



## The Chinese Parrot: *Techné*-Pop Culture and the Oriental Detective Film

R. John Williams

*It seems we have been swooning mainly over copies.*

—Walter Benjamin

*And that Chan never dies, never. That Pop waits in the darkness of every theater, in every TV, ever ready to come to light again at the flick of a switch.*

—Frank Chin

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In the first full-length Charlie Chan novel by Earl Derr Biggers, *The Chinese Parrot*, published in 1926, Charlie Chan goes undercover as a pidgin-speaking Chinese houseboy named Ah Kim in order to get access to a Chinese-speaking parrot that has witnessed (assuming, interestingly enough, that “witnessing” is possible for a parrot) a terrible murder.<sup>1</sup> “You understand,” Charlie Chan explains, “parrot does not invent talk. Merely repeats what others have remarked.”<sup>2</sup> The value of the parrot’s speech as “testimony” in the novel, we discover, lies in its reproductive, mechanical nature—its *lack* of invention and thought. The parrot’s speech is not “language,” but rather a mere “type” of indiscriminate mimetic duplication—important in the story precisely because of its apparent incapacity for duplicity (duplicability, yes, duplicity, no). Descartes, one is reminded, thought of the parrot as something like a ghostless machine.<sup>3</sup> As he explains in his *Discourse on Method*, “One sees that magpies and parrots can utter words as we do, and yet cannot speak as we do . . . it is nature which acts in them according to the disposition of their organs, as one sees that a clock, which is made up of only wheels and springs, can count the hours and measure time.”<sup>4</sup> Parrots are philosophically interesting (Freud would no doubt have said

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96 “uncanny”) because they reproduce as other-than-human the technology most basic to us as humans: language.<sup>5</sup> Parrots speak, and some of them remarkably well, but only as heteronomous creatures—but of course, how could we know for sure?<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps as a result of this weird categorical liminality, parrots have often haunted machine aesthetics and form. Two years before Biggers’s novel appeared, the quintessential artist of the machine age, Fernand Léger (who frequently confessed a fascination with parrots) produced an experimental non-narrative film, *Ballet Mécanique*, in which dancing machine pistons, items of kitchenware, typewriters, and mechanically blinking eyes are juxtaposed with the jerky, similarly repetitive movements of one of Léger’s cockatoos.<sup>7</sup> As Paul Carter has recently noted, Léger’s bird is presented in the film as a media image: “The pathos of Léger’s cockatoo is technological,” reflecting a collective cultural sense of the parrot as a “memory system, which the inventions of Edison, Bell, and Lumière superseded. Parrots contrive to imitate telephone bells; they cheerily catch the hiss and click of the phonograph needle; they learn to double the look of the mirror.”<sup>8</sup> To point to a more recent example (to say nothing of rapidly proliferating Youtube videos featuring talking parrots), online retailers now offer a USB Parrot, which, according to its creators, learns to “speak random phrases which are picked up in passing when a phrase is repeated enough” complete with “mechanical wings.” As the advertisement explains, “Now you can feel like a real pirate while making your illegal downloads with this USB parrot as your sidekick.”<sup>9</sup> It’s a striking image: the online pirate’s USB parrot presiding over endless online iterations of mechanical, and now digital reproducibility (fig. 1).<sup>10</sup>

Even before the advent of moving pictures, the exotic connotations of this speaking animal allowed it to play a rather curious role in the development of “talking” pictures. Spanning the entire history of Western art, the hundreds (probably thousands) of “woman and parrot” paintings that appeared throughout Europe and America are interesting for not only what they communicated about an artist’s mastery of form, but for the artistic conversations they articulated above and beyond their subject matter.<sup>11</sup> When, for example, the French Realist Gustav Courbet painted *Woman With a Parrot* in 1866, it was widely understood to be a critique of Édouard Manet’s famous nude prostitute, *Olympia* (1863), which Courbet had already criticized as rather too realistic, reportedly describing it as “the Queen of Spades stepping out of her bath.”<sup>12</sup> Art historian Arden Reed’s explanation of Courbet’s use of the parrot as a way of “talking” to Manet through his painting might seem a bit tenuous at first, but when we notice Manet’s own response to Courbet in his *Jeune Dame en 1866* [*Young Lady in 1866*], Reed’s take is difficult to dispute. In his painted response, Manet reproduces the woman-and-parrot genre, but conspicuously refuses to reproduce the marketable sensuousness of the traditional female nude, thereby sending the message to Courbet (by way of a mute parrot next to a much less exotic and fully clothed young woman) that Courbet had too spinelessly abandoned the artistic principles of French realism in favor of a more bureaucratic and bourgeois orientalism.<sup>13</sup> Manet’s parrot, in other words, signals a kind of parodic polyglossia—and the pun here on “polly,” as Paul Carter has argued, is neither trivial nor rare.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, these moments of polyphonic speaking-through-genre only scratch the surface of the role of the parrot in literary and visual culture. As Manet’s critique of



Fig. 1. USB Parrot. Courtesy of Thumb-supuk.com.

Courbet implies, for centuries parrots have figured prominently in Western aesthetics as an iconic emblem of exotic imperial gathering. Bruce Boehrer, author of one of several studies on “parrot culture,” notes that, “parrots have the distinction—or misfortune, depending on how you look at it—of being the first animal to be exported from the New World to the Old.”<sup>15</sup> Collected and displayed as part of an “ongoing process of [colonial] acquisition,” parrots became a decorative reflection of Western imperialism.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, in addition to Boehrer, Paul Cater, Julia Courtney, and Paula James have all recently published studies detailing the cultural role of the parrot in selected texts from Ovid to Jean Rhys—arguing, in short, that this “talking” animal has functioned throughout history as an important figure in aesthetic explorations of the delineations and slippages between West and East, machine and human, self and other.<sup>17</sup>

As we shall see, the idea of an “oriental detective” when it first appeared in the 1920s conjured up many of these psittacine fantasies, and corporations and individuals involved in film production were savvy to its potential marketability. It is hardly surprising, in fact, when at one point in Biggers’s novel *The Chinese Parrot*, when Charlie Chan visits Hollywood to observe a film production team at work, the director of the film—literally between takes—glances over at Chan and says, “By gad, here’s a type . . . Say, John—how’d you like to act in the pictures?” Chan laughs off the suggestion, but he is clearly intrigued. “Warmest thanks for permitting close inspection of picture factory,” Chan says about the experience afterwards, “Always a glowing item on the scroll of memory” (271). Biggers knew already that he was writing this novel to be made almost immediately into a film, and the obvious self-reflexivity in the phrase “here’s a type,” as I will argue, relies on all the correlative associations of the parrot: Charlie Chan is exotic; his speech is strangely both halting and elegant, he is ripe for mechanical reproduction—he is already, in other words, sleuthing towards Hollywood. And when he finally entered film culture, his appearance was certainly grand. Between 1927 and 1949, and not counting his appearance in Mexican, Asian, and other international versions, Hollywood studios alone produced over 60 full-production films featuring either Charlie Chan or one of his oriental detective spin-offs.<sup>18</sup>

98 For perhaps obvious reasons, most discussions of the oriental detective genre have tended to focus on whether or not the character reflects a positive or negative stereotype for Asian America. Defenders of the genre have been, until recently, mostly non-academic, arguing that the oriental detective is very consistently portrayed as smart and heroic. Keye Luke, the Asian-American actor who played both the voice of Charlie Chan in the 1970s animated series and Charlie Chan's "Number One Son" in the original films, argued, "They think [the character] demeans the race. I said, 'Demeans! My God! You've got a Chinese hero!'"<sup>19</sup> Ken Hanke, the author of *Charlie Chan at the Movies* insists that "anyone familiar with the films knows that if anyone comes off badly in most Charlie Chan movies, it is invariably Charlie's white counterparts—those dimwitted, cigar chewing Hollywoodized upholders of law and order who get nothing right until Charlie solves things for them."<sup>20</sup> But for Charlie Chan's detractors, the oriental detective narrative is practically a crime scene. The most caustic of Chan's critics is undoubtedly Frank Chin, who has argued that the oriental detective should be characterized as culturally akin to real-world villains like "Lee Harvey Oswald, Adolf Eichmann, [and] Richard Speck."<sup>21</sup> The National Asian American Telecommunication Association and the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium have been similarly, if more diplomatically, negative. In an effort to pressure the Fox Movie Channel to cancel its recent plan to showcase some early Chan films, the two associations issued a joint statement arguing that the Chinese American sleuth represents, "an offensive stereotype who revives sentiments and social dynamics that should be relegated to the past."<sup>22</sup>

Without dismissing these concerns—and, indeed, as a way of more fully understanding them—this essay attempts to reframe the discussion around which scholars have typically investigated the oriental detective genre. More specifically, rather than focusing on the question of whether or not Charlie Chan and his various spin-offs are deplorably racist caricatures or else heroic defenders of justice, I want to follow the trail of the "Chinese parrot" as it makes its way through a discursive convergence of machine culture, corporate aesthetics, and ethnic and racial stereotyping, pausing to notice not only what the oriental detective genre says about American racial attitudes during the 1930s and 1940s, but also what it says about the corporate production of film and film culture (and, in proper sleuth-fashion, all will be revealed in the end). The first clue in such an investigation will be found at the scene of a discourse I call *Asia-as-technê*.

