

Penning Dramatic Chance: Adaptation, Dürrenmatt, and *The Pledge*

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The narrative device of 'chance', particularly when it is called upon to motivate a substantive story arc, is riskily employed in dramaturgy. I refer not to fictions that embrace purely or largely the logic and structure of the aleatory, but to narratives that attempt to integrate arbitrary events into a conventional system of causation. Such works – which use apparently tangential events to direct changes in the main drama – rely therefore on a structural device that, by definition, is neither prefigured in the text nor anticipated by the spectator. It is for this reason that the chance event is perhaps most intrusive in works of detective fiction, since it appears to contravene the epistemic strategies extant in the genre: in the paradigmatic detective story, the narrative is designed to adumbrate a circumscribed number of possible resolutions to the central enigma, whereupon the final outcome, along with adjacent retardatory possibilities, is at some stage *foreseeable*. Conversely, the chance event has no place in the diegetic teleology, cannot be traced to an action initiated elsewhere in the drama, and exists only as a fleeting accident of 'reality', a random thunderbolt to concuss the causal framework. The chief risk for the dramaturgist is that the spectres of contrivance and anticlimax will raise their threat.

Quite in disregard of the inherent dangers, Sean Penn's crime thriller *The Pledge* (2000) strikes straight to the theme of chance, of the transmogrifying influence of fate, and employs it, moreover, as a plot device on which to hang the film's denouement. Written by Jerzy Kromolowski and Mary Olson-Kromolowski, the screenplay is adapted from a novel by the Swiss dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt.¹

Synoptically, Dürrenmatt's tale appears *prima facie* to tread familiar generic ground. The scene is laid in Chur in the mid-1950s. Dürrenmatt's main narrator, about whom we know little except that he is a writer of detective tales, befriends Dr H, a retiree and former chief inspector of the Zurich police. Dr H has attended a lecture given by the innominate narrator on the subject of his craft, and, agitated by the theme, counters that one crucial aspect of police work is always subordinated to the detective genre's dramatic codes: the element of chance, less as an index of some prevenient design than as a pure accident of existence, an ineluctable perversion of scientific, logical endeavour. To illustrate his point, the former police chief narrates the story of an ex-colleague, lower in ranking, but nonetheless a detective extolled for considerable gifts. Matthäi, aged fifty when Dr H picks up his story, is a brilliant logician, a detective distinguished by sagacity and flinty objectivity, and just days from stepping into an esteemed appointment with the Jordanian police. On his final afternoon as a detective in the Zurich canton, a child murder is committed somewhere in the Mägendorf woods, and Matthäi must inform the little girl's parents. With disarming repose, the mother of the dead child, perhaps as balm for her suffering, asks Matthäi to promise to find the murderer, and he so promises. Matthäi's pledge seems at first a cursory attempt to offer a palliative to the stricken parents, an attempt to indemnify while bound on a rack of professionalism; Dürrenmatt also limns Matthäi's action as one of ready compliance, in order that he may promptly exit the situation. Gradually, however, it becomes

apparent that Matthäi's promise – made by his 'eternal salvation', a declaration of absolute and spiritual conviction – is given far from perfunctorily, and is in fact a commitment made as much for the liberation of his own soul as for the amelioration of the mother's grief.

A single suspect is questioned. Circumstantial evidence accrues against the suspect, a local peddler with other misdemeanours in his past. The investigator before whom the peddler is brought dragoons the suspect into confessing, and, thus subjugated, the prisoner commits suicide. Satisfied to impute the murder to the peddler, the Zurich police pronounce the case closed. Yet doubts concerning the peddler's guilt begin to assail Matthäi, and, suddenly restive, the detective decides to continue his questing; no longer engaged in his old post, however, and with his transfer to Jordan newly suspended, Matthäi's investigation is undertaken autonomously. He soon discovers that similar murders have been committed in neighbouring cantons, whereupon he triangulates the crime scenes on a map, and uses the coordinates to identify the killer's probable trajectory. In the centre of the hotbed area, Matthäi takes ownership of a ramshackle gas station, enlists a housekeeper, and uses the woman's young daughter – whose statistics match those of the murder victims – as bait for the killer. News of Matthäi's exploits meanwhile trouble his former colleagues, who perceive the morally ambivalent motive underlying Matthäi's ostensibly benign activity; it is furthermore bruited that the detective has yielded to an intemperate impulse and begun to reveal symptoms of increasing fissure. But when he learns that a man calling himself The Wizard has made overtures to his housekeeper's daughter, in a fashion that resonates with the earlier murders, Matthäi encourages the child to meet with the man again, and, convinced he has finally traced the culprit, persuades his ex-colleagues to mount a sting operation. Entire days pass as the cantonal police lie in ambush, but The Wizard fails to keep a rendezvous with the little girl. Mindful of police resources, the public prosecutor intervenes and aborts the operation, while Matthäi, shackled by

a sense both of unfulfilled justice and of his own tarnation, is tormented into alcoholism and degeneracy.

Dr H then reports how, some years later, he is himself summoned to the deathbed of an old woman who has chosen him – in his professional capacity – to confide some knowledge in. The infirm woman tells the superintendent of her young husband, already deceased, who had privately confessed to the local child murders, and whom, in a chance turn of events, was slain in a traffic collision while *en route* to the place of Matthäi's sting. Dr H, who, in common with his colleagues, had hewn to the belief that justice had been served with the peddler's suicide, hastens to notify Matthäi of the revelation; yet the abraded detective is desolate, refracted: the news has arrived too late. The novel ends not with the main narrator, but with Dr H. The absurd humbling of men of logic and rationality can be safeguarded against, he suggests, by accepting and assimilating into one's calculations the existence of absurdity and chaos as insuperable truths of existence.

