

Middlesex University Research Repository

An open access repository of

Middlesex University research

<http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk>

Cobley, Paul ORCID logo ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8222-159X> (2016) Geopolitical reality: the thriller, global power, and the logic of revelation. In: Globalization and the State in Contemporary Crime Fiction. Pepper, Andrew and Schmid, David, eds. Crime Files . Palgrave MacMillan, London, pp. 197-216. . [Book Section] (doi:10.1057/978-1-137-42573-7_11)

Final accepted version (with author's formatting)

This version is available at: <https://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/20010/>

Copyright:

Middlesex University Research Repository makes the University's research available electronically.

Copyright and moral rights to this work are retained by the author and/or other copyright owners unless otherwise stated. The work is supplied on the understanding that any use for commercial gain is strictly forbidden. A copy may be downloaded for personal, non-commercial, research or study without prior permission and without charge.

Works, including theses and research projects, may not be reproduced in any format or medium, or extensive quotations taken from them, or their content changed in any way, without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). They may not be sold or exploited commercially in any format or medium without the prior written permission of the copyright holder(s).

Full bibliographic details must be given when referring to, or quoting from full items including the author's name, the title of the work, publication details where relevant (place, publisher, date), pagination, and for theses or dissertations the awarding institution, the degree type awarded, and the date of the award.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Middlesex University via the following email address:

eprints@mdx.ac.uk

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated.

See also repository copyright: re-use policy: <http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/policies.html#copy>

Geopolitical reality: the thriller, global power, and the logic of revelation

PAUL COBLEY

Introduction: the thriller, realism and crime fiction

A scholarly preference for interrogating an entity designated ‘crime fiction’ as opposed to the broader, more encompassing genre of ‘the thriller’ is pronounced. As a category, it is clear that ‘crime fiction’ outnumbers ‘thriller’ by a significant proportion, both in contemporary academic criticism and in the middle-brow discourse of the broadsheet newspapers. ‘Crime fiction,’ then, has often been the terrain upon which battles are played out regarding what is most ‘realistic’ in terms of place (mean streets or Mayhem Parva), detail (e.g. the police procedural), motivation (usually in the committing of murder), and plotting (psycho-social causes for the upset to equilibrium induced by crime). Crime fiction criticism is often associated, too, with canon-building and debates about what constitutes ‘good’ writing (Keating 1992) or appropriate ‘language’ (Chandler 1950). Indeed, ‘crime fiction’ has become the master category, as witnessed in the title and contributions to the current volume of essays.

Yet, this was not always the case. The ‘thriller’ once enjoyed a lively existence as a designation for a broad spectrum of generic works, especially those which grew out of the conspiracy narratives of Buchan, Greene, and Fleming (Denning 1987; Palmer 1978; Watson 1971). It designated fictional texts dealing with crime, espionage and *both*. This is not the place to call for a return to the broader category, even if such a turnaround would be possible to effect. Nevertheless, it is apparent that something has been omitted, marginalized, or repressed in the undue

focus on the specificities of realism in ‘crime fiction.’ Despite its adherence to the master category, the current volume interrupts the critical hierarchy by observing the way in which the genre has necessarily incorporated – in its maintenance of verisimilitude – the death of certainties about the state, territorial borders, policing (in the broad sense), and the law.

Some collections (Evans and White 2012; King and Knight 2014) have noted the changes wrought by globalization on detective heroes, local crime-solving, police operatives, limited locales, specific business operations, and family configurations or the ‘internationalization’ of crime fiction such that there are many versions of it in different countries. The following essay, by contrast, considers contemporary narratives which are always already concerned with transnational conspiracies, global operations of business and capital, national and international security, global locales and tangled institutional, political, religious, and ethnic relations. It contends that the limited literary-critical concerns of crime fiction criticism have led to the neglect of the broader genre of ‘the thriller.’ That catholic conception of the genre allows for a comparison of the structures of conspiracy and revelation that can easily be forgotten when the concern is with how psychologically consistent the behavior of a character is or how convincing the description of a milieu might be.

The thriller: conspiracy and totality

The designation ‘thriller’ in scholarship on the topic was particularly helpful in drawing attention to the cultural logics of capitalism that ran through not just spy narratives, but also those genres concerned with more localized crime. In an essay on

globalization in the genre, Pepper (2011: 422) refers to the “crime and espionage novel (or indeed a hybridization of both genres)” in recent years as having been steered “into uncharted territory.” This is a result of the internationalization of crime and the nullification of borders that have seen a complex and nuanced state power suffuse all areas of existence, rendering the concept of sovereignty of domains extremely problematic. For explicit espionage narratives this conjuncture – or the prefigurements of it – have always obtained. The spy thriller has always been an international genre, certainly since Buchan and even since James Fenimore Cooper, no matter how localized its narratives might be. Its international bearing, in fact, is integral to the conspiracy in the thriller; it is for this reason that Jameson (1992: 3) notes that the

‘conspiratorial text’ . . . whatever other messages it emits or implies, can be taken to constitute an unconscious, collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in a late twentieth century whose abominations are heightened by their concealment and their bureaucratic impersonality.

