

Michael Wedel

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Universal, Germany, and ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’: A case study in crisis historiography

by Michael Wedel



“Crisis” becomes a fundamental historico-philosophical concept on the basis of which the claim is made that the entire course of history can be interpreted out of its diagnosis of time. Since then, it is always one’s own particular time that is experienced as crisis. [...] The assumption that every crisis is a final decision is easily revealed as a perspectival illusion.¹
– R. Koselleck

*A strange phenomenon in contemporary historiography must be observed. The historian is no longer a person who shapes an empire. He or she no longer envisages the paradise of a global history. The historian comes to circulate around acquired rationalizations. He or she works in the margins. In this respect the historian becomes a prowler.*² – M. de Certeau

Introduction

In the years 1928 to 1932 the so-called coming of the sound film substantially changed the international film industry. As the new normative product, the sound film provoked necessary fundamental changes not only in the production and exhibition sectors – it also had a significant impact on distribution practices. With regard to transnational film distribution, the film industry’s new commodity threatened Hollywood’s hegemony on a world market that was about to diversify into countless distinct language barriers. As soon became clear, the hope (voiced by Louis B. Mayer in 1928) that the sound film would help to re-enforce English as cinema’s ‘universal language’³ thanks to the worldwide popularity of Hollywood productions (and thus seamlessly continuing the internationalism of the silent picture) was based on a deceptive assessment of the impending market situation, its economic determinants, and cultural dynamics. Instead, innovation and instability, creativity and crisis management were to govern the international film business for years to come.

The conceptual framework within which I want to account for this complex situation is that of a ‘crisis historiography’. This is based on a revisionist notion of

the logic driving historical change in the cinema, most forcefully cast in terms of the medium's shifting identities by Rick Altman who speaks of a 'crisis model of film historiography':⁴

This model recognises that cultural changes (and especially the introduction of new technologies, such as new sound recording and reproduction devices) sometimes plunge representational systems into an *identity crisis* during which they are sequentially and even simultaneously imaged as belonging to several different categories, each with its own separate (and sometimes contradictory) set of practices.⁵

Defined in multiple terms, the system in crisis becomes the site for what Altman calls a *jurisdictional conflict* among practices vying for control. Stability is (if ever) achieved only after a series of redefinitions, model shifts, and *negotiated settlements*:

Because the system in crisis always engages several different reality codes or representational models, involves multiple diverse identity frameworks, and happens over an extended time frame in many different locations, the identity crisis – jurisdictional conflict – negotiated settlement process never appears as a linear progression but instead as fragmented, contradictory, even chaotic.⁶

Charting transitional developments in a more linear fashion, extant film historical accounts of the measures taken by the American film industry in order to protect its interest in foreign markets are centred on Hollywood's leading studio conglomerates. The scholarly debate around the film industry's transition to sound and its impact on the film export business is predominantly based either on strategies taken by Paramount and MGM to safeguard their briefly threatened hegemonic positions on the international market or, it has focused on the actions taken by Fox, Warner, and RKO to considerably expand their market shares and standings both within the studio hierarchy and as major new players in the international film trade.⁷

Compared to those companies which were to arise from the commotion of the early sound years as Hollywood's 'big five', relatively little is known about the role of Carl Laemmle's Universal Pictures (prior to Columbia and United Artists, the largest studio of the 'small three' in 1928). How did Universal react to the introduction of sound? In what ways was Universal's export policy affected by the tussle over patent rights and import quotas between Hollywood and Europe? What were the strategies of adaptation developed and employed by Universal to overcome language barriers and to counter points of cultural resistance? Finally, what was the 'product', in terms of style, subject, and genre, with which Universal thought to meet the fresh expectations European audiences would bring to the sound film?

In finding clues for answers to some of these questions, Universal's activities on the German market in the years 1928 to 1932 will be taken as a case study. In light of the exceptional interest and attention that the studio of the Swabian emigrant Carl Laemmle had always shown towards Germany as a film economic and cultural point of reference, this case study might not qualify as representative for Universal's European policy as a whole. With the figurehead character as Universal's most important European market (a point the company's leading representatives put special emphasis on), Germany should, however, be instructive as a starting point for further comparative research.

At the heart of Universal's activities in Germany after 1928 was its local subsidiary firm 'Deutsche Universal' – its repeatedly reorganised and redefined internal structure formed part of a specific and identifiable strategy aimed at the protection of the company's interest in the German market. As I would like to argue, this strategy constituted a distinct alternative to the adaptation policies adopted by the two leading Hollywood studios for the same market and in the same historical situation.

In order to reconstruct how this alternative approach came about, it is necessary to address the technical, aesthetic, and cultural implications of Universal's market strategy in Germany. My first step will be to consider the historical rationale behind relocating the production of German-language export versions from Hollywood to Berlin. Next, I want to investigate the technical systems employed by Universal to produce German versions of their early sound films and discuss how exactly the studio work in Berlin was carried out.

Universal's German import strategy set its films apart from those of other Hollywood studios – and not only in terms of their formal and aesthetic features and the technological practice of production. As I will demonstrate with the example of the reception of the German version of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (*Im Westen nichts Neues*, 1929-30), it also had a considerable impact on the cultural and political debates of the late Weimar Republic. The consequences Universal has drawn, the lesson it learned from the turmoil surrounding the German version of *All Quiet on the Western Front* with regard to the problem of language adaptation, and how Universal tried to reposition itself in Germany in 1931-32 within an ideologically over-determined social force field, will all be discussed towards the end of this essay.

