

# The Transition from the Silent into the Sound Era in German Cinema<sup>1</sup>

## The Innovative Use of Sound in Pabst's *Westfront 1918*

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With the arrival of sound, cinema had to reinvent itself. The role of the scriptwriter became more complex. Directors had to conceptualise new narrative approaches in order to weave sonic elements into their storytelling. For the first time, sound enabled film to incorporate out-of-vision sound to enhance narrative elements beyond the visual frame. Filmmakers such as Pabst, Lang, Dudow, and Lamprecht recognised the potential of sound film as extending further than the ability to use spoken dialogue in film, and attempted to incorporate sound in more creative ways through atmospheres and effects. One particularly striking example of the use of sound to conjure up the nightmare of human misery in the trenches is G.W. Pabst's 1930 film *Westfront 1918*. Focusing on Pabst's film as an example of sound as a storytelling device, this article discusses the function and emotive use of sound in several key scenes. The article also explores how the German film industry approached its transition from the silent into the sound era during the late 1920s, precisely at a time when the democratic foundations of the Weimar Republic became strained by increasingly polarised political pressures.

### Introduction

In 2001, Sabine Hake described the transitional period from the silent into the sound era as 'one of the least researched periods in the history of German cinema' (2001, p.55). This article contributes to redressing this lack by looking at specific examples of scenes from G.W. Pabst's 1930 film *Westfront 1918*, made on the cusp of Germany's transition to sound. It argues that the coming of sound to Germany did not produce homogenous technological or narrative changes in filmmaking; instead, the transition needs to be understood as an evolutionary process during which – alongside the acquisition of technological competence – a new sound film aesthetic gradually emerged within German cinema. Following a brief résumé of existing scholarship in this area, this article will sketch the historical period of Germany's transition into sound, before discussing key scenes from *Westfront 1918* as examples of the complexity and creative aspiration of early German sound film.

Looking at the subject area of sound design and the moving image in contemporary film theory, the field has developed considerably in recent years. Before the late 1990s, Weis & Belton (1985), Altman (1992), and Chion (1994) remained virtually the only key texts of note on the topic of sound design and the moving image in contemporary film theory. The canon of books has increased notably in recent years, in line with the growing awareness of sound as a significant constituent of moving image production, as important as editing, cinematography, or production design. Contemporary sound designers such as Walter Murch and Randy Thom have encouraged a deeper understanding of sound film aesthetics by contributing practice-based perspectives to the discourse, but this dimension is under-represented in discussions of early sound films. Academic research also remains slow to develop much beyond technological historiographies, frequently positioning sound discourses from the vantage point of *innovation*.

The wider literature on sound film history has also recently expanded, though chiefly from the American perspective, notably by Crafton (1997), Eyman (1999), Abel & Altman (2001), and Altman

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(2005). Incorporating a European perspective, O'Brien (2004) explored the influence of America's transition on subsequent developments in France. Within the relatively small field of early German sound film, the majority of texts have focused on technological or financial perspectives ( Jossé, 1984; Mühl-Benninghaus, 1999; Müller, 2003; Boy, 2009), alongside the establishment of a technological historiography (Wahl, 2009). Another strand of scholarship, from Kracauer (1947), through Eisner (1969), to Korte (1998), Elsaesser (2000), Koepnick (2002), Koebner (2003), and beyond, has investigated the potent relationship between sound film and society in the Weimar Republic at a time when Germany's political factions pulled on public opinion like a supermoon pulling the ocean's tides. However, the emphasis within this article is not on the psychological perspectives of Weimar cinema, but the emergence of a sound film aesthetic, using Pabst's first sound film as a case study.