The film adaptation of *Das Versprechen* makes several significant alterations to Dürrenmatt's story. First, the main action has been transposed from Zurich to contemporary Nevada, a change in milieu not impedimental to the creation of an unsettled, miasmic climate that, in the novel, had been laid in by Dürrenmatt. Second, Matthäi is now Detective Jerry Black, and no longer at the apogee of an eminent career; when Jerry first learns of the child murder, he is not on the brink of an illustrious career move but is surrounded by colleagues and festooned with garlands at his own retirement party. Third, in *The Pledge* Jerry's relationship with Lori (Lotte, his housekeeper, in the novel) is fundamentally romantic, an alteration that burdens the detective with greater loss when his suspect motives become known. Finally, and most significantly in the context of this essay, the book's adapters have shorn away Dürrenmatt's frame narrative. Since the novel's double narration is excised in the film, the story's chance event (the murderer's fatal road accident) is no longer revealed retrospectively, discursively,

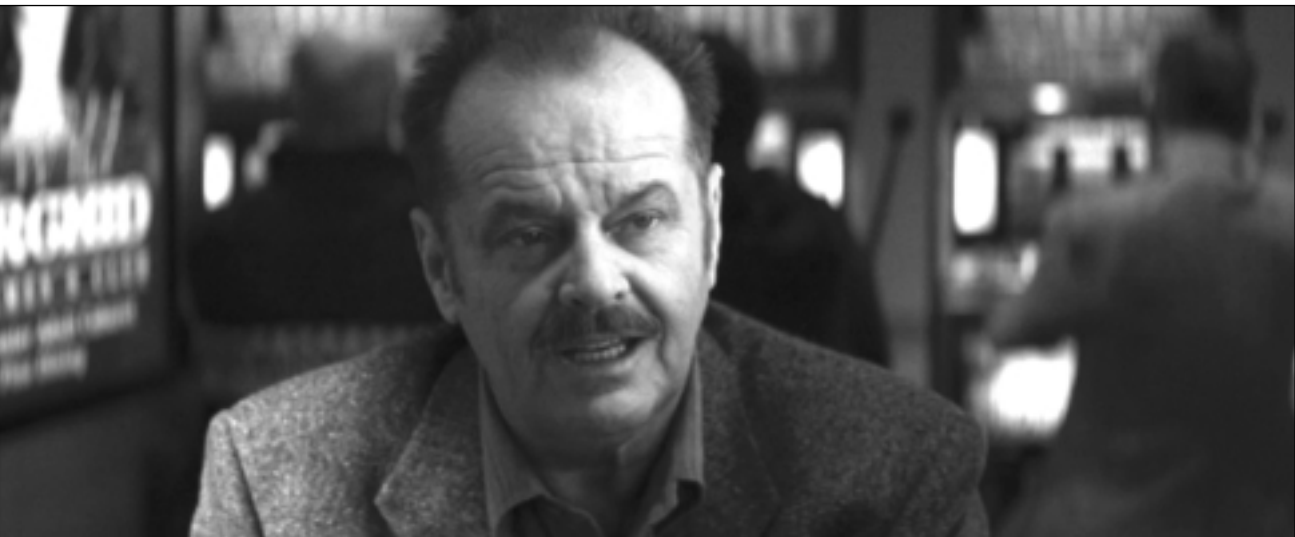
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but is dramatised directly and in its temporally 'accurate' place in the narrative.

This dramaturgic reliance on an acausal event has met with some critical resistance, a reaction, it seems, that is motivated by a fundamental hesitancy rooted elsewhere than in the surface achievements of the film; this critical resistance points, I suggest, to an inherent shortcoming in the structural use of chance for narrative progression. I underscore that the usage of random events to which this study pertains is of the kind that brings about a significant narrative progression, not merely the presence of chance *per se*.² My aim in this essay is to examine precisely why chance in such narratives is deemed narratologically unsound, and to thereby support the above contention that its usage represents a significant risk on the part of the dramaturgist. I want also to consider the ways in which the transmutation of Dürrenmatt in *The Pledge*, in particular the excision of the novel's frame narration, leads not only to an altered emphasis in the narrative placement of the chance revelation, but, more widely, to a substantive transformation of Dürrenmatt's strategies of focalisation and reflexivity.

Short-circuiting narrative causality

In plot structure, the chief interest of *The Pledge* is in the way its narrative turns on a single unportended circumstance: Jerry would have ensnared The Wizard but for the abject interference of a chance occurrence. It is this *coup de théâtre* that is usually the catalyst for critical schism. Those critics adverse to *The Pledge* typically adduce this moment in the narrative as evidence of its shortcomings, as against, for example, aspects of performance or *mise-en-scène*; the film's deficiency, for these critics, is primarily dramaturgical. We may infer from this that the criticism aimed at the film's curve ball belies an aesthetic suspicion of dramatic chance as a strategy for motivating narrative action. Critics who thus denounce *The Pledge* as spurious do so on the ground that its use of chance is a contrivance that obtrudes, a self-conscious conceit grafted onto a relatively conventional narrative. Consequently, it is argued, the narrative issue represented by the 'intrusive' device – in this case, the random and deleterious effects of a chance concurrence – is diminished by the salience of the device itself, such that the spectator is enjoined to



- 'A retirement-crisis story': Jack Nicholson as Detective Jerry Black in *The Pledge*.

