

## **Foreword:** **The Common Place of Crime**

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To think the closure of representation is thus to think the cruel powers of death and play which permit presence to be born to itself, and pleasurable to consume itself through the representation in which it eludes itself in its deferral. To think the closure of representation is to think the tragic: not as the representation of fate, but as the fate of representation. Its gratuitous and baseless necessity.

And it is to think why it is *fatal* that, in its closure, representation continues.

—Jacques Derrida  
“The Theater of Cruelty and the Closure of Representation” (emphasis in original)

Homer Simpson: When I held that gun in my hand, I felt a surge of power . . . like God must feel when he’s holding a gun.

—*The Simpsons*  
Episode “The Cartridge Family”

### **I.**

Where I live now, television viewing preferences can almost look like patriotic dilemmas wrapped in unwholesome tastes while all is really just a limitation of options. There is not much to choose from, and the better part of what I have chosen, as it turns out, is crime drama coming out of the States. To be more precise, while I thought I was an innocent subscriber to a range of American drama, I found myself getting an overwhelming dosage of dramatized crime. From breakfast to dinner, when I sip the first cup of coffee of the day or when I snack late at night, I am being fed crime material at all times, 24/7. The *C.S.I.* franchise occupies the most sobering hours as well as the fuzziest. The long-standing *Law and Order* and its spinoffs are rerun around the clock, across competing subscription programmers. And if *C.S.I.* has reinvented the police procedural line,

new subgenres keep coming along. There is a new series about a forensic investigation expert double-dutying as a serial killer of perpetrators who have escaped law enforcement (*Dexter*); there are series about exceedingly loveable outlaws (*Prison Break*, *Sons of Anarchy*). In one new production the detective tries to strike a balance between his human side and the mythological world he is tasked to see (*Grimm*), in another the detective pretends to see the world as a psychic (*Psych*). There are stories about detectives who are freaks (*Monk*), and there are those about relatively normal detectives (*Life*, *The Glades*). While the subcategory of forensics is going strong (*Bones*), that of profiling has gone through revamping and made a team comeback (*Criminal Minds*). Labor division is essential: a show concerns only criminal cases related to the navy (*NCIS: Naval Criminal Investigative Service*); another focuses solely on a soft-talking hostage rescue team (*Flashpoint*). In the meantime, classics still have their kick (*Alfred Hitchcock Presents*). And then, of course, courtroom drama stands as a distinct turf of its own.

The extent to which televised drama can seem to fulfill all the literary conventions by revolving around the subject of crime—this is something I got to witness while studying and working in the U.S. (And I am not even counting shows that on the surface seem far removed from the crime genre such as my all-time favorite *The Simpsons*, which I think really makes a much more subtle rendition of the everydayness of crimes and misdemeanors than all of the above combined—a good reason why it is presented on the regular Fox channel, not Fox Family.) At any rate, the prominence of the theme of crime in primetime American television is something I do not find in Taiwan.

## II.

The word *theory* shares the same Greek root as the word *theater*: *thea*, denoting “a viewing.” *Theater* literally means “a place for viewing,” whereas the etymological variations of *theory* suggest different types of viewing such as “looking at” and “contemplating.” It would seem that the term *theory* evokes a simultaneity of seeing and the mental representation of what is seen, without much concern with the medium of such representations or the place from which to see. In the long tradition of Western thought, theory—or philosophy for that matter—has indeed tended to present thinking as self-presence, as self-generating. Yet many modern and contemporary thinkers have had the good sense to call such gestures of self-affection into question. They appeal to the “theater of theory,” to the very form which renders the development of thinking possible, and to the site where what is

seen is transmitted to or translated into thought—in other words, they draw attention to the fact that if theory takes shape and takes place, it takes place in some kind of *mise-en-scène*. To theorize is to stage the process of thinking.

