

“Warte, warte noch ein Weilchen...” –
Towards a History of the Serial Killer in German Film History

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*Warte, warte noch ein Weilchen, dann kommt Haarmann auch zu dir,
mit dem Hackehackebeilchen macht er Leberwurst aus dir.*

- German nursery rhyme

It is not an unknown tendency for dark events to be contained and to find expression in nursery rhymes and children’s verses, such as the well-known German children’s rhyme above. At first instance seemingly no more than a mean, whiny playground chant, it in fact alludes to a notorious serial killer who preyed on young male prostitutes and homeless boys. Placed in this context, the possible vulgar connotations arising from *Leberwurst* become all the more difficult to avoid recognizing. The gravity of these events often becomes drowned out by the sing-song iambics of these verses; their teasing melodic catchiness facilitates the overlooking of their lyrical textual content, effectively down-playing the severity of the actual events. Moreover, the containment in common fairy tale-like verses serves to mythologize the subject matter, rendering it gradually more fictitious until it becomes an ahistorical prototype upon a pedestal.

Serial killer and horror films have to an arguably large extent undergone this fate – all too often simply compartmentalized in the gnarly pedestal category of “gore and guts” – in the course of the respective genres’ development and propagation, particularly in the American popular film industry: Hollywood. The gravity and severity of the serial murder phenomenon become drowned in an indifferent bloody splattering of gory effects. Overly familiar cinematic “scare conventions” that one readily catches onto have contributed to the practice of mythologically prototyping the serial killer, rendering ahistorical a character that is/was to a degree provoked and partially even nurtured by its respective socio-political circumstances. In light of the above, this paper aims to discuss the relationship of retrospectively, potentially or essentially dark socio-political circumstances with actual serial murder cases and their frequently unexamined contribution to the depiction of serial murder/horror in German-language cinema.¹

Ever since the legendary, menacing hypnotist Dr. Caligari assigned his obedient executor Cesare to carry out his murderous endeavors in Robert Wiene's 1920 classic of Expressionist cinema, *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*), German mainstream, art and underground film has produced an impressive number of movies dedicated to the ghastly deeds of mischievous miscreants, contemptible criminals, ruthless rogues, and ubiquitous *Übeltäter*. Ranging from the artistically appealing to the atrociously appalling, these films are more often than not modeled after real life serial killers such as Peter Kürten, Fritz Haarmann, Karl Denke, Carl Großmann, Jürgen Bartsch or Kuno Hofmann, all of whose deeds have left an indelible mark on German-speaking culture. In its unique ability to synchronously visualize and attack "existing values, institutions, *mores*, and taboos" (Vogel 9), the medium of film is especially predisposed to portraying the mixture of revulsion and disgust, mystery and fascination emanating from the serial killer (Murakami 9).

Some of the most notable serial killer films in German film history released after the early classics such as *Caligari*, Paul Leni's *Das Wachsfigurenkabinett* (*Waxworks*, 1924), and G.W. Pabst's *Die Büchse der Pandora* (*Pandora's Box*, 1929) – the latter two both being reflections on Jack the Ripper – are, in chronological order, Fritz Lang's *M – Eine Stadt sucht einen Mörder* (*M*, 1931), Robert Siodmak's *Nachts, wenn der Teufel kam* (*The Devil Strikes at Night*, 1957), Ulli Lommel's *Die Zärtlichkeit der Wölfe* (*Tenderness of the Wolves*, 1973), Marijan Vajda's *Mosquito der Schänder* (*Mosquito the Rapist*, 1976), Gerald Kargl's *Angst* (*Fear*, 1983), Jörg Buttgercit's *Schramm* (1993), Romuald Karmakar's *Der Totmacher* (*The Deathmaker*, 1995), Nico Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* (1995), Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997), Kai Pieck's *Ein Leben lang kurze Hosen tragen* (*The Child I Never Was*, 2002), Robert Schwentke's *Tattoo* (2002), and Christian Alvart's *Antikörper* (*Antibodies*, 2005).

Steffen Hantke's remark upon the widespread assumption that "serial killers are as American as apple pie, barbershop quartets, and televangelism" (56) being potentially more the result of "social construction rather than empirical truth" (57) refers to Philip Jenkins, who compiles profiles of German serial killers in order to reveal that, contrary to the mainstream belief of a primarily American disposition to serial murder, "there is little that is truly novel about the phenomenon of multiple murder in the contemporary United States" (Jenkins 44). Harold Schechter expresses his agreement to this observation in a somewhat astonished tone of voice that "there are people who genuinely believe that serial killers are a strictly contemporary phenomenon, a

symptom of something horribly gone amiss in the moral fabric of modern American society” (1). Julia and Peter Murakami add that the phenomenon is based less on nationality than on the drastic break(down)s in a country’s or society’s economical and political foundations favoring criminal and serial killer activities (Murakami 15), something that certainly holds true of German killers, especially the ‘pioneering’ ones – Haarmann, Kürten, Denke, and Großmann, for example, both rose and fell during the harsh political climates of the Weimar Republic, and these personalities are indeed inextricably linked to the Weimar times and circumstances (Kompisch/Otto, *Bestien* 19ff). This observation of temporal correlation can be paralleled or extended to the production of serial killer films, the most famous of which were all made in the Weimar era.

Given the large number of German serial killers, the people’s continuing fascination with this gruesome topic², and its ability to transcend the ‘mundane’ facts of murder in order to make (coded) assumptions about the attitude and mindset of a society, it is not surprising that twentieth-century art has responded in ‘vivid colors.’ The serial killer phenomenon has not only been treated in film, but dominantly also in literature, and the fine arts have in particular spawned large numbers of artistic appropriations.³

However, given its history and alleged reputation as a widely horror (if by far not angst) free environment, it is hence particularly noteworthy that German film has found itself in such a prolific, albeit tumultuous, relationship with its country’s serial killers, the cruelty and repugnance of whose deeds do not escape cultivating sensations of horror and angst. Films modeled after the actions of these serial killers are thus largely unable to avoid being concurrently categorized to a certain extent in the horror film subgenre, even if they at first glance do not appear to conform to general notions and conventions of the horror film.