The paranoid fear of conspiracy has taken different political forms in different social formations or ideological configurations, yet the isomorphism of conspiracy fears – particularly the fear of property theft in the period of burgeoning capitalism – and the crystallization of the thriller genre seem inescapable. Palmer (1978) puts fear of conspiracy at the very centre of the genesis and structure of the thriller. His structural study sees the genre as providing fictional palliatives for the ravages of capitalism through resolutions in the social order and through the triumph of professionalism and competitive individualism over crime. Whilst this latter formula seems overly neat nowadays, it is instructive to remember firstly, that the broader genre encompasses,

especially, espionage narratives that are necessarily international in bearing, proposing a conspiracy which underlies or potentially disrupts quotidian existence; and, secondly, that the residues of conspiracy— even if properly located in reader expectations (Cobley 2005) – remain, no matter how parochial the concerns of any given narrative in the more narrowly defined crime fiction genre.

Undoubtedly, conspiracy fears can be localized or globalized, even if the tendency is towards the latter. What is argued here, though, is that some areas of the thriller genre necessarily invoke geopolitical realities by dint of the regime of verisimilitude by which they operate. Where the genre as a whole seeks to marry its ‘rules’ with the *doxa* (public opinion about the world – see Todorov 1977), the spy thriller in particular effects such a marriage by appealing to elements of the popular belief in conspiracy. It relies on historical specificities but also feeds off neglected generalities of geopolitics. Jameson’s point, above, clearly corresponds to the espionage thriller’s customary revelation that there exists a series of hidden or unacknowledged connections which, if not constituting a totality, make up much of the fabric of social existence.

Alternative history

Two recent thriller novels, Tom Cain’s *The Accident Man* (2007) and *The Network* (2010) by Jason Elliott take a historical approach to revealing the nature of the contemporary conjuncture. One of their main functions is - like the thrillers of Frederick Forsyth, for example - to offer an account of how the West arrived at its most recent geopolitical predicament. This is a fraught enterprise, no matter how accomplished or how poor the style of writing is that conveys it. Conservative accounts run the risk of exposing geopolitical fissures that they sought to paper over;

progressive accounts face the danger of producing a turgid disquisition without engaging the reader.

The first of these two novels, by a journalist writing under a pseudonym, features Samuel Carver, an ex-serviceman who specializes in assassinations that he disguises as ‘accidents.’ In the opening scenes he has arranged for a fatal car crash to take place in the Pont de l’Alma tunnel in the center of Paris on the orders of a mysterious controller named Max. Following the ‘accident,’ Carver realizes that Max has abandoned him and that from that moment onwards Carver is a target for elimination himself. As he laments his role in the accident, it soon transpires that the action is taking place in August 1997 and that a princess has been killed (Diana is not explicitly mentioned) and Carver has been set up. In addition to this rather hackneyed historical pivot (the novel was published precisely ten years after the death of the ‘people’s princess’), there are numerous indications that this novel is not the best crafted piece of writing. It is derivative in general and sometimes in specifics, such as the scene (73) where Carver is chased by a giant ball through a narrow tunnel and stumbles momentarily (a charitable reading might see it as a tribute to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*). Clichéd dialogue such as “If I’m going to be executed, you might at least tell me why” (112) has been redolent of poor plotting for at least a century of the genre; and there are also long passages of expository dialogue. Yet, much of the clumsiness derives from attempts to attain verisimilitude through the kind of accuracy of detail in which over-specificity (excessive attention to technical facts) outweighs realism (balanced depiction of forces in plot and story):

He got out the gun he’d specified, a SIG-Sauer P226 pistol, with a Colt/Browning short-recoil mechanism and no safety-catch. There were twelve

Cor-Bon 9mm 115 grain +P Jacketed Hollowpoints in the magazine. The SIG was the . . . (33).

It looked like a regular long-barrelled torch, the kind police or security guards use. It was, in fact, a portable diode pump laser, otherwise known as a dazzler.

Developed as a non-fatal weapon for US police forces, but taken up . . . (49)

Pedants may or may not be satisfied that the author has done his research. Either way, the scope of the narrative ensures that a fair portion of the dialogue and exposition allows at least a glimpse at the *realpolitik* constituting Carver's world. Thus, there are asides that demonstrate the wide geopolitical sweep with which this genre is concerned:

The administrative headquarters of Malgrave and Company were located behind a glossy black front door flanked by stone columns and surmounted by a carved family crest. The great stone building exuded confidence and security. Carver guessed it dated back to the early days of the century, the era of global trade and national prosperity that flourished before its illusions of unstoppable progress were shattered in the slaughterhouse of the First World (429-430)

Where specificity of technical details might seem jarring to critical readers, it would be unfortunate if the criticism of style was allowed to get in the way of the wider vision that the genre attempts to reveal.

After *The Accident Man*, Carver returned in a series of further 'accidents,' as is the custom in modern publishing. A rare non-series thriller sharing some similarities with *The Accident Man*, but also with some instructive differences, is *The Network*. The story involves the narrator, Ant Taverner, an ex-serviceman and sometime intelligence operative who has previously worked in Afghanistan with a close friend (a Muslim named Manny who is a double-agent penetrating to the center

of Al Qaeda). In the months before 9/11, Taverner is re-recruited by ‘the Network,’ a ‘forward-looking’ splinter group of the UK intelligence services that is represented by a formidable woman simply called ‘The Baroness.’ Taverner’s task is to destroy some Stinger missiles stored in Afghanistan by bin Laden; but the main reason he takes the job is that it offers him the opportunity to be reunited with, and liberate, Manny. To prepare for the mission, he goes to stay with a special ops veteran, referred to throughout only as ‘H’, who puts Taverner through a series of exercises and tests.