concentrate on the mechanics of structure rather than on thematic elaboration. (This is a charge not levelled at Dürrenmatt's novel, for reasons I discuss later.) Nevertheless, in films that exhibit such narrative snares, the sense of manipulation that the surprise event may engender is determined, in large part, by the degree to which diegetic logic is maintained.³ An outlandish narrative snare may lack persuasiveness if it is considered to rupture the systems of logic inscribed in the fictional world; however, it may be perfectly persuasive if this world is continuously outlandish, or is able to accommodate outlandishness in its logical framework. Having established a diegesis anchored in reality, *The Pledge* furnishes an unmotivated event that is entirely plausible within the context of its secular setting. How is it, then, that the film's foregrounding of chance still fails to convince certain audiences? Why is dramatic chance apparently – and inherently – problematic?

In *Time* magazine, Richard Schickel complains that 'for a man as rational and self-aware as [Jerry] clearly is, the [film's] unHINGING outcome is perhaps too much of a surprise to him and not entirely persuasive to us'.⁴ To address Schickel's first complaint – that Jerry's disbelief and confusion run counter to the character's sagacity – is to feel that Schickel misses something important. The story's basic absurdity is anchored in just that ironic contradiction: in Dürrenmatt's phrase, 'there is no greater cruelty than a genius stumbling over something idiotic'.⁵ If the detective protagonist in *The Pledge* has not quite the 'genius' of his literary counterpart, nonetheless he is, as Schickel observes, a man of rationality and self-awareness: his chief flaw is in his overlooking of the ordinary. Schickel's second grievance against the film – and one more immediately pertinent to this inquiry – concerns the persuasiveness of its denouement. Though he does not himself identify the factors underlying his response, I suggest that such a reaction rests ultimately on the film's treatment of causality. The fracturing of causality is, I argue, the base of the widespread suspicion of chance as a dramatic tool.

In *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster defines plot simply as 'a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality'.⁶ Classical film narratives are holistically constituted in the same way of course, by sets of cause-and-effect chains. An effect, or outcome, is almost always foreseeable on the basis of the action that motivates its occurrence; chance events, on the other hand, both in reality and in fiction, are defined by an absence of a *priori* knowability or prefiguration. Causality, therefore, is disrupted by the interjection of an unforeseeable aspect. Dramatic chance provokes scepticism, I suggest, because the random situation obtrudes as an element extrinsic to the narrative's causal system. The spectator may respond sympathetically to this obtrusion if there is little in terms of narrative development at stake. In other words, we may forgive an obscurely motivated event providing its influence upon subsequent narrative happenings is not substantial. I am concerned, however, with fictions that burden the contingent moment with greater narrative responsibility, that bring the device forth to implement changes in the story's main current. In such fictions, the risks are large. As David Bordwell warns, 'the later in the film a coincidence occurs, the weaker it is; and it is very unlikely that the story will be resolved by coincidence'.⁷ *The Pledge*, then, evinces a bold indifference to the conventional dramatic guidelines of, in Bordwell's term, the 'Hollywood rulebook'.⁸

As has been noted, the scenarists behind *The Pledge* reveal the snare earlier in the narrative than does Dürrenmatt's novel. (I will discuss the primary reason for this structural reordering in the next section.) Where Dürrenmatt posits his revelation in a kind of narrative aftermath, such that the chance event is discovered and its consequences illuminated only retroactively, the film generates suspense by crosscutting between the murderer's fatal road collision and the scene of the police ambush set to entrap him. Sean Penn presents the chance occurrence (i.e. the killer's inadvertent road crash) elliptically. Although we are shown, through the windshield of the murderer's station wagon, the oncoming

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tanker (a restrictive composition that prevents access to the killer's face, ensuring the anonymity and, we may infer, the irrelevance of his identity), the impact of the two vehicles is not explicitly rendered: at the crucial moment, Penn cuts away to the scene of Jerry's sting. (Possibly this oblique narration contributes, for some audiences, to a sense of anticlimax: Penn does not furnish a large spectacle with which to provide a gratifying emotional payoff.) We do not interpret the murderer's sudden appearance in the film as disjunctive of the causal order (he has been but glimpsed hitherto this moment.) Rather, it is a corollary to a series of narrative actions, performed by Jerry, to lure the character corporeally into the fiction. At this precise narrative juncture, therefore, the murderer's appearance is justified and motivated by a set of distinct actions that exist in meaningfully causal, goal-oriented relations.

What, then, in this sequence *does* strike us as disjunctive of the predominant causal order? Certainly, though I argue that the chance event presents a temporary threat to the *narrative's* causality, I do not claim that causation itself is aborted altogether. In other words, the chance event does not abandon causal structures in its own localised unfolding. A certain vantage point is established from within the murderer's vehicle; from this perspective we observe the tanker wend along the highway before screeching into our path; an ellipsis enters in, the collision is

expunged, but later we witness the wreckage caused by the accident. Thus, within this sequence, causality is not dispensed with. Through the organisation and juxtaposition of material, the spectator is enjoined to infer the causal relationship between the various depicted actions (i.e. first, between the direction of the tanker and the station wagon; second, between the putative collision and the subsequent scenes of ruination.)