The transition to sound and the 'Universal model' 1929-30

The foundation of a German distribution branch, 'Universal-Matador,' in May 1927 was still in tune with general American studio practices at this point in time and as such, nothing exceptional or unique to Universal's export policy.⁸ Likewise, the expansion of this branch into a full-blown distribution company also work-

ing with German films (implemented a year later with the establishment of the 'Deutsche Universal-Film-Verleih GmbH') can be seen in the context of a more general move the American film industry made in the wake of the recent amendment of the German quota laws and the crisis of the domestic market leader Ufa.⁹ However, characteristic for Universal, Carl Laemmle wanted German theatre owners to understand the exceptional engagement of the company as a token of his personal attachment to German culture.¹⁰

In the years 1930 and 1931, Deutsche Universal was continuously expanded into a production and distribution company for self-made or commissioned domestic films as well as for dubbed German language versions of American Universal features. With the expansion and reorganisation of Universal's German subsidiary company, as a consequence of the transition to sound, a strategy was implemented which deviated considerably from the dominant export practices of the leading Hollywood studios – from the so-called 'Paramount model' of a centralised production of European language versions in the studios in Paris-Joinville (acquired by Paramount and rented out to other companies for this very reason), as much as from the so-called 'MGM model' of importing European personnel to Hollywood for the production of multiple-language versions at the studio's home grounds just outside of Los Angeles.¹¹

The alternative strategy of what one could call the 'Universal model' consisted of two aspects: first, that instead of falling back on the production of multiple-language versions, from the very beginning of its sound film era Universal employed dubbing to adapt its product to the German market; second, that from Autumn 1930 onwards the synchronised German versions of Universal's talkies were produced not in Hollywood or at one central European studio but by the German subsidiary Deutsche Universal in Germany – that is, decentralised on location in the country of destination.

The exceptional design of Universal's strategy becomes clear if one considers the options available to Hollywood studios to adapt their films to the European and, more specifically, to the German market. Relating the original dialog via live commentary, intertitles, or subtitles was not a feasible option for a market as big as Germany, though it was primarily done for less developed film-producing countries and smaller language areas.¹² The two remaining options consisted of producing multiple-language versions, in which American actors were substituted by German or German-speaking actors, or dubbed language versions, where only the dialogue (that is, the actors' voices) was replaced.¹³

If one traces the quantitative proportions of multiple-language versions and dubbed versions over the first two sound film seasons in Germany, the multiple-language version clearly constituted the dominant solution for the German market. Only 10% of all foreign films entering the German market in German language versions in 1930-31 were dubbed. Of the 24 foreign feature films which had

their premiere in German cinemas in 1930 as so-called '100%-talkies' (including dialogue, sound effects, and music), only four were shown in their original English version with German titles or uniquely devised German-language framing sequences. Of the 19 films shown in a German-language version, only two had been post-synchronised into a dubbed German version in Germany itself (the Universal features *Captain of the Guard* directed by John S. Robertson [German release title: *Der Kapitän der Garde*] and *All Quiet on the Western Front* directed by Lewis Milestone). Finally, of all the 64 foreign sound film imports which premiered in Germany in 1931, 52 were shown in a German language version while only six of those 52 were not multiple-language versions but rather dubbed.¹⁴ Three of these six were the Universal imports *Hell's Heroes* directed by William Wyler (German release title: *Galgenvögel*), *Storms* (also directed by Wyler, German release title: *Stürme*), and *Resurrection* directed by Edwin Carewe (German release title: *Wo die Wolga fließt*). What emerges from these figures is that Universal was the only Hollywood studio to have its feature films dubbed for the German market in the country of destination as part of a conscious import strategy in the years 1930 and 1931.

'American capital to Germany': Dubbing in Berlin 1930-31

In 1929, Universal's production of dubbed German language versions was still carried out in Hollywood. This caused two basic problems: one, this practice soon came into conflict with the international patent law situation in technical sound equipment and the fight over the European (and German) exhibition market between the Tobis-Klangfilm group and the Western Electric/RCA Photophone group; two, the German audiences' low tolerance for foreign films dubbed into German.

Among the first of Universal's talkies dubbed into German were the musicals *Showboat* (1929) and *Broadway*. For *Broadway*, Carl Laemmle Jr. contracted the Hungarian director Paul Fejos, who had been working in Hollywood since 1926 but returned to Europe in 1931.¹⁵ The German dialogue for the dubbed version of *Broadway* was directed by Friedrich Zelnik and Kurt Neumann.¹⁶ In early October 1929 the German trade press reported from the dubbing stage in Universal City:

Quite naturally, the actors and actresses have been speaking in English during the shoot. [...] Miraculously, they now all of a sudden speak German, as if it was their mother tongue. And they do so throughout the whole film, which is quite packed with dialogue. Furthermore, what is surprising is that close-up shots have not been avoided at all.¹⁷

In German cinemas, however, *Broadway* could be commercially exploited only in a silent version, which had its premiere in November 1929. In the German press,

the version shown to German audiences was therefore ironically referred to as the 'silenced Broadway'.¹⁸ In 1930 the film daily *Film-Kurier* wrote:

