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ชีวิตที่เปล่าเปลือยของนักสืบและสภาพะยกเว้นในอาชญากรรม

ชุด “วินเซนต์ คัลวีโน” ของ คริสโตเฟอร์ จี มัวร์

The Detective's Bare Life and the State of Exception in
Christopher G. Moore's Vincent Calvino Crime Series

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้นำเสนอการศึกษาอาชญากรรมชุด “วินเซนต์ คัลวีโน” ของ คริสโตเฟอร์ จี มัวร์ โดยตัวละครเอกเดย์ปรากอบอาชีพเป็นทนายความในนครนิวยอร์กและผันตัวมาเป็นนักสืบในกรุงเทพมหานคร วนิยามชุดนี้เป็นตัวอย่างของอาชญากรรมตามแบบ hard-boiled ซึ่งก่อเกิดขึ้นมาในสภาพเศรษฐกิจและสังคมของสหรัฐอเมริกาในช่วงระหว่างสงครามโลกครั้งที่หนึ่งและครั้งที่สอง โดยบทความนี้มุ่งเน้นศึกษาตัวละครนักสืบในวนิยามทั้ง 17 เรื่อง ในฐานะ “ชีวิตที่เปล่าเปลือย” (bare life) ตามแนวคิดของ จอร์จ อากัมเบน ที่ติดกับดักในพื้นที่ระหว่างชีวิตในทางกายภาพ (biological life) และชีวิตในทางการเมือง (political life) อากัมเบนเรียกพื้นที่นี้ว่าเป็น “สภาพะยกเว้น” ซึ่งถือครองโดยผู้ที่ทรงอำนาจสูงสุด (sovereign power) เป็นพื้นที่ที่ประสิทธิ์ศักย์ของกฎหมาย (efficacy of law) ได้รับการดูแลแต่ยังคงการบังคับใช้กฎหมายอยู่ (force of law) สุดท้ายแล้วอากัมเบนนำเสนอทางออกที่จะปลดเปลื้องพันธนาการให้แก่ชีวิต

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ที่เปล่าเปลือยโดยการละเว้นกิจกรรมในทางโลกและมุ่งสู่การต่อต้องในครัวเรือน
ซึ่งเป็นการดำเนินชีวิตที่เน้นคุณค่าทางจิตวิญญาณและเหตุผล (logos)

คำสำคัญ: อาชญากรรมแนว hard-boiled ชีวิตที่เปล่าเปลือย สภาพภูมิภาค
วินเซนต์ คัลวีโน คริสโตเฟอร์ จี มัวร์

Abstract

This is a study of Christopher G. Moore's crime series, featuring Vincent Calvino, a lawyer-turned-detective from New York City, who has relocated to Bangkok. The series is examined as an example of the hard-boiled tradition, which emerged between the two World Wars in response to the particular social, economic and political conditions in the United States. The study places an emphasis on the detective character in Moore's crime series of seventeen novels, suggesting that he is regarded as "bare life" or "*homo sacer*," which cannot be sacrificed, but may be killed with impunity. This character, as Giorgio Agamben postulates, is confined in a zone of indistinction between *zoè*, (the biological fact of having life) and *bios* (political or qualified life), between life and law. This zone is termed "state of exception" and is inhabited by the sovereign power, where the efficacy of law is suspended while the force of law is enacted. Eventually, Agamben's concept of the use-of-self is proposed to epistemologically liberate bare life from the conundrum of its existence. This suggests that in order to release oneself from wretched conditions, one needs to abandon physical activity and resort to contemplation and inactivity, which constitutes the use of the soul according to the *logos*.



Keywords: hard-boiled crime fiction, bare life, state of exception,
Vincent Calvino, Christopher G. Moore

1. Introduction

Contemporary Anglophone crime fiction in Thailand is arguably a fertile ground for research with a sizable repertoire produced by expat writers who are invested in portraying the country through crime fiction. For instance, John Patrick Burdett (b. 1951), a British author, began the Sonchai Jitpleecheep series with *Bangkok 8* (2003), followed by five more novels. Afterwards, Timothy Hallinan (b. 1949), a U.S. writer, started the Poke Rafferty thriller series with *A nail through the heart* (2007). The series continued with eight more novels. However, Christopher G. Moore (b. 1952), a Canadian author, is probably the first writer who launched an English-language crime series in Thailand (Moore, 2010b, p. 103). The Vincent Calvino series was started in 1992, and the seventeenth novel brought the series to an end (Moore, 2020, p. 328). Moore also anthologized *Bangkok noir* (2011) and *Phnom Penh noir* (2012), collections of crime short stories set in the capitals of Thailand and Cambodia, respectively.

