

From German *Grusel* to *Giallo*:

Transculturality in the West-German Edgar Wallace Series

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The West-German Edgar Wallace films of the 1960s are without a match in the history of German cinema. No other franchise is as fondly remembered and paid tribute to in German popular culture as frequently; no other series of films ran for so long and remained profitable for more than a decade.¹ There have been numerous critical studies of the Wallace films, often as part of a sociology of German cinema, with a distinct emphasis on the films' ideological subtexts (see Bergfelder; Gerhards). The films are viewed as emblematic of the transitional period of the 1960s and characterised as indicative of an overarching paradigm shift in the national mentality throughout this decade (see Bliersbach; Grob; Schneider).

There have been far fewer efforts to explore the Wallace films as adaptations² and to unpack their transcultural baggage, even though it is clear from watching almost any film in the series that there is far too much eclectic internationalism and spatio-temporal flexibility here to simply classify the Wallace films as 'Germanised' versions of English source material, or as mere attempts to transplant 1920s crime stories into the post-war context. It is my aim not just to highlight how the Edgar Wallace films work *as* adaptations, but also to argue for the transcultural quality of the series, which goes far beyond the frequently ridiculed ways in which it mines contemporary Anglophilia to subliminally work through national neuroses. By the same token, I want to argue that the tendencies towards internationalisation that some commentators have aligned exclusively to the series' later years, when the Wallace films were absorbed into the Italian *giallo* craze of the 1970s, can be detected several years before that. Both of these aspects make it necessary to include the formal level in my analysis.

Paradoxically, the series' trademark aesthetics – its black-and-white cinematography, low-key lighting and its stylised depiction of Gothic mansions and a gang-infested, foggy London – are what have ensured its longevity, but critical takes on the material have all too often marginalised these aspects.

I will provide an overview of the series' production history and its trademark qualities before turning towards their significance as transnational adaptations that sought ways of dealing with German preoccupations in the disguise of a form of Englishness that was simultaneously

deadly serious and ironically over the top. In order to then locate the *transcultural* component in the Edgar Wallace series, I will discuss an example from the series' transitional period of 1963/64, when the films were beginning to gradually liberate themselves from the shackles of their source material and to flirt with other genres and contemporary cinematic fashions, looking very much ahead to the Italian *giallo* cycle. The film in question, *Zimmer 13* ('Room 13', 1964³), has thus far received no critical attention whatsoever, even though (or rather, *because*) it is one of the most atypical films of the series. I will argue that it is in 'Room 13' where the series' most distinguished transcultural space is to be found: a room where time is truly out of joint and where the overall transitional quality of the Wallace films becomes obvious, as the film looks back to various predecessors *and* ahead to cinematic trends that would become omnipresent throughout the following decade. Moreover, *Zimmer 13* bears testimony to a variety of influences that highlight a transnational quality that has so far remained unacknowledged.

“This is Edgar Wallace speaking!”

The Edgar Wallace series, produced by Danish-German company Rialto, was started in 1959 and officially discontinued in 1972 (a few attempted revivals on television are not considered part of the canon), covering a similar time-span and containing about as many films as the British *Carry on* series. Like the latter, the Wallace films started out in black and white and were run like a repertory company, with a well-rehearsed creative team working behind the camera and a stock company of actors appearing in front of it. Some of them did more than a dozen Wallace films, playing different iterations of their well-established personas like the clumsy comic-relief character (Eddi Arent), the psychopathic tool of the villain (Klaus Kinski), or the dim-witted head of police (Siegfried Schürenberg). Even after their switch to colour in 1966 – a moment usually singled out as ‘the beginning of the end’ in retrospect, as the series rather desperately attempted to appeal to younger viewers – the films remained profitable for another few years, due in no small part to producer Horst Wendlandt's shrewd ways of striking up international collaborations and latching on to cinematic trends. This meant tapping into the sexploitation craze (another similarity to *Carry on*) and mimicking the James Bond franchise.⁴ As softcore porn and technical gadgets entered the series, the link to Edgar Wallace was limited to the branding of the films.

While the series no longer connected with cinemagoers in the early 1970s, it soon found a home on television,⁵ and if you grew up in reunified Germany throughout the 1990s (like me), its countless re-runs would have been hard to avoid. Since that time, nostalgia has produced several comprehensive volumes on the Wallace series, most of which are rich in behind-the-scenes anecdotes and photographic material (see Hohmann; Kramp; Kramp/Naumann; Tses). While the Wallace cycle never produced box-office numbers to rival those of the most successful German films of all time, it remained sufficiently well embedded in collective memory to inspire several revivals on the screen and on the stage, not to mention numerous spoofs. In the 1990s, Germany's most prominent comedian, Otto Waalkes (who owed his own cinematic career to Wallace producer Wendlandt) dedicated a whole TV series (*Otto: Die Serie*, 1995) to re-dubbing and mashing up the films into comedy sketches, in the style of *Dead Men Don't Wear Plaid* (1982). Two big-screen comedies of the early 2000s (*Der Wixxer* ['The Wanker', 2004]; *Neues vom Wixxer* ['More from the Wanker', 2007]), by bringing together surviving alumni of the original films as well as comedians who had grown up as Wallace fans, managed to revive the series' trademark fictional London, its Gothic mansions, trench coat-wearing detectives, as well as the legendary voice-over announcement included in the credit sequences of most of the Wallace films: "Hallo, hier spricht Edgar Wallace!" – "This is Edgar Wallace speaking!"

Why exactly the Rialto series has proven so enduring where other film cycles like the 1950s *Heimatfilm* have been largely forgotten is hard to explain. Chances are that the films will leave contemporary viewers unimpressed unless they grew up with them and experienced their first timidly spine-tingling sensations while watching one of the series' masked maniacs sneaking up on the damsel in distress. Georg Seeßlen has aptly characterised the Wallace films as the appropriate kind of thriller for a time when people did not dare to be *properly* frightened yet (Seeßlen 1981, 210) – in Germany, they are usually referred to as *Gruselkrimis* ('scary crime pictures'), with the word 'Grusel' oscillating between the pleasant chuckles experienced during a rollercoaster ride and the more drastic shock value of the horror film, without ever fully committing to the latter. It is certainly hard to imagine anyone today being properly frightened by the series' costumed maniacs, most of whom are unmasked in the style of *Scooby Doo*'s 'monster of the week'; the list includes not just whip-wielding monks and belated descendants of the Golem, but also villains dressed as frogs or gorillas. At the same time, the Wallace films provided a fertile playing field to rehearse – in a relatively timid

fashion – scenarios that future generations of filmgoers would be more radically exposed to, including the characteristic *mise-en-scène* of the slasher cycle and a glimpse at the zombie motif in *Im Banne des Unheimlichen* (*The Zombie Walks*, 1968), released shortly before George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) revived the zombie film.

It is easy to ridicule the Wallace films for their low budgets, the obvious use of stock footage and back projections of London (see Figure 1), for how their settings try their best to evoke Gothic horror and exaggerated Englishness (the castles are invariably called Blackwood, Darkwood, or Castlewood), or the way the cast members do their best “to pretend that their names were Harry, Linda, and John”, to quote comedian Bastian Pastewka, one of the stars of the *Wixxer* spoofs (“Interview”, my translation).