### **Asia-as-Technê**

It is certainly no secret that the long and enthusiastic romance between Western culture and modern technology has had its ups and downs.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the "golden age" of the oriental detective genre (from the early 1930s to the mid-1940s) coincided with an era of deep technological anxiety in Euro-American culture. Oswald Spengler's *Man and Technics* (1931), for example, lamented an ongoing Western exultation in mechanization, predicting a massive ecological crisis as machines came to dominate the landscape. Lewis Mumford's highly influential *Technics and Civilization* (1934)

decried the unrestrained imposition of a mechanized modernity over the organic, anticipating many of Siegfried Gideon's later arguments in the 1940s in his similarly influential volume *Mechanization Takes Command* (1948). In the early 1940s, reflecting what would eventually become a common theme in Frankfurt School criticism, Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno characterized technology as the "essence" of Enlightenment knowledge, arguing that the question of whether or not technology can be brought under control is "*The supreme question* which confronts our generation today—the question to which all other problems are mere corollaries."<sup>24</sup> Herbert Marcuse would make the connection between enlightenment rationality and the technological exploitation of man and the environment even more explicit: "The more reason triumphed in technology and natural science, the more reluctantly did it call for freedom in man's social life."<sup>25</sup> For these critics, mechanization meant inevitably the ominous hegemony of the culture industry.

It is important to note, however, that such anxieties were not unique to Western intellectuals and radical Marxists. In the 1930s, in addition to the general sense that an acceleration of mechanical reproduction had contributed to the euphoric surplus of the 1920s, and, therefore, the massive depression, many Americans were also highly skeptical that the mechanization of cultural production necessarily constituted a step forward in the arts.<sup>26</sup> The Federal Radio Commission in the early 1930s, for example, legally required as a service to listeners that radio stations describe on air whether the program being broadcast was an actual performance or a mere "mechanical reproduction."<sup>27</sup> Some of the earliest television broadcasters even (however shortsightedly) boasted that they were not simply training the lens on reel-to-reel pre-recorded production, but were delivering "live" and therefore less mechanically tainted programming.<sup>28</sup>

Many commentators on technological anxiety at the time began reminding their readers that the original concept of technology, as embodied in the Greek word *technê*, had initially, before the Euro-American domination of nature, conveyed something more subtle and healthy than the exploitative cultures of mechanical reproduction and heavy industry. The most famous (and problematic) of these anti-modernist recourses to etymology was that of Martin Heidegger, who, in his philosophical search for redemptive alternatives to the massive "enframing" [*gestell*] of the emerging technological world order, turned to the word *technê* in an effort to rescue forms of thinking and handicraft from the systemic metaphysics of modern technology—in short, to distinguish between what we might call the modern *techno* and the originary *technê*.<sup>29</sup> As he explains in "The Question Concerning Technology," "There was a time when it was not technology alone that bore the name *technê*. Once, the revealing that brings forth truth into the splendor of radiant appearance was also called *technê*." Not simply a return to Nature, then, the move toward *technê* was for Heidegger (or at least "late Heidegger") an attempt to resurrect some ancient skill or craftsmanship, and to identify—against the efficient and inhumane technologies of modernity—an ontological aesthetic more conducive to a more romantic concept of organic wholeness.<sup>30</sup>

That Heidegger was dabbling in orientalism while writing "The Question Concerning Technology" is interesting, even if (after beginning, and then almost immediately giving up on learning Chinese) he turns to Greek etymology and Western poetics rather than

100 Taoism or Zen Buddhism as the philosophical wellspring for his therapeutic ontology.<sup>31</sup> Heidegger hinted that Asian aesthetics and philosophy offered a means of countering the Western “enframing” of world mechanization, but never felt confident enough to fully articulate it. However, surprisingly enough, this was an idea already widely circulating in Euro-American popular discourse. T. J. Jackson Lears’ *No Place of Grace*, for example, details an especially interesting and generally overlooked tendency in European and American culture to characterize Asia’s *technê* as the potential solution to the problems of Western over-technologization.<sup>32</sup> As Lears argues, a number of Euro-Americans saw in the East a particular form of *technê*, generally feminized and mystical, that might somehow provide a therapeutic alternative to Western industrial or Taylorized forms of mass production and machine technology.<sup>33</sup> Unlike the more traditional protocols of orientalist discourse (in which the East is either characterized as stagnantly “tech-less” or else dangerously imitating Western technoculture), the advocates of Asia-as-*technê* asserted that the technologically superior West had too aggressively espoused the dictates of industrial life, and that it was necessary to turn to the culture and tradition of the East in order to recover the essence of some misplaced or as-yet-unfulfilled modern identity. J. J. Clarke’s *Oriental Enlightenment* similarly argues that contrary to the idea that the West has consistently characterized the East as irrational and antipathetic to Western cultures of science and technology, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “Western science and Eastern mysticism formed an improbable coalition, with many thinkers looking upon Buddhism as an ally in the struggle of science against indigenous metaphysical traditions.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, evidence for the promotion of Asia’s *technê* as a more therapeutic means of living with modern technology is everywhere in twentieth century Euro-American culture: from the romantic tenets of late-nineteenth century Boston orientalism to the mystical visions of Shangri-La in James Hilton and Frank Capra, from the anti-technocratic visions of the beat poets to the post-counterculturalist values of Robert Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, Asia-as-*technê* has emerged again and again as a critical response to Euro-American overconfidence in Western technoculture.<sup>35</sup>

I contend that the oriental detective genre should be seen in a new way: as another, crucial, iteration of this discourse. But how exactly did the oriental detective reflect a seemingly more therapeutic and creative way of living within the accelerating culture of mechanization and mechanical reproduction? What did the “Chinese Parrot” have to say about these problems? Here I would suggest two interrelated answers: first that Charlie Chan and his spin-offs were, by way of their supposedly oriental philosophical outlook, constantly involved in reframing and even undoing the dangerous intrusion of technology into modern life, and second, that the oriental detective genre was itself a happily self-reflexive product of mechanical reproduction.

### **The Technological World of the Oriental Detective**

In developing this argument, I want to point to something in the Charlie Chan films that, to my knowledge, has never been articulated in the critical discourse (including



those in both academic and non-academic venues): in addition to the novelty of having a Chinese detective hero, technology is a central, perhaps even *the* central, concern of the film series. Consider, for instance, how many of the Charlie Chan films feature some kind of techno-trick at the center of the narrative (see Table 1).

As the accumulation of evidence here clearly suggests, throughout the entire Charlie Chan film series one finds a constant return to the problems and solutions posed by modern technology, such that Chan's solving of the mystery in film after film depends on his ability to utilize (or else uncover the criminal use of) technological devices: microscopes, phonographs, picture wires, photoelectric cells, radiographs, laboratory experiments, ultraviolet film project, and so on. It is important to note here that these moments of gadgetry are not peripheral to the narratives; indeed, they routinely constitute the most distinctive parts of each film. While it is often difficult, for example, to keep track of the various characters in the oriental detective films (such that until the revelation of who the criminal is, it is rather complicated sometimes to distinguish who is who), it is very easy to mark where and how the techno-trick enters the plot.<sup>36</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising that this particular species of detective genre should be preoccupied with the potential problems and solutions of modern technology.<sup>37</sup> Ronald Thomas has recently shown that the "history of detective fiction is deeply implicated with the history of forensic technology."<sup>38</sup> Indeed, technologies such as photography, telegraphy, cinematography, radiography, lie detectors (and on and on) appear with striking regularity in detective fictions from the first moments of the genre. As such, Thomas argues that the genre has sometimes functioned to provide reassurances regarding the place of modern science in western culture, even as it also sometimes "exposed, and in so doing . . . challenged the emerging culture of surveillance and the explanations of individual and collective identity it promulgated"—in short, that detective fiction at various times "both reinforces and resists the disciplinary regime it represents."<sup>39</sup>

What is unique about the oriental detective films, however, is that Charlie Chan's stereotypical "Asianness" is consistently portrayed as a cultural asset in solving the problems created by modern technology. Chan understands and yet crucially stands apart from the dangerous Western technological systems he is called in to remedy. Unlike the hard-boiled and frequently violent lonerism of characters like Sam Spade or Philip Marlowe, Chan helps to solve the problems of mechanical culture without becoming corrupted by them. He is infinitely polite and gracious (his most famous catch-phrase was "thank you so much"). He's a family man (he's portrayed as having 13 children). He's a far cry from the haughty bohemianism one finds in Sherlock Holmes. And he's portrayed as having a kind of limitless supply of oriental wisdom. For example, one of the most memorable and often parodied character traits that audiences remember about Chan is his trademark penchant for quasi-Confucian aphorisms, known as "Chanograms" in Hollywood circles, where he says things like, "only foolish dog pursue flying bird" or "truth, like football, receive many kicks before reaching goal," or "murder case like revolving door; when one side close, other side open."<sup>40</sup> Audiences would often "parrot" these sayings after the show, and no doubt came to Chan films

