

Article

Detective Fiction in a Post-Truth World: Eva Rossmann's *Patrioten*

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Abstract: Detective fiction is known as a genre that is concerned with revealing truths, both in the fictional world of the text as well as in the society after which it is patterned. The current socio-political environment, however, has been described as an era of post-truth politics and political propaganda, in which truth is more often determined by the relative strength of its representation. While some contemporary crime novels continue to propagate a reassuring message of truth, select Austrian narratives reflect this new so-called post-truth world. Bringing together theories of detective fiction and post-truth discourse, this article demonstrates how Eva Rossmann's 2017 crime novel *Patrioten* (*Patriots*) adapts the themes and structures of traditional detective narratives to expose a society in which certainty is determined less by objective facts than by their construction in the media and socio-political discourse. The analysis concludes that the novel's thematic and formal innovations help to redefine the socio-critical potential of contemporary detective fiction by showing the imminent dangers of an unregulated post-truth society.

Keywords: detective and mystery stories; Austrian crime fiction; contemporary Austrian literature; Kriminalliteratur/deutsch; post-truth; truth; nationalism in literature 21st century; patriotism in literature 21st century

1. Introduction

"Something is uncanny—that's how it begins. But at the same time one must search for that remoter 'something', which is already close at hand. The hidden 'who' is in demand . . . " (Bloch 1988, p. 245)

In his renowned treatise "A Philosophical View of the Detective Novel", Ernst Bloch describes the genre's essence as its pursuit of unknowns. Whether to answer a "something" or find a "who", this all-encompassing search for truth is the hallmark of crime fiction. At first glance, Eva Rossmann's 2017 *Patrioten* (*Patriots*) adheres to this model. The novel begins with a body that is found hanging on a cross on a hill outside Vienna and the disappearance of three men. The apparent victim is Julius Sessler, Christian leader of the fictional extreme right-wing Austrian political party, die *Patriotisch Soziale Partei* (the Patriotic Social Party). The missing men and presumed perpetrators are Muslim Syrian refugees. The initial mysteries surrounding these men trigger that all-important search for truth. The objective here, as in all crime fiction, is to uncover knowledge about the events, and thereby also restore order to a society in which the unsolved crime has heightened social and political divisions. In traditional detective novels, the investigation helps to reestablish knowledge and order on multiple levels. First, a material investigation examines evidence to provide knowledge about the victims, perpetrators, and nature of the crime. Second, a narrative act reinstates order by reconstructing a complete account that fully explains the mysterious criminal event. Determining the complete truth also helps restore socio-political order. Identifying the criminal individuals and acts distinguishes the deviant, "foreign"

elements from the persons and society that they threaten. The investigator's final assessment restores social order by helping eliminate the branded deviants and thereby reaffirm the hegemony of the dominant group. The ultimate function of the final "true" account of crime is thus to legitimate existing socio-political structures and reassert their primacy in guaranteeing a logic- and knowledge-driven, ordered society.

Rossmann's *Patrioten* adopts the multiple functions of detection in the traditional paradigm, but adapts them for a twenty-first-century world in which the notion of truth is becoming increasingly problematic. In particular, the novel reflects a post-truth society in which certainty is determined less by objective facts than by the relative strength of their representation. The novel highlights the relativity of truth by transforming the generic forms that create the semblance of certain knowledge and restored order. In the plot of *Patrioten*, a flood of contradictory information in the material investigation frustrates attempts to conclusively determine the individuals' characters and motivations and, thereby, their role in the events. The quest for answers is further complicated by sensationalized reports in print and broadcast media and by demagogic posts on social media, which inflame social and political tensions across Austria. On the narrative level, Rossmann mirrors the difficulty of determining truth by stripping away the literary devices that are used to produce a sense of certainty and closure, such as a fixed narrative perspective, a clear distinction between true and false information, and a conclusive dénouement. In this environment of uncertain knowledge, the detection process fails to produce complete solutions or restore order. The novel also withholds the affirmation of a dominant socio-political system, by precluding the return of certainty and order in the plot and narrative. Instead, this crime novel questions the discourses that sustain social hegemony by classifying individuals according to artificial binaries such as victim or perpetrator, patriot or traitor, normal or deviant, us or them. Highlighting the dangers of such simplistic categories, *Patrioten* creates an alternative reading experience that pushes back against the homogenizing tendencies of these discourses and points to their potentially dangerous effects.

This essay examines how Eva Rossmann's *Patrioten* transforms a conventional resolution of enigmatic crimes into an exposé of the socio-political and media discourses that construct those alleged truths. The analysis begins by outlining the relationship between the genre's form and its socio-critical function that is highlighted in theories of crime fiction.¹ Particular attention is given to the ways in which conventional and unconventional structures, often labeled modern and postmodern, are used, respectively, to reaffirm or challenge a given social order. Drawing on this theoretical framework, I next consider how Rossmann's novel adopts and extends the disruptive potential of unconventional, postmodern crime fiction that characterizes many contemporary texts to reflect specifically the post-truth political environment of the twenty-first century. As my analysis shows, the thematic and formal innovations in *Patrioten* uniquely highlight a society in which truth is determined less by facts than by their construction in the media and in socio-political discourse. The portrayal of deviance in the plot and structure of *Patrioten* emphasizes the inherent dangers in an unregulated post-truth society and, thereby, also demonstrates a new direction for socio-criticism in detective fiction.²

¹ In this article, the terms "detective fiction" and "crime fiction" are used interchangeably, thereby recognizing the genre's richness and diversity. For an in-depth discussion of the changing terminology in the history of German-language crime fiction see Kniesche (2019, especially pp. 5–10, 207–25, 236).

