Early German Cinema: A Second Life?

Thomas Elsaesser

‘Zweimal gelebt’

German cinema is best remembered for its so-called ‘Golden Age’—the Expressionist films of the twenties—and for its long line of outstanding individual directors. But the double spotlight on art cinema and auteurs, reflecting this national cinema’s struggle for cultural respectability and a penchant for psychological introspection, has only deepened the shadows surrounding another side: the history of its popular cinema. An obvious case in point are the first two decades, where the standard histories have little to report as being worthy of detailed study. Because of Germany’s catastrophic social and political history for almost half a century, it was tempting to look to the cinema to uncover hidden truths of the nation and its soul. Especially after 1945, the explanatory deficit about the origins and rise of national socialism was so great and the memory of the regime’s blatant use of the cinema as a propaganda instrument so keen that an account of the German cinema of whatever period found itself offering its own version of hindsight history.¹

Perhaps a blessing in disguise, the period least suited for such a retrospective teleology was the cinema prior to World War I. Against the background of either documenting the roots of nationalism, or rescuing from the debacle an international, self-confident avantgarde tradition, the early film business seemed haphazard, inconsequential. The films themselves, compared with the contemporary output from other countries, notably France and Denmark, looked ponderous and stylistically ‘retarded.’² The more obvious parallels with early cinema elsewhere—its wide appeal to spectators from all walks of life, its canny opportunism and unashamed sensationalism, and above all, its many connections with the other mass media of the time were often passed over in silence or seen merely as negative blemishes. Paradoxically, however, those very first decades of innovation and experimentation, of consolidation, rapid change and major crises can tell us more about this cinema as a ‘national’ cinema than any number of symptomatic masterpieces.

From this perspective alone one might speak of ‘A Second Life’ for early German cinema, in the face of critical hostility and a quite specific historical agenda, which had little use or sympathy for a cinema of stars and genres, preferring one of artistic ambitions and original talent. But the link of German genre films to those made in other countries on the one hand, and to Wilhelmite Germany’s print and image culture on the other hand, must be one of the foremost tasks for any film historical re-visions. As to the stars, when one comes across their names in film credits or trade journal adverts, their lives are now so little-known that it requires major biographical searches even to establish basic dates. Their faces in star photographs or collectors’ postcards, by contrast, immediately evoke a period at once

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Given the grave testimony of Kracauer and Eisner, however, the term ‘normalization’ must seem not only revisionist, but apologetic in intent, part of a by now notorious tendency in recent historiography by which at least German art and culture might have their innocence restored. Precisely because this is not my aim, I feel obliged to retain the term, despite its ambiguous connotations. Two circumstances in particular make the word seem apposite. Firstly, the focus here is indeed on a cinema that was normal, in the sense of ordinary and widely available, and secondly, this cinema can only be understood within a comparative approach, one capable of establishing what might have been the ‘norm’ or ‘norms’ of film style, of film production and film reception during any given period between the years 1895 and 1917, against which exceptions (and possible ‘Sonderwege’) can then be judged. So far, research into the primary material has above all yielded fragments, individual films isolated from the contexts they were once part of. The wider, comparative horizon will hopefully readjust the picture. Film history in the eighties made it its aim to infer, test and verify such norms, and to it we owe the work of Noël Burch and Barry Salt, Ben Brewster, Tom Gunning and Charles Musser. When one adds the monumental research enterprise that has examined the origins and stabilisation of the ‘mode of production’ of classical Hollywood cinema, one realizes the potential rewards of proceeding in this way.

Since several authors in the present volume discuss the German cinema within such a broadly comparative framework, one can already deduce that as far as periodization is concerned, the years 1902-1906 and 1907-1913 are the crucial ones for understanding the further history of cinema also in Germany. The first period consolidates exhibition practice around fixed-site cinemas, creates a film business centred on the short film and the ‘numbers programme,’ and sees the change from buying and selling films to exchanging and renting films. The second period has among its typical features the move from storefront cinemas to purpose-built houses and movie palaces. With it comes the introduction of the three to five-reel feature film (still surrounded by short films) as the presentational programme norm. Around 1910 one also finds the introduction of new strategies of distribution and marketing, which in due course were to redefine crucially the social space and the experience ‘cinema,’ giving it the shape it was to retain for the subsequent seventy years, indeed almost up to the present day.

Thus, following on from the comparative perspective, to normalize early German cinema means to ‘internationalize’ it, that is, to see its developments in more than a one-country context. This seems the proper direction to take, not least because both the legendary Brighton FIAF meeting of 1978 and the subsequent annual Pordenone retrospectives have shown that film production and cinema exhibition up to World War I were a highly international business, making nonsense of an idea of national cinema that does not at the same time take note of tendencies in other major film producing countries, such as France, Denmark, Italy and, of course, the United States. Only in the interplay between different film industries can something like a norm be framed that might in turn serve as reference point to appraise German cinema.
‘Normalization’ and the ‘New Film History’

In this sense, the present volume reflects some of the priorities of what has come to be known as the new film history. Put briefly, its principles oblige one to look first of all at how the cinema emerged and developed as an industry, what the nature of its ‘product’ or ‘service’ was, how production, distribution and exhibition were organized at a given time and in a given place, and finally, what other forms of popular entertainment similarly traded in established cultural values or created new ones. But the ‘new’ film history is also a cultural ethnography, asking what modes of perception and cognition the films first relied on or simulated in their audiences; what other media were drawn into the struggle for the cinema’s ‘right to be,’ and thus what social places and public spaces movie-going helped to transform.

Such questions, of course, shift attention to areas of cinema studies where, in Douglas Gomery’s memorable phrase, ‘film viewing is really an inappropriate research method.’ It alerts one to issues of visual culture and modernity, as well as to the fact that early German films do not always readily seduce the untutored eye: where they are unexpected, they do not always enchant (like early French Pathé films) or disturb (like Yevgenii Bauer’s Russian films), where the narratives are formulaic, the film forms do not look familiar (as in early American films), and where the acting is non-naturalistic, one does not marvel at its extravagances (as in Italian diva films). At times, one has the feeling of no longer possessing the cultural or emotional key to unlock their brittle charm. There are exceptions, of course, like the films of Max Mack or Franz Hofer (two names featured prominently in this volume), but with directors, one needs to be wary as to what one considers the norm and what the exception. Are, for instance, the films of Bolten-Baekers and Adolf Gärtner the norm, and those of Joseph Delmont and Charles Decroix the exception, and where does one fit in the films of Emil Albes, Emerich Hanus or Walter Schmidtässler? Do directors matter at all in this cinema, when they are often not even mentioned in the credits? How representative of German women were the roles played by Henny Porten, quite different not only from those of Asta Nielsen, but also distinct from Dorrit Weixler’s or Wanda Treumann’s parts, not to mention Lissy Nebuschka (known as the ‘German Asta Nielsen’) and Hanni Weisse, or the two female stars created by Ernst Lubitsch in the mid-teens, Ossi Oswalda and Pola Negri?

Fortunately, films in sufficient numbers have survived to preclude such questions from being purely rhetorical. Even if it should prove true that much of the early German output looked inept in its day or did badly in its home market, the films remain an invaluable record for the roots of domestic and public leisure life, while printed sources, such as trade journals, newspaper articles, handbills and postcards testify to the popular appeal of many German cinema stars and picture personalities. These are the areas where one can expect new scholarship to make the most immediate impact, especially seeing how much of the historical work done on early cinema in Germany over recent years owes its existence either to anniversaries or to prestige cultural occasions at local and regional level.
Yet this fieldwork, too, requires a certain amount of ‘normalization,’ now understood as the need to apply to German cinema studies a historically critical stance, where a certain transparency in method and procedure refers itself to verifiable sources and opens up to inspection its filmic or printed evidence. Two exemplary studies, both the result of years of painstaking research among archives, have helped to clear a path and indicate the nature of the problems confronting the historian. Both are explicitly committed to the ‘new film history,’ both recognize the need to rethink quite radically our approach to early German cinema, and yet their methods as well as their conclusions could not be more different.