Figure 1: Back projections set the scene in *Der Hexer* (*The Ringer*, 1964).

Other aspects of the films have stood the test of time rather well, for instance their jazzy and rather cheeky scores (often provided by Peter Thomas) or their idiosyncratic *mise-en-scène*. The series’ trademark visuals are mainly associated with the name of Alfred Vohrer, the most prolific director of the series. Not only did Vohrer oversee the series’ transition towards colour, he was also responsible for its most visually inventive set-pieces, filming an urgent telephone call from inside the phone, through the dial plate, or empathising with a carrot that is crushed between the teeth of Siegfried Schürenberg (see Figure 2). Vohrer’s eye for these visual flourishes and his unapologetic love for horror won him many admirers, including Jess

Franco and Quentin Tarantino. The latter was a fifth-grader when he saw Vohrer's Wallace adaptation *Die blaue Hand* (*Creature with the Blue Hand*, 1967) at a drive-in cinema in Tennessee; he would later single out Vohrer as his favourite German director (see Althen).

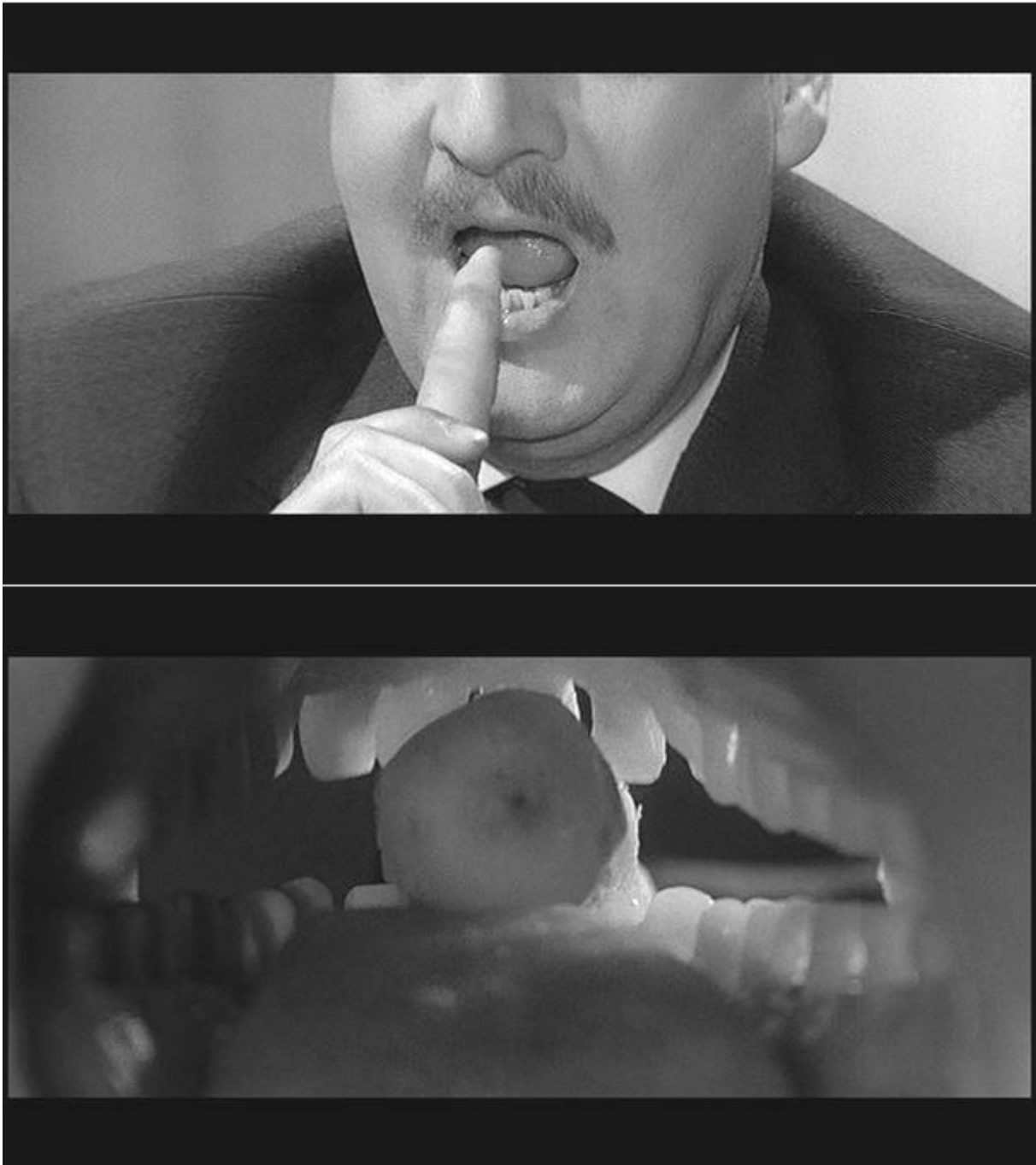


Figure 2: The Vohrer touch at work in *Der Zinker* (*The Squeaker*, 1963).

The Vohrer style did not just earn the director his reputation as 'the German Hitchcock', it also contributed to the series' overall tongue-in-cheek approach, constantly undercutting the scares with laughter (usually of the *intended* kind) as well as with meta-reflexive elements

that had to be considered rather innovative in German cinema of the period.⁶ The dialogue in the final scenes would sometimes announce a forthcoming Wallace film; the climactic reading of the will in *Das indische Tuch* (*The Indian Scarf*, 1963) ends with all the money being left to Edgar Wallace himself; and in one memorable exchange in *Der Mönch mit der Peitsche* (*The College Girl Murders*, 1967), the characters themselves acknowledge that they are appearing in a remake of an older Wallace film. These slightly postmodern touches allowed German cinema to flash its international credentials in a playful manner, contributing to the transcultural qualities of the series.

There was a bit of belated historic justice to that; after all, the Wallace boom of the 1960s had had a historic precedent in the years of the Weimar Republic. Throughout the 1920s, German publishing house Goldmann had popularised Wallace's oeuvre in Germany, establishing a brand with its famous 'red series'. Wallace's trademark pathological criminals made for a natural fit with German popular culture of the 1920s, which took a morbid interest in iconic figures like Jack the Ripper. Fritz Lang's *Mabuse* franchise (based on the novels by Norbert Jacques) was successfully revived in 1960s Germany, too, with many key players of the Wallace cycle in the cast. In spite of overwhelming public demand, the Wallace boom ended abruptly in 1933 once the NSDAP took power, and Anglophone crime fiction became one of the first casualties "of the Nazis' policies of cultural re-nationalisation, alongside the spirit of cosmopolitanism more generally" (Bergfelder 146). After the war, Goldmann revived the Wallace novels in print, but it was not before the late 1950s that film producers took note. Legend has it that Danish producer Preben Philipsen had his company Rialto snap up the rights to the Wallace novels when he saw Guy Hamilton's adaptation of *The Ringer* (1952) – instead of simply releasing the film via his distributor in Germany (as he had originally intended), Philipsen thought that a film of better quality than *The Ringer* could easily be produced in Germany.⁷ The gamble paid off – the first two Wallace films produced by Rialto as Danish-German co-productions, *Der Frosch mit der Maske* (*Face of the Frog*, 1959) and *Der rote Kreis* (*The Crimson Circle*, 1959), were so successful that Rialto set up a branch in Germany and hired Horst Wendlandt to provide a steady flow of new Wallace films (see Kramp 8-13). The resulting series took over from the *Heimatfilm* as the dominant template for commercial filmmaking in Germany – both provided a form of escapism, but where the *Heimatfilm* had emphasized picturesque landscapes in a constant move outside and upwards,

in the Wallace films “everything moves inside and downward (underwater, into prisons, basements and cellars)” (Schneider 382).