The proliferation of Anglophone crime fiction in Thailand has attracted some scholarly attention. Suradech Chotiudompant's postcolonial study of the first three novels in the Sonchai Jitpleecheep series focuses on the representation of Bangkok as an urban space where desire for exoticism draws culturally and ethnically diverse characters into carnal, and probably deadly, relationships (2016). Meantime, in "Smiles of deceit": "Farangs" and the imagining of



Thailand in contemporary western novels (2008), Nopamat Poungsuwan studies the construction of “farang” identities and the imagining of Thailand, carried out via the traditional travel plot, in eight contemporary novels by Western writers, including *Minor wife* (2004), the seventh novel in the Vincent Calvino series. Afterwards, Tom Hoy’s “Detecting Thainess: Primordialism and constructivism in the Thai expatriate crime novel” (Hoy, 2014) explores the competing discourses surrounding the concept of Thai identity or “Thainess” in Moore’s *The corruptionist* (2010) and Burdett’s *Bangkok haunts* (2007). Eventually, Chad A. Evans’s *Vincent Calvino’s world: A noir guide to Southeast Asia* (2015) is dedicated to the study of the first fifteen novels of the Vincent Calvino series. It is a detailed and nuanced study of the series, covering the characterization of the detective and other characters; cultural backgrounds of Thailand and other countries where Calvino carries out his investigations – Cambodia, Vietnam, and Myanmar; the nature of crime investigation in Thailand; and the author’s intellectual backgrounds and social contexts that are reflected in each of the novels. Unfortunately, Evans’s comprehensive chronicle still does not include the last two novels of the Vincent Calvino crime series – *Jumpers* (2016); and *Dance me to the end of time* (2020). In the epilogue of *Dance me to the end of time*, the writer finally bids farewell to his detective and other characters.

2. Research Delimitation and Purposes

The paper aims, firstly, to study the Vincent Calvino series as hard-boiled crime fiction, a subgenre of crime fiction that emerged



between the World Wars and evolved through the last century, within the context of contemporary Thailand, and, secondly, to study the Vincent Calvino series as a literary tool that is employed to pose a question regarding those inhabiting states of exception in contemporary Thailand via the characterization of the private detective, his investigative missions, and the urban setting he inhabits. Relying on Giorgio Agamben's concepts of bare life (1998) and state of exception (2005), the paper hopes to regard the hard-boiled crime series not only as a channel for social criticism, but also as a literary attempt to creatively respond to the hegemony of the state authority and juridical violence. The study encompasses the seventeen novels in the Vincent Calvino series: *Spirit house* (1992); *Asia hand* (1992); *Zero hour in Phnom Penh* (1994); *Comfort zone* (1995); *The big weird* (1996); *Cold hit* (1999); *Minor wife* (2002); *Pattaya 24/7* (2004); *The risk of infidelity index* (2007); *Paying back Jack* (2009); *The corruptionist* (2010); *9 gold bullets* (2011); *Missing in Rangoon* (2013); *The marriage tree* (2014); *Crackdown* (2015); *Jumpers* (2016); and *Dance me to the end of time* (2020).

3. Reviewed Literature: Hard-boiled Crime Fiction

Hard-boiled detective fiction is a sub-genre of crime fiction, generally considered to have come into existence in America during the 1920s and 1930s, initially in the pulp magazines of the period, or the “pulps.” These inexpensive weekly publications were printed on the cheap, rough paper made from wood-pulp, with lurid and garish covers intended to catch the attention of a reading public, especially



a blue-collar, or working class, male audience (Worthington, 2011, p. 122; Scaggs, 2005, p. 56). The best-known pulp magazine *Black Mask* initially offered adventure stories and Westerns as well as detective fiction. After Joseph Shaw (1874-1952) became the editor, the magazine was devoted mainly to detective fiction. Yet, the original juxtaposition of cowboy stories and detective narratives foregrounds the literary and historical links between the private detective and the traditional American hero previously represented by the frontiersman/cowboy. The hard-boiled detective, it has been argued, shared with antecedents such as James Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo in the early nineteenth-century Leatherstocking series a strong sense of justice and morality combined with individuality and physical and mental toughness (Worthington, 2011, p. 122).