² While many literary and cultural theorists have moved beyond postmodernism in favor of transmodernism, crime fiction has yet to be considered in this paradigm. *Patrioten* doubtlessly shares many shared attributes with transmodernism, however the argument here is that Rossmann's novel extends the socio-critical potential of traditional and untraditional crime writing but does not necessarily transcend those models. Thus, while *Patrioten* underscores the pitfalls of truth discourses, it stops short of completing the synthesis of modernity and postmodernity central to the transmodernism (See for example, Magda 2017; Aliaga-Lavrijsen 2018).

2. Results and Discussion

2.1. A Brief Theoretical Overview of Crime Fiction, Social-Political Critique and Post-Truth Discourse

Theories of crime fiction consistently highlight the genre's propensity for socio-political critique due to its archetypal themes and structures. Thematically, crime fiction is by its very definition concerned with acts that are labeled criminal, because they deviate from a society's laws and/or norms.³ In this context, the central conflict between investigator and criminal in the plot embodies that between those who uphold and those who transgress a society's rule of law.⁴ This thematic focus has made the genre a favored medium for social commentary and, throughout its 200+ year history, authors have used crime fiction to expose a system's strengths and weaknesses at the moments it is most severely tested. As Heather Worthington puts it, "Crime, criminals and criminality, then, are evidence of deviance from the cultural and social norm; as such, they offer a useful way into reading the changes in cultures and societies over time" (Worthington 2011, p. x). The recognizable narrative structure of detective fiction—the triad of crime, investigation, resolution—accentuates the subject matter.⁵ The narrative disruption that is initiated by the unsolved case mirrors the social disorder unleashed by the unexplained, deviant act, while the complete story of crime at the end exemplifies the restored knowledge and social order. Referring to this structure, literary theorists, such as Todorov and Brooks, have labeled the detective story the "narrative of narratives", in that "its classical structure lays bare the structure of all narrative" (Brooks 1984, p. 25).⁶ The correspondence between the subject matter and narrative form enhances the genre's potential for socio-political commentary and critique. The successful or unsuccessful investigation and resolution thereby become vehicles to either reaffirm or question the status quo. As Ronald Thomas (1999) notes, in its classic form the complete narrative reassures readers that the dominant social order will prevail against outside threats.⁷ By contrast, when authors play with the familiar structures, the deviations underscore a complex reality that cannot be solved, understood, or explained by conventional means.⁸

Academic studies of crime fiction tend to consider the genre through the lens of modern and postmodern literary theory. Being seen within this dichotomy, the traditional texts affirm modernism's confidence in the ability of reason and systemic discourse to comprehend a unified reality, while the unconventional texts reflect postmodernism's skepticism towards such postulates. Michael Holquist and Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney were fundamental to establishing a theory of metaphysical or postmodern detective novels as texts that expose the artifice of order and the fundamental truth of chaos in society as a whole.⁹ Holquist (1983) observes that postmodern detective fiction highlights illusory order by incorporating elements, such as an open-ended plot, undecidable

³ Worthington goes so far as suggesting that laws create deviants, "[I]n creating rules or regulations or laws, society implicitly creates the criminal in the individual who refuses or fails to comply with the system of governance" (Worthington 2011, p. x).

⁴ See also Moretti (1983) who describes the detective story as a contest between the individual and social organism.

⁵ On the structure of detective fiction see Alewyn (1998), and Bloch (1988, 1998). Bloch shows how the structure of crime novels uniquely mirrors the plot by beginning with the unsolved crime in medias res, and using knowledge about its prehistory to solve the case and restore a complete account.

⁶ Todorov and Brooks both proclaim the detective story as a prototype of all narrative structures (Brooks 1984). This narrative act is in fact two-fold. As Todorov has shown, detective novels dramatize the two stories that make up the structure of all narrative: the *fabula*, or plot, which in detective stories is the story of the crime, and the *sjuzet*, the interpretative ordering of the first, which in the crime genre is the story of the investigation. (Todorov 1977, pp. 45–46).

⁷ See also Cawelti who claims that "the classical detective formula is perhaps the most effective fictional structure yet devised for creating the illusion of rational control over the mysteries of life" (Cawelti 1976, p. 137).

⁸ Thomas comments on the alternate functions of traditional and non-traditional texts. "Detective stories help to provide reassurances at these junctures by continually reinventing fictions of national and individual identity to respond to rather specific historical anxieties, often invoking the authority of science to do so. But the narratives in question did not simply or consistently reassure; they also exposed, and in so doing they sometimes challenged the emerging culture of surveillance and the explanations of individual and collective identity it promulgated. In this respect, the detective story may act less like an enforcer of legitimate cultural authority and more like a force of resistance to such authority" (Thomas 1999, p. 6).

