Cecile Sandten, Gunter Süß, Melanie Graichen (Eds.)

# Detective Fiction and Popular Visual Culture

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# Introduction:
# Detective Fiction and Popular Visual Culture

*Cecile Sandten and Gunter Süß*

Crime and detective fiction have never been more popular. The question is whether this is due to the fact that our lives are less tense. Or is the reverse true, that detective fiction offers relaxation from an increasing daily stress level? Or, in a world gone off rails, it might be that after the last pages of a novel or the closing credits of a film, the reader/viewer will be put back on track. This involves the 'baddies' being punished and – correctly so – legal justice triumphs.

The popularity of detective fiction seems to underline this idea. And it may also be confirmed by the amount of space that detective books occupy in modern-day bookstores, lounges, and public libraries. Furthermore, crime drama is the genre that dominates the offerings of TV stations on both sides of the Atlantic. The last forty years have witnessed an outpouring of serious critical discussion of the once-lowly 'whodunit' stories of the detective and crime fiction genre. This has been heightened by textual, intertextual, and intermedial (by)products pertaining to popular culture such as the early Western detective fiction that is often replenished by the figure of the private investigator as in *Nick Carter's Girl Detective* (1900) (cf. Hamilton 1987); postmodern fictional policemen of Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* series (1990-2011); the blockbuster movie adaptations of *Sherlock Holmes* (2009, 2011); serialization and increasing postcolonial adaptations through re-writes (cf. Matzke/Mühleisen 2006; cf. Christian 2001; cf. Pearson/ Singer 2009).

The detective story has not only become popular as a good read, but has also been transformed into a 'serious' scholarly subject. It is no big secret that the conventional (male) detective – "white, Western, capitalist, and nation-statist" (Pearson/Singer 2009: 2) – has long transgressed the generic and national/regional boundaries of his original site of crime. He (or she) is, more often than not, a figure who morphs into a whole range of "registers, themes and styles, from pulp fiction to highly literary novels with elements of crime, from cosy mysteries with a sense of closure to fragmented narratives focusing on racial tensions, gender conflict or the morals of violence" (Matzke/Mühleisen 2006: 2).

The purpose of this book, therefore, is to bring together, in a bilingual format (English/German), both academic papers which were presented at the conference "Detective Fiction in American Popular Culture" held at Chemnitz University of Technology in October 2011 and three pieces of short fiction (one extract from a novel) which were awarded the "1. Chemnitzer Krimipreis". Moreover, several additional articles particularly written for this purpose are included to

amplify and sharpen the volume's focus. This collection of papers not only occasions the 60th birthday of Evelyne Keitel, but also the 175th anniversary of Chemnitz University of Technology.

The editors have decided to include articles by colleagues, friends, and young academics who share Evelyne Keitel's interests and accomplishments, in particular, her strong focus on detective fiction in American popular culture which culminated in her publication *Kriminalromane von Frauen für Frauen. Unterhaltungsliteratur aus Amerika* (1998), a book that has become a standard university text on this topic.

This book has simply been called "das Krimibuch" by Evelyne Keitel's Ph.D. students as well as many colleagues in British and American Studies, which attests to the status of this publication. Indeed, *Kriminalromane von Frauen für Frauen* presents an excellent overview of the history and form of detective fiction in general. From our contemporary perspective it seems strange that only little academic literature on detective fiction – let alone on detective fiction by women – existed in the mid-1990s. At a time when this was not self-evident, Keitel's publication clearly showed that detective fiction is a genre worth studying. As Larry Landrum (1999: xi) explains, "American mystery and detective novels [...] [had] become a rich source of information about popular art and culture". Thus, detective fiction often reflects the anxieties and fears of its respective society and its moral and ethical codes that are epitomized in the binary structure of good and evil. The crime symbolizes the idea that the social order of its particular society is disrupted and has to be potentially restored by the morally 'good', yet distanced, detective. However, especially recent novels, short stories, and TV series partake in an endeavor to transgress these binary oppositions or to meditate on their discursive construction.

Last, but not least, Evelyne Keitel's book demonstrated something that cannot be appreciated highly enough: academic work on popular phenomena can be intellectually rewarding, culturally and politically relevant, and 'fun' at the same time. In academia everything associated with fun and pleasure has traditionally been regarded with suspicion. Keitel not only showed that this is wrong, she also proved that this perspective is limiting the scope of cultural research. In doing so, she inspired many young academics who read her book, attended her courses, and wrote their theses under her supervision.

Detective fiction has been an especially interesting object of study in this regard. Since its invention in the 1840s, which is usually credited to Edgar Allan Poe (cf. Keitel 1998: 10), detective fiction has been a genre of variation as well as a serial phenomenon. While all central plot elements – as Keitel (cf. 1998: 11f.) writes – are already conceived in Poe's stories, the genre has proliferated since into several subgenres which all have different forms, functions, and effects on the reader. Therefore, Keitel continues, it is problematic to define one homogeneous genre of detective fiction (cf. 1998: 12). This, however, is not only true for the genre itself,

but also for the academic engagement with these primary texts. As Landrum (1999: xi) remarks on the generic developments: "In recent years a great deal of effort has been put into the study of mystery and detective fiction and related genres, providing many new perspectives on how and when these forms emerged and how they are related to culture".