Joachim Kramp suggests a timeline for the Wallace films that covers at least three different phases when it comes to working with (and later, *outside* of) their source material (see Kramp 21-23): after a period of relatively faithful adaptations that rely very much on the structure and dramatis personae of Wallace’s novels (c. 1959-1962) came a transitional phase that saw the writers begin to make substantial changes to the source material (c. 1963-1964). It is this second period which is often seen as the heyday of the Wallace films, and also as their most prolific phase, with nine Wallace films being released in the span of two years.⁸ After 1964, the films were ‘inspired by’ rather than actually based on Wallace’s novels, with the occasional token object or character name serving as the sole connective tissue to the source text. By the time the series relocated to Italy for a number of German-Italian co-productions in 1969, the Wallace brand merely acted as a marketing ploy; the screenplays were not based on any Wallace properties. Around the time that Roland Barthes declared the author to be dead, the Wallace producers still managed to generate a profit from occasionally flashing his corpse. In the eyes of Wallace purists, the brand had already been damaged through the efforts of Wendlandt’s rival producer, Artur Brauner, who had acquired the rights to the novels of Wallace’s son, Bryan Edgar. Throughout the 1960s, Brauner sold his adaptations as ‘the new B. Edgar Wallace’, emulating the style of his competitors, but without bothering about any fidelity to his source material either.

While the adaptive strategies at work in the Wallace cycle took more and more liberties with the novels, it would be somewhat unfair to dismiss them as completely unrelated to Wallace’s oeuvre. *Der unheimliche Mönch* (*The Sinister Monk*, 1965), considered by some to be the quintessential film of the whole series (Kramp 149), may not bear more than a passing resemblance to its source text, but then again, the origins of the story are hard to pinpoint anyway: Wallace had used the ghoulish figure of the hooded clergyman in his novel *The Black Abbot* (1926; filmed for the Rialto series as *Der schwarze Abt* in 1963), then revisited the idea in his stage play *The Terror* (1927), which was subsequently adapted into a short novel of the same name (1929); only the latter is commonly identified as the literary source of *Der unheimliche Mönch*. Effectively, the film only retains the eponymous villain, the mysterious monk who haunts a boarding house like the Phantom of the Opera, consumed by

his mad love for a young woman. But in spite of the substantial plot changes, both versions of the material are mash-ups of Gothic horror tropes: Wallace has no qualms letting his heroine endure “awful, blood-curdling shriek[s]”, organ-playing and mad laughter (Wallace 1929/2016, 28), both rely on appropriately bad weather to deliver atmosphere, and both observe a similar template, one that various commentators, including Wallace’s biographer Margaret Lane, have identified as the gist of the Wallace formula on the page *and* on the screen. The hero is usually a resourceful detective or reporter, the heroine is a pretty girl who “turns out to be deeply though innocently involved in a financial plot, and therefore the object of the villain’s machination” (Lane 293); she is threatened by a monstrous killer and a criminal mastermind who passes for “a sympathetic and blameless character” in daylight (ibid.) but who is really a “mad Rumpelstiltskin hiding underground, cultivating his megalomania” (Bliersbach 203, my translation).

Because Rialto’s Wallace cycle tended to respect this template, even in its later years, it could with some degree of justification still promise to deliver “a genuine Wallace”, as most of the advertising proclaimed, because the cinematic brand had already fused with the literary one at this stage. Like their source texts, the films were brimming with foggy streets, windowless rooms, masked assassins, and an overall “threatening environment, pervaded by dementia, insanity, and violence” (Schneider 381). The brand was strong enough to accommodate the occasional flirtation with cinematic fashions of the day within its parameters, which is why the Wallace series contains a mob movie in *Das Rätsel der roten Orchidee* (*The Puzzle of the Red Orchid*, 1962), a heist movie in *Das Verrätertor* (*Traitor’s Gate*, 1964), and in *Das indische Tuch* a locked-room whodunit in the tradition of Agatha Christie’s *And Then There Were None* (1939).

German *Grusel* Meets German *Angst*

Before tackling the transcultural aspects of the Wallace series, it is worth briefly addressing how the cultural *locus* of the Edgar Wallace films is usually assessed. While critics usually acknowledge the generic hybridity and various strategies of internationalisation that inform the films, they tend to treat them as rather pure-blooded ‘Germanisations’ of their English sources. It is not my aim to denigrate this reading as completely unfounded, but rather to suggest that it fails to do justice to the transcultural dimensions of the films.

Right from the beginning, Rialto sought international collaborations, with partners in European countries like Denmark, France, and the UK. This meant that the series regularly moved to other production facilities and invited foreign collaborators to contribute; the list of people who have contributed to the Wallace cycle in one or other form includes such illustrious names as Dario Argento, Freddie Francis, Lucio Fulci, Umberto Lenzi, Ennio Morricone, and Nicolas Roeg. But in spite of this thorough internationalism – which I shall revisit in the next section –, critics have largely treated the Wallace films as a thoroughly German project, reading their subtexts accordingly.

This approach makes much of the series' characteristic "imaginary idea of the foreign" (Bergfelder 139), a rather unique topography that shapes the *mise-en-scène* and which is informed by clichés of the English aristocracy inhabiting Gothic mansions and of a crime-ridden East London, "both non-specific *and* suggestive enough to let the audience imagine it to be their favourite Jack the Ripper hunting ground" (Huck 164). While this relocation to a thoroughly fictional England certainly constitutes a form of escapism, the films do not completely evade topics that would have preyed on the German post-war mind. Several critics follow Siegfried Kracauer's seminal analysis of Weimar cinema, which reads the films of the 1920s as a subliminal manifestation of contemporary political conflicts and historical shifts. Viewed like this, the Wallace films amount to a kind of clandestine confessional booth, a seemingly innocuous space in popular culture where Germany could hold court over its past and work through its unacknowledged guilt issues. That these repressed feelings broke forth in such a potent manner certainly had to do with not just the collective amnesia of the post-war years, but also with the forceful repression of the crime and horror tradition during the NS regime – after all, the filmmaking culture that had produced classics like *Nosferatu: Symphonie des Grauens* (*Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror*, 1922) or *M* (1931) had been violently expelled as *undeutsch* ('un-German') as soon as the NSDAP took power. Collective repression led to the anxieties of the Weimar years being locked away in the cellar of the collective unconscious, and it is no coincidence that so many of the detectives in the Rialto films are lured into cellars to face the unspeakable: "This cellar was always a German cellar; these English criminals were German criminals. [...] The narrative reflected a desire to unmask the National-Socialists, to finally see their faces and to destroy their imagery." (Bliersbach 215, my translation)

