



Last Word Society - 2017

LW2 Joyeux Anniversaire, Commissaire! An (Im)Possible Interview With Jules Maigret — The “Mender of Destinies”

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The goal of this presentation is to familiarize attendees with the world-famous, fictional detective Jules Maigret on the 130th anniversary of his birth (1887-2017) by discussing the importance of Maigret’s method of investigational rediscovery in a world dominated by a blind faith in technology.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by presenting a multidisciplinary framework, based on the analyses of both the crime stories and television series inspired by Maigret’s investigations, showing how the fat, grumpy commissioner created by the French novelist George Simenon has been wrongly accused of not having a scientific methodology. The goal of this study is to recognize the central features of Maigret’s method in ethnology and the ability to reconstruct psychological and social profiles.

In recent decades, the hundreds of novels and short stories featuring Commissar Maigret have been unfairly neglected. Maigret lacks the mental acuteness of Hercule Poirot and Nero Wolfe as well as the charm of Philo Vance and Ellery Queen; however, Maigret has something more: his extraordinary humanity. Maigret’s humanity is not just a drink at Brasserie Dauphine or a walk in the Parisian neighborhoods he patrols. It is the core of his investigational model, a model that rests on a single question: why?

Maigret’s personal concept of justice lies indeed in the moral maxim *comprendre sans juger* (understanding without judging) that is profoundly connected to the final object of his work: understanding the criminal mind. The principal determinant of an investigation is the detective’s ability to arrive at a complete physical and psychological identification with the circumstances he must investigate in order to understand all the people involved in the case from their own points of view. In ethnology, individuals must be understood before the rules of society, and Maigret does likewise. Using an anthropological language, Maigret conducts his investigations according to the principles of fieldwork and participant observation.

This presentation will illustrate how, for Maigret, crime always arises from individual meanings and not as a consequence of social facts. The novel *La tête d’un homme* (published in English as *A Battle of Nerves*) will be analyzed. Maigret organizes the “escape” from death row of the prisoner Joseph Heurtin, who was convicted of killing Mrs. Henderson, an American heiress, and her French maid, Élise Chatrier. Heurtin had been seen in the neighborhood when the murder was committed and his finger- and footprints were found everywhere in the victim’s house. Nonetheless, Maigret casts doubt on Heurtin’s guilt because of a lack of motive. Physical evidence can direct the detective’s attention, which pertains to “what” happened and “how” it happened. Although Maigret is very passionate about Dr. Moers’s criminal analysis (i.e., from his handwriting and graphological expertise), we learn that the probable offender is left-handed and extremely smart, with science being just one aspect of a more complex situation. His investigation model indeed shows many similarities with clinical criminology. Thus, it is not a coincidence that Maigret had studied medicine for three years, is very interested in positivist criminology, and almost all of his inquiries deal with deviance and criminal responsibility. In this regard, the novel *Maigret Hesitates* analyzed Article 64 of the French Penal Code, which states that an insane person who commits a crime is not responsible. Even if this is the only article concerning human responsibility, Maigret wonders who is the right



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professional to decide whether a defendant is insane. His moral question is now at the center of the contemporary neuroethical debate.

This presentation will conclude by presenting attendees with an interview with Commissaire Maigret regarding some famous Italian criminal trials in which physical evidence, investigation methods, and criminal profiling seem to contradict each other.

As Hegel wrote, “Minerva’s owl spreads its wings with the falling of the dusk,” meaning wisdom takes flight after the day’s main events have taken place.¹ This is why it is important to rediscover Maigret’s investigational methodology on the 130th anniversary of his birth, because the shadow of the past helps us step into the light of the future.

Reference(s):

1. G.W.F. Hegel, Preface to *The Philosophy of Right*. 1820.

Investigation Methodology, Crime Story, Trial