But there is still another sense in which causality in this sequence is localised, and in which the film's cause-and-effect structure is disturbed. If we take *A* to represent the presence and trajectory of the tanker, and *B* to represent the murderer's death, we may say that *A* – its trajectory traced to impact with the murderer's vehicle – is the cause of *B*. It is thus misleading to describe *B* as being acausal (devoid of a cause), since the occurrence of *B* is contingent upon the active properties of *A*. We may more precisely claim that the existence of *A* is acausal: there is no exposition earlier in the narrative to cue us to its existence, nor, therefore, is there anything to suggest its trajectory or significance. This is not, I suggest, a minor qualification. That *A* arrives in the film's narrative without forewarning, that its appearance is not rooted in an earlier causal chain, and because it intercepts and retards a line of action that *is* causally motivated, means that the event *B* (the outcome of *A*) is a small but significant rupture in the narrative's causal



- The moment of chance: causation distressed by a random collision.

framework.⁹ Causality is therefore fractured because there is little in the way of narrative reasoning to account for the occurrence of *B*. The film does not reveal who helms the tanker, nor is it concerned to adumbrate the vehicle's intended trajectory. These details are incidental to the thematic preoccupations of *The Pledge*; what is of significance to the film is the brute, objective fact of *B*. Some happenings, the film wants to say, are devoid of accountability, are mere accidents of time and place; some effects cannot purposefully be traced to a cause. The conceptual core of this narrative is that no quality of logical calculation and rational cognition can safeguard against the ability of chance to undermine human action. So, while the chance event is unmotivated and acausal (in terms of its lack of exposition in the *global* narrative), it is, as an event, resoundingly motivating and causal: it has an *effect*, a substantive one in narrative terms, since it motivates the film's denouement, inflicting various qualities of despair upon the characters.

Jack Nicholson, who plays Jerry, has said: 'I defy anyone who's not familiar with the material to – as you can in most films – predict the ending of this picture.'¹⁰ Despite the unforeseeability of its narrative outcome, *The Pledge* deliberately fabricates false leads, ostensibly malignant suspects, and deceptive horrors; furthermore, the film generates specific hypotheses, enticing the spectator to fill in the

interstices with the apposite deduction.¹¹ This activity is a commonplace of the detective genre. David Bordwell writes: 'The viewer creates a set of exclusive hypotheses – a closed set of suspects, a gradually defined range of outcomes.'¹² Although *The Pledge* hews to this generic trend and seeks to create such a circumscribed range of avenues for the spectator to pursue, it then contrives a resolution that renders all of the spectator's hypotheses redundant. (This is doubtless another manoeuvre considered ill-conceived in Bordwell's 'Hollywood rule-book.')

The film refuses to gratify the spectator by 'coming good' on one or more of the hypotheses: if *The Pledge* circumscribes a number of suspects, nonetheless it reveals the murderer not to be one of them, and, moreover, represses to a significant extent much of what the spectator expects to learn (the murderer's motives, even his identity.) Similarly, as Nicholson predicts, the narrative outcome is not one we are likely to have imagined or anticipated, and is not among the hypotheses that Bordwell imagines us to engender. Narrative closure in *The Pledge*, motivated by the ambiguous presence of chance, therefore discards the generic armature it has spent the majority of the film exhibiting.

It may now be cogent to surmise why Richard Schickel and others respond as they have to the film's narrative schema.¹³ We have said that the chance event is not anchored in global cause-and-effect, that it is not corollary to any



• *The Pledge* assembles malevolent suspects around the child Jerry uses for bait.

previously delineated action or situation. With the unforeseen occurrence comes the element of surprise; with it, too – potentially – is the possible reading that, since the event is arbitrary and not integrated into the narrative’s global causation, and moreover since it does not conform to generic expectation, thus it must be spurious and dramatically inept. This last – dramatic ineptness – is, I argue, an assumption that underlies the genre adherent’s suspicion of chance as a factor bearing on narrative action and resolution. This suspicion takes the sceptic past the diegesis to the source of its creation: the screenwriter. So jarred is she by the snare in the narrative, so shaken from passive absorption, that she is compelled to question the motives of the author. Since the chance event is not a product of preceding events and actions, but appears to drop into the narrative as if from some higher realm, therefore the sceptic looks to the governing hand that designs and oversees the production of narrative. Several doubts then assail: has the writer run his narrative line(s) into a dead end? Is the apparent recourse to a fatalistic circumstance simply a facile attempt to arrive at a desired resolution he knows not how otherwise to reach? Basic to these doubts is a suspicion not only of the tenuousness of chance as a dramatic device, but of the screenwriter as possessing a fundamental defect in dramaturgical competence. Such questions – of structural maladroitness – may have been asked of *The Pledge*, but they are far less likely to be levelled against its source, *Das Versprechen*, for reasons I shall now discuss.

Reflexivity and narration

Of the prevailing straitened conditions he thought operative in contemporary drama, Dürrenmatt lamented: ‘Fate has left the stage on which we play, to lurk behind the scenes, outside the concept of art valid today.’¹⁴ *Das Versprechen* is Dürrenmatt’s attempt to bring fate centre stage.¹⁵ This the writer does with a certain effrontery, laying bare the device of dramatic chance by foregrounding its utility as a device, and using his narrators as conduits for his own

