

Crime Fiction and the Idea of the Normal Space: *The Pledge* and *The Element of Crime*

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Abstract:

This article looks at what I call the ‘normal space’ in crime fiction—a normative vision of society in relation to which the criminal event forms an exception or a mystery. Illustrating this concept, I bring in Sean Penn’s film adaptation of Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s story *The Pledge* as well as Lars von Trier’s *The Element of Crime*. Both films explore a normal space in dissolution or in the process of becoming a zone in which the lines between detective and criminal, as well as crime and its solution, become blurred. I employ the term ‘katechon,’ an ambiguous figure Carl Schmitt uses to describe a double movement—designating both the fight against the antichrist but at the same time the postponement of the kingdom of God—to capture this moment of blurring, which at the same time is a form of clarification; it reveals the fictionality of the normal space, its absence of absolute legitimacy, ironically at a time when this space seems to have reached its complete, immanent form, one that no longer recognizes an ‘outside.’ In both *The Pledge* and *The Element of Crime*, what brings us back from the edge of destruction is the figure of the detective surrendering to madness, that is, to a self-enclosed and separate world, a gesture that thus restores the possibility of the normal space.

Keywords: Crime Fiction, the normal space, genre, Penn’s *The Pledge*, von Trier’s *The Element of Crime*.

Introduction

Genres are born out of and die in very specific contexts and periods, under very specific circumstances, often in connection with concrete events; some survive these originating circumstances, some disappear, and others again manage to adapt, develop, and spread in other historical contexts and societies far beyond their place of origin. Ever since crime fiction emerged during the 19th century, it has remained one of the most popular genres. Especially during the interwar years and post-war years, the genre developed and expanded remarkably. Today, the genre exists and thrives in virtually every society and culture around the world. Notably, the crime genre has shown remarkable geographical and historical adaptability and flexibility, seeming

to thrive through the constant development of new forms and variations, never exhausting its repertoire of inventive and ingenious crime techniques and solutions.¹ Yet, despite crime fiction's remarkably flexible, global adaptability and the dense web of different sub-species that exist today, its basic formal features have largely remained unchanged both historically and geographically.² These features are arguably more insistent and necessary than those of many other genres. Crime fiction is quite simply one of the most recognizable genres in the world, identifiable by a literary recipe that contains many if not most of the ingredients included in the texts that emerged in the mid-19th century. These include an astonishing, unsolved mystery that typically involves a criminal offense of some sort; a character actively seeking to solve this mystery; and finally an ending that usually unveils the mystery. In other words, the genre has managed to maintain its relevance and fascination across history and geographical spread, while also retaining its basic formal features. Tzvetan Todorov has given what is perhaps the most basic definition of crime fiction—a story that actually consists of two stories: the story of the crime ('what really happened') and the story of the investigation (how did we learn 'what really happened').³ Generally, crime stories—insofar as they are 'pure' crime stories—have a sharp and narrow focus on these two narratives.

Significantly, this narrow focus involves an implicit exclusion of potentially subversive questions regarding the legitimacy and nature of the law, that is, questions concerning who has the right to define what crime is in the first place and whether a given act is illegal and punishable. The crime plot rarely questions whether something is a crime; it is. The definitional process is thus always already over when the crime plot begins.⁴ In this sense, there is always a *predefined or pre-established moment* detectable in any work of crime fiction; every crime story defines itself as having come *after* this moment, that is, after the moment when this event, this act, is defined as a crime—even if the actual crime happens in the middle of the story.

This paper takes a closer look at this moment preceding the event of the crime story. It explores a central albeit largely implicit premise of the genre of crime fiction: a normative vision of society in relation to which the criminal event forms an exception or a mystery. Discussing Sean Penn's film adaptation of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's story *The Pledge* as well as Lars von Trier's *The Element of Crime*, I argue that both films explore a normal space in dissolution or in the process of becoming a zone in which the lines between detective and criminal, as well as crime and its solution, become blurred. I employ the term 'katechon,' an ambiguous figure Carl Schmitt uses to describe a double movement—designating both the fight against the antichrist but at the same time the postponement of the kingdom of God—to capture this moment of blurring, which at the same time is a form of clarification; it reveals the fictionality of the normal space, its absence of absolute legitimacy, ironically at a time when this space seems to have reached its complete, immanent form, one that no longer recognizes an 'outside.'⁵ In both *The Pledge* and *The Element of Crime*, what brings us back from the edge of destruction is the figure

of the detective surrendering to madness, that is, to a self-enclosed and separate world, a gesture that thus restores the possibility of the normal space.

