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Georg Seeßlen: Detektive. Mord im Kino

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Georg Seesslen: Detektive. Mord im Kino

Marburg: Schüren Presseverlag 1998 (Grundlagen des populären Films),
278 S., ISBN 3-89472-425-0, DM 38,-

The detective film is haunted by its past. Since its birth in the 1902 Biograph film, *Sherlock Holmes Baffled*, the genre has worked both with and against the narrative conventions and character typologies of its literary predecessors. Without reductively claiming to locate and the original detective figure around which all subsequent representations revolve, a study of the detective film must account for the ghosts of past protagonists. Georg Seesslen's *Detektive: Mord im Kino* provides such an account, tracing the often interrupted genealogy of today's film heroes and anti-heroes.

This new edition of *Mord im Kino: Geschichte und Mythologie des Detektiv-Films* (Rowohlt 1981) is one of several revised volumes by Seesslen, including *Thriller*, *Abenteuer*, and *Western*, which look back again on the history of the most popular film genres in light of developments since the nineteen-eighties. Rather than studying the thematic and narrative content of the genre, Seesslen focuses on the character of the detective as a symptom of (Western European and American) cultural and social values in the last century and a half. In the the book's first section

„Mythologie des Detektiv-Genres“ (unchanged from the earlier edition) the author recounts the theory that the detective was born out of the nineteenth-century tension between the masterful stance of scientific positivism and the Romantic appeal of the fantastic. Holmes and Dupin are cited as the first true literary sleuths, who set the standard for all their followers by explaining mysterious events with a logic that restores social and moral order without denying the presence of unconscious or irrational forces. Over time, the proportional relationship between the rational and irrational in detective narratives has shifted as the specific cultural and political forces associated with control and mastery or, alternately, with chaos and mystery, have changed. However, from Holmes through the neo-noir private eyes, the detective remains the figure whose task it is to reveal and enforce a sustainable balance between the two sides.

Seesslen's argument is founded in the notion of myth as the expression of a culture's wishes and fears, and he rightly concludes that the detective cannot bear the same mythological signification in all contexts. Seesslen therefore accounts not only for transformations in the image of the cultural figure over time, but also for the differences between the detective traditions of England and America. In chapters that are divided typologically and organized chronologically, he introduces emergent twentieth-century detective figures and places them in their specific cultural and historical contexts through reference to class relations and New Deal social policy and events such as the Depression and the Vietnam War. Although only cursorily, Seesslen implies how these factors inspired and necessitated the development of a American hero different from the armchair detective/thinking machine dominant in British detective film. His account of the metamorphosis of that brand of detective also reveals changes in Britain since the heyday of the classic whodunit. Unfortunately, *Detektive: Mord im Kino* does not provide the same kind of insight the socio-historical background of the appearance and disappearance of detectives in German and French popular culture.

Seesslen makes clear that the contours of the myth are also influenced by the medium through which it enters popular culture and his study is attentive to the multi-medial life of the detective. For example, the first chapter recounts the birth of the action-hero, Nick Carter, by describing the styles, audiences, and formats operative in dime novels and magazine serials in the first decade of this century. The final chapter „Nostalgie, Parodie und Revision“ (the only chapter original to the new edition) portrays the decline of the detective film in the 1970s as a result of the hunger for speed and high-power stunts in the movies and explains how television shows were able to sustain the classic detective by providing a slower, more detail-oriented format. In these and other accounts, the question of each medium's role in mythologizing the hero is answered with an array of commentary on production and reception history, industry dynamics, and formal qualities.

Like the classic detective narrative he reviews, Seesslen's history entails the melancholic reconstruction of the events leading to the discovery of a corpse: in

this case that of the detective himself. „Der Detektiv im Posthistorie“, the final section of the new last chapter, argues that up until the nineteen-eighties the hero remained the representative of male, puritanical, bourgeois, enlightenment values; the book concludes with the image of this figure being driven out of popular culture at the twilight of the twentieth-century. Neither the classic sleuth nor the hard-boiled private eye survives the recent social and intellectual challenge to logocentric thinking and male dominated power structures. The book closes with the assertion, „[...] Mit dem Verschwinden des Detektivs, so scheint es, verabschiedet sich auch die populäre Kultur vom Traum der gesellschaftlichen Aufklärung [...] Und doch: Wie alle Helden der popular culture, kann auch der Detektiv nicht wirklich sterben. Er verschwindet, um wiedergeboren zu werden, taucht erneut auf, wo man ihn nicht erwartet hätte, und macht sich vielleicht wieder auf die lange, beschwerliche Suche nach seinen Wurzeln.“ (S.264-265) This conclusion engages in the cultural and philosophical debates over myth's role in the completion of the Enlightenment project, but it neither refers to them nor does justice to their complexity. For Seesslen the return of the detective onto the scene of popular culture will redeem the modern social and intellectual paradigms from which Holmes and Dupin were born. This position effectively excludes minorities and women from legitimate culture. Instead of accepting African-American private eyes and women detectives (whom he questionably lists in a category with clowns, children, animals, ghosts, and aliens) as the new faces of the mythical figure, the author condemns them as comical-bizarre masks of the genuine hero. Seesslen's book is haunted by the loss of the strong, white, male as the anchor of a cultural mythology, a quality which undermines its otherwise noteworthy strengths and contributions.

Detektive: Mord im Kino is one of few German-language resources on detective film and it contains invaluable information on German productions that receive no consideration in most English and French-language histories. However, given the scarcity of sources on the German detective tradition, even more coverage of the topic could have been provided. In his otherwise extensive portrayals of individual European and American films, the author includes facts about production and reception history, as well as some evaluative commentary on the films' aesthetic qualities. While such elements are unevenly distributed, they complement the plot summaries and the passages highlighting particularly memorable scenes, sets, lines, and performances. These accounts are clear and thorough and can be easily accessed via the name and title indices provided in the appendix. The appendix also includes an up-to-date bibliography that places more emphasis on television detectives than did the one in the prior edition. Also new to this edition is a catalog of films available on video in Germany. If it were possible to bracket out the problematic conclusion of its historical interpretation, such factors would warrant this book a place among valuable standard German reference works such as Wacker's *Enzyklopedie* and Zuhort's *Lexikon*.