

Transcultural German Studies /
Deutsch als Fremdsprache

Jahrbuch
für
Internationale Germanistik

Reihe A • Kongressberichte
Band 94



PETER LANG

Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Oxford • Wien

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Building Bridges / Brücken bauen

Herausgegeben von
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Bibliografische Information Der Deutschen Bibliothek

Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.ddb.de> abrufbar.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Transcultural German studies : building bridges = Deutsch als Fremdsprache :
Brücken bauen. - (Jahrbuch für internationale Germanistik.
Reihe A, Kongressberichte ; bd. 94)
1. Culture and globalization – Europe, German-speaking –
Congresses 2. Cross-cultural studies – Congresses
3. Germany – Civilization – Congresses
I. Martinson, Steven D., 1949- II. Schulz, Renate A.
943

ISBN-13: 9783039116270

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Transcultural German studies : building bridges = Deutsch als Fremdsprache : Brücken bauen /
herausgegeben von Steven D. Martinson und Renate A. Schulz.
p. cm. -- (Jahrbuch für internationale Germanistik. Reihe A, Kongressberichte ; v. 94)
Papers presented at an international conference on transcultural German studies
held Mar. 29-31, 2007, at the University of Arizona (Tucson).
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-3-03911-627-0 (alk. paper)
1. German philology--Study and teaching. 2. Cross-cultural studies--United States.
3. Cross-cultural studies--Germany. 4. Intercultural communication--United States.
5. Intercultural communication--Germany. I. Martinson, Steven D., 1949- II. Schulz, Renate A.
III. Title: Deutsch als Fremdsprache.
PF3068.U6T73 2008
430--dc22

2008030186

ISSN 0171-8320

ISBN 978-3-03911-627-0

© Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, Bern 2008
Hochfeldstrasse 32, Postfach 746, CH-3000 Bern 9
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die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

Printed in Germany

**Reception as a Transcultural Process:
Robert Arthur's *Three Investigators (Die drei ???)*
and Their German Success**

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Rachel Farebrother describes transculturality as a “concept applied to literature that crosses geographical, temporal, and cultural boundaries” (61). As a theoretical tool for the study of fiction, transculturality thus seems to be best suited for works whose postmodern protagonists and plots (or, at the very least, authors) stand and move freely between nations, cultures, and belief systems, blurring and even erasing the supposedly stable borders between them. Such works easily provide the “fluidity” (Farebrother 61), “hybridity,” and “multiplicity” (Lowe 24–44) that students of transculturality tend to look for; and it is no accident that the concept has been especially successful in Ethnic Studies, where books that fulfill the criteria mentioned above are the norm. However, limiting one’s scholarly attention to works with obvious transcultural characters, storylines, or authors could be counterproductive; and especially in Transcultural German Studies we would be in danger of missing out on highly illuminating phenomena. I will argue here that a decidedly unlikely candidate, the American youth books series *The Three Investigators* (translated as *Die drei ???* in Germany)—lacking multicultural protagonists and themes, and dismissed by Karen Coats as a modernist example of mystery fiction that, ignoring the “general shift in the status of knowledge under a postmodern paradigm,” does not blur any boundaries but moves “from not knowing to knowing, chaos to order, tension to homeostasis” (187)—, tells us far more about complex cultural transfer and interactions between the U.S. and Germany than the usual literary suspects.

What makes *The Three Investigators* a valuable object of study is its unique reception in Germany, which in turn has influenced its publishing history: Here we have a series conceived and begun in the U.S. that did quite poorly in its country of origin and was dropped, but has been hugely successful in Germany, where it has become a true cultural icon—inspiring everything from glowing homages in highbrow news programs to rap lyrics—, and where, even more remarkably, it has been continued by German writers to this day. After providing the necessary background information, I will first analyze the *Three Investigators* project’s inherent transcultural appeal. Transcending generic conventions and expectations of the U.S. readership, the books had to fail as an ‘American mystery fiction series.’ Precisely this short-

coming, however, allowed them to develop an identity as exciting, boundary-blurring hybrids in Germany, where they could flourish as mysteries from America that are not (fully) American, as adventures that are in sync with German culture but not completely German either. In a second step, I will explain how the German publisher, its translators, and later its new authors (who further complicated the phenomenon by creating the Karl-Mayesque scenario of Germans writing for Germans about America and Americans) took advantage of this transcultural appeal and enhanced it in a number of ways.

The Three Investigators, published in the U.S. between 1964 and 1987 by Random House in 43 volumes, were the brainchild of Robert Arthur (1909–1969), who wrote ten of the first eleven books of the series. Its other authors were Dennis Lynds, known to a wider public as the creator of “Dan Fortune,” who wrote thirteen books under the *nom de plume* “William Arden,” Mary Virginia (“M.V.”) Carey (fifteen books), Marc Brandel (three), and Kin Platt (“Nick West,” two). The heroes of the mysteries are Jupiter Jones, Pete Crenshaw, and Bob Andrews, three about fourteen-year-old amateur sleuths living in the fictitious small town of Rocky Beach near Los Angeles.¹ In each installment, they solve a complex case—often involving supposedly supernatural phenomena that turn out to have been elaborately faked—in such a professional manner that *The Private Eye Writers of America* have put them on their “Private Eyes” list, as the only underage fictional detectives to meet their criteria (Smith, par. 2). A hidden trailer in the junkyard owned by Jupiter’s aunt and uncle, who adopted him after his parents died in an accident, serves as the boys’ headquarters; they make ample use of discarded items to build gadgets for spying. The famous real-life director Alfred Hitchcock acts as their mentor in the series, introducing each episode (after Hitchcock’s death in 1980, the publishing house decided to replace the director with a made-up character called Hector Sebastian [Smolinske, par. 1–2]). Robert Arthur worked for Hitchcock as a story editor and script writer; the use of the director’s name as a marketing ploy for a project he had little to do with was nothing unusual in the 1960s: Arthur himself was responsible for the *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* TV show (E. Arthur and Bauer, “Startling Discoveries,” par. 13–15).

