1 'Lehrreich und amüsant'[1]

Historical films in the period 1896-1933

For a long time, the historiography of German cinema, understood as a complex entity of industry, films, audience and criticism, has been oriented mostly towards the years following the First World War. General studies begin with a description of the first German film screenings, only to make a carefree jump across two decades to the 1920s, a period in which film as art was said to have flourished. Gradually, this historical gap is being closed. Attention to early film has increased enormously since the famous 1978 FIAF conference in Brighton, and it has not passed by German film historians either. In the meantime, several interesting studies have appeared dealing with the first two decades of German film history.[2]

At the end of the nineteenth century, at least two countries in Europe pioneered the development of the film medium. The French Lumière brothers created a furore with their cinematograph, while in Germany, the brothers Max and Emil Skladanowsky stole the (variety) show with a presentation of film images recorded and projected with a home-made device, the so-called Bioskop. Their first public presentation took place in Berlin's Wintergarten on 1 November 1895. The programme, typically consisting of a series of short alternating segments, would influence the design of cinema programmes for years to come.[3] However, in the early years of the new medium, film was also distributed by the so-called Wanderkino operating mainly on fairs and similar festivities. Under the caption 'Neu! Neu! Das Bioskop, die interessanteste Findung der Neuzeit', a Berlin daily described the first experience with the new medium as 'lehrreich und amüsant' – educational and entertaining.[4] In the next few decades, the cinema would move between the two poles, education/entertainment and politics/art. Various social institutions such as religion, education and politics would unleash fierce discussions about the potentially negative and/or positive uses of the film medium.

The presentation of film programmes typically consisting of ten or more very short films about a variety of subjects – such as music, acrobatics, sports, current affairs, drama and humour – drew mixed crowds. Contrary to what has long been assumed, it was not only the lower social classes who were fascinated by film presentations. With the exception of the university-educated 'Bildungsbürgertum', the composition of the audience was rather diverse, also in terms of sex and age.[5] Even the German Kaiser himself was a film enthusi-

ast, especially when he could appear before the camera himself.[6] This meant that film could, to a certain extent, count on a good press.

The 'Wanderkino' phenomenon of travelling 'Bioskope' changed in terms of dimension as well as nature from 1906 onwards. More and more so-called 'Ladenkinos' opened their doors in former shops, cafes and houses, creating serious competition for the 'Wanderkino'.[7] This competition ultimately became an important factor in the establishment of the big 'Kinopaläste', the first of which, the Union-Theater, was opened at Berlin's Alexanderplatz in 1909.

The change of cinema space was accompanied by other developments. From 1910 onwards, the running time of films increased and the narrative structure became more complex. So far, the technological aspect of cinema had been an important novelty attraction and the images actually showed something rather than telling a story. Now, the 'Erzählkino' era began.[8] Story, suspense and film stardom played an increasingly central role. Also, the composition of the audience gradually began to include middle-class spectators. Screen adaptations of works of literature, plays and important historical events – often defined as 'Autorenfilme' meant that even for the middle class, a visit to the cinema became a legitimate leisure activity. This was one of the beat-them-if-you-cannot-join-them strategies used by opponents of the medium – united in the 'Reformbewegung' – to transform the cinema into a respectable cultural practice.[9] Despite these efforts, however, the cinema kept the stigma of being a proletarian and immoral institute for a long time.

The fact that screening spaces became ever larger, narratives more exciting and complex, and audiences more sophisticated, was not really due to the German film productions themselves. On the eve of the First World War, only around fifteen percent of cinema screenings on offer consisted of German films.[10] The other films that were screened came mainly from America, France, Italy, Denmark, and Great Britain. Especially the French film industry operated expansively. From 1908 onwards, production companies such as Pathé Frères, Gaumont and Éclaire gained a dominant position within the German cinema circuit.[11] They lost this position during the First World War, when film exports were curbed. Another strong foreign competitor was Nordisk from Denmark which, because of its neutral status, was allowed to continue wartime exports to Germany.[12] Germany owes one of its major stars to the Nordisk company: Asta Nielsen gained such widespread popularity that she became the country's biggest star next to German diva Henny Porten.

The fact that Germany's film industry at first lagged behind the film industry of its French neighbours was due to the lack of enthusiasm on the part of German banks to invest in this young industry. Because of the limited prospect of sound developments in the future, German banks had strong reservations about the relatively new medium. This did not mean that production compa-

nies lacked capital, but in the first decades the development of new technology received the lion's share of investments.[13] In 1912, a total of seven companies were involved in the production of motion pictures, six of them operating in Berlin.[14] One of the best known film producers was Messter Projektion led by Oskar Messter.[15] He not only produced films, but his studio in Berlin's Friedrichstrasse was also a workshop where he carried out important technical experiments. After Pathé and Gaumont had already established their reputation as newsreel producers, Messter also successfully ventured into this territory. Still during the first decade of the twentieth century the German film industry was hardly able to compete with foreign film production.[16] German film industry did not take off until after 1911, with films starring, among others, Asta Nielsen.

From 1915 onwards, when narrative structure and aesthetics became more complex in films, the discourse about cinema changed, too. So far, the medium had received most of the attention from the daily press and some theatre periodicals, the former usually using a condescending and unprofessional tone. There was hardly any serious criticism. Most film reports were concerned with the design and make-up of the theatre, with technical innovations or with the alleged perverse influence of cinema attendance rather than with the film itself or its aesthetic qualities. More often than not, these reports were nothing more than recommendations to go and see the film. Also, with a weekly average of five hundred premieres, there could hardly be any question of individual film reviews.[17]

The first instance of a serious film review practice came with the establishment of a number of specialist periodicals, *Der Kinematograph* (1907), the *Erste Internationale Film-Zeitung* (1908) and *Lichtbildbühne* (1908).[18] The first and latter remained influential for a long time, while the *Film-Zeitung* was already shut down in 1920. Other important specialist periodicals that appeared after the First World War were *Film-Kurier*, *Reichsfilmblatt* and *Der Film*. These periodicals covered news and had critical reviews on production companies, economic and technical developments, problems of censorship and matters of an organisational nature. In a word, they are important sources for film-historical research.

The 1913 breakthrough in film criticism was partly due to the emergence of the so-called 'Autorenfilme'.[19] At this time, there were some twelve specialist periodicals on the market, and the daily press also began to take more interest in the medium.[20] However, truly professional film criticism written by specialised critics only appeared in the 1920s. In the years preceding this professionalisation, it was normal practice for periodicals and dailies to send their theatre critics or any other interested journalists to the cinema to deal with the step-

child of culture which the medium still was. The process of professionalisation was at first slowed down by the war, but later, reviews were produced that amounted to more than simply a description of the contents of the film. Films were increasingly judged on their own merits and, not surprisingly, the nineteen-twenties saw the emergence of the first theories on functions, objectives and aesthetic possibilities and limitations of film, in a word about the 'essence' of the medium. Some critics, including Rudolf Arnheim, Siegfried Kracauer, Bela Balasz, Herbert Ihering (who was also a theatre critic), Lotte Eisner, Willy Haas, Hans Sahl, Erich Kästner, and Alfred Kerr gained a certain degree of fame.[21] With the exception of Ihering and Kracauer, these were not the critics who would shine their light on the war films of the Weimar period – simply because they hardly wrote about these films – but less famous ones like Ernst Jäger and Georg Herzberg (*Film-Kurier*), Ernst and Hans Wollenberg (*Lichtbildbühne*), Hans-Walther Betz (*Der Film*), Kurt Kersten, (*Welt am Abend*), Heinz Pol, (*Vossische Zeitung*), Walter Redmann (*Berliner Morgenpost*), Erwin Gephard (*Der Deutsche*), Hans-Ulrich Henning (*Kreuz-Zeitung*) and others did. The identity of some critics could not be traced because they chose to remain anonymous or signed their reviews with only their initials, as did a number of the above-mentioned critics.