Although neither regards this cinema as a pre-history, one author sees it as a kind of counter-history and draws as sharp as possible a contrast between Wilhelmine cinema and Weimar cinema, a contrast allegedly due to profound structural changes in their respective ‘public spheres.’ Based on a new interpretation of the films considered as canonical works, and conducting a careful study of the contemporary debates about reception and audiences, Heide Schlüpmann succeeds in making this cinema strange, different, and yet familiar, fully justifying her title “The Uncanny Gaze.”13 Looked at from the vantage point of a Weimar Cinema qualified as ‘patriarchal,’ and concerned with ‘male potency,’ Wilhelmine cinema for Schlüpmann appears as something like a refuge for a different conception of the body and of femininity, one that offers especially the female spectator a novel form of visual pleasure.14 What links her work to the ‘new film history’ is the fact that Unheimlichkeit des Blicks is not a positivist-archival history, but one guided by a number of theoretical concepts, above all the distinction, first formulated by Tom Gunning, between a ‘cinema of attraction’ and the classical narrative cinema as a ‘cinema of narrative integration,’15 which Schlüpmann both genders and periodizes, seeing those features as symptomatic for German film history.

Just how different a starting point has been chosen by Corinna Müller becomes evident when one realizes that her book does not discuss individual films at all, steers clear of past and present theorists, and sets out to challenge the very distinction attraction/narrative integration which forms the conceptual basis of Schlüpmann’s study. Müller begins by asking herself why Germany, given its above average interest in living pictures and its potentially huge market, apparently did not develop a thriving indigenous film production on a sound economic basis until after the Great War? The traditional answer is that the German bourgeoisie was culturally prejudiced against the cinema, and thus industrialists and finance capital doubted the cinema’s long-term prospects and refused to invest. This seems classical ‘retrospective teleology’ even if for once of an economic rather than ideological kind.

Müller’s Frühe deutsche Kinematographie is a case study rather than a comprehensive history, which nonetheless helps to recast a good deal of the early history, not least because it convincingly shows that the German cinema of the first two decades, when measured by international criteria, behaved in ways exceedingly ‘normal.’16 She took the evidence amassed in regional and local studies about exhibitors, picture houses, programme bills, admission prices, advertising in the newspapers in order to build her case, outlining a
comparative framework and making visible a causal nexus within which a more plausible, because immanent and structural, reason can be given for why German film production did not develop in quite the same way as it did in Denmark or even France.

Far from being anarchic, haphazard and amateurish, the early German film business, according to Müller, followed very distinct patterns and organizational principles, namely, those of the variety theatre. In particular, two principles typical of variety - the programming policy and its internal structure - survived the variety show as the dominant form of mass entertainment, remaining in place and exerting a determining influence on the development of fixed-site cinemas in Germany. The German film business, in other words, developed (just like the American and British one) as an exhibition-led industry whose commodity or product was the short film-based numbers programme, with editorial (but also economic) control largely in the hands of exhibitors. A cut-throat competition among cinemas in this exhibition-led industry used up vast quantities of film, devaluing films so fast that the profit margins for home producers practically disappeared and the business sucked in cheap foreign (mainly French) imports. Only when this vicious cycle was broken and profitability restored by means of a novel distribution system did German film production take off, and it did so well before the war and thus without the artificial barriers to imports that the outbreak of hostilities between France and Germany created.

Certain new research perspectives are opened up by this argument, both nationally (encouraging one to find out more about the exhibition situation, the variety theatre and the numbers principle, with its own aesthetic and narrative coherence) and internationally (to identify how exactly the balance of power on the German market shifted from exhibition to distribution and production when films began to circulate according to the Pathé system that first institutionalized artificial scarcity of access and put a premium on priority). To this day, the same manipulation of time and location advantage typifies the rationale of cinema chains and the practice of exclusivity. The findings also suggest that it makes sense to divide the first decades more clearly into distinct phases, with one belonging to the 'pioneers' (and their different definitions of the uses of the cinema), while the others are centred on the constitution of a 'market' (national and international) as well as a standard product, which in turn defines not a use, but an experience, itself differentiated by genres, stars, audiences and exhibition spaces. What follows is a sketch of some of the implications, when considering periodization along these lines.

The Beginnings up to 1907: Showmen and Pioneers

Although it seems perverse to argue that the cinema was not 'invented' in France, it is nonetheless true that Max and Emil Skladanowsky showed projected moving images to a paying public at the Berlin Wintergarten on 1 November 1895, almost two months earlier than the Lumière brothers' performance at the Salon Indien of the Grand-Café. Max Skladanowsky, a typical fairground operator and showman, began experimenting with 'living photography' around 1887. From 1892, in collaboration with his brother Emil, he construct-
ed an ingenious if inelegant double projection apparatus which he patented in 1895 under
the name of ‘Bioskop.’ Running at 16 frames per second with two identical film strips pro-
jected simultaneously, while a rotating shutter alternately masked one image on each pro-
jector, the Bioskop proved a technically imperfect, but nonetheless solidly popular variety
attraction.18

Even chauvinists would have to agree, though, that it was the Cinématographe
Lumière that brought moving pictures to Germany and secured their popular success. A
noted chocolate manufacturer and slotmachine operator, Ludwig Stollwerck showed an ear-
ly interest in commercially exploiting the Lumière invention in Germany.19 He also contact-
ed R.W. Paul, the British manufacturer who had successfully copied Edison’s kinetoscope.
Stollwerck left important eyewitness accounts of the coming of the movies, unique in their
vividness and sharp insights.20 Lumière operators toured Germany from 1896 onwards, and
in their wake a number of notable showmen plied their trade with tent-movies and Wan-
derkinos, making the cinematograph known in neighbouring countries, such as The Nether-
lands and Belgium, and setting up successful businesses that lasted well into the first dec-
ade.21

The real competition to the Lumière Brothers’ projector in Germany, however,
were the machines devised by Oskar Messter, the Wilhelmine cinema’s first universal film
genius. He alone, for a brief period, combined all the functions which were eventually sepa-
rated under a rigid division of labour: inventor of an improved projector, manufacturer of
photographic and cinematic equipment, head of a film production company, director of
‘Tonbilder’ (sound-on-disk filmed opera-scenes),22 fictional scenarios and actualities (he
pioneered the newsreel), distributor and even cinema owner.23 Since his career spans
the entire period of early cinema, and since he was able to sell his companies to the consortium
that set up Ufa, Messter is indeed an emblematic figure in many respects, serving as found-
ing father, as the human face and ‘character’ in an industry increasingly run according to
established business practices. As a filmmaker-producer Messter covered the entire range of
popular film subjects and genres: scènics and actualities, detective films and social dramas,
domestic melodrama and historical epics, romantic comedies, operas and operettas. He also
helped lay the foundation for the German star system, for among the actors who started with
Messter were the leading names of the German silent era: Henny Porten, Lil Dagover, Ossi
Messter, more than anyone else, determined the future shape of German commercial cine-
ma, and the titles in his catalogue alone were indicative of the thrills and pleasures the
 cinema offered audiences by way of entertainment, show values, sensations and sentiment.
His literary adaptations were distinctly middle-brow: hits from the burgeoning mass-market
in printed fiction, folklore and fantasy, or the popular culture on offer from the related
entertainment media: operetta, folk theatre, variety acts, solo performers of songs made
familiar by the sale of sheet music and gramophones.