The first German translation under the name *Die drei ???* came out in 1968. Since 1979, the mysteries have also been published as *Hörspiele* (radio plays on audio cassettes, an entertainment form popular with German

1 Both the exact age of the investigators and the question of which real town, if any, could have served as the model for Rocky Beach (Topanga Beach and Ocean Park have been suggested) are subjects of intense debate among fans (“Where is Rocky Beach, California,” par. 2–3).

youth), parallel to the books. When Random House discontinued the series due to lackluster U.S. sales in the early 1990s, Franckh-Kosmos, the publisher of the German translation, secured the rights (Handschuh, par. 6–7; Towne, par. 2–3; „Die drei ??? und ihre Geschichte“, par. 18–20). Since 1993, German-language writers, most notably Brigitte Johanna Henkel-Waidhofer, „Ben Nevis“, André Minninger, André Marx, and Marco Sonnleitner, have been creating new adventures of the Rocky Beach detectives in German. All in all, including the original American ones, 134 *drei ???* titles are available in the country today (Köhler, par. 1).²

The publishing history already hints at the substantial differences as far as the reception of the series in America and Germany is concerned. The success in Germany has been nothing short of sensational. By 2001, more than 11 million *Three Investigators* books had been sold (David 40); today the number is probably closer to 15 million. The *Hörspiele* have found 27 million buyers so far; some episodes were purchased more than 600,000 times. Interestingly, half of the current listeners and readers are female, and three quarters are between 20 and 35 years old—the old fans who grew up with the series in the 1980s (Sony BMG, par. 5–7).

Mere numbers, however, fail to convey the true force of the impact that *Die drei ???* have had on German culture and society. Not only are they extremely well known, it is also considered a sign of timeless sophistication as well as cutting-edge hipness to proclaim oneself a fan. Moses P., a rapper-turned-producer with unrivalled ‘street credibility,’ is vocal about his love for the series (David 40). The three members of Fettes Brot, a highly successful hip-hop project, have recorded a *drei ???*-themed album—1998’s *Fettes Brot lässt grüßen*—and taken part in the episode *Die drei ??? im Bann des Voodoo*, rapping in German on the corresponding CD or tape. Dozens of German websites are exclusively devoted to the three detectives, some of them being downright magisterial, with such scope, research, and attention to detail that they rival scholarly publications (this is one of the reasons why this article relies heavily on online sources). Well-known DJs use the sites as platforms to present their numerous *drei ???* tribute tracks („Musik-Archiv“). New bands are named after episodes; the latest example is a

- 2 Currently, the respective publishers of the books and the *Hörspiele* are engaged in a fierce, complex, and increasingly surreal court battle for the rights to the series. For the first time since the radio plays started, the two teams, which used to work closely together, have completely split, with some of the writers mentioned above now working for the radio play side, which calls its competing product „DiE DR3i“ (rocky-beach.com documents the events, with regular updates, in its „Die drei ??? vs. DiE DR3i“ section). Altogether there are 125 mysteries available on audio cassettes, or, now, CDs („Die Hörspiele“).

Cologne outfit called, like mystery no. 3, *Karpatenhund*.³ The *Hörspiel* voices of the sleuths, now in their forties and balding, tour the country as celebrities; and the ‚Wuppertaler Vollplaybacktheater‘ makes a fortune by simply playing the tapes while thespians on stage re-enact selected adventures, moving their lips in silence (Schmidt 66–74). On October 2nd, 2004, the series received what author André Marx has called its „Heiligsprechung“ („Interview mit André Marx“, par. 96): an homage by the no-nonsense, highbrow TV news program *Tagesthemen*, arguably the gold standard of German television. Currently a movie is in the making, with American actors, an American screenplay, and Robert Arthur’s daughter Elizabeth as a consultant, but conceived, directed, produced, and funded by German individuals and companies, with Germans as the primary target audience (“The Three Investigators and the Secret of Skeleton Island,” par. 1).

To call the success of the *Three Investigators* in the U.S., their homeland, lukewarm by comparison would be almost a euphemism. So small is the mark the series has left here that it is even hard to obtain any concrete sales figures. Random House itself, which re-issued a few of the old titles in the late nineties—most are out of print today, though—, merely states that the tales “have sold over five million copies worldwide” (par. 2). Considered that in Germany alone the number is more than twice that amount, this announcement does not only suggest that there have been far fewer readers in the U.S., but also that the series’ lack of appeal gave it such a low priority for the publisher that the latter did not even deem it necessary to get its figures straight in this case. Robert Arthur, who earned a combined US\$ 16,000 from the novels he wrote, is largely forgotten today. U.S. academia completely ignores him; Elizabeth Arthur notes that the University of Michigan, which inherited his literary estate, has treated him as little more than a convenient source of income: “The sad truth of the matter is that even after Michigan started getting quite sizable biannual checks from Random House, it showed no interest whatever in managing my father’s literary legacy, providing information to his fans, or even setting up a Robert Arthur writing scholarship. It simply took the checks out of the envelopes and cashed them” (“Interview with Elizabeth Arthur,” par. 64–80). Apart from Karen Coats’ aforementioned rather unflattering brief remarks, the only English-language print sources that mention Arthur are usually encyclopedias, catalogues, and other reference books. They, in turn, tend to contain a lot of false information: There are claims that “Robert Arthur” is a pseudonym of Ray Bradbury (E. Arthur and Bauer, “Startling Discoveries,” par. 1); most often, however, he is confused with Robert Arthur Feder, a movie producer and friend of