German film industry during the First World War

The outbreak of the First World War gave a new impulse to the development of a national film industry. Germany closed its borders to its enemies, gradually putting most of its competitors in the film industry out of business,[22] after a brief initial period when all kinds of exceptions crossed the border.[23] The *Kinematograph* reported on the new situation as follows:

> Vor ca. drei Tagen schon sind die französischen Staatsangehörigen der grossen Pariser Firmen Pathé, Gaumont usw. nach ihrer Heimat abgereist, und Leute, die jahrelang als Kollegen friedlich an einem Pulte arbeiteten, können sich in nächster Zeit als Feinde auf Leben und Tod mit der Waffe in der Hand gegenüberstehen; die Internationalität unserer Industrie bringt das so mit sich – c'est la guerre![24]

As early as five days after the German mobilisation on August 1st, the Verein der Lichtbildtheater-besitzer Gross-Berlins und Provinz Brandenburg (e.V.) had called on cinema managers to stop showing any French films.[25] Although many complied with such calls, much French film material was smuggled into Germany via neutral subsidiaries abroad, and shown in cinemas around the country.[26] Only on 25 February 1916 did the German state officially issue a ban

on film imports.[27] From that moment on, the country was practically left to its own devices and forced to satisfy the domestic demand for film entertainment itself.[28] The products of the neutral Danish, American (until 1917) and Italian (until 1915) film industries were the only ones allowed on the German film market.[29]

How the national film industry reacted to this situation can partly be seen from the figures. The number of domestic production companies grew constantly from 25 in 1914 to 130 in 1918.[30] The centre of German cinema was Berlin; later, Munich would become the film centre of southern Germany. In fact, an increase in film activities could be observed in Germany just before the war, as was shown by the construction of the famous Babelsberg studio complex near Berlin. The success of (foreign) films had convinced German entrepreneurs that producing films could be a profitable activity. In a retrospective published in 1919, the *Kinematograph* confirmed that the war had given a strong impulse to the German film industry:

> Der Krieg hat erst so eigentlich eine bedeutungsvolle deutsche Filmindustrie geschaffen, eine Industrie, die heute erfolgreich auf den Plan mit der ausländischen Konkurrenz treten kann.[31]

Indeed, German industry emerged from the war as a winner. Germany was not called 'Europe's Hollywood' for nothing.[32]

At the beginning of the war, it quickly became clear that the German film industry was lagging far behind that of its enemies. Although in Germany the influence of film was overestimated in a negative sense rather than underestimated – it was seen as a factor in the increase in crime and moral decline in the masses –, France and Great Britain had meanwhile discovered the propagandistic possibilities that the new medium offered. It seemed logical to use film and its capacity for manipulation as a means to convince the population of the depravity of the German enemy. The suggestive effect of the medium turned out to be very suitable to mobilise or fan the flames of anti-German sentiment in order to summon the warlike spirit and willingness to sacrifice soldiers and civilians alike.[33] Once the Germans realised the extent to which foreign cinema defiled German honour, they also decided to take action.

In circles which, in the past, had taken a hostile attitude towards film, much activity was sparked by the desire to restore the damage done to Germany in the international arena. After all, all these so-called Hetzfilme were also exported to neutral countries and allies of the Entente states. People in the higher reaches of press, industry, trade, tourism and culture, as well as representatives of the Foreign Ministry, joined forces in order to develop an antidote. Although the first result was meant as an antidote, it looked far less aggressive than what was being produced in France, Great Britain and later the United

States. In November 1916, interested parties created an organisation which was to formulate a first response to allied anti-German propaganda. This organisation was christened 'Deutsche Lichtbild-Gesellschaft' (DLG).[34] The rightwing nationalist industrialist and media tycoon, Alfred Hugenberg, and his right-hand man, Ludwig Klitzsch, were considered the most powerful men in the DLG organisation.[35] During the Weimar period, they would emerge as the two most powerful men in the Ufa organisation. DLG concentrated mainly on the production of short propaganda documentaries which served to show the success of German industrial development, the beauty of the German landscape and the riches of German culture.[36] Germany was to be shown in a positive light. It will hardly come as a surprise that this 'soft' approach was no match for the more aggressive propaganda films produced by the Allies that, for some time, had been able to penetrate the neutral markets. Germany failed to come up with an effective response to the negative stereotype of the cruel and lustful 'Hun'. In 1917, Reichstag member Gustav Stresemann wrote in *Der Film*:

> Wenn sich heute der Deutsche oft verwundert fragt, woher es denn komme, dass dieses Deutschland, das 44 Jahre hindurch stets die Politik des Friedens getrieben und sich bestrebt hat, der Welt den Frieden zu erhalten, einen so geschlossene Phalanx von Feinden allüberall im Erdenrund, und wie die jüngsten Tage wieder gezeigt haben, bis hinauf in den fernsten Osten sich erwerben konnte (...) dann übersieht er neben anderen meist die ausserordentlich wirkungskräftige Filmpropaganda, welche unsere Feinde sehr im Gegensatz zu uns überall in der Welt getrieben haben. (...) Tausende und Abertausende von Kilometern Ententefilms sind auf die Neutralen losgelassen worden, Films, die dazu bestimmt waren, eine deutschfeindliche Stimmung zu verbreiten und die noch neutralen Länder zum Eintritt in den Weltkrieg an der Seite der Entente zu verleiten.[37]

This statement illustrates an untold belief in the power of the medium of film. Also, Stresemann used the enemy film propaganda to advertise Germany's peace-loving mission.

After the first battles, it quickly became clear that the initial war of movement soon changed into a war of attrition with stagnating front lines. The heroic spirit with which Germany and the other countries that were involved had first entered the war had to be revived. After about two years of battle, the great losses at the front and the food shortages among the civilian population created feelings of dejection and resistance against the desperate situation. Nevertheless, the arms industry was ordered to step up production via the so-called Hindenburgprogramm. At this stage, military circles became interested in the possibilities of the medium of film, too. So far, high-ranking military officials had only taken a passing interest in film propaganda. Matthias Erzberger,

a signatory of the 1919 armistice, wrote in his memoirs: 'Bei den militärischen Stellen fand man 1914-15 äusserst wenig Verständnis für die Notwendigkeit der Aufklärung im Ausland.'[38] Erich Ludendorff, however, had, for quite some time, been unhappy with the war propaganda as it had been conducted thus far. He believed that the film industry was too fragmented to be effective.[39]

Ludendorff therefore thought that the time was right to create production companies that would operate entirely under the guidance and control of the military authorities. Compared to the Entente states, Germany had left it rather late to engage seriously in this form of war propaganda. The idea that the war would be brief had been the ruling thought for too long. This meant that many private film companies were wary of switching to a type of film production that would only serve war propaganda, even in the most testing of times. Also, in Germany it was still unusual for the state to provide financial support to national film production. The situation in the Entente states was quite different, where state authorities poured large sums of money into the production of anti-German propaganda films. In Germany, people felt they were above the vile nature of the antagonistic 'Hass-, Hetz- und Lügefilmen'.[40] Yet it became impossible to ignore these films any longer; something had to be done to redress the balance, and less subtly so than DLG had done.