H looms large in the narrative and the early, fast-moving, and economically written chapters of the volume focus on Taverner’s training. The setting and the *raison d’etre* of the Network, though, are clearly indispensable. The inside knowledge of Afghanistan presented by Elliott, reputedly an ex-Mujahideen volunteer during the war with the Soviets and certainly the author of a respected travel book on the region, is one of the implicit appeals to realism in the novel. Understandably, the integration of a nuanced picture of the region poses a challenge in achieving a balance of thrills and a history lesson. Soon after arriving in Afghanistan for the mission, H authoritatively declares “Every part of it’s different, like a different country. You could never win a war here” (296). Already, however, the lesson has been inaugurated by the Baroness: “‘Have you thought’, she asks, ‘of the wider consequences of the war in Afghanistan and how much we will all be affected by it?’” (130). Her discourse is then reported by Taverner as narrator: “The Western powers will no longer fight conventional wars because the enemy will be more diffuse. It will, in part, grow out of the disaffected peoples of the Islamic world, she tells us” (130).

From the outset, then, *The Network* is explicit in its attempts to introduce into the narrative the political and historical intractability of conflict with Afghanistan.

Where *The Accident Man* clumsily trades in forensic detail, *The Network* does

something slightly different. Despite a somewhat foolish observation in a *New York Times Sunday Book Review* that the novel “may be the ideal thriller for the age of ‘C.S.I.’” (Harshaw 2010), *The Network* tries to establish its verisimilitude by reference to the rules of the genre rather than by the introduction of ‘reality effects’. It does this by some general swipes at fiction:

There are no tie-downs in films about aircraft theft, much less tie-downs with stiff ropes tied too tightly to undo with cold trembling hands (17).

On self-defence, things simplify. Everything I’ve seen in films is bollocks, he says (115).

But the more specific rules of the genre that are being brought into question are the SAS memoirs and fictional thrillers by former military personnel. Thus, the narrator observes of H,

He’s loyal too, I’m thinking to myself, to his former Regimental commanding officer, Peter de la Billiere. By the sound of it he doesn’t care much for the celebrity authors the Regiment has also produced over the past few years (86).

Then, later, in the field: “‘It’s like an Andy McFuck novel’, says H with a grin, removing the magazine from one of the pistols and peering along the sights” (262) neatly following up Taverner’s earlier (72) assertion that Andy McNab is “far too intellectual for me”.

H, then, or the mystique which surrounds him, is the main figure in this novel. Taverner is like a Dr. Watson, while evil lurks elsewhere, offstage, in the character of bin Laden, first mentioned (64) as the financier behind the bombings of US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Although never featuring as a fleshed out person in the narrative, bin Laden is an actant, the target of a failed US attack using cruise missiles in Pakistan after 1998 (154) and the object of desire for those CIA operatives who

dream of “nailing Bin Laden in some Tom Clancy black op” (154). Reference to him also allows reportage of the developing situation in Afghanistan. Indeed, during Taverner’s pre-op in Khartoum, his liaison with Jameela reveals that she is the ex-wife of one of bin Laden’s half brothers, allowing the narrative to relate, in her story, the entry of the bin Laden family to center stage of geopolitics. Despite bin Laden never appearing as a player in the novel, this narration must take place because it points up the parallels between Al Qaeda, sometimes translated as ‘The Foundation’ but a network nevertheless, and the Network. After being recruited for the mission that will send him back to Afghanistan, Taverner muses:

The Baroness long ago taught us the power of a single thought: that in the Network we are never alone. There are always others among its members in similar or more difficult situations, suffering or struggling with the same situations, unable to reveal their true purpose to the world, and this knowledge has often come to my aid, as it does now (57).

Taking the parallelism of Al Qaeda and the Network into account, along with Taverner’s compulsion to return to Afghanistan, it is a short step to the philosophical crux of the novel’s concern with free will, as Taverner thinks to himself that “The interesting question is whether a man who knows he isn’t free lives a different kind of life from the one who imagines he is” (119). The question is not merely an idle juxtaposition of the Network and Al Qaeda, however; it is more a pitting of the world of global political realities against sedated quotidian existence in the West. The burden of knowing what goes into the construction of ‘freedom’ in the globalized world is the spy thriller’s preoccupation. This is the case whether the conspiracy is the somewhat fanciful one behind the death of Diana or the more credible one involving secret Western forays into pre-9/11 Afghanistan. Both are enacted on a global stage.

Murder, killing and genocide

The burden of knowing in the spy thriller is part and parcel of the professionalism that allows the protagonists to act in an international arena. For Palmer (1978), it is precisely the resourcefulness and improvisation of the thriller hero that embodies capital's image of its putatively entrepreneurial self and colors the reproduction of the social relations of production. This professionalism is manifest in many guises and is contrasted with the inflexible bureaucracy and over-planning of the villain and the ineptitude of the amateur. In *The Accident Man* and *The Network*, such relations are inflected in very different ways but to similar ends. In *The Network*, H is the supreme professional, contrasting in so many ways to 'fictional' SAS heroes. Rather than being a 'killing machine,' his persona is completely played down to maximum effect; thus, discussing caterpillars in his garden, "'They're eating my wisteria', he says, 'but I don't like to kill the little buggers'" (247). Taverner, only ever referring to 'the Regiment' (rather than the SAS, the SBS or any of the UK Special Forces), adds:

Nothing makes him stand out in either habit or appearance, unless you count the small knife that always hangs from the back of his belt or the length of opaque plastic that he carries in his wallet, which he can put to so many different uses (247).