### **Overview of the Historical Period**

Germany had resumed film production soon after the end of the First World War and quickly managed to establish a successful industry: popular genres included comedies (such as those directed by Ernst Lubitsch) and dramas with a supernatural, exotic, or fantastical flavour from directors like Robert Wiene, Paul Wegener, F.W. Murnau, and Fritz Lang. During the 1920s, German cinema quickly emerged as a powerhouse of European film production, exporting its homemade product to many countries. Although experimental forays into film sound had begun in Germany by 1919, financing the development of new technology proved difficult. Confronted with proposals for an early optical sound system at the beginning of the 1920s, the country's film industry appeared reluctant to tamper with a cinematic format that was generating considerable successes both at home and abroad.<sup>2</sup> While its silent film industry was thriving, the fragile national economy of the Weimar Republic benefited considerably from the influx of currency dividends generated by Germany's cinema exports.

The language implications of sound film presented new challenges for the film industry (Wahl, 2009; Naumann, 2016). During the silent era, audiences easily tolerated German actors in non-German roles (Emil Jannings famously appeared as Henry VIII in Lubitsch's 1920 film *Anna Boleyn*). At the same time, some of the country's biggest silent stars became international players in Hollywood: in 1929, Jannings became the first recipient of the Academy Award for Best Actor.<sup>3</sup> Sound ended the easy international exchange possible with silent films; Germany's film industry eventually had to follow America's lead and shoulder the expense of converting to sound as American imports like *The Singing Fool* (1928) kindled German audiences' appetite for sound film.

Once the industry made the jump, Germany's first full-length sound features immediately delighted audiences. In Hanns Schwarz's *Melodie des Herzens* (1929), critics picked on the occasionally awkward performance style and stilted dialogue. But for all its technical limitations, the film already brimmed with a joyful readiness to embrace sound, and its enthusiastic audiences, much more forgiving, proved eager for more. Despite technological and financial obstacles, Germany's transition into sound between late 1929 and 1932 happened relatively quickly. At the end of 1929, only eight sound films had been produced in Germany, compared to 175 silent films. By the end of 1932 the number of sound films had risen to 132 (Jossé, 1984, p.240). The number of silent films at the end of that year had fallen to zero (see Figure 1).

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<sup>2</sup> Tri-Ergon – a team of three engineers, Jo Engl, Joseph Masolle, and Hans Vogt – patented optical film technology in the early 1920s, but failed to attract sufficient financial investment to refine the equipment. These financial difficulties have to be understood within the context of the post-war pressures of a defeated nation in the middle of an inflationary crisis spiralling out of control. Tri-Ergon sold its patent rights to Swiss investors, who in turn sold the technology rights to the Fox Corporation in the United States.

<sup>3</sup> Jannings received the Award for his work on *The Way of All Flesh* (1927) and *The Last Command* (1928).

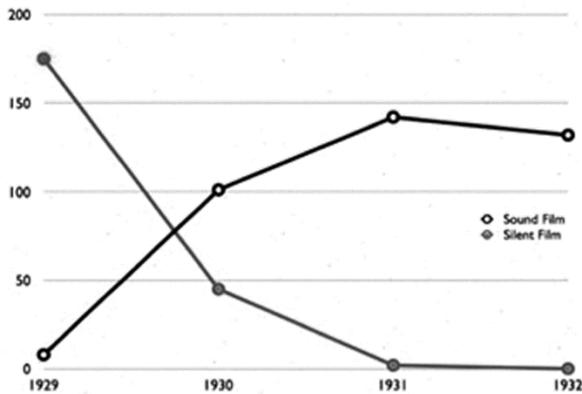


Figure 1: Germany: Silent film and sound film production between 1929 and 1932

The transition's progress is all the more surprising in light of the renewed economic pressures faced by the Weimar Republic. After emerging from the initial post-war inflationary debacle, the country had stabilised for most of the 1920s, before being plunged into new difficulties with the global financial crisis triggered by the US stock market collapse of 1929. Rising production costs associated with sound film resulted in a seismic change in the filmmaking infrastructure of the Weimar Republic (Korte, 1998, p.448). It created a landscape in which major players were better equipped to weather the storm: many independent cinema chains and small film companies could not raise funds to convert to sound. Emerging as Germany's leading film studio, Ufa had recognised that sound technology would warrant investment and constructed a purpose-built sound stage complex laid out on a cross-shaped foundation. Located at the centre of Ufa's new *Tonkreuz* was its optical sound hub, which could simultaneously process the recording tracks from each of its four separate sound stages. *Film-Kurier* published a special supplement in August 1930, which assessed the infrastructure of European film studios and highlighted the recent development at Ufa's Babelsberg studios (see Figure 2).