⁹ For more on the metaphysical detective story, see Holquist (1983) and Merivale and Sweeney (1999). See Rzepka for an overview of the attributes of postmodern detective fiction (Rzepka 2005, p. 233). For a more detailed discussion of the genre's position in postmodernism see McHale (1992).

conflicts in testimony, indecipherable clues, and impenetrable motives that are excluded from the rational, causally coherent universe of the traditional detective story. Drawing on the precepts of postmodernism that were formulated by Lyotard and White, [Merivale and Sweeney \(1999\)](#) further note that the unconventional crime stories point to the inherent bias of all narratives and demonstrate how material objects, events, and actions in the world are assigned their meanings first and only by the very narratives within which they are made to appear as “facts”. Often depicting a defeated sleuth in a labyrinthine world of unreadable texts, the narratives suggest the self-defeating nature of any kind of closure to the investigation ([Merivale and Sweeney 1999](#), p. 8). Whether labeled metaphysical, postmodern, or even anti-detective novels, the unconventional texts adapt traditional structures to expose the flaws in a self-proclaimed logical, ordered society. Much as the classic forms legitimate the given social order, the adapted novels remove the narrative ordering devices in order to question the incontrovertible social order that they imply.¹⁰

Austrian crime fiction is especially known for using experimental language and narrative structures to level sharp socio-political critique. Commenting on the form, Beatrix Kramlovsky notes how in recent Austrian crime novels “the rules of the genre are often ambitiously broken, varied, or satirized” ([Kramlovsky 2011](#), p. 13). Kniesche similarly suggests that contemporary texts continue a long-established philosophical tradition of “experimenting with language, skepticism about language’s ability to serve as a reliable system of communication, and modern and post-modern literature” ([Kniesche 2019](#), p. 50). Contemporary Austrian crime writing is often described as a prototype of postmodernism due to its propensity for literary experimentation ([Krajenbrink 2016](#), p. 54; [Kniesche 2019](#), pp. 46–56). Key examples include Elfriede Jelinek’s *Gier* (Greed 2000), Wolf Haas’s Simon Brenner series (1996–2014), Heinrich Steinfest’s Cheng novels (1999–2019), and Paulus Hochgatterer’s *Die Süße des Lebens* (The Sweetness of Life 2006) and *Das Matratzenhaus* (The Mattress House 2010), all of which explore modes of storytelling that question language’s reliability as a mode of communication and representation ([Kniesche 2019](#); [Krajenbrink 2016](#)). Marieke Krajenbrink elaborates on how the formal adaptations highlight hidden social imbalances: “Austrian crime fiction critically explores what otherwise remains hidden beneath tourist industry images that mask less palatable issues of right-wing populist radicalism and the legacy of Austria’s role during the National Socialist era” ([Krajenbrink 2016](#), p. 52). While this coupling of narrative experimentation and socio-critical commentary might not be exclusive to Austrian crime fiction, scholars, such as [Hall \(2016\)](#), [Krajenbrink \(2016\)](#), and [Kniesche \(2019\)](#), maintain that these features, taken together, are more prominent in Austrian crime fiction than in that from other countries.¹¹

Eva Rossmann’s work offers an insightful window on contemporary crime fiction in its embrace of traditional and untraditional features. A key contributor to Austria’s flourishing popular crime market, the author has entertained audiences with the unlikely amateur detective duo Viennese journalist Mira Valensky and her Bosnian cleaning woman Vesna Krajner in 19 novels (as of 2019). These novels adhere to the genre’s traditional threefold structure of crime, detection, and resolution, but Rossmann also uses the genre’s narrative conventions to expose offences in Austrian history, politics, media, gastronomy, and tourism, for which she draws on her training as a constitutional lawyer and her experience as a political journalist. For example, the 1999 *Wahlkampf* (*The Campaign*) highlights rampant corruption in politics and the media, the 2003 *Freudsche Verbrechen* (*Freudian Crimes*) discusses Austria’s failure

¹⁰ For more on the traditional detective novel as a means of affirming a given order see [Porter \(1981\)](#) and [Thomas \(1999\)](#), who suggest that traditional texts affirm existing systems including social hegemony, scientific reason, and power structures. See also Cawelti for an in-depth consideration of the genre’s conservative and subversive tendencies throughout its development ([Cawelti 2004](#), pp. 276–87).

¹¹ [Kniesche \(2019\)](#), for example, sees a broader move towards socio-critique and innovative narrative techniques in all German-language crime fiction since the 1980s. Inspired by international crime fiction, the texts reflect on “historical and contemporary social and political issues” and negotiate “modern and postmodern literary aesthetics” in a specific way (p. 16). Kniesche nonetheless also distinguishes Austrian crime fiction from its counterparts, asserting that these features are more pronounced in Austrian texts (p. 46). See also [Krajenbrink \(2016\)](#), pp. 51–52).

to deal with its National Socialist past by featuring the continuing effects of the Arian laws from the 1930s and 40s, and the 2018 *Im Netz (On the Web)* highlights the role of social media in blurring the lines between “fakes” and facts in a lethal case of character assassination.

Rossmann’s 2017 novel *Patrioten* includes many of these key socio-political themes. While using the framework of a criminal investigation, the novel shines a light on questionable conduct in politics and the media and on the persisting legacy of fascism in right-wing populist movements. Yet, in contrast to her other texts, the label “Krimi” (crime novel) is noticeably absent from the title and its innovative narrative form departs from that of previous work. Unlike the Valensky novels in which the investigation is conducted and mediated by the reliable, first-person narrator, *Patrioten* consists of several shifting perspectives. Contradictory accounts are conveyed by multiple narrators, fragmented media reports, and passages from social media, and thereby hinder clear determinations about criminal bodies and events. The narrative structure itself heightens the uncertainty by foregoing a sovereign detective figure to control the investigation, and by replacing a logical and intentional detective process with a circuitous, often arbitrary investigation and a definitive dénouement with an open-ending that is partially solved but not fully resolved. The formal adaptations reflect a departure from Rossmann’s Valensky texts and bring *Die Patrioten* more in line with the postmodern and Austrian tradition of highlighting socio-political concerns through narrative experimentation.¹² Yet, unlike her counterparts, Rossmann focuses her critique in this novel on one specific issue: the post-truth political environment in which it was written.¹³