Reading the Regiment's newsletter at H's house, Taverner suggests that "It's as interesting as a village parish magazine. Nothing could be further from the sensationalism of all the books with flaming daggers on their fronts, which now seem absurd to me" (246). H's professionalism is the hero of this novel in the same way

that Chuck Yeager's is in *The Right Stuff* (1985; or even in *Interstellar* 2014). His ordinariness provides a bridge between geopolitical-military professionalism and civilian society subsistence, even if it belies or conceals the qualities of improvisation, as opposed to bureaucratic knowledge, that are required in the field.

Carver's professionalism in *The Accident Man* is rather more egregious. Unlike H, whose qualities are rendered through a first-person narrative by Taverner, Carver is presented in the third person narrative as recognizably heroic. Yet the professionalism of both is constituted similarly by improvisation. Against the odds, Carver turns the tables on his persecutors and starts to hunt them down. Closing in on his quarry in a bar, he notices a man

looking straight at Carver and jabbering into a phone. That was a giveaway to start with. He snapped the phone shut the moment he caught Carver's eye. That was the clincher. Carver walked up to the bar, shaking his head at the idiocy of a man who didn't even have the brains to feign a lack of interest (333).

He stands apart from amateurs and it is inevitable that he will outwit the arch-bureaucrat, Zhukovski, no matter how much torture he sustains. Carver is not a professional for its own sake, however. He has a moral code, especially where his comrades-in-arms are concerned (367) and, like all such agents, he suffers corrosion of the soul while justifying collateral damage: "He believed he made the world a better, safer place. Sometimes people got caught in the crossfire" (40) and

He tried to rationalize what he did as a form of pest control, unpleasant, but necessary. After the Visar job he'd looked, as he always did, for a place where he could wind down and try to clear his mind of what he knew, but did not want to admit: that every additional killing, no matter how many lives it saved, no

matter how logically it could be justified, added a little more corrosion to his soul (24).

Two points arise from this. Firstly, like H, Carver has operated at the epicenter of events with considerable geopolitical implications, a fact that places on him the burden of knowing. Yet his enterprise is laid bare when he considers the circumstances in which he was fooled into the Parisian tunnel job: “To get someone good you’d need misdirection. You’d feed them a pile of crap about taking out a car carrying, say, a radical Islamic terrorist planning a major atrocity. Because that would seem like a job worth doing” (456). This is the state of exception in plain speech - the theory of Schmitt (1922) and, later, Agamben (2005) in which law and honesty can be abandoned in order to maintain sovereignty - transposed onto the fate of a fictional character. Even as an instrument of the state of exception, which he recognizes at the moment he realizes he has been fooled, Carver’s professionalism remains intact. Rather than finding out about it via the internet, like H and Taverner, he is a firsthand witness of the process by which the conspiracy that constitutes geopolitical reality effects the illusion of peaceful existence for citizens of the West.

The second matter to note here bears more on the genre as a whole: the role of professionalism and the mode of presenting violence. When a character in the spy thriller is forced to consider collateral damage, it exposes what is implicit in the operation of spies as a whole: that they are protecting their employers’ interests while violating the interests of others. So, in addition to witnessing geopolitical reality, in espionage fiction there is the illusion of agency, in the guise of professionalism, whilst the character occupies the role of a mere functionary. This dynamic is repeatedly worked through in the espionage thriller’s relationship between spies and their controllers, an obvious invocation of the worker/line-manager relationship. The

difference is in the stakes, particularly where collateral damage occurs. This does not always *explicitly* involve property, although there have been thrillers about industrial espionage and most thrillers are concerned with the issue of private and state capital. Instead, collateral damage is most frequently a matter of violence against people.

It should be remembered that, in the broader genre to which spy fiction belongs, violence against people also takes place. ‘Cozy’ detective fiction exemplified by Agatha Christie and *Midsomer Murders* involves, usually, an individual murder which, in the mainstream of the genre, sets up what many have assumed is its key locus of interest: the puzzle. Later developments of this killing theme involve serial murder and suspense. Crime fiction, as distinct from the ‘cozy’ detective genre, has involved psycho-social motivation and realism in its dealing with individual or serial murder. Hence this subgenre is fundamentally concerned with atypical acts of murder. These are committed in sometimes tangled social and psychological environments; nevertheless, they are susceptible of solving and resolution. For this reason, I have argued elsewhere (2012) that murder in crime fiction is a reactionary art. The thriller, on the other hand, is quintessentially geopolitical in its co-ordinates. At all times the conspiracy at the center of thrillers is a sign for a crime which, globally, is depressingly more common than the individual, transparently motivated murder: that is, genocide.