As is well known, Universal has produced a sound version of Broadway in German. Here in Germany this version cannot be seen in the cinema – it is shown, however, in America, for numerous American cities have a high percentage of German-speaking inhabitants. In Milwaukee, for example, the German Broadway version is a record breaking box-office hit. For how long will the patent war go on?¹⁹

Showboat, a so-called 'part-talkie' (a silent film with intertitles and only a few post-dubbed sound sequences), had become a victim of the unresolved patent situation. Internal test screenings of the dubbed German version took place on a Klangfilm-sound projector in the Berlin Zoopalast in June 1929 and revealed serious acoustic shortcomings. Since the German-language print was tested only a day later on a Western Electric machine, the cause for the deplorable sound reproduction quality clearly laid in the incompatibility of the American (Western Electric) sound recording system and the European (Tobis-Klangfilm) reproduction apparatus. As a consequence, Universal, who had left the commercial exploitation of the film to Ufa, withdrew the film from distribution.²⁰ *Showboat* (German release title: *Das Komödiantenschiff*) had to wait a whole year before it was finally released to German cinemas in July 1930 – and then only, somewhat anachronistically, in a silent version.

In the season 1929-1930, the situation for Universal on the German market was a highly contradictory one; although dubbed German language versions were made available, because of the international patent situation and the technical incompatibility between Western Electric recordings and Klangfilm sound projectors (the issue of the so-called 'interchangeability'), these prints could not be commercially exploited in German cinemas.²¹ For the upcoming season 1930-1931, Universal dealt with the consequences of this extremely unfortunate export situation and developed a twofold strategy to resolve it: on the one hand, Universal relocated its production of dubbed language versions from Hollywood to Germany and, by doing so, moved from Western Electric to Tobis-Klangfilm recording technology; on the other hand, Universal expanded its own distribution activities on the German market by affording Deutsche Universal a broader financial basis.²²

In August 1930, Paul Kohner, the new head of production at Deutsche Universal, summarised the conclusions Universal had drawn from the current situation on the European, and especially the German, market:

'In Hollywood, I was one of the first to make use of dubbing [...]. But we were on the wrong track, and we knew it. We forced language into a unwanted marriage. *Broadway* and *Showboat* were the results. [...] Unconditionally convinced

I am only of a production [of dubbed foreign language versions] in Europe. The import of German actors to Hollywood is commercially not viable. [...] The solution: American capital to Europe. To carry out production, where one can choose from a rich arsenal of actors, where the current taste of the audience is immediately felt. Everything else is an experiment.²³

Earlier that year, in a general meeting on their export policies, American producers had noted that after a short period of time in the United States, an alienating resonance would enter the native language of the actors brought to Hollywood. It was estimated that in the long run this would lead to considerable financial loss on the European market in comparison to those local language versions produced in Europe.²⁴ Of course, this conclusion concerned multiple-language versions as much as dubbed export versions.²⁵

Additional problems were caused by legal measures taken by Tobis against German language versions dubbed on American sound recording systems. For example, in May 1930, Tobis sued the Artiphon-Record Company for releasing William Wellman's film *Wings*, which had been dubbed in America, onto the German market. As a result, the film had to be withdrawn from German distribution.²⁶

Against the horizon of these events and deliberations, Universal's change of strategy reflected a more general trend within the American film industry's export policy. In contrast to the vast majority of American studios, Universal did not swing over to multiple language versions but instead continued to produce dubbed versions. Kohner's analysis of Universal's erroneous policy in 1929-1930 referred not to the practice of dubbing as such but to the fact that the production of dubbed versions had been carried out at Universal City on American recording systems with actors assimilating too rapidly – and not in Germany on recording devices compatible with local sound reproduction technology and the German patent law restrictions. These considerations led Universal to move the production of post-synchronised German language versions to Germany within weeks after the publication of Kohner's article. In making this move, Universal was the great exception among the Hollywood studios, which still had to be forced to have their German language versions produced in Germany by a new quota law in the summer of 1932.²⁷

In the earlier quoted text, Kohner also speaks of a technical system Universal was experimenting with to perfect the practice of post-synchronisation. The technical system he was referring to, without giving any concrete information (in order to keep it secret from competitors)²⁸, was Carl Robert Blum's so-called 'rhythmo-graphic apparatus'. Blum's device was to be employed for all of Universal's dubbed German language versions of 1930-1931, including *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

WARUM
lassen Sie nach alten Methoden synchronisieren,
wenn es eine
RHYTHMOGRAPHIE
gibt?

Die Rhythmographie hat in der kurzen Zeit ihres Bestehens folgende
Sprach-Versionen hergestellt:

VON ENGLISCH IN DEUTSCH
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„Auferstehung“ Universal, Berlin
„Cimarron“ Radio Pictura, Berlin
„Seed“ Universal, Berlin

VON DEUTSCH IN ENGLISCH
„Hampelmann“ Terra, Berlin
„Der Sohn der weißen Berge“ Universal, London
„Fra Diavolo“ Universal, London

VON FRANZÖSISCH IN DEUTSCH
„La fin du monde“ L'Ecran d'Art, Paris

VON DEUTSCH IN FRANZÖSISCH
„Elisabeth von Oesterreich“ Hupps, Paris

VON ENGLISCH IN FRANZÖSISCH
„Dracula“ Universal, Paris
„Resurrection“ Universal, Paris

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„Sieg der Rhythmographie“.