dramaturgic investigation. (We are deliberately tempted into locating the author in the text: Dürrenmatt’s main narrator is an innominate author of detective fiction.) When Dr. H, a frame narrator in the novel, presents an inventory of narrative devices that a fiction might effectively employ to bring closure to Matthäi’s story, we can observe Dürrenmatt beneath the text, acknowledging awareness that such techniques exist, but with the conviction that he shall not be appropriating them. Though the novel deals centrally with Matthäi’s murder inquiry, the story’s frame narrative concerns the resistance within the detective genre to confront and utilise the element of chance for dramatic purposes. This is nowhere more evident than in the novel’s subtitle, ‘A Requiem for the Detective Story’, which intimates not only that the subject of detective fiction will be made manifest as an explicit theme, but further that the conventions embedded in the genre will be dissected and overlaid. It is in this vein of reflexivity that any suspicion of Dürrenmatt’s dramaturgical competence is mitigated. Dürrenmatt shows us that the generically orthodox trajectories have occurred to him, that he is cognizant of the conventions that the reader expects and desires; yet he has scrutinised those conventions and found them wanting. As his mouthpiece in the novel – Dr H – tells the anonymous author-narrator:

in your novels, chance plays no part, and if something looks like chance, it’s made out to be some kind of . . . providence; the truth gets thrown to the wolves, which in your case are the dramatic rules.¹⁶

The ‘dramatic rules’ of the detective genre, therefore, are inimical to Dürrenmatt’s desire to reclaim ‘fate’/ ‘chance’ as a dramatic index of reality.

Much of the commentary in *Das Versprechen*’s frame narration is concerned to explicate the significance of chance in the embedded narrative, the story of Matthäi. Indeed, what motivates Dr H to convey the story in the first instance is his conviction that, in reality, the success of the detective’s inquiry is heavily

predicated upon arbitrary factors. Dürrenmatt peppers the texture of his novel with small instances of coincidence, evoking a diegetic universe afflicted by accidental disturbances to the causal equilibrium: returning to the crime scene, the peddler insists that his discovery of the little girl's corpse was pure happenstance, repeating 'I just happened to pass by here, just by chance!'¹⁷ Later, Dr H observes: 'It was a Sunday again, and it seems to me, looking back, that many of the crucial moments in this story took place on Sundays.'¹⁸ This detail, inconsequential in narrative terms, nonetheless serves a textural function as just one more item of coincidence in a discomfiting diegesis. Such items of chance in the novel are a faint augury of the trajectory that Matthäi is to trace. Dürrenmatt foregrounds chance with great explicitness, principally through the reflexive discourse of Dr H, but the extent to which chance is to figure in Matthäi's story is forecast even more overtly. We know with a high degree of foreknowledge that some aspect of chance will feature in Matthäi's activity and, moreover, effect a significant narrative change in the primary line of action. While the reader cannot know the precise character of this chance occurrence, she is cued by more or less explicit signpostings to anticipate its arrival. Because the chance event is so densely prefigured, therefore, it carries with it a greater mediation of surprise than does the same event in *The Pledge*, where prefiguration is expunged. For this reason, Dürrenmatt's novel circumvents accusations of exiguous payoffs and anticlimax: the salience of a chance event has all along been assimilated into the reader's expectations.

The Pledge, though its strategy is deemed less dramaturgically sound, has in a sense greater fidelity to the idea of chance, such events in life being unprophesised and sudden. As the film excises Dürrenmatt's frame narration, so it eliminates the novel's foreshadowings of the climactic trope, thereby enjoining suspense on the spectator (and, as noted earlier, enhancing the element of surprise.) Moreover, *The Pledge* rejects a traditional practice in film adaptation wherein the narrator of the source book is

transplanted as a non-diegetic narrator, 'authoring' the diegesis. Rather, narrative action in the film is conveyed from an impersonal, objective vantage point, dramatising events rather than 'narrating' them. But, in shearing away Dürrenmatt's frame device, the screenwriters had to be reconciled to a corollary effect. *Das Versprechen* is foremost a metanarrative, its reflexive strain enabled by the use of frame narrators, who ruminate on the flaws inherent to detective fictions while imparting the embedded narrative. Penn, in contrast, uproots this embedded narrative and relies on its autonomy as the sole basis for his drama, thus discarding the parentheses employed by Dürrenmatt. If this structural transmutation is ultimately in the service of the *film's* interests, it nevertheless occasions the hobbling of the original text's reflexive concerns. It is in this sense that I claim *The Pledge* (generally considered a faithful adaptation) radically alters its source material, pillaging Dürrenmatt's primary narrative of its *raison d'être*.

Dürrenmatt's frame narration having been suspended, *The Pledge* does not bare the device of chance as flagrantly or self-consciously as its source text. Nonetheless, this suspension does yield certain consequences for the film's chance event and denouement. We have already noted that the murderer's fatal road accident is not narrated retrospectively but dramatised in temporal continuity with its corporeal occurrence, and intercut with a simultaneous line of action. This is self-evidently a strategy for the creation of tension and suspense. Yet there is still another ramification for the film's climax. In Dürrenmatt's novel, it is necessary that Dr H is cognizant of an entire set of narrative facts concerning the story he narrates; he has omniscient authority over Matthäi's narrative, and, as such, is able to organise its recounting in innumerable ways. However, because Dr. H is both omniscient narrator and *diegetic character*, Dürrenmatt must justify his knowledge *through narrative events*. In other words, it must be explained how Dr H comes into complete possession of the narrative facts (and this explanation must occur diegetically.) Thus

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- The detective inveighs his former colleagues to believe in The Wizard's existence.