The distinctive feature of the pulp magazine stories is the graphic portrayal of crime and its omnipresence in American society during the Prohibition (1920-1933) and the Great Depression (1929-1939) (Worthington, 2011, p. 122; Porter, 1981, pp. 161-162; Symons, 1992, pp. 143-144; Scaggs, 2005, p. 57). In terms of plot, the typical hard-boiled pattern is action-oriented. The detective is called in to investigate a seemingly simple case, like a missing person. Yet, “[h]is investigation comes up against a web of conspiracy that reflects the presence of a hidden criminal organization; finally, the track leads back to the rich and respectable levels of society and exposes the corrupt relationship between the pillars of the community and the criminal underground” (Cawelti, 1976, pp. 148-149). The hero is usually a private detective in the big city, and both endures and deploys



physical violence as well as resolves mysterious puzzles. He is a professional hired by clients, but at a critical stage decides to pursue a case for its, and his, own interest (Knight, 2010, pp. 230-231).

Among those recognized for pioneering the hard-boiled fiction are Dashiell Hammett (1894-1961) and Raymond Chandler (1888-1959). Known for *Red harvest* (1929) and *The Maltese falcon* (1930), Hammett created the protagonists – the Continental Op, Sam Spade, Ned Beaumont et al. – who generally exist on the margins of society. He views the crime “not as a localized incident, but as a social phenomenon, implicating and involving every level of society” (Thompson, 1993, pp. 135; 143). Chandler was writing in the shadow of Hammett. He is well-known for starting a series of seven novels that feature Philip Marlowe as the private eye, including *The big sleep* (1939), and *Farewell, my lovely* (1940). While the early stories of Hammett and Chandler do deal specifically with gangsters, the deepest threats faced by the private eyes, come from personal betrayals, mostly by women. Depicted as the threatening “other,” the figure of the *femme fatale* is the antithesis to the hard-boiled private eye (Knight, 2010, p. 111; Scaggs, 2005, p. 77)

One of the most important aspects of the hard-boiled formula is the special role of the modern city as background (Cawelti, 1976, p. 140). The private eye is compelled to negotiate this difficult territory that hides a world of exploitation and criminality (Horsley, 2005, p. 71; Cawelti, 1976, p. 141). The urban world of Los Angeles, New York, Miami, etc. represents a profound decadence that forms a link between crime and respectability, producing a milieu



indispensable to the hard-boiled detective story (Cawelti, 1976, pp. 154-155).

In the meantime, the detective figure in the hard-boiled crime fiction is usually a male private investigator, also called a private eye (P.I.). He investigates the crime and corruption on the city streets of America during the 1920s and 1930s, facing gangsters and corrupt police and government officials (Worthington, 2011, p. 122). It has also been noticed that the use of the first-person narrator for the private detective suggests his solitary observation, “a solitary eye” of the frontier scout or the cow boy, “an eye for hire” (Porter, 2003, pp. 95; 98; Scaggs, 2005, p. 74). He is also noted for wisecracking cynicism, American vernacular, physical endurance, a personal code, and independence and self-sufficiency, inherited from the frontier hero. Relying on hunches, that derive from a combination of folk instinct and experience, he is the figure of a loner fighting for truth and justice, yet hiding “an inner compassion and sentimentalism quite at odds with his tough, taciturn exterior” (Scaggs, 2005, p. 58; Porter, 1981, pp. 166-167; Thompson, 1993, p. 138; Knight, 2010, p. 112).

The private eye’s weapon of choice is always invariably the gun, of which the role was historically steeped in the process of establishing American nationhood, back to the times of the first settlers’ struggle to survive against the wilderness, Indians, and competing European peoples, in the period of the Revolutionary War, and in the era of Western expansion. Consequently, the gun in U.S. culture has become “the totem of democracy. It is the great equalizer” (Porter, 1981, p. 171).



