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Parsing the Archive of Rudolf Mayer Film, Vienna, 1937-9

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Joachim Schätz:

Parsing the Archive of Rudolf Mayer Film, Vienna, 1937-9

When Kurt Mayer brought the surviving documents from his father's company to the Austrian Film Museum for deposit in March 2011, the materials easily fitted into two bags: one well-filled thick binder, two folders (one bulky, the other slim), an envelope, one duplicating book for delivery notes and a couple of photographs curled by age. Despite this slender volume, those documents, put together with the films that Kurt Mayer had already deposited at the Austrian Film Museum before, form one of the most revealing windows on the lively period of professionalisation in Austrian advertising film that were the 1930s: the archive of Rudolf Mayer Film. The binder proved especially instructive and is the main source of the following observations.

It contains, in alphabetical order of the client companies, film proposals developed by Rudolf Mayer and his collaborators, as well as occasional business correspondence - papers lost without a trace in the case of most other contemporaneous producers of short films in Austria. They give some clues as to the everyday procedures and networks of advertising film production that neither contemporaneous trade papers and academic studies nor the surviving films provide. To better outline the epistemic value of those papers, I will briefly chart Rudolf Mayers career and the efforts at professionalising short film production in Austria during the 1930s as known via other sources.

Context (I): Rudolf Mayer

Since his youth, Rudolf Mayer (1903-1962) had been working in his father Gustav Mayer's company, Mayer's Filmbüro. Founded in the early 1920s, the company first specialised in actualities and newsreels, but would be one of the most successful producers of advertising films in Vienna from 1934 onwards. When Gustav Mayer died in 1936, Rudolf's younger brother Adi took over the family enterprise, prompting him to start his own company, Rudolf Mayer Film, in October 1937.¹ The new company's output of both advertising films and state-sponsored educational films (*Kulturfilme*) was fairly constant before Rudolf was drafted as a frontline cameraman at the end of 1939. While the family enterprise, renamed Adi Mayer Film, would go on to be one of the most

successful and long-living manufacturers of advertising films and TV commercials in post-war Austria, Rudolf Mayer's business would never recover from the forced hiatus during World War II. After the war, he would only produce the occasional commercial and campaign film and specialise (with limited success) in manufacturing special effects in his garage studio.

The written documents in the archive of Rudolf Mayer Film mostly cover the early successful period, from the company's formation in October 1937 to the end of 1939. They also encompass occasional projects dating back to his time at Mayer's Filmbüro, as well as occasional projects taken on by Rudolf for another local producer of advertising films, Hans Ludwig Böhm. The business correspondence in the binder is scarce, but informative. The collection of film proposals for the period until the end of 1939, although large, is not complete, as can be measured by the absence of several surviving Rudolf Mayer films. It contains proposals and notes on some seventy proposed films, often in three evolving versions (typescript with handwritten notes). Reflecting the different formats of promotional films produced at the time, the proposals' lengths vary from half a page (usually for *Sprechstreifen*, i.e. film strips containing recorded sound only that were combined with slide presentation) to ten pages (for longer narrative promotional films).

Context (II): Professionalisation of Advertising in 1930s Austria

Before Rudolf Mayer was drafted into service as a cameraman his business seems to have benefited from the National Socialist annexation of Austria, in March 1938. In the period from March 1938 to the end of 1939, there were hardly any advertising films produced in Vienna by anyone other than Rudolf (fourteen films) and Adi Mayer (nineteen films).² The decrease in competition was in no small part due to National Socialist persecution, which led, for instance, to the deportation and eventual death of influential Austrian advertising film producer Robert Reich.

But Rudolf Mayer Film's relatively steady production until the end of 1939 was also shaped by enduring creative and business contacts and rooted in long-running efforts at professionalisation undertaken by the Austrian producers of advertising films and supported by the previous Austro-Fascist government's Ministry of Trade. In the summer of 1935, the established makers of advertising films and other short subjects founded the Verband der Kurzfilmhersteller (Association of Producers of Short Films) to better assert their interests and organise production and distribution.³ In March 1936, they managed to have the profession of producer of short films changed to a protected profession requiring a licence, thus shielding the market from new competitors.