3 The number refers to the order of the audio plays. Within the book series, *Karpatenhund* is no. 23.

Hitchcock's, for instance in James D. Keeline's entry in the *St. James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* (par. 2),⁴ which might well be the most extensive print article on *The Three Investigators* in English. To be fair, there are extremely devoted fans in and impressive fansites from America, but in contrast to Germany they do not constitute a mass phenomenon. Tellingly, the websites often rely on and recycle German sources. The starting page of The Three Investigators U.S. Editions Collector Site (www.threeinvestigatorsbooks.com), for example, links to the in-depth interview with Elizabeth Arthur from rocky-beach.com.

All this of course leads to the question of what made (and still makes) the mystery series so attractive to Germans, and relatively unappealing to Americans. One could assume that the main reason for the German success might be the country's fascination with California. A closer look, however, reveals that there is very little specifically 'west coast' about the books (the very first episode is set in a gothic castle). Motifs, themes, and settings are often borrowed from European models. *The Mystery of the Deadly Double* (no. 28) has a doppelgänger as its central issue, *The Magic Circle* (no. 27) deals with occultism. In *The Silver Spider* (no. 8), the three boys travel to a fictitious European nation called "Varania." *The Trail of Terror* (no. 39) even conforms to a European genre: Essentially it is a picaresque novel, with Bennington Peck, Pete's grandfather, as the rogue whose pranks and quirks keep the boys on constant alert during their road trip from coast to coast. Typical Southern California features one could expect to find, like beaches and good weather, do not play any role in the books, and the *unbegrenzten Möglichkeiten* Germans associate with Greater Los Angeles as an extreme, deranged but glamorous synecdoche for the U.S. as a whole are notably absent from the lives of Jupiter, Pete, and Bob: They cannot drive, have financial constraints, and are subject to the whims and work assignments of Jupiter's bossy Aunt Mathilda.

So the appeal of *The Three Investigators* does not lie in a capability to convey a familiar, fixed picture of America that can be matched to dreams and preconceived notions. On the contrary, what is crucial about the books are precisely those features that do not easily conform to conventional conceptions of American culture, that transcend such conceptions and allow (or force) international recipients to negotiate preconceived ideas about U.S. culture with the U.S. culture they find in the series, and with their home culture. In short, it is the transcultural features that are of central importance.

Since the complex negotiation process is not necessarily attractive, it does not explain yet why the three detectives are so successful in Germany.

4 I quote Keeline from the online version of his article, which is identical in content to the print version in Pendergast and Pendergast (eds.).

What it does explain, though, is why they failed in the United States: These transcultural books simply do not work as homegrown, wholesome ‘American mystery fiction,’ as for example *Nancy Drew* or *The Hardy Boys* did. They violate too many U.S. cultural values and expectations towards literature to have any mainstream appeal.

If one combines sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset’s seminal work on the American value system with the findings by literary critics Richard Chase and Leslie Fiedler regarding typical protagonists in American fiction, one gets a sensible basic idea of what U.S. readers look for in literature. Lipset’s “American Creed” contains liberalism, individualism, egalitarianism, populism, and laissez-faire, which together imply a certain disdain for elitist intellectualism and a willingness to break rules (19). Quite in accord with this, Chase’s quintessential American protagonist is the “intense and driven loner” (Hume 281), a troubled but brave individualist, an outsider-rebel with little respect for authority, a man or woman of action who does what he or she has to do with single-minded determination (Chase 105–113).⁵ Pointing out how many characters in American classics are running away from something, Fiedler illustrates that the “doing what one has to do” part often corresponds with a neglect of responsibilities, family ties, and relationships (338–341).⁶ American heroes from all ages and genres show many of these individualist, anti-authoritarian, and driven traits, from the irreverent runaway Huck Finn and the enigmatic, lonely rebel Bartleby to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, who not only leaves but kills her boyfriend in order to save the world, *24*’s Jack Bauer, who resorts to illegal torture because he needs to get a job done, and the various *CSI* characters whose private lives are a mess due to their obsessive devotion to their forensic calling.

The Three Investigators, however, could not be more different. First of all, they always work together, they are not individualist at all. To borrow a business buzzword, they ‘create synergy’ by perfecting teamwork, combining Jupiter’s powers of deduction with Pete’s gift of sympathetic understanding and Bob’s ability to do thorough research (they go as far as specifying areas of responsibility on their ever-present business cards). When they split, it is usually a bad sign. Secondly, they show a pronounced respect for authority and do not like to break rules. Chief Reynolds from the Rocky Beach

- 5 Chase stresses the “purely personal code of conduct” of for instance Jay Gatsby and Natty Bumppo (165); furthermore, the fact that *Moby Dick* shows “the alienation from life that results from an excessive or neurotic self-dependence” allies the book “intimately with the work of other American writers” (101).
- 6 Fiedler calls the “myth of Rip [Van Winkle]” a “fundamental American archetype” (341) and claims that American writers abhor “compromise with society, an acceptance of responsibility and drudgery and dullness” (338).