Bufa and Ufa

The year 1917 saw the establishment of the Bild- und Filmamt (Bufa) on 30 January and the Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft (Ufa) on 18 December. Bufa became an umbrella organisation for all governmental and military film and press agencies. The production company was supervised by the Foreign Ministry's military section and concentrated on producing documentaries on military action and propaganda feature films.[41] During the war, Bufa was responsible for the establishment of hundreds of small screening venues at the front. Showing films behind the front lines was supposed to stir up the ordinary soldiers' fighting spirit. This meant that the programme offered them entertainment in an alternation with images from reality which referred to the actual situation at the front as little as possible.[42] In 1916, field doctor Spier Irwing wrote in *Der Film*:

> In der Front, im Einerlei des Stellungskrieges, nach den Kampftagen des Schützengrabenringens erweist sich das Kino als nervöses Heilmittel, als ein einflussreicher Faktor bei Überregtheit und Depression, (...) die Kinos an der Front sind mehr als Amüsierlokale, und ihre Tätigkeit kann man nur billigen und unterstützen.[43]

These film screeings were, of course, very popular with the soldiers. People who had, until then, treated film with contempt often developed a more posi-

tive attitude towards this leisure activity after their experience with the medium at the front. This was an important side issue for the film industry.[44]

After the war, Bufa eventually became part of the Interior Ministry.[45] Many of the film recordings made during the war were later used in documentaries about the First World War. The best known examples are Der Weltkrieg I (1927, Soldan) and Der Weltkrieg II (1928, Lasko), both Ufa releases. Many feature films shot after the war contained footage derived from the Bild- und Filmamt archives. This so-called front footage was often shot during parades or exercises behind the lines rather than at the theatres of war which they were supposed to depict.

While Bufa focused on producing short documentaries, Ufa concentrated mainly on the production of feature films. The year 1917, when the two companies were established, was also the year in which the United States gave up its policy of passive support to the Entente states and entered the war to play an active role on the battlefield. The American film industry had involved itself in the war earlier by producing countless patriotic and anti-war movies.[46] The final step towards war propaganda proved a small one after 1917. Within a short period of time, both American and foreign film theatres were supplied with new war movies that portrayed the Germans in a very bad light.[47] Eight months after the Americans had declared war, Germany took up the gauntlet by establishing the Universum-Film Aktiengesellschaft (Ufa).

Ufa originated from a co-operative association between the military leadership and top-level management of German banking, represented by Field Marshall Ludendorff and the President of Deutsche Bank, Emil Georg Stausz.[48] With money brought together by Deutsche Bank, the government and the heavy industries – a starting capital of no less than 25 million marks – the largest and most famous film company was founded that Germany would ever see. Ufa was a giant in two respects, both horizontally and vertically. Ufa took hold of the three sectors that make up any film industry: production, distribution and film theatres. The company also became the parent company for a great number of daughter companies, including Union Film and Messter-Film. Ufa also gained control over part of the Danish Nordisk concern whose extensive film theatre chain was the only means of access to the German film market, and, as a neutral institution, it had some influence on film markets both in anti-German and in neutral countries.[49]

The establishment of Ufa proved an enormous impulse for the German film. It attracted the cream of the crop of the film world. People like Viggo Larsen, Fritz Kortner, Konrad Wiene, Robert Wiene, Joe May[50], Mia May, Ernst Lubitsch, Harry Liedtke, Emil Jannings, Giuseppe Becce[51] (musician), Henny Porten, Reinhold Schünzel[52], Karl Freund, Ossi Oswalda, Margarete Kupfer[53], Pola Negri, Käthe Haack[54] and Harry Piel would make Ufa famous. Together

with an excellent production infrastructure, including the fabulous Tempelhof studios, this enormous creative potential made sure that, in the 1920s, Ufa was seen as Europe's answer to Hollywood. The aim was to build a strong basis from which to compete with the foreign film industry. Nonetheless, the films with which Ufa shelled its competitors were not of a baiting nature.

Screening the war

What was actually shown to the audiences during the war years? It emerges from the two main specialist film periodicals, *Kinematograph* and *Lichtbildbühne*, that the film industry adjusted almost immediately to the changes after the first days of August 1914.[55] People were generally aware that they would be asked to fulfil new tasks.[56] In the impending years of war, audiences would need images that provided up-to-date information, stirred up patriotism and a fighting spirit, as well as images that offered entertainment and consolation. Only three days after the outbreak of war, the *Kinematograph* said more people visited the cinema than ever before.

> Das Publikum harrt ungeduldig der definitiven Nachrichten. Bis in die späten Nachtstunden sind die Strassen dicht bevölkert, und die vielen im Betrieb befindlichen Kinotheater sind eine höchstwillkommene Gelegenheit, ein Paar Stunden in den Lichtspielstätten zu verbringen, um mit Hilfe der flimmernden Bilder Angst, Unruhe und Aufregung zu beschwichtigen.[57]

As yet, however, up-to-date images were lacking.Until then, these had mostly been provided to the Germans by French production companies. Germany was now called upon to solve the problem of visual news gathering itself. The Messter company alone was unable to fulfil this task. In addition, the army leadership initially resisted the idea of having film cameras at the front. Fortunately, there were enough creative minds to come up with other solutions. On 12 August 1914, *Kinematograph* ran an article whose author gave a number of useful tips on how to meet demand without actually using up-to-date images. In a somewhat irritated tone, he wondered why people in the film industry were not as smart as those who provided the illustrated magazines with pictures. His solution to the problem was as follows: take a number of back issues of 'Wochenrevue', cut out shots and scenes of matters that are relevant to war, such as health care in wartime, car technology in the army, dogs being used as couriers (Kriegshunde), top-notch equestrian performances by the German, Austrian and Italian armies, military aviation, etc., and edit them together with suitable intervening titles. 'Im Handumdrehen wäre ein aktueller Film fertig, dem kein mensch ansieht, dass er schon früher in den Theatern Revue passierte.'[58] It goes without saying that footage of earlier wars such as the 1912-

1913 Balkan conflict should be used for images of real war. The critically acclaimed Mit der Kamera in der Schlachtfront thus contained footage shot during the war in the Balkan countries.[59] On the basis of similar – usually brief – films, special war programmes were compiled, which were shown at reduced admission fees, or free of charge for war invalids and soldiers.[60] Such programmes drew crowds of people that would otherwise not have gone to the cinema.[61] Many overcame their reservations about the medium in order to be able to watch the filmed activities of the German army. The massive advertisement campaign for war newscasts instead of feature films was a deliberate attempt to interest a large audience for the medium. The composition of the audience also changed. Since a larger part of the male population was fighting at the front, after a while the audiences consisted of mostly women and young people.[62]

In addition to the trick of using old images to compile new films, another method to meet demands was simply to provide older films about war, or films set in war, with new subtitles and/or intervening titles. In this way, films were dressed up, so to speak, with 'feldgraue Uniformen' as someone would write later.[63] In order to create the appearance of actual, up-to-date footage, an Italian company, for example, gave the German release Wenn die Heimat ruft the subtitle 'Kriegsepisode in drei Akten'.[64] The film deals with a conflict between a husband and wife of different nationalities. The producers believed that this metaphor would draw large audiences, especially in wartime. Films about conflicts between friends with different nationalities were also popular.