Yet Messter’s almost mythical reputation as everyone’s favourite image of the

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Wilhelmine modernity: The Kaiser as gramophone star and media manipulator

cinema’s inventor-engineer-entrepreneur must not obscure a distinctive feature, not shared by those who followed: to him, making films for public exhibition was only one aspect of the invention we call the cinema. If one looks at the rivals for the claim of having pioneered and invented the cinema in Germany – Messter and Skladanowsky, Alfred Duskes and Paul Davidson – the distinction to draw is thus not between documentary and fictional, and not even between the scientific-analytical uses of the cinematic apparatus and the illusory-synthetic ones, it turns on their relative conception of the social significance of the device itself. The Skladanowsky Brothers were inventors and showmen, they backed the cinematograph rather than X-rays as a novelty which would attract an audience. As their efforts were directed towards exploiting the cinema as a form of entertainment, so Messter efforts were guided by an inventor-engineer’s way of thinking. Not content with attracting a paying public to his shows, he wrote to schools, retired army officers, and state officials suggesting a variety of uses for the cinematograph, including scientific, military, educational, administrative and investigative ones. The other important aspect of Messter’s thinking was entrepreneurial: unlike the Skladanowskys, he successfully monopolized and integrated the various stages of the whole cinematic process, building his own projectors and cameras, making the films himself and distributed them, much as the Pathé Brothers were to do in France. Like them, Messter realized at a very early stage that a crucial aspect of cinema is to exert and maintain control over all the diverse associated technologies and practices.

The modernity of his strategies lies at the heart of Messter’s relevance for the development of the German cinema. Style, genre or subject matter were for him, during the first decade at least, a matter of assigning to the invention different exploitation contexts: a modus operandi, in other words, which shuffled the elements of cinema – technology, films, users – so that films were exchange values that commanded different use-values, rather than vice versa, in contrast to the second decade, when the fixed use value ‘entertainment’ was
demographically and culturally upgraded via exclusivity (restriction of access) and longer films to suit (or lure) a better-paying public. Messter adapted to the second phase as well, perhaps because he understood how to develop cinema around its capacity to combine services to different users with supplying commodities to a single market. This distinguishes him not only from the ‘scientific’ strand for whom the cinematograph was a precision instrument (Etienne-Jules Marey), but also from those who were supposedly gripped by a ‘gothic’ male obsession and, like Frankenstein, wanted to recreate artificially and mechanically the very essence of life. Noël Burch identified this tendency with Thomas Edison, but it could be said to lie also behind the fantasy of German cinema, if one’s view of this cinema is shaped by homunculi and mad scientists, by Dr Caligari and his medium Cesare, by Dr Mabuse and the Golem, by Nosferatu and his vampire acolytes, by Rotwang and his robot from Metropolis. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which Messter the inventor, the optical instrument and precision engineer, partook in a fantasy that went beyond the scientific desire to see more closely, to trace what escapes the human eye, and to generally intensify the look. Just visible behind Messter’s bonhomme and factory-owner’s pride are the bachelor machines that Villiers de L’Ile-Adam described in his famous Edison novel, L’Eve future, where the combined alchemy of optical, electrical and chemical substances do indeed constitute something like a new life elixier.

Finally, Messter’s resourcefulness when it came to new uses for the cinematic apparatus, among which spectacles for public viewing were only one instance, marks a possible limit for the ‘cinema of attractions,’ since the term suggests that one can seize in one particular use – that of entertainment – a multiplicity of what are more properly ‘applications,’ whose histories, as we now realize in the age of ‘smart’ bombs, micro-surgery and surveillance cameras, had – after Messter – temporarily gone ‘underground,’ while the entertainment cinema with the feature film at its centre became the publicly most visible face of these applications. On the other hand, the ‘cinema of attractions’ directs our attention to exhibition sites and audiences, rather than production sites and makers.

Not the Film but the Programme
A cinema performance around 1907 was still modelled very closely on Germany’s highly developed variety culture, with its own sequence of attractions, ranging from gags and comic sketches, via sentimental duos, acrobatic acts and magic tricks to dances, review numbers and solo performances from famous plays, operettas or favourite operas. The still extant films made between 1896 and 1906 bear out the pattern. Max Skladanowsky’s 1897 views of Berlin (DIE WACHE TRITT ANS GEWEHR), the comic turns (BROTHERS MILTON KOMISCHES RECK), or the quite carefully staged street scenes (EINE KLEINE SZENE AUS DEM STRASSENLEBEN IN STOCKHOLM) in which too much comic or mock-dangerous business is going on to be taken in at one viewing all confirm that these films were made with an already constituted entertainment audience in mind. Subject matter and format were determined by the dou-
1896/97: Note the yet tenuous presence of the cinema in the variety context, e.g. the announcement of Messter's Biograph at the bottom of the Wintergarten programme and the 'Living photographes' at the Herrnfeld theatre; also present are the operetta and music hall intertext, with the future film subject 'Robert und Bertram.' Both the Metropol and the Apollo theatres were soon to become luxury cinemas.

ble media intertext of variety theatre and music theatre, or even the exhibition context of fairground and circus.

In many of these 'genres,' Pathé and Gaumont were the uncontested world leaders. But Messter, too, had different numbers in production, ranging from musical preludes, actualities, comic turns, dramatic sketches, slapstick ('derb-komisch') and sentimental drama ('Rührstück'). He even did multiple versions: one could buy an 'artistic' DANCE OF SALOME and, for specialized audiences, a 'blue movie' version. Where his firm had a commanding lead was in the 'Tonbilder' – more popular in Germany and Austria than elsewhere in Europe – which required from cinema-owners substantially higher investments in technical apparatus and operating costs, a telling disadvantage when it came to the price wars investigated by Müller. Audiences expected the spectacle to be discontinuous and varied:

The room is darkened. Suddenly we float on the Ganges, palms. The Temple of the Brahmins appears. A silent family drama rages, with bon vivants, a masquerade, a gun is pulled. Jealousies are inflamed. Herr Piefke duels headlessly and then they show us, step by step, mountaineers climbing the steep demanding paths. The paths lead down to forests, they twist and climb the threatening cliff. The view into the depths is enlivened by cows and potatoes. Then the arc lamp hissingly announces the end. Lights! And we push ourselves into the open daylight, horny and yawning.
These quick changes of story and scene, in a programme that would have been made up of around eight to ten different items, none longer than three minutes, is typical for the cinema in its variety theatre phase. Given the innumerable accounts, mostly by writers and intellectuals, of the typical film performance, one has the impression of a chaotic, disorderly, haphazard accumulation of bits-and-pieces:

As simple as the reflex of pleasure is the stimulus that provokes it: detective stories with a dozen corpses, one chase of the villains more hair-raising than the next in rapid sequence: grossest sentimentality: the blind beggar is dying and his dog sits faithfully by his grave. A piece with the title 'Honour the Poor' or 'The Lobster Queen.' Gunboats: and when the Kaiser or his generals appear on parade not the slightest sign of patriotism moves the spectators; rather, snide and spiteful surprise.31