Police is not the competition but a partner with whom they share information and whom they call when a case is about to be closed or getting too dangerous. Even when they are absorbed in particularly exciting detective work, the boys remember what is proper: "We'd better tell Aunt Mathilda we'll be late for supper" (R. Arthur, *Terror Castle* 57). They value and obey their families, whose errands frequently interfere with and delay their sleuthing:

"Jupiter!" Mathilda Jones's voice rang out in the California sunshine. "Stack those iron rods against the fence. Peter! Help Jupiter carry the rods. And you, Bob, are you getting a tally of everything?"

It was a busy day at The Jones Salvage Yard. Sitting on an overturned bathtub, busy tallying everything, Bob Andrews wondered if they ever would be able to get into Headquarters for a meeting. (79)

Only once does Jupiter deceive his adoptive parents, in the later German-only episode *Das leere Grab*; and this is portrayed as a disgraceful act: When he, seriously distraught by the news that his real parents might still be alive, books a flight to Venezuela and forges the signatures of Aunt Mathilda and Uncle Titus for school, Pete and Bob tell Jupiter off in no uncertain terms, leaving no doubt that his comparatively minor misdeed is completely unacceptable.⁷

The Three Investigators are no rebels; the Huck Finn type in the books is Skinny Norris, their brash rival and arch-enemy whose willingness to use lies, deception, trickery, and sabotage to solve cases is very much hated. To the three amateur detectives, the end does not always justify the means, and solving the case is not the most important thing in the world. They are not particularly driven. A typical example can be found in *The Stuttering Parrot (Der Super-Papagei)*, where they interrupt and leave their investigation in a crucial phase as soon as they hear someone who needs assistance in an unrelated matter: „Da hat jemand ein Problem. Komm, Peter, vielleicht können wir helfen“, says Jupiter in the German *Hörspiel* version. The boys are also not unreasonably adventurous or thrill-seeking; whenever possible, they make calculated efforts to avoid danger, as in *Terror Castle*, the first volume:

"Therefore, I propose we vote on whether or not to stay away from Terror Castle, as warned. All in favor vote aye."

"Aye!" Bob said.

7 This example also serves to illustrate that *The Three Investigators*' respect for authority and family is no remnant of mid-century conformity to be found only in the early books. Carey's works from the 1980s and the later German volumes are exactly in the same spirit.

“Aye!” said Pete. “That makes a majority vote.” (90)

The dangerous situations that lend suspense to the mysteries are most often not the result of reckless behavior on the part of the young investigators, but of unforeseeable coincidences, as in *The Dead Man's Riddle* (*Die gefährliche Erbschaft*), when Skinny Norris unmoors the house-boat that the boys are examining, which then shoots towards perilous rapids. Generally, the three value thought over action—contradicting Emerson's “American Scholar,” which condemns the “mere thinker” (842) and calls thinking a “partial act” (847). Jupiter's statement in the audio version of *The Stuttering Parrot/Der Super-Papagei*, „Ich möchte erst noch einmal alles überdenken“, defines him in a nutshell. In a later German-only mystery, a friend of Jupiter's concurs: „Das passt nicht zu dir, du bist kein Freund von schnellen Entschlüssen“ (*Das leere Grab*). At the center of many cases are complex riddles or language games—*The Stuttering Parrot*, *The Screaming Clock* (*Der seltsame Wecker*), *The Dead Man's Riddle*, and *The Nervous Lion* (*Der rasende Löwe*) being the most famous examples—which require brains, not brawn or bravery. Frequently, *The Three Investigators* win out in the end by virtue of patience or even inaction. Thinking and waiting trumps doing in *The Stuttering Parrot* and *The Dead Man's Riddle*: In both cases, a physically superior antagonist who has been following the detectives attacks them when they find the supposed treasure with still one puzzle to go. The villain runs off triumphantly, oblivious to the fact that he just fell for a ruse by the original riddler, giving the boys, who have been standing by passively, all the time in the world to locate the real loot. In *The Silver Spider* (*Die silberne Spinne*) the youngsters are literally saved by not having gotten anything done in terms of solving the case: Bob gets knocked on the head and forgets everything he knows, so when questioned by criminals under hypnosis he cannot remember the findings which, if revealed, would have provided sufficient incentive to kill him and his friends.

In case all these features still do not sound sufficiently incongruous with the U.S. values and tastes introduced above, a closer look at the specific characteristics of each of the protagonists makes clear that Arthur's concept was truly a recipe for disaster as regards commercial success in America. In his encyclopedia article, James D. Keeline describes the investigators thusly: “Jupiter [...] was the group's leader, Pete the impulsive athlete, and Bob the reserved, studious type” (par. 1). This is wishful thinking and has not much to do with reality; Keeline tries to fit the boys into conventional, familiar categories that are based on desirable qualities (e.g., drive, control, decisiveness, courage, physical strength) in accord with Lipset, Chase, and Fiedler. Jupiter, however, is far from being an all-American boy-scout-leader type or little general. He much rather conforms to a type that is, to put it mildly, not

wildly popular in the U.S.: the pompous, conceited intellectual.⁸ Jupiter is an egghead. He uses big words and loves to show off with language; the first volume alone, which sets the tone for the whole series, offers more than enough examples. Explaining the question marks on the business cards, Jupiter says: “The question mark [...] is the universal symbol of something unknown. We are prepared to solve any puzzle, riddle, mystery, enigma, or conundrum which may be brought to us. Hence the question mark will be our trademark” (R. Arthur, *Terror Castle* 9). Even spontaneous utterances come out stilted: “I have a strategy in mind, [...] I only hope it will work, for we seem to have arrived” (16). Jupiter’s rhetoric becomes so annoying at times that it even gets too much for his friends. When he, in a dangerous situation, remarks, “Our exit [...] is effectively barricaded,” Pete retorts: “Even at a time like this you use long words! [...] Why don’t you just say we can’t get out? We’re stuck” (64). Jupiter proudly displays his *humanistische Bildung* (he knows Latin and the classics), and shows tendencies of elitism that sometimes manifest themselves in statements which make him sound more like a decadent emperor than like a general down with the troops: “Lying here last night, unable to sleep, I decided upon another course of action. The two of you must proceed to explore Terror Castle without me, while I lie here and ponder the different mysteries with which we are confronted” (91).