Table 1: *Techno-Tricks used in Charlie Chan films from 1930s and 1940s*

<i>The Black Camel</i> (1931)	Typewriter identification test solves the case, while a secret mechanical button on the floor is revealed as part of the home where the murder takes place.
<i>Charlie Chan in Egypt</i> (1932)	X-ray machine provides a radiograph of ancient Egyptian sarcophagus, a typewriter identification test is used again, and Chan's work in the laboratory reveals the technology to create a small glass capsule that breaks when exposed to high sound frequencies.
<i>Charlie Chan in London</i> (1934)	Plans are made for a high-tech noiseless propeller that the German government wants to steal, and Chan discovers a mechanical dart gun that shoots out tiny missiles.
<i>Charlie Chan in Shanghai</i> (1935)	A switchboard and telephone figure centrally in the plot, while a special paper, when held to the light, reveals a secret message.
<i>Charlie Chan at the Circus</i> (1936)	Chan uses a microscope to enlarge images of some fake ape hair, and a phonograph is used to charm a deadly snake.
<i>Charlie Chan's Secret</i> (1936)	A loudspeaker is hidden in a chandelier while an ultraviolet camera projects images from across the room. Chan does more work in the laboratory and discovers both a radio transmitter and a mechanical contraption used to fire a gun from a great distance.
<i>Charlie Chan at the Opera</i> (1936)	Chan is again in a makeshift laboratory, mixing chemicals (giving an impromptu lesson in techno-science for his son), and Boris Karloff's picture is transmitted mechanically, via AP wire.
<i>Charlie Chan at the Race Track</i> (1936)	Yet another typewriter identification test, while photoelectric cells are placed every ¼ mile on the track, and later developed with a high-speed film developer—Chan uses these to capture the criminals.
<i>Charlie Chan at the Olympics</i> (1937)	A robot device is created that can fly a plane from remote radio control. Chan even takes a ride on the Hindenburg zeppelin (filmed in late 1936 before the famous airship exploded in New Jersey).
<i>Charlie Chan on Broadway</i> (1937)	"Candid Camera Night" at a club reveals photographic clues for Chan ("Camera remember many things human eye forget"). Also when one of the suspect's fingerprints are found on the murder weapon, he submits to a "paraffin test," which is explained in elaborate technical detail.
<i>Charlie Chan in Honolulu</i> (1938)	A human brain is kept alive mechanically in glass case, and a high-tech camera automatically takes photographs when lights go out.
<i>Charlie Chan at Treasure Island</i> (1939)	Mechanical "spirits" emerge when a button concealed in floor is pressed, used to manipulate the victims.
<i>Charlie Chan in Reno</i> (1939)	Chan solves the case through his scientific experiments with nitric acid.



*Charlie Chan at the Wax Museum* (1940)

Shows a wax automaton/robot (an obvious play on the famous “Turk” chess-playing automaton hoax in the late eighteenth century), plastic surgery is used to alter the criminal’s face, and an electric current (running through a radio) is attached to a chair, to deadly effect.

*Charlie Chan in Panama* (1940)

Chan is dispatched to help protect the Panama Canal (the great marvel of early twentieth-century engineering) from the threat of wartime espionage. Discovers an attempt to destroy the American fleet with biological weapons.

*Charlie Chan’s Murder Cruise* (1940)

Chan uses trick-photography to determine who committed the murder.

*Murder Over New York* (1940)

The culprit’s face and voice have been changed by plastic surgery, but Chan uses fingerprint-recognition technology to identify him. Also a glass vial with a dangerous chemical is designed for use as a bio-weapon.

*Charlie Chan in Rio* (1941)

Chan discovers a cigarette drugged with a kind of truth serum, used to produce a “semi-comatose” state, forcing the victims to reveal their secrets.

*Castle in the Desert* (1942)

When Chan discovers that there are no telephones in a mysterious castle, he uses one of his son’s carrier pigeons as an emergency mode of communication (“United States Army carrier pigeon number 15376—prefer briefer name, Ming Toy, daughter of happiness”). Chan then discovers a modern chemist shop hidden in the castle.

*Charlie Chan in the Secret Service* (1944)

Chan discovers a closet fitted with a mechanical electrocution device. In another scene, Chan visits a scientist’s laboratory and takes obvious delight in all of the various gadgets.

*Charlie Chan in Black Magic* (1944)

Cigar case conceals a mechanical gun, which shoots bullets made of frozen blood. Chan also discovers a drug that causes its victims to abandon all “mental or physical resistance.”

*Charlie Chan and the Jade Mask* (1945)

Using voice-recognition technology, only a certain person is allowed into an elaborate passageway where the treasure is hidden. Also, a special gas is invented that hardens wood to the toughness and durability of metal (solving the steel shortage of the war at the time). Chan also uses a recording dictaphone.

*Red Dragon* (1945)

The title refers to a type of special Chinese ink, which an atomic engineer uses to hide his secret equations on a typewriter ribbon. Also, a thermostat in a room is actually a radio-remote control mechanism for triggering a double-bullet device planted on the victims (one of these almost killing Chan).

*The Scarlet Clue* (1945)

Chan is employed to protect government secrets in radar technology, which happen to be located in the same building as a radio broadcast network. Small gelatin capsules filled with poison are placed in a microphone, and designed to break at a certain frequency (and the poison then reacts only with tobacco smoke).

*The Shanghai Cobra* (1945)

A jukebox in a diner turns out to have a kind of television camera embedded in it, through which the customers are viewed on a monitor by a woman in a dark room. The jukebox is equipped with a small mechanically-run needle that shoots out and delivers poison to its victims. Chan also inspects the government’s radium supply in the local bank’s large vault.

Table 1. *Continued*

<i>Shadows Over Chinatown</i> (1946)	Chan's watch stops a bullet, and later in the film Chan again uses AP wire technology to send a picture through phone lines.
<i>Dark Alibi</i> (1946)	Another typewriter test sets Chan on the trail of the killer. Later, in the laboratory, he eventually discovers that another suspect's fingerprints have been forged when fingerprint cards are copied and dabbed with a mix of animal oils to duplicate the effect of real human skin.
<i>The Chinese Ring</i> (1947)	The victims are shot with a "European air rifle," which delivers poisonous darts, and Chan even brings out one of these guns from his own collection. Through various experiments in his newly acquired private laboratory (complete with film and slide projectors), Chan discovers that the bank drafts are forgeries.
<i>Docks of New Orleans</i> (1948)	Chan determines that a vacuum tube in a radio will break at a certain frequency, and that this was filled with poisonous gas by the murderer.

expecting these rhetorical flourishes (one large advertisement for a Charlie Chan film even promises, in large lettering, “Chinese Wisecracks of Laughter”).<sup>41</sup> Clearly, none of these particular aphorisms have any currency in Chinese culture, but of course that was never really the point. What mattered was that this highly “oriental” figure seemed to have both an authoritative grasp of modern technology and a sagacious ability to transcend the dangerous and systematic mechanicity of American culture, even as he confirmed the fundamental place of technology within that culture. Take, for example, Twentieth-Century Fox’s *Charlie Chan in Egypt* (1935). In this film, set in an exotic locale (and capitalizing, no doubt, on the ongoing public fascination with the discovery of Tutankhamen’s tomb), an archeologist’s son dies suddenly while playing the violin. Chan suspects foul play, and in a scene that offers a number of important clues in our investigation, he discovers that a small tube made of extremely fragile glass and filled with poisonous gas had been placed inside the violin and designed to explode when exposed to the violin’s sound vibrations (fig. 2–3). Chan’s demonstration of this technotrick before the other inspectors functions as a narrative turning point in the film, and, combined with a series of memorable Chanograms (e.g. “Hasty conclusion easy to make, like hole in water”), the film develops what would become a familiar pattern in the oriental detective genre: the wisdom of the East resolving the techno-perils of the West, and doing so in a way that did not reject technology, but rather seemed to demonstrate a wise and more organic way of living with it.

But beyond this rather obvious instance of Asia-as-*technê*, I want to argue further that a closer inspection of the larger oriental detective genre reveals a surprising degree of meta-cinematic self-reflexivity, such that one can readily imagine both the filmmakers and their audiences detecting that the posited *technê* in these films is a parodic, technological construction—a mechanically reproducible stereotype that continually acknowledges the limits of its own authenticity. In short, that the ethnic or even racial identity of the oriental detective becomes itself a kind of generic technology, exposing that at the heart of the genre lies a composite picture of celebrated reproducibility. In developing this argument, I will be relying on a particular discourse in film studies that focuses on the presence of what might be called extra-diegetic managerial signals that allow the films to speak as products of “corporate art.”

### **The Cinematic Corporation and the Chinese Parrot**

Characterizations of Hollywood cinema as the work of corporate “industries” devoted to the mass-production of visual products (rather than as the unified, self-contained work of a single “auteur”) have been useful in drawing attention to the critical economic processes of film production and distribution.<sup>42</sup> Seen in this light, the oriental detective genre fulfilled, usually, a very specific role in the economic structure of the Hollywood studio system. As primarily “B” films, or else “programmers” (those occupying an in-between position “straddling the A-B boundary”), the films of the oriental detective genre are part of that massive “other half” of Hollywood that has often been neglected in critical discourse.<sup>43</sup> This despite the fact that, as Brian Taves argues, since



Fig. 2. Screenshot from *Charlie Chan in Egypt*. Twentieth Century-Fox, 1935.