Figure 2: *Film-Kurier*, 15 August 1930 (with the kind permission of CineGraph, Hamburg)

Alongside practical consequences for filmmakers triggered by the arrival of sound, a transformation of the cinematic aesthetic also became the subject of public debate. Many quarters within the film industry realised that adaptation of the new format extended beyond operational competencies in the use of any technical kit; it also required a new engagement with film concepts.

The technical transition – the position of the microphone in the studio, the installation of the loudspeakers in the cinema – was only the first step. Many thought that this was all there was to it. But the cultural transition into sound film is far more difficult, and may take years; everyone will have to submit to this: whoever is reticent will not stay the course.<sup>4</sup>

(Anon, 1931, n.p.)

This extract from a *Film-Kurier* editorial reflected a wider published debate in the late 1920s and 1930s, concerning the creative challenges brought about by the arrival of sound. This suggests that the integration of sound within filmic narratives was an evolutionary process: synchronous sound offered new directions in enhancing cinema's creative potential – a concept filmmakers such as Pabst soon came to recognise.

### ***Westfront 1918* in Context**

With the addition of the *Tonkreuz*, Ufa's Babelsberg became one of the period's most advanced sound film studios. While Ufa sought to capitalise on its investment by generating popular box-office material, the relatively liberal Nero film company – one of the few smaller film companies that had weathered the initial transition into sound – focused on more altruistic subject matter. Nero had already made a reputation producing successful storylines exploring themes of social justice and international peace (Herzberg, 1930, p.2). Reflecting this ethos, Pabst embarked on *Westfront 1918* in February 1930. He filmed exterior scenes near Frankfurt/Oder in rural locations standing in for the Western Front, while some interior scenes were shot at a small studio. The location material incorporated sound effects of battlefield explosions and gunfire, cut directly between lines of speech in the dialogue track, something confirmed by the film's editor Jean (Hans) Oser (Geisler, 1990, p.93). Multi-track recording of different sound components became possible in German studio productions surprisingly early, enabling live mixing of separate audio tracks (captured via individual microphone channels) at the time of recording, and a multi-channel set-up may have been used in some studio scenes to achieve the simultaneous recording of dialogue and out-of-vision music. For location shooting, mobile amplifiers, manufactured by Tri-Ergon for the purpose, were available for hire by the German Tobis company, credited with supplying the sound equipment for *Westfront*. However, it seems unlikely that location multi-track recording was used; while some degree of post-production sound mixing was possible, re-recording existing optical audio tracks in a post-production mix generated additional layers of unwanted hiss. Live mixing and recording represented the best and quietest option for integrating different sound elements, and was one frequently used in German studio productions during the early 1930s.

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<sup>4</sup> In the original: 'Die technische Umstellung – das Aufhängen des Mikrophons im Atelier, das Aufstellen der Lautsprecher im Kino – war ja erst der Anfang. Viele glaubten, es sei schon alles. Die geistige Umstellung auf Tonfilm ist viel schwieriger, sie kann Jahre dauern, ihr muß sich jeder unterwerfen: wer es nicht vermag, wird aus der Bahn geschleudert.'



Figure 3: Tobis mobile amplifier (Umbehr & Wollenberg, 1930, p.69)

Aside from issues of sound technology, *Westfront 1918* also shows itself a product of an industry in flux through the format of its film script – a production element then undergoing a metamorphosis (Kagelmann & Keiner, 2014, p.91). Unusually, the *Westfront* script was printed in landscape format, using separate columns for sound notes, as well as instructions regarding camera positions and dialogue lines. Indicating that this layout marked a transitional stage in the evolution of sound film scripts, Pabst's next script, for *Kameradschaft* (1931), followed a different format, with sound notes integrated into the dialogue column (Kagelmann & Keiner, 2014, p.112, n.56). The arrival of sound not only affected the layout of film scripts, it also profoundly altered the involvement of writers in shaping a film. Sound gave writers the opportunity to experiment with more complex character development as well as with semantics and the shaping of dialogue lines. On *Westfront*, dialogue was created by Peter Martin Lampel, while the script was adapted for the screen by Ladislaus Vajda (involved in every Pabst film script between 1927 and 1932). Filmmakers themselves could add further depth to a writer's characters by working with actors on accents, dialect, and intonation – opportunities which Pabst seized upon in this film.