Gerhard Bliersbach analyses the very first Wallace film, *Der Frosch mit der Maske*, through the prism of the German past, reading the character of John Bennett as a traumatised war veteran who remains alienated from his family, and he also points out that no-one at the time seems to have bat an eyelid at the sight of the villain killing people with hydrogen cyanide (see Bliersbach 202-218).⁹ Eight years later, *Der Mönch mit der Peitsche* will open with two ‘mad scientists’ developing a perfectly lethal gas, before debating whether their invention should be used to kill people. Bizarrely, it was only when poisonous gas was used as a murder weapon in *Das Geheimnis der weißen Nonne* (*The Trygon Factor*, 1966), an Anglo-German co-production spearheaded by the British, that the German critics took offense (Bergfelder 159). The sight of the Wallace villains escaping prosecution by biting on cyanide capsules adds to the overall effect of a collective exorcism; with the happy ending driving home the point that “the inheritance could now be accepted, as it has been cleansed through the death of the villains” (Seeßlen 1981, 216). What is present as subtext in these films would later be spelled out accordingly in the spoofs: the two *Wixxer* parodies of the early 2000s have actor Christoph Maria Herbst do a fully-fledged Hitler impression in the role of the butler. He works out to the soundtrack of David Hasselhoff’s “Looking for Freedom”, proposes “to act as *Führer*” when offering guided tours through the castle, and dismisses the story outcome: “I have zero tolerance for villains committing suicide just because their world-conquering schemes have failed.”

In the Rialto films, the German past is most obviously present in the characters played by Klaus Kinski. Frequently, Kinski appears as a deranged character who is easily manipulated and controlled by the criminal mastermind to commit murders, though his pathological state of mind makes him half-culprit, half-villain. His last words in *Die toten Augen von London* (*The Dark Eyes of London*, 1961) are quite revealing in that respect, as Kinski begs in vain for his life: “Who are you? What do you want from me? I’ve just done what was asked of me. I know nothing, really! I know nothing!” (my translation) In these words, Kinski’s biographer Christian David detects unmistakable echoes of the characteristic self-proclaimed German ignorance after the end of the war (David 137), when collective whitewashing attempts were part of everyday normalization – tellingly, *Die toten Augen von London* premiered two weeks before the start of the Eichmann trial.¹⁰

The continuity with the German past was also driven home by the co-presence of several generations of German acting nobility, as well as of acting styles that harked back all the way to the silent era.¹¹ Stars like Lil Dagover and Fritz Rasp had already worked with Friedrich Murnau and Fritz Lang; some had appeared in the Weimar Wallace films, which would also serve as reference points for the Rialto series (Kronshage 390); many of them had made a career in Nazi Germany, which had not barred them from returning to their profession in the 1950s. The fact that there were just as many “veterans from Weimar and Nazi cinema” *behind* the camera adds to the overall impression of what Tim Bergfelder calls the series’ “skewed temporality”, a form of “progressive nostalgia that bracketed the white spot of an absent present and recent past” (Bergfelder 150 and 167).¹²

Such a reading could also be applied to *Zimmer 13*, not just because its screenwriter, Will Tremper, gained some notoriety throughout the 1990s as a reactionary pundit who accused Steven Spielberg of having exaggerated the atrocities of genocide in *Schindler’s List* (1993). *Zimmer 13* revolves around Sir Robert Marney, a respectable representative of the upper-class, whose guilty secrets catch up with him after twenty years. Needless to say, this setup would have carried quite a different resonance for German cinemagoers of the year 1964 than for Wallace’s readers, particularly if the viewers recognised Walter Rilla in the role of Sir Robert. Rilla, an eminent theatre actor of the Weimar Republic and married to a Jewish woman, had fled Germany for England in 1934, and only returned in the late 1950s, having become a British citizen by then. His son Wolf started a directing career in England and made one of the most quintessentially English horror films: *Village of the Damned* (1960), a film that can be read as an allegory of fascism and the self-proclaimed Aryan master race. But in spite of these historical dimensions, which carried a particular resonance for German audiences, the Wallace films need to be viewed in a wider international context, and with a particular focus on their transcultural qualities.

Linda Hutcheon has argued that *any* form of resetting or recontextualisation of sources constitutes a form of transculturation (Hutcheon 146), but it goes much deeper than that, really. The Edgar Wallace films became possible in an environment of mutual exchange, where territorially bound notions of culture were only important on the levels of production and release, but not on the levels of creating and meaning-making. Instead of exclusively looking back to the German past, the films rather favoured a model of cultural hybridity,

which is a key characteristic of transculturality (see Bond/Rapson). In order to fully grasp the multitude of influences that shaped the Edgar Wallace films – and comparable franchises of the time, including the briefly revived Fu Manchu cycle –, it is not enough to just frame them in arguments of national specificity; arguments which historical and sociological approaches to the films have tended to foreground. Inevitably, this meant that they were also viewed as almost exclusively German affairs in terms of style and aesthetics, and thus as belated, somewhat ‘sleazy’ continuations of the Weimar legacy. As I will show in my reading of *Zimmer 13*, a thoroughly transcultural view of the Wallace series must necessarily reveal a much greater variety of influences (mainly, but not exclusively, European ones), and thus point towards the hybrid status of the Wallace films.

A Look inside Room 13

While *Zimmer 13* has found little love among fans of the Wallace series and hardly any critical attention, it is usually mentioned in the Wallace encyclopaedias as one of the most stellar examples of Rialto’s speed and efficiency (see Kramp 114-119). Having already commissioned a script that was closer to the source novel, *Room 13* (1923), producer Wendlandt decided to radically rewrite the project after news broke that Bruce Reynolds and his gang had stolen nearly three million pounds from a Royal Mail train in August, 1963. The incident received much media coverage at the time and soon went down in the annals of crime as ‘The Great Train Robbery’.¹³ Wendlandt sensed a business opportunity and hired a new screenwriter, Will Tremper (working under the pseudonym Quentin Philips), to write the train robbery into the existing outline for *Zimmer 13*. Tremper turned Wallace’s gang of counterfeiters into a fictionalised version of Reynolds’s men, and he needed only a few weeks to deliver a new script. The film went straight into production and was ready for release in February of the following year – a mere six months after the robbery. This degree of topicality meant that the film stood a chance in foreign markets where the Wallace cycle was not an established brand; in France, *Zimmer 13* was released as *L’attaque du fourgon postal*. In Germany, however, the film failed to match the box-office numbers of the previous films, mainly because its second plot strand went for more graphic horror and erotic content than previous Wallace films. The film got an 18 rating instead of the usual 16, which meant that teenagers had to seek their thrills elsewhere.¹⁴