Later in 1936, they also succeeded in having protective measures imposed against foreign film producers making advertising films for domestic companies.⁴ The same year, sixty-one advertising sound films were produced in Austria (including state-sponsored promotional films) - a modest number considering the German output of over 650 advertising films in 1935,⁵ but still impressive in comparison with the twenty-one films made in Austria in 1932.⁶ (Twenty-four - more than a third - of those 1936 films were registered as Mayer's Filmbüro productions in the censorship lists.)

With their steady output and institutional ties, the handful of established producers of advertising and industrial films like Gustav Mayer, Karl Köfinger, or Hans Ludwig Böhm⁷ fitted well with the agenda of the Austrian Reklamewissenschaftliche Vereinigung (Association for the Science of Advertising), which prominently included promotional films as a topic in its vocational training course in 1935.⁸ Like other Austrian and international advertising trade organisations at the time, the Association for the Science of Advertising stressed a programme of professionalisation that aimed to rid advertising of dubious or ill-informed market participants and thus improve the business's overall reputation.⁹ The practice of those established advertising film producers might seem distinctly different from the specific ideas about professionalisation heralded in the trade publications *Kontakt* and *Österreichische Reklame*: it hinged on broad, craftsman-like know-how rather than on creative and scientific specialisation; on tight-knit family enterprises and loose networks of freelancers rather than clear-cut organisational hierarchies and divisions of labour. But, then again, that was mostly the state of affairs in advertising in 1930s Vienna as well, with ambitious small Reklamebüros (advertising companies) fulfilling a variety of functions.¹⁰

This mode of production in the field of advertising films, markedly distinct from the differentiation of tasks under the supervision of ad agencies that would finally prevail in Austria circa 1960, is partly elucidated by the written documents of the archive of Rudolf Mayer Film. The papers are revealing regarding both advertising films' commissioning and their conception.

Material (I): Commissioning Films

The producers of short films in 1930s Austria were generalists. According to all available evidence and accounts by descendants, this does not just go for their output - which ranged from advertising films and *Kulturfilme* to newsreel segments and film interludes for live performances - but also for the division of labour within the companies. Diverse creative (camera, editing, title cards, directing) and business (contacting possible clients,

distributing films) tasks had to be performed by the producer and his staff which often (as in Gustav Mayer's and Karl Köfinger's case) consisted largely of family members.¹¹ The producers' informal way of keeping contact with both freelance creatives and clients makes it difficult to trace standard modes of procedure - for instance, the way films were commissioned.

Concerning this matter, the papers of the Rudolf Mayer Film archive offer some insight. They reveal, for instance, that differentiation of tasks in advertising had evolved to the extent that small advertising offices sometimes worked as intermediaries between clients and film producers and developed film concepts. In a letter, advertising professional Fritz Engelhart informs a perfume manufacturer of his idea for the subject of an advertising film it had commissioned, as well as the film's probable length and production cost. Engelhart claims that he can't be more specific, as he hasn't yet chosen a film company to commission with this film.¹² The existence of a copy of this letter among Rudolf Mayer's company papers suggests otherwise - censorship lists reveal that Engelhart had collaborated with Mayer's Filmbüro for a long time.¹³ Another document that points to the intermediary role of advertising agencies is an envelope containing detailed guidelines on a planned advertising film and PR materials from the textile company Ganahl in Feldkirch. It is addressed, not to Rudolf Mayer, but to professional Viennese sales representative Hans Glass, who likely contacted Mayer.¹⁴

It is impossible to gauge from the surviving materials the ratio of films commissioned via an advertising intermediary versus films commissioned in direct contact between Mayer and clients - an option that, according to practitioners, was still in practice until the 1950s in the small Austrian market.¹⁵ But the documents prove that, by 1937, this mode of doing business already co-existed with a more streamlined division of labour.