The Oxford dictionary defines “post-truth”, also its 2016 word of the year, as “Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Languages 2020). The Oxford English Dictionary (2000) and Cambridge Dictionary (2020) additionally note that the term most commonly appears in a political context, such as in references to the European Union (EU) referendum in the United Kingdom and the 2016 presidential election in the United States. The criminal investigations in *Patrioten* are set in the post-truth political environment of 2017 and explicitly and implicitly refer to the year’s top headlines on Brexit negotiations, Donald Trump’s unexpected presidential victory, and the surge in public support for far-right political parties leading up to key European parliamentary elections. Rossmann reinforces associations between the fictional and real-world events by repeatedly naming authoritarian leaders, such as Donald Trump, Marine Le Pen, Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orbán, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan. References to these leaders and their stance on immigration and nationalism are evoked to bolster the views expressed by the characters, the press, and on social media. The novel’s central concern with current populist, post-truth movements is directed at both global and at specifically Austrian political developments. Indeed, Rossmann seems to anticipate the populist surge that left an indelible mark on Austria’s parliamentary elections in October 2017. In the election’s dramatic conclusion, the conservative Austrian People’s Party (ÖVP) and the Freedom Party (FPÖ) used their first and third place wins to form a coalition government that shifted the country’s politics to the right after more than a decade of centrist coalition rule. Advocates for an open-door immigration policy in Austria were particularly concerned when the Chancellor assigned the post of Secretary of State to the FPÖ, a party that is defined by its “Austria First” policy.¹⁴ Rossmann reinforces the associations between the fictional and real-world events in Austria with the rhetoric of the fictional right-wing Patriotisch Soziale Partei in *Patrioten*, which bears an unmistakable resemblance to Austria’s

¹² Traci O’Brien identifies many postmodern concerns in Rossmann’s *Freudsche, Verbrechen*, including its skepticism about the possibility to find the truth within the “mass of accumulated information” (O’Brien 2015, p. 129). She concludes, however, that Rossmann provides a way out of this hermeneutic dilemma in the novel by using the detective’s “stable, ethical vantage point from which to interpret the facts gathered during the investigation” (ibid., pp. 129–30). My analysis demonstrates that *Patrioten*, by contrast, amplifies rather than solves the problem of truth-seeking by withholding a central, stable detective-narrator. For more specifically on the critical reception of *Patrioten* see Skorpil (2017) and Pisa (2017).

¹³ See also Salgado (2018) for a compelling analysis of the effects of online media on post-truth politics and postmodernism.

¹⁴ See the Party Programme of the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ).

Freedom Party. Multiple characters in Rossmann's novel also explicitly comment on the resemblance between the Patrioten and the Nazis, a charge also leveled against the FPÖ.¹⁵ The references to national and global socio-political developments communicate the intended broad scope of the novel's critique. The search to resolve fictional crimes in Austria is meant as a case study on actual national and global tendencies. Rossmann uses the account of deviance in her unconventional crime novel to showcase the problems in a post-truth era, where certainty is based less on facts than on their appropriation and an impassioned representation in the media and in socio-political discourse.

2.2. An Analysis of Crime Fiction and Post-Truth Discourse in *Patrioten*

Despite its generally unconventional treatment of crime fiction, the plot of *Patrioten* begins much as one might expect in the traditional genre. The first sentence, "Sie haben ihn ans Kreuz geschlagen" (Rossmann 2017, p. 7; "They nailed him to the cross"),¹⁶ points to an inexplicable deviant event that must be solved: the identity of the "they" and "him" must be established, and the death and crime explained. Yet, from the beginning, Rossmann places doubt on the quest for truth through the flood of fragmented information delivered in the rambling thoughts and dialogues of multiple narrators and in excerpts from media reports and social media. These fragments are lean on facts but rife with opinions, and piecing them together only yields three certainties: that the deceased "him" is Julius Sessler, leader of Austria's far-right Patriotic Social Party, that his body was found on a cross-like structure on a hill outside Vienna, and that three Syrian asylum seekers, identified in the news as Muhamed S., Nasouh A. und Rami A., disappeared the night of his death. The men's characters, motivations, and role in the events are what remain disputed until the end of the novel, which is the crucial information required to complete the crime narrative and restore social stability. The unknowns about these two groups creates a gap in the plot and the narrative structure that is the hallmark of detective fiction. Ronald Thomas identifies the objective of most detective stories as "to tell the story of a past event that remains otherwise unknown and unexplained by fixing the identity of a suspect and filling in the blanks of a broken story" (Thomas 1999, p. 4).¹⁷ Rossmann's novel begins with this gap and, as the investigation progresses, it builds suspense about the "whodunit" by supplying numerous contradictory explanations of the men's characters and the nature of Sessler's death. Yet, what complicates this investigation and ultimately prevents the resolution typical of classic detective fiction is that here overt socio-political ideology taints the sources and interpretations from the beginning until the end, which makes it impossible to organize the excess of information into one truth.¹⁸

The primary sources of information about Julius Sessler are the contradictory opinions about the politician expressed in public and private venues. While each proclaims its truthfulness, the novel shows that the so-called facts are directly connected to the speakers' ideological views. The highly controversial leader of the right-wing nationalist party is posthumously praised by his supporters as a "true Christian" ("wahrer Christ") while being denounced by his opponents as an "agitator" ("Hetzer", Rossmann 2017, p. 7). His supporters and opponents hotly contest these contradictory opinions at public rallies, on social media, and in private discussions. Sensationalized press reports further stoke public discord by intensifying the contrasting images of the politician as either a Christian patriot or a dangerous demagogue. These predetermined political views about Sessler and his party's ideology color the interpretations of his death as either a sacrificial act or a deserved punishment. The two

¹⁵ Richard Pribil repeatedly points out, "PSP – PS wie NS – nur damit das klar ist. Patriotisch Soziale, Nationalsozialisten. Du brauchst nicht glauben, dass das ein Zufall ist" (Rossmann 2017, p. 142; PSP – PS like NS – just so it's clear. Patriotic Socialists, National Socialists. You shouldn't believe for a second that is pure coincidence").