In spite of the radical reshaping of Wallace's outline and the addition of a serial-killer plot, *Zimmer 13* retains more elements of its source novel than later Rialto efforts. The book is about a respectable businessman named Peter Kane whose past catches up with him when the gangster Emanuel Legge hatches a revenge plot against him – Kane used to be one of Legge's associates and 'squeaked on him', putting him behind bars for fifteen years. In retaliation, Legge has his son Jeffrey marry and later abduct Kane's daughter, Marney, so that the Kanes become entangled in the Legges' money-forging scheme and getaway plans. It is only through the involvement of Johnny Gray, a friend of the Kanes who has just been released from prison (and who is subsequently revealed to be a detective), that Marney can be freed from her captors.¹⁵ The Rialto adaptation of *Zimmer 13* retains the essential quartet of characters, but it fuses the two Legges into one man and also redefines the terms of Kane's debt to Legge so that the gangster plot can intersect with the killings. In the film, Legge does not seek revenge against his former ally; he used to be a lover of the latter's wife and blackmails him into aiding and abetting him. This constellation provides the link to the serial-killer plot and to the character of Marney Kane, renamed Denise Marney for the film: having watched her mother commit suicide over Legge's threats as a child, Denise has been driven into lunacy and is eventually revealed to be the razor-wielding killer of women.

As the brief synopsis makes clear, the psychology of the film is rather crude, particularly because it never becomes clear what exactly triggers Denise's murderous rage. Occasionally, it seems to be blind hatred of all women – a motif that the Rialto films would increasingly turn to in subsequent years to justify their voyeuristic 'college girl murder' plots –, whereas in one case, her madness resembles that of Norman Bates in that both are triggered by seductive displays of female sexuality. At the heart of the film's serial-killer plot is the kind of backstory wound that will later resurface in classic *gialli* like *Profondo Rosso* (*Deep Red*, 1975), where childhood trauma prefigures homicidal rage. In fact, if it weren't for the black-and-white cinematography, it would be easy to mistake the beginning of *Zimmer 13* for a typical *giallo* scene: The first shot shows two hands, clad in black gloves, fiddling nervously with a razor; all of the elements which are present here (see Figure 3) – the gloves, the weapon, the point-of-view of the killer, the female assassin – will soon become *giallo* staples, to the extent that Dario Argento's *L'uccello dalle piume di cristallo* (*The Bird with the Crystal Plumage*, 1970) was released as 'The Black Glove Mystery' (*Das Geheimnis der schwarzen Handschuhe*) in Germany, and marketed as part of Brauner's Bryan Edgar Wallace cycle.



Figure 3: The beginning of *Zimmer 13* evokes conventions of the *giallo*.

The razor-wielding maniac and the childhood trauma of the female lead were bleak subject matter for a 1960s Edgar Wallace film, and the final-act revelation that Karin Dor – the series’ most iconic and popular damsel-in-distress – was the killer certainly alienated some audience members.¹⁶ No other Wallace film of the period negates the series’ customary “erotic mythology” (Seeßlen 1993, 26) this forcefully, nowhere else does the series treat the pathology of the mind with the same degree of empathy and melancholia.¹⁷ The final shot is not the usual Arthurian coda of the knight and his bride walking hand in hand towards the castle, the dragon having just been slain; it rather carries overtones of hardboiled cinema (yet another transnational foil that the Wallace films occasionally flirt with), as the detective drives off into the sunset, alone. It is also up to him to deliver the psychiatric expertise that clears up the case in the penultimate scene – a clear nod to *Psycho* (1960), where the climactic monologue of the doctor must provide the direly needed rationale to exorcise some of the preceding Jacobean horrors.

This is not the first time the German Wallace craze crossed paths with Alfred Hitchcock – Karel Lamač and Martin Frič had used footage from *Blackmail* (1929) for their adaptation of *The Squeaker* (*Der Zinker*, 1931) because they had no other London footage (Kronshage 384)¹⁸ –, nor is it *Zimmer 13*’s only intertextual link to Hitchcock. The scream of the very first

murder victim is absorbed by the shrill whistle of a passing train; the film thus clearly tips its hat to a similar moment in *The 39 Steps* (1935). Moreover, screenwriter Tremper makes a deliberate choice to rename the characters, so that Marney Kane of the novel becomes Denise Marney. It is possible that keeping Marney as the first name of the female protagonist would have flagged up another Hitchcock film about a psychologically disturbed young woman whose childhood trauma sets her on a criminal path. *Marnie* (1964) was shot at around the same time as *Zimmer 13*; and while the release of the former followed several months *after* that of the latter, Winston Graham's source novel had already been translated into German in 1963. In both films, the female protagonist's trauma is linked to her mother's promiscuity – Marnie's mother is a prostitute whose client the child had to kill in self-defense; Denise Marney's mother kills herself out of shame when her lover threatens to make their affair publically known. While these parallels could be coincidental, others are more deliberate and indicate that the Wallace crew knew their Hitchcock well. Like *Vertigo*'s (1958) Madeleine Elster before her, Denise falls under the spell of a portrait, the only difference being that in Hitchcock's much more layered film, the portrait-gazing turns out to have been staged for the sake of the detective (see Figure 4). The two scenes with Denise in front of her mother's portrait are a clear homage to *Vertigo* and might have helped put Dor, whose international profile grew steadily throughout the 1960s, on the radar of Hitchcock himself. She would later appear in his final spy thriller, *Topaz* (1969), where her death provides the only truly memorable scene.¹⁹ As the most obviously Hitchcockian title in the series, then, *Zimmer 13* should be vintage Vohrer, but it is, in fact, a Harald Reinl picture;²⁰ somewhat ironical but also strangely appropriate, given that Dor is thus being directed by her then-husband in this film.