The Normal Space

Although stories about crime go back to the earliest literary history, the modern crime genre emerges around the first half of the nineteenth century, a period that largely coincides with the consolidation of the modern, political space as a delimited territory ruled by a homogenous, legal-political, institutional framework.⁶ This territory largely coincides with what I refer to as the normal space, which essentially involves the manifestation of the idea that violence, injustice, and transgressions constitute *exceptions* to the norm—and thus threats that must be marginalized, neutralized, and eventually expelled and eradicated. In this delimited territory, all individuals are at least in principle protected and bound by the regulations and workings of a modern legal framework. The latter embodies what the sociologist Hans Joas has called “the dream of a modernity without violence”, i.e., a society freed from the forms of violence characterizing premodern societies.⁷ As Norbert Elias observes in his book *The Civilizing Process*, violence in premodern societies—which included territorial wars, conquests, plunder, feuds, retributive acts, torture, duels, and violent sports—was integral to the balance of social life, the notion of justice, political questions, identity, and sometimes a source of joy and pleasure.⁸ Accompanying this process of marginalizing violence we find the idea of a delimited territory in which all individuals at least in principle are protected and bound by the regulations and workings of a modern legal framework. My argument here is that one of the implicit premises of the genre of crime fiction is the existence of this normal space. Reflecting on the nature of this normal space, Carl Schmitt argues that

The endeavor of a normal state consists above all in assuring total peace within the state and its territory. To create tranquility, security, and order and thereby establish the normal situation is the prerequisite for legal norms to be valid. Every norm presupposes a normal situation, and no norm can be valid in an entirely abnormal situation. (Schmitt, *Political Theology* 46)

One of the things that Schmitt points out is that at a very fundamental level, the normal space was only ever a fiction—but a fiction that so to speak forgot its own fictionality. As the consolidation of the normal space spreads to the extent that this space becomes synonymous with the way in which everyday life is experienced and lived, *as reality itself*—a certain paradox emerges: at no point before in history has the state been able to monopolize violence and control unsanctioned transgressions with such aggression, insistence, and force; yet ironically at no point before in history has the state ever felt more vulnerable and threatened by those acts, at least to the extent that they remain unaddressed or unpunished. The state becomes increasingly intolerant when it comes to violence perpetrated by others than itself.

Within the confines of this normal space I want to identify a vital context for understanding some of the socio-political premises and challenges underpinning the emergence of the crime genre. The delimited territory forming the contours of the normal space corresponds with a modern legal framework not only in the obvious sense that by crossing state borders one often encounters other forms of legalities, enforced by other sovereign orders—but perhaps especially in the sense that the normal space *as normative* presupposes an idea of delimitation, a demarcated space within which a notion of immanence can be created and in which it makes sense. The normal space embodies a particular fantasy about dealing with certain actions, perceived to be transgressive or problematic. It is here, in the wake of the emergence, formation, and consolidation of this space, that the crime genre gradually becomes one of the most purified cultural articulations of this fantasy; that is, at a time when the state's institutions of power have monopolized the right to use violence—as well as the right to define concepts in general—within a specific, delimited territory. The collective experience of the normal space manifests itself *implicitly* or *indirectly* in the sense that it is rarely addressed, reflected upon, or questioned in a direct sense. Its existence is largely taken for granted. As such, the normal space has no concrete, tangible, or positive content. It is a space defined in terms of what one might call a negative imagination, that is, the *inability* to imagine a point outside its limitations. It is in this sense that the normal space thus produces and reproduces a collective experience of reality that no longer possesses the ability to imagine an 'outside'.