Fig. 3. Screenshot from *Charlie Chan in Egypt*. Twentieth Century-Fox, 1935.

the Depression-era advent of the “double bill,” the B-film was essentially “*the* basis of production, the underlying commercial and artistic means by which the industry survived—as well as the vast quantity and range of films offered to spectators during the studio era” (*GD*, 313). Indeed, B films were what “fueled the engines of production, distribution, and exhibition” in the 1930s.<sup>44</sup> For example, when asked what he thought of B film productions in 1938, John Stone (the assistant to Twentieth Century-Fox’s producer Sol Wurtzel, who made most of the Chan films) noted that these films “are really the products which count in the long, steady pull,” and then adding, with a smile, “They don’t lose money.”<sup>45</sup>

Two crucial pieces of evidence, however, begin to complicate the effort to characterize the oriental detective films as the slavish products of generic industries. First, as a number of scholars have shown, what the financial stability of the B film process meant in practical terms was that (provided the filmmakers finished on time and within their allocated budget) the cheap genre films we typically think of as adhering most faithfully to the reproduction of inherited form were in fact allowed a greater degree of artistic freedom than were their more carefully regulated A-list counterparts.<sup>46</sup> As B film director Robert Florey once explained, “As long as I remained on schedule, I could shoot all the angles and set-ups I wanted, and move the camera whenever and wherever I wanted to, in the limited time I had.”<sup>47</sup> Second, as Jerome Christensen has recently noted, “looking at Hollywood as a generic industry has the considerable disadvantage of erasing the strategies of individual studios, each of which—oligopolistic agreements notwithstanding—had a distinctive corporate intention that informed the meanings its films communicated to their various audiences.”<sup>48</sup> Christensen’s point here is that *corporate* authorship quite often played a much larger role in film production than has previously been understood—often shaping a film’s final content above and beyond even economic considerations. As he succinctly puts it, “When Jolson sang, Warner Bros. performed. When the lion roars, MGM speaks” (168). What would it mean, then, in our investigation of the oriental detective films to take seriously Christensen’s argument that “numerous Hollywood films could only have been made by the studios that released them”?<sup>49</sup>

To answer that question it will be useful to look at a few of the many attempts to capitalize on the success of the Charlie Chan series from Twentieth Century-Fox (the two studios merged in 1935, at the peak of the series’ success). When Fox realized that audiences were enjoying the Charlie Chan films faster than they could make them, the studio quickly set up another film crew and introduced the “Mr. Moto” series starring Peter Lorre, which was soon enjoying as much success as the Charlie Chan films.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the Mr. Moto films followed the familiar pattern of techno-gadgetry and oriental wisdom, interestingly tinged, however, with an occasionally violent unpredictability that, coupled with America’s entry into WWII, clearly spelt the end of Moto as a moment of *Asia-as-technê* (when Japan could *only* be seen as a techno-threat). In 1938, the Monogram Pictures Corporation, one of the leading small studios in what is referred to as “Poverty Row” (typically characterized as the “dregs” of the Hollywood studio system), seeing Twentieth Century-Fox’s success with not only Charlie Chan

108 but now Mr. Moto as well, introduced yet another oriental detective, Mr. James Lee Wong played by Boris Karloff.<sup>51</sup> In fact, there were so many oriental detective films circulating at the time that one reviewer at the *New York Times* only half-jokingly noted, “This subtle discrediting of the West, this constant insistence on the superior finesse of the yellow races in the presence of homicide, is something which every red-blooded American should resent.”<sup>52</sup>

Hiring Boris Karloff to play Mr. Wong meant that Monogram’s budget for these films would be tight, but with the generic Asia-as-*technê* forms already clearly established by Fox, most of Monogram’s work was done before they had even begun filming.<sup>53</sup> The first installment in the Mr. Wong series, William Nigh’s *Mr. Wong Detective* (1938), is perhaps one of the most fascinating, meta-cinematic films of B Hollywood, though it has certainly never been recognized as such (there’s a legitimate reason, I would argue, that Jean-Luc Godard was being only partly ironic when he dedicated “*Breathless*” to Monogram pictures). In the opening shots we encounter one Mr. Dayton, a businessman who suspects that his life is in danger, and so we see him rushing to Mr. Wong’s residence. Let into the study by Wong’s Chinese servant (played by Lee Tung Foo), Mr. Dayton enters the screen on the right, just as a parrot resting on a small perch in the center of the room squawks, “What do you want?” Mr. Dayton then glances nervously about the room, as though he is not sure from where the voice has come, “I . . . I am looking for Mr. Wong” (the effect is, of course, comically unbelievable). The camera cuts to another angle, and Mr. Wong has appeared suddenly, startling Mr. Dayton, “Good evening Mr. Dayton. I am James Lee Wong. I beg you to forgive my feathered friend. He delights in his own voice, but like so many humans, the words don’t seem to matter” (fig. 4).

Karloff’s wardrobe is not immediately Chan-like. With a shimmering silk-robe, Chinese slippers, his exotic furniture, and the delicately feminine way he holds his cigarette (between his thumb and index finger), Karloff seems more Fu Manchu than Chan in these opening shots. But when Wong arrives the next day at Mr. Dayton’s office, he is dressed in a Western suit, and has become much more of the Chinese detective that Monogram is attempting to parrot. Unfortunately, however, Wong arrives just a few minutes too late, and discovers that Mr. Dayton has been murdered, the only clue being a few small shards of very fragile glass lying near the body. Taking the glass to a laboratory, Wong reconstructs the original unbroken glass object, a small, spherical orb that fits into the palm of his hand. When the autopsy on Mr. Dayton’s body reveals that he died of a poisonous gas, Mr. Wong is convinced that the small glass sphere is somehow involved. But how could the glass break and release its deadly gas when Mr. Dayton had been alone in his office?

One is reminded here that Fox’s Charlie Chan had rather smoothly solved this problem in *Charlie Chan in Egypt* in 1935. And the filmmakers at Monogram clearly know that they are directly parroting not only the Chan character, but also the technotrick at the center of the Chan genre. As a “parrot,” then, Monogram’s Mr. Wong is both parodying and speaking to the original “Chinese Parrot.” Back in his study, Mr. Wong carefully places the fragile glass sphere on a tiny pedestal on his desk (fig. 5).





Fig. 4. Screenshot from *Mr. Wong Detective*. Monogram, 1938.



Fig. 5. Screenshot from *Mr. Wong Detective*. Monogram, 1938.



110 Behind him on the left-hand portion of the screen is his parrot. On his desk, a variety of Chinese musical instruments—the exotic accoutrements of Wong’s supposed *techné* culture—have been laid out in preparation for the experiment. Wong reaches for a suona (a kind of Chinese oboe), points it directly at the glass orb, and begins to play.

The resulting noise is terrible, a kind of screechingly dissonant, a-tonal whine, and Mr. Wong’s Chinese servant (played by Lee Tung Foo) turns toward Wong with a painful grimace on his face. However, the glass orb remains intact. Puzzled, but deep in concentration, Wong sets down the suona and picks up a zhongruan (a kind of miniature Chinese guitar). Plucking the strings awkwardly, the sound is again dissonant and clumsy, and Wong’s Chinese servant seems even more annoyed, perhaps even embarrassed. The glass orb still undamaged, Wong picks up an erhu (a kind of Chinese violin with only two strings), and begins to play it in precisely the same way that Charlie Chan had played the violin in the *Egypt* film (compare fig. 2 and fig. 6). However, unlike Chan’s smooth, methodical demonstration in that film, Wong’s erhu playing is so cacophonous and jarring that his Chinese servant scowls and puts his fingers in his ears. Wong’s *techné*-powers would seem to be lacking in this particular case. Mystified by the glass orb’s resistance to his experiments, Wong stops playing and looks down. And then suddenly his parrot squawks, loudly, and the shrillness of the sound—wait for it!—causes the glass orb to shatter into tiny pieces on his desk (fig. 7). Startled by the parrot’s “speech act” Wong looks back at his parrot, down again at the shattered glass, and then walks back over to his parrot, and “bows to form,” as if to say “Thank you so much,” Charlie Chan’s famous catch phrase (fig. 8).

But of course what we are witnessing here is not simply Mr. Wong thanking his parrot. This scene is Monogram’s way of speaking to Twentieth Century-Fox, as if to say, we know we are pirating and parroting the Chan genre (good pirates always have a parrot on their shoulder), and “Thank you so much!” Monogram knows that Mr. Wong is not their invention, and so his homage to the parrot (the “Chinese” parrot) is explicitly metonymic. Wong’s uncovering of the techno-trick is clumsier and more primitive, and lacks the high-budget polish of Chan’s demonstration with the violin, but this is again Monogram’s highly self-reflexive way of communicating its debt to Twentieth Century-Fox, as if to say, yes, we know that without Chan, Mr. Wong’s techno-tricks would have never existed, and this is our way of playing with the piracy, riffing on it as one might a musical variation.

Mr. Wong’s more-Chinese servant, played here by Lee Tung Foo, is not entirely impressed with Mr. Wong’s parroted mimicry. As Lee Tung Foo’s grimace (and his subsequent fury at having to clean up the glass shards) seems to indicate, Wong’s piracy is only making a mess of Chinese culture (fig. 9). But Monogram had an interesting reason for casting Lee Tung Foo as well. As Krystyn R. Moon has shown, Lee Tung Foo, beginning with his career in vaudeville, was for quite a time the most famous Chinese-American in the entertainment industry.<sup>54</sup> In 1906 Lee’s act became a smash hit when, after singing a Cantonese song or two in traditional Chinese dress, Lee would return to the stage in a tuxedo, and sing popular ballads like “My Irish Molly O,” and other Tin Pan Alley favorites in English with a flawless Irish accent. After touring Europe in 1909,



▲  
Fig. 6. Screenshot from *Mr. Wong Detective*. Mono-gram, 1938.