The fact that few of these films have survived can only reinforce the impression of volatile inconsequence. But a study of the trade-press and more bread-and-butter reviewing indicate that cinema-owners had a very sophisticated sense of how to schedule the films into a programme, with its own dramatic shape, planned transitions and overall unity, no less coherent than the variety programme it replaced. The episodic and fragmented nature of the spectacle was further mitigated by the presence of the lecturer ('der Erklärer') who would provide a running commentary, sometimes explaining the action, but more often making irreverent jokes and improvising little routines. Between the disparate segments he was not only the link, but also the filter, the frame and the perspective, shifting and varied, through which the audience experienced the spectacle. The power of the word, as opposed to music was of crucial importance here, for the lecturer's ironic distance to the action allowed an audience to respond with that hostility or hilarity towards figures like the Kaiser Wilhelm II - 'first German movie star' - which Döblin (in 1909!) mentions.32 Mühl-Benninghaus, below, confirms this point when he quotes the derisive reaction of soldiers in the Fronkinos when faced with so-called authentic war footage in the newsreels: they jeered back at the screen, insulted at the sight of so much improbability, and so blatant a propaganda effort. His comment can usefully be compared with that of Egon Friedell who remarked that the cinema was an 'expression of our time - short, rapid, military'33 and contrasted with the view of film historian Friedrich v. Zglinicki, who argues that the authorities tried to get rid of the 'Erklärer,' because they suspected him of stoking up 'class hatred,' an accusation made by the right, but which found a curious echo in the objections to the cinema voiced by left-wing 'Kino-reformers':

For the capitalist it is a business, and among the exploited are not only the poorly paid projectionists, pianists, lecturers; the exploited are above all the audience, the mass whose voyeurism, hunger for sensations and receptivity for erotic stimulation are the targets of the cinema entrepreneurs' speculative calculations, and in whose interest it is to constantly increase these show-values (...). The direc-
tion of their efforts is thus diametrically opposed to the tasks and goals of adult education and other cultural movements. But just as threatened by the cinema as social ethics, public morality and sexual calm is the physical health of the population.\(^{34}\)

One can here see that such a programme did not reflect a ‘national identity’ or nationalist ideology. Rather, it represented the cinema’s most international phase, as can be judged when viewing samples from different countries – at festivals like Pordenone – where a remarkable degree of homogeneity, if not in quality (very variable), then in genres and modes, quickly (re-)creates what must have been a comforting sense of familiarity. It suggests, beyond individual talent and national particularity, the strong pressure on the makers exerted by a well-defined and stable set of spectatorial expectations. However, given the comments just quoted, one can understand why this cinema was nevertheless an ‘ideological’ battleground, even if the political lines were almost impossible to draw. Its ease of access, unpolicied transnational trade and quasi-universal popularity made it a natural melting-pot of good intentions and paranoid fantasies among reformers, teachers, politicians, trade-unionists and social workers. The more valuable, even if less colourful, information about film-watching up to 1910 therefore does not generally come from the writers or poets, but from the reformers and their volunteers, whose field reports one has to read only slightly against the grain, in order to gain useful first-hand data about composition of audiences, programme content and numbers sequence, as well as about the physical conditions of the cinemas as more or less salubrious public spaces.\(^{35}\) Among the colourful accounts, another passage from Alfred Döblin can be cited, who draws attention to the location of cinemas before 1910 in working-class districts, the so-called Ladenkinos (converted shop cinemas):

A typical 1890s variety programme (left) and the cinema programme that replaced it (right)
They’re in the north, the south, the east, the west side of town, in smoke filled rooms, sheds, disused shops, large halls, wide fronted theatres (...) but only the low haunts in the North have the special genre, on a level well above the mere artistic (...). Inside, at the end of a pitch-dark room with low ceiling, the square of the screen, six foot high, no bigger than a man, shines across the monstrous public, a mass mesmerized and rooted to their seats, by this white eye with its rigid stare. Pairs of lovers are squeezed in the corner, but carried away by what they see, their unchaste fingers stop pawing each others’ bodies. Consumptive children breathe flat gasps of air, and shiver quietly through every bout of fever. The men, exuding unpleasant smells, stare until their eyes are ready to fall out of their sockets. The women, in stale-smelling clothes, the painted street whores are bent forward on the edge of their seats oblivious to the fact that their headscarf has slid down their neck.36

Döblin’s graphic description from 1909 implicitly concedes that these types of theatres had by then already become exotic, which refers one back to the fact that what ultimately determined the production of films was the ‘production’ of audiences. The variety format, as well as the wide spectrum of admission prices (from 30 pfennig to 3 marks) indicates that early cinema – contrary to what historians have sometimes claimed – was not aimed at working class audiences alone, but catered for demographically broad target groups, and numbered among its audiences men, women and children, with young males already then forming the majority among the cinema-going public, although in one source, a clear distinction is made between ‘errand boys’ whiling away time between odd-jobs and ‘young men from the public schools’ hoping for a sexual conquest.37

In the same vein, it has been argued by the noted sociologist Emilie Altenloh that early German cinema was particularly aware of its female audiences, feeding a veritable ‘cinema-addiction’ not only with genres of gender-specific appeal such as mother-daughter stories, dramas of shipwrecked lovers and women waiting, but also in comedies where women had the freedom to invent for themselves sexual identities by putting on men’s clothes (so-called ‘Hosenrollen’) or, as female detectives, gain visual and vicarious access to social spaces and thus to experiences normally out of bounds to women, whether married or unmarried.38

Creating a Stable Market and Attracting a Middle-Class Audience
What was the German cinema’s domestic production base which supplied this demand? It seems that prior to 1911 filmmaking in Germany suffered from an apparently inordinate number of small firms (Georges Sadoul lists 51)39 eking out a precarious existence. The major production firms were Messter (see Martin Koerber), Alfred Dukse (with its Pathé connections, see Frank Kessler/Sabine Lenk), Vitascope, Projektions-AG ‘Union’ (Paul Davidson, see Peter Lahn), Deutsche Bioskop and, finally, Deutsche Continental.40 Although the history of production companies is still one of the least researched areas of early

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German film, and although the figures published in trade journals are notoriously difficult to verify, it is variously estimated that during the period 1905-1910 only about 10% of the films shown in Germany were of German manufacture, with French film imports (30%), US (25%), Italian (20%) and Scandinavian (15%) making up the majority shares. Herbert Birett's Index of Films Shown roughly confirms these percentages, but since a listing by titles gives little information about the number of prints (or feet of film) imported, no conclusions can be drawn from such figures about relative popularity and market penetration. According to the 'feet-of-film-imported' calculated by Kristin Thompson, about 30% of all films show in Germany during this period were of American origin which would put U.S. imports slightly ahead of French ones. A popular joke about French films in Germany implied that by the outbreak of the war, Pathé had recouped more money from exporting to the German market with its films than the French government had paid in reparations after the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871. Whatever the truth or source of this story, it takes for granted the fact that Pathé was the most important single foreign force in Germany. The essay by Sabine Lenk and Frank Kessler greatly illuminates this vexed question of the French presence, letting us see how involved the trading relations between the two countries were, and how even such detailed studies as theirs do not allow one to generalize about either impact or influence of the foreign firms and their films. Emilie Altenloh – quite helpfully – identifies in her 1914 study the German-origin films shown in the cinemas neither as a total figure nor in percentage terms, but by genres. Accordingly, it seems for instance, that under 'drama,' German productions did relatively well (12%), whereas under the heading 'humorous sketches' only 3% of her sample were German. But here, too, one needs to bear in mind that one reason why foreign competition was so strong was that both French and American firms could offer German exhibitors whole programme packages, compared to domestic producers who were often limited to one or two genres.

Almost as difficult is an objective assessment of the exhibition basis. Corinna Müller has provided valuable new information, especially for the first decade, which shows that cinema-going reached quickly and deeply into the social fabric, both in the countryside and the cities. Again, figures that simply compute one type of exhibition venue can give a misleading picture: 'In 1902 Germany had only two fixed site cinemas (in Hamburg and Würzburg), twelve years later (at the start of the war) several thousands had opened their doors, with an estimated two million attendances a day. In England, by 1912, there were six thousand, and in the USA fourteen thousand cinemas.' This suggests that Germany was not one of the world's leading cinema nations, when in fact, due to its size and population, it has always been the largest European market, for domestic as well as foreign firms.