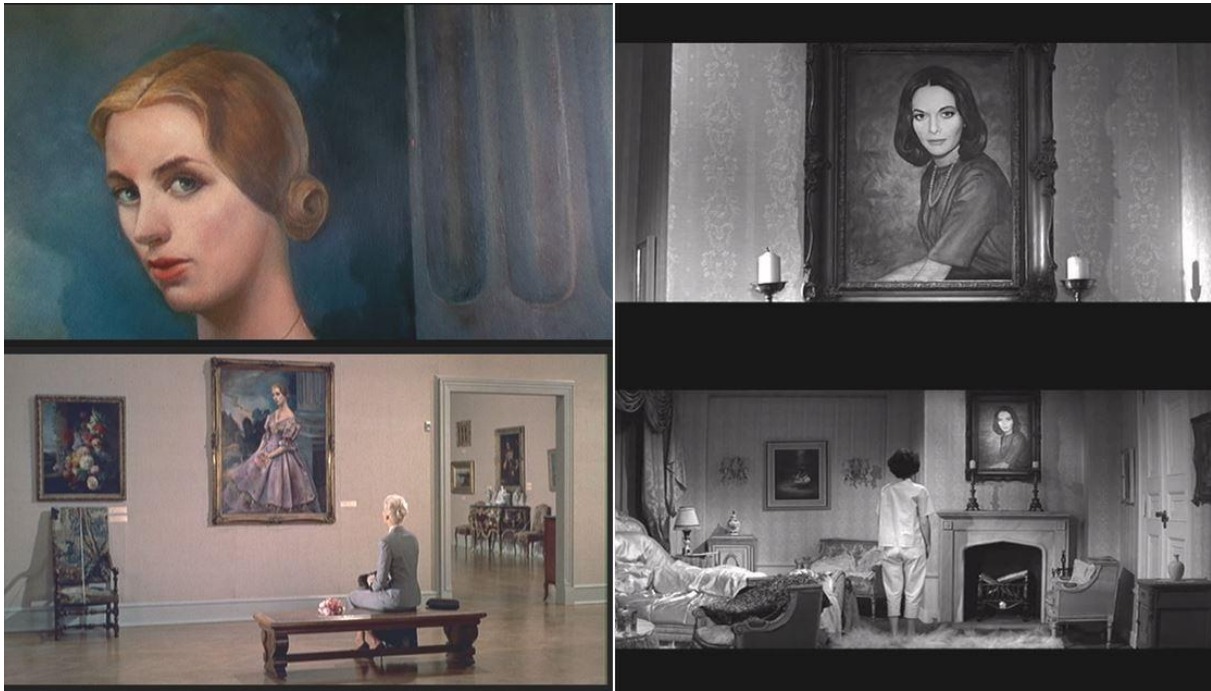


Figure 4: Spellbound by their female ancestors: Madeleine Elster (*Vertigo*) and Denise Marney (*Zimmer 13*).

Hitchcock is one of several transnational signifiers that permeate *Zimmer 13*; others featured more habitually in the series, which was eagerly (and, in some cases, rather desperately) trying to prove to its audience that it did not turn a blind eye to the international competition and to the flair of the exotic. At its crudest, this tendency gave way to various forms of exoticism, and it is no coincidence that 1960s German cinema was instrumental in reviving the Fu Manchu franchise. Christopher Lee, who played the title role in these films, also appeared in three Wallace productions: once as a Chinese detective, once as an American police captain, and once as a lion-tamer with a rather unspecific accent and nationality. Elsewhere, the Wallace cycle's eclectic transculturality became manifest in its inspired cinematography and in Peter Thomas's scores, which frequently fuse elements of jazz, electronic music, and Latin-American dance.

With its rather unique blending of a very topical *sujet* with both retrograde and current filmmaking devices, *Zimmer 13* goes far beyond the usual spatio-temporal ahistoricness of the Wallace series. Some of the trademark Rialto elements are firmly in place, including the country-house setting, but the film also flirts with much more risqué subject matter. Of course, token appearances of contemporary illicitness are scattered throughout the *whole* Wallace series: one of the suspects in *Der Zinker* (*The Squeaker*, 1963) leafs through a copy

of Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) before going to bed; the poster of *The Graduate* (1967) can be spotted during the credits of *Der Mann mit dem Glasaugen* ('The Man with the Glass-Eye', 1968). But *Zimmer 13* amps this up to an unprecedented degree – it revamps the Highlow Club, the sanctuary of the gangsters in Wallace's novel, into a strip joint; Eddi Arent's usual comic-relief character entertains a mannequin fetish (in the concluding scene, he mourns for a mutilated doll more than for any of the murder victims), and the film even cracks a rather crude joke at one of the victims, a murdered police-woman whom her colleagues fail to identify in her state of undress. The film also name-checks Christine Keeler and is the first one to develop Joachim Fuchsberger's trademark happy-go-lucky detective character into a playboy; yet another sign that *Zimmer 13* is already looking firmly ahead to the series' colour period, where time is even more strikingly out of joint, and where Gothic, labyrinthine mansions coexist alongside heroin addicts and sexual promiscuity.

The popular narrative of the Wallace cycle tends to suggest that these more exploitative elements only began to feature in the series when the foreign studios with whom Wendlandt went into alliance took over; in fact, the producer himself later disowned the last few Wallace films completely, claiming that the Italians took charge of the whole production process and merely used the Wallace label because it helped them sell the film in Germany (Wendlandt in conversation with Tses 179). Not that this was always successful – Massimo Dallamano's *Cosa avete fatto a Solange?* (*What Have You Done to Solange?*, 1972) is considered a minor classic of *giallo* cinema; in Germany, however, where the film was released as *Das Geheimnis der grünen Stecknadel* ('The Mystery of the Green Pin') and marketed as an adaptation of Wallace's *The Clue of the New Pin* (1926), it has never found much love, presumably because it presented too much of a departure from the traditional Wallace template.²¹

The idea that the Wallace series died as soon as it allowed itself to be absorbed by the Italians is widely supported among Wallace purists, who are highly critical of Rialto's Italian flirt. It implies that the *giallo*, being a far more powerful entity in popular culture of the early 1970s, simply swallowed the Wallace series in a manner akin to what Thomas Leitch has described as the 'colonisation' model of adaptation, effectively emptying the source of its distinct features and then "fill[ing it] with new meanings" (Leitch 109). This constellation can be read in either one of two ways: as the xenophobic story of how foreign copycats put a much-loved

domestic product out of business, or as the story of how the Wallace series managed to add a few years to its parasitical existence by attaching itself to blossoming cinematic trends. Tim Bergfelder, in noting how the Wallace soundtracks “liberally *plunder*[ed] any conceivable international musical style” (167, my emphasis), seems to go with the second interpretation, but this reading does not quite do justice to the overall nature of the transcultural back-and-forth that permeated European filmmaking of the period.

While it is certainly true that the later Wallace cycle latched on to the *gialli* to revitalise itself, there is a common genealogy here without which *Zimmer 13* would not exist. It would be far too simplistic to suggest that the Wallace films ‘lost their essence’ when they crossed paths with the *giallo*, or even to assume that the two can be separated into two pure-blooded archetypes that firmly belong to compartmentalized, national cinemas. If the Wallace brand, in the late 1960s, fed on the *gialli*, it could only do so on the condition that the original iteration of *giallo* had sprung from a variety of sources that also included Edgar Wallace (see Newman 142-143). The German translations of the Wallace novels which appeared in Goldmann’s ‘red series’ of the late 1920s came out at around the same time as Mondadori’s famous ‘yellow series’ in Italy, from which *giallo* cinema would later emerge (see Eynaud). Wallace’s stage play *The Man Who Changed His Name* (1928) had even been adapted into an Italian film called *Giallo* in 1934, and his creative DNA is all over the classic *gialli*, with their “deliriously convoluted plots featuring masked killers and elaborately staged murders” (Bergfelder 160).