The wars of the nineteenth century were an inexhaustible source for the representation of theatres of war. Germany's glorious role during the war of liberation against Napoleon and in 1870/1871, again against the French proved an important subject, both during and after the war. Although before 1914 the film industry had shown little interest in historic feature films about the nineteenth century [65], such films became hugely popular during and after the war. The heroism of previous generations of Germans was a suitable subject for transposition to the new war situation. Films whose main subjects were indefatigability, the willingness to sacrifice and patriotism clearly served a propaganda purpose, which is why they were known as 'Durchhaltefilme'. In addition, the demand for images of more or less realistic theatres of war had to be met. This meant that the market was quickly flooded with short and long feature films which were released and released. The specialist periodicals recommended these pictures with catchy slogans. The film Bismarck, for example, was given the subtitle 'patriotisches Gemälde aus Deutschlands Ruhmestagen', and the advertisement for the film reminded readers that 'Wir Deutsche fürchten Gott, und sonst nichts auf der Welt!'[66] In addition to Germany's national pride, Bismarck, Theodor Korner was also honoured with a

film. In a number of ways, this character played an important role in the 1914 rush to war. Not only had his name become immortal because of his heroic death in the war of liberation against Napoleon, but the patriotic songs that he composed had made him even more famous. The melodies of his songs could be heard again everywhere during those first days and weeks of the war. The film, which was named after its hero, had already been shot in 1912, but could now be re-released under very favourable commercial conditions.[67]

In a number of cases, historical-patriotic films were promoted with direct reference to the current situation. One distribution company tried to recommend the film Im Schatten des grossen Krieges (Episoden aus dem Feldzuge 1870/71) by referring to the threat of war, even though war had not yet broken out: 'Wollen Sie sich bei der Momentanen Kriegsbegeisterung angesichts der *österreichisch-serbischen Spannung* ein volles Haus sichern, dann beeilen Sie sich.'[68]

In the wake of these films followed a new trend, which film publicist Oskar Kalbus saliently called 'feldgrauer Filmkitsch'.[69] Such patriotic films contained high levels of drama and sentiment. They told stories about a reconciliation between a father and son as a result of the mobilisation (Kriegsgetraut); volunteers reporting to the front (Es braust ein Ruf wie Donnerhall); a French nurse (Henny Porten) conveying the sad news of the death of a son to his mother (Ein Ueberfall in Feindesland); and stories about brave Red Cross nurses and mothers (Das rote Kreuz, Das Vaterland ruft, Deutsche Frauen-Deutsche Treue, Fürs Vaterland). According to Kalbus, 'Die Taschentucher der Zuschauer' were 'zum Auswringen' at these screenings.[70] As the war was becoming a painful reality for most people in due course, interest in such drama quickly waned. After 1915, the genre all but ceased to exist.

Heroic acts, drama and a large dose of patriotism – these were the things that the civilian population needed according to the film industry. Hardly surprising, the industry showed itself to be very adept at the commercial exploitation of the war effort. In view of the difficult circumstances in which the German film industry found itself, this almost went without saying. After some time, the clever moves needed to meet demand for images from the theatres of war in the first days of the war were no longer necessary. Germany had gone to war against its surrounding countries on different fronts. The advance of the German army had been successful until the last months of 1914, on both the western and the eastern fronts. The war changed from a war of movement into a war of attrition, a state of affairs that would last until the 1918 armistice.

Until the outbreak of war, the weekly cinema newscasts were produced by French film companies but, from now on, Germany itself would have to provide film news. In due course, production companies such as Eiko-Film,

Messter, the Nordisk company, and, from 1917 onwards, the Bild- und Filmamt would engage in the production of this category of film. Over a short period of time, a limited number of cameramen, hand-picked and subject to very strict military control, were sent to the front. Subject to permission from the highest military authorities, they were allowed to film at the front and in the occupied territories.[71] In spite of the strictest regulations, which were also in part put in place because of the dangers of espionage, these cameramen were very rarely in a position to film actual fighting, as was also the case with the Bufa films mentioned earlier.[72] As one cameraman remarked:

> Besonders schwierig ist es, Szenen aus dem Schützengraben auf den Film zu bringen, denn die Bauart der Gräben gibt dem Kino keinen guten Blick. Direkte Kampfszenen aufzunehmen, ist noch schwieriger, denn der Kinematograph erfährt selbstverständlich nichts vor dem geplanten Angriff.[73]

The heavy and unpractical tripod cameras, which were practically unmanoeuvrable in the trenches, made shooting combat situations very dangerous. The camera and its operator would have to be raised to a position looking out over the parapet in order to be able to film anything at all, and even then, chances were that there was nothing to be observed except plumes of smoke and earth, and a barren landscape shelled to pieces. Also, many front line activities took place at night. There was little else to do for front line cinematographers than to shoot relatively innocent scenes of activities behind the front lines, or of military parades and exercises. As had been the case with the films compiled from footage of earlier wars, the producers of so-called front footage also assumed that the audiences would be unable to notice the deceit.[74]

Nonetheless, when cameramen managed to shoot some fragments of what happened on the battlefield, this did not mean that the footage would be released for presentation without further ado. Military as well as local censorship authorities had the power to halt or seriously slow down the release of such footage in the interest of national security.[75] This meant that when they were finally shown, such films were often behind on current events.

Besides these more or less up-to-date images, heroic films on historic subjects and patriotic drama, the audience also had an increasing need for moments of true distraction. The film programmes that were shown in the cinema after the first year of war show that images of war, even if most of them were products of the imagination, were avoided more and more. Just like soldiers at the front craved film stories about anything but the war, the tastes of the home audience appeared to be subject to change as well. Especially after 1915, when the first enthusiasm for the war had subsided, the need for escapism increased. The film industry, which was by now operating at full steam, tried to meet this demand by producing a wide variety of films in the category of light entertain-

ment. The extent of the offer is shown by the rotation schedules of cinema programmes. The smaller theatres would offer new programmes every eight days, while the larger theatres changed their programmes at an even faster rate.[76] This not only illustrates the speed at which German film industry managed to work itself out of the slump, but also the growing popularity of the medium.