Halle points out that despite its “long history of [...] engagement with the haunted screen, [...] contemporary studies of German film have largely disregarded the horror genre” for one reason or another (281). As factors responsible for the disruption of horror film production he names the Third Reich (ibid), economic factors during the 1960s, and the encapsulation processes and genre movements “into underground and subcultural milieus” towards “the fringes of the culture industry” (282). A lack of genre-consciousness (Seeßlen 801) in conjunction with a tendency of discourse-determining scholars (and journalists) to dismiss horror films – at least those made after the end of

WWII – as totally tasteless, utterly useless and unworthy of any serious consideration, appreciation, let alone canonization, may be further factors preventing German-speaking horror films from having had a deeper impact on their respective countries' cinematic scenes.

However, in spite of these restrictions, contemporary genre contributions have experienced (modest) economic success (*Tattoo*, *Antikörper*), or have otherwise garnered heightened interest for the genre in academia (e.g. *Schramm*, *Der Totmacher*, and *Funny Games*), both of which contributing to the shift of a marginalized genre from (partly self-ordained) underground fringes into the limelight of the mainstream.⁴

The different attitudinal approaches to the genre are wide in scope. So are the levels of critical evaluation. Nevertheless, contextualization of the individual films exposes a number of shared characteristics. Rather than delivering a strictly chronological documentary of the genre under investigation, this paper aims to provide a comparative analysis of the main contributions to the genre.

The older, more unequivocally canonized films will serve as important points of reference and evidence the rich history of the genre. However, despite these films' relevance, they will be used mainly as constants against which comparison can be made, rather than as material for any specific argument. This is because the actual focus of this initial step towards a panoramic history of the German serial killer film will a) be on those fringe-films that generally tend to be overlooked or dismissed – deemed as questionable at best and grotesque or perverse at worst, and b) on an initial evaluation and categorization of the most recent films of this genre. In the process, where applicable to the depiction and/or further theoretical examination of serial murder in film, questions of nationality and identity, distinctions between high and low culture, the increasing influence of American movie productions and gender (with especial focus on the juxtaposition of misogyny with feminism) shall be introduced into the discussion.

While the films about to be discussed undoubtedly deserve deeper analysis than they can be accorded within the space of this paper, the objective of this article is to deliver an inaugural panoramic study on the depiction of serial murder in German film. Taking into consideration that non-canonical serial murder/horror films are in themselves so seldom examined in academic fora, and that this paper aims to treat these furthermore comparatively against canonical films of the genre, it will hopefully be demonstrated that the insights to be gained from such a sweeping discussion compensate for the (merely) concise – as opposed to meticulous – examination of issues raised in the films at hand.

In a journey through the genre's history, Fritz Lang's first sound picture, *M*, lends itself as a starting point. If not the first film of its kind in Germany, it is nevertheless rightfully regarded as one of the first genuine masterpieces of the genre. Siegfried Kracauer describes it as Lang's first important film: "*M* again reaches the level of his earlier films, *Der müde Tod* (*Destiny*, 1921) and *Die Nibelungen* (1924), and moreover surpasses them in virtuosity" (219). Widely lauded for the groundbreaking juxtaposition in its "counterpointing of sound and image" (Eisner 320) which, according to Lotte Eisner, "is done with supreme mastery" (*ibid*), *M* is not based on any one particular serial killer, but is certainly influenced by the events surrounding the murder cases involving Peter Kürten and Fritz Haarmann (Tatar 154). The portrait of a child killer on the loose in the city of Berlin, amidst a self-doubting, claustrophobic, controlled and totalitarian society dominated by a distrust in authorities (Kaes 66f), *M* "focuses almost consistently on the disturbing effects rather than the causes of crime" (Tatar 154). David Kalat's in-depth study of Lang's *Dr. Mabuse* films and their legacy, attempts to explain *M*'s ongoing relevance by stating that this "unusual, challenging, sublime motion picture" is "a visual feast that has hardly dated. [...] In fact, its artistry and execution are more ambitious and successful than many contemporary films" (32).

Another film dealing with the country's immediate past (and present) and reflecting on its collective identity is Robert Siodmak's 1957 film *Nachts, wenn der Teufel kam*, nominated for a *Best Foreign Language Feature Academy Award* in 1958. Nowadays, it is mainly remembered for its remarkable constraint and subtlety in depicting German life during the Hitler regime (Seidl 216f). Claudius Seidl describes this film, which relates to the alleged serial killer Bruno Lüdke and the circumstances leading to his capture, as a successful attempt to reconstruct German history without whitewashing it (*ibid*). He emphasizes the film's ambivalence towards any mentality of the good versus the evil German and also the precision with which the former emigrant Siodmak managed to reveal the system of collaboration, corruption and hypocrisy running through all levels of Nazi power (cf. Seidl 219f). Stefan Höltgen, in a popular scientific but nevertheless highly interesting and informative online article on the phenomenon⁵, touches upon a similar issue by explaining that films like *Nachts, wenn der Teufel kam* or *Es geschah am helllichten Tag* (*It Happened in Broad Daylight*, 1958) instrumentalize the serial killer as a means to illustrate the ideological, social or media-critical positions prevalent during the respective times of production (Höltgen). Since then, the approaches of

instrumentalization and metaphorization (ibid) have remained an essential part of German serial killer film production.

