

Edgar Wallace and the Criminal Spaces of London

In Quentin Tarantino's latest movie *Inglourious Basterds* (US, 2009), a couple of allied spies, Nazi soldiers and civilians decide to play a game that involves attaching name cards to one's forehead – a game known to be quite popular in Germany. As expected, this gives Tarantino the opportunity to nod his head to 1930s German cinema: Brigitte Helm of *Metropolis* is mentioned, Brigitte Horney who played in Erich Kästner's *Münchhausen* as well Georg Wilhelm Pabst, the influential Austrian director. While these names merely seem to show off Tarantino's nerdy knowledge of German cinema history, the following cards reveal a much deeper understanding of the German imaginary. From *King Kong*, a landmark production in the history of spectacular movies, the camera moves to the man who is credited for writing the script for *King Kong*: Edgar Wallace. For those who connect Wallace with the 1960s movie series featuring Klaus Kinski, Eddi Ahrendt, Joachim Fuchsberger and an array of other German TV-stars, or maybe even think of Bully Herbig's *Der Wixxer* (2004), this reference might seem anachronistic. However, Tarantino refers to a much older love affair of the German audience with the British thriller writer, a love affair that the Nazis were as critical about as they were unable to prevent it. Goldmann's translations of Wallace's books were as successful in 1920s and '30s Germany as the originals were in Britain. What Tarantino seems to grasp is the huge importance of Edgar Wallace in creating Germans' image of Britain, and, more precisely, London. The aim of the following text is to examine the topological space of London Edgar Wallace creates in his crime stories, and also the space that German filmmakers have created through their adaptations of Wallace's works to the screen. The following, therefore, is both a transcultural and a trans-medial analysis of the production of space.

The British Novels

Most of Wallace's crime novels were written during the interwar period and gained great popularity. Several scholars have suggested that in "1928, an astounding one-fourth of all the books manufactured in the UK (except for The Bible and school text books, obviously) were new Edgar Wallace stories or reprints by the prolific author" (Paul). In Germany, the success was of similar proportions; contemporary advertisements for translations of Wallace's novels boast about circulations of more than 1.5 million.

The question that interests me here is what kind of Britain is being presented in these novels that found (and still find) such a wide distribution among the German public. First of all, Britain, here, consists of Country Houses and London only; apart from a few investigative trips into the Home Counties, nothing else seems to matter. In the following, I will leave aside the locked rooms of remote mansions, although a space highly significant and functional for crime novels, but rather concentrate on those texts that feature real-life settings, specifically London. – The analysis is based on detailed readings of eight novels that are all firmly situated within London.¹

¹ These novels are: *The Daffodil Mystery* (1920), *The Green Archer* (1923), *The Strange Countess* (1925), *The Fellowship of the Frog* (1925), *The Door with the Seven Locks* (1926), *The Terrible People* (1926), *The Forger* (1927), and *When the Gangs Came to London* (1932);

What kind of London, then, is being presented in Wallace's novels? Most people who are asked to *imagine* an early 20th-century London riddled with crime, violence and horror are rather unanimous about where one would find such scenes: most minds will wander off on an imaginative journey visiting Jack the Ripper's foggy East End, the sites of Newgate and Old Bailey, or maybe Fagin's Rotherhite and Oliver Twist's Whitechapel. In this case, the imaginary topography of the reader seems to be quite in line with the sociographic knowledge of the period in question. From 1929 to 1931 the London School of Economics (LSE) conducted a *New Survey of London Life and Labour*, which followed in the footsteps of Charles Booth's pioneering survey of forty years earlier.² The study is based on interviews with 28,000 households and provides a series of maps giving details of how the economic and social conditions vary throughout the city. A colour code ranging from *black* for "criminals" through *blue* for "poor," *purple* for "unskilled," *pink* for "skilled" to red – like the Empire – for "middle class and wealthy" indicates the distribution of wealth and crime in London. As one can easily detect on this map, the more West you go, the more wealth you will find, the more East (and South) you venture, the more poor and criminal people you will meet. Such a map quite obviously invites a critical analysis of its representational distortions – I am more interested here, however, in how Wallace employed this public knowledge of the sociological make-up of London for his crime stories.