The crime genre as such depends entirely on an idea of immanence, a space that in principle tolerates no outside legal order or normative reality. Once this self-enclosed reality becomes a distinct political possibility, the conditions for the modern crime genre likewise emerge—that is, roughly, around the first half of the nineteenth century and onwards. During this time, we begin to see the development of a literary genre narrowing its focus around what was earlier no mystery at all, but which in this secularly flattened, demarcated, and self-enclosed space becomes ever more marginalized, singularly crystallized, puzzling, impossible, enigmatic: the crime and its solution.⁹

It is in this sense that one could define the crime genre as a narrative fantasy made possible by incorporating another fiction as its main premise, namely the fiction of the normal space. The latter only becomes a normal space to the extent that it operates smoothly, at a level of self-evident seamlessness, so much so that it overlaps and eventually becomes identical with an objective-scientific concept of material reality. This self-evident seamlessness remains intact insofar as the implicit premise of the normal space is maintained, i.e., its implicit assumption of a space that is basically cleansed of illegal acts of violence. The normal space is thus characterized not only by the dream of a peaceful society, but just as much, and perhaps even more fundamentally, by the implicit and negative assumption of the *absence* of illegal acts of violence. From a historical perspective, the crime genre constitutes both a confirmation and consolidation of this negative assumption—and an exploration of exceptions to this fiction that the normal space constitutes,

that is, when something problematic occurs, something unacceptable and fundamentally incompatible with the *modus vivendi* of the normal space. The crime genre tests and stages these transgressive exceptions, while at the same time offering ingenious models of solution.

The unsolved, mysterious crime is a perennial challenge to the normal space in that it stands as a parenthesis or exception around everything that this space implicitly guarantees; it thus ultimately questions the validity, the *reality*, of the space. It is important to remember here that in crime fiction, the crime rarely involves the neighbor's son stealing a bike or another criminal activity that can be easily solved.¹⁰ Quite the contrary, we are only ever encountering a particularly mysterious, malignant, or in other ways *exceptionally problematic* crime, whose apparent impossibility and resistance implicitly asks a fundamental question about the normal space, namely whether this space is in fact normative at all, that is, whether it is real. The very presence of this kind of crime questions the *normativity* of the normal space, typically enforced by the police or other state-affiliated institutions, and furthermore questions whether these institutions are sufficient; the transgressive, criminalized act thus constitutes a remnant of a kind, an exception that constantly challenges, problematizes, and ultimately threatens to undermine the normal space—or to turn this space into a zone of abnormality. I argue that the modern crime genre typically evolves around this mysterious remnant, around a particularly mysterious, malignant, or in other ways *exceptionally problematic* crime, whose apparent unsolvability implicitly asks whether what we assume to be a normal space is in fact normative at all or whether it is fiction.

Within the confines of the normal space, any violent act conducted by a non-state agent in principle poses a threat, not so much because a concrete-individual crime would constitute a real, existential threat—but simply because it threatens to reveal the *fiction* of the normal space, its unreality, that is, the fiction of a space whose very premise is the eradication of crime.¹¹ Incidentally, this is also why the concrete-individual crime as such—its nature, whatever it is, e.g., theft, murder etc.—is largely irrelevant. What we remember from an Agatha Christie story is less what the crime was all about, its nature, the motives, the people hurt, etc., but rather *how* the crime was committed and *how* it was solved.

Political Theology and Crime Fiction

This question leads us to consider the connections between crime fiction as a genre and some of the problems that political theology articulates, or more specifically whether the normal space really *is* normal or whether it is fiction, an illusion, a lie. Conceptualized by Carl Schmitt in the 1920s (but with a much older lineage),¹² political theology designates some of the problems of a transitional world becoming increasingly secular and immanent. It too addresses an unresolved remnant, a problematic, in secular societies—namely the legitimacy of political authority; in the absence of God, who has the right to monopolize the use of violence? and who possesses the definitional right—that is, the right to define something as legal and something else