Very different, but by no means less effective attempts to make sense of Germany's national, social and cultural identity during the first half of the twentieth century can be found in two notable films portraying yet another notorious serial killer from this period along with the social implications surrounding his presence: Fritz Haarmann. In 1973, Fassbinder's protégé Ulli Lommel directed *Die Zärtlichkeit der Wölfe*, based on a script by Kurt Raab, who played the role of Haarmann roaming the streets as the murderer of young male prostitutes and homeless boys. In spite of, or perhaps rather due to, its limited availability, Lommel's controversial film about the homosexual lust murderer with vampiric and cannibalistic inclinations allegedly selling the flesh of his victims to a nearby butchery has gained a reputation as a gore-drenched carnage. However, despite this reputation, Jay McRoy points out that there is more to the film than meets the eye, claiming that it is "perhaps one of the most visually and emotionally compelling products of the 'New German Cinema'" (McRoy). Mirroring viewer responses that comment on a lack of violence⁶, McRoy explains that even though *Die Zärtlichkeit der Wölfe* has plenty to offer regarding social critique and repressed *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, "viewers searching for a 'true-crime' account of Fritz Haarmann's reign of terror will most likely walk away from this film disappointed" (ibid).

Those mainly interested in instant atavistic gratification will be equally dissatisfied with Romuald Karmakar's *Der Totmacher* (1995), the second German film directly based on the notorious Haarmann. *Der Totmacher*⁷ adopts an altogether different set of measures to – metaphorically speaking – crack open the head of this infamous serial killer. Using the actual evaluation and interrogation protocols as sources for its dialogue⁸, the film is a quasi-documentary psychological evaluation of Fritz Haarmann. In his article, Hantke applauds the film's "austere, minimalist production" (67f), explaining that through the sole emphasis on interviews conducted in a single room, "the film violates the rules of commercial mainstream cinema and also ignores some of the crucial conventions of the serial killer genre" (68), such as bloodshed, visualization of the murders or close-up shots of gaping wounds (Nicodemus 346). It has to be remembered though, that *Der Totmacher* is fundamentally still a film – an artificial recollection and subjective recreation of the interrogation process. Nevertheless, the loyal utilization of the protocols and maintenance of interrogation form render audiences neither able to distance themselves nor to refer to

traditional concepts of an individual's innocence and guilt (ibid). This level of ambiguity and unease is generally reflected in people's reactions to Karmakar's film. Critics tend to be both attracted and appalled by the director's technique of creating an equal amount of immediacy and distance, leading Hantke to note that "there is something simultaneously austere and overwhelmingly assaultive about the film" (Hantke 70). As indicated, both films portray Haarmann not only as a serial killer, but as "the product of specific historical and social circumstances" (71)⁹ – as *the* serial killer, a German myth (cf. Borrmann 122), interminably linked to German history and disaster, an "uncanny prefiguration of Germany's future descent into fascism" (Hantke 71).¹⁰

Moving beyond the Weimar and WWII era experience, Kai S. Pieck's 2002 film *Ein Leben lang kurze Hosen tragen*, is an approximation to the phenomenon of Jürgen Bartsch, the notorious (fun)fair killer, dubbed "devil incarnate" by German media at the time of his arrest in the summer of 1966 (Kompisch/Otto, *Monster* 93f). In perspective and approach, *Ein Leben lang kurze Hosen tragen* is not dissimilar to Karmakar's *Der Totmacher*. However, whereas Karmakar's film does not leave the interrogation chamber for the entire duration of his film, Pieck employs a three-layered perspective on Bartsch's 'formative' years and his murders. First, a mixture of grainy and viridescent, fictitious documentary sequences, in which Tobias Schenke, the actor portraying the adult Bartsch, directly addresses the interrogating camera. Second, sepia-toned flashback film sequences illuminate significant passages in Bartsch's desolate and love-deprived childhood and youth in the immediate aftermath of WWII (and also the time of the *Wirtschaftswunder*, the economic miracle). Third, a rich tapestry of voice-over and title cards superimpose the actual images in the shape of sentences written in a child's handwriting, this feature further encapsulating the killer's attitudes and marking important breaks and developments in the plot. As in *Der Totmacher*, no attempt is made to 'explain' (i.e. commend or condemn) the deeds. Similar to Karmakar's film, the murderer's actual confessions (and the superimposed titles) are taken from letters Bartsch addressed to the American journalist Paul Moor, who was covering the case.¹¹ In both films, the camera remains in deep focus throughout, literally and figuratively disallowing any blurry patches during the attempt to shed light on the events. The camera is rarely intrusive and remains in the position of the observer. Employing a decidedly distanced, neutral perspective of someone unwilling to pass easy judgment (despite tight framing devices in both films¹², this objectivity is orchestrated by a rather large number of unobtrusive long

shots), the filmmakers are well aware that the resistance against making an explicit statement does not equate to not making a statement per se. In accordance with the assumption that their respective audiences are familiar with the background of the events¹³, the emphasis is on the semi-documentary character of the narration, which is further emphasized by utilizing the aforementioned excerpts from protocols, diary entries, and letters: as far as this is possible in feature films¹⁴, it is up to the main characters to deconstruct or unfold themselves, which is also where the assaultive character that Hantke mentions may stem from. However, unlike the versatile virtuosity displayed by Götz George as Haarmann, a(n unintentional?) level of alienation is achieved by Schenke's somewhat artificial, distanced, and sober reproduction of the peculiarly stilted language of Bartsch's letters.

After those films, which were mainly concerned with the social circumstances surrounding and nurturing serial murder, the films to be considered in the following section appear to display a distinctive move away from the causative preoccupation with issues of history and national identity. Contrary to the aforementioned emotionally detached, apparently 'objective' contributions, Marijan Vajda's obscure 1976 'Eurotrash'-film *Mosquito der Schänder*, the Austrian director Gerald Kargl's *Angst* (1983) and Jörg Buttgerit's *Schramm* (1993) are arguably the most subjective, polarizing and offensive additions to the genre. In their exclusive and more often than not confronting foci on the killers and their psychological thought processes, these directors force audiences to immerse themselves in the perpetrators' worlds and to see *our* reality through *their* distorted eyes. A tangible 'outside' world as an objective point of impartial reference per se, is non-existent.

