

Amanda Beech

An Exercise in Fatality

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The loneliness of the LA cop, alienated from family, no-one to trust, stuck in the recesses of dark psychological solitude; demons from an incomprehensible past; bad relations with IA and antagonisms with the boss – a violent life of cruelty, corruption, instability and legal-murder. *None* of these figure the operations of the TV series *Columbo* and the schematics of what might be termed its supporting structure – the domestic bliss that frames all of the crime scene investigations, plot construction and the achievement of true justice that is almost always achieved in the *denouement* of each episode. Columbo suffers no such bad relations: things are OK with the dentist, things are OK with the mechanic, things are OK with the chilli-guy. Events, weddings, christenings, all get done. A life of ordinary engagements. Nevertheless, we cannot locate the film noir hero that figures the lone violence of the troubled loner hero-cop in diametrical opposition to Columbo as the figure of the tragic. Lt. Columbo may be the dishevelled ‘small guy’ – the lost pen, the crumpled raincoat, the misplaced ticket, the New Yorker somehow in LA, the distracted eye, the wife, the niece, the cousin, the dog, the car... – but instead of all these elements making for a subject who doubts self and is limited in the face of a Big Other, the character of Columbo figures a realism of the *pragmatic* kind, the kind that would lead Falk the actor to find an affinity between his long-term starring role and his predilection for the realism of John Cassavetes.ⁱ In a world of glamorous noir that is the world of LA’s burgeoning neo-liberal landscape of territorialism, egoic narcissism, modernist furniture,ⁱⁱ iconic artworks, self-betterment and ruthless corruption, Columbo stands out. But although he may not fit in, rather than symbolising some other possibility for life in LA – a life that would be social, a life of domestic bliss – he *parallels* noir subjectivity with *another* life of alienation, distraction and commitment; after all, he is (still) the work of law. It is impossible to make an opposition or a mirrored correlation between *Columbo* and noir, precisely because all of the suggested social relations that make up the *Columbo* backstory, despite being a constant reference, remain unseen. Columbo is alone, and whilst these social relations imply the figuration of some noir-otherness, we know that they are left largely at the door of the PD.

This possibly fictional domestic life remains crucial to the *Columbo* narrative, being ever present not only in the references to family that are never evidenced, but also in particular episodes where Columbo entices a killer into his home. For example, in the episode *Rest in Peace Mrs Columbo* (1990) the widow of a murderer put away by Columbo kills her boss and plots to kill Columbo's wife, and then Columbo himself. Having apparently succeeded in poisoning Columbo's wife with her homemade marmalade, after the funeral the murderer accompanies Columbo to his home, where he pretends that he too is poisoned, and thereupon extracts the inevitable confession. As in the other rare occasions where we get this behind-the-scenes look at Columbo's private life, we learn very soon that the home is in fact a façade, a staging for the set-up. It's not his apartment, it's not his kitchen. There is no life-as-fact outside of the investigation. All of this suggests *Columbo's* real proximity to noir: the possibility that he's just another lone detective, another dispossessed individual, working it all out, his only relation a dog.ⁱⁱⁱ The dishevelled, distracted life on the job *is all there is*.

This undecidable fiction of Columbo's social relations does however force a separation. For, whether or not Columbo's references can be empirically attested, the cop's world of homicide investigation suggests an *other heterogeneous* space, away from the paradigm of LA noir – and it must do so, precisely because, in *Columbo*, all LA *is Noir*: Ironically, the kind of transcendence normally required to exercise the law, according to which social life must be evacuated for law to be enforced, (a narrative as familiar to classic noir as it is to westerns and *Spiderman*) is now the defining culture of LA. We see this clearly in every one of Columbo's well-heeled, decadent quarries: a world of crime in which subjects – citizens – have singularly achieved the status of law through the eradication of all social concerns: they go ahead and kill as a law unto themselves, they take what they want, they mete out justice in their own terms; law is naturalised to individual subjective action in this legacy to America's Emersonian liberalism. The private is now the public, relations are smashed and now the only bonds are ties through the primacy of capital: economic and aesthetic desire rules in big offices inhabited by thick carpets, big artwork and bigger egos. This condition of the law spells out its crisis, where regulatory frameworks disappear and force rules through ruthless capitalistic investments.