Like Milestone's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), *Westfront 1918* was based on a literary source written by an author with first-hand experience of the Great War. Ernst Johannsen's popular 1929 novel *Vier von der Infanterie* had been published by the *Fackelreiter-Verlag* in Hamburg. Pabst's film premiered in Berlin on 23 May 1930 and immediately established the director's reputation for creative and highly effective use of sound. The film was repeatedly praised in the press for its authenticity, and its soundtrack provided material for discussion in many reviews. Pabst's decision to use the topic of the First World War for his first foray into sound was apposite: sound offered Pabst the potential to fundamentally affect the action's *mise-en-scène*. Sound film also proved effective in transposing to the cinema the sonic metaphors permeating Johannsen's prose.

Pabst's film evidently struck a chord with contemporary audiences: in six weeks nearly 62,000 people had seen it at the Capitol cinema, according to the *Lichtbild-Bühne* of 12 July 1930 (Korte, 1998, p.219). The first German sound film to deal with the Great War, *Westfront 1918* has languished in the shade compared with the more widely known *All Quiet on the Western Front*.<sup>5</sup> This is all the

<sup>5</sup> As an indication of how overlooked this film has been for years, DVD versions of *Westfront 1918* with English subtitles have only recently been released (by Eureka and Criterion), finally making it more accessible to a wider international audience.

more surprising considering Pabst's creative use of sound, as well as the impact that the film clearly had at the time of its release. Working as a film reviewer during the Weimar Republic, the author Siegfried Kracauer extolled its sonic virtues in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* (27 May 1930):

Above all it is the sound of the film which is being utilised as an emotive device. If one is able to hear the moans of an injured soldier who is beyond salvation, without ever being able to see him, then this touches you to the core and cannot fail to move the critic, who can no longer remain merely an observer. Equally haunting, the moans and screams of the injured in the hospital rupture the visual frame and become palpable reality.<sup>6</sup>

(Kracauer, 1930)

Kracauer admired the aesthetic risks taken by Pabst in his first sound film, concluding that *Westfront* succeeded in transcending the limitations posed by cinema's visual boundaries:

The question is whether this film rightly crosses over into a third dimension. In this particular case, I would tend to say 'yes', especially as the memory of this war needs to be preserved at all costs. A new generation is coming of age, one that does not have first-hand experience of those years. It must be able to see, time and time again, what it has not seen itself.<sup>7</sup>

(Kracauer, 1930)

Kracauer hoped that *Westfront 1918*'s cinematic horror might engender national commitment against future wars.

Other reviewers beyond the broadsheets reviewed *Westfront 1918* favourably; the lunchtime edition of the *Berliner Zeitung* praised its cast and overall flow as well as the use of sound. In general the press assessed the film as an objective portrayal of soldiers at war, a quality underlined by the realistic quality of Lampel's dialogue and its interpretation by the actors. Sound effects as well as dialogue played a key part in enlarging and sharpening the film's narrative thrust. Through use of sound effects and other sonic elements on and off screen, and despite the limitations of nascent audio technology, Pabst created a vivid 360-degree impression of the misery of warfare.