Material (II): Writing Films

Most of the film proposals in the Rudolf Mayer Film archive are unsigned, except for the stamp of 'Rudolf Mayer, Kurzfilmhersteller [producer of short films], Neubaugasse 25'. Usually, the texts are followed by the blanket statement, 'Non-binding proposal. All rights reserved.' Of course, Rudolf Mayer's company signature doesn't mean that he wrote those texts - ranging from short film descriptions to more fleshed-out screenplays - on his own. First of all, as discussed, both advertising professionals and the clients themselves were active in conceiving of film plots. The aforementioned correspondence with Ganahl highlights the striking level of detail in which a client of middling size would instruct a film producer. A letter titled 'Guidelines for a manuscript' specifies the range of products to be

advertised, as well as ideas for the structure of the film (both of which Mayer's subsequent proposal closely adheres to).¹⁶ It also offers this elaborate objective regarding the company's corporate image:

The film aims to popularize our trademark and company name. Find the enclosed trademark but mind that in the new edition the term 'Montforta' [a former quality description] will take a backseat to the company name 'Ganahl' So 'Ganahl' is to be advertised first and foremost, and 'Montforta' only in connection, to accustom the viewer to the other name. Yet, this transformation is not to be specifically depicted, but only to be imprinted in passing.¹⁷

Another letter concerning Ganahl, this time addressed to Mayer's Filmbüro and most likely written either by a company employee or a sales intermediary (the author refers to 'our goods'), contains another set of tasks for the film ('review of products and plea to the consumer, suitable for following a salesman's pitch') and a matching plot outline.¹⁸ Apart from such detailed writing on the part of the client, Mayer frequently employed freelance authors. While the surviving films' credits are sparse, mentioning little else beyond featured prominent actors and singers and the promoted company, the papers allow for a little more insight into Rudolf Mayers network of collaborators. The authors credited in the proposals include, for instance, journalist Josef Szekely and successful *Wienerlied* songwriter Erich Meder, who contributed specially written lyrics for two film proposals.

The use of popular songs, which is also evident in Mayers surviving advertising films, was fairly typical of 1930s advertising. Mayer productions often announce their singer-stars in the film title (*Franz Schier singt 'Das Lied von Sooß'* [*Franz Schier sings 'The Song of Sooß'*], *Das Boheme-Quartett in: 'Die Vier von der Tegetthoffstraße'* [*The Boheme Quartet in: 'The Four from Tegetthoff Street'*]). But beyond the pervasive popularity of *Schlager* and *Wienerlied* music and their interpreters, building an advertising film around a song had pragmatic advantages made evident by the proposals: songs composed for one proposal could be applied to another if the film wasn't made after all; even songs written specifically for the occasion allowed for flexibility in planning a budget. A proposal for Persil based on new lyrics by Erich Meder, *Wien steht Kopf* (*Vienna on its Head*), is prefaced by an explanation about two possible versions of the film, one significantly shorter than the other.¹⁹ Likewise, a screenplay built around Erich Meder's song 'Qualität bleibt Qualität' ('Quality will be Quality') is introduced by the note that single shots in the film (and the verses they are connected to) could be

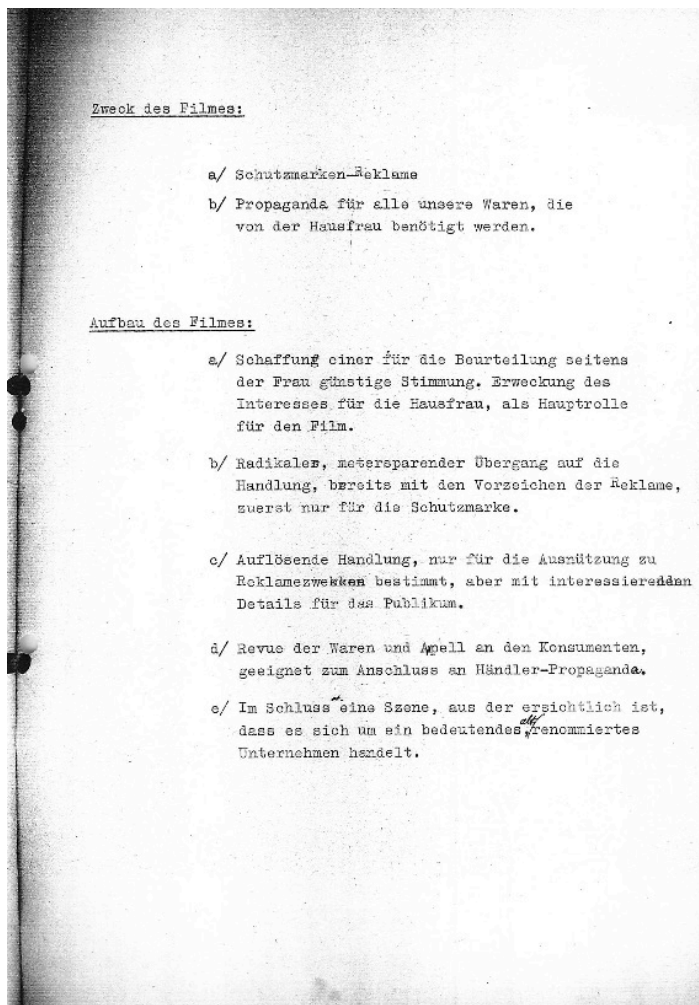
swapped and cut as desired. The song as a whole, originally written for Abadie cigarettes, would be reused for proposals for the textile shop Sandera and the shoe retailer Delka.²⁰

