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Discussing Todd Herzog's *Crime Stories*

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Crime and German Decadence

Discussing Todd Herzog's Crime Stories

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In *Crime Stories: Criminalistic Fantasy and the Culture of Crisis in Weimar Germany*, Todd Herzog – explicitly or implicitly – deals with different established myths about crime fiction, criminality and its cultural presumptions. It is generally quite seldom – as Herzog does – that the three subjects are dealt with collectively and in doing so he establishes new grounds for reflection on crime and culture – both factual and fictional representation as such. Approaches to crime fiction often build on an acknowledged history of the genre which, then, reproduces an established concord of assumptions. In recent years, new and refreshing approaches to crime fiction have emerged where – among others – particularly Maurizio Ascari's *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction* (2007), Leonard Cassuto's *Hard-Boiled Sentimentality* (2008) and Andrew Nestingen's *Crime and Fantasy in Scandinavia* (2008) probe the boundaries of understanding the cultural and historical roots of genre and crime fiction. Nevertheless, the missing link in dealing with crime fiction – even though Nestingen takes certain steps in that direction – is often its connection to criminological and cultural studies. If we approach crime stories in general – both fact and fiction – and the cultural, philosophical and sociological components in the established presumptions of these stories, there seems to be a foundation of a general revision of the understanding and representation of crime and violence. Todd Herzog's recent book *Crime Stories* is indeed part of this needed and remarkable wave of theoretical and historical revisions of our understanding of crime through factual and fictional representations.

Herzog's subjects in question are crime stories, criminality and the crisis culture in Weimar Germany during the period following the First World War until the national socialist's assumption of power in 1933. This period is particularly known as "a period of decadence and crisis" (1) where "commentators from all political and historical perspectives are in general agreement that the Weimar Republic was a decadent and crime-ridden society" (2). Herzog, then, asks the question of how accurate this image of Weimar Germany is. Crime rates were high in the wake of the war, but after 1924, however, "crime rates decreased sharply throughout Germany", but even as the crime rates dropped, "the popular perception of widespread lawlessness continued and criminals remained pervasive in Weimar Germany's output" (2). Every which way criminality could be considered or dealt with – i.e. newspapers, crime fiction, true crime stories or even guidebooks – Weimar Germany "was acutely

conscious of its own perceived decadence; it seemed to take pleasure in the spectacle of crime, in imaging itself as a criminal space” (3). This, at first, seems to break with a more or less general assumption that crime fiction and dealings with criminality are most popular in countries with lower crime rates – Weimar Germany seemed to wallow in criminal sensationalism albeit their relatively high exposure to real crime and violence.

To explain this tendency throughout 1920’s Germany, of which Herzog gives several examples and analyses, he employs a coined phrase “criminalistic fantasy” from the Deputy President of the Berlin Police, Bernhard Weiß. Weiß used this term “to describe this active interest and engagement of the public in matters of crime” (3). Obviously, Weiß never developed this term further, so Herzog’s usage of the phrase is naturally a supplementary development into a more general terminology that hands him a motivating and attractive basis for explaining the cultural situation in mid-war Germany. “In the Weimar criminalistic fantasy”, Herzog expounds, “the boundaries between fiction and reality, as well as between the aberration and the norm, became unstable” (3). The basic epistemological boundaries were shaken both from without – the increased crime rates – and from within – the representational understandings of the surrounding criminal crisis. The breakdown, though, was not merely “between reality and fantasy”, it is additionally a blurring of the boundaries between “criminal and non-criminal, public and professional, and narrative genres” (7) – the representation of the criminal became uncertain, the public was as much detectives as the police, and the clarity of narrative fact and narrative fiction unfolded as well ambiguously. Representations, then, seemed to both produce and reproduce a self-image of decadence, violence and chaos which leads Herzog to the preliminary thesis that we “cannot understand the chaos that we see around us without understanding the shadowy forces that produce and profit from this chaos” (6). Weimar Germany is often in popular narratives, e.g. Christian Duguay’s problematic docudrama *Hitler: The Rise of Evil* (2003), described as an unstable though basically existing democracy that was overruled by the national socialists. Nevertheless, reading Herzog’s analyses of German mid-war representations of crime, the picture turns out quite as clear-cut. Therefore, Herzog steps into the factual and fictional shadows of Weimar Germany in order to explain this unstable culture of crisis. “To understand our times”, he writes, “we need to understand our criminals” – a thesis that generally seems more applicable than to Weimar Germany alone. We might ask ourselves why crime fiction and true crime are, perhaps, the most popular genres in the wake of our new millennium.

