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Laughing at the law: the authenticity consultant and James Ellroy's *LA Confidential*

ABSTRACT

The world of the authenticity consultant tends to be shrouded in secrecy. The consultant is responsible for ensuring accuracy and authenticity in a work, usually a film or television production. Yet these concepts are far from concrete in meaning and could even be seen as acts of mimesis and performance, particularly when the authenticity consultant also aims to uphold a particular image or representation of their profession. Using James Ellroy's novel LA Confidential as a case study of the ironies and idiosyncrasies encountered around the idea of truth and accuracy in representation, this paper will evaluate the most common perceptions of the role of the authenticity consultant, the similarities and differences between these depictions, and discuss the dysfunction between veracity and the allusion of veracity in the representational process.

KEYWORDS

authenticity consultant
James Ellroy
LA Confidential
mimesis
representation of police

The experiences of the authenticity consultant in film, television, and literature are usually shrouded in secrecy. Due to strict contractual conditions demanding confidentiality, a consultant tends to be forbidden to discuss the details of their role and contribution. This is in addition to restrictions about the disclosure of plot, story events, and cast and crew behaviours that are levied against all members of the production (Tucker 2013). This censorship renders the voice and experience of the authenticity consultant silent, denying an important insight into how the real work of the specialist collides with the cultural products constructed around their lives, traumas, and professions. Yet consultants are common place in film and television, as evidenced from the claims in opening credits of the US series Dragnet (NBC 1951-1959) that 'the story you are about to see if true' and its oft-cited determination to use real cases and real police language (Jermyn 2012). This paper looks at how this silence is overcome to some degree through fictional articulations of the authenticity consultant, Jack

Vincennes, in James Ellroy's novel *LA Confidential* (1990). Whilst the consultant and their work as represented in fiction is still an act of dramatic re-storying rather than testimony, and functions as a representation rather than a factual voicing, it is still invaluable as it offers an insight into processes, tensions, and dilemmas that would otherwise remain unknown.

James Ellroy's critically acclaimed and commercially successful novel *LA Confidential* (1990) includes a protagonist who, whilst holding a serving position with the LA police force, also acts as a technical consultant on a television series based around a group of detectives. *LA Confidential* provides a highly effective vehicle for exploring the ironies and idiosyncrasies around the idea of truth in representation on a number of levels. It tells the story of the machinations of a corrupt LA police force in the early 1950s, and, through the policemen's movements and moral dilemmas, captures not just the landscape of Hollywood's myth and image-making industry (Knight 2006: 200; Horsley 2009: 214), underground drug, and gang scene, but a wider social world in which 'legality and criminality have become indistinguishable' (Spinks 2008: 135). One of the Detectives, Sergeant Jack Vincennes, also works as a technical adviser on a TV series that dramatizes and, as Ellroy's fictional policeman Art De Spain explains, 'lauds our beloved LAPD to millions of television viewers each week' (16). More than merely a backdrop, the television series holds a significant thematic and plot resolving role in the novel and is crucial to our understanding of the Vincennes character and the representational contradictions of the novel's world.

THE ROLE OF THE AUTHENCITY CONSULTANT

Whilst Vincennes and the TV series *Badge of Honor* are fictional constructs, the tasks Vincennes' undertakes in his role as an authenticity or technical consultant for the series seem at first glance to be reasonably representative of what a 'real life' advisor would carry out. The authenticity consultant tends to serve a number of functions. One is to advise the writers and performers on how things are done (Kirby 2013). This tends to be basic information such as what procedures or techniques would be used to gain a particular outcome. This information might be crucial to the solving of the murder, or merely background information used with the intention of 'setting the scene' (Kirby 2013: 95). Crime writer and forensic advisor Doug Lyle emphasises the routine nature of this information when he reports that most of the scriptwriters he works with requests insight not about highly unusual medico-legal procedures, but about standard forensic techniques, such

as 'what stage the maggots would be at so that the medical examiner would determine that this person had died 48 hours ago…how body temperature changes after death, rigor mortis, and things like that' (Kirby 2013: 95).