▲  
Fig. 7. Screenshot from *Mr. Wong Detective*. Mono-gram, 1938.



▲  
Fig. 8. Screenshot from *Mr. Wong Detective*. Mono-gram, 1938.



▲  
Fig. 9. Screenshot from *Mr. Wong Detective*. Mono-gram, 1938.

Lee Tung Foo returned to the U.S. with a Scottish number, having learned to perfectly mimic a Scottish accent, wearing an authentic Scottish costume (fig. 10). Audiences at the time described it as “screamingly funny,” and Lee was widely credited with having debunked the popular assumption that Chinese people could not reproduce Western accents and musical sounds.<sup>55</sup> Lee Tung Foo had already demonstrated, in other words, the fascinating (and highly marketable) affect made possible by the “other” faithfully “parroting” speech back to the “self.”

In 1941, Twentieth Century-Fox responded with a Charlie Chan film entitled *Dead Men Tell*. In this film, a terrified elderly woman claims to have seen the ghost of a pirate on a ship recently at harbor, and so Charlie Chan (now played by Sidney Toler, following Warner Oland’s death) is brought in to investigate. Going below deck, Chan is inspecting some high-tech sea-diving equipment when he hears a strangely distressed voice: “Look out, it’s the cops! Beat it, it’s the cops!” Chan looks over in the direction of the voice, and the camera zooms in slowly onto the face of a plastic pirate mask, propped up in the corner. The voice continues, “murder, murder, murder!” As Chan walks over to the corner, the mask suddenly lifts and a parrot flies up into Chan’s face (fig. 11). Thus, Chan learns that the source of the phantasm is really just someone dressing up



Fig. 10. Lee Tung Foo in Scottish Dress, 1909. Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, CA.



▲  
Fig. 11. Screenshot from *Dead Men Tell*. Twentieth Century-Fox 1941.

and imitating a pirate (parroting a pirate, as it were). Chan's investigation soon focuses on the captain of the ship, a strangely Karloff-ish looking character who is rarely seen without a parrot on his shoulder. And perhaps not surprisingly, the piratical captain's chief assistant and co-conspirator in *Dead Men Tell* is none other than Mr. Wong's (the Monogram pirate) servant, Lee Tung Foo.

In 1942 Twentieth Century-Fox, like most other major studios, was facing pressure from anti-trust suits to reduce its B-film units, and so allowed Sidney Toler to secure the rights to the Charlie Chan character, which he took with him to Monogram Pictures for the remainder of the Chan series. As a full-fledged Monogram product, Charlie Chan was now a part of the very studio that had so self-reflexively parroted and paid homage to him in the form of Mr. Wong just a few years previously. And in these increasingly low-budget Chan films, Monogram seems to revel in its playful cribbing of the same old techno-tricks and *technê*-forms from previous inter-corporate conversations. Fifteen minutes into *The Scarlet Clue* (1945), for example, we learn that Chan's suspect is one "Mr. Horace Karlos" (pronounced so as to rhyme with Boris Karloff) and we are hardly surprised to discover that the murderer has planted a small glass capsule filled with poisonous gas into a studio microphone, which shatters when exposed to, again, a concentrated sound frequency.<sup>56</sup> In the *Docks of New Orleans* in 1948 we find Roland Winters playing Charlie Chan, back at home in his study, holding a small radio tube in his hand, and pondering the now-very-familiar mystery of how the tube's glass could shatter on cue. Chan's chauffeur (Mantan Moreland) and Number Two Son Tommy (Victor Sen Young) are, much to Chan's annoyance, in the next room playing jazz music. When the music causes the familiar breakage, Chan picks up another radio tube and walks into the next room where the comic duo had been playing: "Excuse interruption of music festival, please," Chan says, "but would mind repeating excruciating sound made with assistance of cat intestines?" Tommy jauntily picks up the violin again and plays, causing the second radio tube to explode with a loud *pop*. "Ah ha!" Chan exclaims, to which Tommy responds—in what can only be described as a parodic twist on what he calls his parent (parrot?)—"Discover something new, *pop*?" (fig. 12).

As many in the audience would have certainly known, there was nothing new about Tommy's "pop" at this point, and, indeed, nothing new about the acoustic "pop" of this particular techno-trick. Indeed, one could posit here an ongoing metonymic parity between the representation of a given technology (that is, the "pop" caused by a given frequency within acoustic space), the "pop" (or father/predecessor) of these films caused by the "frequency" with which these mechanisms were recycled through the Hollywood studio system (reflecting here the *generational* nature of genre—the genre film being a moment of *refamiliarization* rather than artistic *defamiliarization*), and, finally, the attempt to characterize this endless reproducibility not as a product of industrial mass culture, but as a simultaneously organic, exotic, *pop* culture.

### Conclusion: The Mystery Exposed

Here, then, is the mystery exposed: what really pops out from within the glass encasing of Asia-as-*technê* is the not-so-subtle characterization of *cinema-as-technê*.



▲  
Fig. 12. Screenshot from *Docks of New Orleans*. Monogram, 1948.

Inasmuch as the wonders of oriental aesthetics and exoticism are supposedly transmitted by means of the mechanical reproducibility of film, the realm of the cinematic apparatus is portrayed as taking on its own mysterious, exotic splendor. To put it very simply, the cinema wants nothing so much as to become the Chinese parrot. Indeed, from the very beginnings of film theory and production, one finds an ongoing effort to amplify the aura of the cinematic apparatus with the *technê*-cultural equipment of the orient. Metaphors for the cinema as a kind of universal orthography went hand-in-hand with ideographic characterizations of Oriental script.<sup>57</sup> The juxtapositional processes of montage, according to early film theorists like Vachel Lindsay, Sergei Eisenstein, and Jean Mitry are precisely those of the Chinese ideograph.<sup>58</sup> And certainly nothing better evokes what might be called the Architectural School Of The Chinese Parrot than the dozens of polychromatic Oriental Theater palaces built across America in the 1920s and early 1930s. There were Oriental-styled theaters in Chicago, New York, Denver, Milwaukee, Portland, Seattle, Detroit, Boston, and, of course, the most famous and iconic of the Oriental movie palaces, Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood in 1927—which, I would argue, looks like nothing so much as a massive parrot (fig. 13).<sup>59</sup> In one of the publicity photos for the opening of the theater, usherettes stand beside the massive black projection machines, dressed in ornate Chinese costumes and headdresses (fig. 14). The middle projector is turned on, and the camera seems ready to burst with light from within, mirroring in microcosm the bursting spectacle of light from the theater itself on film premier nights—events that at least one spectator described as “a veritable furnace of energy” (fig. 15).<sup>60</sup>





Fig. 13. Street view of Grauman's Chinese Theater, 1927. Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.



Fig. 14. Usherettes at Grauman's Chinese Theater, 1927. Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.



Fig. 15. Grauman's Chinese Theater illuminated for the movie premier of *Hell's Angels*, ca. 1929. Courtesy of the University of Southern California, on behalf of USC Libraries.

The frequent and self-reflexive turn to Asia in the process of constructing a discourse of the cinema-as-*technê*, in other words, reflects an ongoing and highly self-conscious response to charges that the reproducibility of cinema be understood solely as a product of capitalist, machine culture. Whereas Adorno would rather unforgivingly characterize the “culture industry” as a means of inducing—in “parrot-fashion”—a kind of social resignation and impotency, the oriental detective emerges as a means of evoking the pleasures and self-reflexive artistry of generic reproducibility.<sup>61</sup> Thus, the Chinese parrot flies closer to Walter Benjamin’s realm in the second version of his magisterial essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility.”<sup>62</sup> Written in 1935, the same year that *Charlie Chan in Egypt* appeared in theaters, Benjamin admits that the inherent “political advantage” of the cinematic apparatus will remain latent “until film has liberated itself from the fetters [feathers?] of capitalist exploitation.”<sup>63</sup> Just a few paragraphs later, however, Benjamin argues that the “pol[ly]technic training” of technological reproducibility has the power to induce a “progressive attitude . . . characterized by an immediate, intimate fusion of pleasure—pleasure in seeing and experiencing—with an attitude of expert appraisal” (36). If then, for Benjamin, the “shattering of tradition” in the loss of artistic aura coincides with an “emancipation” of the work of art “from its parasitic subservience to ritual,”<sup>64</sup> we might argue that the Chinese parrot’s refamiliarization of technology (by way of the frequent “shatterings” of glass tubes in film after film) was presented as the celebrated, iterative broadcasting of a new



kind of ritual—a *tradition of pleasurable “frequencies.”* In 1938 (coincidentally, again, the very year Mr. Wong would be bowing to Twentieth-Century Fox’s Chinese parrot), Benjamin turned his attention to an exhibit of Chinese paintings at the Bibliothèque Nationale, pointing specifically to the recent revelation that very few of the paintings on display had actually come from the earlier, and more celebrated Yuan period (most of the paintings being Ming or Qing-era hand-reproductions): “It seems,” he wrote, “that we have been swooning mainly over copies.”<sup>65</sup> But this swooning over simulacra did not disappoint Benjamin. Rather, the implication is that there is something delicious in this irony, something that allows him to draw a metaphorical line between traditional Chinese art and the liberatory power he found in technological reproduction: “It is from this blending of the fixed and mutable that Chinese painting derives all its meaning. It goes in search of the thought-image.”<sup>66</sup> If we are going to be parrots, the logic of both Charlie Chan and Walter Benjamin seems to be, then let us be *Chinese* parrots.