Edgar Wallace, the author, grew up in the London of poverty and crime: although born in Greenwich, he grew up with the family of a fish porter in Billingsgate, a ward east of the City of London, lying on the north bank of the Thames between London and Tower Bridge; it is known for its fish market and the low-life clientele it attracts (cf. Lane 3, 14-15). But whether it is *despite* or *because* of this, the criminals Wallace presents in his fictional works come from an altogether different area: the East we imagine and the East Wallace grew up in are almost completely absent from Wallace's fictional universe.

Every single crime in the examined texts – bar two minor crimes that happen up north in Holloway and down south in Lambeth – are being committed in West London. And this is also where the main criminals live, where the victims live and where the heroes have their homes (see fig. 1). This is also where the action takes place: if we follow detective Larry Holt on his investigations in *The Dark Eyes of London*, we see that he leaves central West London only to visit a graveyard in Kent and a church up in Highgate; a similar pattern emerges when we follow Jack Tarling, who only leaves London twice, on his investigations into the *Daffodil Mystery* – although here the hero has to visit an accountant near Bishopsgate once (see fig. 2). All in all, the situation appears to be rather obvious: the East, imaginatively and sociographically connected with crime, does not play any significant role in Wallace's texts; instead, the wealthy West is the preferred

the texts were selected from over one hundred novels published between 1918 and 1932, the year Wallace died. I am deeply indebted to Franziska Kutschker for her detailed readings of the texts and to Alexander Joachimsmeier for his invaluable help in the preparation of the maps accompanying this text. Both are/were research students in the DFG-funded research project 'Travelling Goods // Travelling Moods'.

2 Booth started planning the original survey in 1886, which culminated in the publication of the 17 volumes of: Charles Booth, *The Life and Labour of the People in London*. The LSE survey was published between 1929-1931 as: Hubert L. Smith, *New Survey of London Life and Labour*.