The protagonist in the model of the tough private detective is seen as a modern but also traditional American hero (Knight, 2010, p. 110). He is an epitome for a tough guy who is insensitive to emotions as well as resistant to violence (Knight, 2010, p. 231). However, he remains vulnerable, continually under physical and social threats (Cawelti, 1976, p. 157; Horsley, 2005, p. 72). He is usually an outsider who can freely cross social class boundaries, moving through the neighborhoods of both rich and poor alike (Geherin, 2008, p. 51). Nonetheless, the hero's basic characteristics identify him with the lower middle class, those suffering from economic disadvantages. Equipped with a smattering of culture and masculine certitude, the hard-boiled detective demonstrates potency and courage (Cawelti, 1976, p. 157). He usually operates alone, judges others by himself and against himself, and carries a personal set of values (Knight, 2010, p. 112). He usually has an employer, but refuses to let the client determine the methods of his investigation (Cawelti, 1976, p. 157). For instance, tied down to many rules and regulations, The Continental Op in *I, the jury* (1947) has to report to his agency in San Francisco.

4. Conceptual Framework: *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception*

The detective character may be saliently viewed through the concept of human life and state of exception developed by Giorgio Agamben (b. 1942). In *Homo sacer: Sovereign power and bare life* (1998) and *State of exception* (2005), Agamben proposes to explore the hidden point of intersection between the juridico-institutional and the biopolitical models of power (Agamben, 1998, p. 6). He starts with



Archaic Roman law, which stipulates the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), *who may be killed and yet not sacrificed* (Agamben, 1998, p. 8; original emphasis). *Homo sacer* on whom this curse falls is an outcast (Agamben, 1998, p. 79). His is the banned life or, bare life. But who has the authority to “ban”? It falls on the one with sovereign power. The sovereign is the one who has the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, and, in effect, legally places himself outside the law (Agamben, 1998, p. 15). Then, what is the connection between the sovereign and the banned life, or bare life, is the state of exception, as zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exclusion and inclusion (Agamben, 1988, p. 181). Thus, the fundamental activity of sovereign power is the production of bare life as the threshold of articulation between nature and culture, between *zoè* (biological life) and *bios* (political life) (Agamben, 1998, pp. 83; 87). The concept of bare life may be identified in refugees. In the modern state, citizenship is the state where natural life merges with political life. However, citizenship is something of which one has to prove oneself worthy and which could therefore always be called into question. In the refugee, however, life has been stripped of political life; the link between birth and nation is invalidated (Agamben, 1998, p. 133).

The specific contribution of the state of exception is the separation of “force of law” from the law. In extreme situations, “force of law” floats as an indeterminate element that can be claimed both by the state authority (Agamben, 2005, pp. 38-39). The state of exception is a space devoid of law, and the nature of acts committed during the state of exception/state of emergency seems to escape all



legal definition. Because they are neither transgressive, executive, nor legislative, they seem to be situated in an absolute non-place with respect to the law (Agamben, 2005, pp. 50-51). One example of state of exception takes place during the funeral of the sovereign. The death is followed by periods of mourning usually characterized by a suspension and alteration of all social relations (Agamben, 2005, p. 65). As a living law the sovereign is not bound by it, and in him the life of the law coincides with a total anomie, whereby the social order is temporarily subverted. And yet, precisely because he is identified with the law, he is held in relation to it and is indeed posited as the anarchic foundation of the juridical order (Agamben, 2005, p. 69).

The concepts of bare life and state of exception have gained tremendous traction and have been used in a variety of studies in social sciences and bioethics. In light of literary studies, the application of the concepts of bare life and state of exception is still limited. As far as crime fiction studies are concerned, *homo sacer* and the state of exception offer a productive theoretical framework in the study of the development of the American hard-boiled as a sub-genre. For instance, in “Except for law: Raymond Chandler, James Ellroy, and the politics of exception,” Lee Spinks makes a comparative study of Raymond Chandler’s *The big sleep* (1939) and James Ellroy’s *L.A. Confidential* (1990). He argues that *The big sleep* examines the ambivalent position of the detective within and without juridical structures whereas *L.A. Confidential* describes a world in which a threshold between law and crime disappears, “the idea of law is



produced by the *suspension of the juridical principle*” (Spinks, 2007, p. 135; original emphasis).

5. Vincent Calvino as a Hard-boiled Detective

Meanwhile, the Vincent Calvino series features Bangkok as an urban setting where crimes are graphically portrayed. Yet, lesser-known enclaves of the capital have been explored. Prior to the launch of the Vincent Calvino private eye series in 1992 with *Spirit house*, no writer had set an English-language crime series in Southeast Asia (Moore, 2010b, p. 103). In his introduction to the first novel of the Vincent Calvino series, Moore acknowledges that “*Spirit house* started as an experiment. I wanted to find out whether I could bring the private eye’s passion for social justice and fairness into what I knew about Thailand” (Moore, 2004b, p. ix). Bangkok in the Vincent Calvino series is painted as a metropolis characterized by cultural incongruities. This is where “cultures clash: urban and rural, Chinese and Thai, the second-class citizens like the hill tribe and illegal migrants and first-class Thai citizens, and the farangs and the Thais” (Moore, 2004a, p. ix).