as illegal—and on what basis?¹³ The normal space results from this transition towards the immanent, de-transcendentalized world, a process that reached a preliminary culmination point in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The point that Schmitt makes and which he attempts to encapsulate through the notion of political theology is that in modern society, human laws replace the notion of absolute justice; rational knowledge replaces the notion of absolute truth. Secularization here means that humans become judges instead of God, while justice becomes a concept to be settled in the court. Or: in secular societies, we act as if we have become God. In such a secular society, the unsolved crime poses a profound problem, because it exposes our human limitations and potentially reveals that we live in a meaningless world without any higher moral authority, that is, a world in which evil people get away with their evil deeds, and are perhaps even rewarded, while the innocent are punished. The unsolved crime thus questions the very idea of a society, the meaning of a community.

The crime genre can be seen as a response to this development, plotting ingenious solutions to ever-more-challenging mysteries. It is when the police and the judiciary are unable to solve a particular case—when the mystery refuses to be revealed—that the detective in crime fiction is summoned. Ordinary cases require trivial, mechanical, automatic, non-original, and random solutions—all of which are taken care of by the police. The police represent the law in its generality, the generally applicable law (and hence perhaps also a mechanical and de-individualized application of justice). On the other hand, crime fiction revolves around the ambiguous, the extraordinary, the singular, the unique, the spectacular, *the particularly sinister and mysterious event*.

In some of the earliest modern crime stories, the main purpose of the detective—for example, Edgar Allan Poe's Auguste C. Dupin—typically coincides with efforts to respond to the problem of political theology; that is, the detective's incredible and exceptional rationality and deductive skills bring us yet again within the vicinity of the transcendent, albeit notably in a wholly secular world. Thus, despite the detective's surprising insights, everything can in the end always be explained rationally, immanently, that is, by virtue of this world's phenomena. The immanent social order of the normal space is precisely characterized by the impossibility of the transcendent, the metaphysical, the magical, the supernatural; everything must, in principle, be explained through the same methods and frameworks of understanding.

The detective in that sense saves us from the collapse of the known physical universe; that is, the discovery that our human and scientific explanations and categories are not sufficient—that causes sometimes are not followed by the same effects, that the laws of gravity no longer apply, that ghosts really exist, that the dead may rise again. What the detective gives us is typically an incredible but nonetheless *natural* explanation of something that would otherwise remain inexplicable and hence question the very foundation of the known world. The traditional detective is an ambiguous figure in the sense that he or she on the one hand pays homage to the possibility of transcendence, i.e., in the form of the detective's genius, the almost magical ability

to understand and decode a truth that appears mysterious and enigmatic to everyone else, and on the other hand an unambiguous tribute to the order of immanence, that is, an order of absolute rationality; hence the soothing and deeply materialist explanation once the crime has been solved. The traditional detective thus allows us to have it both ways; the ability to decode absolute truth as the legitimate basis of distributing absolute justice—without at the same time at any point seriously undermining the normal space.

The locked room mystery as an allegory of the normal space

It is against this background that we may understand one of the crime genre's most persistent and most classic tableaux, namely *the mystery of the locked room*, and more specifically the mysterious crime that happens, impossibly, within the confines of a space where such a possibility has been eliminated, at least in principle. I argue that the mystery of the locked room allegorically embodies the idea of a normal space in which the crime or the transgressive event should in principle have been eliminated and hence become impossible—*but which nevertheless occurs*.

Crime fiction was from the very beginning closely tied to the emergence of the normal space, i.e., the carefully defined, delimited territorial space of the state suffused by the idea of absolute order. It is precisely the delimitation of the normal space that enables the understanding of its transgression as an exception, i.e., as a unique and individualized event, which thus, implicitly, confirms the exact opposite, namely, the totally immanent and peaceful space as the *norm*.