Tied closely to the task of advising on how things are done is the need for the visual and aural to appear accurate. This includes aspects like ensuring props appear to be from the era they represent and that specialist dialogue is delivered close to the way it was originally spoken. For instance, Jack Green, a museum curator who also acted as authenticity consultant on a modern staging of Henry Wouk's Mutiny on the Bounty, was hired to interpret and give context to sections of dialogue and WW2 navy terms that have no meaning today. Green explains his process: 'My first job was to give on interpretation as to what was going on, including the nuances in the dialogue. I made what I call script notes: When I see something in the script that I think a modern person may have difficulty understanding, I'll do a set of notes on the background, on what the character is saying and why. I sent the script back with the notes, and the production people started sending questions back to me' (Rosenberg 2006: 1).

In *LA Confidential,* Vincennes' fulfils these functions of advising how things are done and what they need to appear to be when, in his own words, he teaches the actors 'to play a cop' (25, 436). Much to the chagrin of the rest of the police force, he also provides insight into procedures that criminals could use to hide their guilt, for example, dousing gun powder stained hands with perfume to invalidate a paraffin test (119). Yet this 'teaching' is alluded to rather than shown in the novel and so, given the corrupt nature of Vincennes' everyday policing, raises the question of exactly what type of cop he is teaching the actor to portray and whether, as discussed later in this paper, the techniques being taught are a performance themselves. Indeed, in a scene later in the novel where the now disgraced Vincennes' meets up with a crew member saddened by the pending demise of the series, Vincennes remembers an evening out spent teaching him to be cop involved not only a bust (or 'roust'), but a visit to prostitutes. While the screen adaptation of LA Confidential features a scene where Vincennes is present on the set of the series and intervenes to correct an inaccurate manoeuvre, there are no such scenes in the fiction. Rather, Vincennes' advising occurs off the page and off stage and the reader is left to imagine what teaching someone 'to play a cop' actually entails. In a world where 'the heroes are heroes only in comparison to the villains, who are unspeakably evil' (Malloy cited in Pederson 1996: 339), the gulf between daily work and performative 'play' proves to be uncomprehendingly wide.

There is also significant difference between Ellroy's depiction of the method of advising compared to Green's. Green is given access to the script with the intention of intervening in it in some way, whether it's through mark ups to production staff or amendments to the dialogue. Vincennes' relationship to the script appears more tokenistic and demonstrative rather than practical. There are no scenes in the novel of Vincennes examining the script. Instead, the frequent references dotted throughout Vincennes' dialogue of being 'friends' with, and being photographed alongside, the actors and the inclusions of newspaper headlines attributing *Badge of Honor*'s success to Vincennes' inputs of 'authenticity' implies it is not the act of advising but the publicity attached to the relationship that provides the real value for the series, Vincennes and the police force. Indeed, in a secret report compiled by the Los Angeles police force's internal affairs department, it's remarked that Vincennes' eventual severance from the TV series 'cost the LAPD a small fortune in promotional considerations' (262).

What is articulated in Ellroy's novel, however, is the tension that the technical advisor feels between being a member the normally elite and closed hedonistic world of Hollywood filmmaking and his role as an enforcer of law. At a cast party, Vincennes steps beyond his role as advisor into his role as everyday detective and frisks a cast member for drugs before assaulting him. The cast do not expect this behaviour from him as he is a paid member of the production and had been instructed to 'pianissimo on the tough guy stuff' (54-55). When they insist he 'play the game' (54), Vincennes argues that he clearly is acting as a member of their world of make believe, or he would have arrested a fair number of the cast and party guests: 'I am empowered by the Los Angeles Police Department to roust those cocksuckers on general suspicion, and I'm derelict in my duty for not doing it. Because I'm *playing the game'* (54).

AUTHENCITY AS PERFORMANCE

This notion of 'playing the game' can be seen as a metaphor for the authenticity consultant's need to present their audience with the type of information that both 'feels' authentic and upholds the reputation of the consultant's primary profession (Baht 2010). Authenticity implies a representation that echoes reality. It suggests accuracy. Yet, as Kirby explains when discussing the role of forensic science in crime television shows, accuracy means 'something different' to the storyteller and the consultant (2013: 97). For the storyteller, an event or procedure can be regarded as accurate if it could happen, whereas for the consultant, accuracy

is measured by how likely it is that an event could happen. David Berman, an actor and science consultant for CSI, explains that ‘writers need to know if things are possible, not likely’ (Kirby 2013: 97).