¹⁶ All of the English quotes are my translation.

¹⁷ See also Alewyn (1998).

¹⁸ I see this overt politicization as different to the subversive critique of capitalist ideology that Kaemmel (1983) sees as part and parcel of the detective genre.

extremes come into sharpest relief in the long excerpts from social media in which users articulate their opinions under names, such as “ES (IT)”, “Comandante”, “Local Citizen’s Office of the Patriots – Resign Immediately!”, “Pro-Pork Austria”, “Joker”, “Zorro”, or “Siegfried” to name just a few. Some of the names are humorous, many betray the users’ political leanings, but all of the posts offer extreme opinions on the Sessler mystery. The most decisive and divisive voices are ES (IT) and the Comandante, who respectively represent the pro-Sessler, right-wing, anti-immigrant and the anti-Sessler, left-wing, pro-immigrant views. ES leads the pro-Sessler camp in heralding the politician’s death as a national tragedy, stating,

Wir trauern um Julius Sessler, der sein Leben in den Dienst unseres Landes gestellt hat. Einen, [...] der sich mutig gegen die Mächtigen auf die Seite des Volkes stellte. Der für unsere Kultur eingetreten ist. Sie haben ihn verhöhnt. Aber er hat gesiegt. Die einfachen Menschen erkennen, wer für sie ist. Er wurde zum Führer einer internationalen Bewegung, der Angelpunkt einer Sehnsucht nach Heimat, nach der Bewahrung des Eigenen. Jetzt haben sie den Patrioten ans Kreuz geschlagen. So weit kann Hass und Spaltung gehen. Hat er sterben müssen, damit wir leben können? (ibid., p. 15)

We are mourning the death of Julius Sessler, who dedicated his life to serving our country. One [...] who courageously stood up for the common people against the powerful elite. One who advocated for our culture. They mocked him. But he prevailed. Ordinary people recognize who is for them. He became the leader of an international movement, the lynchpin of a longing for the homeland, for preserving ones own. Now they nailed the patriot to the cross. This is how far hate and division can go. Did he have to die so we can live?

Drawing on religious symbolism (the cross and the sacrificial gesture) and nationalist catchphrases (culture and homeland), ES portrays Sessler as a sacrificial victim and Austria’s savior. Moreover, he suggests that the deviants are not only his murderers, but all those who oppose his nationalist values, such as “the homeland” and “preserving ones own”. In subsequent social media posts, ES sharpens the distinction between the victims and perpetrators as that between religious entities, specifically Islam and Christianity, battling for control of Austria. The blogger also decries the media for manipulating the facts, such as when he questions, “Warum berichten die Medien nicht über die Kreuzigungen von Christen durch radikale Dschihadisten? Leider ist der Kreuzestod von Julius Sessler kein Einzelfall, auch wenn uns das die gleichgeschaltete Presse einredet. [...] Es gilt, Verbündete zu finden und unser Land zu verteidigen” (ibid., pp. 59–60. Why don’t the media report the crucifixion of Christians by radical Jihadists? Sadly, Julius Sessler’s crucifixion is not an anomaly, even if that’s what the compliant media wants us to believe. [...] We must find allies and defend our country”). ES repeatedly rallies support for an extreme nationalist political platform by insisting that only he is telling the truth that the other media suppress. However, this truth is comprised less of facts than of incendiary portrayals of Sessler and his presumed murderers that draw on the oppositional categories of Christians and Jihadists, friend and foe, patriot and traitor, us and them. This rhetoric is what elicits agreement or disagreement from the other users.

The extreme rhetoric and blatant prejudice of ES’s statements signals their unreliability as facts, and yet opposing images of Sessler in the novel indicate equally consequential biases. Comandante leads the charge against the politician and his *Patriotisch Soziale Partei* by deeming them the real deviants rather than the victims: “Sessler hat sich zu Jesus zwei stilisiert. Der Retter der Armen und Ohnmächtigen, der Messias der Geknechteten. [...] Er hat die Verhetzung angeführt! Nicht Menschen, die zu uns geflohen sind, sind das Problem. Sondern Politiker wie er. Und Medien, die dieser Rattenfängerei folgen” (ibid., pp. 16. “Sessler stylized himself as a second Jesus. The Savior of the poor and powerless, the Messiah of the downtrodden. [...] He incited the insurrection. The problem is not the people who have fled to us. But rather politicians like him. And the media that cover this farce”). While Comandante’s posts reverse ES’s determination of the real victims and perpetrators, they use the same rhetorical strategies to present their truth. Like ES, Comandante uses inflamed

language rather than concrete facts to prompt his followers to combat the threat posed by the real social “deviants”, namely Sessler and his party. Like his counterpart, Comandante also establishes his views as the sole truth and denounces all counter narratives, especially the media, as biased, even dangerous. ES and Comandante both wage a battle of words on social media that provokes strong opinions from other users on Sessler’s death and on the perceived larger battle between upstanding patriots and deviants, natives and foreigners, us and them.