To the modern, sovereign state it becomes imperative to move away from tautological forms of legitimacy, i.e., legitimizing the monopoly on violence simply by referring to more violence, or to a transcendent-theological principle. Within the normal space, violence no longer possesses a natural occurrence in society, let alone a positive-vitalist force. This is why no matter how violently the state punishes the perpetrator of violence, it is never enough: the criminal act must be explained and understood, its neutralization justified and legitimized according to the principles guaranteed by the normal space. Furthermore, the unsanctioned, free-floating, and detached act of violence—that is, a violent incident not connected to a specific subject—is especially dangerous and undesirable *because* it is inexplicable and mysterious, that is, an act that could have been committed by anyone, including the state. The task of the state is thus not only to eradicate the unsanctioned use of violence, but equally to explain it and to connect this act to a punishable individual. It is in this perspective— in the increasingly paranoid eyes of the state—that all citizens gradually become at least potential criminals, that is, individuals threatening to undermine the state's monopoly on violence and in a further sense question the legitimacy of the normal space. In the locked room mystery or whodunnit crime story, the idea is that everyone becomes a suspect, that anyone could have done it, *and* that someone really did commit the crime. In fact, one could go even further and say that the person who looks the *least* suspicious is often the one who turns out to be the culprit, and conversely the one who looks the most suspicious turns out to be innocent—a cliché in crime fiction, which underlines the notion

that in the eyes of the state, we are all potential criminals. Only the detective—with his or her solution—can redeem the community from this festering suspicion that threatens to turn every one of us into a criminal.

In crime fiction there is always a culprit, someone who really did it. Trivial as this might sound, the point here is that one of the functions of crime fiction is precisely to *produce* a subject in relation to an otherwise free-floating act, a bit like the Cheshire cat's smile in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Oftentimes evil comes in many complex shapes and forms, derived from many different sources, a series of unrelated events or accidents happening simultaneously, or perhaps from non-human forces, like a tsunami or a pandemic. Crime fiction humanizes evil in the sense of identifying a single source of evil, a site of agency, someone to blame, and whose arrest and punishment may serve as a restoration of the idea of a meaningful, just society—in other words, the normal space.

The Pledge and the Katechon

Here, I want to turn to two contemporary—and perhaps somewhat atypical—articulations of crime fiction around the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century, Penn's *The Pledge* (2001) and von Trier's *The Element of Crime* (1984). The former is a film adaptation of Friedrich Dürrenmatt's story *Das Versprechen*. The plot begins a few hours before Jerry Black is about to retire as a police officer; a girl called Ginny Larsen, is found horribly murdered. When Jerry informs the grieving parents of the death of their child, the mother makes Jerry swear on his soul's salvation that he will find and arrest the murderer. The police arrest a man, but the details do not add up and the man commits suicide at the police station. The police decide to close the case, but Jerry is not convinced and starts re-investigating the case. He discovers several important clues—for example, a drawing by the murdered girl which contains hedgehogs, a black station wagon, and a huge man dressed in black—and also that the police have been unable to solve other cases involving missing or murdered children that are similar to the Ginny Larsen case. He buys an old gas station because he has figured out that the murderer might pass through the area—based on the murderer's previous movements. Here, he meets a woman named Lori and her little child Chrissy, and together they start a family life. Soon after, Chrissy starts to talk about a man she's met, who gives her chocolate pieces shaped like little hedgehogs, and who also happens to be driving in a black station wagon. Jerry immediately contacts his former colleagues and on the day Chrissy is supposed to meet the man at a remote location, the police are hiding in the background, ready to arrest the suspect. But no one arrives, and Jerry subsequently loses his mind. Driving back to the station, the police officers witness a terrible car accident, which happens to be a black station wagon. In other words, the film ends on an ambiguous note—with Jerry sitting alone at an abandoned and derelict gas station, drinking whisky, mumbling to himself, clearly in a state of mental and physical deterioration; while at the

same time suggesting that there really was someone out there, a man driving around in a black station wagon killing little girls.