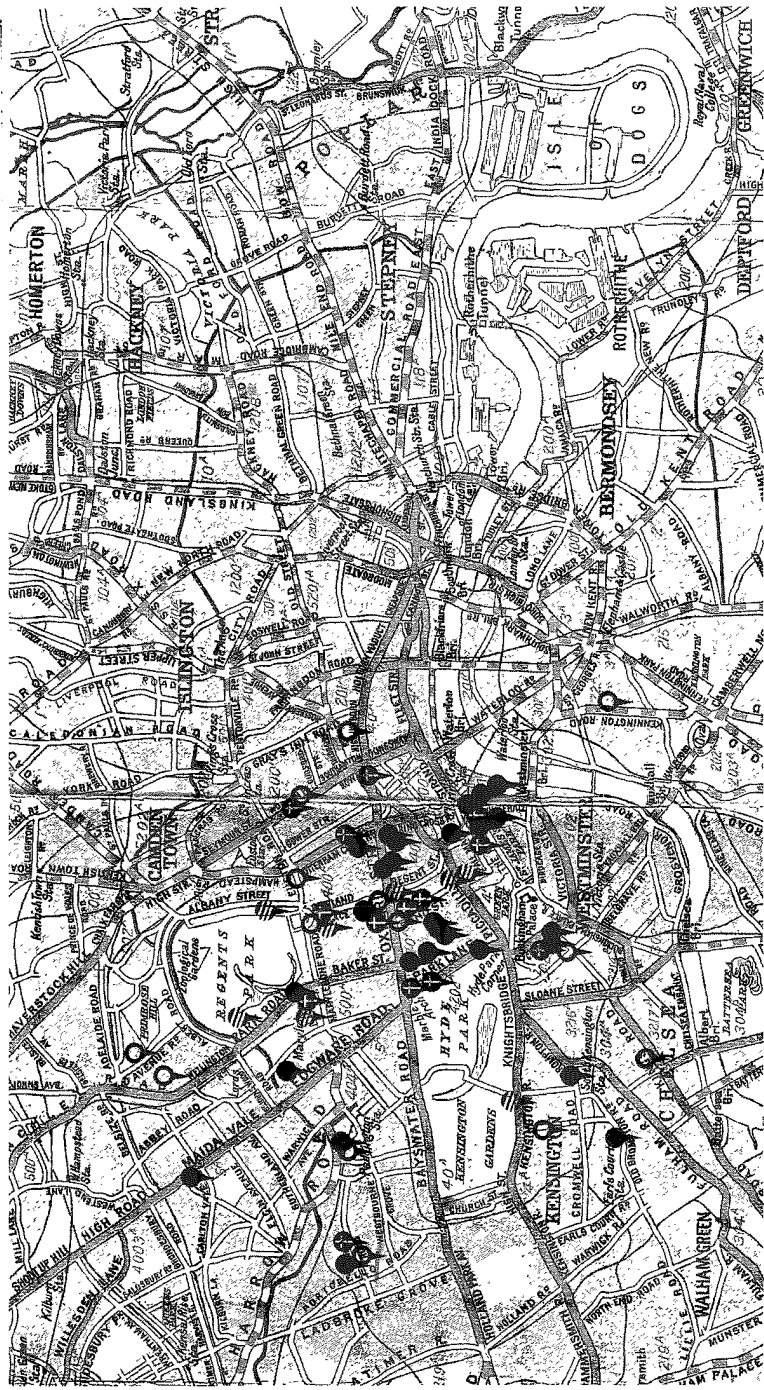


Fig. 1: Crimes (black), criminals (circle), victims (cross) and heroes (striped) in Wallace's novels