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RHYTHMOGRAPHIE
Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung
BERLIN SW 68, ALTE JAKOBSTRASSE 133
Fernsprecher A 7 Dönhof 5230-32

Fig. 1. Advertisement for Carl Robert Blum's 'rhythmographic' dubbing system (*Film-Kurier*, special issue, 15 August 1931).

Blum's system actually represented a technical transformation and new industrial application of his 1926 'musical chronometer', which, amongst a number of other practical implementations, had been tested a year later by composer Edmund Meisel in preparation for the premiere of Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin – Symphony of a Big City*.²⁹ On the occasion of the premiere, Blum had already conceived of what he called the 'universal applicability' of his device and predicted its later development in the early sound era.³⁰ With this apparatus, Blum wrote in 1927, 'any rhythmically structured sequence in motion – filmic, acoustic or linguistic – can be analysed and synchronised.'³¹

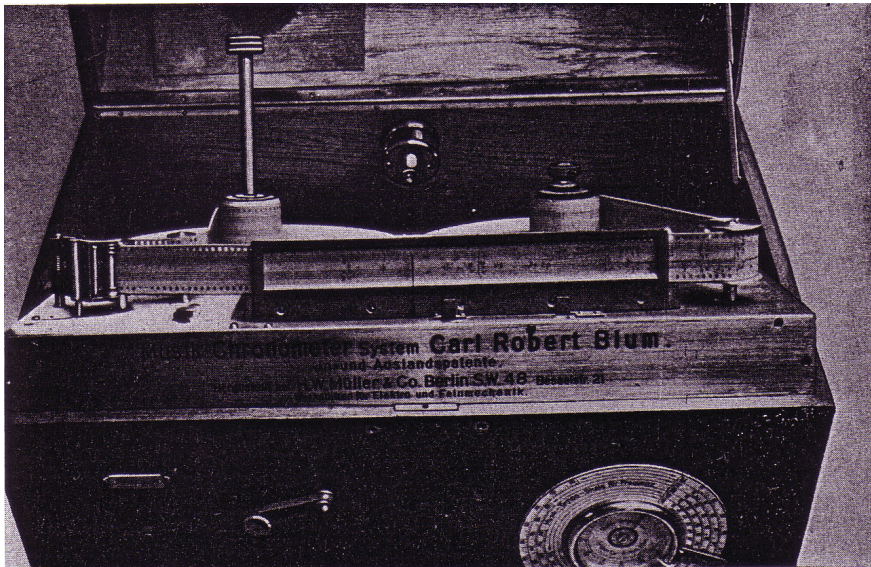


Fig. 2. Carl Robert Blum's 'Musical Chronometre' (*Die Musik*, No. 1, 1928).

The first Universal feature to be dubbed in Germany with the help of Blum's rhythmographic system was *Captain of the Guard*, released in October 1930. Reports in the trade press pay attention to exactly how the dubbing work was carried out on the sound stage:³² a rhythmographic track with a coded transcription of the original dialogue, reminiscent of Morse code and visible though a thirty-centimetre small outlet, was put into sync with the projected film. On the basis of the rhythmographic track, coded according to the length of each syllabus in the original dialogue, the script for the German dialogue (which was not a literal translation but rather a German equivalent in terms of phonetic length and emphasis) could then be developed. The German dialogue was finally recorded with the help of a marker at the centre of the opening, indicating to the actors which syllable was

to be spoken and what length it needed to have in order to be perfectly in synchrony with lip movements and the action on the screen.

Blum's system was only one among a number of similar synchronisation devices. With regard to all of these systems, in particular Blum's device, it was repeatedly emphasised that the exact formulation of the German dialogue was less oriented towards a close literal translation of the English original and rather concerned with an exact correspondence in terms of word length and phonetic articulation.³³

The problem of cultural acceptability

The rhythmographic device seems to have produced more than satisfactory results, if one takes contemporary reviews of the German versions as evidence.³⁴ Regardless of the technical quality of Universal's dubbed versions, their releases met with resistance on the side of German critics and audiences in the earliest years of the sound period.³⁵ The initially reluctant and even hostile attitude of the German public towards dubbing needs to be factored in if one wants to explain why multiple-language versions represented the dominant solution for foreign import versions until 1932.

What the early reception of dubbed versions suggests is that the so-called delay of dubbing as the standard technique of language adaptation for Germany is not due primarily to unsurpassable technical difficulties of post-synchronisation – its main reason is in the irritation German audiences felt when being confronted with the split between body and voice, on which post-synchronisation as a technological practice is fundamentally based. In this respect, multiple-language versions seemed more acceptable to German audiences because they would keep the imaginary unity of the actors' body and voice intact. Dubbing and post-synchronisation, on the other hand, fused the body of the American actor and the voice of the German actor into a hybrid cultural identity.

It was only in the course of the industrial standardisation of dubbed language versions, as well as the concomitant conventionalisation of an audience disposition towards readily believing in the illusion of imaginary unity of body and voice, that this resistance could be counter-acted and gradually decreased during the course of 1932. As film historian Joseph Garnarcz succinctly put it:

The refusal of dubbed versions of foreign films goes back to the cultural problem, that for a contemporary audience, it was not easily possible to ascribe the "borrowed voice" of the post-synchronisation to the actor on screen. [...] If one relates this refusal of dubbing back to the non-identity of body and voice, then one has to understand the gradual acceptance of dubbing as a cultural learning process, in which the knowledge about the non-identity between the one who

is visibly speaking, and the invisible source of the spoken word, is filtered out in the consciousness of the spectator.³⁶

One way to enhance and accelerate this cultural learning process consisted in naturalising the split between body and voice (image and sound) by making it a topic of the films themselves. This contributed to a self-reflexive tendency to be found as a central characteristic in many early sound films.³⁷ It is no surprise that Universal seems to have been particularly active in this area of cinematic self-promotion; for example, if one considers a production like the all-star film *Die große Sehnsucht* (The Great Longing) from 1930, a film-within-a-film whose action is set almost entirely in a sound film studio. Or, if one looks at Universal's marketing strategies and the PR events it organised and orchestrated in the years 1930 and 1931.