Given the tradition of hard-boiled crime fiction previously discussed, one can infer that Vincent Calvino is considered a hard-boiled detective, also known as a private eye. He is described as follows.

American national. About forty, born in New York City. 6' 2", about 175 pounds. The women like the dimpled chin and full head of hair. Resident



in Thailand about eight years. Disbarred lawyer. Police connections. Tough, cynical, world-weary type who drinks too much but never appears drunk. Ball-busting ex-wife collecting alimony. Honest with a disturbed sense of humor. Never met a woman he didn't like. (Moore, 2004b, p. 61)

The detective rents a small office space where his clients can pay a visit. However, he does most of the investigation outside the office on his own while Ratana, his secretary, takes care of clerical matters. He is well-known among the expat community in Bangkok, who gather at Washington Square. Meanwhile, Calvino has formulated Calvino's rules in dealing with Thais and non-Thais. For example, in *The big weird*, the fifth novel of the series, he lays down some rules.

Calvino's Golden Rule for a *farang* living among the expat community had a broad based consensus – Don't shatter my illusions and I won't shatter yours. (Moore, 2000b, p. 31)

The crime series revolves around the detective, his secretary, his expat community, and his Thai friend. Typically, Calvino is approached to solve cases of missing persons since he has a knack for finding people. For example, in *Missing in Rangoon*, the thirteenth novel of the series, he is hired by Alan Osborne to look for his son Rob Osborne. Moreover, in *Zero hour in Phnom Penh*, the story is set in the



early 1990s, at the end of the civil war in Cambodia. Calvino tries to track a missing *farang* from Bangkok to Phnom Penh. But Pratt, his Thai police officer friend, fails to tell Calvino that the missing man is connected with the case of the jewels stolen from the Saudi royal family.

The Vincent Calvino series is narrated through the third person point of view with the exception of the last novel. It is typically action-packed. Hence, the detective is subject to physical assault, and prone to injuries. In *Spirit house*, he is seen checking out one Ben Hoadley's apartment in Soi Suan Phlu. There, he spots two hitmen who disguise as a blind lottery vendor and a transvestite.

[H]e saw a knife flash in the hand of the *katoey* on his left. He had been ready for a move and had planned his reaction. Calvino shook off the *katoey* on his arm, reached for the fake lottery vendor's heavy metal pipe. He smashed one end of the pipe up, hooking the *katoey* square, shattering the right side of his big jaws with a thundering crack. The *katoey* screamed and dropped to his knees. Blood streamed down on his blouse and jeans, as the *katoey* fell unconscious. (Moore, 2004b, p. 49)

In addition to physical force, Calvino relies on the use of firearms in his investigation. In *The risk of infidelity index*, the ninth novel in the Vincent Calvino series, physical force is replaced with guns



in the shootout between Weerawat, the millionaire playboy, and Calvino (Moore, 2007, pp. 308-309).

At the end of each novel, Calvino usually succeeds in identifying those responsible for and involved in the crimes. However, oftentimes, as they are identified with the elitist and influential circle, they are not brought to justice. *Jumpers*, for example, reveals the police involvement in a Chinese crime syndicate operating out of the base in Huai Khwang district. The network is responsible for the death of one Raphael Pascal, a painter from Quebec. A notebook comes into Calvino's possession. In it are records of Sia Lang's monthly payment to government officials (Moore, 2016, p. 354). The same network is responsible for trafficking pentobarbital into Thailand. The investigation runs into a dead end. The detective has finally resigned to the following conclusion.

It was a real problem for detectives in Bangkok that any one crime was likely to be linked to another, and that one might be linked to another and so on, and as the investigation expanded, the trail was likely to lead to a destination no investigator wanted to arrive at: the *untouchables*. (Moore, 2016, p. 59)

The eventual conundrum whereby crimes are solved, but justice is not served constitutes a fertile ground for critical exploration, where the rule of law is suspended and the force of law is exercised.