As with all serial phenomena, the evolution of the genre can be described by two simultaneous processes: repetition and variation. On the one hand, a constant reprise and voluminous proliferation by market-orientated production and publishing industries over media borders can be witnessed. On the other hand, the genre's development is heavily marked by postcolonial re-writes, postmodern irony and playfulness, pastiche, parody, and cross-medial adaptations, which lead to a multitude of forms and a delusion of the authority of the more traditional texts.

Our book reflects on these tendencies by presenting scholarship on a wide range of subjects, themes, texts, and theories. It includes individual case studies as well as papers, which are concerned with theoretical underpinnings. As a gesture of tribute to Evelyne Keitel, the book opens with short personal statements by Brigitte Georgi-Findlay and Sabine Deitmer. This is followed by the first of four sections, entitled "Space and Place". Brigitte Georgi-Findlay's essay "Does Region Matter? The West in American Women's Detective Novels" starts from the assumption that setting and sense of place have always played a significant role in detective fiction, from Agatha Christie's English rural manor to the dark city streets of the American hard-boiled novel. The publications of American women's detective novels which have gained enormous popularity since the 1980s (e.g., by Sue Grafton, Marcia Muller, Sara Paretsky, Lisa Scottoline, Janet Evanovich, Sharyn McCrumb and many more) have continued this tradition by placing their stories within locally and/or regionally connoted social microcosms. In her paper, Georgi-Findlay raises the following question: Which role does the choice of location play, especially in view of recent (re-)turns in cultural studies (the 'spatial turn'), the political and economic landscape (the shift toward the Sunbelt), and popular culture ("Southernization" or "Westernization" phenomena)?

The second paper in this section, Karin Ikas' "Outback Crime and the Failure of Communication and Justice in Gail Jones' Australian Murder Mystery *Sorry*" is engaged in Australia's relatively recent history of the crimes against the Aboriginal people. The article scrutinizes the novel's commitment to attend to issues such as xenophobia, racism and gender discrimination in the context of the 'Stolen Generations'[1]. Jones' novel, as Ikas aptly argues, follows the general pattern of crime

1 From the 1880s to the late 1960s, the governments of many Australian states systematically removed children of aboriginal descent from their families to be raised in foster homes or church orphanages for the purpose of 'integrating' them into the white Australian society, that is, to train them to become servants to white Australians. In this context, many Aboriginal and also mixed-raced children lost their homes, traditions, identities, and

fiction, which is increasingly characterized by both, heterogeneity as well as a socio-political concern at grass-roots level. In spite of the fact that Jones' *Sorry* refrains from the classical detective character, the crime is solved, however, more or less by itself through the chain of events that is the repetitive apparition of murder scenes and, reflected in, traumatic memories. Thus, as Ikas points out, *Sorry*, as a belated recognition of white Australia's shame and guilt, comes to a moralizing and discomforting close. As the author argues, the novel is eventually incapable of restoring justice to the Aboriginal people of Australia as long as whiteness is itself not questioned.

The third paper in this section, Sabine Deitmer's "Anna, Bella & Co.: Der Erfolg der deutschen Krimifrauen" deals with the development of crime fiction by female writers in Germany during the last fifty years. While Deitmer's paper seems to start out as a personal account of her experiences as a writer of detective fiction, it really is a portrait of an era of writing, publishing, and reading, deeply interested in power and gender relations.

The final paper of the section "Space and Place" is Eva Erdmann's "Chemnitz im Vergleich: Heimat im internationalen Kriminalroman". Erdmann argues that although the book market is witnessing an increasing internationalization – both in terms of its readership and the issues discussed within the genre – the actual narratives of crime fiction seem to revolve around regional settings. She shows how this contradictory development fuels the vitality of detective fiction and enables the reader to reconsider his concept of home in a globalised world.

The next section is titled "Krimipreis" and presents the three pieces of short fiction (of which one is an exposé and extract from a novel), which were awarded the "1. Chemnitzer Krimipreis". This section opens with an "Introduction" by Cecile Sandten in which the three awardees, Brigitte Hähnel (geb. Böhm, 23.08.1943 – 10.05.2013), Anne Bergmann and Anett Steiner, are introduced. This is followed by the writers' respective texts: "Die Nackte", "Wegzoll für den Fährmann" and "Herz und Straße".

The next articles are grouped around the topic of "Detectives on Television". Gunter Süß's paper titled "'A Detective in the House:' The Cultural and Medi(c)al Relevance of *House M. D*." discusses the extremely popular drama series *House M. D.* in the context of the contemporary television landscape in the United States, especially in connection with the category of 'Quality TV'. Furthermore, Süß addresses the generic hybridity of the series, the importance of the main character Gregory House, and the pleasures of intertextuality in the show. Süß concludes that *House M. D.* is many shows in one, presenting different layers of meaning for different audiences.

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finally their dignity. In the opening of the Australian parliament in 2008, the newly elected prime minister, Kevin Rudd, for the first time apologized to the so-called "stolen generations" (cf. "Bringing Them Home"; "Sorry Day and the Stolen Generations").