But what I have been arguing here is not simply that the oriental detective film is really only “about” cinema. Nor has it been my intention to redirect attention away from the socio-political consequences of these stereotypical representations of Asians and Asian Americans. On the contrary, Frank Chin’s lament that the Chan figure has so oppressively overshadowed Asian American self-representation (as he writes, like an unwanted father figure that “never dies, never. That Pop waits in the darkness of every theater, in every TV, ever ready to come to light again at the flick of a switch”) reminds us that the talkative “parrot” as it appears in the West has only ever been a creature of captivity.<sup>67</sup> As Paul Carter points out, “parrots do not imitate other birds in the wild” (*P*, 8). It is time for us notice, he argues, “not the parrot but the cage through which we look at it” (*P*, 171). Thus, in cultural discourse surrounding the Chinese Parrot, there is a striking disparity between those who celebrate and those who despise him. This says less about the specific traits of the oriental detective than it does the contradictory aesthetics and sociopolitical inequalities of the cinematic cage. From a rather straightforward historical perspective, for example, we are reminded that Hollywood studios restricted roles and production control in highly racist ways. Lee Tung Foo might have been a fine Charlie Chan, but was not allowed to be an “oriental detective” because he was not white. But of course the problem has never been one of simply controlling one’s own stereotypes. The more puzzling dilemma of this simulation cage (or, as Plato would have it, “cave”) is that the perceived dangers of mechanical duplicability—stereotype, erasure of individuality, the possibility of forgery—directly coincide with the mimetic faculties that make us human.<sup>68</sup> As one of the detective’s many Chanograms reminds us in *Charlie Chan at the Circus*, “Even if name signed one million times, no two signatures ever exactly alike.” My signature speaks only for me, in other words, when it is something I can repeat a million times, and yet I am supposed to find it reassuring that I can never reproduce it in *exactly* the same way (even though, in the end, this hardly makes it more difficult to forge a signature).<sup>69</sup> Perhaps this is why the parrot so fascinates us: it becomes a kind of auto-graph, reproducing—with exotic flourish—our most basic *technê*, and yet never fully collapsing the boundaries of the self and the other.

## 118 Notes

1. Technically, the first appearance of Charlie Chan was in Biggers' *The House Without a Key*, but he does not actually show up in the story until nearly a quarter of the way through the novel, and does not play as central a role as he would in subsequent Biggers novels.

2. Earl Derr Biggers, *Five Complete Novels* (New York, NY: Avenel Books, 1988), 187.

3. By "ghostless," I mean here that if we accept the terms of Gilbert Ryle's famous critique of Cartesian dualism in his 1949 polemic, *The Concept of Mind* (succinctly re-articulated in Koestler's *The Ghost in the Machine* [1967]), the parrot is a haunting apparition precisely because it reproduces speech without the ghostly/soulful presence of human consciousness. See Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 49–50.

4. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and The Meditations*. trans. F. E. Sutcliffe. (New York, NY: Penguin, 1968), 74–75.

5. As Simon Critchley has argued, parrots are "surely the most unnerving of animals because of their uncanny ability to imitate that which is meant to pick us out as a species: language. Comic echo of the human, holding up a ridiculing mirror to our faces, the parrot is the most critical beast of all the field." *On Humour* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 38. Paul Carter similarly observes, "Parrots defy classification not by coming in all shapes and sizes, but because they are chromatically mutable, promiscuously social, verbally equivocal and intellectually enigmatic." Paul Carter, *Parrot* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 34.

6. The most impressive case for an argument against the notion of parrots as "mindless mimics" is found in Irene M. Pepperberg's "Studies to Determine the Intelligence of African Grey Parrots," *Proceedings of the International Aviculturalists Society* (January 11–15, 1995), [www.clas.mq.edu.au/animal\\_communication/pepperberg.pdf](http://www.clas.mq.edu.au/animal_communication/pepperberg.pdf). However, as Paul Carter observes, "Pepperberg's experimental situation proves mainly that her experiments work. They work because of a strange untested assumption, which is that Alex [her parrot] will mimic his trainers *knowingly*, that he will internalize what they do, and identify it with his own desire, in this way learning to behave in a non-mimetic, self-motivated way" (154).

7. Additional images and clips referenced in this article can be viewed on my personal website at [www.rjohnwilliams.wordpress.com](http://www.rjohnwilliams.wordpress.com). On Léger's use of parrots, see Museum of Modern Art, New York, *Fernand Léger* (New York, NY: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 50, 145–146, 226, and 233.

8. Paul Carter, *Parrot*, 74. Hereafter cited in text as "P." See also the website [www.movieparrot.com](http://www.movieparrot.com), which collects "the best and worst lines from cinema."

9. <http://www.techfresh.net/usb-parrot-encourages-piracy/>

10. It is hardly surprising that Andy Warhol would be similarly fascinated with parrots, as evidenced in "Parrot," part of his Toy Series (1983). See *Andy Warhol, 1928–1987* (New York, NY: Prestel Publishing, 1993), 103. The techno-romantic Walt Whitman also saw something beautiful in the mechanical reproducibility of the parrot: "I have probably not been afraid of careless touches from the first—and am not now—nor of parrot-like repetitions—nor of platitudes and the commonplace. Perhaps I am too democratic for such avoidances." *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York, NY: Library of America, 1982), 637.

11. An in-depth study of "woman and parrot" paintings is well beyond the scope of this essay, but it is worth mentioning a few important contributions merely to demonstrate the historical and geographical breadth of the genre, which begins in earnest in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century and continues on into the present: see paintings by Quiringh Gerritsz van Brekelenkam (1622–1669), Jan Havickszoon Steen (1626–1679), Pieter de Hooch (1629–1684), Frans van Mieris the Elder (1635–1681), Rosalba Carriera (1675–1757), Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696–1770), Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806), Eugène Delacroix (1798–1863), Charles Louis Bazin (1802–1859), Valentine Cameron Prinsep (1838–1904), Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), William Sergeant Kendall (1869–1938), Viktor Rafael (1900–1981), Salvador Dalí (1904–1989), Frida Kahlo (1907–1954), and Fernando Botero (b. 1932). The "woman and parrot" genre is also present throughout the early decades of Western photography. For a more detailed discussion of the Parrot in Western art, see Richard Verdi, *The Parrot in Art: From Dürer to Elizabeth Butterworth* (New York, NY: Scala Publishers, 2007).

12. Qtd in Arden Reed, *Manet, Flaubert, and the Emergence of Modernism: Blurring Genre Boundaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 34. As Reed argues, "It is not inconsequential that the *Jeune dame* represents a parrot, speaking creature par excellence, because the bird's presence already turns the *Jeune dame* into a 'talking picture'" (15).

13. As Reed notes, Courbet's own stated goal in *Woman with a Parrot* was not to "represent the customs, the ideas, the appearance of my own era according to my own ideas," as he had declared in his realist manifesto of 1855; rather, in preparing for this painting, he suddenly foreswore allegiance to realism, producing "a highly readable picture by invoking one of the most potent of narrative lures: erotic fantasy" (35).

14. Carter's study of cultural "parrotics" puns wildly on *polly* (noting the parrot's qualities in the context of polymorphism, polysemia, polyglossia, typol[og]y, and polyphonicity, among others). He also notes, "the Polyamory group, which promotes 'loving multiple people simultaneously,' has adopted the parrot as its mascot" (85). For Carter, "the essence of the ur-parrot is doubleness" (44).

15. Bruce Thomas Boehrer, *Parrot Culture: Our 2500-Year-Long Fascination with the World's Most Talkative Bird* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 54.

16. Boehrer, *Parrot Culture*, x.

17. Carter's book tracks "the ramifying web of parrot associations, as parrot circulates in the collective imaginary," pausing to note an entire "flock of literary parrots whose powers of imitation expose human 'parrots'" (50). See also Julia Courtney and Paula James, *The Role of the Parrot in Selected Texts from Ovid to Jean Rhys* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006).

18. IMDb.com lists 58 "Charlie Chan" films, eight "Mr. Moto" films, and seven "Mr. Wong" films (all appearing between 1927 and 1949), and 39 television episodes of "The New Adventures of Charlie Chan" (running from 1957–1958).

19. Quoted in Ken Hanke, *Charlie Chan at the Movies: History, Filmography, and Criticism* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc, 1989), xv. Luke's description of the racial politics of the original series was reflected recently in Yunte Huang's personal narrative/collected thoughts on the genre in *Charlie Chan: The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous with American History* (New York, NY: Norton, 2010).