The genre sometimes interrogates or draws attention to genocide obliquely, without the need for it to be narrated specifically. It should be clear that the term ‘genocide’ here refers to murder of distinct groups of people for definite political purposes; yet, it is surely closely related to the multiple murders that occur for political ends in many thrillers. Taking a sample of recent spy thrillers such as *Salt* (2010), *The Cold Light of Day* (2011), *The Expatriate* (2012), *Zero Dark Thirty*

(2012), *A Most Wanted Man* (2014) and *The November Man* (2014), all of them feature multiple murder and/or offscreen genocide in the service of geopolitical interests or in the service of occluding geopolitical interests. Even less physical, ‘retro’ spy thrillers such as *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* (2011) and *The Game* (2015) feature the same themes, notwithstanding the fact that genocide might be wholly offstage. Offstage genocide is prevalent, too, in many post 9/11 thrillers: a CIA agent might set a trap for a terrorist responsible for numerous killings in Europe (*Body of Lies* 2007); a private black ops agent might be set up for assassination (*Haywire* 2011); an amnesiac assassin might go off grid and attempt to redeem himself for his past actions (the Bourne films, 2002 on); a CIA undercover agent with Al Qaeda might be charged with preventing terrorists spreading a plague (*The Faithful Spy* 2006); the leader of a Counter Terrorist unit of MI5 might realize that a decisive cache of Al Qaeda weapons is closer to home than she thought (*Close Call* 2014). All involve multiple state-sponsored killings and/or a scenario of genocide enacted for geopolitical, rather than individual psycho-social, reasons.

However, while I would argue that the thriller is closely associated with the politics of genocide and crime fiction is typically associated with localized murder, the issue must be qualified in order to take into account the vagaries of representation. In such a qualification, it is possible to identify why the reality effects of crime fiction have been so comprehensively studied. John Corner (1995) proposes a distinction between what he calls ‘turn-on’ violence and ‘turn-off’ violence as they appear in media texts. ‘Turn-on’ violence is usually employed in sequences of heightened action, to provide excitement or to dramatize particular aspects of characterization and/or plot. ‘Turn-off’ violence, by contrast, usually occurs in the moral framings of everyday life and, as such, is likely to incite disturbance or even distress as opposed to

excitement. The distinction has some applicability across both audio-visual texts and print fiction but, for the purposes of the current argument about the thriller, it is notable that there are narratives that switch between both modes. In the James Bond films, for example the bodies of the faceless minions of the villain routinely pile up when Bond exercises ‘turn-on’ violence and this has continued in the more recent issues from the franchise, despite the exquisite parody of the fate of one such minion in *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (1999). Simultaneously, the Bond narratives also feature the ‘turn-off’ violence that ensues when Bond or an associate (e.g. Leiter in *License to Kill* 1989) is tortured by the villain. The combination of ‘turn-on’ and ‘turn-off’ is not entirely alien to crime fiction. But, given the thriller’s geopolitical orientation, it is not unreasonable to read the ‘turn-on’ – or, at least, ‘neutral’ – violence as being on the side of that collateral damage and unseen genocide which underwrites Western polity, while ‘turn-off’ violence hits close to home, even at Western polity, no matter which character is the perpetrator.

In terms of the broad thriller genre, it would be wrong to assume that ‘turn-off’ violence entails greater artistry, realism, or moral superiority. There seems to be a flavor of this assumption in much of the acclaim that has been lavished on so-called Scandi Noir crime fiction. I have raised this issue for different purposes elsewhere (Cobley 2012) but, for the present context, it is worth noting that one feature of the Danish television crime serial *The Killing* (2007) that was repeatedly lauded was the prolonged narration of the aftermath of the single murder and its attendant claims to ‘realism’ (e.g. Graham 2011: 20–21). *The Killing*, then, attempts to render some of the everyday realities of the aftermath of the death of a family member, but does so through the genre of crime fiction. *Quantum of Solace* (2008), its near contemporary in the thriller, attempts to present some of the actions that sustain geopolitical

alliances and conflicts between states and private enterprise, but does so through the genre of the spy thriller. However, and without wanting to endorse “an analytical framework that posits the international realm of the latter against the domestic focus of the former,” ignoring “the international reach of some crime writing and the domestic focus of some espionage fiction” (Pepper 2011: 411), there seems to be a case for stating that the offstage genocide in *Quantum of Solace* makes the concerns of the text rather more pressing, politically, than the text that revolves around single murder. To put this another way, the ‘conspiracy’ to murder Nanna Birk Larsen and evade justice is a very individual enterprise and is ultimately exposed, for viewers to see, by Detective Inspector Sara Lund. On the other hand, the conspiracy in *Quantum of Solace* to set up a puppet government in Bolivia and create a monopoly of essential commodities, through multiple murder and blackmail, is a collective, international enterprise which, because of the mysterious and tentacular nature of Quantum, can only be partially exposed. *The Killing* acts locally with materials (a murder, an aftermath, an investigation, a resolution) that are eminently susceptible of narration. *Quantum of Solace*, while it takes the materials that it can narrate (Bond’s and Camille’s quests for revenge, Greene’s machinations to effect a coup, the enactment of revenge), is like *The Network* and *The Accident Man* in thinking globally of a conspiracy that cannot be neatly resolved.