The programmes on offer included a collection of various film genres. Apart from the serious Autorenfilm mentioned earlier, love dramas, detectives, comedies, and satires were programmed. At the same time, a new phenomenon appeared in the film world – the film star. Many films, especially love dramas, became nothing more than a vehicle for letting one single actor or actress become the centre of attention of a relatively simple story. Some of them came from the theatre and, after some embarrassment and diffidence, had switched to the young medium.[77] With the film star as its main selling point, the industry flung itself headlong into the production of film serials. After the first one by Joe May, many other complete series were set up around actresses such as Wanda Treumann, Fern Andra, Mia May, Leontine Kühnberg, Erna Morena, Asta Nielsen, Henny Porten, and in detective stories around actors such as Max Landa, Harry Liedtke, Ernst Lubitsch and Ernst Reicher.[78] Some of them became highly popular among front soldiers, like Henny Porten, who was not only popular as a modest pin-up on the many billboards, but also served as a symbol of German women and German identity in general. The fact that she herself had become a war widow in 1916 certainly played an important role in this.[79]

Film in the Weimar Republic[80]

After the war, a period began in which cinema attendance was extremely popular.[91] This development could also be seen elsewhere in Europe, its cause probably having something to do with the widespread feeling of war fatigue.[82] If going to the cinema had already been popular on the eve of the First World War, after the war it turned out to be a popular leisure activity, even for the middle classes.[83] Also, the status-boosting effect of cinema attendance coincided with the gradual recognition of film as the seventh art. Add to this the influence of a change in the architecture of film theatres. More and more 'film palaces' emerged in the centres of big cities; more than the muggy, out-of-the-way little venues in the suburbs had done, they began to shape the image of the cinema in the city.[84] In Berlin, the construction of such theatres was concentrated mainly in the Bahnhof Zoo district, where theatres like the Ufa Palast am

Zoo, Marmorhaus, Alhambra and Primus-Palast were built.[85] These are only three examples of the twenty large film palaces built in Berlin in the early 1920s. In total, however, there were more than three hundred film theatres in Berlin.[86] This meant that not all theatres were replaced by luxurious film palaces, but that the profile of a different kind of audience became increasingly clearer. These developments meant that visiting certain cinemas became an artistically acceptable thing to do.

This last development was not only due to the screening context but also to what was actually shown. Aesthetically modern films – and indeed any other films that were in some way striking – that we nowadays associate with the canon of Weimar period films did not by definition belong to the most popular category of films. That category included films that were commercially very successful during the Weimar period but subsequently sank into oblivion: An der schönen blauen Donau, Das tanzende Wien, Die Heilige und ihr Narr, Das Land des Lächelns and Bomben auf Monte Carlo.[87] Popular war films were Unsere Emden, Weltkrieg I, Heimkehr, Verdun (a French production by Léon Poirier), Westfront 1918, Berge in Flammen and All quiet on the Western Front (VS).[88] The co-existence of modernist and conventional artistic expressions and culture practices can be observed in different periods, but it was especially poignant in the Weimar period. Co-existence did not mean that they were separated, however. One may suppose that there was a certain intertextual connection between both practices. Artistically interesting films, even if they were attended by relatively small audiences, were probably partly responsible for raising the status of film in general. The same was true for the more popular 'Autorenfilme' and large historical productions. Also, new developments in filming techniques had a great influence on the productions of conventional film makers. There were, for example, other approaches in the use of the camera, editing, set construction, effects of light and shadow, acting styles, the direction of mass scenes, exterior footage and (after 1929) sound registration.[89]

Directors and producers of war films, however, did not in the first place worry about creating artistically satisfying productions. In a number of war films, the main emphasis was on communicating a historical narrative in a didactically effective way. Yet a large number of other war films were concerned with telling a captivating or exciting story about the adventures of individuals during the war.

Censorship

Interest in popular history, i.e. historical writing for the largest possible audience, was considerable during the Weimar period. There was a big market for

historical novels or biographies (Emil Ludwig), illustrated histories or chronicles (including those about the war) and historical films. As we have seen, the cinematographical representation of the past had already become popular in the first decades of cinema's existence. This trend continued in the Weimar period. One of the largest historical spectacles, Madame Dubarry (1919), about the French Revolution, was made by Ernst Lubitsch. Many more historical films would follow.

Our main topic, however, is films that were concerned with the German past. The Fridericus Rex films dealt with the life and accomplishments of Frederick the Great.[90] The Prussian past, usually taken to cover the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, turned out to be an inexhaustible source of entertainment, interest and inspiration. Besides the lives of Frederick II (1712-1786) and Queen Luise (1776-1810), the period of the wars of liberation against Napoleon was also a subject greeted with enthusiasm. Several dozens of such films on Prussia were released in the 1919-1932 period, and they became instant commercial successes.[91] Films about historical figures such as Lasalle, Bismarck, Oberst Redl and Nicholas II were very popular, too.

Reactions to these films are more interesting than simply knowing that these films were made. These reactions are important indices to the political climate in which these and later or contemporary war films were screened and perceived. The popular Fridericus Rex films, for example, provoked major controversies and their screening sparked riots. Leftist groups suggested that the screenings should be boycotted or banned altogether.[92] Why should there have been such an uproar surrounding these films? It was because of the link that was made between the past and the present. The authoritarian power structure, imperialism and nationalism represented by Frederick the Great was associated with the monarchist rule of Wilhelm II, and the films were thus said to be monarchist propaganda. Some saw the films as innocent entertainment, while others, especially leftists, took offence. Something similar happened with a current events documentary made towards the end of the war, Kolberg (not to be confused with the 1945 Nazi film about the Napoleonic wars of liberation), about the history of this city, which would be handed over to the Poles in 1919. This film also contained footage of Field Marshall Von Hindenburg. His appearance in the film sparked serious disturbances. The train of thought among the protesters probably ran something like this: Von Hindenburg = war = monarchist politics = anti-Weimar = republican protests = anti-republican reaction, etc. The censorship authorities decided to ban the film unless the Hindenburg footage was removed. The Oberfilmprüfstelle, which was given the task of revaluing the film, judged that this was an overreaction and passed the film without any alterations.[93] Such incidents indicate

the sensitivity of the political context in which the films were screened, and what rejection and fear they provoked.

The political sensitivity had to do with the propaganda function that film had served during the war. The distrust caused by this continued after the war. After all, in a democratic society where various political party interests were in direct competition, film could again be used as a means of propaganda. Even if certain films, in this case historical dramas, could not be used as direct propaganda, they could very well be used to serve the interests of political parties. The *Kinematograph* wrote in 1922: 'Der Krieg ist gewesen. Ist der Propagandafilm damit begraben? Nein. Nur der Rahmen ist enger geworden. Nicht mehr der Grosspolitik, – der Parteipolitik wird der Film jetzt überall dienstbar gemacht. Auch in Deutschland.'[94] In a society that was not used to democratic freedom of expression, people would quickly take to the streets against any political element that could be found in a public form of expression. Film was thought to be a very powerful medium of manipulation, which became clear, among other things, from the fact that film, and to a much lesser extent theatre, art and literature, was subject to censorship.[95] No German or foreign film could be screened without the permission of the censorship authorities.