Mosquito der Schänder depicts in considerable and gruesome detail the case of Kuno Hofmann, a deaf-mute necrophiliac and killer sometimes referred to as the "vampire of Nuremberg" (cf. Farson 141). *Angst* recounts an infamous murder spree that took place in the city of Salzburg/Austria in 1980. *Schramm*, unlike most films hitherto discussed, deals with an invented killer. While all three films share certain traits, in that they all are unflinching descents into the killer's mind, they embark on different aesthetic paths to get there. The largely forgotten Swiss production *Mosquito der Schänder* is, in the words of the web-based fanzine *mondo-digital.com*, a "strange precursor to extreme European necrophilia yarns like *Nekromantik* [an early film of Buttgerit's, JS], shares its era's fascination with blended art house aesthetics with repellent subject matter." However, despite its qualities, for example its "grotesque set pieces" (ibid) or its "grim, obsessive tone"

(www.fright.com), the film – as the lack of ‘credible’ analytical sources used in this paragraph hopefully indicates – remains greatly underappreciated. The main character’s psychological and moral disintegration would, however, be explored further and generate even more disturbing results in the works of Kargl and Buttgereit.

Schramm, structured in flashbacks around a fatal domestic accident, plays out as the last thoughts of the dying killer (“Today I am dirty, but tomorrow I will be just dirt,” as the promotion poster for the film so aptly puts it), and becomes increasingly surreal and claustrophobic in its intimate portrayal of a person’s mind and body literally disintegrating. *Angst*, on the other hand, is a furious, frenetic and ferocious first person narration of a ravenous murder spree, throughout which the deranged main character’s voice-over – reflecting his rapture, fear, frustrations and frenzy for more – is the only point of direct reference granted to the audience.¹⁵ Marcus Stiglegger states that the voice-over consists primarily of “passages from other serial-killers’ confessions, especially those of Peter Kürten, the so-called “Vampire of Düsseldorf” (cf. Stiglegger). Aside from other stylistic devices (Stiglegger mentions high-angle and handheld camera), a ‘self-cam’ strapped to the actor’s chest and directed at his face¹⁶ enhances and arguably epitomizes the aura of extreme subjectivity enforced throughout the film. Due to their extreme subject matters, their gritty representation of mutilation, desecration, vampirism and necrophilia, none of these films has thus far amassed the academic attention they deserve. However, where at least a small number of articles and even a book-length evaluation have been written about Buttgereit, *Angst*, despite being one of the very few genuine Austrian horror thrillers, has found hardly a mention in journals¹⁷ and *Mosquito der Schänder*’s undirected fury (Seeßlen/Jung 801) and nihilism directly maneuvered the film from the streams of a national cinema into the extreme sidelines of taste (ibid). It has remained there ever since. As indicated, despite the authorities’ unanimous dismissal, there is growing belief in the moral and aesthetic quality of Buttgereit’s films. Seeßlen and Jung, for instance, praise *Schramm* as a highly profound reflection of the serial killer genre (803), while David Kerekes maintains that *Schramm* “is not gore. This is cinema about the soul, about the human condition” (*Schramm* DVD inlay).¹⁸ Even though Buttgereit’s films are often decried as purely exploitative or worse still, misanthropic and *gewaltverherrlichend* (glorifying violence), Kerekes’ observation (agreeing with Linnie Blake’s critical evaluation of the director’s earlier film, *Nekromantik*) touches upon an important element inherent in all of his and the other directors’ films in this context: there

is a darkness in everyone. This appears to be in line with the opinion of the *Germanist* and criminologist Alexandra Thomas who explains that sadism, violence, physical communication, self-aggrandizement, *Todessehnsucht* and destructive urges (which are generally attributed to the serial killer) are inherent parts of human fantasies and determinants of human behavior (539f). As a result, Thomas explains, serial killers follow psychological and social patterns anchored in society: their actions are in essence an extreme externalization and execution of psychosocial conflicts and disturbances inherent (or, stronger even, omnipresent) in the social system (527). Accordingly, authorities have repeatedly attempted to prevent people from seeing Buttgereit, Kargl or Vajda's film(s)¹⁹: the films discussed in the first part of this paper generally approach their respective topic with subtlety and nuance, and clearly mark the serial killer as the 'other', the 'anomaly' that has to be investigated from the perspective of rationality. Even those filmmakers who are unwilling to simply label the killer as 'the other' (cf. Karmakar and Pieck) grant audiences a certain level of 'protection:' structural and content-related precision together with planned-out and framed compositions enable one to fall back upon a level of aesthetic evaluation and appreciation, which consequently plants such films in a context of serious 'art.'

Neither *Schramm* nor *Angst* (or, in that respect, *Mosquito der Schänder*), however, seem to come within these boundaries of 'art' and, in turn, the freedom that 'art' encompasses and entails, and this is not simply because they do not grant this kind of (audience) self-protection. There is no 'reasonable' frame of reference to seek refuge in, and the rough, hand-made rawness does not allow audiences to easily divorce style from message. They fall into one: the assaultive perspective, imposing on the spectator the world as perceived through the eyes of a killer, is mirrored in the unflinching visual and aural assault – e.g. the 'self-cam,' the voice-over and the unedited murder-sequences in *Angst*, or the blood-splattered walls and extreme close-ups of genital mutilation in *Schramm*. However, far from being mere exploitationists – as their detractors purport – Buttgereit and Kargl (Vajda arguably to a lesser extent) are accomplished filmmakers, well aware of the possibilities the medium has to offer. The austerity and furthermore uncompromising execution of their visions are counterpoint not only to purely escapist thriller entertainment, but also to the self-controlled rigorousness of arthouse cinema. In a way, they may be regarded as heirs apparent to the drastic depictions of violent murder in avant-garde and Expressionism. According to Vogel, Expressionism is a gesture "of defiance against the

chaos which is organized society” (45), feeding “on dissonance, excess, violent emotion, the secret worm gnawing at the vitals of society” (ibid), whose principles were “formed by the distortion and exaggeration of color and mass, character and décor, stylized into making the normal artificial” (ibid) with an overall “emphasis on extremity and shock” (46).