German Modernism and Its Outsiders

In the following five chapters, Herzog delves into more precise research questions commenced in his introduction. Chapter 1 – “Crime, Detection, and German Modernism” – form the basis of a so-called *modernist theory of crime fiction* by employing especially three leading critics and intellectuals of Weimar Germany: Walter Benjamin, Bertolt Brecht and Sigfried Kracauer. The point of departure is the interesting evaluation of a series of crime novels that Benjamin and Brecht planned to co-author. For the German modernists “criminality seemed to provide a point of access into modern German culture”, Herzog writes, “an account of the hidden sources of the seemingly arbitrary and chaotic events of the Republic, something like the secret history of contemporary Germany” (14). Generally throughout mid-war Germany skepticism towards rationality and causality emerged and crime stories, hence, seem to offer “a

point of departure into modernity” (14) itself. The implicit argument is that crime stories – whether they be factual, fictional or in between – offer a category of cultural sensibilities where German modernism “sought to disrupt” the assumptions of “a finite number of possible causes and effects” and the idea that “there exists a regulated and invariable relationship between them” (15). What anon establishes itself as a modernist – or even postmodernist – tradition in the crime fiction genre seems to take form in Weimar Germany. Here, Herzog argues, “the German crime novel, in contrast to the English, French, and American detective novel, situated itself outside of reason, logic, and order” (31). The novels in question – e.g. by Walter Serner or in fact Bertolt Brecht – establish an unstable and uncertain view of the world of crime and detection and rupture the semiotic stability in, for instance, Agatha Christie’s crime fiction. In Serner’s crime fiction, reason “is nowhere to be found, and causal chains fail to hold together” (30). In explaining this relation between early modernist crime fiction and the failure of detection, Herzog rewardingly takes up Benjamin’s utilization of the *flâneur* – “the urban walker who plays such an important role in his philosophy” that “rarely makes an appearance in Benjamin’s work without the accompaniment of the analogous figures of the criminal and the detective” (16). The interest in criminality – the so-called criminalistic fantasy – during this period of German history then “answers the questions about what lies behind the curtains covering the windows of the metropolis” (20). The detective story, explicates Benjamin, has an X-ray vision of the “site of shock, terror and alienation” where the criminalistic fantasy “converts the impenetrable lived world into the apprehensible narrated world of the detective novel” (20). Nevertheless, the detective series that Benjamin and Brecht planned – based on Lorenz Jäger’s reconstruction of their story – rather turns out to be a “narrative of a flawed economic and moral system with no clear agents directing it” (28). This analysis of a culture in crisis does not only and particularly turn out as insolvable murders and other crimes, but it – in Benjamin and Brecht’s narratives, as well as Serner’s – blurs the boundaries between guilt and innocence. It additionally, though, “takes all the classical elements of the genre and uses them to undermine the faith in evidence and reason that are the foundation of classical detective fiction” (29). Modernist crime stories attempts – instead of cleaning up the streets – to “understand the modern world through criminals and their crimes” (31). This is, in addition, an endeavor to depict and portray the everyday life of Weimar Germany rather than escaping them; the social incentives of Western crime fiction seem to have abundant roots in mid-War Germany.