We could read this other life of Columbo as some traditional story of the immanence of neo-liberal subjectivities and the breakdown of community, where Columbo articulates the thin line between social relations on the one hand, and the ruthless world of privatisation on the other – an allegory in which Columbo stands for the last vestige of Statist or communitarian interests and

enacts a form of revenge by the poor and humble against the rich and decadent. However, such a binary formula, despite its neatness, does not capture the logic at work here. The law that Columbo exercises does not embellish further the spectacle of subject power that we recognise in liberal heroics as a parody of noir, where the cops are just darker and more fucked up than the fucked-up killers they're investigating; nor does it read Columbo's identity-as-law back into some tragic dimension of finitude – a spectacle of humanity as the impoverished-everyday ordinary man whose work stands for the justice of the average. Instead, in the face of an LA now naturalised as *noir*, what Columbo stands for is the possibility that the law does not occupy some transcendental role that produces a field of singular agents, but rather is immanent to action. This is not the law of 'the one', the law of rights, freedom, or will; instead this is the law of objective universal justice. The kind of freedom-myth supporting those individual agents who party in their luxury penthouse apartments, murder their friends and play games with peoples' lives, remains subject to *another law*. In this sense we could say that neo-liberalism is not immanent to Columbo, but a universal law is immanent to neo-liberalism – a form of law that Columbo embodies. Columbo's subjectivity – the figure of community without community – sits here as the spectre of objectivity, producing a rootlessness, extraordinary alterity that demarcates another form of existence. The law remains as the ultimate space of dispossession, but this space is now outside any associative relation to any form of regulative subjectivity, that is, a subject of will, knowledge or power that would support either the State-social notion of co-belonging or capitalist-individualist frameworks.

It's probably not worth pointing out – because who doesn't know? – but every episode of Columbo begins at the end, begins with the fact of the crime itself. And Columbo enters fifteen-to-twenty minutes into the episode to direct his cigar straight at the killer. Columbo knows who did it; he may not know how, and he may not have proof, but this is *cop intuition*, available only because of his immanent identity to the crime itself. (No crime goes unsolved and the only episode where the murderer is not arrested is *Forgotten Lady* [1975] starring Janet Leigh.) This knowledge is neither transcendental nor empirical, it belongs to the inner workings of cop-reason. *Columbo*, therefore, is an exercise in empiricism, knowledge and justice that can only be attained from the *inside out*.

Agenda For Murder (1990 Season 9 Ep3) stars Patrick McGoohan^{iv} as the careerist attorney Finch (right-hand man to Congressman Mackey, working towards the Vice Presidency) who has his sights set on becoming Attorney General. At the crime scene Columbo spots several

anomalies: the blood from the staged suicide of Frank Staplin (a mob racketeer) is underneath not on top of the gun, and sending a joke fax to his wife on holiday in Hawaii is not the type of thing someone about to commit suicide would do. But more remarkable than these cop-like observations is the moment where Columbo spots some teeth marks in some cheese on the desk at the crime scene. These are later matched to teeth marks in chewing gum to prove Finch's guilt. To locate the significance of the teeth marks in the cheese right from the start demonstrates *another* form of detective work, where truth is not found but embedded.

Internalising the frameworks of the scene of the crime, getting to know the killer, allowing the pieces to unfold, the killer will be allowed to unravel his/her own guilt through a series of small, apparently banal altercations that push the protagonist to the edge of their own fiction – the cover-ups and lies that hide the real truth. This dynamic between the murderer and Columbo is underscored by the stream of famous guest stars queuing up to act out the role of killer and to get to banter with Falk. Patrick McGouhan makes four appearances, William Shatner, two (*Fade in to Murder* [1976] and *Butterfly in Shades of Grey* [1990]) as well as Ray Milland (*The Greenhouse Jungle* [1972] and *Death Lends a Hand* [1971]). Columbo invariably pushes the protagonist to the point of frustration – they just seem to get sick of him being around because the logic just kills them. Holes emerge in best-laid plans, errors are forced through this mixture of banal precision logic and intuition; the details start to assemble, the things that hold together fall apart. In one of the pilot episodes, *Prescription Murder* (1968), Brian Capron, playing the killer of his heiress wife Carol, says, “Carol’s death has almost been too perfect, that’s what irritates him, it’s like a speck in his eye ... why, he’d even find flaws in the Old Testament.” And at the end of an episode we wait for the conclusive proof to be performed, the verbal confession of what we know to be there already – a simple stating of the facts. But finding out what we already know, this restating and assertion of the facts, has an aesthetic dimension. The naming of the truth is crucial to this. Of course, verbalising this truth doesn’t change anything – no-one is brought back from the dead, and unlike TV series like *CSI* and *Law and Order*, we don’t get to focus on the kind of justice that is done in the court house. Columbo’s process of knowledge – a form of scientific study of human behaviour mixed with an eye for special details – now becomes the primary focus, as the detective carefully reconstructs the murder for the murderer, assembling a series of apparently inconsequential fragments of evidence that lay before their eyes and ours all along. In the face of creative responses, explanations and rationalisations produced by the murderer(s) Columbo appears fascinated. His entertainment is ours, a kind of wonder about how fictive explanations can attempt to claim the status of fact, a curiosity about the impossibility of

correlating these reasons to those causes. Justice is meted out through the agreement between the murderer and Columbo, achieved through the acknowledgement that fictions can no longer support the truth. This process of the laying out of the truth, preparing for it to be named in public, is the spectacle of *Columbo*.