With regard to marketing and promotion, a number of press reports are striking examples for how to naturalise both the practice and the effects of post-synchronisation as a new aesthetic possibility and technological marvel. In October 1929 Deutsche Universal invited over 40 journalists to witness a post-production sound recording for *The Last Performance* (German release title: *Illusion*). The recording was allegedly made necessary because in a test screening in Hollywood it was noted that an important sentence of Conrad Veidt's dialogue during the central courtroom sequence was not audible on the original soundtrack. Since Veidt, the only actor speaking German on the set,³⁸ had in the meantime relocated in Berlin, he was now supposed to verbalise his sentence over a radio-telephone, his voice being transmitted via London and New York to Universal City where the actual recording took place.³⁹ This is at least what the ensuing press reports claimed.

A year later, during the opening of the 1930-1931 season, Universal fell back on a similar marketing stunt with little variation. The company placed an article written by its contract director John M. Anderson in German trade journals which reported on the solution to a similar calamity that had happened during the shooting of the Paul Whiteman-Musical *The King of Jazz*, which was soon to have its premiere in Germany. This time there was a gap in the musical score for one particular scene, which was quickly composed, arranged, and recorded in New York and, again via telephone, transmitted in real time onto the Hollywood set, allegedly enabling the actors to sing and dance in perfect synchronicity.⁴⁰

Language adaptation and the controversy around *All Quiet on the Western Front*

Obviously, promotion stunts like the two just mentioned could not significantly change the general reservations and skeptical attitudes German critics and moviegoers held against American movies dubbed into German. To what degree the problem of language adaptation could acquire a critical potential of socio-polit-

ical explosiveness, Universal was to realise when it wanted to release the dubbed German version of *All Quiet on the Western Front* – Universal's only A-picture of the season. The controversial reception of the first German version of *All Quiet on the Western Front* has been extensively documented and discussed in light of the rise of National Socialism and the general radicalisation of the political arena in the final years of the Weimar Republic.⁴¹ However, less attention has been paid to the technical and aesthetic aspects strongly informing the debate. As I would like to suggest, the critical and at times almost hysterical reactions to the German version of *All Quiet on the Western Front* – while doubtlessly being initiated by the Nazi provocations and demonstrations against the film's first public screening – can to a certain degree be related to and interpreted as a reflection of the problem of language adaptation and the lack of a cultural acceptance of dubbing.



Fig. 3. Advertisement for the dubbed German version of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (*Der Kinematograph*, No. 279, 29 November 1930).

As a matter of fact, the German premiere of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, on 4 December 1930, took place precisely at a moment in time when the rejection of dubbed import versions of foreign films reached its peak. Critics widely complained that audiences would be annoyed by the ‘non-sense’ of dubbing that would never truly achieve a neat synchronisation.⁴² One critic even went so far as to argue that German audiences would never accept the ‘biologically impossible’ division of body and voice. He claimed that the practice of dubbing would constitute a serious violation of the social fabric and national body of the Germans, by literally tearing apart the German people’s ‘experiential economy’.⁴³

Therefore, what was at stake for many German critics in the debates over the practice of dubbing was nothing less than the coherence of the nation’s collective experience – that is, Germany’s national identity and cultural distinctiveness. With its division of voice and body, image and sound, visual and acoustic perception, the trans-cultural practice of dubbing was considered to be a traumatic threat to the idea of a coherent national identity, a threat that could easily be instrumentalised to ideological and political ends. In order to fully capture the historical dynamics and cultural reverberations of the public controversy surrounding the release of the German version of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, it therefore seems necessary to locate it within a multi-causal framework and to consider it to be a complex phenomenon of cultural interference at the intersection of socio-political, cultural, technological and aesthetic discourses.

In triggering off such a debate, *All Quiet on the Western Front* was like no other film of the time. Based on a German novel depicting the First World War from the perspective of a German soldier, adapted by an American film company with American actors (who, surprisingly, can speak German), the question who is speaking for whom and who is representing whom, in an aesthetic as much as in a political sense, appears to be at the heart of the whole enterprise. The fact that the film was the very first A-picture from Hollywood to enter the German market in a dubbed version only added to the critical potential of this very question.

It is interesting to note that Universal representatives had seemingly anticipated the problems a dubbed version of *All Quiet on the Western Front* might encounter. The studio initially considered shooting a German language version with German actors in Germany, which would keep both the unity of body and voice and the national imaginary of the whole film intact and coherent.⁴⁴ In the public debate following the scandal surrounding the German premiere of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Universal was criticised for a number of cuts in the German version as compared to the international version. Universal was, above all, accused of many subtle and not so subtle changes in the dialogue. This was partly due to considerations of political correctness from a German perspective but also, as was noted above in connection to Blum’s rhythmographic post-synchronisation device, a common practice in the very process of dubbing. The result was that the film was banned in

Germany for almost a year before it was re-released in a substantially altered version and became a major box office hit.