Generally, the picture of a rapidly growing infrastructure of cinemas seems correct, but statistics adduced by Georges Sadoul try to show that, compared with other countries, there were fewer cinemas for a population as large and as urban as that of industrialized Germany. The same figures are used by Dieter Prokop, in order to argue that the cinema was, after all, an underdeveloped business in Germany, with the implication that the
weakness of the exhibition sector was largely to blame for the backwardness of German film production.\footnote{26}

Here, more detailed field-work brings some necessary corrections. In his essay, Peter Lähn traces the rise of entrepreneur Paul Davidson, who opened his first picture palace in 1906 and by 1910 had built up a sizeable chain of 600-1000 seater luxury cinemas. It is therefore around this time that financial power can be seen to concentrate itself in the hands of certain exhibitors, who chose to become themselves large-scale buyers and importers, and thus distributors, in order to supply their venues. Similarly, as Evelyn Hampicke points out, a cinema-owner like Paul Oliver could amass not only a fortune in exhibition, but develop into a force to be reckoned with at the level of distribution and even production, within a relatively short space of time, right in the middle of the war.

What actually marks the transition from the first to the second decade most decisively is that the exponentially rising demand up to 1905 had in fact, by about 1906-1907, stabilized and even started a downward trend. Trade journals talked about a deep crisis, cinemas closed, and commentators predicted with un-concealed glee the terminal decline of this five-day wonder of which the public had already tired. What actually happened was a structural transformation, so that in order to understand the crisis in cinema-going around 1907, and the structural changes that remedied it, one has to move decisively away from the films themselves, as well as from looking for the reasons among the lack of interest by financiers or lack of talent among production companies. As we saw, attention must focus on the way films were traded and how they were presented. The emergence of a national cinema in the first instance depends on building up an institution – of which production is only one part – whose purpose it is to ensure that spectators do not just see this or that particular film, but come back, time and again, week after week.\footnote{47}

**Stars and Genres**

What typifies the second phase, in Germany as elsewhere, then, is initially the fact that a generation of cinema entrepreneurs came on the scene who understood how to build these audiences by building better cinemas, in more glamorous locations. If the first decade, emblematically, is that of Oskar Messter, the second belongs to the Paul Davidsions and David Oliers, entering the film business from the exhibition side, before moving to distribution and production, and in the process, becoming at once experts in the local (what customers in Frankfurt or Breslau, Hamburg or Dresden ‘want’) and the global (where to find what they want in the international market: Davidson with Pathé, Oliver with Nordisk).

For only once the distribution practice of the Monopolfilm – the ‘solution’ to the crisis and the ‘engine’ for restructuring the exhibition sector by bankrupting smaller cinema-owners – had established itself as the norm, did the domestic production sector begin to be profitable again, which often enough was by then in the hands of exhibitors (to Davidson and Oliver, one should add the names of Ludwig Gottschalk and Martin Deutler). Due to their money and buying power the film business witnessed the extraordinary expansion of
production and the experiment of the full-length feature film between 1911 and 1913, to which the German cinema owed its first flourishing of a narrative star-and-genre cinema. It helped to bring into existence a production profile that included the famous Autorenfilm and Paul Wegener's mock-gothic fairy-tales, as well as helping Asta Nielsen to her well-deserved national and international fame.

It is at this point that Asta Nielsen properly comes into the picture, whose magnetic pull greatly aided the establishment of the Monopolfilm as the dominant business practice, and the star as its most visible embodiment. We know that Nielsen is central to early German cinema, but we can now see that the logic that propelled her is almost directly inverse to the way it is traditionally pictured, where the Nielsen films are said to be the breakthrough to screen art, finally freeing the cinema from its commercial constraints. It would be more accurate to say that because of the commercial imperatives of making films more valuable by creating the scarcity called ‘Monopol’ or exclusivity, introduced in order to halt overproduction and thus the collapse of prices and profits, an actress like Asta Nielsen could attain the fame she did. That the kind of surplus exhibition-value she brought to the film-product was not grounded in her films’ artistic ambition, but in their universal appeal is usefully demonstrated when one recalls that one of the first successful Monopol films on offer for distribution by PAGU, Nielsen’s future business partners, was not a dramatic film at all, but the Johnson vs. Jeffries boxing match from July 1910 in Reno. As in the United States, then, the consolidation of the new commodity ‘cinema’ in Germany emerges out of a combination of longer films, restriction of access, transformation of programming policy, and building up of picture personalities or ‘stars.’

The shift of emphasis draws attention to one feature in particular: the connection of the cinema to the world of commerce and marketing, of consumer goods, fashion, lifestyle, travel – what used to be called, dismissively ‘Die Konfektion’ (the rag trade). One can clearly observe it in the example of Ernst Lubitsch, brought from the theatre to filmmaking by Davidson, and whose early films were frequently set in the milieu of garment shops or department stores (see Karsten Witte’s essay on SCHUHPALAST PINKUS). Featuring locations and intrigues that effectively mirrored or parodied the cinema itself, the films not only exposed how clever young men were making their fortune by trading on the vanities and anxieties of a new breed of (often female) consumers. Lubitsch also understood – and demonstrated in action – how in this world of make-believe, imposture can become itself a higher form of sincerity, and flattery the subtle pact film stars conclude with their public.

It is sometimes argued that the early cinema knew no picture personalities, since the mix of programme numbers did not allow for either individuation or identification. But what one finds in the German cinema, from the first Messter production onwards, are star performers. Admired for their special skills and extraordinary talents, proven in the performance arts of circus and variety, these were artists doing lightning sketches, strongmen like the Brothers Milton, operetta virtuosi like Franz Porten, Tilly Bébé the Lion Tamer, magicians, gagmen and gymnasts. Thomas Brandlmeier’s essay on German film comedy...
gives a good indication of how this world of skilled performers, with names like Josef Giampaietro, Alexander Girardi, Hans Junkermann (the lead player of Unser Klassenlehrer, discussed in several essays), Wilhelm Bendow, and, of course, Karl Valentin, formed the bedrock of the early cinema, in its crossover phase with variety theatre, which found itself mostly written out of film history. This is because scholars of German cinema – with the exception perhaps of Barry Salt[50] – have not paid the necessary attention to operetta as perhaps the key genre and media intertext that shaped the German cinema. A form as crucially dependent on music was unlikely to catch the attention of those looking for the roots of ‘silent cinema,’ but the example of Messter’s Tonbilder, the plots of so many German films from the teens and early twenties,[51] and the strongly developed music cultures in Germany at all social levels amount to incontrovertible (though even in this volume underrepresented) evidence for suggesting that popular and middle-brow music forms and music tastes may well be the hitherto hidden ‘norm’ of the early German cinema of the 1902-1909 period.[52]

In comparison to the vaudeville and variety theatre performers, it is fair to say that the picture personalities of the second phase were built up differently. In its links with ‘die Konfektion,’ the cinema’s chief assets were stars who could be loved not for special skills, but for what might be called their uncommon typicality or special ordinariness. Henry Porten as much as Hanni Weisse, Ernst Reicher or Harry Piel provided the role models for an upwardly mobile audience, showing to perfection how to behave as governess, daughter, or unmarried mother, and sporting the clothes, the gestures and attitudes fitting the man about town, the gentleman or intrepid detective.

Since genres are the conduits for stereotyping socially acceptable and transgres-
sive behaviour, they are the most obvious ways in which the cinema interfaces with its public, and thus with the situated knowledge, the prejudices and preferences, in short, with the cultural codes but also the shifting norms and values of a given community. The specificity of a nation’s cinema might therefore be most readily accessible via the genres its audiences preferred. For reasons that are touched on in the essays by Tilo Knops and Sebastian Hesse, but also Sabine Hake, the detective film is not only a key genre for certain processes of self-definition and self-reflexivity regarding the cinema as a whole, raising questions of narrative, plotting, agency and so on, but via its rich international pedigree (notably Danish and French, as well as American) locates the early German cinema firmly in the crucial arguments about modernity, the city and nostalgia.