Within the context of his argument about political theology, Carl Schmitt refers to the concept of the katechon, a biblical term, stemming from a passage in Second Thessalonians.¹⁴ It refers to an agent of God seeking to prevent the coming of antichrist, the breakout of chaos and disorder, but also, at the same time, a temporal delay of the coming of the kingdom of God. It is a figure that fights against the evil, but in doing so also prolongs the fight, deepens it, and thus in fact prevents the final overcoming or defeat of evil. And one could go even further and say that it is a figure that fights the antichrist, but also keeps the antichrist ever-present and alive through that very fight, perhaps even *producing* the antichrist, or at some point during that fight *becoming* the antichrist. It is thus a fight that eventually eradicates the clear boundaries between the katechon and the antichrist. The point here is that *The Pledge* can be read as a work that explores the ambiguity of the figure of the katechon.

At the beginning of the film, Jerry is about to end his work as a detective, but nonetheless continues to work on the Ginny Larsen case after he has retired and after the case has been closed. Jerry becomes weighed down by the solemn pledge to Ginny Larsen's grieving parents. Perhaps because he *recognizes* that this pledge ultimately entails not only one murdered girl, or many, but something altogether more fundamental. That the pledge to find the child murderer becomes much more than an empty gesture intended to comfort the desperately grieving parents—i.e., the fact that it becomes *real*, to the extent that it comes to haunt Jerry—is possibly a testimony to the fact that it touches upon something essential, a crystallization of the struggle that defines Jerry, his being, the very meaning of his work as a police detective during all those years, and which—along the lines of our argument here in this paper—one could formulate as *the belief in the normal space as absolutely just and truthful*; that is, Jerry represents the guarantor, the one who pledges to the rest of us that the normal space—as a space of absolute justice and truth—is real and legitimate. In other words, it is the reality of that space that is at stake.

Believing too much in the normal space

Within the normal space, the detective in crime fiction as we have seen constitutes an exceptional figure, one that is precisely defined by the promise to discover the truth and identify the true killer, that is, as distinct from simply finding *a* possible killer who could have been present at the time of the murder and thus someone who could possibly have done it. Officer Krolak, Jerry's younger colleague and the one taking over Jerry's old office after the latter's retirement, here represents the ordinary police, satisfied with an arrest of any subject who could possibly have committed the murder. Krolak's objective is precisely *not* absolute justice and truth first and foremost, but rather the fact *that someone* is identified as the plausible killer, which thus allows for the case to be closed.

The premise of the plot in *The Pledge* involves a situation in which Jerry, as the possible guarantor of the legitimacy of the normal space, is about to retire prematurely, i.e., while the criminal—or the antichrist—is still potentially out there. Jerry is uncertain as to whether the police have caught the right person, and he eventually becomes convinced that the true child murderer is still out there, and moreover that this person has done it before and will do it again. Retiring at this moment in time means—at least to the extent that Jerry represents an *exceptional* detective—that the entire legitimacy and *raison d'être* of the normal space is at stake. This insistence or doggedness is what makes Jerry transcend the status of the police; i.e., what makes him a *detective*, an exceptional figure, someone intent on finding the truth and not simply plugging a hole in the normal space.

It is in this perspective that one could argue that the detective as an exceptional figure occupies the position of the subject who believes a little too much in the fiction of the normal space, its perfection, its absolute nature, one that has replaced and thus eradicated the need for a transcendent dimension. Ironically, it is precisely the detective's stubbornness and persistence—what makes this figure exceptional—that eventually threatens to expose the fiction of the normal space, its limits, its underlying reality; that it is *not* absolute, transcendent, or semi-divine, but rather random and ultimately meaningless in terms of administering absolute justice and truth. The exceptional detective thus constitutes an ambiguous figure, or rather a figure embodying an ambiguity that is constitutive of the normal space itself. The exceptional detective is at one and the same time protecting the normal space from its enemies, but also, qua his or her exceptional status, a reminder of this space's limitations, its fictionality—a reminder of the fact that the normal space *needs* the exceptional detective to sustain its fiction. Incidentally, this is also why the police typically *dislike* the figure of the detective in crime fiction—another endearing cliché in crime fiction, one that we find in the earliest modern crime stories as well as in the latest versions on Netflix. It is in this sense that Jerry embodies the figure of the katechon, the one who prevents the coming of the antichrist, but at the same time prevents the normal space from transcending its limitations, its fictionality.