Chapter 2 – “Writing Criminals. *Outsiders of Society* and the Modernist Case Story” – takes on the comprehensive fourteen volume series of documentary crime novels *Außenseiter der Gesellschaft: Die Verbrechen der Gegenwart* (*Outsiders of Society: the Crimes of Today*). The interesting question that Herzog poses here is, then, what happens to the criminal case study “when the belief in narrative coherence goes into crisis?” (35). The short answer is:

When the belief in the ability to narrate a life story, to turn experience into text, comes into doubt, the belief in the ability of a narrative to separate criminal from noncriminal and to reconstruct the events that lead to the crime must fall under suspicion. (36)

This series of case studies from leading German intellectuals – such as Alfred Döblin, Ernst Weiß and Theodor Lessing – actually turns out to be a “breakdown of the

case narrative” (36) very much in line with the overall thesis of criminalistic fantasy. Here, the basic difference between fact and fiction, criminal and normal, and guilt and innocence is fuzzy – these case studies locate “the criminal squarely within society rather than outside of it” (36). Herzog’s analysis goes surprisingly well hand in hand with the initial theory of modernist crime fiction, for the reason that these various representations are “imaginative reconstructions of events based on what is always inadequate evidence”. “As such,” Herzog continues, “these volumes constitute an odd genre that falls between nonfiction (trial reports, criminological treatises) and literary fiction” which means that “the emotionally charged atmosphere surrounding the case precludes even the possibility of neutrality” (43). The case studies are subjective accounts, speculative and revisionary rewrites and “present multiple voices and multiple perspectives, which refuse and indeed work against narrative closure by incorporating self-contradictory documents” (44). In every which way these case studies of criminal cases – as Herzog describes them – amount to a borderline genre that reflects the difficulty of representation and – a concept that criminality and crime fiction normally deals with – truth. The crises that these volumes reflect are, firstly, the difficulties of comprehending causality coming from the distrust in evidence and, secondly, the inability of telling a story. These are, of course, basic modernist characteristics, but it amounts to the fact that it – combining the two – becomes difficult to establish a *causal narrative*. This results in “an uncertainty about where to locate agency and guilt” (47). Modernist frustrations of the fragmented subject and the epistemological flux are at base throughout these case studies – and Herzog’s analysis delivers a wide-ranging and skilled reading of a complex set of case narratives.

Chapter 3 – “Understanding Criminals. The Cases of Ella Klein and Franz Biberkopf” – follows up on one of the most interesting case studies in the *Outsiders of Society* series, namely Alfred Döblin’s study of the Ella Klein and Margarete Nebbe case *Die beiden Freundinnen und ihr Giftmord* (The Two Girlfriends and their Murder by Poison) from 1924. Herzog chooses to do so because Döblin’s 1929 novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* “is clearly indebted to his earlier work on Klein and Nebbe” (57) – at root this gives an identifiable idea about the cross-section between factual and fictional representations among the Weimar intellectuals. Initially, Herzog discusses the diverse receptions of the case study, a reception by commentators that – hand in hand with the general mode of the series – have clear difficulties defining the genre of *The Two Girlfriends*. Döblin’s two texts “are neither strictly scientific studies nor strictly literary fictions, neither a text book case of an urban novel nor a *Bildungsroman*” (58) – instead *The Two Girlfriends* in particular “represents an attempt to find the language to narrate the breakdown of borders between individual and society, as well as between the criminal and the noncriminal, the norm and the aberration” (59). This means that the case study is, as such, not just an investigation of narratological and investigative endings, but – through the questioning of problematic social structures versus the two girls sexuality (they were supposedly homosexual) – it is additionally a “debate over criminology and the legal system” (63). Instead of asking whether or not the two girls were guilty of murdering the husband of one and planning the murder of the other (there was apparently no doubt), Döblin’s concern is “primarily an investigation into the arguments about where to locate the cause of criminality” (64). This is, so to speak, a noteworthy budge away from the *whodunit* towards the socially engaged *whydunit*, which consequently goes for Döblin’s *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Here, Herzog argues, Döblin “attempts to overcome the fixation of guilt and the artificial separation of the aberrant criminal from the normal, noncriminal society by allow-

ing different parts of his text to come into conflict with one another" (66). In this way order, detection and truth are exposed as mythological constructions. The narrative paradox is then out in the open: "Stories ultimately cannot – yet must – be told" (72). On the very last page of this chapter Herzog returns to Walter Benjamin and gives a very brief mention of his apocalyptic concept of *divine violence*. This concept seems – in Herzog's context – highly applicable to *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, though this is not an easy concept, which means that Herzog's claim is neither philosophically nor analytically overtly developed. Nevertheless, the chapter on Döblin is perhaps the most intriguing and convincing chapter of the book.