Dürrenmatt carpenters a situation in which the deceased killer's wife, ailing and prone to divagation, confesses her late husband's crimes. This situation exists in the narrative, I would argue, as much out of dramatic necessity (i.e. the need to account for the narrator's knowledge) as for the desire to bring epistemic enlightenment to the characters. Nevertheless, in distributing knowledge among the agents, *Das Versprechen* allows one minor palliative to Matthäi's dismal situation: as a result of the dying widow's confession (which, I have suggested, is placed in the novel for a dual purpose), the narrative agents are brought into knowledge concerning the murderer's demise, thus into a knowledge of the accuracy of Matthäi's deductions. Matthäi's obsessive activity can at least be vindicated by the shared recognition that his conclusions had a firm basis in fact. *The Pledge* puts forth a comparatively bleak scenario, however. Stripped of Dürrenmatt's diegetic character-narrator, the film has no need for the figure of revelation – the infirm widow – since her function to enlighten is now redundant. The film has only to depict the old woman's revelation explicitly, to dramatise her description directly. As consequence, a cruelly dramatic irony is effected, in which *no-one* in the diegesis is in full possession of the facts; the spectator's knowledge of events is hierarchically superior to that of any of the characters, while Jerry's ex-associates in the police – unaware of the validity of his suspicions – continue to lament

the sad deterioration of their former colleague. A circumstance in which the characters are made cognizant of all the narrative facts could conceivably have been invented for the film, yet Penn and his collaborators prefer to keep Jerry's situation barren. Therefore, while Dürrenmatt's novel mitigates the sense of tragedy insofar as it permits a retrospective recognition that Matthäi's actions were valid, *The Pledge* resolves to contain its protagonist's isolation and despair by preserving the ignorance of its narrative agents; from a once 'great cop' to a 'drunk and a clown', the film traces the deterioration not only of a mind but of a reputation.

If the chance event in *The Pledge* is crosscut with a simultaneous narrative strand (the scene of Jerry's stakeout) in order to generate suspense and distend a moment of climax, it also depends upon this editing technique to confirm a suspicion that has hitherto been braided through the film. The narration in this sequence echoes an earlier significant stage of narrative action, in which Jerry's retirement party is interwoven with the discovery in the woods of the little girl's corpse. In both sequences, the narration is at once omnipresent and omnipotent. In both cases, too, there is an emphasis on the spectator's epistemic access to narrative information. Yet we are compelled to note a schism between, on the one hand, an effectively unrestricted narration, and, on the other, the awareness that both sequences contrive to

restrict and harness Jerry's knowledge. It is salient that in the film's two most influential story events, and most injuriously in the denouement, Jerry is unaware of crucial narrative information. This is not to want to endow the character with thaumaturgic powers; unless possessed with such gifts, no character can be expected to be cognizant of events that occur outside of their perceptual awareness. Nevertheless, in cases where the spectator's story knowledge is superior to that of a protagonist, it typically obtains that the protagonist will shortly thereafter acquire possession of those facts of which they were initially ignorant. The suspicion that *The Pledge* has sought to arouse by the time of the dramatic climax pertains to Jerry's command of the diegetic world, to his status as an agent of unerring reliability. This suspicion bears out and culminates in the recognition that for Jerry, if not for us, there is no moment of *anagnorisis*: for Jerry (and, I would argue, *not* for us) there is only anticlimax, a sense of desperation that gives way to mere waiting. Left only to mutter 'He's coming, he's coming . . .', Jerry fills dead time with an abysmally futile conviction to wait for a murderer whose existence is moot, echoing the absurd activity of Beckett's tramps who complain: 'Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful.'¹⁹

In abandoning Dürrenmatt's framing device, *The Pledge* sacrifices reflexivity in the name of a more intense focus on Jerry's propulsive drive toward apprehending the murderer. As we have seen, *Das Versprechen's* narrational structure positions the reader so that we are, as it were, twice removed from the detective protagonist (Dr. H recounts the embedded narrative to a crime author who, in turn, conveys the story to the reader.) Penn's film permits us a more direct access to the protagonist. While the film medium is apt to convey the subjective experience of its central character, Dürrenmatt's novel is able to achieve this less effectively because its narrators are also characters in the diegesis. Whereas an authorial narration can convey information about a character's inner state unproblematically, the diegetic character-narrator cannot reasonably

have access to another agent's interiority. Dürrenmatt's narrators can thus only conjecture as to the inner processes of the protagonist's mind.²⁰ *The Pledge*, then, expunges the mediating presence of the book's narrators, and both allows greater alignment with, and deeper internal access to, the detective. At the same time that these processes enable us – unlike the film's characters – to perceive the weight of Jerry's deductions, and, moreover, encourage the spectator to become allied to Jerry, so, too, does this close alignment allow us to best bear witness to the character's mental collapse.²¹ It may be tempting to locate Jerry's intertextual counterpart in J. J. Gittes, Jack Nicholson's private investigator in *Chinatown* (1974) and *The Two Jakes* (1990), a detective whose inquiry in the earlier film is similarly doomed to hopelessness. This temptation is best resisted, however, for the reason that these films seek to limn their protagonist as a mere snoop, a fundamentally defective investigator, furnishing motifs and actions to undermine his focalisation and interpretation of events; Jerry Black, on the other hand, is a superlative detective, a logician who handles crime investigations as he might handle chess pieces, moving methodically and rationally through the narrative world. *The Pledge* does yield sequences given over to Jerry's warped perception – one moment in particular, where Jerry hallucinates the murder of the child he uses for bait, forces us to retroactively recognise it as a subjective distortion – yet, though such instances alert the viewer to an unstable point of view, they prove not to undermine Jerry's ability for detection. Only one miscalculation prevents Jerry capturing The Wizard: his failure to anticipate the arrival and intervention of chance.²² At any rate, events in *The Pledge* are not – as they are in Dürrenmatt's novel – rendered through frame narrators but are focalised directly through the detective figure, a transposition that, among other functions, works to magnify the emotional fissure of the protagonist.