Typology, ideology, purely objective reality

The question that has been raised in the foregoing discussion, then, concerns how genre texts embody ideology. In fact, this has been a perennial in serious considerations of genre, but in the context of the globalized thriller – the broader

genre encompassing espionage *and* crime fiction – the issue clearly demands re-thinking. Pepper (2011) has commenced this process by noting that different narratives - in response to the post-9/11, globalized re-casting of sovereignty, borders and state power - take different routes. Sara Paretsky's *Blacklist*, he shows, presents an approach in which states must protect sovereignty within their borders, maintaining the distinction of domestic and international affairs. The same approach is to the fore, quite clearly, in that espionage fiction which strongly emphasizes 'security,' such as the long-running television series, *Spooks* (2002-11) and *24* (2002-9). I would seek to emphasize in this typology that the approach to sovereignty is also dictated by the demands of the subgenre. An apt example for current purposes is *The Killing II* (2009). When Sara Lund is (somewhat improbably) brought back to serve as a detective, the early episodes of the serial focus on the events at a military base and a mental hospital whose inmates include a veteran of Afghanistan. At this point, there have been two murders and the narrative reveals that these are connected to a cover-up of a massacre by Danish soldiers of Afghan civilians. The international dimension of the story, plus the central role of the military with its remit far beyond domestic policing, initially sets up a vertiginous affect for both the viewer and Lund as it becomes apparent that she is caught in intrigue she will never be able to surmount. At this stage, *The Killing II* is edgy and bristling with promise; but, of course, the geopolitical tension is neutralized when the narrative regains its generic co-ordinates and Lund is involved not in genocide but a mere murder case.

By contrast, Pepper identifies texts responding more thoughtfully to the new maps of sovereignty in both crime fiction (Don Winslow) and in espionage fiction (recent Le Carré). He is no doubt right to conclude that these genres, or a hybrid of both "may be better placed than other literary forms" (2011: 422) to address the

consequences of new security arrangements after 9/11. In so doing, he persuasively presents two works which might instance a preliminary typology of narratives that do not resort to arguments based on protection of the state in response to geopolitical realities. While crime fiction has been provoked into catching up, the thriller genre concerned with espionage has continued with key elements present from its inception. It has always incorporated, onstage or offstage, the crises provoked by contradictions of sovereignty, borders, state power, and the threat of genocide. In 1969, Ralph Harper dubbed the thriller the genre of crisis situations. "Most people," he writes (1969: 46) "never live in the focal eye of national crisis, and only in the reading of thrillers do they feel that they are participating in operations from the command post". Absolutely no evidence is presented for this last observation about empirical readers. However, it does point, once more, to the need to assess the ideological nature of the thriller in depicting a geopolitical reality that is seemingly far from, but underpins, the everyday lives of Western readers. Customarily in accounts of the thriller and other genres, texts are taken as churning out ideology in readily consumable form. The more committed and insightful accounts of genre describe how genre *is* ideology - that ideology is inscribed in genre's very structure. Yet, especially in the thriller, that which is the object of ideological constructions is also brought into plain sight. As Harper contends, the thriller exposes geopolitical crisis, no matter how effectively that crisis is resolved in individual narratives.

This revelatory aspect of the thriller, its focus on exposure, is often underestimated despite the high profile of real-life whistleblowers from Ellsberg to Snowden. Even in melodramatic texts such as *The Accident Man* and texts desperately trying to establish their verisimilitude such as *The Network*, the thriller's logic of revelation, specifically of an alternative history in these cases, is foregrounded. In

traditional and, especially, Marxist versions of ideology, one would conclude, then, that in the manner of whistleblowing the thriller thus reveals geopolitical reality to readers mired in the demands of everyday life. This is Harper's argument, too. Yet, of course, there are problems with such a conclusion, especially if the very act of exposure that the thriller enacts is itself ideological. This conflict is one of the key problems that recurs in theories of ideology, often leading to the conclusion that everything must therefore be ideology or, in the Foucauldian formulation, that regimes of truth subsist in the shifting of discourse. Yet, in the face of this, there remains a concern in the academy and in everyday life with what is true and what is flagrantly false. Material realities can have effectivity without principally being part of a regime of representation. Moreover, what is true, what is untrue, and what has effects can change according to contingencies. Contemporary semiotics has gone some way to addressing the problem by putting forth the notion of 'purely objective reality' (Deely 2009) — a fiction that nevertheless suffuses, is suffused by, and guides experience.

Noting that 'objective reality' is a misnomer, Deely (2009: 243-4) shows how objects are 'objects of experience' by definition; they require a subject and the 'objective world' is a world dependent on experience (rather than the existing world outside experience that common parlance assumes):

The most important point in the social construction of reality, no doubt, occurs in the political order, when the semiotic animals sit down together to try to decide how to govern themselves, how to decide what is to be permitted and what not permitted in social behavior and arrangements. Thus the constitution of a state, for example, the document, I mean, which details what the arrangement shall be for a given human community, is a prime example of a

purely objective reality which can yet be realized in the subjective order of living and interacting individuals. Reality as we experience it is neither purely objective nor purely subjective nor purely intersubjective, but rather a constantly shifting mixture and proportion of all three – a mixture and proportion of which it is not at all easy (perhaps not even fully possible) to keep track.

There should be a hint, here, regarding the consequences of this philosophical proposition for the observations that have been made on the state in this essay and in other essays in this volume, as well as the consequences for the thriller genre.

Nevertheless, these require a little unpacking.