It is true that in Germany’s genre cinema one can note some specific variations, so that, for instance, the general star cult included the particular cultural capital associated with a ‘name’ from the stage or the literary establishment (from Albert Bassermann and Paul Wegener as key actors, to Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Gerhart Hauptmann and Paul Lindau as representatives of the literary establishment). Yet the principle remained largely the same, and it indicates that Germany, on the eve of the world war, was poised to experience an expansion of production as well as a concentration of all the branches of the film business which together amount to the quantum leap that led to a qualitative change. Into this situation, the outbreak of hostilities in 1914 could only have sown confusion, since in view of the more muted and indirect causal nexus outlined here between cinema and politics, the impact of the war on the film business is far from easy to determine.\textsuperscript{53} Rather than assuming, as film historians have tended to do, that the war meant a radical rupture in the German film business, either in order to explain why the German cinema only ‘properly’ got under way after 1918, or to argue the inverse, namely that the import restrictions and the absence of foreign competition from 1914 onwards stimulated the growth of German domestic production, a careful reading of the evidence now suggests a more nuanced judgement.\textsuperscript{54}

The essays by Jeanpaul Goergen and Rainer Rother, for instance, indicate how closely self-advertising for the cinema, product promotion and military propaganda belong together, so that the divide between the industrial adver-
tising film, the military propaganda discourse, and what Sabine Hake names self-referentiality in early German cinema is often difficult to draw, indicating that the whole issue of fiction and non-fiction, of documentary, faked footage, and the Kulturfilm so typical for German cinema in its reform-movement phase needs to be looked at anew, in the light of the rediscovery of both filmic and non-filMIC evidence.

Among the ‘rediscovered’ non-fiction films of the teens, one of the key works must surely be a Messter production from 1916, now only known under its post-war title, which translates as THE POLDHÜTTE STEELWORKS DURING THE GREAT WAR. As Kimberly O’Quinn points out, there are at least three distinct genres or discourses skilfully interwoven and present simultaneously: that of the industrial advertising film, the technology-as-spectacle ‘cinema of attractions’ genre, and finally, we find here the blueprint for the formally experimental, ideologically complex ‘city film’ one usually only associates with the twenties. POLDHÜTTE raises once more all the issues of the argumentative structuring and visual patterning of non-fiction material debated in the seventies among film scholars when re-assessing the Lumière heritage of the factory film (process-as-progress forming a strong basis for narrativity). At the same time, POLDHÜTTE also gives a most intriguing twist to the standard industrial film, whose routine narrative (taking the viewer from raw materials to finished product, followed by display, dispatch, consumption) cannot but be highly ironic, and – one assumes – not only in retrospect, when one realizes that the products here readied for consumption are grenades, as beautifully ominous and ominously beautiful as such fetish objects of male technology are depicted in the films of Walter Ruttmann or Fritz Lang.
In POLDIHÜTTE a form of detached, dare one say, lyrical gaze motivates the slow pans, the atmospheric images, the precision editing. An eerily ordered life of the city-factory of the future is captured in the drama of a steel-mill in a rural setting, living from smoke and fire, from heat and noise, driven by machines to which are attached the armies of men and women toiling on the shop-floors and in the yards, but also the white-coated lab technicians and engineers. The film is poised on the cusp between a 19th century mode of perception that turns a man-made environment into a natural idyll, for the benefit of a self-flattering contemplation of human progress, and a 20th century constructivist view of the first machine age, with the machines themselves – veritable anthropomorphic monsters – representing only one species of mutant creatures in the huge hangars to be erected, or amongst the test stations, where cranks are turned for acroplanes, and giant suspension springs predict the pressures and shocks the new century is called upon to absorb. It is as if the filmmakers, commissioned to promote the propaganda effort of the German Reich, had already realized how heavy industry and warfare, mass-production and mass-destruction were to become the dominant face of the century. POLDIHÜTTE is the recto to METROPOLIS’ verso, indicating that Lang’s film may be looking back at Wilhelmine military ‘modernism’ as much as it agonizes over its fascination with American ‘Fordism.’

On the whole, then, the war affected the institution cinema in Germany quite unevenly, helping some branches to come into their own, but also posing new challenges to the production side which already experienced its major upturn before August/September 1914.56 If at first, the rather extreme (and as Mühl-Benninghaus below points out, unworkable) censorship measures took their toll, it seems that by 1916, the industry was booming again, before the severe shortages around 1917-1918 once more reduced production output. Films as exceptionally rich by any reckoning as DAS TAGEBUCH DES DR. HART, POLDIHÜTTE, HOMUNCULUS or DER GELBE SCHEIN – to name only those that are mentioned in the essays here from the years 1916/1917 – give some indication of the diversity which the feature-length production in Germany was capable of sustaining. The only assertion one can therefore make with some confidence is that the war distorted the ‘natural’ economic development of the German film business, just as Germany’s defeat severely handicapped it, mainly because of export embargoes, loss of audiences in occupied territories (such as Belgium), and the general shrinking of the market that had been available to German films during the war when the exhibition base had artificially expanded with Frontkinos, for instance. As it happens, not the end of the war per se, but another external economic factor, Germany’s hyper-inflation in 1921, became the main catalyst of its international recovery, but that is another story.57

Forms of Perception and Constructions of Space
Thus, rather than dwell only on the economic or institutional infrastructure, it seems important to begin to assess anew the effects that the revolution in exhibition practice, the move upmarket into consumer culture, and the shift to the full-length feature film as the central
element of the programme were introducing to film form and film style. As several contributors point out, in this respect, the teens in Europe generally and in Germany in particular have not fared well in the critical literature. Often seen as 'derivative,' 'transitional,' 'backward,' the films are above all, because of the middle-class orientation, considered as either irritatingly enslaved or interestingly indebted to the theatre and the (bourgeois) stage. With the theatre as (negative) 'norm' in mind, the production of the teens can then be checked for exceptional works that clearly do not have the stage as pretext. Conversely, the films can find themselves severely judged in comparison to an international contemporary practice that had already left the theatre behind, developing more intrinsically filmic means of story-telling. This is the case made, for instance, by Barry Salt, who is not at all surprised that even German audiences shunned domestic productions in favour of American films, given their manifest stylistic defects. Deploying his detailed knowledge of international filmmaking in the teens, he can present histograms and tables, of the kind he is justly famous for: average shot length, shot scales and cutting rates prove that German films are 'slow,' by comparison with American, French, Italian and Danish productions of the time. Salt has rubbed in the 'sins' of German films by itemizing the general lack of scene dissection and continuity editing, the tableau-like framings and frontal acting, paired with overcomplicated or poorly constructed plots, much of which seems to reconstruct a 19th century theatrical narrative space, all but devoid of spectacle, pace and narrative verve.

In contrast, Sabine Hake has tried to look at German production of the teens with the criteria of self-referentiality and the self-conscious use of the medium in mind. In quite a large number of films she detects narrative devices that clearly refer to the medium itself, putting in play the audience, as in the satire of a hypocritical film-reformer WIE SICH DER KINTOPP RÄCHT ('The Revenge of the Cinematographer'); by featuring protagonists who are engaged in filmmaking (DER STELLUNGSLOSE PHOTOGRAPHER, a photographer in search of a job, with its rare scenes of a portrait photographer's studio); or starring Asta Nielsen in DIE FILMPRIMA DONNA, an amusing film-within-a-film parody of the business.