The Pledge is replete with apertures through which to glimpse traces of peculiar or unstable behaviour – a shot of a liquor flask tucked in

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- Unknown forces – and Penn's camera – close in on Jerry.

Jerry's back pocket, the stabbing of an anxious, grubby finger at a child's crayon drawing – and which cue the spectator to a gradually turning narrational manoeuvre. The purpose of this manoeuvre is to shift the spectator's attention from the focalised to the focaliser: the spectator is enjoined to accommodate a concomitant concern for the investigator of the crime as well as for the solving of the crime itself. One feature of this manoeuvre is to foreground the reaction shots of supporting characters. Most films will restrict the majority of reaction shots to the main character; as our protagonist and focalising agent, it is, after all, this response that matters to us most. As it progresses, *The Pledge* exhibits a concern to convey a wider spectrum of character reactions, but these reactions are, crucially, given in response to Jerry's behaviour. Such emphasis on the perception of the protagonist by other characters encourages the spectator similarly to subject him to scrutiny. The characters' reactions therefore serve not only to influence our judgment of the detective, but to routinely widen the space of alignment between Jerry and the spectator, such that, on a local basis, we share the same response as the person whose reaction is rendered. This narrational strategy, moreover, crystallises a broader sense that *The Pledge* is only notionally concerned with its central enigma, employing generic conventions as a pretext to explore the internal conflicts of the individual. Ostensibly preparing the ground

for a confrontation of antagonists, as per the classical cinema, the film instead aims to locate the less tangible antagonist of the individual, revealing itself to be preoccupied with the mind of the detective hero.

One of the most significant alterations that the screenwriters of *The Pledge* make in Dürrenmatt's novel is to take the protagonist to retirement age. The stakes are thus raised for Jerry: his pledge becomes a personal crusade to validate his existence in the face of time, and the longer the period that elapses, the more desperate his search for the killer. Jerry's pledge thus grows alpine in his consciousness and filters into obsession. As in Penn's *The Crossing Guard* (1995), the figure of the dead child looms like a wraith throughout the narrative, and we are shown physical traces of her brief life – photographs, sketches, clothing; vestiges that are insistent reminders to Jerry that his promise remains unfulfilled. The film also suggests that Jerry's pledge is anchored in some sense of moral propriety. He tells his former superior: 'I made a promise . . . you're old enough to remember when that meant something.' Jerry thus feels himself an anachronism, and Penn's film makes explicit the theme of age, of fear of retirement and empty time, of impending decay and death; indeed, a key contribution that *The Pledge* makes to Dürrenmatt's story is to crystallise Jerry's being-towards-death. Penn has even referred to the film as depicting 'a retirement-crisis story',



- Visual clarity is disturbed to emphasise a nebulous identity.

while one critic notes that Jerry's evident anxiety at his own retirement party – before word of the murder comes – is attributable only to 'the simple fact of his redundancy.'²³ *The Pledge* gives expression to these preoccupations early on. Under the credits, a sharp zoom-in tightly frames Jerry's watch; later, he gazes silently at a senior citizen ambling along the street on a walker; he then glances at various photographs strewn around his office, images of a younger Jerry in the military and in the police. In these opening scenes, the film asks: what happens when the man whose life has been spent immersed in certain kinds of regimented institution no longer has those establishments to instil personal order and provide tegument?²⁴ At Jerry's retirement party, Penn provides a striking composition that speaks to this point. As his colleagues carouse around him, in sharp definition and framed in depth, Jerry moves laterally across the foreground *out of focus*, a gesture that points not only to the implication that Jerry's identity itself is distorted and indistinct, but also to his evident sense of alienation from this environment. Moreover, this stylistically destabilising device – Penn also decelerates the visual action – serves to portend a miasma, to crystallise an ominous mood.

We have seen how *The Pledge*, by effacing Dürrenmatt's frame narrative, is enabled to increase proximity between the embedded story and the spectator. This transmutation opens up

possibilities of subjectivity and focalisation, which the film exploits in order to project a harsh, probing light upon the protagonist. We have also noted a corollary to this narrational rearrangement, in the form of the reflexive strain that is given expression by the narrators in the novel, and which is consequently expunged from the film. For Dürrenmatt, his use of narrators arises out of a recognisable need that is motivated by the metacritical nature of his project: his narrators are fictional constructs contrived to mount a critique of the detective novel. It is not inconceivable that this criticism could have been altered for *The Pledge*, to build a critique of *cinematic* detective texts, and which would have then allowed Penn to retain Dürrenmatt's basic structural discourse. Nonetheless, in excising *Das Versprechen's* reflexive narration, *The Pledge* (among other effects discussed above) appears a comparatively conventional detective story, a fact both advantageous and, as we have said, potentially deleterious to the sting in the narrative tail. Sutured into the narrative without the signpostings flagged by Dürrenmatt's narrators, the chance event has greater potential for surprise, yet it is the dramaturgical use of chance itself, I have argued, that perturbs some audiences. In rupturing the story's connective tissue, the chance event is considered both to impair narrative unity and yield vitiated payoffs. It is in this sense that I claim *The Pledge* takes

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substantial risks, and, if we are inclined to find the film successful, its triumph over the kinds of resistance I have attempted to delineate in this essay must surely be measured as one of its highest achievements.