Chapter 4 – "Seeing Criminals. Mass Murder, Mass Culture, Mass Public" – turns to the activity of seeing the criminals and furthers the analysis of the crisis of evidence. More precisely, the shift is towards a crisis of identification which evolved from out of the deviation from "the physical signs of criminality" (92): Nineteenth-century criminal anthropology, Herzog explains, "concerns itself not with tracking individuals, but rather with identifying types" (90). Most famous is here, of course, Cesare Lombroso's assertion that there exists a so-called *delinquente nato* – a born criminal with "oversized or undersized skull, thick, dark hair, asymmetrical faces, noses that are either large and wide or long, and thin, and misshapen ears" (93), as Lombroso's disciple Hans Kurella claims. Here, Herzog distinguishes between two methods – the Cesare Lombroso method and the Sherlock Holmes method – that both have a certain faith in vision, but the main difference is that Lombroso searched for clues on "a marked body" while Holmes "track visual clues" left behind by the criminal, both of course in order to capture the criminal. These visual regimes were refined throughout Weimar Germany, but they came under attack from a different angle. The *Hochstablér* – or the imposter – received a lot of attention and was met with great popularity in both fact and fiction. A popular imposter was, to mention but one, Georges Manolescu that "served as the basis of Thomas Mann's *Felix Krull*, a narrative "that wonderfully satirizes medical science's ability to read the patient's body" (100). This vision of the imposter, then, generated two very different approaches to criminality – a criminal biology versus a distrust in external appearances – where "Weimar society imagined that *Hochstablér* were everywhere and that bodies were difficult, if not impossible, to read" (102). Even though the public eye had been engaged in tracking criminals, different narratives and assessments began questioning the status of vision and the so-called "trained eye". Endingly Herzog, in describing this challenge, concludes that – in both popular factual and fictional accounts as well as criminological work – Weimar Germany had reached the status of a "paranoid world, in which criminality seems to be omnipresent and invisible" (105) and "the Weimar "criminalistic fantasy" worked to paint a paranoid picture of a society completely undermined by criminality" (107). One case is especially interesting – both historically, but also cinematically – in this context and that is the serial killer dubbed *the Vampire of Düsseldorf*.

In Chapter 5 – "Tracking Criminals. The Cases of Peter Kürten, Franz Beckert, and Emil Tischbein" – Herzog takes his departure from this *Vampire of Düsseldorf* that partly inspired Fritz Lang's masterpiece *M* from 1931. This case of Peter Kürten – as was the real name of the vamp – was especially famous for marking "a crisis of belief in both the visual regimes" (113) because Kürten looked so very normal. Here, Herzog cross-reads the case of Kürten in itself and its popular consequences, the investigation of the murders with special attention to "one of the most innovative and important police investigators of the time", Ernst Gennat (113), and lastly its fascinating connection to Fritz Lang's film *M*. The investigator Gennat was "celebrated for his