In addition, the classical avant-garde, as Büsser establishes, was equally driven by the pleasure of destruction and a rebellion against destructive social circumstances (35). What else are those films – those journeys down the serial killer’s rabbit holes, replete with increasingly violent dissonances and emotions, distortions, exaggerations – other than ways of holding up a mirror to their societies and thereby confronting them, albeit sometimes in necessarily repulsive ways, with their worst fears? The observation that the violence depicted is not just an end in itself is also confirmed by Buttgereit when he was asked about the effect of his films on moviegoers and genre fans. Acknowledging his pedagogic streak in an extensive interview with the German *Rolling Stone* magazine, he responds that his films were not only made to cater for, but also to annoy horror fans: “Mate, why do you actually want to watch this stuff?”²⁰ (Hentschel 47)

Another director who shares Buttgereit’s belief in the didactic and moral value of art (Ossenagg 118) is the Austrian Michael Haneke, who Christopher Sharrett explains as having “established a position as one of cinema’s important *provocateurs*, a concept lost in an era where cultural/political subversion is often seen as passé, or conceived with jaundiced, anti-humanist cynicism” (Sharrett). Wessely, Larcher, and Grabner echo Sharrett’s opinion by claiming that almost no other contemporary director is able to be as consequential and precise in their critique of Western societies as Haneke (10). Haneke’s film *Funny Games* ranks among the most frequently discussed and analyzed German-language genre contributions. Christopher Sharrett, for example, calls it “the most disturbing remark on action [/horror] cinema and those works pretending to comment on its social ramifications” (Sharrett). A story of an Austrian family of city dwellers in their weekend estate, who are slowly and painfully tortured to death by two twenty-something media-savvy yuppies during a set of elaborate mind games, *Funny Games* is an unflinching, lethally funny, crushing indictment of the petite bourgeoisie. The strongly self-reflective film has often been discussed in terms of the complex links it delicately weaves between media saturation and violence.²¹ In addition, its relevance as a pitch-black parody of action/horror thrillers has been established, with Haneke’s intentions being not to fall into the trap of violence exploitation (Scheiber 81), but

to actually “slap in the face” (Sharrett) and provoke reaction. Visually, structurally and discursively elaborate, *Funny Games* seems to be worlds away from the low-budget, hectic, vulgar and harsh ‘hand-made’ splatter films by Buttgereit and Kargl. However, as indicated, neither the films of Buttgereit nor of Kargl allow its audience to simply dismiss the violence, but actually turns the apparently uninvolved (indeed behind the silver screen even supposedly ‘untouchable’) spectators – torn between disgust and fascination – into unsuspecting collaborators. If nothing else, *Funny Games* is even more radical than the films of Buttgereit and Kargl in its refusal to provide a safety net at all. It repeatedly breaches the fourth wall by rewinding and altering scenes or eventually winking towards the audience. Channelling a widespread consensus, *New York Times* film critic Stephen Holden describes *Funny Games* and its ambiguity towards the audience’s reception of violence and violent behaviour as “posing as a morally challenging work of art,” which is really “a sophisticated act of cinematic sadism. You go to it at your own risk” (Holden).

All of the films depicted so far are in one way or another meditations on the very ‘heart of darkness’ of a society: violence and its devastating effects on the vulnerable. Excitement, fear, outrage, repulsion: these are some of the most primal and visceral responses. A genre like that of the serial killer horror/angst thriller is particularly adept at eliciting these responses. Whereas some of the films, especially the earlier examples like Lang’s *M* or Siodmaks *Nachts, wenn der Teufel kam*, rely on atmosphere, a restrained technique and also attempt to “resolutely conceal [...] the body of the victim and, once the deed is done, deflect [...] attention from the victim to the investigative process used to apprehend the perpetrator and to the social consequences of his crime” (Tatar 155), it has been shown that other, more underground-oriented films prefer a more hard-hitting, bare-knuckled approach and focus on the climatic moment of the murder, illustrating the devastating effect of the weapon literally penetrating the vulnerable body. Unwilling to compromise their intentions to break new ground in an old genre as far as aesthetic form, dissecting the psyche of the killer (and their audiences) and overturning notions of what is acceptable and in good taste is concerned, Buttgereit, Kargl, Haneke, et al, make good on Vogel’s plea for the inherent qualities of film as a subversive art and shock-art as a trigger of thought. The characters are not pretty enough. The violence is not cool, slick, stylish or, yes, sexy enough. The aesthetics are either too cultured and clever, or too crude and coarse. The audiences are thrown back upon themselves, and rules of decency, taste and common sense are repeatedly broken. *Funny Games* does not

refrain from inflicting cruelty and murder on either animals or children. Besides scenes of genital mutilation as grisly as they are surreal, *Schramm* contains one of the most literal interpretations of a *vagina dentata* in all of film history and engages in extensive sequences of auto-eroticism. *Angst* does not recoil from violence inflicted on the elderly, or the mentally and physically handicapped. And finally, *Mosquito der Schänder* wallows in extended scenes of child molestation and less-than-subtle hints at necrophilia. Contrary to widespread opinion that these breaches of cinematic 'codes of conduct' degenerate to ends in themselves, they are instead not only essential clues in deciphering the killers and the events unfolding on screen, but also an opportunity to achieve a pedagogic if not cathartic effect, as proposed by Vogel and advocated by Buttgerreit or Haneke. On the one hand, a body of films engaging in reflections of historical circumstances has been examined. On the other hand, a group of films dealing with the artistic value of excessive violence and taboo-breaking has been discussed. The following paragraphs will reflect on the extent to which the latest contributions to the genre – *Tattoo*, *Der Sandmann*, *Antikörper* – have been able (or willing) to combine these elements and thereby add new dimensions to the genre. Even though their rather recent release dates renders it difficult to pass judgment on how they will eventually be evaluated and classified in terms of both the genre's history and their own merits, some initial observations of the source material, the growing American influence with regard to perspective and structure and, directly related to it, the question of gender and victimization, may be appropriate.