Sidestepping the theory of ideology, Deely's concept of 'purely objective reality' is bound up in humans' constant shifting, from instant to instant, between mind-independent and mind-dependent reality. These shifts are part of the process of apprehending 'things' (mind-independent) which, once apprehended, are necessarily 'objects' (mind-dependent) and always susceptible of translation into 'signs' (partaking, with effectivity, of both mind-dependent and mind-independent reality – as in the constitution of a state). In basic semiotic terminology, any thriller must be a text or collection of signs, thus harboring the potential of mind-dependence and mind-independence. Through this capacity it has the ability to disrupt or supplant, even if only temporarily, existing purely objective realities that govern everyday existence. One example is paranoia, a state that can be pathological or justified. Whereas the 'paranoid style' - as has been noted already, an inescapable component of thrillers - was once viewed as a unitary political phenomenon with a single complexion (Hofstadter 1964), more recently its parameters have been shown to be broader and more pervasive (Walker 2013). There has been evidence that at certain times in

history – for example, the 1970s (Cobley 2000) – the paranoid vision peddled in thrillers has been received as a credible outlook on contemporary events. Moreover, paranoia has been cited as the only convincing means of explicating specific historical events (Eagleton 2004). Rather than delivering readers to the “command post,” as Harper would have it, the most ideologically complicit of spy thrillers at the very least harbors the capacity to indicate that there *exists* a “command post.” Furthermore, it characterizes that “command post” as underpinning everyday life, maintaining a conspiracy of silence about the basis of Western habits of consumption, shrouding military-industrial machinations on distant shores, even if not rousing individuals from the purely objective realities that facilitate their slumber in both civil society and the state.

The shift between mind-independent and mind-dependent realities also shares affinities with the incarnations of contemporary statehood. As Pepper (2011: 418) notes, the concept of exceptionalism formulated by Schmitt in the 1920s tends to afford the state more sovereignty than is appropriate for the current neo-liberal hegemony within which space has been so comprehensively privatized. State power has given way to something far more messy, sustained only by temporary alliances, “contingent and shifting according to rapidly evolving geopolitical circumstances.” Although, as purely objective realities, the state and other fictions such as the thriller share the ability to have their objects continually invested and reinvested by experience, I am not arguing that the thriller’s ability to ‘reflect’ the current conjuncture is in any way guaranteed. As Miller notes, “There are risks in any automatic association of drama with a prevailing political climate” (Miller 2003: 2). He instances those spy thrillers that contain parodic elements, but the more prevalent edict is against an untenable mechanical one-to-one relationship. Instead, I would

argue that the spy thriller's relationship with a prevailing political climate arises not from such specificities, but from its general global disposition. As such, it necessarily presents an opportunity to glimpse a domain of conspiracy and violence which is distant from domestic Western existence, yet unnervingly proximate in sustaining that existence. That domain appears to be characterized by its inexorable movement to consolidate the power of the few over the many, while also dramatized by its repeated fall into crisis.

Conclusion: the place of global power

It has been argued that the broader conceptualization of the genre designated by the term 'thriller' has fallen into disuse. Furthermore, this is unfortunate at a time when it seems that some crime fiction has undergone change enforced by globalization, the state of exception that Western governments have attempted to impose after 9/11, and the neo-liberal privatization of space and services, particularly those associated with security. If the West is now characterized by this overdetermined conjuncture, then it seems clear, as argued here, that the espionage thriller is the globalized genre *par excellence* and, moreover, has been for some time pre-dating 9/11. The genre is necessarily internationalized. It has long been concerned with the fragmentation of the state and private interests, depicting the conspiracies arising from splinter groups and rogue operations long before Oliver North was brought to trial. While *Odyssey* (2015; *American Odyssey* in the US) narrates the aftermath of an operation by an internal military assassination bureau, analogous state/private conspiracies make up the crux of the plot in *Enemy of the State* (1998), *Clear and Present Danger* (1994), *Marathon Man* (1976), *Three Days of the Condor*

(1975), *The Parallax View* (1974), and many more. The spy thriller is centrally concerned with revealing a conspiracy by which geopolitical reality is concealed from the general populace by spin, management of the public sphere, and violence. The most acute examples of this in thriller plots are when state/private enforcers prematurely collaborate with the fourth estate: in *Spartan* (2004), for example, Joanna Newton's dead body is reported in the media as found before she is rescued by Scott; the funeral of Odelle Ballard takes place, again in *Odyssey*, while she is still hiding in Mali; and, long before 9/11, a state funeral for three astronauts is disrupted in *Capricorn One* (1978) when one of them, Brubaker, escapes from his captors and turns up at the ceremony. What the thriller reveals is a totality of connections which either extend the putative totality of state/private interests that sustain Western comforts or a kind of alternative totality or geopolitical reality upon which quotidian existence rests. As well as the alternative histories of *The Network* and *The Accident Man*, *State of Play* (2003), *Syriana* (2005), and *The State Within* (2006) are all post-9/11 examples of this revelation and, significantly, all of them implicate the oil industry in the conspiracy. The totality of connections can undermine a purely objective reality that has been constructed to justify state action (e.g. weapons of mass destruction) or it can expose a truth concealed (e.g. the five-year secret bombing of Cambodia). The thriller's verisimilitude relies on the here-and-now of the *doxa*, such that many thrillers inspire the reviewers' standby that their plots are ripped from the morning headlines. Yet, what the thriller depicts is not so definite: it invariably features a non-place ('liminal', if preferred), a place that is not just fictional or artificial but only discernible in the interstices of common existence, where splinter groups meet or come into conflict and/or where unholy alliances are formed. At times, this interstitial place will seem imaginary and relatively inconsequential, as in the

conspiracy surrounding the death of a princess; at other times, it will seem to map onto the known world, as in the conspiracy of silence regarding the West's pre-9/11 understanding of Afghanistan.