What is particularly instructive about the blind spots and inherent contradictions produced by the debate over the German soundtrack of *All Quiet on the Western Front* is that, while the German dialogue was heavily criticised, other acoustic elements such as the noise and sound effects of the battle scenes were praised and celebrated as being authentic and realistic. This praise even came from extremely conservative or right wing critics, ignoring the fact that, of course, the film's sound effects had already been synthetically produced and post-synchronised to the action in the original American version of the film.⁴⁵

Reactions and consequences 1931-32

For Universal the events surrounding the German release of *All Quiet on the Western Front* made it painstakingly clear that the problem of language adaptation could produce serious cultural and political reverberations and that it presented a number of ideological traps to fall into. Parallel to the attempt to get clearance for the film from the German censorship boards, Universal took two measures from which it hoped to provide a better protection of its future investments in Germany.

One of the actions the German subsidiary of Universal took was a move from dubbing to the production of multiple-language versions for the European (and especially the German) market, a principal decision discussed in a meeting of Universal's European heads of production and communicated to the public in April 1931.⁴⁶ In order to put this new directive into practice, a contract was signed with the Société Internationale Cinématographique in Paris. Following the Paramount model, this contract initially intended for the central production of French and German language versions to be realised in Paris.⁴⁷ However, the search for an appropriate studio space brought no result and the production of Universal's European language versions remained decentralised in the two respective countries of destination – France and Germany – under the umbrella of the Société Internationale Cinématographique. In a statement given to the press in June 1931, S.D. Wilson, head of the Société Internationale Cinématographique, pointed out the rationale behind Universal's future production policy, not least in respect to European language versions:

We want to produce films, which already by their topics are appropriate to the countries in question, Germany, France, England, and America. [...] A well organised production should make it possible, that an interesting subject matter, elaborated in a proper way for each country, becomes a success.⁴⁸

Already in February 1931 the Universal comedy *The Boudoir Diplomat*, adapted from a German stage play and shot in Hollywood in the previous year, had its premiere in a German version.⁴⁹ As an exception to the rules of Universal's general practice at that time, the German version had been produced – following MGM – by flying in the German actors (Olga Tschechowa, Johannes Riemann, Arnold Korff and Hans Junkermann) for shooting at Universal Studios in Hollywood. The German press welcomed Universal's transition from dubbing to the production of multiple-language versions early in 1931: 'The good quality of German language versions that Hollywood has always promised theoretically, this time it has been delivered by Universal.'⁵⁰ Concurrent to the disaster with *All Quiet on the Western Front* on the German market, the considerable success of the German version of *The Boudoir Diplomat* with critics and audiences had doubtlessly again reinforced Universal's tendency to make the switch from dubbing to multiple-language versions.⁵¹

With the transition from dubbing to multiple-language versions, Universal was, at this particular moment in time, again diametrically going against the grain of general Hollywood practice. Universal and its European subsidiaries intensified their engagement in the production of multiple-language versions precisely at a historical juncture (spring/summer 1931) when all the other Hollywood studios abandoned the production of multiple-language versions for the European market and made their transition – in the opposite direction, as it were – to dubbing as the standard format for foreign language versions of their product.⁵²

Examples of German and French language versions produced or co-produced by Deutsche Universal and/or Société Internationale Cinématographique for Universal in the years 1931 to 1933 include: a French version of *Ich geh aus und du bleibst da* under the title *Inconstante*; the French versions of G.W. Pabst's *Die Herrin von Atlantis* (*L'Atlantide*, 1932) and Carl Boese's *Paprika* (1932); the German and English versions of Kurt Bernhardt's and Luis Trenker's *Der Rebell* (*The Rebel*, 1932-1933); and, in Spring 1933, the German and English versions of S.O.S. *Eisberg* (*SOS Iceberg*). The last multiple-language version distributed by Deutsche Universal was the German version of *Skandal in Budapest* (*Scandal in Budapest*), produced by Universal's Hungarian subsidiary, Universal-Hunnia RT, in summer 1933.

Apart from halting the dubbing process and making the belated and utterly anachronistic transition to multiple-language versions, Universal's crisis management included two other strategies which can be seen as a consequence of the ban of *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Universal cut a deal with Tobis to exclusively use Tobis-Klangfilm technology for production in their studios all over Europe without having to pay license fees in cash, a deal which finally allowed Universal to create a homogenous technological framework in order to avoid problems of adaptability and interchangeability.⁵³ Also, after the experiences with *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Universal sought to adapt to what it considered a particular sensibility and mental disposition of the German public towards the representation of military

conflict and issues of national identity. This is reflected to some extent in the style and subject matter of films either produced or distributed by Deutsche Universal in 1932-1933, with titles such as *Unter falscher Flagge* (Under the Wrong Banner, 1932), *Die unsichtbare Front* (The Invisible Front, 1932), or the already mentioned nationalist epic *Der Rebell* – which had the rather dubious honour of becoming Hitler's favourite movie.⁵⁴ All these efforts in catering to the tastes of the new political and administrative elites in Germany could not save Universal's German subsidiary from being re-named 'Rota-Film AG' and placed under the control of the National Socialist State in July 1934.