A related criterion – that of 'expressivity' – can be found in Kristin Thompson's essay. The detailed investigation of one film's formal strategies and principles of narrative construction, derived not from theatrical staging or the story on which DIE LANDSTRASSE is based, demonstrates a will to style and filmic expression that Thompson has noticed in very diverse films from a number of countries, and that has led her, more broadly, to argue for something like a filmic avantgarde already for the teens, in contrast to the more common assumption of the birth of the film avantgarde with THE CABINET OF DR CALIGARI. Leonardo Quaresima, too, in his essay on HOMUNCULUS, strongly argues for this film to be seen as experimental, and as such, a 'missing link' between the fantastic films of the early teens, like THE STUDENT OF PRAGUE, and the more famously stylized fantasy films from the twenties.

Similar with respect to their formal rigor, both Salt and Thompson aim at distilling filmic specificity, in order to derive from this the notion of a cinematic style which might be posited as a period norm, useful not only in distinguishing the cinema from the theatre,
but also for calibrating ‘good practice’ and comparative, international criteria, against which some films, in Salt’s case DIE LIEBE DER MARIA BONDE, and in Thompson’s Paul von Wörningen’s DIE LANDSTRASSE can be seen as (interesting) exceptions.

Thompson comes to some intriguing conclusions, notably that the treatment of space deserves special attention. This argument has been central to a number of readings of European films, for instance, the Scandinavian films from the teens, including the famous STUDENT OF PRAGUE, whose enigmatic director Stellan Rye is featured in a separate essay by Caspar Tyberg.\(^5\) Michael Wedel, in his essay on Franz Hofer’s HEIDENRÖSLEIN has extended this approach to cinematic space, in order to extrapolate from it a new theory of genre, especially as it applies to melodrama, and the distinct regimes of knowledge this genre deploys. In melodramas, the pressure of other stylistic paradigms, as well as media intertexts is very notable, and Jürgen Kasten, looking for Heinrich Lautensack’s signature on ZWEIMAL GELEBT, gives a reading of the relation between stage and screen across screenwriting, at a point where it seems to establish itself in Germany as an independent practice. Since Michael Wedel situates this same film’s spatial configurations in the context of the particularly enigmatic ‘commercial’ strategy of its director Max Mack, ZWEIMAL GELEBT is indeed the film around which something like a debate develops, especially intriguing in view of the fact that ZWEIMAL GELEBT is also singled out by Salt as particularly inept,\(^6\) just as according to his criteria, there is little to commend the films of Franz Hofer, in turn the objects of glowing and very detailed analyses by Yuri Tsivian and Elena Dagadra.

Might it be possible, by way of concluding this introduction, to spell out a little what seems involved in this debate, if necessary by situating the arguments so far summarized within a slightly different conceptual frame? For instance, I would want to suggest that film production in the teens can best be defined in two directions simultaneously and so to speak, two-dimensionally: one dimension pertains to the narrative and stylistic implications of the new feature-length format, while the second dimension concerns the spectator-screen relationship, considered in its constitutive, philosophical dimension (as discussed by so-called ‘apparatus theory’),\(^7\) but also in its context-dependent history (as discussed, for in-
stance, by Charles Musser’s history of ‘screen-practice’). The two dimensions are interconnected but nonetheless independent variables, which need to be examined separately, and which do indeed require a very careful scrutiny of the films themselves. The essays by Heide Schlüpmann and Michael Wedel, by Jürgen Kasten, Ivo Blom and Elena Dagarda can—and should—be read as returning with fresh eyes to a number of films and filmmakers, arguing implicitly that our notion of norm and deviation, but also any argument about filmic specificity must be carefully grounded in historical intertexts, so that neither the theatre (in Schlüpmann’s reconsideration of Asta Nielsen’s use of profilmic, scenic, filmic and intra-diegetic spaces) nor painting (in Ivo Blom’s essay on the pictorial and touristic representational conventions), neither proscenium space (Jürgen Kasten) nor illusionist space (Michael Wedel) should have an a-priori value assigned to it, regarding its filmic specificity or lack of it. Elena Dagarda’s detailed and sensitive look at Hofer’s films, with the parameters of point of view and space in mind, shows how much such a close reading can yield in new information, but also how a knowledge of historical intertexts and a cognitive approach to narration can bring to life a filmmaker whose work was hitherto all but absent from the pantheon of cinema. But it is above all Yuri Tsivian’s comparative study of spatial features, compositional details and character blocking in films by Yevgenii Bauer and Franz Hofer that openly challenges the one-dimensional picture we have of the teens as a period tyrannized and stultified by the theatre, for he demonstrates how at the very heart of theatricality and pictorialism a genuinely original conception of cinematic space and narrative form can emerge.

Putting in Place: Screen Space, Audiences and Self-Reference

Two films from the early teens raise these issues in exemplary form, if only because their relative directorial anonymity would indicate that one is dealing here with formal features so much taken for granted as to constitute the invisible presence of a ‘norm.’ Since both films were also very popular at the time, while today the reasons for this popularity almost wholly elude us, they pose the sort of challenge mentioned earlier: what might film history gain from examining the films themselves? Picked more or less at random, the films are two Messter productions, RICHARD WAGNER (Carl Froelich/William Wauer, 1913) and DES PFARRERS TÖCHTERLEIN (Adolf Gärtnerr, 1912). In the case of RICHARD WAGNER, the focus is on film length and what it can tell us about a film’s social function and intended audience, while with DES PFARRERS TÖCHTERLEIN the screen-spectator relationship is the point at issue, defining its generic identity as melodrama, but also its sociological value as interpretable document.

RICHARD WAGNER, at a length of 70 minutes, seems at first sight one of the more strangely ‘inept’ films when judged by our contemporary taste or Barry Salt’s evolutionary scale. Slow, choppy, devoid of story-telling skills, its succession of tableux convey the overwhelming impression of stasis: more an illustrated picture book than a dramatic narrative (see illustr., p. 000). Yet given that length correlates directly to the conditions of reception
(and the structural changes the early film programme underwent) and thus defines generic identity as well as marketing strategy (the ‘Monopolfilm’), the film might become interesting once we regard it as the solution to a problem we may no longer feel as such, namely of how to tell a longer story within determinate conditions of reception, still dominated by the numbers programme. As to its generic identity, one would expect a film about Richard Wagner to belong to the Autorenfilm, aiming at the better-paying middle-class audience, looking for cultural respectability. Yet judging from the publicity material, Richard Wagner appears to have been treated as something of a folk hero, whose fictionalized life belonged less to the (later) genre of the musician’s bio-pic than to the oral narratives of youthful rebels and national savours, like William Tell or Andreas Hofer, about whom Messter had already made a film in 1909. Once one regards Richard Wagner under the double aspect of hybrid genre (bridging – like its hero – the cultural divides of ‘high’ art and ‘low’ entertainment), and ‘transitional’ form (in the move to the long feature film), the apparent solecisms and stylistic unevenness may turn out to have their own logic. In other words, the argument would be that the ‘medium’ the film intertextualizes is not Wagner’s music or his operas, but a popular literary or semi-literary genre, maybe even fairy tale and myth (one notes, from the advertising, that it played as one of the big Christmas pictures of 1913). Richard Wagner was a film made for a mass (family) audience, while at the same time possessing an identity as an Autorenfilm, involving a ‘name’ personality from the arts, which goes to show that the concept of the Autorenfilm was a marketing concept before it was a quality concept, or rather, the quality concept is also a marketing concept.63 What, however, becomes evident only when viewing the film itself is that its narrative structure is heavily marked by the numbers principle, and thus represents a distinct stage within the narrative transformations occasioned by the change in film length. Bearing the variety programme in mind, and recalling the distinctions between the various ‘genres’ of the short film, one can in Richard Wagner, without too much difficulty, recognize a range of spectacle attractions and genres from the pre-1910 international cinema: there is the (British) restaged documentary [in the 1848 revolution scene], the (Danish) detective serial [as Wagner hides in the doorway to escape arrest], the (French) film d’art [the encounter Wagner and Liszt], the (Biograph or Pathé) historical reconstruction [the tableau including Friedrich Nietzsche, where in the USA it would be Lincoln, or Dreyfus in France], and there is even a Méliès-type trick film scene, when Wagner is shown telling the story of Siegfried and the helmet that makes him invisible. As especially this last episode shows, the film takes great care over its narrational procedures. putting in place several narrators, both external and internal, introduced by script and intertitles, themselves referring to different narrational levels, as in the narrative within a narrative, or the insert shot of the warrant for Wagner’s arrest.

