texts or discourses into their components, or a taxonomist arranging and categorizing texts into larger groups.” Both anatomist and taxonomist, they add, “attend to what is present rather than privilege what is absent” (11). Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Purloined Letter” tells us that what lies in plain sight is worthy of attention but often eludes observation. Best and Marcus consider, therefore, that we don’t need detectives looking past the surface in order to root out what is underneath it. As dissatisfaction with suspicious reading has developed, a host of alternative directions for literary studies have emerged: New Aestheticism, Formalism, and Materialism, surface, distant and machine reading, etc. New names have also appeared such as “reflective reading” (Felski), “reparative reading” (Sedgwick), “self-creation” (Rorty), to name only a few. They prioritize a willingness to actively engage with the text over a capacity to diagnose them.

Today, it appears therefore that suspicion is taken with a pinch of salt—not to say suspiciously—in scholarly circles. However, suspicions proliferate on the social media blindly targeting politicians, the police, justice, doctors, the media, even scientists when they expose the risks of global warming or defend vaccines... Even as the pillars of contemporary society—actually, contemporary western societies—are under suspicion, a host of conspiracy theories of all kinds has developed. Sarraute’s “age of suspicion” has long passed but this is no doubt a new age of suspicion, that is, a dark age of ignorance where information has been replaced by disinformation, and fake news prevail—bringing about more suspicion.

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The above observations indicate the complexities of suspicion as a concept that necessitates examination from diverse perspectives using an array of methodologies and theoretical and conceptual frameworks. The essays featured in this special issue seek to explore the protean

ways in which suspicion engages in dialogue with literary and cultural texts. These analyses span various historical periods and encompass a spectrum of linguistic and discursive forms, ranging from literature to cinema, and from legal discourse to popular culture.

Gary Watt's "Four Species of Suspectacle" serves as the inaugural piece, establishing an insightful foundation through its exploration of the ostensibly predominant concern for the visual within the language of suspicion—as suggested by the word "suspectacle" he has coined. Adopting an etymological and philological methodology, Watt discerns that, notwithstanding the visual connotations in the language of the sus-"spect," suspicion encompasses deeper meanings beyond mere "sight." Watt thus introduces four provocations, each contributing distinct perspectives, all interlinked by their shared concern for rhetorical performances involving persuasion, credibility, and doubt.

The ensuing group of essays—penned by Nathalie Jaëck, Anja Meyer, and Sidia Fiorato—examine the intricate interplay between suspicion and detective fiction in 19th-century Britain. These contributions elucidate the nuanced dynamics encapsulated in the language of suspicion, as expounded by Watt. The three authors reaffirm the entrenched and widely acknowledged meaning and utilization of suspicion through the examination of a genre in which suspicion has, from its inception, assumed a pivotal role. Nevertheless, the analyses offered by the three authors contribute to endowing a greater complexity to this relationship. Jaeck's analysis, for example, suggests that suspicion in detective stories extends beyond character dynamics and plot intricacies; it infiltrates the very essence of narrative construction reshaping traditional realist storytelling norms. Meyer delves into the analysis of detective narratives, situating Doyle's fiction in relation to the contemporaneous invention of photography in 1839. Meyer explores the controversial issues of authenticity and suspicion arising from the ambiguous status of this medium and to its equally ambiguous positioning between science and the supernatural. Fiorato employs the docu-fictional work of contemporary author, Kate Summerscale, to explore a notorious 19th-century juvenile murder. Fiorato posits that suspicion was at the time directed toward the penny dreadfuls, as these publications were often implicated in the rise of juvenile crime.

The last two essays—penned by Christophe Chambost and Roberta Zanoni—shift critical reflection on suspicion from the world of literature to the world of cinema. Chambost's analytical focus centers prominently on Hitchcock's film *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943) and Park Chan-wook's later work, *Stoker* (2013). The narrative cores of both films pivot significantly on the rites of passage of the two young protagonists, which unfold against the backdrop of the suspicion they grapple with, propelling them onto the trajectory of maturity. Drawing

inspiration from Paul Ricœur's conceptual framework, suspicion is posited by Chambost as an indispensable stage, a necessary precursor to averting a descent into absolutist delusion. Zanoni's article concludes this special issue through a circular trajectory, reconnecting with Shakespeare, who was initially cited as a literary exemplar by Gary Watt in his introductory essay. Zanoni delves into an examination of how cinema has grappled with suspicions surrounding Shakespeare's life, elucidating the contrasting approaches adopted by two films, *Anonymous* (2011) and *All is True* (2018). Zanoni's article illuminates how popular culture has harnessed suspicion to generate two antithetical positions, both intertwined with the affirmation of a truth that, nonetheless, appears elusive. Within this framework, the status of what is deemed real undergoes continuous adaptation, redefinition, and debate.

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