Lotte Eisner, it is worth noting, was remarkably critical of Pabst's use of sound in her influential text on the cinema of the Weimar Republic, *The Haunted Screen*. She believed that Pabst was too interested in the visual component at the expense of the sound, complaining that the 'frequently very fine camera-work is marred by extremely banal dialogue' (1969, p.314). Her critique stands in direct contrast to the praise lavished upon the film, and its realistic dialogue, in 1930. The more relevant point, in the context of this article, is that Eisner fundamentally failed to acknowledge the film's complex aural scenarios. *Westfront 1918* not only used sound to stretch cinema's narrative boundaries, it also succeeded in creating an acoustic representation of trauma and warfare that clearly resonated with its audiences. In the process it joined *All Quiet on the Western Front* as a potent example of the historical conjunction later noted by Anton Kaes, where a 'new interest in realistic accounts of the front lines coincided with the historic shift from silent to sound film' (2009, p.212).

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<sup>6</sup> In the original: 'Vor allem aber wird der Ton mit Erfolg als Mittel der Versinnlichung ausgenutzt. Wenn man einen Verwundeten, der nicht gerettet werden kann, stöhnen hört, ohne ihn je zu sehen, so geht das unter die Haut, und der Bewertachter bleibt nicht länger mehr Betrachter. Und nicht minder sprengen die Seufzer und Schreie aus dem Lazarett den Bildrahmen und dringen unmittelbar in die Wirklichkeit.'

<sup>7</sup> In the original: 'Die Frage ist, ob er zu Recht ins Dreidimensionale überspringt. Ich neige dazu, sie in diesem einen Falle zu bejahen, in dem es gilt, die Erinnerung an den Krieg um jeden Preis festzuhalten. Schon ist eine Generation ins Alter der Reife gerückt, die jene Jahre nicht mehr aus eigener Erfahrung kennt. Sie muss sehen, immer wieder sehen, was sie nicht selber gesehen hat.'

### **Exploring Sound within *Westfront 1918*: Karl's Home Leave**

Set during the last months of the First World War, mostly in the trenches and wider area around the Western Front, *Westfront 1918* tells the story of four German infantry soldiers: the Lieutenant, the Bavarian, the Student, and Karl. The Lieutenant leading the group is a consummate soldier, obeying his orders with unquestioning devotion until succumbing to shellshock. The burly Bavarian is fatalistically resigned to doing his duty as a soldier; his gallows humour provides relief for his comrades, but frequently illustrates the grim reality of their prospects. The Bavarian provides an emotional counterpoint to the youthful enthusiasm of the Student, who falls in love with a young French farmer. After a disastrous visit to see his wife, Karl returns to the Front and immediately volunteers for a suicide mission and the Bavarian feels duty-bound to accompany him. Seriously wounded, both men succumb to their injuries in a field hospital. During the final scenes, Karl looks into the face of a nurse and mistakes her for his wife asking forgiveness for her infidelity. Karl mumbles that everyone is at fault and dies and a French soldier on the stretcher next to him reaches out to grasp his dead hand, declaring that they are not enemies, but comrades.

Most of the action in the film is located in or near the battlefields of the Western Front. Forty minutes into the narrative, soldier Karl's visit home, away from the trenches, widens the horizons emotionally and geographically, and proves a turning point in the film, after which the tone noticeably changes. The section's sound design is of great interest as it utilises referential musical elements to create emotive tensions – tensions further heightened by Karl volunteering for a risky military operation on his return to the frontline. The sequence begins in an urban, exterior setting with Karl witnessing newly recruited German soldiers being paraded through the streets of what proves to be his hometown. Cheered on by bystanders alongside the road, the conscripts march to the accompaniment of a fife and drum band. The camera swings to the right towards a well-fed civilian who asks Karl how things are progressing at the Front, and wonders when the troops are due to reach Paris. Reluctant to engage in this conversation, Karl walks on and the action cuts to a large queue of people waiting outside the butcher's shop, photographed in lighting conditions different enough to suggest strongly that these two scenes were shot at different times. Drumming continues on the soundtrack, little different in rhythm from the rhythms heard in the previous shot; but a noticeable audio cut suggests that the drummers were recorded simultaneously on location with the dialogue – an assumption supported by the music's acoustic quality. Possibly this jump cut in the background music was deliberate, meant to signal a shift in time. But it seems more likely that it was a by-product of a time when easy mixing of sound elements during post-production was difficult, an assumption supported by a further jump cut in the diegetic music as the scene develops.