The 1920 introduction of the Film Act saw the establishment of two censorship agencies, the 'Filmprüfstelle', operating from Berlin and Munich, and the 'Oberfilmprüfstelle', with its office in Berlin.[96] One could appeal to the latter agency for revaluation if one was dissatisfied with the ruling by the lower 'Filmprüfstelle'. This latter agency consisted of a chairman and a committee of four persons who had a vote and who were appointed by the Interior Ministry for a period of three years. The chairman was generally expected to have had legal training, had worked in public services or to have work experience in the courts. The committee members were recruited from the world of film, arts and literature (always representing a minority) and from general welfare, education and youth care.[97] 'Durch die Zusammensetzung der Prüfstellen (...) wurden im vornhinein Entscheidungen begünstigt, die nicht auf künstlerischen, sondern auf traditierten sozialethischen und – entgegen den Intentionen des Gesetzes – politischen Grundauffassungen beruhten.'[98] Besides the appointed members of the committee, there were usually another five interested parties present at the Filmprüfstelle sessions. People from the film industry, education or other cultural agencies were usually allowed to attend these sessions.[99] A film could be banned if it (1) was likely to jeopardize public order; (2) presented religion in a negative light; (3) was coarse and immoral; (4) was likely to damage Germany's relations with foreign countries.[100]

The censorships authorities' motives for banning a film were of course very important to the film industry, the general public and the critics. However, the

censorship board often offered only vague arguments that could be interpreted in many ways, such as jeopardising public order and causing displeasure abroad.[101] The latter argument was especially popular when censorship authorities were evaluating displeasing images or scenes from war films. At a time when the implementation of the Versailles Treaty was being negotiated, it was tactically unhelpful to offend the former enemy at the negotiating table or to furnish him with counterarguments by screening anti-foreign films or films critical of Germany.[102]

For this reason, export films had the propaganda purpose of giving a positive image of Germany. In addition, the authorities considered this necessary because so-called Hetzfilme were still being produced in foreign countries. The press very attentively monitored these productions, even if they would appear in German cinemas much later, and then only in heavily censored form. Examples were American films like The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (1921) and Mare Nostrum (1925), both based on novels by the Spanish writer Vincente Blasco Ibañez and directed by Rex Ingram.[103] The press also painstakingly reported about (uncensored) foreign screenings and about the protests against these by the Reichsverband deutscher Lichtspieltheaterbesitzer and the Spitzenorganisation der deutschen Filmindustrie.[104] As had been the case during the war, Germany (that is, the Foreign Ministry) again opted for the 'soft' approach. Germany did not respond with films that depicted the former enemy in similarly negative or stereotype ways, but it protested via the appropriate channels, or tried to exert a positive influence on foreign countries by exporting aesthetically startling films and 'politically neutral' German films.[105]

The military in film

It turned out to be inevitable that films about a controversial past – still so fresh in people's memories – were followed very closely. Namenlose Helden (1925) and Volk in Not (1926)[106] were among the first war films after 1918 to depict the battlefields. The latter was not the only war film to see the light of day in 1926. It was followed by Feldgrau, Das Deutsche Mutterherz, Brandstifter Europas, Ich hatt'einen Kameraden and Die versunkene Flotte. Nevertheless, these individual films initially did not cause much of a stir; this did not happen until after the screening of Unsere Emden, towards the end of 1926. Initially, the press focused on the phenomenon in its entirety, the phenomenon of the 'Militärfilme'. The 1925-1926 period saw a boom of military films. Films about the First World War were only a fraction of the total number. Most of the films dealt with military life during the Prussian era or the Napoleonic wars: 'Soldatenfilme, Offizierstragödien, Königsdramen.'[107] These

were films by producers trying to copy the success of the Fridericus Rex films. Rosenmontag, Aschermittwoch, Reveille, Der Totengräber eines Kaiserreichs (about Redl), Annemarie und ihr Ulan are just some of the titles from a whole series of similar films. Some people were disturbed by the new trend and considered it a threat to republican values. In September 1926, the left-liberal *Berliner Tageblatt* published a survey of military films that had been shown in the cinema over the previous eighteen months.[108] The newspaper counted at least twenty, while the author of the article expected another fourteen of such films to be shown in the cinema during the next season. The most striking aspect, he found, was that none of these films had been banned by the censorship authorities. He was also very critical of the fact that so many high-ranking officers had been employed as advisors to the producers of these films, because 'dann weiss man zur Genüge, aus welcher Richtung der Wind weht.'[109]

The *Berliner Tageblatt* was not the only newspaper to take note of the boom in military films. The specialist periodicals also looked for an explanation of the latest trend. *Kinematograph* tried to put things into perspective by saying that these films were popular with only a small portion of the public. Also, protests were not heard until the films were serialised in the cinema and began to dominate the entire screening programme.[110] It is therefore very well possible that the demand for such films was stimulated by the supply-side, by which a process of self-generation was set in motion.

A psychological argument was presented by Ilse Zerbe writing for the moderate journal *Der Film*. Starting from the question why these films were so popular with certain audience groups, she reasoned as follows: 'Ist das nun lediglich eine plötzliche Geschmacksumkehrung zu der früheren Vorliebe für Uniformen?' She rejected this suggestion, however, because costume drama had been popular for years. 'Ist es die Rückkehr zur Freude an alter, rhytmisch vertrauter Militärmusik (...)?' This could not be the only reason. 'Der Grund liegt also tiefer. Das Volk (...) fühlt sich in der grauen Gegenwart, der seit Jahren jeder Ansporn zu seelischer Schwungkraft fehlt, bedruckt.' In addition, the future was also very uncertain.

> Einen hellen Schein aber braucht die Seele, um Elastizität zu bewahren. Erdichtete Heldentaten fehlt in solcher Zeit der zündende Funke; also zurück zu Wirklichkeiten der Vergangenheit.[111]

After all, what could bring more joy than 'der Durchmarsch vorn Soldaten mit Militärmusik!' The army still embodied security and glory. Audiences did not so much like military films as that they wanted to see a 'lebendiger Wiedergabe erhebender, nicht zu fern liegender Vergangenheit, in der noch persönlicher Mut, Tatkraft, Unternehmungsgeist, Stolz und Ehrgefühl über

Schwachheit und Hinterlist triumphierten'. It is clear that Zerbe expressed sentiments popular among the monarchist or otherwise conservative sections of the general public, unless she had meant to be ironical. Anyway, the article suggested that the films under consideration were serious in nature, while they were actually soldiers' farces, so-called Soldatenhumoreske or Militärklamotten.

Military films nonetheless provoked many protests, which is why specialist periodicals called on cinema owners to change their rather one-sided programmes.[112] Representatives of the film industry did not want the cinema to become an arena for political struggles, which the military films threatened to bring about. Film was supposed to be above party politics and should strive for neutrality. This was not only a 'prescript', some people even considered it a matter of indisputable fact: 'Man darf nicht vergessen, dass der Film als Industrie absolut unpolitisch eingestellt ist, dass auch die Filme als Kunstgegenstand sich jedweder Tendenz zu enthalten haben und auch enthalten', wrote *Der Film*.[113] (Some months before, Ilse Zerbe, writing in *Der Film*, had shown a lot of understanding for films propagating a monarchist and military world view).