Interestingly, though, none of the critical accounts that trace the Wallace phenomenon towards the genealogy of the *giallo* (including Tim Bergfelder’s book from which I have just quoted) include *Zimmer 13* in their efforts, because the film breaks with the established chronology. It is not my aim to posit that *Zimmer 13* is an overlooked forerunner of the genre which the Italians later emulated, but rather that the main ingredients of the *giallo* formula were not exclusive to Italian cinema, just as the German crime films of the period were informed by various transnational influences. Much of what tends to be included in scholarly summaries of *giallo* cinema’s key characteristics would also apply to the Wallace cycle: Michael Sevastakis characterises them as “low-budget whodunits” with “a flair for aesthetic ingenuity” (2); Ian Olney cites “the efforts of an amateur or professional detective to solve a chain of grisly, sexually charged murders” and the targeting of “beautiful young women” as

key plot elements, and argues that in *giallo*, “story often takes a backseat to style” (104); Kim Newman points to the Argento-inspired “plague of masked, black-gloved homicidal maniacs with twisted motivations and surprising identities” (255); the list of iconic *gialli* elements would also include Wallace trademarks like the inept police-force, dubious priests, and the killer’s point of view.

Zimmer 13 premiered just a month before Mario Bava’s *Sei donne per l’assassino* (*Blood and Black Lace*, 1964), a landmark *giallo* film that would have fit easily into the Wallace films of the colour period, with its masked killer, whodunit plot, and setting – a fashion house stocked with attractive young women, where the Rialto films preferred boarding houses.²² By the same token, some of Artur Brauner’s unapologetically sleazy Bryan Edgar Wallace films would not feel out of place with the *gialli* of the period, because they really went for the 18 rating that hurt *Zimmer 13*’s box-office chances. In his Wallace rip-offs, Brauner resurrected the Jack the Ripper motif (*Das Ungeheuer von London-City*/‘The Monster of London’, 1964), set a female assassin on a rape-revenge killing spree (*Das Phantom von Soho*/‘The Phantom of Soho’, 1964), and even dared to reveal the killer to be the schizophrenic hero of the film (*Der Henker von London*/*The Mad Executioners*, 1963). Subsequent Wallace films of the colour period would also provide the characteristic *giallo* look, nowhere more so than in *Der Mönch mit der Peitsche*, whose uninhibited colour palette looks ahead to films like *Suspiria* (1977) – the two films even share a cast member in Rudolf Schündler, an actor who rose to fame with his over-the-top caricatures of German authority figures and who came to a bit of international recognition when he appeared as the caretaker in *The Exorcist* (1973). One of the most memorable scenes of *Der Mönch mit der Peitsche* sees the titular homicidal monk, clad in a bright-red habit, chase after Grit Böttcher, who is wearing a flamboyantly yellow coat (see Figure 5); like in vintage Argento, the aesthetic quality of the set-pieces is perfectly untroubled by narrative cohesion.

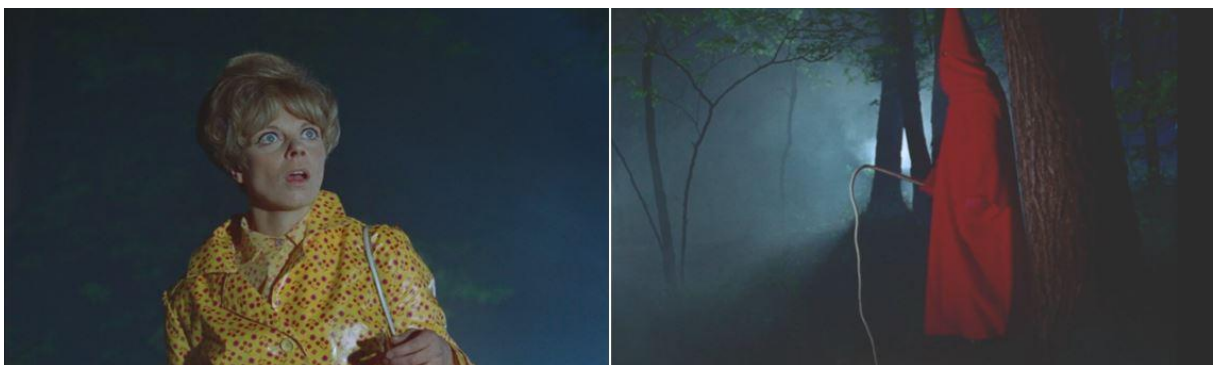


Fig. 5: Gothic Horror arrives in the Swinging Sixties (*Der Mönch mit der Peitsche*).

Outlook

Rialto's Edgar Wallace cycle is a rather unique phenomenon in the history of European cinema. It remained profitable for more than a decade by constantly adapting to cinematic trends and by constantly updating its list of cinematic ingredients, with a few base components remaining constant over that period. What started out as an attempt to cash in on the established Edgar Wallace brand and a renewed hunger for crime stories in post-war Germany thus turned into a transcultural franchise with rather flexible and extremely varied intertextual affiliations. Rialto's flexibility and willingness to move with the times and to look beyond the narrow confines of merely German traditions of filmmaking and of German 'Anglophilia' becomes manifest in the series' disparate spatio-temporal structure, where conventions of the sentimental and the Gothic tradition coexist alongside more topical, risqué subject matter. By the same token, the series' aesthetics are not just informed by expressionist filmmaking of the Weimar era, Gothic horror, Hitchcockian cinema; they also look ahead to and co-exist side by side with the Italian *giallo* cycle of the 1960s and 1970s, and they rehearse modes of production that would later become integral to German television. In fact, the Wallace cycle's similarities to the latter's efficiency and mode of production made it easy for the Wallace staff to continue their careers on the small screen once German cinema was in a crisis and could not keep up with the international competition anymore.²³

Given this background, it is not a surprise that the Wallace films are widely judged as hybrids,²⁴ as they contain elements of the police procedural, the whodunit, the horror film, and the psychological thriller. They are less frequently viewed as *adaptations*, even though the authorial brand of Edgar Wallace always featured so prominently in the marketing of the films and in the collective memory. In a rather refreshing way, the reception of the series has been largely free of any 'fidelity' criticism, at least with regard to their respective source novels. As the more controversial later films in the series testify, however, fidelity is invoked, after all, but in a more self-referential manner, the Wallace films having established their own template of what makes for 'a genuine Wallace'.

Their status as a transcultural success story is not just evidenced by the presence of *noir* and *giallo* elements, but also by the various acting styles at work here, and by the way in which some of its key players would go on to play important roles in European cinema. Klaus Kinski

was soon to bring his trademark ‘loose cannon’ persona to an endless list of international co-productions (including Spaghetti Westerns, costume dramas, and slasher films); Wallace performers Karin Dor, Gert Fröbe, and Ilse Steppat went on to play James Bond villains; and other regulars of the series like Harry Riebauer and Albert Lieven appeared as Nazis in international hits like *The Guns of Navarone* (1961) and *The Great Escape* (1963). This had the somewhat ironical yet strangely appropriate effect that performers who had built their career on films in which a deceptive brand of monolithic and stereotypical English culture was performed for the sake of German audiences found themselves performing *another* clichéd brand of national stereotypes – *über*-German villainy – for international spectators. The processes of adaptation, translation, and dubbing which are inherent in this process would require yet another detailed analysis to really assess their full implications, as the Babylonian pluralism of languages at work effectively negates the idea of clear-cut origins that are sometimes claimed as heuristic necessities in adaptation studies, and it also makes for numerous curiosities.²⁵ This touches not just upon still underexplored topics within the adaptation industry, but also upon what Cristina Della Coletta calls the “*agoraic domain*” of “the multicultural and multilingual marketplace” (2); yet another transcultural component that deserves its own chapter in the history of European cinema.