6. The Detective's Bare Life in the State of Exception

In this study, the concepts of bare life and state of exception are deployed since they provide a feasible theoretical context within which to understand the status of the private detective. He, I contend, inhabits a zone of indifference, on the threshold between natural life and political life. Meanwhile, the urban settings in which he finds himself are placed under diverse modalities of state of exception, especially in the sphere of law enforcement.

Vincent Calvino is an ex-New Yorker, who is half-Jewish and half-Italian. He has been friends with Police Lt. Col. Prachai Chongwatana, aka Pratt, since they first met in New York City. Calvino's background as the fall guy started there when he was framed by a Chinese triad. One hundred thousand dollars from a client's account was deposited into Calvino's personal bank account and half a kilo of heroin was planted in the lower filing cabinet drawer in his law office. As a result, he had been disbarred for the misappropriation of client funds (Moore, 2004b, p. 80). After he relocated to Bangkok, he was once accused of killing a bar girl in *Asia hand*. Afterwards, he was framed for killing his girlfriend Siriporn in *The corruptionist*. Arguably, Calvino is considered *homo sacer*, confined in a zone of indistinction between life and law. Although his connection to Pratt occasionally helps him out of troubles, he is often trapped in the space where the rule of law is suspended while being subject to the force of law that appears in the forms of police brutality. The state of exception is comparable to the refugee camp or other places of confinement



where *homo sacer* is never charged with a crime, but indefinitely detained without purpose.

In actuality, his legal status, thus, classifies him as an outsider; yet, he lives in Thailand as a semi-permanent resident. Calvino is one of the expats required to leave the country every ninety days for a visa run. The visa run is a curious aspect of the Bangkok expat experience. All they need to do is merely to cross one of Thailand's borders, only to re-enter and thus renew their permission to stay in the kingdom. In *The big weird*, it is revealed that this has been Calvino's ritual for over ten years. In the series, he usually hangs out at the Lonesome Hawk bar with the expats, who have also got stuck in a liminal space between two worlds, where the "home" sentiment is disoriented. Despite his friendship with Pratt, who lives "inside a network of loyalties, and nothing could tempt him to cross the border that separated where foreigners and outsiders dwelled" (Moore, 2010a, p. 88), Calvino's ambivalent position leaves him at odds with the Royal Thai Police locating him both outside and inside the sphere of law. As a non-citizen of Thailand, he is allowed to stay in the country until the visa expires. Ironically, he needs to physically remove himself outside the sovereign sphere of the Thai law before he can eventually be authorized to re-enter Thailand.

While bare life, exemplified by the detective character, is confined in a zone of indistinction, between life and law, the sovereign power that gives rise to the state of exception is embodied in influential or unidentified people. One salient case is the Thai military junta that stages coups every few years. Three coups d'état are



referred to in the Vincent Calvino series. The period after the coup is considered the state of exception, a “zone of anomie” where the sovereign has become law in itself. It is manifested in the state of emergency; the drafting of interim constitution; the declaration of martial law; and the suspension of normative law (Winichakul, March 9, 2020, pp. 174-175). The judiciary legitimizes those coups and endorses the ensuing state of exception by adjudicating that the coup leaders are the sovereign and by refusing to question their abuse of power (Winichakul, March 9, 2020, pp. 179-180). Those military coups are referenced in some of the novels in the Vincent Calvino series: the eleventh coup on February 23, 1991 in *Spirit house*, the twelfth coup on September 19, 2006 in *The risk of infidelity index*, and the thirteenth coup on May 22, 2014 in *Crackdown*.

When martial law is declared, a state of emergency is in effect. The law is suspended, but the force of law is applied. This further compounds the risk confronting the private eye during his investigative mission, particularly when the establishment of state of exception facilitates the collusion between the state authorities and the crime network. In *The corruptionist*, for instance, an incident of police framing also befalls Calvino. Two ex-police officers are sent by Wei Zhang, a business tycoon from Yunnan province, China. His grandfather made a fortune selling weapons to Chairman Mao’s military. Running into a problem with someone in the Agricultural Ministry, Zhang relocated his operation to Thailand, hoping to develop and produce genetically modified rice, and manufacture mechanically altered weapons (Moore, 2010a, p. 357). The police officers arrive in a



pickup truck with a black gym bag. Inside the bag is found half a dozen Ziploc bags tightly packed with white powder. Calvino would have been apprehended if he had not been alerted by the death of his girlfriend Siriporn.