The search to resolve Sessler’s death is riddled with these irreconcilable interpretations regarding the deceased political leader, all of which are voiced by sources claiming a privileged access to truth. The self-proclaimed truth speakers also express similarly biased opinions about the perpetrators. Proponents of the Patriotisch Soziale Partei quickly conclude that the deviants, the unidentified “they” from the beginning, are three Syrian asylum seekers. After the police focus their investigation on the refugee Rami S. and his wife Sina, they become the main targets of the attacks. ES, the primary spokesperson on social media, insists that “the facts” (“die Fakten”, *ibid.*, p. 246) prove the men’s guilt and the threat that this “network of crucifiers” (“Netzwerk der Kreuziger”, *ibid.*) poses to Austria as a whole. ES later refers to circumstantial evidence as proof of the Syrians’ guilt, including the men’s sudden, unexplained disappearance the night of Sessler’s death, their DNA traces later found at the crime scene, and cryptic messages from Rami to his wife confiscated by the police. However, as the responses to the posts show, it is ES’s militant tone rather than these purported facts that convince his followers of the Syrian’s guilt. This becomes particularly evident when ES and his followers continue to vilify the refugees, even after the police determine that the DNA had been planted and that the men had an air-tight alibi—they had been in captivity the night of the politician’s death.

While the extreme rhetoric of the pro-Sessler voices alerts the readers of *Patrioten* to its unreliability, the counter-narratives proclaiming the Syrian’s innocence are just as problematic. Posts on social media and public statements use the same types of militant rhetoric and simplistic assessments to argue for their truth. Comandante compares his opponents’ scapegoating of the Syrians to the Nazis (*ibid.*, p. 161). In another example, the human rights lawyer Trummer uses the case of the refugees Rami and Sina at a political rally to garner support for his pro-immigrant political agenda. Referring to the Patriot party as a dangerous “right-wing, fascist system” (“rechts-faschistoides System”, *ibid.*, p. 292), he calls his followers to wage war: “Wir werden für sie und für ihn und das Recht kämpfen” (*ibid.* “We will fight for her and for him and for justice”). Deflecting from the facts, Trummer only references the case to advocate for a fight to protect the ebbing rights of citizens in society as a whole. His militant verbiage constructs the same distinct contrasts as his right-wing political adversary and incites followers to political action by reinforcing the same binaries as his opponent.

In the plot of traditional detective novels “the truth”, i.e., the one true narrative of the criminals and crimes, is determined by differentiating between true and fabricated information and by piecing together the objective facts that were revealed by the physical investigation of the bodies and of material evidence. The flood of impassioned rhetoric in *Patrioten*, by contrast, renders information and disinformation about the men indistinguishable; indeed, the obvious biases in social, political, and media discourses and in the plot invalidate their conclusions about the men and the case. This obfuscation of knowledge is consistent with postmodern crime fiction more generally and contemporary Austrian crime writing more specifically. Whether in individual texts by established literary authors, such as Thomas Bernhard, Peter Handke, Christoph Ransmayr, and Elfriede Jelinek, or in popular crime series by Wolf Haas, Manfred Wieringer, Alfred Komarek, Heinrich Steinfest, Edith Kneifl, and Eva Rossmann, Austrian crime fiction expresses a similar distrust in language.¹⁹ However, in contrast to contemporaries and to her own Valensky novels, Rossmann’s *Patrioten* notably does not refract the world of the novel through an expansive postmodern lens that deems truth and reality a fruitless pursuit. Instead, the novel pinpoints one culprit in the seemingly insurmountable search for certainty:

¹⁹ See also Kniesche (2019, pp. 46–56) and Krajenbrink (2016).

a post-truth world in which determinations are based on the intensity of the represented beliefs that are sold as facts. Even more specifically, as the contradictory judgments about Sessler's death and the Syrians' disappearance demonstrate, the social media and socio-political discourses, along with their unquestioning consumers, are the perpetrators in this new post-truth environment.

The structure of *Patrioten* intensifies the problem of determining the truth about criminals and crimes thematized in the plot. Rossmann's novel reworks the formal narrative elements of crime fiction that help to conclusively determine the truth, beginning with the detective figure. In traditional novels, the expert detective is skilled both in the science of detection, which relates to the material investigation, and the art of detection, which pertains to reconstructing the final narrative that relays the incontrovertible truth.²⁰ In the physical investigation, this extraordinary individual is tasked with resolving contradictory accounts and evidence. He/she succeeds where others fail particularly because of his/her unique ability to "read", i.e., interpret, the clues and discern the true from fake facts and to maintain objectivity to the people and events.²¹ These experts can be found for example in the mid-19th- to early 20th-century work of Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Raymond Chandler in Anglo-American literature, and in Adolph Müllner, Adolf Steckfuss, and Balduin Grollier's novels in the German and Austrian genre.²² *Patrioten* challenges the detective's authority to produce one official truth by replacing the unassailable master detective/narrator with multiple unreliable narrators and media. The novel includes more than six alternating third-person narrators, whose accounts are interspersed with fragments from radio, television, and newspaper reports, and with excerpts from social media. The polyphony of voices expresses views from a broad cross-section of contemporary Austrian society, yet also provides a continuous flow of varied information and interpretations without one sovereign observer to reliably and conclusively resolve contradictions.