This practice of recycling cannot only be traced across the film proposals and short screenplays in the Rudolf Mayer film archive.²¹ It also pertains to the surviving Mayer films which often reapply existing footage, making the best of the broad range of films produced. Here, the film-makers show genuine imagination: with material he very likely had just shot for a *Kulturfilm* about professional raftsmen (*Flößer/Raftsmen*, 1941), Adi Mayer made the advertising short *Nimm das Steuer in die Hand (Take the Steering Wheel)* (1941), which promoted insurance by likening life to the navigation of wild waters. Despite the practical necessities and frugal calculations behind such practices of recycling, there is also a playful, occasionally even baroque streak to some of Rudolf Mayer's screenplays for advertising films. Fully in keeping with his later career as a special effects craftsman who made spaceships fly in the state-sponsored sci-fi oddity *1. April 2000* (1952), the proposal for *Wien steht Kopf* calls for trick photography showing a flooded inner-city Vienna and St Stephen's Cathedral transposed on a nearby mountaintop.²² The most formally adventurous of those proposals, named *Das Geheimnis der Zehn? (The Secret of the Ten?)*, commissioned by the Delka chain of shoe stores, was actually filmed. As no copy of the film has been found, it is impossible to say how many of the screenplay's sophisticated superimpositions made it into the actual film.²³ But - to switch from historical analysis to art appreciation for one final moment - the proposal itself has its own special attraction. The 'ten' in the title refers to the number of branch stores Delka ran in Vienna, which Rudi Mayer planned to visualise with a photo-montage of the different shops forming a '10'. This is anticipated by a sketch of the ten, overlapped by a paper clip demonstrating the 'revue of shoes and stockings' to appear out of the zero. The paper clip can be folded, concealing and revealing parts of the sketch behind it. Both functional and somewhat improvised, this image-object might be an emblem for Rudolf Mayer's mode of production. It's movement brought onto paper, a flourish directed at Mayer's clients rather than at the audiences in the cinema.

Images



The surviving documents of Rudolf Mayer Film



Guidelines for a Ganahl film

B i l d .

T o n .

In's Bild kommt groß die Tafel
D e l k a .

Sprecher:
Delka mit seinen 10 Wiener
Filialen.

Aufzug bleibt stehen.
Tafel zerreißt und es erschei-
nen aus den Rissen, die Ziffer
10 gebildet aus den 10 Filialen
Delka's.

Durch die aus den Filialen
gebildete Ziffer 10,
geht durch die Null eine
Revue von Schuhen und Strümpfen
in Großaufnahme.

Für jeden Bedarf den
D e l k a Schuh und auch den
passenden Strumpf dazu.

Schlussbild.