After Karl leaves the rotund bystander, the action returns to the people lined up outside the butcher's shop. The diegetic drumming continues as various dialogue exchanges unfold until a weeping woman tries to cut in at the top of the queue.

The camera angle now changes to capture the resulting talk, while visually pitting the weeping woman against the rest of the crowd. The cut ushers in drumming at a lower dynamic level – again suggesting that this scene was filmed with the unseen drummers recorded simultaneously. This highlights again the limitations of shooting action and music on location, but the use of diegetic music must have been important enough to persuade an accomplished filmmaker like Pabst to accept the sonic discontinuity.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In today's film-making practice the music would simply be added to the soundtrack later and mixed in, without affecting the dialogue.



Figure 4: Weeping woman attempts to jump queue. DVD screen grab from *Westfront 1918*

Following the argument in the food queue, the background music cuts from drumming to the chorus of a well-known tune, ‘In der Heimat, da gibt’s ein Wiedersehen’ (‘We’ll meet again back home’), sung off-screen by the marching conscripts. Through the song’s lyrics, the soundtrack generates a painfully ironic emotional contrast between desperate civilian misery and the cheerful tune extolling the joys of an idealised homeland or ‘*Heimat*’, an emotionally charged concept in German culture since the late nineteenth century. Another level of irony is supplied by the shot’s revelation that the butcher shop queue includes Karl’s mother, who spots her son but feels unable to leave the queue to greet him.

The visual action now cuts to an interior studio set depicting the staircase of Karl’s tenement block. As the high-angle shot shows him mounting the stairs to his apartment, the background singing from the exterior scenes draws to a close, at which point the sound cuts to the sync recording of Karl climbing and whistling ‘In der Heimat [...]’. Functioning as a thematic reference and a temporal and spatial link between the exterior and interior locations, Karl’s whistling also sets up a sense of anticipation, suggesting his emotional mood as he looks forward to being reunited with his wife.

Karl continues whistling as he unlocks the door, but stops as he turns the door handle and enters the apartment, when other sync effects take over. The absence of musical elements focuses attention on the acute stillness of this moment: Karl, apparently intent on surprising his unsuspecting wife, moves soundlessly, taking off his heavy rucksack and propping his rifle against the wall. Suddenly, a woman’s laughter from out of frame punctures the stillness, the sound apparently coming from the adjacent room. The point of view now cuts to the adjacent room’s interior, with Karl’s expectant, smiling face emerging as he peers around the door. The camera stays on him as his gaze moves around the space; his expression changes from happy anticipation to perplexed surprise, creating uncomfortable tension and suspense. The camera viewpoint cuts to what Karl is looking at: his wife in bed, motionless and startled, with the bed covers pulled up to her chin, and slowly, the camera pans to a young man, a mere youth, frozen in the moment of gathering up his clothes. After reflecting the sentimental optimism of the *Heimat* melody, Karl’s mood – and the mood of the film – abruptly changes when he is confronted by his wife, *in flagrante* with the butcher’s apprentice.

The depiction of Karl’s immediate response is striking. There is no angry dialogue, no noisy quarrel: the medium of sound film gives Pabst the opportunity to depict Karl’s reaction as speechless resignation. In what seems to be a return to silent film acting, incredulous glances and visual compositions follow, appearing as vignettes frozen in the moment. All Karl eventually manages to say in response is ‘Ach so – na, küßt euch nur ruhig weiter’ (‘I see – well, just carry on kissing’), spoken in a resigned way with a modicum of tired anger. Karl’s wordless unravelling before the marital bed stands out for its dramatic effect in a previously dynamically fluid film, often pointedly oscillating

between quietness and sudden, sharp noise. The creative potential of relative silence paradoxically marked one of the sound film's most fundamental and fruitful innovations, with silent moments between scripted lines becoming as significant as the dialogue itself. In the new world of synchronous sound, the creation of such dialogue rhythms opened up new avenues in the craft of editing.