Conclusion

There are as many ways to research and interpret the role *All Quiet on the Western Front* has played on the German market as there are approaches to writing film history in general. The film is as much part of a larger history of media and technology as it is inserted into the histories of economics, society, and culture. It can be interpreted as an allegory of political developments or it can be taken as indexical for changing ideas and shifts in collective mentalities. Finally, Lewis Milestone's early sound film can be studied as an aesthetic object and considered in the context of the history of film as a specific art form in order to trace transitions in film form and define individual stylistic developments along patterns of influence and rejection, as well as moments of cultural change and technological innovation. As a concept cutting across traditional areas of film historical reasoning, the notion of 'crisis historiography' offers a conceptual and methodological tool to observe the in-between points where the various levels of historicism and their corresponding interpretive systems intersect and interact.

As historian Reinhart Koselleck has pointed out, the term 'crisis' stems from the Greek *krino* and refers to a whole spectrum of activities such as to cut, to select, to decide, to judge, and by extension to measure, to quarrel, to fight.⁵⁵ In its original meaning, then, the concept of 'crisis' implies radical alternatives and final decisions that permit no revisions. However, a second dimension of the concept, also fleshed out by Koselleck, tends to divest this notion of target-oriented vectorisation on the diachronic time axis by infusing it with a strong sense of synchronic dispersion; crisis always refers to more than one area of life at the same time, to politics, psychology, economics, culture, the arts, as well as historical consciousness itself. As a key concept in the writing of film history, it can thus serve to bring different heuristic paradigms and areas of investigation that are usually kept apart into a critical constellation; this includes the history of film aesthetics, the history of film technology, the history of film economics, and the social history of film.⁵⁶

In this sense, Rick Altman's recent plea for a 'crisis model of film historiography' that would consider the medium as beset with an unresolved identity cri-

sis from its historical beginnings right up to its digital present, where stability on one level (e.g. in the areas of film technology or the film industry) runs parallel to contradictions between others (e.g. in film style or politics), closely relates to the threefold semantics of crisis as it is discussed by Koselleck. This includes crisis as a multi-dimensional process that interprets history as a permanent crisis; as an 'iterative periodizing concept' that characterises 'a singular, accelerating process in which many conflicts, bursting the system apart, accumulate so as to bring about a new situation'.⁵⁷ Or, as 'the final crisis of all history that precedes it' – opening up a future-oriented and even utopian horizon of meaning, suggestive of the oft-repeated idea that the technical media (and film in particular) have taken the place of historical consciousness itself, traditionally understood as being built on the assumption that historical progress is based on the linear-causal succession of 'real' events.⁵⁸

Given the semantic richness of the term, in order to constitute more than a conceptual metaphor and to become an operational heuristic instrument for the examination of clearly circumscribed case studies like the one presented in this essay, crisis as a historiographic concept has to meet a number of criteria: historical processes that are characterized as crisis-laden must be limited in time. They must substantially affect and significantly change the society or the social environment in which they occur, without necessarily assuming 'revolutionary' status. When a historical instance or process is cast in terms of a crisis, this denomination must help to determine it in its singular distinctiveness and recognizably serve to comprehend its causes, structure and effects. The concept of crisis subsumes change and rupture but it must also be able to account for stability and continuity, in order to allow for the observation and theoretical reflection of different temporal logics and various levels of meaning existing parallel to each other.⁵⁹

Once these criteria are met, the idea of a 'crisis historiography' can contribute to our understanding of particular film historical processes and constellations by a renewed sensibility for their constitutive openness, irreducible complexity, and inherent multi-dimensionality. This sensibility is paired with a deep-rooted skepticism towards any premature attempts to dissolve the intricate singularity of a historical phenomenon by dividing it up either synchronously (into the allegedly distinct areas of the social, the economic, the political and the aesthetic) or diachronically (into distinct 'periods' and their specific interpretational systems).

Both the sensibility and the skepticism were already shared by the eminent historian of the 19th century Jacob Burckhardt. With regard to the insight a non-restrictive 'crisis phenomenology' may contain, he thought of historical crises as 'nodal points' of multiple developments, seeing the task of the historian not so much in disentangling (let alone cutting) the Gordian knot at hand but rather in bringing its singular complex intertwinement to light.⁶⁰

Author

Michael Wedel is Professor of Media History at the 'Konrad Wolf' University of Film and Television in Potsdam-Babelsberg (Germany). From 2005 to 2009 he was an assistant professor in the media studies department at the University of Amsterdam. His most recent books are *Filmgeschichte als Krisengeschichte: Schnitte und Spuren durch den deutschen Film* (Film History as a History of Crisis: Cuts and Traces through German Film, 2011) and *Kollision im Kino: Mime Misu und der Untergang der 'Titanic'* (Collision in the Cinema: Mime Misu and the Sinking of the 'Titanic', 2012).