The skill sets and techniques drawn from the consultant in the name of accuracy are then translated into the narrative to become both ‘simplified and exaggerated’ (Kirby 2013: 96). Kirby goes on to offer the examples of procedural durations being exaggerated through acceleration, while the methods used to analyse rarely return results as exacting as those portrayed in the story (Kirby 2013).

Jack Vincennes’ notions of accuracy concur with Kirby’s. Vincennes presents to the TV series visions of what could happen and what should happen in the morally upright, ‘simplified and exaggerated’ world of suburban 1950s LA, while recognising that the audience would not believable the most likely happenings in his world of legal criminality. This creates a natural tension within the novel, and within the character, as Vincennes is faced with the dilemma of advising on techniques, procedures and attitudes that he and his own corrupt colleagues routinely discard. In Ellroy’s hands, and in Vincennes’ world, police work becomes an act of performance and so an act of faking authenticity. For instance, Vincennes’ popularly, credibility and growing career hinges on arrests and drug raids prompted by tip offs from the Hollywood tabloid ‘Hush Hush’. It is not his own investigative skill and police work that results in data about the illegal drug and sexual activities of celebrities, but rather the investigations of magazine’s range of hired private detectives and informers. Yet Vincennes is positioned, quite literally, as the heroic door busting crime fighter by the publication when they meet outside the site of illegal activity and discuss the arrest methods and entry approaches that are most likely to give the best photographs and images. Indeed, Ellroy has our first exposure to the Vincennes-Hush Hush drug busts open with the line ‘His stage was waiting…’ and then goes on to create a scene that includes the setting up of arc lights to allow better light saturation for photos, and instructions on where Vincennes should stand to ensure Grauman’s Chinese Theatre can be seen as a way for the audience to immediately verify the location, and by implication, verify the accuracy of the event. All, as Vincennes thinks, ‘great for an establishing shot’ (23).

The dysfunction between veracity and allusion of veracity in the world that Vincennes is supposed to moderate both as a policeman and a consultant is made even clearer when he uses in his everyday policing what Spinks calls ‘plot devices’ such as deliberately inaccurate news reports, the planting of evidence, and the use of false confessions and statements (2008: 139). These are constructed from imagination as a way of controlling

political opponents and resolving crime rates regardless of guilt or innocence of the perpetrators, and are a direct violation of the objective and confidence inspiring police procedures that he has so proudly been seconded to promote on *Badge of Honor*. What results is a reciprocal relationship intent on promoting a deceitful representation of the functioning of the law.

Vincennes status as a gatekeeper of a deceitfully 'correct' representation grows even more interesting when paralleled to Detective Edmund Exley's increasingly 'public face' of their department. Exley's early appearances in the novel position him as a possessing a 'principled dependence on fact and evidence' (Spinks 2008: 136). He attempts to prevent violence abuses by drunken policemen towards incarcerates suspected of injuring policemen, argues with his father over the validity of planting evidence and beating confessions out of suspects. His incriminations towards his colleagues allow the department's managers to push him forward publically as the face of responsible and moral policing and as a reassurance to the public and politicians that the department functions as an upholder and enforcer of the law rather than as an outlet for a form of 'legalised crime' (Spinks 2008: 137). Just as Vincennes is presented as the public face of vice eradication, Exley is presented as the public face of a newly sanitised police force. Like Vincennes, however, Exley has risen to his position and cultivated his reputation through a carefully stage managed series of lies. He claims to have killed a squad of Japanese soldiers during a heroic battle in World War 11 of which he is the only survivor, when in reality he was completing a menial task outside the camp and returned to find his battalion murdered, and the perpetrators having killed themselves in a heroic act of self-sacrifice. He secures a promotion by being the only policeman able to offer articulate and allegedly accurate testimony of an officer led riot, when in fact he was locked in a room away from the events and had formulated three versions of what was most likely to have occurred. By the end of the novel, however, Vincennes' status as gatekeeper collapses as he is lured further and further into the film industry's pit of vice and as the public grow more aware that the 'authenticity' he provides for *Badge of Honor* is just as fictional as the series itself, while Exley comes to be promoted to the highly public role of Head of Detectives.