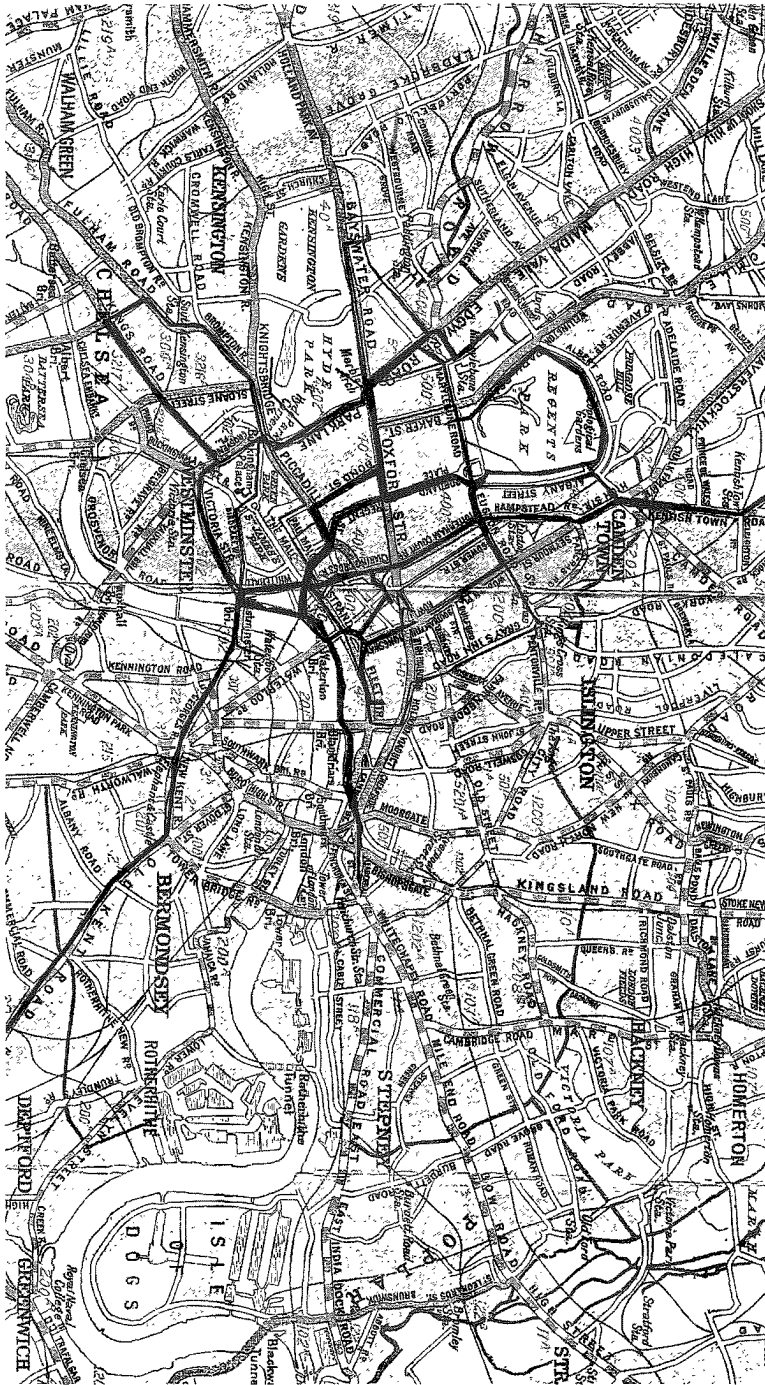


Fig. 2: Routes of investigation in *The Dark Eyes of London* and *The Daffodil Mystery*

setting for his crimes. The spatial practices of Wallace's protagonists, it seems, oppose the representational space of criminology. But why?

Although this might surprise some, Wallace, here, is a direct descendent of Arthur Conan Doyle. In his pioneer study, *An Atlas of the European Novel*, the literary historian Franco Moretti shows that Sherlock Holmes visits the East End "exactly once in fifty-six stories" (134). Moretti comes to the conclusion that "fictional crime" takes place "in the London of wealth," "real crime, in the London of poverty" (135). As it seems, popular fiction does not care a lot for real-life circumstances – a common allegation.

However, while the evidence is overwhelming, the motive for this diversion of the fictional from the factual seems less clear. What motivates Wallace to situate his fictional crimes in the West of London, where most readers would expect them to happen in the East? For one, Wallace, like Doyle, is neither interested in the petty crime of Fagin and the Artful Dodger nor in the prostitutes the Ripper kills: his criminals are either out to take over London, or even the whole world,³ or they are after huge sums of money, preferably taken from naïve heiresses. Ideologically, this is exactly that conservative emphasis on apparently endangered bourgeois property which so many earnest critics of crime novels from Ernst Bloch to Ernest Mandel have attacked; popular detective novels, they claim, evade the real reasons for crime, i. e. the poor social circumstances the victims of capitalism have to live under. Instead, crime is individualized; as soon as the detective has solved the riddle by the use of universal reason he can remove the rotten apple and save the barrel. Order is restored, property safe.

For Wallace, however, the topography of West London has an important narrative function, too: the world he indeed very accurately represents clearly influences the way he narrates his stories. Or rather, in order to tell the stories he wants to tell, Wallace has to create a space apart from the stereotypical representational space of criminology. According to Juri Lotman, an event, the basic component of a story, takes place if, and only if, a character crosses the limits of a semantic space (cf. Lotman 535). For Dickens, the transportation of a good soul like Oliver's into the immoral world of the East is enough to motivate his novel: the distance that has to be travelled to get out of this place, and the time this takes, marks the dimensions of Oliver's growth – just as the distance Kurtz travels from London to the *Heart of Darkness* signals the enormity of his moral demise. Wallace, however, is interested in interesting crimes first and foremost, and not in morality and character development. For him, a criminal act in the East End is not an event: it is a normality, it confirms what can be expected. Instead, Wallace situates crime in the underbelly of the respectable West. Doppelgängers, two-faced criminals and other ambiguous figures populate his stories: a respectable façade often hides a closet full of skeletons, literally. Wallace's characters are constantly under threat of crossing the border towards an altogether different semantic space: hidden trapdoors and tunnels directly lead from the comfortable West to the criminal spaces of London. Wallace's popular appeal, it appears, is founded on his ability to bring semantic spaces of maximum distinction into the most imaginable proximity.