Pete is misrepresented even worse in Keeline’s classification. True, he is athletic and does not share bulky Jupiter’s general contempt for physicality. Nevertheless, he is also genuinely fearful, up to the point of caricature: “‘Terror castle!’ Pete exclaimed. ‘That’s a name I don’t like!’” (27); “‘Wow!’ Pete exclaimed. ‘The more I hear about this place, the less I like it!’” (30); “‘If I have to use this tape recorder,’ Pete said [...], ‘all you’ll hear will be the sound of chattering teeth!’” (35). Thus, sensitive, animal-loving Pete occupies an even lower rank in the American hierarchy of popular culture types than a simple coward: He is a cowardly athlete, a prodigy who has all the physical abilities but is too scared to use them, a promising boy who wastes his gifts—a Clark Kent, Peter Parker or Bruce Wayne in reverse. Even worse, instead of at least keeping his fears to himself in a manly way, Pete openly, almost proudly admits that he is frightened (cf. the frequent use of the verb “exclaim” in connection with Pete’s anxiety): “‘Wow,’ Pete Crenshaw said [...], ‘that place looks scary!’” (36); “‘And besides, I don’t want to be scared out of my wits. I’m halfway there already!’” (37); “‘We frightened it!’ Pete exclaimed. ‘What do you think it did to *me*?’” (38). It is no accident that the German *Hörspiel* producers chose an actor with a curiously high-

8 See Hofstadter for a comprehensive analysis of the American uneasiness with intellectuals.

pitched, almost girlish voice for Pete (Jens Wawrczeck, who today, tellingly, dubs the wimpy character “Spence” in the TV series *The King of Queens*).

In Bob Andrews’s case, James D. Keeline is right to call him “the reserved, studious type”—Robert “Bob” Arthur modeled the avid reader on himself (E. Arthur and Bauer, “Amazing Revelations,” par. 9)—, but this agreement does not make *The Three Investigators* any more attractive to most young American readers looking for familiar heroes to identify with or be inspired by. The combination of intellectual, softy, and bookworm is about the worst possible choice as far as possibilities for commercial success in the U.S. are concerned. Keeline’s last sentence sums up the dilemma perfectly. Masquerading as praise, the phrase “librarians preferred [*The Three Investigators*] over the mass-market [...] *Hardy Boys* books” (par. 3) really is an insult, implying that children and teenagers most certainly did not.

What had to put American readers off, however, appeared familiar and perfectly reassuring to the (West) Germans in the 1980s who would turn into *The Three Investigators*’ loyal fanbase. This is the missing element that explains why the complex transcultural reception process of negotiating one’s ideas of America with the America found in the books and the German home culture proved so attractive. The sleuths crossed the border easily; unwittingly, Arthur wrote a series that—in its exciting, Hitchcock-endorsed ‘American mystery fiction’ package—transported German cultural values. Twenty-five years ago, Germany was a country still very much influenced by *Bildungsbürgertum* ideals, where the three available TV channels were all under public law and considered it their prime duty to educate the people (*Bildungsauftrag*). As even the popular comics that concerned *Bildungsbürger* parents despised as pulp (for instance „Yinni und Yan“ in the *Yps Hefte*) made countless references to Shakespeare, Goethe, Wagner and the rest of the Western canon, Jupiter’s intellectualism would not have been perceived as threatening or annoying. Quite to the contrary, Heinz Schlaffer stresses that it is the fear of *not* being seen as *gebildet* that troubles Germans: „Noch heute verfolgt die Angst, als Spießer oder Philister [i.e., originally, a nonacademic inhabitant of a college town; today, an un- or anti-intellectual person] angesehen zu werden, die Bürger in Deutschland und treibt sie der Kunst in die Arme“ (69).

The German publishing team shrewdly emphasized the intellectual aspects of the series in a number of ways. Most notable is the cover design. In 1970, artist Aiga Rasch gave the *drei ???* a corporate look that is still used today: a jet-black cover with Hitchcock’s name in red, the title in white, the question marks, and a minimalist yet atmospheric painting that no more than hints at the events to be expected, and never shows any of the boys. The many different U.S. editions look cheap and uninspired in comparison. Going for sensationalism, they almost always depict the investigators, mouths

agape, on the lookout for or wrestling with monsters or other evildoers. The effect of the German design is clear. Not only does it convey the rather cerebral nature of the boys' adventures better than the American versions, it also suggests to adolescent readers from *Bildungsbürger* backgrounds (and their parents, who in the 1980s still exercised a considerable influence on what children and teenagers were allowed to read) a welcome level of sophistication. The covers virtually proclaim: "This is not pulp, this is art"—„Du bildest dich, wenn du dies liest“.