Despite the revelatory impetus of the thriller and the discussion of 'geopolitical reality' in this essay, hopefully it has been made apparent that thrillers do not reveal 'truth' in opposition to 'ideology.' It has been suggested, instead, that the realm of signs that make up a lived reality (as Althusser would have it) is constantly moving between mind-dependent and mind-independent realities which are susceptible to interruption by new 'purely objective realities' or fictions. Rightly, there has been suspicion on the part of commentators regarding thrillers' veracity given that they are invariably narratives with closure and resolutions. At the same time, it should not be assumed that presentation of muddied realities necessarily entails the ultimate unveiling of 'truth'. Or that overly neat ideologically complicit accounts of the international conjuncture in thrillers do not betray the contradictions of globalization or their own construction. For the purposes of the current argument that the thriller has, in contrast to crime fiction, long prepared for globality, it might have seemed expeditious to focus only on 'quality' texts that provide a nuanced presentation and an apparently informed analysis of the international situation. *Syriana* (2005), for example, with its multi-strand narrative, its complex web of interests, its exposure of state collusion with corporatism and the sponsorship of violence by both, the selling down the river of key intelligence employees, its depiction of the plight of geographically displaced workers, the US attempt to 'rehabilitate' Iran (particularly prescient in light of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in the months in which the current essay was written) and, above all perhaps, the sensitive depiction of religious radicalization leading to suicide bombing, might

have provided a supreme example of the thriller's ability to make cogent observations about geopolitical reality. Yet, focusing on such texts is likely to invite the response that these are just the 'good' in a genre of predominantly poor ones or, worse, the festering old chestnut in which 'good' texts 'transcend the genre,' a cliché which inoculates its speaker from any involvement with that which is not the best that has been thought and written. Instead, the aim of this essay has been to draw attention to the thriller as a whole, its potential for revelation (even in spite of itself), its delineation of a place where valuable or useless or partial lessons can be learned about geopolitics.

References

Agamben, G. (2005) *State of Exception*, trans. K. Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

Berenson, A. (2006) *The Faithful Spy* (New York: Random House).

Cain, T. (2007) *The Accident Man* (London: Transworld).

Chandler, R. (1950) 'The simple art of murder' in *Pearls are a Nuisance* (London: Hamish Hamilton).

Cobley, P. (2000) *The American Thriller: Generic Innovation and Social Change* (London: Palgrave).

Cobley, P. (2005) 'Objectivity and immanence in genre theory' in G. Dowd, L. Stevenson and J. Strong (eds.), *Genre Matters: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: Intellect).

Cobley, P. (2012) 'The reactionary art of murder: contemporary crime fiction, criticism and verisimilitude', *Language and Literature* 21 (3): 286-98.

Corner, J. (1995) *Television Form and Public Address* (London: Arnold).

Deely, J. (2009) 'Afterword: on purely objective reality' in P. Cobley (ed.) *Realism for the 21st Century: A John Deely Reader* (Scranton and London: University of Scranton Press).

Denning, M. (1987) *Cover Stories: Narrative and Ideology in the British Spy Thriller* (London: Routledge).

Eagleton, T. (2004) 'At the coal face', *The Guardian*, 6 March (available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/mar/06/featuresreviews.guardianreview20> date accessed 24 August 2015)

Elliott, J. (2010) *The Network* (London: Bloomsbury).

Evans, L. and White, M. (2012) *Symposium: Crime Narratives and Global Politics* special section of *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 47 (2).

Graham, A. (2011) 'Lessons of *The Killing*' *Radio Times*, 26 March-1 April, pp. 20-1.

Harper, R. (1969) *The World of the Thriller* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press).

Harshaw, T. (2010) 'The inconstant gardener', *New York Times Sunday Book Review*,

8 October 2010 (available at:

http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/10/books/review/Harshaw-t.html?_r=0 date

accessed 24 August 2015)

Hofstadter, R. (1964) *The Paranoid Style in American Politics' and Other Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape).

Ignatius, D. (2007) *Body of Lies* (New York: Norton).

Jameson, F. (1992) *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press).

Keating, H. R. F. (1992) 'Unpublished interview' in Cobley, P. (1993) *Generic Innovation and Social Change: The American Thriller in the 1970s*, PhD thesis, London Guildhall University.

King, S. and Knight, S. (2014) *Global Crime Fiction* special issue of *Clues: A Journal of Detection* 32 (2).

Miller, T. (2003) *Spyscreen: Espionage on Film and TV from the 1930s to the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Palmer, J. (1978) *Thrillers: Genesis and Structure of a Popular Genre* (London: Edward Arnold).

Pepper, A. (2011) 'Policing the globe: state sovereignty and the international', *Modern Fiction Studies* 57 (3): 401-24

Rimington, S. (2014) *Close Call* (London: Bloomsbury).

Schmitt, C. (1922) *Politische Theologie: Vier Kapitel zur Lehre von der Souveränität* (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot); translated as *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, by G. Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

Todorov, T. (1977) *The Poetics of Prose* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press).

Walker, J. (2013) *United States of Paranoia: A Conspiracy Theory* (New York: Harper).

Watson, C. (1971) *Snobbery with Violence: English Crime Stories and their Audience* (London: Eyre Methuen).