The film industry fiercely defended the myth of neutrality and used it on every possible occasion. When the union ADGB threatened to boycott theatres which showed military films, the industry called on the cinema owners to observe some distance from the successful 'genre'.[114] Also, *Der Film* was not only afraid that the actions might have financial consequences, but that they might lead to sharper censorship rules as well.[115] So far, censorship regulations stated that films could not be banned because of their political content, but only if they jeopardised public order or blemished Germany's prestige abroad.[116] Despite protests, military films remained popular and in the end, nothing could prevent them from being shown in cinemas. The dominant opinion was that these films were in themselves neutral, and that the (leftist) press was responsible for their politicisation. For example, *Der Film* named the article in the *Berliner Tageblatt* as one of the factors responsible for rousing public sentiment, while the moderate *Reichsfilmblatt* blamed socialist press in general.[117] This was not true, however, for films that had a clear party-political orientation, regardless of how difficult it was to make the distinction. A film like Keinen Pfennig der Fürsten, for example, which took sides in the discussion surrounding the dispossession of lands and properties held by sovereigns ('Fürstenenteignung')[118] was considered a clear instance of propaganda and rejected as a film for the general public by the left-liberal *Film-Kurier*.[119]

The social democrats soon responded to the military films. In 1924 and 1925, two republican films were produced, Schmiede and Freies Volk, respectively, both of them made by the socialist director Martin Berger.[120] Al-

though the films appeared to be geared to appeal to large audiences, they were not very successful and received negative reactions from the critics.[121]

The complicated relationship between film and politics caused contradictory argumentation. In a short article, the left-liberal *Lichtbildbühne* spoke out against party politics in film. In another part of the periodical, however, it said:

> Hat ein Film eine politische Tendenz, mit der jeder Deutsche einverstanden ist, weil es sich um keine Parteisache, sonder eine nationale Angelegenheit handelt, so ist natürlich in keiner Weise dagegen etwas einzuwenden.[122]

These words were used by the author to voice his approval for a propaganda film about the former German colonies, Ich hatt' einen Kameraden! The point of view expressed by *Lichtbildbühne* was very similar to statements made five years later by the right-wing *Kinematograph* – which addressed its reader from the front page as follows:

> Sie wissen, dass wir die Behandlung nationaler Stoffe, wie etwa der Verfilmung der Nibelungen oder rein geschichtliche Filme wie 'Königin Luise' oder 'Fridericus Rex' niemals als ein Politikum ansehen.[123]

Following the scandal surrounding the Phoebus film company – which produced navy propaganda films in exchange for covert financial support (see chapter 5) – the specialist press was rocked in 1926 by an outrage concerning film material about the First World War that had been put into circulation. In a front page article headlined 'Wir verlangen Aufklärung', the *Lichtbildbühne*, in an indignant tone, started a discussion about film material from the war being used by politically suspect right-wing radical circles connected with Stahlhelm.[124] The magazine had discovered that private gatherings, so-called 'Vaterländische Film-Abende', were held under the auspices of the Berlin association Deutschtum im Bilde. Among the films shown were Vogesenwacht, Meldehunde im feindlichen Feuer, Helden an der Somme[125] and Höllenkampf an der Aisne. 'Also Filme, die das *ganze* Volk interessierten und nicht *einseitig politischen* Tendenzen dienstbar gemacht werden sollten.'[126] After some research, *Lichtbildbühne* discovered that the films originally came from the Bufa archives. Shortly after the war, when Bufa went from the Defence Ministry to the Foreign Ministry and eventually became a much reduced film department at the Interior Ministry[127], several films had been given for safekeeping to the Vaterländischen Film-Gesellschaft.[128] This agency was also given permission to lend out films, sporadically and under very strict conditions – without commercial intent and only for educational purposes – for screening at private gatherings. According to the magazine, these conditions were not met.[129] The fact that they were German propaganda films was left out

of consideration. Several days later, a group of former Bufa cameramen who had worked at the front reacted with indignation to the abuse of 'their' images.[130] An official reaction came from the left-liberal Interior Minister Külz (Deutsche Demokratische Partei) in the form of an article in the *Vossische Zeitung* in which he promised to prosecute the association in question if it would continue to serve its specific (that is, right-wing radical, ergo, hostile to the republic) clientele.[131]

It is not surprising that discussions about films and politics would flare up in 1925 and 1926. Although the discussion was sparked by the Fridericus Rex films and the military films that followed, it also took place at a time when political controversy was running high on account of a number of issues: the death of social-democrat president, Friedrich Ebert, and the election of the former war hero and monarchist, Paul von Hindenburg, as the president of the Reich; the flag decree; the referendum about the dispossession of sovereign lands and properties; the Phoebus scandal; and the screening of Eisenstein's Russian propaganda film Potemkin (and the ban and subsequent lifting of the ban).[132] The mutual mistrust between the political left and right was gigantic, and because of the power ascribed to the medium, the parties kept a close watch on each other after 1926, too. Discussions about politics and film never fell completely silent. This meant that with respect to war films, German and foreign critics remained very much on their guard.

From relative stability to crisis

Despite the fact that the second half of the 1920s remained full of unrest, it was nevertheless the most stable period of the republic. This was due to political and economic factors, such as the 1925 election of Paul von Hindenburg as president of the republic. The embodiment of German heroism during the First World War and new political beacon for the right had been put forward as a candidate for the second round by the right-wing parties. Von Hindenburg's victory had made the republic more acceptable to the anti-republican, monarchist and vindictive right-wing parties. Until 1928, the country would no longer be governed by a centre-left cabinet (the Weimarer Koalition) but, with only a short interruption, by a centre-right coalition. This contributed to political stability during this period.

The tide also turned with respect to the economy. After the 1919-1923 crisis, the success of the currency reform checked inflation and, buoyed up by American loans and the 1924 Dawes plan, the German economy was back on track

again. The economic aid programmes contained regulatory provisions about German reparations as laid down in the Versailles Treaty. In close correlation with this, Gustav Stresemann achieved substantial successes with his foreign policy. Germany was accepted as a member of the League of Nations and concluded security pacts which guaranteed its (western) borders. These developments marked a period that saw Germany slowly emerge from international isolation.

Political and economic stability did not mean, however, that there were no conflicts in Germany. Conflicts had only temporarily disappeared below the surface and stability was only relative. This situation was reflected in the film industry. At first there was a downswing which forced many companies to close. After the surge of inflation, German films had become considerably more expensive abroad, causing exports on which Germany depended to drop. Another reason for company shutdowns was the increase in the number of mergers in production, distribution and screening sectors. Film companies such as Ufa, Emelka, Terra and National Film swallowed parts of these sectors. In the end, the German film market also suffered heavily from American competition. American movies were popular with the general public and dominated the cinema screens. Protectionist quota regulations requiring production companies to match every American production shown in Germany with a domestic production provided an economic impulse but they also resulted in the production of many mediocre films. All in all, German film production totalled between 200 and 250 annually during this period.