Ellroy's novel, and indeed those accompanying LA Confidential in the LA Quartet series, themselves make a grand play towards authenticity by drawing upon 'real' settings, events and personalities of the era. The novels are filled with celebrities and people who did exist during the time the novels are set. Across the pages stroll Hollywood stars like Lana

Turner, real life gangsters like Mickey Cohen and Johnny Stompanato, and gossip about celebrities such as Rock Hudson and his sexuality. Ellroy's manic vision of the era is a parallel universe of alternate and possible hidden histories, an 'implicit theory of history' (Schwartz 2002: 44) with just enough 'real' references to mark his stories of grand corruption and vice as plausible. By pushing his make believe characters through and across the lives of names from the annals of celebrity and political history, he embeds his characters in the real and so imbues them and their visions with authenticity by association. One could argue that Ellroy himself functions as a variation on the authenticity consultant: he grew up in the era he writes about, was involved in petty crime and, infamously, lost his own mother (Knight 2004: 200) in a murder mystery that he narrated and re-storied many times. Critic Richard B. Schwartz seems to be edging close to this idea when he remarks that Ellroy writes in a 'phenomenological style' (2002: 48) and 'speaks as he writes' (2002: 49).

AUTHENCITY AS MIMESIS

From a theoretical perspective, the authenticity consultant is tasked to engage in the most purposeful act of mimesis imaginable: to convince others that reality is being enacted through both action and dialogue. Mimesis is regarded as 'the capacity of literature to represent or "imitate" reality' (Rimmon Kenan 2002: 107) and is based on the assumption that art is a copy of the real (Potolsky 2006). Its origins reside with Plato, who wrote in 'The Republic' that speech can be divided into diegesis, in which the poet themselves tells the story, or mimesis, in which the poet communicates the story through the voice of characters (Wake 2006). Yet the concept of mimesis has, through various evolutions in narrative theory from Aristotle onwards, been broadened beyond the illusion of character voiced narrative towards a larger idea of capturing a phenomenological reality within the pages or on the screen of a cultural narrative driven artefact.

The function of Vincennes' police work as performance rather than reality means that it could be seen to have moved away from mimesis into semiosis. In other words, his representations aim not to replicate reality and the truth of law enforcement, but rather to present a set of signs that manipulate the audience of the series *Badge of Honor* and the readers of the popular press that these occurrences, values, and procedures are indicative and representative of the state of LA policing at that time. These acts of semiosis aim to convince the audience that mimesis is occurring, and thereby assert a false perception of the moral and procedural effectiveness of what could be seen as the source text, which to the audience is not the script of *Badge of Honor*, but the lives and daily experiences of the police it is based on.

While Vincennes may be engaging in an act of semiosis rather than mimesis, the audience firmly believes mimesis is at work. That there is so little tension within the audience for most of the novel between the representations they see on the screen versus the real policing that is occurring on the streets around them can be accounted for by the tendency of mimesis to function as an assertion of conventional belief and values. Modern literary theory builds upon Aristotle's idea that mimesis is only effective if it is based on basic cognitive functions (Potolsky 2006), that is, that it reflects an image of the world back at us that we recognise in some way. Hence mimesis is closely tied to convention, in that we will accept as real or resonate artificial recreations that concur with the unspoken rules, social contexts, or collective beliefs by which we live (Potolsky 2006). As Potolsky suggests, 'fidelity to convention, not fidelity to nature, is the source of mimesis' (2006: 4). This explains why in the world of the 1950s, even through the lens of Ellroy's fiction, representations of authority figures and agents of social control as primarily positive and trustworthy resonates with audiences of this era, and their fictional counterparts, in a way that they would not today. The mimesis of *Badge of Honor* works to capture what the imagined audience of that time wanted to believe was their reality.

The authenticity consultant, then, can never imbue a production with complete realism. What qualifies as an accurate representation to the consultant will not necessary be appropriately dramatic for an audience, nor will an 'authentic' event feel realistic to an audience. The concept of mimesis brings with it a complex set of assumptions that depend on notions such as convention and phenomenological relativity. As James Ellroy's LA Confidential engagingly explores, the authenticity consultant resides in a space of tension between veracity and the appearance of veracity, in which the act of performance can become a necessary device in bridging the gap between the daily realities and unpleasantness of the profession and the popularly accepted myths that surround that world.

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