

Love Detectors and Kiss-o-meters: The Role of the Erotic in the History of Deception Testing

Dr Geoff Bunn
Manchester Metropolitan University

The lie detector was born on February 14th 1929. This was, of course, the decidedly unromantic day on which seven members of “Bugsy” Moran’s North Side gang were lined up against a Chicago garage wall and executed by men acting on the orders of South Side boss Al Capone. One of the consequences of the public outcry over the St Valentine’s Day massacre was the establishment, the following year, of Northwestern University’s Scientific Crime Detection Laboratory. The charismatic “Lie Detector Man”, Leonarde Keeler, quickly became the Laboratory’s poster boy and his instrument the jewel in its crown. Keeler was often photographed with a female suspect attached to the “sweat box”; a galvanometer electrode in her hand, a sphygmomanometer cuff on her arm and a rubber pneumograph tube strapped around her chest. Keeler’s fascination with the deceptions of the female body was one he shared with all his fellow lie detector pioneers. The Harvard-trained psychologist William Marston for example used his “Marston Deception Test” to prove that “brunettes react far more violently to amatory stimuli than blondes” – whilst they watched clips from the Greta Garbo movies *Flesh and the Devil* and *Love*. Although the hardware from which the lie detector was constructed had first been used to assay the pathologies of *Homo criminalis* in the late 19th century, the project to chart the erotic correlates of lies had emerged with criminology’s prurient interest in the female offender. As I shall argue in this paper, what particularly arouses our interest is not so much the persistent presence of the erotic in lie detector discourse, but rather the more fundamental role it played in the instrument’s origins.



Watt a kiss! Illinois Tech attempted to measure the sparks exchanged in a kiss with an electrical kiss-o-meter (May 1948).

Dr Geoff Bunn is Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Manchester Metropolitan University. He is currently the Chair of the BPS History & Philosophy of Psychology Section. His book on the history of the lie detector, *The Golden Lasso of Truth*, is forthcoming with Johns Hopkins University Press.