Another consequential change has a similar purpose. "Jupiter Jones" became „Justus Jonas“ in the German translation.⁹ If one recalls Steven D. Martinson and Renate A. Schulz's dictum, stated on the website announcing the launch of the University of Arizona's Ph.D. program in Transcultural German Studies and the international conference that gave rise to this article, that "[t]he practice of Transcultural Studies takes seriously the idea that culture is embedded in language" ("Trans-Cultural German Studies," par. 2), this transformation is crucial. With it, the German publisher eliminates the American uneasiness with the intellectual that Robert Arthur's choice of the name "Jupiter Jones" for his main character still reflected, if Arthur intended it or not.¹⁰ "Jupiter Jones" juxtaposes a presumptuous, pompous first name (the first among the Gods) with an everyman surname. The result is pathetic; it suggests an ordinary guy who thinks he is God, a Latin-speaking elitist out of touch with his populist and egalitarian background, which is, as shown before, precisely the impression Jupiter's behavior and statements must make on a lot of American readers. The German readers, with their generally affirmative attitude towards intellectualism, were better suited with a name which would give the protagonist an aura of unambiguously positive sophistication. The new name did just that, with „Justus“ and „Jonas“, both German given names popular with *Bildungselite* parents, having a decidedly classy and well-educated ring about them (the facts that one of them means "the just" in Latin and that Justus Jonas is also the name of a sixteenth-century reformer certainly did not hurt either). The resulting oddity that the native Californian Justus and his family carry names that not just indicate a possible German ancestry or a penchant for Teutonic words, but are also *pronounced* the German way—the *Hörspiele* make this abundantly clear—is never explained. Nor does there seem to be any need for explanation; the German readers apparently have welcomed and accepted „Justus Jonas“ as

9 And "Pete Crenshaw" became „Peter Shaw“, but here causes and effects are less evident. The new name is just slightly more readable.

10 At least "Jupiter" was better than "Genius," the alternative Arthur had in mind. Elizabeth Arthur was asked to decide and chose Jupiter ("Interview with Elizabeth Arthur," par. 20).

natural and logical, as just one more element in the exciting-but-familiar mix of German and American cultures that is the series in their country. Whole episodes are based on the ‘German’ name without raising any eyebrows: In *Das leere Grab* (German only, no. 78), Justus’s suspicion that his parents could still be alive results from a friend’s observation during a holiday in Venezuela, where the latter met a middle-aged couple going by the same names as the supposedly deceased: „Der Name Jonas ist ja nicht gerade häufig“, is how the friend describes in the radio play what first alerted him. This plot would certainly not have worked with “Jones.”

Combined, these means help create a scenario where finally all cultural borders are really blurred, if not erased. *The Three Investigators* are neither purely American nor German—being dead and buried in the former and mere imports in the latter country. Yet, by virtue of transcultural reception (and its manipulation), they are both, and it is hard to draw any lines. The Californian by the name of Justus Jonas, the cover that shouts “Hitchcock!” and “American flag!”¹¹ amidst an understated design that seems to come right out of the Bauhaus, these are new holistic systems that are more than the sum of their parts to the recipients; trying to divide them up into their parts and to then dissect these would strip the systems of any true meaning. Within the realm of *Die drei ???*, German and American culture are not two neat, separate entities (or “spheres,” in the terminology of Wolfgang Iser [195]) any more.

With the German authors taking over from their released American colleagues, and the center of production effectively moving to Germany, the story of the transcultural *Three Investigators* gets even more complicated, and more fascinating. The fact that now Germans are writing in German and for Germans about America and Americans leads to what one could call a ‘Karl May effect’: Just like May’s immensely successful Wild West narratives, although being geographically specific and full of descriptive detail, reveal more about German dreams and fears than about the Llano Estacado where they are set, the Rocky Beach of the new *drei ???* writers necessarily reflects their German ideas, viewpoints, and even stances within current domestic political debates. As the series becomes a platform for German social commentary, naturally the question arises how the new books compare to the old ones; how much they remain in the original spirit of Arthur and his co-authors, and how much they retain the cultural-sphere-dissolving potential that this original spirit allowed: the potential of creating a new country in the minds of the readers, geographically American but with a certain German feel. As fans from the 1980s—André Marx, one of the most prolific in the new

11 In the German version, the colors of the question marks displayed on the cover were changed to white, red, and blue.

team, was hired because of an episode he had written as a birthday present for a friend (David 40)—, the new writers had been an active part of the reception process described above, with its appreciation of both the intellectual, consensus-oriented aspects of the texts and their inherent suspense, and were keen on keeping the earlier vision intact.

Many of their innovations, like the introduction of Bob's friend Jelena, who works with the three boys and is for instance the driving force behind decoding *Die Botschaft von Geisterhand* (no. 95), as a female counterpart, or the portrayal of Justus, Bob, and Peter as computer whiz kids and skillful internet users, were things that the American authors would probably have done themselves if they had had the chance,¹² given their socially progressive outlook, and the fact that the investigators, with their earlier portable tape recorders, walkie-talkies, and answering machines, had always been presented as up-to-date with contemporary technology. Even episodes that clearly break with established tradition are less revolutionary than they look: True, Marx's *leeres Grab* (adapted by André Minninger for the *Hörspiel*) is much more about Justus's desperate journey to come to terms with his role as an orphan than about any crime, and it shows the usually composed and superior detective in a completely helpless, unhinged state for the very first time. Yet, the protagonist's search for identity is quite in accord with the general image of him as a deep, serious thinker; and the concentration on his personal struggle is both in harmony with the primacy of moral concerns over the mere pragmatic closure of criminal cases in the series, and its focus on the central role family plays (in Venezuela, Justus gradually realizes how valuable Uncle Titus and Aunt Mathilda are). Far from violating basic principles of the series, *Das leere Grab* rather makes these principles visible by forcing them to their logical extremes. For Oliver Rohrbeck, the famed *Hörspiel* voice of Justus, *Das leere Grab* is therefore the best episode of all (par. 16).