The connection of Freud's thinking with the figure of theatricality, for instance, is a commonplace in psychoanalysis scholarship. Not only do Freud's central concepts pivot on the most famed family in Greek tragedy, he has drawn on the figure of the stage fairly frequently. His most significant moves of theorizing the subject, one may say, are effectively facilitated by theatricalization. *The Interpretation of Dreams* delineates the subject's (potential) self recognition in the process of deciphering the dream work. At this stage, when Freud reads dreams mostly as wish fulfillments, the unconscious is described as a director exhausting every means to stage desire (Lyotard 165). Even in his later years when he shifts attention to drives, according to Jean-François Lyotard, Freud still relies heavily on the figure of theatricality for his theorization of the subject. While drives are less readily perceptible, we may still try to transcribe them by observing the operations of the *mise-en-scène* of words, images, and affects (Lyotard 168-69). The inquiry now has turned into one about representation in general.<sup>1</sup>

Walter Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book, according to critics, is significant not only for its innovative approach to the baroque mourning play, but also for its penetrating theorization of the subject in theatrical terms. There, as Rainer Nagèle notes, Benjamin constantly plays out the epistemological as well as theatrical underpinnings of such German terms as *vorstellen* ("to put forward," "to present," "to imagine") and *darstellen* ("to present," "to represent," "to depict") in his

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida in "Freud and the Scene of Writing" would contend that in his employment of writing as the trope and scene of psychoanalysis Freud remains stuck in the Western system of representation (Derrida 246-91). Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe also notes the mechanism of representation in Freudian thinking: he sees Freud's thought as quintessentially "tragic" and argues that the lesson of "tragic thought" is the inevitability of representation. Samuel Weber, however, detects the presence of the "circus" and "clowns" in Freud's psychoanalytic theater, which he believes forcefully challenges the Aristotelian doxa of (tragic) recognition and complicates the staging of the subject's self perception with elements of the uncanny, the ridiculous, and the farcical (Weber 251-76). Last but not least, while he is known for configuring the unconscious as a language, Jacques Lacan is among the first to identify the importance of theatricality in Freud's work. Lacan proposes that the German term *Rücksicht auf Darstellbarkeit*, which refers to one of the components of dream work and which is usually translated as *rôle de la possibilité de figuration* in French ("role of the possibility of figuration" in Alan Sheridan's English translation and "role of the possibility of representation" in Bruce Fink's translation), be translated as *égard aux moyens de la mise en scène* (for our purposes, Fink's translation, "consideration of the means of staging," is more apt than Sheridan's "consideration of the means of representation"). See Lacan, *Écrits* (French original) 511; *Écrits: A Selection* (trans. Sheridan) 161; Lacan, *Écrits* (trans. Fink) 425.

explication of a modern subject that is divested of interiority and can come into being only by looking as a spectator at its own show—theatricality thus stands as an exteriority marking the splitness of the self (Nagële 1-27).

Or, in the review article where he would amicably predict the twentieth century to be the Deleuzian century, Michel Foucault, too, refers to some kind of “philosophical theater,” which he thinks Gilles Deleuze has helped recast in a new light. Foucault says that in Deleuze’s attempt to dismantle the Western philosophy of representation and its paraphernalia such as origin, identity, and mimesis, Deleuze not just presents a new system of thought but brings to light the eventfulness of thinking. The Deleuzian “event of thought” (*la pensée*), as Foucault views it, figures as “mime” or “repetition without a model” (Foucault 179). The theatricality here points to the process that forms thought, not as a search for truth, but as a production of the phantasm of thought; not as a maneuver of meaning by the subject’s assuming the position of the object, but as a repetition as singular as a throw of the dice (176-79).

Of these better-known examples of the staging figure in theory and philosophy, what is consistently made clear is the frame and framing in the process of philosophical presentations. As Timothy Murray puts it, theatricality is “what performs and lays bare the mediating procedures of reflexivity that give rise to thought, text, and image while proving false the utopic postwar notion of the unprejudiced” (Introduction 2-3). The important book that Murray edited in the mid-1990s, which clusters some of the most representative theoretical texts in contemporary French thought that draw on the theater figure in one way or another, reflects a significant rerouting of philosophy in our time, a theatrical turn, as it were.

The trace of the theatrical in philosophy, however, is not new. As Samuel Weber argues, the conception of theater has in effect accompanied Western thinkers since antiquity—see, for instance, the scene of the Platonic cave. And if the earlier metaphysicians have a fear for theater and have attempted to delimit its purposes or even condemn its existence, Weber says, it is because theater calls forth a kind of exteriority that threatens the doctrine of presence and self-identity championed by ontology (1-30). What the above-mentioned contemporary thinkers, among many others, have sought to do is to elucidate the ineluctability of the staging in which thinking or theorizing takes place.

What I here call the common place of crime, thus, is not just the ubiquity of crime as a plot mover in pop culture, but the stunning commonness of the crime motif in the *mise-en-scène* of our theoretical formulations.

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