20. Ibid., xv. Jon L. Breen goes even further, arguing that Asian-American animosity toward the character is "baffling," noting that "Asian Americans who protest Charlie Chan are making themselves look foolish, mainly because they show no evidence of having seen the products they want to suppress" "Charlie Chan: The Case of the Reviled Detective," *Mystery Scene* 82 (2003): 31. For an interesting academic reappraisal of the Charlie Chan novels (if not the films), see Charles Rzepka's "Race, Region, Rule: Genre and the Case of Charlie Chan," *PMLA* 122.5 (2007): 1463–1481. Film scholar Brian Taves has also characterized the Chan movies as "a fundamental reversal in Hollywood's treatment of Oriental characters." See "The B Film: Hollywood's Other Half," *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939*, ed. Tino Balio (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 336.

21. See Frank Chin, "Interview: Roland Winters," *Amerasia* 2 (1973): 17.

22. Quoted in Breen, "Charlie Chan," 26. Similarly negative views of the Chan character can be found in William Wu, *The Yellow Peril: Chinese Americans in American Fiction, 1850–1940* (North Haven, CT: Archon Books, 1982), 175; and Sheng-mei Ma, *The Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian American Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 13.

23. This quasi-religious discourse of American technological enthusiasm has been well documented. See, for example, David F. Noble, *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* (New York, NY: Penguin, 1999); Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Man: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989); Thomas P. Hughes, *American Genesis: A Century of Invention and Technological Enthusiasm, 1870–1970* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

24. Quoted by Horkheimer and Adorno from a 1943 *Rockefeller Foundation Review*. See Max Horkheimer and Theodore W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 258 emphasis added. The most elaborate articulation of Frankfurt School suspicion of technology is Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964).

25. Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), 256. The role of Walter Benjamin's famous essay on technological reproducibility in this context will be discussed below.

26. On the perceived role of technology (referred to here as "a great disturber") in the economic crisis of the 1930s, see "Technological Trends and National Policy," *Science* 86 (July 23, 1937): 69–71. For a fascinating film documentary on these themes, see Civic Films, Inc's *The City* (1939), exhibited as part of the New York World's Fair, and narrated by Lewis Mumford.

27. "Hits at Phonograph in Radio Programs," *New York Times*, August 15, 1929, "The use of mechanical reproductions in broadcasting programs without announcing their source was condemned as 'a fraud upon the listening public' by Radio Commissioner La Fount today, who added that 'unless this situation is remedied broadcasting programs will rapidly deteriorate in this country.'" La Fount's argument led to new federal legislation: "Mechanical Music Must Be So Noted," *New York Times*, December 7, 1929; "Radio Ruling Made on Phonograph Use," *New York Times*, December 28, 1929; "Music and Machinery," *New York Times*, September 12, 1931; "Programs That Whirl On Disks" *New York Times*, October 19, 1930, 143. La Fount's legislation, however, was overturned just two years later: "Ban on Records is Lifted" *New York Times*, January 24, 1932. It is worth noting that this particular legislation was also due to the efforts of musicians' unions who were losing jobs because of the new ubiquity of technological reproducibility: see Mark Coleman, *Playback: from the Victrola to MP3, 100 Years of Music, Machines, and Money* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 2005), 39, and Eric Arnesen, *Encyclopedia of U.S. Labor and Working-Class History, Volume 1* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 1080.

28. "Ban on Records is Lifted," *New York Times*, Jan. 24, 1932. For more on the various cultures of Western technological anxiety, see T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden*, (Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000); Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1934); Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1967). The 1930s also saw the publication of Aldous Huxley's techno-dystopic *Brave New World*, the technological catastrophe of the Hindenburg, and, in the words of one *Harper's* magazine essayist, congested highways that "injured the beauty of the country," which, he argued, only reflected the slapdash cacophony of communications technologies that had caused "deplorable changes . . . in social intercourse." See Floyd H. Allport, "This Coming Era of Leisure," *Harpers*, Nov. 1931, 641–652.

29. "Problematic" because, as has been well-documented, Heidegger's refusal to philosophically consider his own role in the justification of the highly mechanized slaughter of Jews during the Holocaust makes him, perhaps, one of the least qualified philosophers to offer more therapeutic and organic models of consciousness within the realm of technological systematicity. See Berel Lang's *Heidegger's Silence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

30. Throughout the twentieth century, the invocation of *technê* as an originally *artistic* form of human production became a staple of neo-luddite (and sometimes more enthusiastic) reconsiderations of machine culture, including poetic, critical, and philosophical figures like Ezra Pound, in his *Machine Art & Other Writings* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 23–25; Marshall McLuhan, see Donald F. Theall, *The Virtual Marshall McLuhan* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 13, 43, 75–6, 101, 116, 139, 172, 271; Daniel Bell, "Technology, Nature, and Society," *Technology and the Frontiers of Knowledge* (New York, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1973), 23–72; Richard McKeon, *Selected Writings of Richard McKeon, Volume 2* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 169; Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New York, NY: Bantam, 1974), 283; and, more recently, Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 1* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1–18. On the question of "late" Heidegger, see Arnold I. Davidson, "Questions Concerning Heidegger: Opening the Debate," *Critical Inquiry* 15.2 (Winter 1989): 407–426.

31. In 1946, still reeling from the embarrassment of the de-Nazification proceedings, Heidegger retreated to his mountain cabin in Todnauberg where he began translating the *Tao Te Ching* with another visiting Chinese student, Paul Shi-yi Hsiao. Hsiao's reminiscences on the weeks spent translating show that Heidegger was fascinated by the text, and especially Chinese characters, but that he

would often take liberties with the original that made his partner in translation feel anxious. See Paul Shih-yi Hsiao, "Heidegger and Our Translation of the *Tao Te Ching*," *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, ed. Graham Parkes (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 93–104.

32. T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 218–260.

33. On the "Scientific Management" of F.W. Taylor, see Martha Banta, *Taylored Lives: Narrative Productions in the Age of Taylor, Veblen, and Ford* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

34. J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 165.

35. On the Boston orientalist, see Van Wyck Brooks, *Fenollosa and His Circle* (New York, NY: E.P. Dutton, 1962). See also James Hilton, *Lost Horizon* (New York, NY: Perennial, 2004), and Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1971). On the Eastern mysticism of 1950s/1960s beat bohemianism, see Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968). See also Robert Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (New York, NY: HarperPerennial, 1974). For an analysis of a Chinese American appropriation of this discourse, see R. John Williams, "The *Technê* Whim: Lin Yutang and the Invention of the Chinese Typewriter," *American Literature* 82 (June 2010): 389–419. Arnold Pacey's *Meaning in Technology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999) reiterates the basic premise of Asia-as-*technê*: "Daoist sentiment, which is not against technology, but which avoids the attempt to conquer nature by means of massive forms of construction may be a philosophy that can be adapted to address some of our present dilemmas" (135).

36. Ken Hanke sees the centrality of this "techno-trick" as the unique contribution of director H. Bruce "Lucky" Humberstone, who directed a number of Chan films in the 1930s: "Humberstone was absolutely awestruck by mechanics, inventions, and scientific gadgets on an improbably 'Mr. Wizard' level. All of his Chan outings contain at least one scene where the action stops dead for an enlightening scientific demonstration" *Charlie Chan at the Movies*, 74. However, although Hanke may be right that Humberstone accelerated the narrative role of these techno-tricks in the Chan genre, he does not seem to notice that they were very consistently present before Humberstone's Chan films, and that they would continue to appear for years after.

37. Philippa Gates has argued that the prevalence of technology in films like *Charlie Chan at the Opera* (1937) and *Mr. Wong, Detective* (1938) "anticipated the police procedural, offering audiences glimpses of the advances in crime-fighting technology and science" (90). Many of these films, she argues, "tended to have scenes that marvel at the technology available to police," which eventually became "the focus of the procedural" (90–91). Philippa Gates, *Detecting Men: Masculinity and the Hollywood Detective Film* (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 2006).

38. Ronald R. Thomas, *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3.

39. Ibid., 14. Critics of detective fiction have argued that detective plots evidence a kind of Althusserian "interpellation" such that a hegemonic encoding of the technocultural regime is inevitably mapped onto readers. Dennis Porter, for instance, sees the detective genre as inherently conservative, "a literature of reassurance and conformism." Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 220. Franco Moretti has argued that the genre's tendency to isolate guilt serves a similarly conservative purpose: "Detective fiction . . . exists expressly to dispel the doubt that guilt might be impersonal, and therefore collective and social." Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Terms*. (New York, NY: Verso, 1983), 135. Defenders of the genre, such as Marshall McLuhan, have argued that what is so admirable about the detective figure (as opposed to the bureaucratic figure of the "cop") is his autonomous "integrity," which McLuhan sees as offering a model for uncovering the hidden mechanisms of the culture industry. Marshall McLuhan, "Footprints in the Sands of Crime." *Sewanee Review* (1946): 627. For a succinct introduction to the politics of detective fiction, see Charles Rzepka, *Detective Fiction* (New York, NY: Polity, 2005), 9–31.

40. The first of these is from *Charlie Chan in Shanghai* (1932), the second from *Charlie Chan at the Olympics* (1937), and the third from *Charlie Chan on Broadway* (1937).



41. See *Chanograms: The Aphorisms of Charlie Chan*, DVD. Twentieth-Century Fox, 2007.

42. The classic text on this approach is David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristen Thompson's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1988). See also Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), Ethan Mordden, *Hollywood Studios* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1988); and David Gomery's *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (London: BFI, 2005).