Potentially more problematic, and more in line with a characteristic 'Karl May effect' as one would expect it, is the irrational fear of technology expressed in the new works. Heavy machinery and glitzy urban landscapes are often described as dangerous, as dark, abstract threats. Typical examples can be found in *Toteninsel*, again by Marx (book) and Minninger (*Hörspiel*).

12 Actually, to a certain extent they did implement such changes, in an ill-fated spin-off series called *Crimebusters*, where Jupiter, Bob, and Pete are a few years older, and have cars, computers, and girlfriends (who are, however, rather flat characters). Some of the *Crimebusters* books were translated and incorporated into the German *drei ???* series as if they had been regular *Three Investigators* titles; and the style of these mysteries clearly influenced Henkel-Waidhofer, the first German-language author.

In the radio play, the narrator introduces a ship as „stählernes Monster“.¹³ A *Wolkenkratzer* in Los Angeles is similarly labeled as a „beeindruckendes Monster aus Stahl, das ein Dutzend Stockwerke in die Höhe ragte“. This constitutes a clear deviation from the original volumes. Robert Arthur, for all his criticism of California’s growth fetish, would hardly have called a 12-story building a “skyscraper,” let alone a scary one—to Americans, the very idea must seem unintentionally funny, just like some of May’s descriptions of the *Indianer* in the Wild West. The demonization of technology by the new authors has its roots in a very German discourse, not in an effort to emphasize or radicalize ideas from the American authors. It represents a strong tradition of *Technikfeindlichkeit* and *Technikskeptizismus*, ranging from Romanticism to Heidegger, for which no equivalent exists in the U.S.¹⁴ Only by treating the attitudes towards technology in *Die drei ???* as manifestations of thoughts resulting from specific German philosophical concepts, one can explain why Marx, Minninger et al. are able to portray modern inventions as monstrous while at the same time enthusiastically continuing the picture of Justus, Bob, and Peter as inventors and eager users of the latest technological devices. Viewed within a Heideggerian context, this is not jarring at all. The writers’ distinction between threatening, faceless machines and the useful gadgets that the boys assemble in their junkyard headquarters reflects the philosopher’s influential distinction (*Sein und Zeit* 69–71) between objects that are *vorhanden* (merely present, existing) and objects that are *zuhanden* (present for me, organically embedded in a concrete, meaningful nexus of production and use).¹⁵ While *Technik* in general, with its pragmatic, “instrumental” focus on functioning regardless of where, when, and by whom it is used, has the potential of destroying this correlation for good (“Question Concerning Technology” 287–317), the investigators are Heideggerian craftsmen whose work informs their life and whose life informs their work.

This contrast does not only illuminate the authors’ stance on technology. It also shows that said stance, while clashing with some of Arthur’s beliefs, in fact reinforces the basic phenomenon that made Arthur’s books so successful in Germany: the thrilling combination (or dynamic juxtaposition) of familiar ‘German’ values and characters with America as an ‘other.’ Together with the reassuringly *technikskeptischen* detectives, the reader goes out and faces the dark sides of technological progress, which are associated with

13 All following *Toteninsel* quotations are taken from the *Hörspiel* version.

14 Leo Marx has shown in *The Machine in the Garden* that in America, technology and commerce are in fact seen as directly related to a pastoral utopia.

15 Macquarrie and Robinson’s translation of *Being and Time*, still considered authoritative, renders *vorhanden* as “present-at-hand,” and *zuhanden* as “ready-to-hand.”

the U.S. more than with any other country. Thus, overall we have a Karl May effect here that will look positively silly to Americans revisiting the series but fits well with the original spirit of the books as the protagonists of the German reception understand it. One does not have to agree with the premises of *Technikfeindlichkeit* to admit that it makes complete sense within the *drei ???* universe.

Toteninsel, the special 100th episode, an ambitious three-volume „Meta-Krimi“¹⁶ (David 40) set mostly on the South Pacific island of “Makatao,” is also the best source to analyze a potentially more disturbing—and ironic, given the U.S. origins of the series—‘new’ element: a latent (political) anti-Americanism.¹⁷ The investigators’ home country is not only criticized as a global bully carelessly endangering world peace, it also plots to have Justus, Bob, and Peter killed. Not pulling any punches, the authors pit the boy sleuths against a gigantic conspiracy involving the CIA, the Army (both of which the *Hörspiel* cover proudly lists as „Die Gegner“), and the upper echelons of the government: When the secret service finds out that the young detectives have discovered Makatao’s true purpose as a production-and-storage facility and potential testing site for a type of nuclear warheads that the U.S. Government itself banned after massive public protests, the people in charge send in a special forces unit to eliminate everybody on the island; the boys (together with a group of archaeologists called Sphinx) narrowly escape and make the scandal public.