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Notes

- 1 Koselleck 2002, pp. 239, 244.
- 2 De Certeau 1992, p. 79.
- 3 Thompson 1985, p. 158.
- 4 Altman 2004, pp. 15-23.
- 5 Altman 1996, p. 689.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Gomery 2005.
- 8 On the development of German subsidiary firms of American studios in the 1920s, see Saunders 1994, pp. 51-53.
- 9 In October 1925 Universal had contracted Filmhaus Bruckmann to handle the German distribution of their productions (from April 1926 the company was also in charge of

- the German distribution of Warner Bros. films). In return for a 15 million Reichsmark credit, Ufa distributed 10 Universal pictures in 1926 and 1927. This agreement was discontinued by Universal in November 1927 when, as one is led to assume, it was already preparing the establishment of a German subsidiary after the introduction of a new quota law (in November 1927) determined the number of imported films for the period between 1 April 1928 and 30 June 1929 to be 50% of the total number of domestic productions.
- 10 Laemmle 1928.
 - 11 Gomery 1985, p. 27; Vincendeau 1999, p. 207; Durovicová 1992, p. 147.
 - 12 Thompson 1985, p. 163; Vasey 1997, p. 97.
 - 13 In contrast to the general European practice, American studios usually shot their foreign language versions not parallel to the original versions but rather as remakes on the basis of the originals. See Krützen (1996, 134-5).
 - 14 Wolffsohn 1933, p. 259.
 - 15 Fejos made only one more film for Universal in 1929, *The Last Performance*, before returning to Europe. He was briefly considered to direct *All Quiet on the Western Front*.
 - 16 Krützen 1996, p. 148.
 - 17 Ch. 1929.
 - 18 For example in *Der Kinematograph*, No. 279 (29 November 1929).
 - 19 *Deutschsprachige Tonfilme 1930*
 - 20 Mühl-Benninghaus 1999, p. 119-121.
 - 21 The problem of the so-called 'interchangeability' between American and European systems (a major issue in the context of the 'patent war') was only settled in the Paris agreement in July 1930. See Mühl-Benninghaus 1999, p. 171.
 - 22 Deutsche Universal AG now had a budget of two million Reichsmark at its disposal. See Wolffsohn 1930, p. 109.
 - 23 Kohner 1930.
 - 24 Murr 1930; Engelhard 1930.
 - 25 Press reports from Hollywood had already drawn attention to this problem in April 1930. See Dr. F.K. 1930.
 - 26 Mühl-Benninghaus 1999, p. 163.
 - 27 Thompson 1985, p. 163; Spieker 1999, p. 26.
 - 28 Kohner 1930.
 - 29 For a more extensive account see Wedel 2007, pp. 192-217.
 - 30 Kohner's attention could have been drawn to Blum's device by a series of articles in the trade press. See for example E. Palme, 'Das Rhythmographie-Verfahren', *Kinotechnische Rundschau*, Nos. 28/29, 12/19 July 1930.
 - 31 Blum 1927, p. 26.
 - 32 In 1930-1931 dubbing was done in the studio of Blum's Rhythmographie GmbH in Berlin. Only when dubbing became the standard solution, all major German film studios where equipped with the necessary technology. The Jofa-studios, later used by Deutsche Universal, were among the leading facilities in this respect. See Wolffsohn 1933, pp. 309-11.
 - 33 See *Das Rhythmoband 1930*. For an overview of these synchronisation devices see Wedel 2003.

- 34 See the review of *Insurrection* in *Der Kinematograph*, No. 250, 28 October 1931. Also see the various production reports (*Die neue Universal-Staffel 1930*; *Rhythmographie-Arbeiten 1931*). Universal also distributed silent versions of their films in order to satisfy the demand among the considerable number of theatres that had not yet converted to sound equipment (*Der stumme Film in U.S.A. 1930*).
- 35 Some of the films, including *Hell's Angels*, were offered to German theatre owners in synchronised versions 'without dialogue' – that is, in versions which only contained music and sound effects. See *Der Kinematograph*, no. 36, 12 February 1931.
- 36 Garncarz 1996, pp. 132-133.
- 37 Schweinitz 2003.
- 38 This may have been one reason for *The Last Performance* becoming the first Universal picture to be dubbed into German. Whereas Veidt's voice was replaced in the English version, the dialogue of the other actors was dubbed into German (see Conrad Veidt *telephoniert mit Hollywood 1929*; *Universal Takes Lead in Foreign Version Films 1930*).
- 39 The press reports reveal the strong tendency to transform an attitude of cultural resistance into a modern and universal fascination with technology (see al. 1929).
- 40 Anderson 1930.
- 41 Simmons 1989; Kelly 1989 and 1998, pp. 103-32; Dörp 1993; Chambers II 1994. The most comprehensive collection of documents about the German reception of both novel and film is Schrader 1992.
- 42 Pander 1930.
- 43 Landry 1933.
- 44 Deutsche Universal verfilmt *Im Westen nichts Neues* 1929.
- 45 Mitchell 1985.
- 46 Revirement bei Universal 1931; Keller 1931; Crafton 1999, p. 438.
- 47 Carver produziert für die Universal in Frankreich 1931.
- 48 Universal-Kombination plant 10 Filme 1931.
- 49 Apart from a German version, Universal produced French and Spanish versions of this film in Universal City in October and November 1930.
- 50 Ein deutscher Tonfilm aus Hollywood 1931.
- 51 *Liebe auf Befehl* im Deutschen Reich 1931.
- 52 Hollywood dreht keine 'Versionen' mehr 1931; Crafton 1999, pp. 436-437.
- 53 Wolffsohn 1933, pp. 41, 225, 262.
- 54 Spieker 1999, p. 47.
- 55 Koselleck 2002, p. 237.
- 56 Allen and Gomery 1986.
- 57 Koselleck 2002, p. 240.
- 58 Rosenstone 1995.
- 59 See Vierhaus 1978, pp. 320-321.
- 60 Burckhardt 1956, p. 138.