In the *Dark Eyes of London*, for example, much of the action takes place at "Todd's Home for the Indigent Blind" in Lissom Lane, close to Edgware Road – safely

3 Here, Wallace's heroes are predecessors of Ian Fleming's James Bond.

in the West. However, if one has a closer look at the sociography of Wallace's West, as presented in the above-mentioned *New Survey*, the homogeneity of wealth becomes questionable: spread over most of this area one can find little pockets of darkness – around the stations, mostly, in Soho, but also in Bloomsbury and Marylebone. Smith's update of Booth's study even allows for composite colours: "Where the majority of inhabitants of a street belong to one class, but there is a substantial number who belong to the lowest or highest grade of the classification, black blue or red stripes as the case may be are imposed on the predominating colour" (see map references; vols, IV: maps I & VII: maps II). Here, high and low, good and bad, rich and poor even touch each other directly.

While there is no real Lissom Lane, neither in today's nor in 1920s London, it is safe to assume, from the directions Wallace gives, that he is referring to the area between Lisson Street and Lisson Grove, near Paddington. And this is exactly the kind of area Wallace employs for his plots: it is deep in the West, it is full of wealth, but there are dark and blue areas where criminals might lure in backyards and blind alleys. The device Wallace employs in *The Dark Eyes of London* is symptomatic: the home for the blind, run by a respected reverend and sponsored by a respected director of an insurance company, is connected, **underground**, to a deserted laundry that doubles as a **hide-out** for criminals. Such a combination of respectability and criminality is hard to find in the East. In the end, however, most two-faced criminals are unmasked by the plain talking, honest, well-off, but not rich middle-class investigator, more often than not a member of Scotland Yard, professionally neutral enough not to be stopped by any semantic thresholds.

For Wallace the criminals are amongst us – and he uses the complicated social topography of London to tell us about it and make sure we become frightened. Different to contemporary 'art'-novels by Evelyn Waugh, Virginia Woolf or other respected writers, Wallace does not create a psychography or even a phenomenology of London; Wallace simply names places and streets and thereby imports popular knowledge into his stories. His popular realism allows for a spectacularity that more refined forms of realism cannot deliver: while artistic realism aims for aesthetic coherence and fit, the reality Wallace insinuates places high and low, light and dark, good and bad in close proximity and dazzling, shrill contrast. His figures, rather than being rounded characters, embody these contrasts.

German Adaptations

After this analysis of the use of space in the novels Edgar Wallace wrote during the 1920s and 1930s, I will now examine what happens to this space when these novels are transformed into German, 1960s movies. In 1961, Rialto Film, the company that produced thirty-two Wallace films between 1959 and 1972, released *Das Geheimnis der gelben Narzissen*. Although the advertising refers directly to Wallace's novel (*The Daffodil Mystery*), the film's plot is only *very* loosely based on the book. However, what is more interesting is the fact that the film shows great fidelity when it comes to the representation of space; it is even more 'London' than the book, concentrating especially on the then infamous Soho, as the opening sequence of the film reveals, which plays only a minor role in the book. All throughout the film, authentic location shots from London's West are used. Indeed, the German Rialto Film cooperated with the English Omnia Pictures (Kramp 65) for the production of this film and together they produced a film that, at least in

its use of location shots, flirted with the style of British New Wave cinema, comparable maybe to 1960s UK-classics like *Never Let Go*. However, *Das Geheimnis der gelben Narzissen* failed with most critics, both in Germany and in the UK, where the same film, although with a different cast, was released simultaneously. I assume that in England the film failed, because it can neither compare to other films producing realism in the wake of the 1958 classic *Look Back in Anger*, nor to the thrillers Alfred Hitchcock was pouring out at the time: *Vertigo* is from 1958, *North by Northwest* from '59, *Psycho* from 1960, *The Birds* came out in 1963 and *Marnie* in '64. Wallace's plots do neither have the psychological depth to produce a thriller, nor the gritty setting to produce social realism.