The absence of a redeeming moment in *The Pledge*

In the traditional detective story, there is typically a moment—however minimal—of disbelief, eccentricity, abnormality, or even madness during the detective's process of discovery, a process that often comes across as strange, at times offensive, even perverse or bizarre, but above all remains inexplicable and distinctly different from the police's methods. However, once the case has been truthfully solved, once the detective's explanation has fully satisfied our desire for the solution to the mystery—all this strangeness is redeemed and the detective is reincorporated into the normal space; the detective's temporary abnormality thus ends up reinforcing the normal space.

In *The Pledge*, this redeeming moment never occurs, and it is precisely because this moment is absent that the detective ends up threatening to reveal rather than reinforcing the normal space, that is, its fiction. Jerry's madness here signifies on the one hand the terrifying insight or awareness of the impossibility of keeping a sacred pledge in a secular realm—and on the other hand what one could see as the normal space's expulsion of Jerry, perhaps even a form of *revenge*; exposing Jerry as absolutely mad, fabricating, and untrustworthy.

The Pledge—much more than Friedrich Dürrenmatt's original story—constantly insists on retaining this ambiguity; on the one hand, it is evident that Jerry becomes more and more insane as the plot develops, and that the redemptive solution becomes ever more elusive and unrealistic, but on the other hand the film also clearly shows us that something mysterious is really happening; children *have* disappeared and been killed mysteriously, the police *have* been unable to solve these cases properly, the locations *do* form a strange and indicative pattern, the police *did* interrogate their man under highly problematic circumstances, Ginny's drawing *does* suggest something strange and suspicious, there *is* a black station wagon driving around, Chrissy *is* approached by a strange man, and she *does* receive chocolate pieces shaped like little hedgehogs from him, and, finally, a man in a black station wagon *is* in a car accident at the end of the film, perhaps on his way to meet Chrissy.

In other words, there *is* an objective reality that supports Jerry's theory. To everyone else, however, his theory seems like a crazy fantasy. That *The Pledge* throughout retains this ambiguity between on the one hand Jerry's gradually deteriorating psychological condition (i.e., that there was never a murderer other than the person who committed suicide in police custody) and a real child murderer out there (which thus at the same time implies Jerry's status as the exceptional figure pursuing truth and justice at all costs)—is precisely what brings to life the problem of political theology in the film.

The Element of Crime: to identify with and think like the criminal

Lars von Trier's early crime film *The Element of Crime*, like *The Pledge*, can be read as a story about the katechon's attempt to save the normal space from being revealed as fiction—by descending into a state of madness. The film's main character is the former police officer, Fisher, who has lived in Cairo for many years and is being called back to Europe to solve a mystery, the so-called Lotto murders, i.e., little girls selling lotto tickets who've been murdered in bestial ways.

The film begins with Fisher, now back in Cairo, going through a hypnosis session recalling what happened back in Europe. The main story of the film itself is thus placed within the frames of the hypnosis session. The Europe Fisher conjures up while being hypnotized is a dark and dystopian place shrouded in permanent darkness. As a detective, Fisher is heavily inspired by a textbook called *The Element of Crime*, written by Fisher's old mentor, Osborne. The basic thesis of the book is that in order to solve the exceptional crime, one must try to understand the criminal's mind and learn to think like this person. It is this method that gradually escalates into

insanity over the course of the film's story. In chasing the lotto killer, named Harry Grey, Fisher begins to behave more and more like him. He follows in his footsteps, imitates him, starts a relationship with Grey's former mistress, and finally inadvertently strangles a little girl he was supposed to have protected. That is to say, Fisher crosses the line of the identification and *becomes* the lotto murderer himself; a catastrophic coincidence of detective and criminal.

To imagine the exceptional crime outside the normal space

Why does this gradual identification take place? More specifically: why this ambiguity, to which Fisher is completely blind, i.e., the fact that he is increasingly being transformed into Harry Gray? In line with the argument I have pursued in this paper, one could say that Fisher's identification is a symptom of the gradual dissolution of the normal space. Within the dissolved normal space, crime and investigation are no longer clearly distinguishable—precisely because the ability to maintain a distance, and thus a distinction, erodes; everything flows together, the detective becomes the criminal, the investigation becomes the crime, or vice versa. The crucial point here is that in the dissolved normal space, it is no longer possible to tell the difference.