In this respect, Richard Wagner seems more ‘sophisticated’ than many other films from 1913, while at the same time more ‘primitive,’ although especially among the Autorenfilm one finds further examples of films where the numbers principle has survived inside the continuous feature film. The phenomenon was appreciated or remarked upon as
such by the reviews, as in the case 

\textit{atlantis} (by August Blom, 1913, after the novel by Gerhart Hauptmann) and \textit{wo ist coletti?} (by Max Mack, 1913, and discussed by several contributors).\footnote{The examples illustrate less the old argument about the difficult transition from short to feature length film (the problems of how to generate a longer narrative), and rather indicate how beholden the German cinema still was to the variety theatre as its structural principle, not as a performance mode or entertainment site, but as the narrative space in which spectators and films communicated. In other words, key films from 1913, in order to reach a mass audience, practically reinvented for the long \textit{Monopolfilm} a narrative which simulated the short film numbers programme. That this is what the audience wanted and expected is clear from many a contemporary account. As we saw, only intellectuals thought the numbers programme incoherent, and the paradox of ‘primitive’ and ‘sophisticated’ film form in Richard Wagner directs attention to the fact that the film proposes to the spectator a narrative space which is no longer ours, just as its mode of address to the audience puts the modern audience in a relation to the screen we would no longer label ‘cinematic.’ As with so many other films discussed in this volume – by Asta Nielsen/Urban Gad, Max Mack and Franz Hofer, or Paul von Woringen, Joseph Delmont and William Wauer -, the Archimedean point around which film form in the teens in Germany seems to turn are the different levels that link audience-space to screen space and structure their registers of reference, be they theatrical, illusionist, performative, documentary, fictional. The relation screen space, audience and self-reference, which are addressed by almost all the contributors, points to the possible logic that underlies the changes of film length, of distribution and exhibition practices, as well as the cinema’s relation to other arts. What in the past has sometimes been thematized, often rather polemically and antagonistically, under the heading of the presumed theatricality of early film, or conversely, the cinema’s efforts to break free from theatre to find its own identity, turns out to be part not of a modernist quest for medium-specificity, but belongs to a more fundamental history of modernity in the sphere of representation and public spaces, where the cinema plays its role in the shifting and contradictory development which in urban environments at once fragmented and collectivized the masses into spectators and audiences.

The fact that in early cinema the films imagined their audience to be physically present, while in the later, narrative full-length feature film it was precisely the imaginary viewpoint of the spectator, his or her virtual presence in the representation that became the norm, indicates that what is contrasted is not theatre and cinema, but one kind of cinema with another kind of cinema. This affects quite crucially the way a film can be interpreted, and thus points to a possible interface between reception history, genre study and the formal analysis of individual films. While a reception and genre-directed approach to early German films tends to establish a socio-cultural or socio-pathological profile of Wilhelmine class, caste and status society, perhaps by pointing out the many nannies and officer’s sons, or all the middle-aged lovers courting tomboys that could be their daughters, such a one-to-one correlation now seem to me to miss the crucial dimension. How can one feel confident about

\begin{center}
\textit{Thomas Elsaesser}
\end{center}
interpreting the prevalence of authority figures like the military and the clergy within a political or ideological argument after having given some thought to the interplay of spectator space and screen space in some of these films? My second film example is a case in point. DES PFARRERS TÖCHTERLEIN (‘The Pastor’s Daughter’), an all but forgotten Henry Porten film which in its day was internationally popular, emerges as important precisely to the degree that, in contrast to RICHARD WAGNER, it requires and to some extent assumes an imaginary spectator, both cognitively (insofar as narrative comprehension depends on the spectator appreciating an uneven distribution of knowledge among the characters) and perceptually (insofar as the spectator is privileged in sharing the heroine’s optical point of view in a crucial scene).

More precisely, DES PFARRERS TÖCHTERLEIN combines both models of spectator-screen relationship in early cinema, that of an audience imagined as physically present, and that of an audience both ‘present’ and ‘absent.’ In fact, it makes the conflicts between two modes the very heart of the drama, readable today – in the multiplications of diegetic and non-diegetic audiences, and the discrepancy between optical and ‘moral’ point of view – as the mise-en-abyme of the historical audience’s dilemma. One can speak of a veritable object lesson in teaching a new form of perception and reception, of understanding narrative logic and character motivation psychologically (the hallmark of film melodrama), designed to force the spectator to put him/herself into the place of the protagonist, and no longer understand the protagonist as the (re)presenter of feelings and actions.

Such a reading would suggest almost the opposite of a traditional sociological interpretation in the manner of Kracauer: a major is needed (in, for instance, another forgotten, but ‘normatively’ useful film, DIE KINDER DES MAJORS [‘The Children of the Major’]) not because he reflects the militarism of Wilhelmine society, but in order to motivate efficiently at the level of story-world a most subtle narrational structure about who knows what, when and about whom, allowing the film to introduce the convention of the duel, and thereby obliging the spectator to experience the situation of the brother seeking satisfaction on behalf of his jilted sister as irresolvable and ‘tragically’ inevitable. Similarly, the pastor needs to be a pastor in DES PFARRER’S TÖCHTERLEIN so that the complex architecture of gazes which culminates and climaxes the film – the daughter witnesses how her father marries the man she loves to the woman he left her for – can actually be physically motivated, creating an explosive dramatic space (See Figs. 1-4, below). In addition, only the ‘local’ or ‘cultural’ knowledge of the spectator that this concerns a protestant church, and within the church, the physical location of the altar, gives the film its full (melo-)dramatic pathos, since it stages the conflict as the drama of spaces and gazes. What is significant is the pastor’s physical position, seeing his daughter appear in the organ loft at the other end of the altar while the bride and bridegroom, kneeling in front of the altar, are oblivious to the drama unfolding between father and daughter, over their heads and behind their backs. In this film, then, it is the pastor who motivates the church setting, which motivates the space, which in turn allows these complex interchange of gazes and uneven distribution of knowledge to be
physically embodied. Across the pastor as bearer of multiple significations, a space of suspense and drama is created which no other profession could have conveyed as economically.67

These cursory examples of a reading, informed so evidently by present historical and theoretical preoccupations, once more return one to the question of 'normalization,' for they open up the difficulty of assuming that a historical period not only has a norm, but 'knows itself' (i.e. is self-reflexive, or self-expressive) through this norm by deviating from it. Just as likely, and here I come to the fourth meaning of the title 'A Second Life,' the mirroring, the self-referentiality, the mises-en-abyme, and the different types of expressivity and stylization – but also the shadow of hindsight falling on a pre-history – only help to confirm that in the history of the cinema, as in all history, the phenomena analyzed neither 'know themselves' in the terms we know them, nor are they ultimately sufficient on to themselves, as the idea of 'normalization' misleadingly and ideologically suggests. We therefore, inevitably, have to 'normalize' our own demand for normalization, which is to say, relativize any presumption we might have to 'know' how Wilhelmine society has 'lived' its cinema and represented it to itself: on the contrary, the films will forever demand from those who rediscover them 'a second life.'
Section I
Audiences and the Cinema Industry