Afterwards, in *Crackdown*, Calvino is hired by Alan Osborne to track Fah, one of his girlfriends. A university student, Fah, is studying political science. She and her classmates have a study group that work on a project of light graffiti projection containing anti-coup messages. Sometimes she does not come home since there is a curfew in place (Moore, 2015, p. 45). Later Fah and her group are rounded up and inducted into a 7-day attitude adjustment since their professor reported them to the junta. They are confined in an interrogation room while some military personnel are questioning their ideals (Moore, 2015, pp. 261-266). The room itself is turned into a zone of indistinction where law is suspended, but force of law is applied. The military assume the role of sovereign power.

Similarly, it has been noted that the state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics when “war on terror” has become a norm (Agamben, 2005, p. 2). The immediately biopolitical significance of the state of exception as the original structure in which law encompasses living beings by means of its own suspension emerges clearly in the “military order” issued by the president of the United States on November 13, 2001, after the 9/11 attacks, which authorized the “indefinite detention” and trial by “military commissions” of noncitizens suspected of involvement in terrorist activities. They do



not even have the status of persons charged with a crime according to American laws. They are neither prisoners nor persons accused, but simply “detainees” (Agamben, 2005, p. 3). The site of detention is entirely removed from the law and from judicial oversight. As Judith Butler has effectively shown in *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence* (2004), in the detainee at Guantánamo, “bare life reaches its maximum indeterminacy” (Agamben, 2005, pp. 3-4).

7. Retreating from the Threshold and the Use-of-Self

Residing in a squalid neighborhood in Sukhumvit Soi 27 while relying on uncertain incomes, Calvino is liable to physical assaults while on investigative assignments. He is not always protected by the rule of law. He discovers himself constantly threatened by the police as well as strongmen, or *jaopoh* (Moore, 2012, p. 126), leaving him as *homo sacer* that may be killed with impunity. Whenever he becomes a murder suspect, he is subject to police brutality. In *Asia hand*, for instance, Calvina becomes a suspect in the death of a bar girl. He later finds himself in one of the holding cells of Thonglor police station. Once the charge is cleared, he is unceremoniously released without receiving any proper apology from the authorities.

However, to liberate himself from the state of exception in Bangkok and Thailand, he might need to resort to Agamben for an exit strategy. The Western political tradition has, according to Agamben, split life into two categories: *zōe* (the biological fact of having life) and *bios* (political or qualified life). This process leads to a production of “bare life,” an in-between of the two categories that marks the limit



point of politics (Murray, 2010, p. 56). All we are left with is the establishment of a threshold or border between inside and outside, upon which sovereign power is founded (Colebrook, & Maxwell, 2016, p. 62; Norris, 2000, p. 47).

Therefore, in his attempt to liberate bare life from the state of exception, in *The use of bodies* (2015), Agamben proposes “exile” as an alternative existence by deactivating the opposites, *bios* and *zoè*, and rendering them inoperative. A living being, or what he calls *form-of-life*, is not defined by the use of its body, but the use of its self. It contemplates its own potential to do and not to do. This relation with oneself, or the use-of-oneself, is a process of subjectivization, or the ongoing process of becoming human of the human being (Agamben, 2015, p. 247). That is to say, there is not a subject before the relationship with itself and the use of the self; the subject is constituted through practices of the self in contemplation (Agamben, 2015, p. 101). Contemplation and inoperativity in this sense operate in liberating living human beings from every biological and social destiny and every predetermined task. (Agamben, 2015, p. 278). In contemplation or thought, life is inseparable from its form.

In the Vincent Calvino series, initially contemplation appeared in the form of dreams since it transpired in a state of unconsciousness and inoperativity. In *Spirit house*, Calvino investigated the death of Jeff Logan whose cause of death was officially recorded as “heart attack.” But Calvino had a different theory. Logan may have been murdered because of his investigation of mysterious deaths of expats. Before Calvino came to this conclusion, the story started with a dream



featuring a bar called D.O.A. BANGKOK, whose owner was nicknamed Fast Eddy, an ex-noodle vendor with a street stand near the Ambassador hotel. In the dream, Fast Eddy was responsible for the mutilation of Logan's body. In this case, activity in the dream state was later replaced by activity in the wakeful state, which eventually led to the successful investigation.