Robert Schwentke's *Tattoo* (2002) investigates a series of disappearances and gruesome killings linked to a complex underground network of the tattooed skin trade. Nico Hofmann's *Der Sandmann* (1995) has at its centre a rehabilitated murderer-turned-bestseller author, a recent series of prostitute killings and a journalist's increasingly desperate endeavors to link the two. Last but not least, Christian Alvar's *Antikörper*, which was released in summer 2005, begins with the capture of a child killer and spends the remainder of its running time attempting to elicit the killer's confession. These films take up threads already stitched in by their predecessors, vary and extend motifs, and pay due respect to the genre's inherent mechanisms. Yet, after the radical experiments in style and tone of Karmakar, Buttgerreit, Kargl, and Haneke's films, these most recent productions nevertheless appear to be steps backwards in the development of the genre. However, through some compromise of the rawness in their predecessor's rough edges, important aspects and characteristics of the genre could be merged to

arouse a level of mass attention that may be marked as a success for the hitherto marginalized genre.

Even though surprisingly many relevant German productions are directly based on, or at least inspired by, real-life murders, the centre of attention seems to have shifted in the recent years from the thinly veiled navel-gazing of quasi-documentary profiles of films based on real events, to broader, more openly escapist, fictitious cases, largely eschewing the controversial socio-political ramifications prevalent throughout the genre's development. Kompisch and Otto establish that ever since the emergence of the concept of the serial killer, depictions in art, literature, film and media tend to oscillate between a glorification of the fascinating *Übermensch* on the one hand, and an awareness of the killer as being a product of modern society on the other (*Bestien* 32). Whereas their predecessors generally leaned towards the latter element, *Tattoo*, *Der Sandmann*, and *Antikörper* tend to be more attracted by a glorification of the genre and generally refrain from explicit comments on socio-cultural circumstances. The filmmakers' and audiences' interest is no longer merely kindled by *history* but rather by *story*, by plot rather than character. Schneider describes this as a "postmodern narrative universe commodifying and denying Germany's own history" (5). Whilst it has been a problem to trace international references in the productions of their predecessors, *Tattoo*, *Der Sandmann*, and *Antikörper* are more comfortable in their embrace of characteristics widely attributed to American mainstream cinema regarding structure, perspective and focus (which, it needs to be added, has in turn been heavily influenced by the atmospheric settings and character constellations in Weimar productions such as *Fritz Lang's M* or Robert Siodmak and Billy Wilder's famed exercises in film noir). All three films may essentially be described as atmospheric *whodunnits* or '*hovedidits*' (for lack of a better word) in the tradition of contemporary Hollywood thrillers.

Tattoo's gloomy atmosphere and set pieces, for example, remind of the grimy snuff-porn underground portrayed in Joel Schumacher's *8MM* and the fatalism of David Fincher's *Seven*, while the mid-90s made-for-TV movie *Der Sandmann*, as Hantke convincingly illustrates, is heavily influenced by American media culture and TV thrillers and consequently closely follows their 'flat' aesthetics (Hantke 62). *Antikörper*, finally, rather openly adapts Jonathan Demme's *Silence of the Lambs*, most notably in its lengthy high-security prison interrogation sequences. What is more, the films also largely adhere to the perspective, not invented but nevertheless popularized, by the American genre films

from the 1990s in which the audience experiences the events unfolding through a rookie's eyes, usually making sense of the circumstances at the same rate s/he does.²² *Tattoo's* young detective has an equivalent in *Der Sandmann's* young and ambitious female TV-research assistant, and *Antikörper's* restrained small-town policeman is being drawn into a case that exceeds even his wildest imagination. A retreat into the 'safer' perspective of the serial killer hunters may be one of the most obvious or reasonable explanations why these films appeal to a wider audience.

However, as Buttgerreit states in an interview with Alexander Kluge on the DVD of *Schramm*, this change in focus is essentially a change in genre: they are no longer serial killer, but rather police films (DVD *Schramm*). Despite the filmmakers' attempts to add levels of complexity to the protagonists by adding shades of gray²³ to their ethical character, their moral superiority is never in doubt. The wall between 'us' and 'the other,' broken down eloquently by Buttgerreit, Haneke et al, has been re-erected and the status quo distinction between good and evil has been restored. The killer, his living spaces, and the results of his actions are depicted in such a way that indicates right from the establishing shot of his world, that he (and in these films the killer is almost always a 'he') may be among us, but not one of us. This development does not only reinforce clear dividing lines between the self of the audience and the other of the deviant subject – it also hints at an important structuring device of these films. As already mentioned, they attempt to merge the investigative process of the earliest genre contributions with the murderous actions and an increased focus on a detailed depiction of the disfigured victims.

Suchsland identifies the cleverly devised symbolism and the feature of having a network of clues sown throughout the film as elements characteristic of American productions (Suchsland), to which Hölting adds his observation that the American 'jigsaw structure' (cf. Hölting) is borrowed and employed: every riddle solved brings the detectives one step closer to solving the big mystery. Detailed forensic examinations (thanks to the heightened voyeuristic value added to the disfigured body, the trend is sometimes described as "forensic porn"²⁴) of the murder's attendant circumstances are the main focus. The individual victims' tortured and mangled bodies are objectified and quite literally turned into puzzle pieces to read, interpret and establish the killer's methodical fingerprints. In accordance with the basic premise of the *whodunnit* mystery (and Buttgerreit's assessment), the identity of the killer is relegated to the background in order to not divert attention from the murderous set pieces. *Tattoo* does not uncover the identity of the

actual perpetrator until the very last shots, and *Der Sandmann* leaves the solution in limbo. Even though the identity of the killer was never in doubt in *Antikörper*, the question advancing the story is one of trust: can this monster's words be trusted? These questions of focus and structure may be identified as being the most obvious, if not the only regressive genre developments. Kompisch and Otto associate the approach of zooming in on the result of the actions with methods utilized by conservative media, and speculate that this indirectly relieves the killer of his responsibility by putting the blame on his victims, their lifestyles, their degraded morals, and their social environments (*Bestien* 16). Films like *Angst*, *Schramm*, *Der Totmacher*, *Funny Games* and *Ein Leben lang kurze Hosen tragen* (enhanced by the perspective employed) transcend reactionary assessments and theories by a rigorous refusal to commit to linear models/frames of explanation.