### **Exploring Sound within *Westfront 1918*: The Sounds of War**

Sound added a deeper emotional dimension to the film's portrayal of warfare, demonstrated in miniature in a scene towards the end of the film where the off-screen cries for help by an injured and dying French soldier are heard by the Bavarian and by Karl, who has just returned from his unhappy experience on home leave. Though the Frenchman's screams never resonate loudly on the soundtrack, they insinuate themselves enough to needle the already shaken Karl. He attempts to leave the relative safety of the German trench to attend to the enemy soldier, while the Bavarian reasons that it is the responsibility of French soldiers on the other side to rescue their comrade from no man's land. For Karl, with his own emotional state intensified by his home leave as well as news that a close comrade has been killed, the French soldier's screams perhaps externalise his own emotional pain.



Figure 5: DVD screen grab from *Westfront 1918*



Figure 6: DVD screen grab from *Westfront 1918*



Figure 7: DVD screen grab from *Westfront 1918*

The dying soldier's screams fade into insignificance compared to the sounds of human agony famously heard in the film's final section, following the devastating battle scene in which Karl and the Bavarian are seriously wounded. Throughout the film the character of the Lieutenant had been that of an experienced soldier, fully focused on his duties, rigorously obeying all orders issued by the Imperial army's leadership. His attitude of complete military devotion crumples after the disastrous battle. Crazy but still dutiful, he is seen rising up from a pile of dead soldiers from both sides of the conflict, jumping to attention again, his militarism reduced to hysterically screaming 'Hoorah', as if the gross carnage signified victory.

As he is led away for treatment, the image fades to black, before fading back up in the field hospital. Although the screams don't form a smooth aural transition between the exterior and interior settings, it seems Pabst's intention is to use the screaming to create a sound bridge, as indicated in the original script by the annotated word *Tonüberblendung* – i.e. an audio dissolve, or mix (Kagelmann & Keiner, 2014, p.89).

The Lieutenant's screams continue to echo round the field hospital, and soon mingle with screams and cries from other casualties. 'I'm blind!' shouts one. 'My legs have gone!' cries another. Even today the scene's raw realism is disturbing, though not so disturbing as it obviously was for German audiences in 1930, still painfully close to the war. A Reuters reporter in 1930 relayed the film's effect at the Berlin premiere for the British readers of the *Daily Herald*, with a story headlined: 'Grim Realism of War Film. Many Spectators Walk Out. Talkie Horrors' (Anon., 1930a). Kracauer and other commentators similarly documented audience unrest. Even without the screaming Lieutenant, the film's loud and jangling soundscape of rat-tat-tat gunfire, explosions, and whizzing shells could easily be shocking enough. In the hands of Pabst and his technical team, the ambient setting of warfare provides far more than atmosphere; it becomes a crucial component of the entire *mise-en-scène*.

Six years before, in 1924, German censors had cut a mute example of war trauma, a scene depicting a soldier writhing in agony, from Kurt Bernhardt's early Austrian film *Namenlose Helden* (1924), even though *Westfront 1918*'s aural representations were considerably more affective (Kester, 2003, p.131). During film sound's early days, censors were possibly less attuned to the potential impact of war's sonification. There is evidence, for instance, of controversy between official government guidance on censorship and individual decision-making. On the day that *Westfront 1918* premiered, *Film-Kurier* carried an article headlined 'Sound is beyond censorship!', a proclamation justified by reference to the opinion of the Weimar Republic's home secretary, Dr Joseph Wirth, who

had publicly declared that only the visual component of films was subject to censorship, not dialogue or music (Anon, 1930b).



Figure 8: *Film-Kurier*, 23 May 1930 (with the kind permission of CineGraph, Hamburg)

Wirth’s position was not necessarily borne out in practice: the article cited a recent case when the censor had refused to pass a film on the grounds that its dialogue contained offensive elements. Clearly, with the coming of sound the methodologies and policies of film censorship were in a volatile state, like the film industry in general. But in 1930 at least, censors’ latitude allowed *Westfront 1918* to add a harrowing aural dimension to its representation of human suffering.