Later in *The marriage tree*, a murder investigation led Calvino inside a network smuggling Rohingya out of illegal camps and detention centers. After the death of the Black Cat, a rock singer from Myanmar, Calvino suffers from hallucinations. He claims that he experiences the sight, smells and sounds of the dead, who come as "visitors" (Moore, 2014, p. 2). As a result, he seeks help from a psychiatrist named Dr. Apinya. Afterwards, the narrator suggests that Calvino chooses oblivion instead of admitting personal issues. It would be too painful to admit that he cannot afford to forget what has transpired in his life.

In the last novel of the series, *Dance me to the end of time*, Calvino is stranded in the conundrum between engaging in more detective work or complete retirement and continued contemplation. He reflects on the difference between human and machine, and realizes that a machine like Al Henrietta relies on what is observable and measurable, *nomos*. Meanwhile, human life requires dealing with chance and randomness, *anomie*.

We were not smart enough to get beyond the
horizon where chance and randomness



manufactured the improbable world of reality.

[...] Do we believe only in what can be observed and measured? Or can we have faith in beliefs that are unobservable and unmeasurable?

(Moore, 2020, pp. 296-297; 300)

In his contemplation, what defines humans is fear and hope. Bare life lives on the threshold between biological life and political life, founded on the state of exception and defined by the suspension of law. Yet, to depose the paradox of *homo sacer*, of life that may be killed but cannot be sacrificed, one needs to transform the use-of-body to the use-of-self, from habits that lead to actions to life in exile or contemplation. However, some aspects of life cannot simply be predicted, and crimes constitute an inevitable part of urban life. Therefore, investigative work is still needed. As the detective's job naturally requires life in action, when he is requested to take up a case, Calvino's life in exile would invariably be put on hold.

8. Conclusion

Hard-boiled crime fiction emerged as a sub-genre of crime fiction in America in the 1920s and 1930s. It particularly focused on social and economic corruption in U.S. cities, the economic effects of the U.S. Depression, the Prohibition, endemic violence, and the corrupt justice system. The period witnessed the forerunners of hard-boiled crime fiction, such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. It has qualities that make it well-suited to the tasks of critique and protest.



It deals with acts of violence; the alienated and marginalized protagonists operate against the corrupt and powerful. The critical function of hard-boiled fiction has been taken up by successive generations of crime writers with very different agendas (Horsley, 2005, pp. 5-6). From the 1920s to the 2020s, hard-boiled crime fiction has seen itself adopted and adapted by numerous authors in several countries. The Vincent Calvino series is an example of the diversification of the sub-genre. It has continuously served as a tool to explore and comment on social and cultural dimensions of Thailand. Generally classified as Bangkok novels, the series features its protagonist as a private investigator operating in a deterministic world, where hostile circumstances are a daily constant. Furthermore, the detective is regarded as an outsider who needs to rely on some of the kind-hearted locals while negotiating cultural and linguistic barriers.

The character may be viewed as an embodiment of bare life or *homo sacer* who may be killed with impunity. He is confined in state of exception, between life and law. Therefore, the detective is constantly subject to the force of law while the efficacy of law is suspended – punctuated by a series of military coups, state surveillance, police brutality, extrajudicial killings, etc. In order to liberate oneself from this state of exception, Agamben proposes that, instead of relinquishing oneself as an instrument in the use of the body, the subject establish the practice of the self in contemplation. The living being or the form of life contemplates its own potential to do and not to do and finds peace in it (Agamben, 2015, p. 247). Only in contemplation or thought will the subject be liberated.



Nevertheless, Calvino is trapped between the two modes, between the use-of-body and the use-of-self. In case after case of investigation, he needs to engage in physical and mental exertion in order to locate a missing person or to determine the identity of a criminal. Yet, the hiatus between the sixteenth novel and the seventeenth and last novel has left him undecided whether he should resume his profession or retreat into a hermetically sealed sphere of contemplation.

The practice of the self in contemplation is simply an epistemological solution to the conundrum of bare life while a practical approach would be an overhaul of the legislative, executive, and judicial systems of the country. Nonetheless, hard-boiled crime fiction like the Vincent Calvino series works well as a spotlight shining on the dispossessed. This study of the crime series underlines the significance of the critical function of hard-boiled crime fiction in general. It aims to draw public attention to stories of those suffering under the force of law, those whose lives are laid bare to sovereign power. The theoretical approach used in the article is also applicable to other crime series, other literary genres, or even real-life situations, highlighting the purpose of social criticism in literature.

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