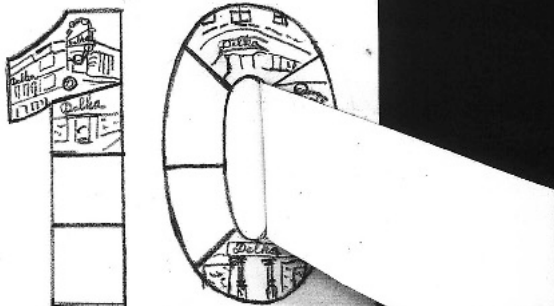
D e l k a
t r ä g t s i c h g u t .

E n d e .

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E n d e .



The Secret of the Ten? (Das Geheimnis der Zehn?)

Documents in the Archive of Rudolf Mayer Film

(owned by Kurt Mayer, deposited in the Archive of the Austrian Film Museum, Vienna)

'Beilage zum Brief an Filmbüro Mayer, Wien'

'Das Geheimnis der Zehn?'

'Freude'

Prucha, Franz, 'Richtlinien für das Manuskript'

'Qualität bleibt Qualität. Ein Werbefilm für "Abadie" von Erich Meder'

'Qualität bleibt Qualität. Sujet für einen Werbefilm'

Reklamebüro Fritz Engelhart, 'Kopie. Titl. Fa. M.E.Mayer. Wien, 2. Sept. 1937' 'Schusterweisheit'

'Wien steht Kopf. Ein Persil-Reklame-Film. Idee von Erich Meder'

Notes

¹ Information on the company's concession obtained in an email from Walter Töttels, MA 63 Zentralgewerberegister Wien, on 6 November 2012.

² Information obtained researching the German censorship lists at the Bundesarchiv Filmarchiv on 13 November 2012.

³ 'Verband der Kurzfilmhersteller', *Das Kino-Journal* no. 1305 (August 1935), p. 6.

⁴ 'Zum Schutz der heimischen Kurzfilmindustrie', *Das Kino-Journal* no. 1355 (July 1936), p. 10. Subsequently, in January 1937, a travelling salesman for a company in Zagreb was sentenced to a fine of 800 Schillings for having shot advertising films in Austria without a concession.

'Unbefugte Kurzfilmherstellung', *Das Kino-Journal* no. 1379 (January 1937), p. 4.

⁵ Ralf Forster, *Ufa und Nordmark. Zwei Firmengeschichten und der deutsche Werbefilm 1919-1945* (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2005), p. 176.

⁶ For the numbers, see Emil Guckes, 'Der Tonfilm als Werbemittel in Deutschland' (PhD dissertation, Leopold-Franzens-Universität Innsbruck, 1937), p. 145.

⁷ Gustav Mayer was a member of the Viennese Industrial Cooperative's film panel; Karl Köfing was also the sworn official legal expert on the conditions of film copies. 'Werbung durch den Film', *Österreichische Film-Zeitung* vol. 8 no. 42 (1934), p. 5; Karl Köfing, 'Filmrollen und Filmwirtschaft', *Das Kino-Journal* no. 1387 (March 1937), p. 5.

⁸ 'Filmvorführung', *Kontakt* vol. 10 no. 6 (1935), p. 22; 'Vortrag: "Wie entsteht ein Werbefilm"', *Kontakt* vol. 10 no. 7/8 (1935), pp. 29-30; 'Verband der Kurzfilmhersteller', *Das Kino-Journal* no. 1305 (August 1935), p. 6.

⁹ See, for instance, Erwin Paneth, 'Der Aufstieg der Reklame vom Pfuschartum zur Wissenschaft', *Österreichische Reklame* vol. 1 no. 1 (1926), p. 4; Hanns Kropff, 'Die letzten Entwicklungen und die nächsten Aufgaben der Reklame', *Kontakt* vol. 6 no. 1 (1931), pp. 3-9; Charles J. Angermayer, 'Advertising Agency = Anzeigenexpedition +x', *Kontakt* vol. 6 no. 6 (1931), pp. 31-2.

¹⁰ This even applies to the consulting jobs of August Lichal, chairman of the *Reklamewissenschaftliche Vereinigung*: 'August Lichal R-W-V', *Kontakt* vol. 6 no. 12 (1931), p. 14. On advertising offices, see also 'Hanns Kropff über aktuelle Rekalmefragen', *Kontakt* vol. 6 no. 12 (1931), p. 34.