Three years later, in 1933, everything changed. Following Hitler’s rise to power, the film had to be resubmitted to the censoring body. The cries of the wounded (on both sides), the Lieutenant’s screaming nervous breakdown, and other aural elements of suffering now met with the censors’ particular disapproval. Revoking the film’s certification that April, the censors judged that these sound elements, together with the battle defeat, the depiction of German war dead and civilian misery on the home front, were wholly incompatible with the new government’s goal of nurturing a fighting spirit in the population.<sup>9</sup>

### Pabst’s Journey into Sound

The creative use of sound elements in *Westfront 1918* is particularly striking coming from a director initially sceptical about the new technology’s value. A 1928 article by the Danish silent star Asta Nielsen, provocatively titled ‘Tod der Filmkunst’ (‘Death of Film Art’), quoted Pabst’s belief that the addition of sound would only benefit educational films or films made for political propaganda; employed on a larger fictional canvas, it would damage the progress and achievements made in silent cinema (Mühl-Benninghaus, 1999, p.91). Within a year, however, writing in a special edition of *Film-Kurier* to mark the magazine’s tenth anniversary, Pabst declared film sound an important and

<sup>9</sup> *Film Oberpr fstelle* document./reference: Nr 6490 dated 27 April 1933, p.3, available from: <http://www.filmportal.de/node/8133/material/1239493> (Accessed: 30 October 2015).

innovative component in cinema (Pabst, [1929] 2016, p.563). He had visited London in the spring, watching imported American talkies, and observing synchronous filming in action at British Talking Pictures at Wembley (Blakeston, 1929, p.27). It had clinched his conversion. Returning to Germany, he made one last silent drama in 1929, *Tagebuch einer Verlorenen* (*Diary of a Lost Girl*), before laying the groundwork for his first creative experiment with sound in his painfully realistic story of the anguish and carnage of the First World War. Initially he ambitiously planned a script in three languages, German, French, and English, matching the nationalities of the characters to be featured. In the event, the German language, heard in various local dialects and interspersed with a little French, prevailed. The film's soundtrack stayed complex enough, with its adventurous sound editing, sudden silences, overlapping dialogue, bridging sonic gestures, and double use of music as narrative element and emotional counterpoint. Above and beyond lay the unnerving sonic battlefield bombardment, sometimes captured in static shots, other times sinuously explored by Fritz Arno Wagner's newly mobile and soundproofed camera.

*Westfront 1918* marks one director's journey from the medium of silent film into sound. At the same time, Pabst's personal conversion and change of mind reflects the changing views of other critical voices initially sceptical about the concept of sound. In most instances such objections were expressed from the standpoint of theories and principles evolved during the silent era, rather than marking any reflection of the present and future possibilities of sound film. Once filmmakers began to recognise the innovative prospects that sound offered, the creative dimension of the new aural component would flourish, and critical voices fade away.

## Conclusion

In addition to the historiography of evolving technology, the transitional period needs to be recognised in terms of the emergence of an entirely different cinematic aesthetic. A more complex understanding of sound design has established itself around contemporary cinema, but a corresponding and nuanced discussion of sound design style in early sound film remains underdeveloped. Gianluca Sergi rightly asserted that 'sound matters', arguing that the inclusion of sound has repercussions on every aspect of cinema: from inception to production, through post-production to the audience's experience of the story via *image and sound* (2004, p.3). Engaging with the complex demands of the arrival of sound primarily within a framework of technology means failing to recognise the creative challenges faced by filmmakers. These challenges reached beyond technological aspects of sonic equipment where microphones, mixing consoles, optical sound cameras, cables, and booms were only the tools to bring sound to the cinema screen. How these tools became integrated into the process of telling stories through film required an entirely new approach by all those involved in film production. In examining the screams, explosions, silences, and musical counterpoint of Pabst's first sound film as an exemplar of an evolving sonic style in Germany, this article hopes to encourage film theorists and historians alike to engage more deeply with the complex aural concepts that enriched many films during the final three years of the Weimar Republic, as well as with early sound films produced throughout the rest of the world.

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