Patrioten also undercuts the objectivity of the detection process. Indeed, the strongest, and arguably most biased, views in favor of the Syrians come from the self-appointed amateur detectives, three of the primary first-person narrators who undertake their own search to find the missing men and prove their innocence. As Rossmann shows, these characters believe in the suspects' innocence due to obvious personal and political biases. Rami's wife Sina continually insists "Hat nichts getan, Rami! Gut Mann!" (Rossmann 2017, p. 23; "Did nothing, Rami. Good man"). At the same time, she will say and do anything to ensure her family's future in Austria, which includes concealing notes by her missing husband from her Austrian friends and the police. The 83-year-old Viennese widow Lotte Klein, believes in Rami's innocence because of her faith in Sina and the positive view of refugees that she has developed through volunteer work at her local parish. Lotte's 90-year-old male friend Richard Pribil is driven by both personal and political motivations. The WWII veteran aims to help Lotte, but he is also a staunch Communist determined to rescue Austria from the destructive belief system of the *Patrioten* party which, for him, is a continuation of Nazi ideology. He sees this case as an opportunity to oppose Sessler's supporters and their anti-immigrant stance.

In addition to withholding the expert, objective observer, and interpreter, *Patrioten* undermines a sense of narrative certainty by replacing the logical and intentional detective process with a circuitous, often arbitrary investigation, in which the would-be detectives Lotte and Richard always seem to be one step behind the media and bloggers. Indeed, the elderly couple finds partial answers to Sessler's death and the missing men simply because they happen to be in the right place at the right time. Their search for Rami ends fortuitously while visiting Lotte's grandson David in Brussels, where he is interning at the EU parliament. On a tour of the building, they find the Syrians and uncover an elaborate plan to kidnap them, bomb the EU parliament, and then frame the men for the attack to convince Austria and Europe of the threat that is posed by refugees. Lotte and Richard also accidentally

²⁰ See also Alewyn (1998).

²¹ See for example Thomas (1999) and his comment "The detective hero's function is to identify that contested narrative space and to occupy it with his truth-telling voice, with his 'solution' to the case" (p. 9).

²² For more on the history of German-language crime literature see Hall (2016) and Kniesche (2019).

find a video recording by Sessler in a trash can. In this final testament, the politician attests that he is choosing to end his life, or more precisely to hasten his impending death of pancreatic cancer, by following Christ to the cross. He ends his video confession by urging his followers to continue his righteous fight against evil and to keep their homeland pure (ibid., p. 341).

This series of accidental events in Brussels brings about a partial resolution to the case: it helps to explain the real cause of Sessler's death and exonerates the Syrian refugees. Thus *Patrioten* does not conclude with the complete chaos seen in many postmodern novels (Holquist 1983; Rzepka 2005). At the same time, the novel also lacks the traditional dénouement, in which the expert investigator unfolds a complete account of the crime and its resolution. Instead, Rossmann's novel ends with numerous unanswered questions. The mastermind behind the kidnapping and bomb conspiracy is never revealed, neither is the identity of the individual(s) made known who taped and withheld Sessler's final confession. While Lotte and Richard speculate that the new *Patrioten* chairman Fuhrmann had likely orchestrated the events, alternative explanations continue to circulate in the news and on social media. The amateur detectives' investigation does have some direct effects on the political landscape: an official inquiry begins against Fuhrmann and he is forced to resign as party chairman. Yet, he continues to influence the narrative about the crimes, even after he gives up his official title. In an official press statement, he claims that he and his associates had in fact prevented, not caused, the terrorist attack in Brussels. ES, the ever-ready champion for the nationalist cause, reinforces the ex-leader's claims on social media, where Fuhrmann's support grows. Posts by followers on Facebook vilify "das Lügenkartell aus Politik und Medien" (ibid. p. 339; "the lying cartel of politicians and media") and praise ES for his continuing anti-immigrant, pro-Austrian comments as the only voice of truth. They further proclaim that Fuhrmann will rise up again "wie Fönix aus der Asche" (ibid., pp. 338–39; "like Phoenix from the ashes").²³

Frustrated by the persistent counter-narratives on social media, Lotte's grandson David disgustedly comments to a friend "Sie stilisieren ihn [Fuhrmann] zum Opfer. Sie hetzen im Netz. Die glauben die Wahrheit einfach nicht" (ibid., p. 339; "They are making him [Fuhrmann] out to be a victim. They are inciting hatred on the internet. They just don't believe the truth"), to which she cynically replies, "ach, was bist du nicht klug. Weil es die Wahrheit gibt" (ibid., "aren't you the smart one. As if the truth exists"). This obvious dismissal of the notion of the truth highlights the only certain results from the criminal investigation in *Patrioten*. The search reveals that contradictory claims cannot be resolved either with a logical investigation or with one conclusive account. This larger realization leaves the would-be detectives Lotte and Richard uncertain about the possibility of knowing and disseminating truth, not only about this case, but also about socio-political injustice in the world. The novel ends with their observations: "Die Welt ist ein Irrenhaus, sagt Richard. [. . .] Weniger zu wissen macht vielleicht ruhiger, sagt Lotte.—Aber nicht klüger, gibt Richard zu bedenken.—Besser, als man glaubt jeden Unsinn, fügt der Säulenheilige hinzu" (ibid., p. 341; "The world is a mad house, Richard says. [. . .] Knowing less perhaps makes one calmer, Lotte says.—But not smarter, Richard points out.—It's better than believing every crazy notion, the stylite adds"). Rossmann's novel ends as it began, with competing claims of truth. On social media and in the world of the novel, the truth about the crime and criminals continues to be constructed and determined not by facts but by rhetoric. The depictions of individuals as either victims or perpetrators, patriots or traitors, for or against us is what creates and convinces of the truth. Closing with conflicting views on criminals and crimes rather than a conclusive dénouement, Rossmann's novel underscores a world that is governed by post-truth discourse rather than fact and, thus, ongoing contradictions rather than resolutions.