However, the film tries to hold on to this possibility of distinction—via the frame construction, Fisher's story being told within a hypnosis session. It is in this sense that one can say that the normal space paradoxically is saved from dissolution by the detective being declared insane. What the film thus attempts to envision is to imagine the exceptional crime outside the normal space. The film ends with Fisher desperately begging the therapist to wake him up—in other words, it concludes without the frame construction coming to an end; ambiguously, inconclusively. The point here is not simply that Fisher during the hypnosis session remembers the trauma of becoming the lotto murderer, Harry Grey, but more disturbingly that at some point it becomes unclear as to whether he really is Detective Fisher being hypnotized, or whether he is in fact Harry Grey, whether he was always Harry Grey from the very beginning, or whether Harry Grey *or* Detective Fisher ever existed in the first place.

The Element of Crime is thus a film that tries to imagine the impossible, namely the exceptional crime outside the framework of the normal space. This outside is not just a state of nature, lawlessness, or anarchy, but more specifically an amorphous space where distinctions can no longer be clearly drawn. In such an amorphous space, the act of solving a crime becomes impossible. Instead, what we witness is the collapse of the crime genre into something altogether different, e.g., a medical case story, a story about insanity.

Conclusion

Both *The Pledge* and *The Element of Crime* explore the limits of the implicit premise of the crime genre—the normal space—perhaps so radically that the only way the detective, as a figure of the katechon, can save this space, the credibility of this fictional space, is by surrendering to madness, that is, to a self-enclosed world separated—by way of madness—from the idea of a

space that remains uncontaminated by the unsolved crime. What both works explore is the inherent strangeness of the normal space, its inherent anomaly, or what Carl Schmitt has called the miracle of the normal space, that is, the state's ability to pull us out of the swamp of the state of nature, out of civil war, permanent violence, and anarchy, and to create a fiction involving the idea that the political body is fundamentally rational and peaceful, and that the normal society can solve all the political and moral problems of the world *rationally and hence peacefully*—albeit sometimes only, grudgingly, in unique cases, with the help of the exceptional detective.

Endnotes:

1. See Thompson, *Fiction, Crime, and Empire* (1991), Gosselin, *Multicultural Detective Fiction* (1999), Mukherjee, *Crime and Empire: The Colony in Nineteenth-Century Fictions* (2003), Reitz, *Detecting the Nation* (2004), Matzke et.al., *Postcolonial Postmortems* (2006), Miller, *Cross-Cultural Connections in Crime Fiction* (2012), Pepper et. al., *Globalization and the State in Contemporary Crime Fiction* (2016), and Nilsson et. al. *Crime Fiction as World Literature* (2017).
2. As Cook argues the detective story “has possessed a recognizable and stable narrative ... an essential homogeneity, a unity of structure, theme and language which meets a deep desire in the reader” (X). Regarding the genre's homogeneity and conservatism, see also Moretti 11.
3. See Todorov 159-160.
4. As Dennis Porter observes, “in a detective story, the law is never brought to justice” (121).
5. See Hardt and Negri, *Empire* 3-21.
6. See Elden, *Birth of Territory* 2, 15; and Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and its Competitors* 153-180.
7. See Joas, *War and Modernity* 53.
8. See Elias, *The Civilizing Process* 163.
9. As Newman writes, “In this flattened-out world there can be no place for hierarchy or genuine authority” (26).
10. As Boltanski argues, crime fiction embodies a reworking of the anxiety generated by the conception of a social reality based on an idea of absolute peace. See Boltanski 15.
11. From a political perspective, the real danger emerges when an isolated, exempt act is elevated into a general tendency, which would expose the fictionality of the normal space, and hence potentially throw the state into an existential struggle for survival.
12. See Newman 5.
13. See Schmitt, *Political Theology* 5.
14. See Schmitt, *Nomos of the Earth* 59-62.

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