As such, what is played out in *Columbo* is not the typical narrative of discovery, or the narrative that exposes ‘the big cover-up’. The place of knowledge here is not one of paranoia or doubt. Rather, knowledge here is part of an apparatus that terminates in a form of facticity that realises itself in a ‘final image’. We see this in quite literal terms in the construction of the crime in almost every episode: *Columbo* plays out the detail of the murder for us and then again for the murderer, another display that acts in parallel to the event of the crime. Whilst we see all we need to know – motive, means and opportunity – in the first fifteen minutes of the episodes, in his subsequent reconstruction Columbo alerts us to the creativity of the original crime, its imagination and invention but also its status as fiction. For this type of homicide there is always a plan, and moreover there is the plan to execute the perfect murder, where escaping justice is made equivalent to an art and thus art is understood to access a place beyond the law. Columbo’s act of laying out of the truth in parallel exercises a form of science meets creativity that exposes not only the truth of the crime itself, but points us towards the conclusion that this fiction is criminal because it is incapable of science – this is the aberration of image as criminal act. This re-performance of the crime by Columbo is the point at which the crime is revealed as image and image as crime.

Columbo and the Murder of a Rock Star (1991, Season 10, Episode 3) stars Dabney Coleman as Hugh Creighton (another high-flying lawyer) who murders his rock-star girlfriend. Creighton is exposed ultimately due to a speeding ticket. The speeding ticket provides the alibi for Creighton’s whereabouts at the time of the crime but Columbo notices that the face in the car is in fact a mask of another face. Columbo spots this in a *Blow Up* style moment in the LA police labs, where images of the traffic camera photo are blown up to reveal what is in fact *another* image. This image exposes the fact that the driver was not Creighton but his blackmailing female associate – another social climber careerist. Columbo retreads this unseen passage of the crime, *making it visible*.

The empirical presentation of the image of the crime as *fact* exposes the failed fiction of the cover-up. The truth as to ‘whodunnit’ can now be named, and in fact the perpetrator most often

gets to name themselves, in an admission rather than a confession. After all, there is nothing to confess to, only the need to re-state the facts. This is the image that carries a form of certitude that cannot be disagreed with. It is correct. It is not a matter of interpretation, perception or nominalism, but simply the making visible of facts through an imaging of the structural support for a murder. Such a process of the image is in marked contrast to the images that constitute the lies of the murderer's cover-up, since the latter have a necessary relation to the murder, in a sense acting as interpretations of it, clustering around the original event like satellites. But in addition to this, and most crucially, Columbo's construction is also separated from the images of the murder we saw at the opening of the show. These two images – of initial fact (our initial viewing of the murder) and secondary truth (Columbo's closing articulation of the murder) operate as parallel, independent identities, since Columbo has no original object to interpret, only the evidence that makes up the process of crime scene inquiry. There is no 'lack' for Columbo, no secret, no empty centre that must be disclosed. There is no crisis of knowledge, only the there-ness of people, things, and events. Duly, a type of force is produced through Columbo's construction where the image achieves its independent status as truth in this final instance.

This reading of the image obviously causes problems for the mythology of the perfect murder – a mythology that correlates a kind of freedom and transcendence from the law with the 'spectacle of the real' (image as successful mask). This correspondence is thwarted by the exact demands of the logic of the image as truth, since here there is no possible correlation between the transcendence of law and the empirical image that would complete the picture for the perfect crime. Instead, justice is conditioned through the image.

This story of the fate of the image has its own fatalities; that of a destruction of the relations between freedom and power and subject and object; which also brings with it disaster for an art that is made under the shadow of these relations. This terminus of the image through its *forcing as fact* demands a new comprehension of the image, and indeed asks us to think again about what we decide to call art. Art might now be compelled to reconsider its assumptions about its task, its effect and its function. If this means anything it means that an art dispossessed of relations, an art that is part of the matter of the world, must now take more seriously this charge to name truth.

ⁱ *Husbands* (1970) and *A Woman Under the Influence*, (1974) Dir John Cassavetes,

ⁱⁱ "...My sister, she has a living room, its very, very modern, well the minute you sit down in it you can't open your mouth, you know, she's got this big kidney shaped coffee table, it upsets me just to look at it, her husband, he doesn't say anything and I figure that the coffee table got to him years ago..." (*Prescription Murder* (1968))

ⁱⁱⁱ Due to the many years *Columbo* has been on air 1968-2003 with approximately 69 episodes, my reading of tendencies in plot and style take on the core aspects of the series. One late episode, *No Time to Die*, (1992) (where episodes tended towards some poorer scripts and awkward self referential screenplay) does evidence the fact that Columbo has a nephew, as well as the short lived spin off series *Mrs. Columbo*, two pilots that featured a 'Mrs Columbo' with no Falk, but this is a clear anomaly to the other episodes that stay true to the emptiness of Columbo's back-story.

^{iv} McGoohan also directed a series of *Columbo* episodes and specials including *Ashes to Ashes* (1998) and *Murder with Too Many Notes* (2001)