Notes

- 1 Tracing an oddly cyclical trajectory, Dürrenmatt's novel, entitled *Das Versprechen* ('*The Promise*', 1957), was itself an elaboration of a film screenplay that Dürrenmatt developed earlier in that decade.
- 2 Chance occurrences are more or less commonplace in particular genres – comedy is a prime example – and the troubles with the device that I address here self-evidently do not have the same pertinence for those narratives. I shall discuss the role of genre later in this essay.
- 3 I do not mean to invoke the concept of 'snare' proposed by Roland Barthes, in which is suggested a form of retardation and delay. See Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford, Blackwell, 1974), p.75. Rather, I mean to capture the sense of surprise elicited by an unexpected turn in narrative events.
- 4 Richard Schickel, 'What Lurks Beneath', *Time*, 22 January 2001, 72. Schickel does not empty the baby out with the bathwater: his criticism of *The Pledge* is generally favourable, yet his reservations regarding the film's random event epitomise a general wariness of the device.
- 5 Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *The Pledge*, trans. Joel Agee (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 2001), p. 152.
- 6 E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1974), p. 93.
- 7 David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (London, Routledge, 1985), p. 13.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 This aspect also distinguishes *The Pledge* from that category of films defined by their 'twist' endings. Unlike such recent examples as *The Sixth Sense* (1999) and *The Others* (2001), the snare in *The Pledge* is not motivated by some prior narrative action or event, nor is it directly pertinent to or cognate with the lives of the principal characters (it occurs independently of the protagonists).
- 10 Quoted in *Hotdog* (August 2001), 71.
- 11 Penn's casting is shrewd: his chief suspect is played by Tom Noonan, an actor perhaps most recognisable to audiences as The Tooth Fairy in *Manhunter* (1986). The director plays on this intertextuality by having Noonan incarnate another sinister role.
- 12 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London, Methuen, 1985), p. 64.
- 13 For similar reservations regarding the film's denouement, see Stephen Holden, 'Where's the Glory, Tough Guys?', *New York Times*, 19 January 2001, section E, 1, 33.
- 14 Quotation in Timo Tiusanen, *Dürrenmatt: A Study in Plays, Prose, Theory* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 150.
- 15 I reiterate that this is not Fate in the metaphysical, predestined sense, wherein chance is conceived as an *intervention* by some transcendent force. In such a definition, unmotivated occurrences are taken as a 'sign' that Fate – as a preordained mapping of destiny – exists, governs, and orders daily life; and, moreover, that some omnipotent force occasionally reshuffles the causal order, thereby yielding chance events. Rather, fate in Dürrenmatt's tract is set apart from these notions of providence and predestination, and is conceived instead in terms of a quite random determinism, a domino pattern of causes and effects that collide and intersect with retardatory power.
- 16 Dürrenmatt, *The Pledge*, p. 9.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 111.
- 19 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (Faber, 1985). Jerry's obsessive marking of time, and the influence of chance upon his actions, raises another comparison. The protagonist of Claude Chabrol's *Que la bete meure* (1969) is the father of a young child maimed in a hit-and-run accident; the protagonist then resolves to find the child's killer, writing in his journal: 'I'm only a human being tracking another. My only aim is my patience. I have all the time. I have all my life. And his. Unless chance interferes. Chance is wonderful and it exists. It's the only thing that exists. The point of my pen on this paper is like everything in the world . . . a coincidence.' Still another coincidence can be found in the fact that Sean Penn's previous film as director, *The Crossing Guard* (1995), also concerns the stricken father of a child murdered by a drunken driver, and his attempt to execute the killer. Nicholson is again the protagonist.
- 20 Consider, for instance, the inferential character of the following sentences: 'I suppose the formality of my manner saddened [Matthäi]' (p. 73); and 'probably [Matthäi] imagined this would be his final farewell from us' (p. 11). Occasionally, however, there is a slippage between inference and declaration, as subjective information pertaining to Matthäi is presented by the narrators as absolute truths: '[Matthäi] felt like a spectre, like a man resurrected from the dead' (p. 80); and 'rimless glasses . . . were obligatory here, and maybe, Matthäi thought, they were the insignia of some secret order' (p. 89). But Dürrenmatt justifies his liberties with omniscience by ascribing them to the literary and editorial impulse of his main narrator

- (the detective writer), in whose narration is placed the following caveat: 'I should also add, as a purely technical point, in defense of my craft and for the sake of literary honesty, that I have of course not always reproduced [Dr. H's] immense verbal outpouring precisely as it was delivered . . . I had to intervene, shape and reshape . . . and rework it according to certain laws of the writer's craft; in short, to put it into publishable form' (p. 148). Once more, we may note, Dürrenmatt makes the reader aware that certain 'rogue' elements of reality must be recast, 'shaped and reshaped', to ensure smooth adherence to the governing norms of a fiction.
- 21 The notion of alignment is derived from Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1995).
- 22 Bordwell might be speaking of *Chinatown* when he states: '. . . the detective film employs the generic convention whereby we are not allowed access to the detective's inferences until he or she voices them (*unless* . . . the detective is baffled or turns out to be wrong).' (*Narration in the Fiction Film*, p. 67). Or, we might say of *The Pledge*, unless the detective is *correct* but his accuracy is academic because chance intervenes to undermine it.
- 23 Danny Leigh, 'Don't Fence Me In', *Sight and Sound* 13:5 (May 2003), 12.
- 24 Nicholson's subsequent film, *About Schmidt* (2002), serves as an intriguing companion piece to *The Pledge*, and confronts the same question. Warren R. Schmidt, the antithesis of the recalcitrant antiheroes of Nicholson's past, deals with retirement in a different, though comparably destructive, way.