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True (Kantian?) Detective. Fighting Illusion with Disillusion

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Abstract: Duty represents a perfect model and the outcome of all our interconnected illusory orders. The duty, so markedly present in the genre of a crime series, is like a free play of illusions and subsequent disillusionments: the belief in revealing the truth and its ultimate victory, a justly punished culprit, an uncorrupted judge and investigator, etc. What attracts crowds of viewers to the True Detective series can be described as a kind of common microcosm, almost religious, miniature form of fleeting touch with the boundaries of reality, shining through the clouds of everyday disillusionments (the factual impossibility of defining truth, universal injustice, etc.). However, True Detective asks another serious question: Does the pursuit of consistency in action, total consistency and moral fulfillment of obligations not mean the worst possible threat to the individual? Does the Kantian principle of duty, conceived to the extreme, not lead to its own (and worse, voluntary) extinction?

Keywords: True Detective, Illusion, Moral Law, Duty

True (Kantian?) Detective: Ilúziou proti dezilúzií

Abstrakt: Povinnosť predstavuje dokonalý model a vyústenie všetkých našich vzájomne prepojených iluzórnych poriadkov. Povinnosť, ktorá je tak markantne prítomná v žánri kriminálneho seriálu, je ako voľná hra ilúzií a následných dezilúzií: viera v odhalenie pravdy a jej konečné víťazstvo, spravodlivo potrestaný vinník, neskorumpovaný sudca a vyšetrovateľ atď. To, čo k seriálu True Detective priťahuje dav divákov, možno označiť za akýsi spoločný mikrokozmos, priam náboženskú, miniatúrnu formu letmého dotyku s hranicou skutočnosti, presvitajúcu pomedzi mračná každodenných dezilúzií (faktická nemožnosť definovania pravdy, univerzálna nespravodlivosť atď.). True Detective však kladie ešte jednu závažnú otázku: neznamená pre jednotlivca snaha o dôslednosť v konaní, o totál-

nu dôslednosť a morálne plnenie povinností, tú najhoršiu možnú hrozbu? Nevedie kantovský princíp povinnosti, domyslený do krajných dôsledkov, k vlastnému (a čo je horšie, dobrovoľnému) zániku?

Kľúčové slová: True Detective, ilúzia, morálny zákon, povinnosť

“Faced with a world that is illusion”, writes the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, “all the great cultures have striven to manage the illusion by illusion – to treat evil with evil, so to speak. We alone seek to reduce the illusion with truth – which is the most fantastical illusion.”¹ Of course, in their essence, all religious systems, Western or Eastern, constitute the negation of the reality of this world: the truth is simply elsewhere. In the Vedas, the universe is presented as an illusory variable – *Maya* – i.e. a system of changes that do not have their own reality. For example, also Christianity understands reality as one of the possible, not necessarily existing, worlds, which is based on a special metaphysical construct of “creation from nothing” – *creatio ex nihilo*. Moreover, beginning with Basil the Great, Christian theology has long denied the ontological reality of evil, which it has defined as “the absence of good”. However, the denial of reality, which may appear to the average person as a symptom of madness, has its undeniable inner rationality and is characterized by deep human wit – are we not saying that “one nail drives out another”? Would it not be the most tragic event in human history if we really found the ultimate truth? If there was no space left for illusions and subsequent disillusiones?

I think that the extremely popular criminal drama *True Detective* (HBO 2014–2019), plays with this very idea. The story follows two, more precisely three, criminologists investigating a mysterious and occult murder that they are partially able to close. They simultaneously interview other people, who investigate a similar or directly related crime. It is for that reason that the story unfolds in two distinct times: the present (the base time) in which the protagonists construct their own version of the events, and the past (flashbacks) that shows the viewer how the story truly happened. The story told in the base time is, from the perspective of the protagonists quite believable, but from the perspective of the viewer, who has the opportunity to confront it with reality, it is clearly fiction that, in the most important aspects, does not conform to reality in any way. If we disregard this fact, however, we may arrive at an incomparably more important fact that each of the protagonists of the story is, in a sense, a prisoner of his own illusions and at the same time a ferocious fighter against them. It is necessary to state

¹ Baudrillard, J.: *Passwords* (transl. by Chris Turner, first published as *Mots de passe*. Pauvert, département des Éditions Fayard 2000). London/New York: Verso, 2003, p. 62.

that from a relatively clearly formulated pessimistic vision of the world (Matthew McConaughey *alias* agent Rustin Cohle), the protagonists are gradually willing and able to communicate their convictions less and less.

In any case, all of them are convinced pessimists and nihilists, for them, human life is nothing but an inflated bubble which is best summed up by agent Rust: “... death, and futility... in all your life, all your love, all your hate, all your memory, all your pain, it was all the same thing. It was all the same dream, a dream that you had inside a locked room. A dream about being a person. And like a lot of dreams, there’s a monster at the end of it.” The agents see the world through their everyday confrontation with the victims, in its brutality and terrifying nakedness; violence, murder, every-present corruption that goes all the way to secretaries and senators...the climax is definitely a child fried in a microwave...they do not have any illusions about human goodness, final purpose and prevalence of truth, and the viewer must agree with them whether he wants to or not. *Vanitas vanitatum et omnia vanitas.*²

We come to realize that the world of illusions has no bottom. The explanation is contained in the question: Are the agents in their tireless effort not driven by “the most fantastic of illusions” – faith in revealing a final truth? (After all, none of them ever doubted that the web of the case extends much farther, and that the true criminals, or rather the prime movers of the chain of causes and effects, will never be justly punished). Are they not fighting against the illusory property and emptiness of this world by employing yet another illusion in the form of the Kantian conviction of *the primacy of duty* (the conservation of that which has never existed, meaning “the good old times,” “decent America,” etc.)? Do they not try to convince themselves that people deserve the truth, even though they firmly believe that the truth is of no concern to them? That, in principle, the truth goes directly against our interests?

Especially agent Rust represents a typical Kantian figure. Same as Kant, he is also fascinated by two things: the starry sky above Alaska, and moral law consisting in the awareness of duty. It is known that duty (to close a case, carry out revenge, disclose results, identify the perpetrator), in the criminal genre, maintains an exclusive role, is above the law, and quite often even against it. When Kant defines duty, he speaks of it in terms of a “moral law” or “categorical imperative”; which means that it is a non-conditioned action which is not enforced by external circumstances, and which corresponds to one’s conscience as well as universal reason. Duty thus constitutes a universal answer to Rust’s fundamental question: “*What do we owe each other for our mutual illusions?*”

Ultimately, the *true detective* is the one who authentically, even consciously

² Vanity of vanities! All is vanity (*Eccl.* 1,2).

self-destructively, applies his life to the principle of duty. Despite the breakdown of memory, the unreliability of the mosaic, and the loss of overall coherence (Season 3, Mahershala Ali *alias* agent Wayne Hays). Despite the clear consciousness of the futility of individual action and inconsequence of the cause. Each case is closed in the manner that it opens newer and newer cases. One story involves several others, and a part of the final verdict is also the possibility of appeal... duty above all. I ask myself if this generally accepted regulator of action is not just another illusion that we have created in order to rewrite the neural pathways after the death of critical thinking.

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