method of careful observation”, but by the end of Kürten’s series of murder “he seems to have lost faith in his long-cherished method of carefully tracking clues in order to apprehend the criminal and abandons his advocacy of a methodical, professional examination of evidence” (114). The only way, then, to trace criminals such as Kürten was to wait for the next attempted murder and the mobilization of the public to be on the lookout. This does, though, in fact pose a “central paradox: we must be on the lookout for criminals but remain cognizant of the fact that they are not visibly marked as criminals” (115). The Kürten-case is, hence, in many ways highly expressive of the general culture of crisis: loss of belief in the visual regimes, loss of methodological investigation, and loss of confidence in visual marks of the criminal. This general picture goes as well for Fritz Lang’s important film. Herzog, then, goes through the main difference between the case and the film and Lang’s own claim that the film was *not* inspired by the Kürten-case. There are, of course, significant variations, but Herzog credibly demonstrates that the inspiration was out of the question, and instead he aligns the film with *The Outsiders of Society* series in its compliance with the concept of criminalistic fantasy. This makes “the initial shock value of the film” (119) even greater, and in every way the film seems to voice the paranoia and cultural crisis: In fact the only way that the murderer in *M* is made visible is by aid of the “M” that is written on his back, which consequently means that he can be traced and caught by the public – in this case the local Berlin gangsters. In this analysis, the “title of the film – *M* – is a reference searching for a referent, and only eventually does this referent emerge”. This actually appears, though Herzog unfortunately never develops this analysis, as a clear indication of an early semiotic crisis of the sign. Herzog does fleetingly mention semiotics, but – even though it would appear open-and-shut – it would be historically interesting to further develop this dimension: an early post-structural process of signification. Nevertheless, this chapter – as well as the four previous chapters – gives a general and convincing reading of “a paranoid world, in which danger is ever present and usually invisible” (131).

Reviewing Herzog

Todd Herzog’s book on criminalistic fantasy in Weimar Germany is a theoretically and analytically convincing read. The book, firstly, gives numerous first-hand accounts of Weimar Germany and is in itself, then, an original way of writing history – understanding a culture of crisis through factual and fictional narratives opens up new ways of generating knowledge about the culture in question. One point of criticism, though, would be Herzog’s indistinct application of the concept of narrative – when narrative goes into crisis it is not entirely clear what the opposite of narrative is. A further narratological development – hand in hand with a clearer explanation of the crisis of the sign – could strengthen the already swaying argument. Secondly, Herzog’s analyses probes the boundaries of our understanding of factual and fictional crime stories, and this cross-reading of narrative modes creates new ground for a general understanding of representations of crime. Such a careful interpretation of the intersection between factual and fictional accounts is uncommon and Herzog’s development of the concept “criminalistic fantasy” is in itself a scoop – basically it could be more widely applied in sensing increasing cultural crisis (take for instance the Danish fascination with *Blekingegadebanden* in both fact and fiction). On the other hand, though it is not within Herzog’s primary scope, there seems to be a dim predilection the German narratives in question. When Herzog writes that “the German crime, in contrast to the English, French, and American detective novel, situated itself in a realm outside

of reason, logic and order" (31) there is no question about the differences between, for instance, "G.K. Chesterton, Agatha Christie, and Dorothy Sayers" (26) and the Weimar crime novel. In particular, a further reading of Edgar Allan Poe – especially biographically and additionally by including other than his three popular crime stories – would widen the grounds for, perhaps, a paranoid fantasy and a crisis of deductive methodology already included in the birth of western crime fiction. Herzog gives, as well, a brief mentioning of the American writer Dashiell Hammett and the French George Simenon: "These traditions differ significantly", Herzog writes, "but all share a common trait: they all focus on the detective, whose task is to solve a crime. Neither criminals nor their victims receive much attention in these narratives" (26). However, there are similarities as well, especially in Dashiell Hammett where the detective – as famously described by Raymond Chandler – is "part of the nastiness". Here, the sign goes into crisis as well, trust and truth goes overboard in corruption, the detective and the criminal are not minutely distinguishable and, hence, the criminal identity is unclear. This is as well often approached by critiques as a respond to the concurrent cultural situation in USA – specifically San Francisco. And since Hammett debuted in 1922 and is noticeably contemporary with Weimar Germany, it is unclear why particularly Hammett is written off.

Just the same, these approaches and interests would be suggestions for further readings in, possibly, an American criminalistic fantasy. The critical points made here are, by and large, a nitpicking of smaller details – the larger view and thorough analyses of factual and fictional representations of the Weimar culture of crisis must be of larger interest to anybody dealing with either cultural analysis or the study of crime fiction.

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Reference

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