

Todd Herzog, *Crime stories. Criminalistic fantasy and the culture of crisis in Weimar Germany*. Berghahn Books, New York, Oxford, 2009. viii, 150pp. Bibliography and Index.

The novelist Kingsly Amis purportedly said that he had given up reading novels that did not open with a man coming through a doorway, gun blazing. Little comfort for him, then, in the crime writing of the Weimar Republic. Despite its one-time foreign minister, Walter Rathenau, describing Berlin as ‘Chicago on the Spree’—implicitly underlining its similarity to Al Capone’s city—Todd Herzog assures us that German crime writing was different from other examples of international detective fiction of the 1920s.

From its first appearance in the middle of the 19th century to the second quarter of the 20th century, the detective story maintained a belief in the existence of a logical causal chain, which the reasoning detective could uncover. Precisely this comforting resolution, in contrast to the alienation and inexplicability of modern experience, Herzog suggests, explained the genre’s great popularity during the Weimar Republic. Criminals and crime continued to fascinate not only ordinary citizens of the Weimar Republic but some of its leading thinkers and writers.

Heinrich Mann, for example, often reviewed crime novels; Hermann Hesse edited a volume of true crime stories. Walter Benjamin, preoccupied by the idea of the urban walker or *flaneur*, believed the detective story could help account for the alienation and inexplicability of modern experience. Bertolt Brecht’s essay from 1938 explained the genre’s popularity in terms of the comforting resolution it offered amid the ‘alienated strangeness of modernity.’ Siegfried Kracauer’s *The Detective Novel: A Philosophical Treatise*, published in 1925, also argued that the detective figure, in depicting the world as knowable, compensated for the ‘inscrutability of modernity.’ (p.22).

Such intellectual giants could scarcely be satisfied with the concept of pure escapism. Nor were these ‘modernists’ content to theorise about crime fiction. Some of them wrote it. In doing so they consciously abandoned the centrality of the detective figure and focused instead on the criminal. In other words—in Herzog’s opinion—they crossed over from the incarnation of reason to the incarnation of logic. The resultant exploration of the relationship between criminals and legitimate society, together with the blurring between the legal and extra legal order, were exemplified in

Brecht's crime novel, *The Threepenny Opera*, in 1928. Brecht's detective is a parody of the traditional figure.

The theoretical onslaught on what such intellectuals viewed as a conservative genre was also evident in a series from a left wing publisher in 1924–5. Entitled *Outsiders of Society-the Crimes of Today*, the volumes were to be commissioned from star writers of the time. Although the series yielded only 14 volumes Herzog argues that it consciously intervened in the tradition of crime narratives 'in order to question the nature and effects of the genre' (p.35). In his view the venture also introduced a new type of book, incorporating what he regards as the two essential features of German crime writing in the 1920s; firstly the crossover from detective to crime novel and secondly, the intermingling of fact and fiction.

He then explores this intermingling in an analysis of the initial volume in the *Outsider* series, based on the trial of two young women who fell in love with one another and then poisoned their husbands. The book, *Two girl friends and their murder* was written by no less an author than Alfred Döblin, later famed for his novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Commentators of the time, notably Joseph Roth and Robert Musil were struck not by the uniqueness of the crime but by 'its paradigmatic qualities' (p.60).

Their responses, Herzog argues, have to be seen also as part of a wider debate on criminology between three competing schools, namely: the anthropological school, seeing biological factors as the root of criminality; the sociological school, where social factors were held to be determinants of criminal behaviour and, finally, the psychological school, which tried to tie the criminal to psychic factors. Intriguingly, Herzog finds that the early and little known crime novel by Döblin holds a key to the innovative form of his *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Hence the latter book's location at the uncertain border between criminal and non-criminal. What we are also seeing in this overall process, Herzog affirms, is a new style of crime fiction, the documentary crime novel.

Within this of course there remained much room for argument as to whether there existed criminal types, that is to say, born criminals. The idea owed much to the work of Cesare Lombroso's *Luomo delinquente*, published in 1876, and Hans Kurella's *Naturgeschichte des Verbrechers*. The new criminology tried to 'locate a marked body, a distinct, visible difference in the criminal.' On the one hand it resulted in an increasingly medicalised discourse, focusing on bodily signs. Moreover, the idea of

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criminals having distinct physical characteristics was later appropriated by those seeking to criminalise entire groups, notably Jews and Gypsies. On the other hand the actual careers of modern criminals ‘increasingly made clear that they could not always be easily recognized’.

Herzog neatly summarises the dilemma. ‘Paranoia about the location of criminality thus simultaneously followed two contradictory paths. “Evil” was conceived both as easily named and immediately visible and as an invisible, hidden and omnipresent threat’ (p.95) The one path was pursued through the foundation of such institutes as the first criminal biological research archive in Munich in 1924, followed by other institutes in Germany and Austria. The second path led through studies of the *Hochstapler* or impostor, a figure depending on physical impersonation and thereby subverting beliefs about appearances.

The lesson of stories about impostors—popular during the Weimar Republic—was in Herzog’s opinion to make visible the absurdity of the social order. He illustrates this by a consideration of Wilhelm Voigt, a shoemaker and long time prisoner, who posed as the captain of Köpenick and of Felix Krull, Thomas Mann’s extraordinary con-man. The outcome of such writing was to reinforce the increasingly popular notion that impostors and serial killers lurked at every corner behind their outward ‘normality.’

By such a route the author arrives back at his opening statement that ‘the use of evidence to distinguish criminal from non-criminal goes into crisis’ during the Weimar Republic’s brief existence. The point is underlined by an extract from the trial of the Düsseldorf mass murderer, Peter Kürten. When his defence counsel asked one woman what Kürten looked like as he tried to attack her, she replied: ‘Like the devil incarnate.’ To laughter in the court, the counsel responded: ‘What does the devil incarnate look like?’ Herzog reinforces his argument by then examining the famous film of the child murderer, *M*, where Peter Lorre, who played the villain, transformed himself before a mirror from grotesque figure to the child like creature he appeared to be in everyday life.

The book ends with a very brief look at the 1930s, stressing in particular the institutionalisation of recruitment of the public to help police investigate ‘crimes’ and an even briefer sketch of the post-1945 era. An interesting and thoughtful study if marred at times by theoretical jargon. How far Herzog’s arguments apply uniquely to

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Germany in the 1920s is an open question and for late-night compulsive page turning readers should revert to the crime novels themselves.

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