However, in Germany the film did not fail because it lacked realism or suspense. In Germany the film failed because for the German critics this was not a 'Wallace'. What the German critics could not accept was the *style* of the film, the overall 'feel' of the production.⁴ The question that has to be answered, therefore, is what the accepted 1960s German version of Wallace looked like, and what kind of space these films produced. It is, that much becomes clear from the beginning, a British space, and more specifically a London space: the movie poster of *Die toten Augen von London* features Big Ben, Inspector Hold reads the *Times* and poses in-between a picture of the Queen and a map of London, he reveals that he lives in Hartford Avenue, and the Home for the Blind is in Blossom Lane. However, the image of two detectives meeting in Blossom Lane (fig. 3) gives away two important points: firstly, the places in London the film mentions are non-existent, they are not only fictionalised, but fictitious – Blossom Lane, other than the book's Lissom Lane cannot be placed on the map of London. *Die toten Augen von London* shows none of the realistic settings both the original novels and the British co-produced *Gelbe Narzissen* feature. Secondly, the image (fig. 3) reveals one of the reasons why this might be so. At close examination, one can detect that the street sign might be British, but the house number is probably not: to my knowledge, only the German digit '7' has a cross – and English street names usually do not feature hyphens.

All of Rialto's productions were indeed filmed in Germany, first in Hamburg, later in Berlin. The opening sequence of *Die toten Augen von London* reveals how they nonetheless managed to produce 'London': the presentation of a street sign saying "East Road," a car with a British license plate and a good fog machine are quite enough to create an image of London before the audience's eyes – regardless of the fact that what we actually see is a German car on a street in Hamburg, St. Pauli (Kramp 52). Most of the film is set either indoors or is clouded in fog; there are at least twelve instances where there is either fog or talk of fog – the city is hidden behind a veil of special effects. When outdoor-settings are shown, either generic buildings are depicted, or a quite peculiar trick is being employed. After showing a shot of Westminster and Big Ben, the film cuts to a scene where a British policeman fishes a corpse out of a river; while this river is in fact the Elbe – for the audience, it is the Thames.⁵ The sequence showing actual shots of London was stock footage bought by the production company and used in several films to create an impression of London; none of the scenes showing identifiable London landmarks features any of the actors – they never even set foot on British soil (Kramp 56).

4 On Anglo-German co-productions of Wallace films, see Bergfelder 138-171, esp. 157-159.

5 In film studies, this is sometimes called the Kuleshov effect.

Nonetheless, the audience travels to London. However, the London the filmmakers produce is basically without contours and completely non-specific and unrealistic: as a viewer, one never really knows where exactly a scene takes place. However, the London presented has *one* feature nevertheless: this London is vaguely *East* and by the river. Although the East Road shown in the opening sequence is nowhere near the river in reality, in the film it leads to the banks of the Thames; and although the Home for the Blind is near Paddington according to the novel, in the film it has an underground exit leading to the Thames. In the end, the film's producers leave it



Fig. 3: Screenshot from *Die toten Augen von London*

open, where *exactly* in London we are; nonetheless, the fictional space they create is both non-specific *and* suggestive enough to let the audience imagine it to be their favourite Jack the Ripper hunting ground. The films provide a mere surface, suggestive nonetheless, to attract imaginative investments by the recipient.

Space vs. Figure/Figurality

After this analysis of the production, or rather: the destruction of space in the above-mentioned cinema adaptations, one central question remains unanswered: if the novel relies on London's social topography to develop its plots, what can a film without any sense of place do instead? And if it is not realism that enthuses the fans, what is it instead? The short answer to these questions is the following: where the novels have *space*, the films have *figures*. According to the most influential structuralist theories of storytelling, *space* and *figure* seem to be the two main generators of plot: while for Lotman, spatial oppositions (high/low, close/far) engender plots, for Vladimir Propp, every story enfolds in-between the network of a number of stock-characters (hero, villain, helper, donor, etc.) (21).

While Wallace's novels, as I tried to show, rely heavily on social topography, the adaptations, however, miss the ordered ('sujet-free') sociographic space that Lotman identifies as the basis for the transgression that engenders a plot (539). Instead, the films inflate the already enormous figures of the novels. "Blind Jake" becomes an almost mythical personification of animalistic evil, Klaus Kinski, as always, dumb show-acts a madman, Eddie Ahrendt, as always, is the clown, the "Reverend" is the man with the mask, Karin Baal the innocent heroine and Joachim Fuchsberger the cool, infallible hero (see fig. 4). However, figures, in the

sense of non-realistic, larger-than-life characters, are not the only, and probably not even the most important supplementation the adaptation produces – although it is surely that part of the film which is responsible for the film’s fairytale appeal, and its consequent classification as low or popular culture.