In March 1927, the film industry was rocked by a drastic change: to stave off bankruptcy, the largest film company in Germany, Ufa, was taken over by Alfred Hugenberg, industrial tycoon, newspaper magnate and, from 1928 onwards, chairman of the Deutsche Nationale Volkspartei or DNVP. Alfred Hugenberg, his managing director Ludwig Klitszch and production manager Erich Pommer, brought back from Hollywood, decided to move into a new direction. Expensive experiments such as Murnau's Faust and Lang's Metropolis could no longer be allowed. Ufa decided to commit to mediocrity. One of the first films to be premiered after the changing of the guard was the first part of the epic Der Weltkrieg! However prominent Ufa's role in Weimar cinema was, the company only released two other war films after the two Weltkrieg films: Heimkehr and Morgenrot.[133]

After the upsurge of films about the First World War had died down around 1926 in favour of yet other military and Prussian films, a reaction followed in 1928 against both military films and commercial productions in general. A group of leftist intellectuals and artists, including Heinrich Mann, Leonhard Frank, Käte Kollwitz, Karl Freund, Erwin Piscator, Bela Balasz and Georg Wilhelm Pabst established the Volksverband für Filmkunst. *Die literarische Welt*

wrote: The organisation 'fordert den sozial gerichteten, die wahren Gegenwartsprobleme behandelnden Film. Er bekämpft den nationalistischen und militaristischen Filmkitsch'.[134] In addition, the Volksverband argued for a boycott of theatres which showed such productions. As did most other organisations and producers with left leanings, the Volksverband would eventually get the worst of it. At any rate, its efforts achieved nothing to halt the renewed rise in the production of war films that occurred in the early thirties. The production of the anti-war film, Westfront 1918 (G.W. Pabst, 1930), by the leftist production company Nero-Film can in a sense be seen as one of the very few answers to the rise of war films. The same is true for films such as Die andere Seite (Heinz Paul, 1931) and Niemandsland (Viktor Trivas, 1931).

The relative political and economic stability ended around 1929. The death of Gustav Stresemann who, as Foreign Minister between 1923 and 1929 had been one of Germany's most important advocates abroad, brought an end to the peaceful revision of the Versailles Treaty. The so-called Young-plan provided new American loans so that Germany could continue to meet its reparation requirements. Led by Alfred Hugenberg, the DNVP and the Stahlhelm organisation of veterans joined forces in a committee against ratification of the plan. They said that foreign support would only bring Germany in a position of dependence. The action failed, but it made Adolf Hitler a household name, which was an important step towards further consolidation of his party.

Late 1929, the international economic crisis also reached Germany. The effect on the German film industry was devastating. In 1930, film production had sunk to 127 films.[135] Many small production companies went bankrupt, which again sparked a process of monopolisation. Ufa, Tobis, Emelka, National Film, Deutsche Lichtspiel-Syndikat and Südfilm managed to stay afloat.[136] The crisis was deepened by another factor, the switch to sound-film. Perfected in America in 1927/1928, the talking picture was now developing in Germany, too. This development was supervised by Tobis-Klangfilm, a merger of two competing companies established in 1929.[137] The first sound-film about the war that was dominated by dialogue was 1914. Die letzten Tage vor dem Weltbrand (Richard Oswald, 1930). The ear-splitting noise of the front could first be heard in Westfront 1918, which made a huge impression on audiences for that reason alone.

The final phase of the republic was marked by economic as well as political crisis. As part of a strategy devised by Schleicher and Von Hindenburg to end the republic, Zentrum politician Heinrich Brüning was found willing to lead a presidential minority cabinet. Article 48 of the Constitution, which had been written earlier, allowed a great concentration of political power with the president of the Reich, ultimately to the detriment of parliament, the Reichstag. Von

Hindenburg used the article as an instrument to install new cabinets or appoint chancellors without having to deal with parliament. This period was marked by the infamous presidential cabinets (March 1930 – May 1932) which would lead to the dismantling and ultimate dissolution of the German democratic order and the annihilation of the opposition. As a veteran with strongly vindictive sentiments, Brüning did his utmost to get the reparations imposed by the allied powers cancelled. Even before this was achieved, he lost Von Hindenburg's support, partly because of his economic and financial policies, and was replaced by Franz von Papen at the end of May 1932.

In the meantime, DNVP, DVP and SPD suffered great losses in the 1930 Reichstag elections, while both the NSDAP and the communist KPD achieved great gains. The country's two major anti-democratic movements became the largest, if not the most powerful parties in Germany. There could of course not be any question of co-operation between the two. The same was true for the other parties. Hitler's party was watched very closely by other right-wing parties and tolerated at best, while the weak social democrats and the communists were like cats and dogs. The polarisation was intensified even further by the Reichstag elections of 31 July 1932. The liberal DVP and DDP were practically annihilated, and both the SPD and the DNVP lost votes. Again, the KPD won considerably. No party, however, gained as much as the NSDAP, which took possession of 230 seats.

In order not to antagonize the NSDAP, Von Papen had promised to cancel the ban on the SA established earlier that year. The SA now continued its reign of terror in the streets with a vengeance. The street violence was mainly targeted at the communists, who were not exactly innocent bystanders themselves. In the summer of 1932, no less than 18 people were killed and 68 injured in street fights in Hamburg's Altona district (the so-called Altonaer Blutsonntag). Something of this terror had emerged earlier in Berlin during screenings of Lewis Milestone's All quiet on the Western front (December 1930). Joseph Goebbels and his henchmen had set off stink-bombs and released white mice to frighten the audience and scare off potential spectators. This resulted in counter demonstrations. At the end of the day, however, all this agitation failed to produce the desired effect. The authorities first banned demonstrations, and then the film. In addition to the familiar motive of disturbing public order, defiling German honour and an overzealous propagation of pacifism were also cited as reasons for banning the film.[138] However, after a vote was taken in the Reichstag, the film was released for screening again, albeit after a number of judicious cuts. The members of parliament for the SPD, DVP and Zentrum had joined forces to vote in favour of lifting the ban. More than eighteen months later, the film was finally banned by the National Socialists.

In these crisis-ridden final years of the republic, interest in the war past surged again. Also, this interest was much more explicit in the early thirties than it had been around 1926. The reason was that, from 1929 onwards, more war films were produced – Scapa Flow, Somme, Westfront 1918, 1914. Die letzten Tage vor dem Weltbrand, Douaumont, Im Geheimdienst, Berge in Flammen, Die andere Seite, Niemandsland and Morgenrot – and an enormous amount of war literature was published. This upsurge in interest in the war also left its mark on the theatre. In 1929 alone, plays such as *Karl und Anna*, *Douaumont*, *Die Marneschlacht* and *Die andere Seite*[139] became overnight successes. As far as literature is concerned, Hans-Harald Müller indicates in his study of the period that between 1928 and 1933 more than two hundred books were published that dealt with the war, while no more than one hundred war books appeared in the ten years preceding that period.[140] Various authors have pointed to the economic crisis and the political instability as important factors.[141] It may perhaps be unnecessary to indicate that this crisis situation was not reflected directly in the individual films. How these social and cultural contexts 'found their way' into the films will emerge in the course of this study. Reactions in contemporary criticism clearly show how controversial representations of the war past could still be, ten or fifteen years after it took place. Nowhere has this been illustrated better than in the film 1914. Die letzten Tage vor dem Weltbrand.