More recent films, however, not only reinforce safe perspectives but also appear to nourish the conservative streak inherent in the genre by falling back onto the biblical notion of 'an eye for an eye.' *Tattoo* depicts the bustling counter-culture of Berlin as a world riddled with drugs, violence, and depravity by turning it into a dark, shadowy and rainy parallel universe in washed-out colors, where everyone has brought the misery upon himself or herself. *Der Sandmann* and *Antikörper*, while different in content, generally appear to tow the same line by employing distinctive oppositions of good versus evil. Especially the strongly religious *Antikörper* – as Suchsland explains – contains many strong clashes of systems: young – old, purity – sin, country – city, all of which exclude the possibility of tapping into the moral gray zones invoked by some of the predecessors. The last-mentioned opposition of country – city shall illustrate the claim for *Antikörper's* rather conservative streak: the journey to the city can be seen as the protagonist's spiritual enlightenment to differentiate guilt from atonement. In the city – utilizing the archetypical idea of it being a place of sin – he is tempted and runs astray by getting involved with the only self-confident woman in the film. In accordance with the conservative perspective the film has embraced, this woman is depicted as the red-robed seductress testing the protagonist's strength of character. In light of this element, Suchsland accordingly identifies the undifferentiated misogynistic portrayal of women as one of the major deficiencies of Alvar's film (Suchsland). Not only *Antikörper*, but *Tattoo* and *Der Sandmann* also, convey rather bleak conceptions of women and their roles in society: they are either reduced to scheming manipulators or hapless victims, tempting nymphomaniacs or obedient housewives, puppets on strings or exotic

exhibits of a dangerous netherworld. They are, however, never in charge of the situation. Even the investigative journalist in *Der Sandmann*, who is apparently in control for a large part of the story's duration, turns out to have been played rather than to have been the player. What is more, Suchsland's description of sex as a somewhat joyless business in *Antikörper* certainly holds true in *Tattoo* and *Der Sandmann* as well. While not resorting to the extreme levels of open hostility towards pornography and alternative subcultures presented in *8MM*, *Tattoo* nevertheless paints a dreary image of the porn industry, populated by heavily tattooed freaks in shabby studios replete with advanced S&M machinery. Sex is dirt is pain is death. *Der Sandmann* – in the tradition of late Victorian horror tales orbiting Jack the Ripper and not unlike other genre films of the time, e.g. the Danish production *Nattevagten* (*Nightwatch*, 1994) by director Ole Bornedal – displays an open contempt for prostitution and, similar to *Tattoo* and *Antikörper*, contains a number of strongly voyeuristic sequences with the camera lingering on nude, defenseless, bound, and objectified female bodies. Despite the apparent omnipresence of this misogynistic streak in the most recent films, it is nonetheless still a relatively new addition to the catalogue of German serial killer film characteristics. Buttgereit's films, for example, may very well be read as studies of male isolation and alienation. None of the numerous acts of violence – not even during their most outrageously repulsive – depict scenes of female degradation or humiliation. It is instead the male characters who have their come-uppance, induced by an existential crisis. Similar observations can be made about Kargl and – with some reservations – about Vajda: augmented by their subjective perspectives, a reduction of the female to prey is not a sign of misogyny per se, but rather a hint at male inadequacy. This is not to claim that either of the latter directors had any intentions to push the feminist agenda. Likewise, the numerous acts of violence inflicted on women may be more than the casual viewer is able (and willing) to bear. That being said, in their unflinching dissection of their male perpetrators' sensibilities, shortcomings and paranoia, the films of Buttgereit and Kargl are closer to a feminist re-interpretation of the quintessentially phallogocentric genre (made by men, depicting 'strong' men fighting each other, directed at a predominantly male audience) than any of their predecessors or successors, who despite the advantage of hindsight and a wealth of influences to draw upon, generally tend to fall back on traditional genre stereotypes of men and women being victims and saviors/victimizers, respectively.

Far from being merely extravagant bloodbaths and superficial gore galore stagnantly bogged in prototype categories such as sexploitation and splatter, the majority of German-language serial killer/horror films discussed above indeed communicate insightful socio-political commentary, albeit in a (bloody) unassuming vernacular. Just as the chimy surface of such children's verses is to be penetrated in order to realize underlying dark substances contained in the verse, the very shiny surfaces of "scare conventionally" polished serial killer/horror films are to be punctured to grasp the socio-political factors incubating, provoking and nurturing such actions. If one indifferently and statically lingers and loiters around, if the dangerously droning nature of the all too familiar is neither realized nor reacted against nor acted upon, the legacy of its potentially imbedded darkness retains the power to repeatedly exert unpleasant socio-political evils upon our existence – *Warte, warte nur ein Weilchen, dann kommt Haarmann auch zu dir, mit dem Hackebackebeitchen macht er Leberwurst aus dir.*