These industrial aspects are worth studying in more detail, particularly because the Wallace cycle’s production history has so far been explored in great detail by fans and devotees of the series, but not very much by adaptation scholars. Thus, a major part of their transcultural history is yet to be explored.

Endnotes

¹ The series had allegedly generated 140 million marks at the German box-office by the time of the last film’s release in 1972 (Schneider 379). Horst Wendlandt himself suggests, however, that those numbers are way off, and that the Wallace films sold fewer tickets than is widely reported (Tses 203). Such a discrepancy is not unusual – there are conflicting numbers for many German films of the postwar era, as some statistics tend to include ticket sales in the GDR.

² One notable exception is Florian Pauer’s book (*Die Edgar-Wallace-Filme*, 1982), which does not only include the German adaptations and which clusters all the films around the plays and novels that they were based on.

³ Throughout this article, I will provide translations of the film titles in inverted commas. In those cases where the film was actually released in English-speaking countries and with an English title, I will provide this title in italics (usually, these titles are no literal translations of the German original).

⁴ Of course, there were more 1960s James Bond rip-offs in German cinema of the 1960s, for example the *Jerry Cotton* series and the *Kommissar X* films, but elements of the Bond films also found their way into the Wallace cycle, particularly in Joachim Fuchsberger's performances as a flirtatious, tongue-in-cheek detective.

⁵ As I am writing this (in December, 2019), eight of the 1960s Wallace films have just been made available to German Netflix subscribers.

⁶ Sascha Gerhards stresses the role that irony plays in the consumption and appreciation of the Wallace films. Crucially, Gerhards demonstrates that this effect is not just at work in retrospect, to enjoy the films in a 'so bad it's good' fashion, but that even contemporary audiences were sophisticated enough to identify the camp quality of the films (Gerhards 147).

⁷ Tim Bergfelder has chronicled the publishing history of Wallace in Germany in more detail. He also highlights that the rights to the Wallace novels were cheap to acquire for German producers in the 1950s, because the books had largely fallen out of favour with British readers after the war (see Bergfelder 147-149).

⁸ Seven of those films were part of the regular Rialto series; two were made by rival producers but employed several of the series' regular cast members.

⁹ Georg Seeßlen also reads the gendered subtexts of the Wallace films as comments on the German marriage market of the 1950s, where men were scarce and young women were actively chasing husbands (Seeßlen 1993, 26).

¹⁰ *Die blaue Hand* paraphrases this little monologue in the scene when Dr. Mangrove (Carl Lange) is interviewed by the police: "What do you want from me? I just followed orders. [...] I just did as I was told." (my translation)

¹¹ Tim Bergfelder credits Kinski with bringing a "Weimar performance style in[to] postwar German cinema", thus embodying "the otherwise repressed legacy of Peter Lorre's child killer, Conrad Veidt's somnambulist, and Haarmann's real-life vampire" (Bergfelder 156).

¹² Georg Seeßlen characterises the series' trademark aesthetics as a compromise between television and cinema aesthetics, and as a bizarre blend of retrograde and contemporary elements (1981, 209).

¹³ Several Wallace alumni would later appear in *Die Gentlemen bitten zur Kasse* ('The Gentlemen come to collect', 1966), a three-part miniseries based on the train robbery.

¹⁴ Tobias Hohmann also cites the lack of a convincing psychology in the resolution of the crime as a reason for the film's unusual rating (Hohmann 348). *German Grusel* (2011), a documentary about the cultural impact of the Wallace films, intercuts material from a contemporary newsreel about the cinema's alleged responsibility for the moral deterioration of young Germans with a murder scene from *Zimmer 13*.

¹⁵ Moreover, *Room 13* is one of several novels in which Wallace uses the character of Mr. Reeder, his most iconic detective character. However, the Reeder character in *Room 13* departs considerably from his other appearances, and the last-page revelation that Johnny Gray is just an alias of Reeder makes little sense, as Wallace favours the impact of the twist over any sense of continuity.

¹⁶ Karin Dor reports that after the film's release, she received many protest letters from fans, begging her to never play a character like this again (Dor in conversation with Tses 208). Such twist endings were possible because Rialto often employed actors in similar roles, so that it became easy to subvert expectations by having the actors play *against* their well-established personas. Eddi Arent, the series' most reliable funny man, played villains in his last four Wallace appearances.

¹⁷ The realm of madness was usually the exclusive domain of Klaus Kinski's deranged performances, many of which transgress into outright horror (David 114).

¹⁸ *Der Zinker* was produced by Czech actress Anny Ondra, who had played the lead in *Blackmail* but who had no career prospects in England after the invention of sound film. According to Eike Kronshage, Ondra "must, in all likelihood, be credited with the idea of producing crime films in the early 1930s" (Kronshage 379).

¹⁹ Karin Dor's death scene in *Topaz*, which concludes with her dress seeming to emanate from her like a pool of blood, is available on YouTube (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dkAv65bo8a8>).

²⁰ Most critics argue that Vohrer was the more experimental director of the two, with no qualms to dabble in straightforward horror. Jess Franco admired Vohrer because he was "committed to making B movies" instead of "trying so very hard to make A movies", like Reinl (qtd. in Hohmann 493, my translation).

²¹ Arrow's 2015 BluRay release of *Cosa avete fatto a Solange?* includes a very frank interview with Wallace regular Karin Baal, who appears in the film as the wife of the main

suspect. Her memory of the shoot is indicative of the muted German reception: not only does she recount the shoot as deeply exploitative and voyeuristic, she also accuses the Italian director and crew of being highly unprofessional.

²² The intertextual connection is just as pronounced in Bava's earlier *La ragazza che sapeva troppo* (*The Girl Who Knew Too Much*, 1962). Michael Sevastakis reads this film in terms of its indebtedness to classic tropes of the Gothic novel and of detective fiction, including the works of Edgar Wallace (see Sevastakis 5-25).

²³ Again, it is hard to pinpoint what came first here. Director Jürgen Roland, who helmed two of Rialto's first Edgar Wallace adaptations, had acted as the showrunner of long-running police procedural *Stahlnetz* (1958-1968) on West-German television, and brought some of his trademark style to the films. The style of *Stahlnetz*, in turn, was informed by NBC's *Dragnet* (1951-1959).

²⁴ Norbert Grob discusses the Wallace films as genre hybrids, though strangely, he characterises *Zimmer 13* as a straightforward detective film (Grob 77).

²⁵ Actors rarely dubbed their own lines for the versions that were released in their native countries. [Synchronkartei](#), the biggest database of voice actors in Germany, lists more than a dozen different voice actors who dubbed Kinski between 1965 and 1975, the period he spent living and working in Italy.

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