²³ One patriot even applauds ES for being the only voice of truth against the state-controlled media: "Die verbreiten Lügen im Staatsfernsehen. Die sagen, die Terroristen sind harmlos gewesen. Gleichgeschaltete Medien. Danke ES" (Rossmann 2017, p. 338; "They are spreading lies on state television. They are saying that the terrorists were harmless. Conformist media. Thank you IT".)

The characters in *Patrioten* admit that they are ill equipped to restore order in this uncertain post-truth world. Rossmann mirrors the difficulty of this venture for her readers at the meta-level. Excerpts from or references to print media and television and radio reports provide an unending flow of undifferentiated information whose sensationalized rhetoric leaves readers struggling to separate “facts” and “fakes”, as Rossmann calls them (Semrau 2017). The structure of the narrative accounts exacerbates the task by blurring various types of information and their sources. Monologues and dialogues often begin without identifying the speaker, and the text also omits quotation marks between the comments, while only using paragraph breaks and hyphens. The long passages from social media heighten the sense of a blurring of knowledge and truth. The anonymity of the sources masked by user names conveys a similar feeling that one is continuously bombarded by contradicting, subjective views, fragmentary information, and partially-developed, even erroneous, interpretations. Rossmann’s disclaimer at the end of the novel that while her characters are fictitious, many of their comments were taken from actual media, is what makes these posts most disturbing. “Natürlich sind die handelnden Personen rein fiktiv. Viele der Zitate sind allerdings der Wirklichkeit entnommen. Man kann sie auf Facebook in Pressesendungen und Medien berichten finden. Es gibt sie, die Fakten. Wir dürfen bloß nicht aufhören, sie zu suchen” (Rossmann 2017, p. 342; “Of course all of the characters are purely fictional. Many of the quotes, however, were taken from the real world. They can be found on Facebook, in press releases and in media reports. They do exist, the facts. We must never stop looking for them”).

3. Conclusions: The Post-Truth Detective Novel

In *Patrioten*, Eva Rossmann extends the socio-critical potential of crime fiction to uniquely reflect the challenges of a post-truth world. The play with the genre’s traditional themes and structures mirrors much of postmodernism’s skepticism regarding restoring order in the world. The open ending, the unresolved contradictions in witness testimony, and the unexplained clues and motives point to the illusory order and logic that Holquist (1983) and Merivale and Sweeney (1999) attribute to the genre and that Krajenbrink (2016) and Kniesche (2019) attribute to contemporary Austrian crime fiction in particular. However, *Patrioten* levels a far more specific critique than that previously described. The novel attributes the lack of certainty and closure less to an innate ontological and hermeneutical ambiguity in the world than to a new precarious state of truth. Her crime narrative specifically pinpoints the broadcast and social media and the socio-political discourses that rob the truth of its factual foundation. In their hands, she suggests, criminal acts and individuals are no longer determined by a stable and controllable narrative, but rather by an undifferentiated mix of representations and misrepresentations. Rather than reassuring readers of a certain definable truth like modernism, or questioning its very existence like postmodernism, *Patrioten* illustrates that truth has become a construct of the media and of socio-political discourse. These entities project the illusion of knowable facts and a controllable narrative, while in fact manipulating them to create their own truth and ultimately define their own reality.

The incomplete investigation in the plot of *Patrioten* highlights the dangers of eroding truth in a post-truth world, an experience that the novel’s structure recreates for its readers. By withholding an authoritative voice that might harmonize the discrepancies and thereby become complicit in reaffirming social hegemony, like traditional crime fiction, this adapted representation creates a dynamic reading experience that compels readers to recognize and reject artificial constructions of the true crimes and criminals and draw their own conclusions instead. Rossmann makes this goal manifest in a 2017 interview on *Patrioten*.

Dass wir Schreibende nichts anderes können und wohl auch wollen, als Geschichten zu erzählen, hat sich inzwischen herumgesprochen. Das ist bei mir nicht anders. Aber wenn ich anhand von Personen über Themen erzähle, die mit unserer Gesellschaft zu tun haben, wenn ich auch versuche, auch in fiktiven Texten Fakten statt Fakes zu vermitteln, dann habe ich die Hoffnung, dass es Menschen gibt, die darüber nachdenken. Die Schlüsse, die sie daraus ziehen, sind ihre Sache. (Semrau 2017)

The word has gotten out that we writers can't, and possibly don't even want to, do anything but tell stories. It is no different for me. But when I use characters to write about topics that have to do with our society, and when I attempt, even in fictional texts, to convey facts instead of fakes, then it is because I hope that there are people who will think about these things. The conclusions that they draw are up to them.

Rossmann points to her work as fiction that reflects social realities and also counters some of its destructive tendencies. Her novel, she suggests, pushes back against a post-truth world by both educating its readers about the modes that blur distinctions between the truth and its counterfeit and by conferring the ultimate authority on them to distinguish between the two. These stated aims underscore the author's aim to use fictional Austrian characters, settings, and crimes as a case study of current global challenges in societies that are connected by information and communication technologies. *Patrioten* also demonstrates crime fiction's openness to variation by using an alternative form of crime fiction to realize these goals. Rather than negating the genre's themes and forms, Rossmann demonstrates their flexibility by reshaping them to negotiate the socio-political realities and narrative sensibilities of a post-truth world.

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