There is a **figurality** that goes beyond character-figures. The film version of the *Toten Augen* highlights, much more than the failed adaptation of the *Gelben Narzissen*, what film critics from Rohmer to Bordwell have singled out as cinema’s most original contribution to the arts: *style* (Rohmer 3-13; cf. Bordwell 50f., 275).⁶ What in literature might be considered a part of the (*sujet* or) discourse in opposition to the (*fabula, histoire* or) story takes on a dimension of its own in the cinema: here, *design* – that is, the use of non-representational signs, signs that mean something without referring to a pre-existing signified⁷ – becomes more important than *mimesis*. While popular literature is dependent on a shared world, because it has neither the time nor the ability to laboriously create new ones, films can easily create such new worlds full of semantic differences: through shadows, folds and angles that no pen can describe. The signifiers, as Rohmer states, take on an ‘other’ meaning separated completely from the signified. And it is on this performative level that Rialto’s Wallace-films show their particular strength. In its discontinuous use of editing, its use of light and shadow, its special effects and camera angles the film partly continues the art of German Expressionism known from the pre-war past, and partly hints at the blockbuster future that we know from James Bond movies. The ‘feel’ that these cinematic techniques produce goes beyond any narratable story: weird camera angles, special effects, spectacular costumes and eccentric editing are combined with an unusual, non-classical score. Here, clearly, the medium is more important than the message; it, indeed, becomes the message.

The use of such non-representational signs surely contributes to cinema’s attractiveness, but it might also be the reason why cinema is unavailable to criticism based on purely representational ideals: there is little sense in criticising the films for distorting the reality of London when they create rather than re-present. References to symbols of London (fog, river, Scotland Yard, Big Ben) are an invitation to invest emotions rather than an attempt to represent London. It becomes impossible,

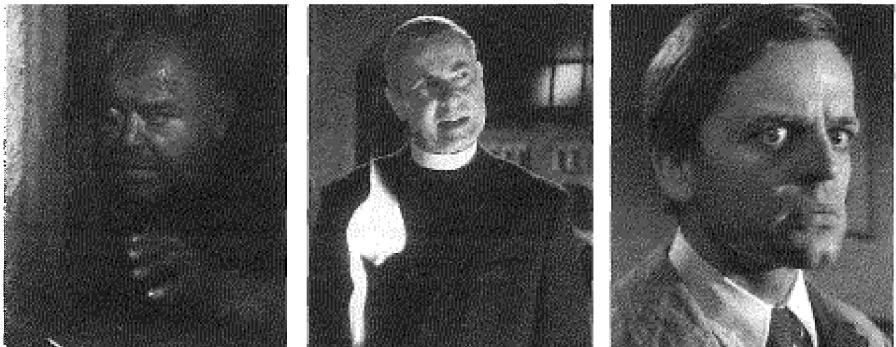


Fig. 4: Screenshots of ‘Blind Jake,’ the ‘Reverend’ and Klaus Kinski

- 6 The style of a film comprises all available cinematic techniques: mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing and sound, i.e. staging, acting style, decoration, lighting, costumes, camera movement, lens aperture, composition of the shot, montage, music, etc.
- 7 For the idea of non-representational signs in films, see Dyer 20-21.

indeed, to speak of a *London* space in these films in any meaningful way, and consequently, we reach the limits of my examination of the presentation of London in crime stories by Edgar Wallace and their cinematic adaptations. Where Wallace's novels transform the topography of the *New Survey* into a topology of crime, the cinematic adaptations seem to transcend any relation to a given space.⁸ Freed of its narrative shackles and the novelistic imperative to create a diegetic world, the films instead succeed in creating a firework of attractions. Whether this amounts to an escape from the real world, and whether this escape is a flight or a rescue, has to be discussed another time.

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8 For the difference between space, topography and topology, see Günzel 13-29.