¹¹ Interviews conducted by the author, Sema Colpan, and Lydia Nsiah with Rudi Mayers son Kurt Mayer (6 October 2010) and Adi Mayers son Peter Mayer (17 July 2011). Josef Navratil, *Das Werk des österreichischen Kulturfilmproduzenten Ing. Karl Köfinger am Beispiel einer Serie von Fremdenverkehrswerbefilmen* (Vienna: Österreichisches Filmarchiv, 1989), pp. 21, 25-6.

¹² Reklamebüro Fritz Engelhart, 'Kopie. Titl. Fa. M.E.Mayer. Wien, 2. Sept. 1937', company archive Rudolf Mayer Film, preserved by Kurt Mayer, deposited at the Austrian Film Museum.

¹³ See 'Der Schlüssel der Gesundheit', 'Das rassige Vollblut', 'Der schneidige Traber' and 'Die lieben Nachbarn', in Thomas Ballhausen and Paolo Caneppele (eds), *Entscheidungen der Wiener Filmzensur 1934-1938* (Vienna: Filmarchiv Austria, 2009), pp. 192, 212, 248.

¹⁴ 'Herrn Ing. Hans Glass', company archive Rudolf Mayer Film. On Hans Glass, see Lehmann 1936, vol. 2, 3rd section, 28, 'Schikanederstraße 6'.

<http://www.digital.wienbibliothek.at/wbrobv/periodical/pageview/220605>

¹⁵ Interviews conducted by the author, Sema Colpan, and Lydia Nsiah with Kurt Mayer (6 October 2010), Peter Mayer (17 July 2011) and Harro Pfeiffer, former general manager of the ad agency Eggert (merged with Grey Austria in 2000) in Vienna (27 April 2011). Navratil, *Das Werk des österreichischen Kulturfilmproduzenten Ing. Karl Köfinger*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁶ Franz Prucha, 'Richtlinien für das Manuskript', company archive Rudolf Mayer Film.

¹⁷ Ibid., translation by J. S.

¹⁸ 'Beilage zum Brief an Filmbüro Mayer, Wien', company archive Rudolf Mayer Film.

Translation of Fig. 2 by J. S.: 'Purpose of the film: a) Advertising the trademark, b) Advertising for all our wares that are used by housewives. Structure of the film: a) Creating a mood that is beneficial to the evaluation by women. Awakening interest in the housewife, as central character in the film, b) Radical, footage-economic transition to the plot while already signalling towards advertising, first focused only on the trademark, c) Resolution of the plot, providing an opportunity for advertising, now with details of interest to the audience. d) Revue of wares and appeal to the consumer, suitable to follow a salesman's pitch. e) In the end a scene that makes it clear that this is a distinguished, prestigious company.'

¹⁹ 'Wien steht Kopf. Ein Persil-Reklame-Film. Idee von Erich Meder', company archive Rudolf Mayer Film.

²⁰ 'Qualität bleibt Qualität. Ein Werbefilm für "Abadie" von Erich Meder', 'Qualität bleibt Qualität. Sujet für einen Werbefilm'. Both: company archive Rudolf Mayer Film.

²¹ Other proposals that are reused include 'Schusterweisheit' (for shoe businesses BB and Delka) and 'Freude' (used for Delka, coffee brand Imperial and the Aryanised department store Kaufhaus der Wiener, formerly Gerngross). All proposals are part of the company archive Rudolf Mayer Film.

²² 'Wien steht Kopf. Ein Persil-Reklame-Film. Idee von Erich Meder', company archive Rudolf Mayer Film.

²³ 'Das Geheimnis der Zehn?', company archive Rudolf Mayer Film. Translation of Fig. 3 by J. S.: 'Image. The plate saying "Delka" appears prominently. The elevator stops. The plate is torn, and from the ruptures, there appears the number ten, formed from the ten Delka branch stores. Through the zero, a revue of shoes and stockings in close-up appears. Final shot. Delka wears well. Sound. Narrator: Delka with its ten branch stores. For every need the Delka shoe/and the matching stocking as well. The End. All rights reserved. Non-binding proposal.'