43. Brian Taves, "The B Film: Hollywood's Other Half." *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930–1939*, ed. Tino Balio (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 313. Hereafter abbreviated in text as "GD." As Leo Braudy has argued, "No part of the film experience has been more consistently cited as a barrier to serious critical interest than the existence of forms and conventions, whether in such details as the stereotyped character, the familiar setting, and the happy ending, or in those films that share common characteristics—westerns, musicals, detective films, horror films, escape films, spy films—in short, what have been called *genre* films," *World in a Frame: What We See in Films*. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 663.

44. *Ibid.*, 313.

45. Quoted in Bosley Crowther, "How Doth the Busy Little 'B.'" *New York Times*, January 2, 1938.

46. Taves notes, "Within the limits of the B form, resourceful filmmakers . . . were sometimes allowed to be more creative than in A's . . . the B's, especially at the majors, could become an artistic endeavor, while avoiding the budgetary excesses that doomed the A endeavors of a Josef von Sternberg or Orson Welles," "The B Film," 337. Hye Seung Chung has also argued that "in addition to unusual visual flourishes, less conventional subject matter and characterizations could pass relatively unscathed in low-budget B pictures, perhaps none more so than in the Oriental detective films theatrically released in the 1930s and 1940s." *Hollywood Asian: Philip Ahn and the Politics of Cross-Ethnic Performance* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006), 67–68.

47. Quoted in Taves, "The B Film," 55.

48. Jerome Christensen, "Studio Authorship, Corporate Art," *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader*, ed. Keith Grant (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing 2008), 168, further references in parentheses. See also Christensen's "Studio Authorship, Warner Bros., and *The Fountainhead*," *The Velvet Light Trap* 57 (Spring 2006): 17–31; "Studio Identity and Studio Art: MGM, *Mrs. Miniver*, and Planning the Postwar Era," *ELH* 67.1 (2000): 257–292; and "The Time Warner Conspiracy: *JFK*, *Batman*, and the Manager Theory of Hollywood Film," *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 2002): 591–617. Thomas Schatz's *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1988) offers a more traditional approach with themes similar to Christensen's.

49. Christensen, "Studio Authorship, Corporate Art," 171.

50. Sometimes the Chan and Moto films would even blend together, as when Oland died, and Fox had already filmed substantial portions of *Charlie Chan at Ringside*. Rewriting the plot as a Moto film, Fox found a reason for Chan's Number One Son, Lee, to be working with Moto (taking a "detective class" from him at the college), and released the film as *Mr. Moto's Gamble* (1938). As a Japanese detective, Mr. Moto was bound to end with the beginning of WWII, and the last Mr. Moto film at Fox was *Mr. Moto's Last Warning* (1939), preceded by *Thank You, Mr. Moto* (1937), *Think Fast, Mr. Moto* (1937), *Mr. Moto Takes a Chance* (1938), *Mysterious Mr. Moto* (1938), *Mr. Moto's Gamble* (1938), *Mr. Moto Takes a Vacation* (1939), and *Mr. Moto in Danger Island* (1939).

51. The character was originally introduced by Hugh Wiley in *Collier's Magazine* in 1934, the year after Earl Derr Biggers' death. When Monogram purchased the rights to Wiley's "Mr. Wong" series, it was not in fact the first time that Mr. Wong would make it to the screen, as Victory Pictures had been quietly incorporating a "Mr. Wong, San Francisco detective," into their Bela Lugosi vehicle *Shadow of Chinatown* (1936). The character is minor, and is never fully identified as "James Lee Wong," which perhaps would allow Victory Pictures to capitalize on Hugh Wiley's introduction of the Wong detective name, without actually buying the rights from Wiley.

52. "Mr. Wong in Chinatown," *New York Times*, July 31 1939.

53. The five Mr. Wong films with Boris Karloff at Monogram Studios were *Mr. Wong, Detective* (1938), *The Mystery of Mr. Wong* (1939), *Mr. Wong in Chinatown* (1939), *The Fatal Hour* (1940),

and *Doomed to Die* (1940). A sixth Mr. Wong film in the series at Monogram, *Phantom of Chinatown* (1940) starred Keye Luke as the Chinese detective, and is sometimes incorrectly labeled as the only Hollywood film of the period to have an Asian detective played by an Asian actor (In fact, the first three Charlie Chan pictures had Asian actors, and Sessue Hayakawa played a very heroic Chinese detective in Paramount's Fu Manchu film *Daughter of the Dragon* in 1931).

54. Krystyn Moon, *Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s–1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 1–9.

55. Moon, *Yellowface*, 1.

56. Accentuating this playful allusion, Chan actually meets “Karlos” when he bumps into him in the hall. With grand gestures and a distinctly Karloffian trilling of the tongue, the man (played by Leonard Mudie) exclaims, “Sir! To meet a gentleman who apologizes for *bumping* you in these days is a rare thing indeed. He is either a coward or a gentleman,” and then, with a flourish, “I give you credit for the latter.” In an over-the-top melodramatic voice, Karlos gives a brief monologue about his great days on the stage, before turning to radio, film, and television, but unfortunately now playing “only the mad monster.” “Still,” he adds, “it is a living.” The word “bumping,” according to the *OED*, was widely used in the 1940s to mean “dismiss[ing] someone from a position, or tak[ing] the position of another, especially by exercising the right to displace a less senior member of an organization.” Given the fact that Monogram studios had already given up on the Mr. Wong series, and that Twentieth Century-Fox had given up on the Charlie Chan films, Chan had clearly “bumped” his way over to Monogram in a way that would prevent Karloff’s Mr. Wong from ever making it back on the screen.

57. There are many studies of the characterization of cinema as an orientalized “ideographic” medium. See, for example, Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); Tom Conley, *Film Hieroglyphs* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Christopher Bush, *Ideographic Modernism: China, Writing, Media* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010); R. John Williams, “Global English Ideography and the Dissolve Translation in Hollywood Film,” *Cultural Critique* 72 (2009): 89–136; Matthew Bernstein and Gaylyn Studlar, eds. *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

58. See Vachel Lindsay, *The Art of the Moving Picture* (New York, NY: The MacMillan Company, 1916), 226; Sergei Eisenstein, “Beyond the Shot [The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram],” *Film Theory and Criticism 6<sup>th</sup> Edition*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 13–22; Jean Mitry, *The Aesthetics and Psychology of the Cinema* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 13–14. For an interesting take on the chronologically-earlier Chinatown films, see Ruth Mayer, “The Glittering Machine of Modernity: The Chinatown in American Silent Film” *Modernism/modernity* 16.4 (2009): 661–684.

59. Consider the degree to which Paul Carter’s description of the Parrot’s classificatory ambiguity coincides with cultural field of Grauman’s theater: “Parrots . . . are chromatically mutable, promiscuously social, verbally equivocal and intellectually enigmatic,” *Parrot*, 34.

60. See David Karnes, “The Glamorous Crowd: Hollywood Movie Premiers Between the Wars.” *American Quarterly* 38.4 (1986): 557.

61. Theodore Adorno, *Quasi Una Fantasia* (New York, NY: Verso, 1998), 109.

62. It is tempting to speculate that Benjamin would have thoroughly enjoyed Robert B. Stone’s novel *Damascus Gate* in which an American expatriate journalist in Jerusalem remembers his father taking his mother on a trip to Los Angeles, where she meets members of the Frankfurt school, including Adorno: “She thought Theodor Adorno was the guy who played Charlie Chan in the movies . . . She asked him, ‘Does it hurt when they do you up Chinese?’” Adorno is described as thoroughly perplexed by the conversation. See Robert B. Stone, *Damascus Gate* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Books, 1998), 126.

63. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,” *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 33. For a discussion of the different versions of Benjamin’s essay, see Miriam Bratu Hansen, “Room-for-Play: Benjamin’s Gamble with Cinema,” *October* 109 (2004): 3–45.



64. Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 24.

65. Walter Benjamin, "Chinese Paintings at the Bibliothèque Nationale," *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 257.

66. Benjamin, "Chinese Paintings," 259. For a fascinating discussion of Benjamin's views on Chinese aesthetics, see Christopher Bush, *Ideographic Modernism: China, Writing, Media* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 103–121.

67. Frank Chin, *Gunga Din Highway* (St. Paul, MN: Coffee House Press, 1994), 18.

68. On the simultaneous inevitability and political potential of stereotype, see Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002), 58–59, and Jameson, Frederic. "On Cultural Studies." *The Identity in Question*, ed. John Rajchman (New York, NY: Routledge, 1995), 251–95. Adorno was as adamant as is Jameson on the ineluctability of stereotypes, but whereas Jameson and Chow see legitimate possibilities, Adorno sees only the stultifying oppression of the culture industry. As Adorno argues in "How to Look at Television," "Since stereotypes are an indispensable element of the organization and anticipation of experience, preventing us from falling into mental disorganization and chaos, no art can entirely dispense with them. Again, the functional change is what concerns us. The more stereotypes become reified and rigid in the present set-up of cultural industry, the more people are tempted to cling desperately to clichés which seem to bring some order into the otherwise ununderstandable," *The Culture Industry*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (New York, NY: Routledge, 199), 147.

69. For a fascinating discussion of the philosophical and cultural effects of the signature, see Loren Glass, *Literary Celebrity in the Modern United States, 1880–1980* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2004), 42; and Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 1–24.