Observers doubting that this plot can be linked to a particularly German worldview might point out that the U.S. has its own fair share of critical voices who, like Michael Moore for instance, claim that the Government lies to and goes against its own people. However, first of all even Moore would probably judge the storyline of *Toteninsel* a bit over the top for an American

16 Marx and Minninger’s mystery is full of allusions to famous classic episodes (the „magische Kreis“ that opens a secret pathway, the „Narbengesicht“ of Sphinx’s Professor Phoenix) and ironic, self-conscious references to the curious German/American history of the series. Skinny Norris’s comment, for instance, brilliantly captures how *The Three Investigators* look from an American ‘Huck Finn’ perspective – and thus presents the reasons for their failure in the U.S. once again in a nutshell: „Justus ‚Baby Fatso‘ Jonas. Und natürlich die nie von seiner Seite weichenden Schatten Peter ‚der Schisser‘ Shaw und ‚Mr. Langweilig‘ Bob Andrews.“

17 I.e., a condemnation of the U.S. based on its political actions, as opposed to a cultural anti-Americanism, which “considers the dominant American values and their practical implementation in social life as being somehow inferior to one’s own cultural standards” (Sontheimer 117), treats the United States as “a lower class artificially raised to a nation” (Diner, *America in the Eyes of the Germans* 51), and rejects “the American ‘way of life’” (Markovits 14).

mystery series officially aimed at teenagers, and secondly, homegrown critics of current U.S. politics and culture typically combine their misgivings with a statement of faith in America as an idea, like Moore in *Stupid White Men*: “I hate writing these words. I love this big lug of a country and the crazy people in it” (91).

The American characters in Marx’s book and Minninger’s radio play do not proclaim any affinity, emotional or otherwise, with their country. On the contrary, they consistently talk about it as if from an outside perspective, as if they were discussing a foreign nation: „Die Marshall-Inseln sind nicht gerade ein rühmliches Kapitel in der Geschichte der Vereinigten Staaten“ (not: „in unserer Geschichte“), lectures a member of Sphinx in the *Hörspiel*. Never do the protagonists display the torment of being betrayed by their homeland that could be expected. Questions of the what-does-this-mean-for-me kind that vexed Justus in *Das leere Grab* do not come up. All the reader witnesses is the moral superiority of outside observers. There is morally superior outrage, as shown by an archaeologist: „Das ist ja wohl die größte Schweinerei“. There is morally superior historical analysis: „Die letzten Atomtests der Vereinigten Staaten im pazifischen Raum, von denen ich gehört habe, fanden 1962 statt, und damals versprach die Regierung, die pazifischen Inseln nie wieder für solche Tests zu missbrauchen“. And there is morally superior sarcasm, by Justus: „Warum sollte man auch die Menschen und die Natur im eigenen Land gefährden, wenn man statt dessen ein paar unbedeutende Inseln in die Luft sprengen oder auf Hunderttausende von Jahren verseuchen kann?“

It is worth noting that only a few months after *Toteninsel*’s release, struggling Chancellor Gerhard Schröder won a general election he was predicted to lose by relentlessly criticizing the American handling of the Iraq crisis with morally superior outrage, morally superior historical analysis, and morally superior sarcasm (Hacke 7–15; Thumann and Kleine-Brockhoff 8). Marx and Minninger’s characters display attitudes towards the U.S. that have a long-standing tradition in Germany, still resonate with the mainstream, and, as Schröder proved, can be easily activated when a suitable event on the world stage offers itself.¹⁸ America as an ill-informed, ruthless empire that, in contrast to reasonable, altruistic, multilateral Europe (and

18 It should be stressed that *Toteninsel* came out before 9/11 and Donald Rumsfeld’s notorious “Old Europe” speech, at a time when the diplomatic relations between Germany and the United States were good. Thus, the anti-American tendencies of the episode are not the one-time result of a sudden dissatisfaction with President Bush based on a concrete issue or incident. Rather, they reflect general attitudes whose prevalence helps explain why the subsequent anti-Bush mood in Germany could become so massive and all-encompassing so quickly.

particularly non-aggressive postwar Germany), uses force and dirty tricks to pursue nothing but its own questionable interests, this has been a popular stereotype especially among intellectual Germans, not just since the Pershing II debate in the 1980s (Diner, *Feindbild Amerika* 115–162, Markovits 4–10). Viewed through this lens, the three investigators Justus, Peter, and Bob appear as ‘honorary Germans’ in *Toteninsel*: As victims of and critical, distanced commentators on America’s crimes, they assume the part of the ‘noble Europeans’ of the stereotype.

It is not easy to put this last, most striking ‘Karl May effect’—American characters spouting German anti-Americanisms and behaving as if they were not American in the first place—in context and evaluate it from a transcultural perspective. It raises questions that go to the heart of the whole issue of the German reception and its meaning. On the one hand, the effect can be seen as the logical culmination of the mixing of culturally German characters with elements emphasizing America’s status as an ‘other’ that is the foundation of the series’ German success. Yet, it could with equal justification be interpreted as a radical, fatal break with what *Die drei ???* have stood for: a blend of German and American cultures which blurred borders so completely and effortlessly that national cultures did not really matter any more to those reading or listening to the mysteries; a wholly new place where Doktor Renz, Schiffmeister and König Boris from the Hamburg-based hip-hop outfit Fettes Brot could be the “Wet Boys” from downtown LA, rapping „Mehr Schein als Sein“ in German, and it made complete sense. As multiple answers are neither unusual nor threatening to those involved in Transcultural Studies, the impossibility to neatly sort this question out should not lead to frustration. In fact, it serves to make one thing certain: Texts like Robert Arthur’s *The Three Investigators* may not boast postmodern plots or multi-ethnic protagonists, but they surely are worthwhile, complex-enough study objects for students of transculturality.

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