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Notes

- ¹ The author wants to thank Ava Schacherl-Lam for her extensive editorial support.
 - ² Some of the most recent titles in the ever-expanding library of serial killing in German are, among others, Harbort's *Das Hannibal-Syndrom* and *Ich musste sie kaputtmachen*, Kompisch and Otto's studies *Bestien des Boulevards* and *Monster für die Massen*, Berg, Robertz, and Schüler. See bibliography for full references.
 - ³ Tatar and Büsser deserve a special recommendation for offering detailed analyses of the topic as motivation for great art.
 - ⁴ For further reference, consult Halle/McCarthy, Mathijs/Mendik, and Schneider/Williams, all of which are excellent introductions to films often neglected by canon-oriented film- and cultural studies.
 - ⁵ Even though a number of web-based film magazines and fan sites will be referred to in this paper, a clear distinction has to be made: citations from those 'popular' sources are obviously not to be regarded as being on the same analytical level as serious film analysis. That being said, it appears worth noting how the discourse surrounding films considered 'unworthy' of serious interpretation is often relegated to the murky depths of websites designed by and made for horror/trash/niche film aficionados. The internet's ability to keep these films and their cult status alive is nevertheless a field of research that certainly deserves closer attention than it generally receives.
 - ⁶ Cf. www.imdb.com, also other niche-websites such as www.mondo-digital.com or www.blairwitch.de.
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- ⁷ Incidentally, *Der Totmacher* was the nom de plume the press adopted for another serial killer, Rudolf Pleil, while Haarmann was widely referred to as the *werewolf of Hanover* (Kompisch/Otto, *Bestien* 28; *Monster* 24).
- ⁸ Edited by Christine Poczar and Michael Farin, *Die Haarmann Protokolle* were published in 1995 to accompany the film's release.
- ⁹ Cf. Schechter and Tatar: while Schechter calls Haarmann "one of the most ghastly of all twentieth-century serial killers" (211), Tatar attempts to define Haarmann as a symbol and quotes the Austrian sculptor Alfred Hrdlicka, who said that "Haarmann the mass murderer [...] was not only a lightning flash revealing the state-sanctioned mass murders that were to come; his antisocial preoccupations and drives were, above all, what made him a prototype of his time" (4).
- ¹⁰ Referring to Lessing's influential biographical study Borrmann establishes a number of links between Haarmann and Hitler. Above all, he points to the social contexts and the special nature of the times, where a climate of public pathology, a pathogenic family sphere and chaotic and deteriorating social structures after a devastating war are generally in favor of a resurfacing of hidden and atavistic impulses (122). Kurt Raab would eventually play Hitler in a 1985 TV movie called *Mussolini and I*.
- ¹¹ Based on this, Moor published a book titled *Jürgen Bartsch: Selbstbildnis eines Kindermörders*.
- ¹² Reflecting the circumstances of their respective imprisonment, the interrogation rooms serve as natural frames. In addition, none of these films hardly utilizes any off-screen action. Bartsch's lifelong imprisonment in his body and his social environment is further emphasized in a lack of open spaces. His existence takes place in cramped rooms, gloomy forests, wet caves, restricting churches and dormitories.
- ¹³ Tellingly, the first sentence uttered right at the beginning of *Der Totmacher* is Haarmann's "Das wissen Sie doch schon!" ("But you know that already!").
- ¹⁴ Despite the best intentions, a certain level of judgment is unavoidable. Filmmaking is a subjective art. Camera angles (e.g. the interrogation sequences in *Ein Leben lang kurze Hosen tragen* range between eye-level and slight high angle shots to establish the imbalanced, inquisitive nature of the relationship interrogator-interrogatee, whereas the flashback sequences frequently utilize low angle shots emphasizing the predatory dominance of the killer), camera distance and placement of characters within the frames (again, *Ein Leben lang* employs a variety of extreme long shots and long shots – even in closed rooms – to express the characters' alienation and isolation in their environments), their interactions between each other or the length of takes, to name but a few, are subjective decisions directors make to influence their audiences' attitude towards the events taking place on- and off-screen.
- ¹⁵ Kargl uses this technique of excessive voice-over to chilling and unsettling effect: it is not revealed until the very last scene that the voice-over and the character's real voice are not one and the same, further stressing the killer's mental degradation and alienation from his surroundings.
- ¹⁶ A technique rarely used in film, it has nevertheless been employed to great effect in Darren Aronofsky's *π* (1998) and *Requiem for a Dream* (2000) and the British production *Freeze Frame*, directed by John Simpson in 2004, all of which highly subjective films, portraying characters in great psychological distress.
- ¹⁷ One notable exception is Stiglegger's informative interview with Kargl and his knowledgeable, if brief analysis of the film.
- ¹⁸ Originally published in *Sex Murder Art*, a book-length evaluation of Buttgereit's films, the chapter "Schramm: The Making of a Serial Killer" was later expanded and used as an accompanying inlay for the *Schramm* DVD reissue. The above quote is taken from the inlay.
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- ¹⁹ The booklets accompanying the DVD releases of Buttgereit's films assiduously collect letters and prohibitions and confiscation documents and therefore give eloquent evidence of this director's difficulties of finding a way to get his work done and made available to a wider audience. In addition, Roland Seim's highly recommended studies *Ab 18* (together with Josef Spiegel) and *Zwischen Medienfreiheit und Zensurgriffen* spend a considerable amount of space on describing the complicated history of film censorship in Germany.
- ²⁰ Translation: JS.
- ²¹ See, for example, Metelmann or Wessely/Larcher/Grabner.
- ²² Whereas most recent American serial killer thrillers are based on this premise, apart from the three films discussed in this paragraph, the idealistic young policeman trying to solve the murder case is only employed in one further German genre film, Siodmak's *Nachts, wenn der Teufel kam*.
- ²³ The detectives in *Tattoo*, for example, are either not ill-disposed to drugs or have reputations for taking the law into their own hands from time to time. The investigative journalist in *Der Sandmann* does not like to adhere to rules either, and the small town policeman in *Antikörper* has to fight religious crises and numerous temptations and come to terms with the hypocrisy of his beliefs.
- ²⁴ Cf. Russell, mirroring Karen Halttunen's notion of a "pornography of pain" (from the title of Halttunen's essay) nurtured by a media intent on commercial exploitation and public arousal. Cf. Kompisch/Otto 39, referring to Halttunen.

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